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JUNE

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MAGAZINE

FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

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THE BOUNCE**

A MR. MADDOX NOVELETTE

by **T. T. FLYNN**

A "HIGH PRICE" STORY

by **DALE CLARK**

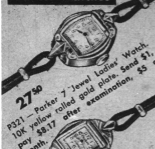
**THE CORPSE
TAKES A WIFE**

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by **FREDERICK
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Vol. 48

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Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next issue.

Cover: "Soon the logs would roar with flame and the evidence of murder would vanish up the chimney."

From: *Murder on the Bounce*.

The July Issue will be out June 1st

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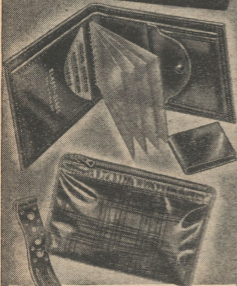


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MARIANO MERCADO, that fabulous unmasker of murder *à la Mex*, could face a thug's automatic or a knife in the hand of a killer three times his weight with equal equanimity. But show him an enlarged microphotograph of the most innocuous germ that ever got trapped on a scientist's slide and he'd tremble in abject terror. Thus the dapper little *detective particular's* reluctance to throw an unwelcome guest out of his office. That would have necessitated physical contact with a human germ carrier. And the visitor couldn't very well leave under his own power with a bullet hole in his back!

D. L. CHAMPION takes us south of the border once again to let us watch the Latin shamus demonstrate that a dead Indian isn't necessarily a good one—or honest money always clean. *Death in the Sun* answers the assorted kill riddles in as exciting a novelette as this perennially popular author has contributed to these pages in many a moon.

And **JULIUS LONG** in *Loaded for Murder* brings back Clarence Darrow Mort—that legal light shining in the darkness of the underworld—to form a partnership with Blackstone Jones and lift a man from the hot-seat that was beginning to scorch his breeches and ring in a substitute bleacher for the high-voltage armchair.

It's standing around knowing there's a killer loose that gets you. Tack was of the hit-first-and-think-about-it-later school but Malachi Manatee had regrets about the final fist-fest. "I was ashamed," he confessed after it was all over. "I should have been able to handle an old woman without slugging her." *Shame on Malachi!* by **WILLIAM R. COX** explains his embarrassment between murders.

Plus other gripping novelettes and short stories by **C. WILLIAM HARRISON**, **STANLEY C. VICKERS** and other of your favorite authors.

This great July issue of **DIME DETECTIVE** will be on sale on **JUNE 1st**.



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A Department

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IT IS certainly a shame that such a sentiment as sympathy for those who have been permanently injured in the defense of all of us is being exploited by a few men without principles who want only a few dirty dollars.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

This swindle has happened with such monotonous regularity in Dallas since the beginning of the war, and has been of such a vicious nature, that I thought you might use it for your "Rackets" column which I enjoy reading very much.

A skin-game which has reached such proportions in this city must really have parallels in other parts of the country. The gyp works like this:

A merchant receives a telephone call purportedly made by a World War veteran of either this or the last war. He is asked if he would care to make a contribution to either of the local and nearby veterans hospitals, which he names. The money, the caller says, would buy cigarettes, magazines, chewing gum, candy and other similar comforts for the men.

Sometimes, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas time, the line varies. Then the sucker is asked if he will contribute money to buy fruit baskets and other gifts for the veterans.

Most merchants are quite willing to aid ex-soldiers and agree to the solicitor's offer. The "veteran" then says he will send a representative around to collect the money, which he does.

Reported contributions have run all the way from ten dollars to one hundred dollars with many certainly not reported.

The catch is a slick one. The merchant is given a receipt for his donation which appears to be very proper. It even bears the name of the veterans' organization in bold print on the top.

But—in microscopic print at the bottom of the receipt—is a brief note which states the donor has paid for an advertisement in an unknown veterans' magazine.

The veterans' magazine is a mimeographed sheet of which less than one hundred copies are printed. Each sucker gets a copy, and he can't kick because his receipt says that is what he paid for!

In this city the racket is even "protected" by law. In explanation, the leader of the racket, who poses as an army captain of the last war, was tried in the corporation court during the spring of 1944. He won his case!

In the first place, telephone conversations are not admitted as evidence in this state. Thus, whatever was told the merchant over the telephone is strictly un-admissible as testimony. That leaves the swindler who made the call out of the case entirely.

His accomplice, who picked up the money, is guiltless—according to law—because he gave a proper receipt for the money, stating what it was to be used for. An ad in a "magazine"—which can be printed for the cost of a few sheets of paper and a mimeograph stencil!

The local Better Business Bureau has hollered long and loud about the racket, the newspapers have screamed warnings, yet it still continues to be worked.

L. M. Young,
Dallas 5, Texas.

ITINERANT salesmen sometimes get a rather unsavory reputation—justified or not as the case may be. In this case it was plenty justified.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

A few years ago I received a card in the mail from a traveling studio. It invited me to have my children's pictures taken. One enlargement would be given free and I could purchase as many more as I wished.

On the date indicated on the card, I took the children to the hotel in town where they had fixed up their studio. The pictures were taken and I saw the proofs which I thought were very good. I decided to take six and was told the price would be three dollars. I gave the photographer the money and my address with the understanding that I would receive the pictures in the mail.

In about two weeks they came in the mail—C.O.D.! I had to pay an extra six dollars.

Just recently a similar card came in the mail but I didn't bite. I warned a few of my friends, but they evidently wanted to learn the hard way, by experience.

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MURDER ON THE

By T. T. FLYNN

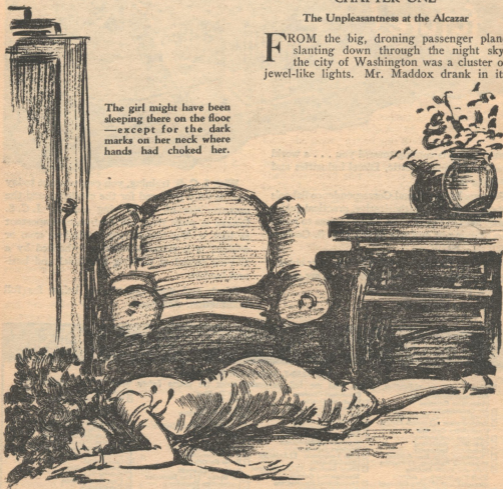
Author of "Win, Place and Kill!" etc.

CHAPTER ONE

The Unpleasantness at the Alcazar

FROM the big, droning passenger plane slanting down through the night sky, the city of Washington was a cluster of jewel-like lights. Mr. Maddox drank in its

The girl might have been sleeping there on the floor—except for the dark marks on her neck where hands had choked her.



Washington was more than the nation's capital to Mr. Maddox. It was for him a four-grand rubber check from a 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—for murder can bounce as far as a rubber check and toss an innocent man into a cell on the rebound.

BOUNCE

A Mr. Maddox
Novelette



beauty as he looked out the plane window, then his broad face settled into hard purpose and his mind once more ranged over the business ahead. The very unpleasant business ahead.

Washington was more than the fairyland of twinkling lights which one could see from an airplane seat to Joe Maddox, bookmaker to famous names from coast to coast and many names never heard of. Washington was for him the four thousand-dollar-check Mr. Maddox carried in his fat pigskin billfold. Washington was the man who had issued the check. When the check and the man were added together, the total was probably trouble, or at the very least a nasty and disagreeable scene.

The man who had issued the check was known to most readers of newspaper head-

lines. He was short-tempered and slippery and vindictive when angered. He made a point of being vindictive. He was the rabble-rousing, hate-shouting owner of a chain of prosperous, moderately-sized newspapers all over the country. Official and political Washington resented him, and in turn suffered discomfiture and embarrassment too often.

The writer of the check was the bandy-legged, wasp-waisted, fox-faced, bellowing and vitriolic publisher, Ben Strong. And the check for four thousand dollars, given for an unlucky guess on an unlucky horse in the short racing season at Miami, had bounced higher than the aluminum cap on the Washington Monument.

In Miami at the time, Ben Strong had believed that the race had been crooked. Couldn't

have been anything else. Ben Strong knew racetracks. He had been raised in the blue-grass of Kentucky. He owned a breeding farm himself. He bet like a gentleman and was glad to have his newspapers or any other papers print the facts. If his own readers didn't like it, they could buy some other publisher's papers.

But after bellowing loudly enough to make the sports pages in every competing newspaper across the country, Ben Strong had paid up with a check on which his signature stood out with the usual strong black flourish.

The check was back again in Mr. Maddox' pocket as the big silvery plane came down through the night sky toward the Washington airport.

Ben Strong had gone back to Washington before the check bounced. From Miami Mr. Maddox had telephoned Washington and had been informed that the publisher was busy. He had telegraphed Ben Strong and had not received a reply. Twice more he had telephoned and had been told to write a letter, which Ben Strong undoubtedly would answer. After that Mr. Maddox caught a plane north.

The airport beside the Potomac river rose gently to meet the plane which wheeled with growling motors to its unloading spot. Mr. Maddox was a big, prosperous figure as he emerged with the other passengers. He might have been a corporation president rushing to Washington for important conferences.

Actually, this chill winter evening beside the Potomac, Mr. Maddox was more important than most Washington-bound travelers. Most politicians and newspapermen in Washington would have said so. A delegation of the press probably would have been on hand if they had known. But no one knew. Joe Maddox was only another passenger from Miami as he walked away from the plane. Oscar, his wizened assistant, had been bumped off the plane by a priority, and a very pretty young priority she had been.

She was a brunette in a dark traveling suit and a seal coat. At first she had read a magazine, the rest of the trip she had talked with the young Navy lieutenant across the aisle. Mr. Maddox had liked her smile.

Now outside the plane Mr. Maddox smiled slightly himself as he noticed the girl in the seal coat walking beside the lieutenant. They seemed reluctant to say the last word and go their separate ways.

IN THE busy waiting room, Mr. Maddox rifled a telephone directory and called the home of Ben Strong. The voice which answered had the same polite and cheerful note that Mr. Maddox had already heard over long-distance to Miami, and in person several times at different racetracks.

The voice belonged to Harris Forney, confidential secretary and man of all duties to Ben Strong. Forney was always good-natured and polite. It was his business to smooth the troubled waters caused by Ben Strong's belowlings. Tonight Harris Forney answered the telephone with pleased surprise. "Isn't this Mr. Maddox?"

"It is," Mr. Maddox replied. "I want to talk to Ben Strong."

Harris Forney's voice throbbed with real regret. "Mr. Strong is not at home this evening. I am sorry, Mr. Maddox. How is the weather in Miami?"

"Raining when I left," Mr. Maddox said shortly. "And I brought a storm here to Washington."

"Oh! You're here in Washington?"

"I am," said Mr. Maddox coldly. "Did you give Ben Strong my last message?"

"Naturally. That is, I think so. You know how it is, Mr. Maddox. So many messages. Mr. Strong is a busy man."

"He's acting like one, at least. Forney, get this: I didn't fly here from Miami for a brush-off. I've got Ben Strong's check in my pocket. I want to see Strong tonight. Where is he?"

Harris Forney seemed to be thinking it over—or counting to ten before he replied. His manner continued cheerful and encouraging. "Well, it's hard to say where Mr. Strong is at any given moment. If you'd wait until tomorrow . . ."

"No dice, Forney. I said a brush-off wouldn't work. Not even your grade-A kind, with a pat on the shoulder and a good handshake."

"That's good," Harris Forney laughed. "Very good indeed. Glad to see you so good-natured about it, Mr. Maddox."

"The hell I am!" said Mr. Maddox more coldly. "I'll be camping on Strong's doorstep tonight if I can't see him sooner. But first I'll shake up the town with telephone calls. Someone will know where Ben Strong is, if you don't—which I think you do. Now what are you going to deal me?"

Harris Forney was injured. His sigh came over the wire from the heart. His voice was close to throbbing with sincerity. "You really are mistaken, Mr. Maddox. I know I speak for Mr. Strong as well as myself when I assure you we don't want you put to any extra trouble. Will you wait a moment? Mr. Strong may have left a memo on his study desk, telling me where he is. He sometimes does. I'll look."

A full minute passed. Mr. Maddox would have laid steep odds that Harris Forney was still standing at the telephone, silently cursing the visitor from Miami. But when Forney spoke again he had the same honey-smooth touch.

"I had some luck. Here's a note that says Mr. Strong is going to dine at the Alcazar. You might find him there."

"Thanks."

"Glad to do anything possible at all times," said Harris Forney heartily.

Mr. Maddox was smiling grimly as he stepped out of the telephone booth. Harris Forney earned every dollar of the sizable salary Ben Strong reputedly paid him. Forney was a genius at the soft and reassuring reply.

Mr. Maddox stepped quickly aside from the pretty brunette he had almost walked into. He dropped her a word of apology and smiled with belated recognition when he saw she was the same girl who had been talking with the young Navy lieutenant in the plane. She smiled back. The lieutenant was standing behind her with a rapt look. Mr. Maddox chuckled to himself as he walked out to a taxi. A touch of romance seemed to be riding the winter wind tonight.

The Alcazar was the newest and largest hotel in Washington. And more than that. All who wanted to be seen or to see went to the Alcazar. In a way, the new Alcazar had become one of the crossroads of the world, like the Terrace at Cairo or the Savoy in London. These tense and history-filled days brought all the world to Washington—and all Washington came to the Alcazar for pleasure and business.

The Alcazar's great dining room managed a feeling of smaller intimacy by subtle lighting and ingenious seating arrangements. And of course there was Jules, the maitre d'hotel, ruling the tables and service with his own suave elegance.

Jules also played the horses. But well. Jules could pick a longshot with all the finesse of a gourmet selecting the prize creation on the menu. At the sight of the well-fed and smiling Mr. Maddox coming to the doorway of the dining room, Jules radiated welcome.

"M'sieu Maddox! 'Ow you are?" Jules flourished a menu and spoke behind it. "Tomorrow at Havana I have ze winner—"

Mr. Maddox shook his head, chuckling. "No horse money, Jules. I'm only passing through town. I understand Ben Strong, the publisher, is dining here this evening."

"Ah, *oui!*" Jules could speak English perfectly, with a Brooklyn accent. He was a native of the Williamsburg section, and proud of it among a sparse circle of close and trusted friends. Mr. Maddox was one of the friends. "You wish to join Mr. Strong and the ladies in his party?" Jules inquired. "The young ladies," he added.

"How many young ladies?" Mr. Maddox questioned.

"Three—tonight," said Jules.

"One young lady is too much for that ban-

tain blatherskite," said Mr. Maddox callously. "Call him out here, Jules. Don't give him my name. You might manage to suggest I could be an ambassador or something."

"*Oui,*" said Jules, bowing as only Jules could bow. Jules winked. "Ze Ambassadeur of ze gee-gees," said Jules. "Ah, *oui!*" Jules went grandly in person to summon Ben Strong. It was an act that should have made the Palace in the old days.

MR. MADDOX strolled back from the dining room doorway and held a match to a fat black cigar. His smile was grim as he opened the pigskin billfold and plucked out the four thousand-dollar-check given him by Ben Strong in Miami.

And then a lusty hand-slap struck Mr. Maddox' broad shoulder. A familiar voice greeted: "What sucker did you intend to clip in Washington, Joe?"

"Cassidy!" Mr. Maddox said without warmth. He was annoyed. Resignation was also in his manner. "Do you have to be everywhere?" Mr. Maddox questioned accusingly.

"Now you see me, now you don't," Cassidy said genially. He caught Mr. Maddox' hand and he shook it heartily.

Cassidy was another big man, grizzled, with the heavy and solid look of one who enforced the law. Cassidy was a crack detective of the Masterton International Agency. For more than twenty years Cassidy had been on the Masterton race track detail.

The track detectives of the Masterton Agency did their best to stop bookmaking at the big tracks by making sure that dishonest angles did not creep into racing. They screened out pickpockets and con men who tried to harvest the lush crowds at the tracks.

Mr. Maddox, as one of the best known bookies in racing, had long been fair game for Cassidy. As yet Cassidy had not been able to arrest Joe Maddox for an infraction of track rules. But he continued to try. Meanwhile a wary friendship existed between the two men. "The more I see of you, the less I like it," Mr. Maddox informed Cassidy now.

"Always something nice to say, eh, Joe?" Cassidy replied drily. "Why are you hanging around here with a four-grand check in your hand?"

"So you could snoop over my shoulder and ask questions that are none of your business," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Now beat it. You're soiling my social standing."

"I didn't know I'd slipped that low," said Cassidy cordially. "Have a drink, Joe?"

"No. Scram."

Cassidy was delighted that his presence was not desired. "Waiting for someone?" he inquired.

"Not you."

"You look nervous, Joe."

At that moment the wasp-waisted figure of Ben Strong appeared in the dining room doorway.

"There's a chap I know. See you in several years, I hope," said Mr. Maddox, strolling toward the publisher.

Ben Strong's sharp face showed quick irritation as he recognized Mr. Maddox. "Are you the one who got me away from my table?"

"Correct," said Mr. Maddox. "All the way from Miami to see you. I brought that four thousand-dollar-check that bounced. If that's your idea of humor, I haven't laughed. Will you make it good or won't you?"

Ben Strong put out a hand and took the check. He looked at it, both sides. His fox-like face grew red. He began to breathe harder. With a sudden flare of temper he tore the check into bits and shoved the remnants in a pocket.

"Damn your infernal nerve!" Ben Strong exploded, his voice rising in a loud, angry rasp. "Hounding me on a matter like this! A cheap bookmaker calling me out in a public spot and trying to embarrass me! I should have known better than to give you the check! The race was crooked in the first place!"

"I didn't run the race," Mr. Maddox reminded him unmoved. "If your horse had won, I'd have paid off and kept smiling. What will you do about making that check good?"

"Nothing—and what are you going to do about it?" Ben Strong demanded loudly, rocking back on his heels and glaring.

"I'll collect."

"Try it!"

Anger was a luxury with Mr. Maddox. And a confession of weakness to which he seldom surrendered. Suddenly he was as angry as the wasp-waisted little publisher.

"You loud-mouthed fourflusher!" Mr. Maddox said under his breath with cold fury. "It's time someone called your hand, and I'm the one who's going to do it!"

"So! Threatening me, are you, Maddox?"

"Take it that way if you like."

"I'll have you run out of town. Make one move to annoy me and I'll—" The brilliant wink of a flashbulb encompassed them. Ben Strong stopped his tirade in mid-sentence.

A grinning young photographer lowered his camera and asked: "Having trouble, Mr. Strong?"

"Damn you, black out that plate!" Ben Strong ordered furiously.

"Sorry."

"What paper are you with?"

"Not one of yours," Ben Strong was informed. "Fact is, I was fired off your *Graphic*. Orders straight from your office, I was told. Happy returns if this is printed—and I think it will be."

BEN STRONG looked like as if he were going to follow the cameraman, but something else caught his attention. He paused long enough to snarl, "I warned you, Maddox!" then walked rapidly across the lobby. Mr. Maddox whistled softly and watched with new interest when he saw whom Ben Strong had joined.

The pretty brunette off the Miami plane had been watching the scene uncertainly. The lieutenant was not with her now. Ben Strong spoke rapidly to her and gestured for emphasis.

Mr. Maddox had forgotten Cassidy until he heard the Masterton man's amused voice at his elbow.

"Nice going, Joe. I thought you were hopped up to take a punch at him. Ain't that Ben Strong, the publisher?" Cassidy helped himself to one of the thick, black cigars in Mr. Maddox' front coat pocket. "He's the guy who squawked about that Miami race, ain't he?"

"Is he?" Mr. Maddox countered. His anger had faded the moment Cassidy spoke. Only good humor was on his broad, bland face as he said: "Someone is always beefing about a race. How about that drink?"

"The expense account will stand one for you," Cassidy decided. "Maybe two if you've got anything to say."

Half an hour later Mr. Maddox had said many things, and not one word had told Cassidy any more than he already knew about Ben Strong and the little scene in the Alcazar lobby.

"So you're just passing through town," Cassidy finally said.

"More or less," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Maybe a day in town, or a week. Thanks for the drinks and if I don't see you again, it will be a pleasure."

They parted on that pleasant and friendly note. Mr. Maddox taxied to the Morrissy Hotel where he always stopped. The slender, dark-haired girl was in his thoughts. She had still been listening to Ben Strong at his last sight of her. Ben Strong had shown no disposition to invite her into the dining room, where three other young ladies were at his table.

Ben Strong was not married. Still, despite his wealth and reputation, he seemed to be having more than his share of young ladies this evening.

The clerk at the Morrissy had a telephone message for Mr. Maddox when he picked up the key to the room he had reserved by wire. Eyebrows lifting a little, Mr. Maddox digested the message.

I'd like to see you at my house tonite. Ben Strong.

Mr. Maddox went up to his room, ordered Scotch and ice, and freshened himself before

taking a leisurely drink and going down again to meet Strong. He was not too surprised about the publisher's summons. The man was all shout, bluster, threat in public. But he had a way of easing out from under when his hand was called.

Ben Strong lived at the edge of Rock Creek Park. Mr. Maddox had never been to the house. When a taxicab brought him to the place, he was amazed.

In keeping with everything else he did, Ben Strong had an eye-arresting and unusual home in Washington. He had leased a small replica of an old Norman castle. It even had a water-filled moat, now covered with ice.

A driveway circled in front of the moat. Visitors walked over a drawbridge that was backed with an iron portcullis, now raised. The place was situated at the forested edge of a deep ravine, with tall trees on the ravine side stair-stepping down into dark depths below. The gloomy, gray stone walls carried an air of somber defiance.

"Goofy place," the taxi driver said over his shoulder as he stopped in front of the drawbridge.

"I've seen pleasanter looking spots," Mr. Maddox chuckled as he got out.

"Want me to wait?"

"Yes. I don't know how long I'll be inside,

but I'll want you when I'm ready to leave."

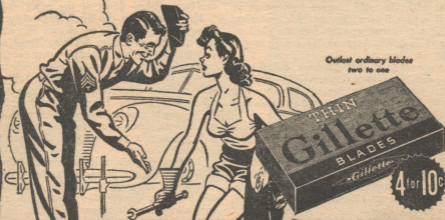
What would have been the great courtyard of the real castle, was in this smaller replica a vine-cloaked patio, dimly lighted by small wrought-iron lanterns hooked into the stone walls. The main doorway was on the right of the patio, the door of heavy bolt-studded timbers, dark and weathered.

It was like Ben Strong to have such a retreat, Mr. Maddox thought. Here the wasp-waisted little publisher could bellow and plan and scheme. His moods, venom, and hates could pour out over the country via the teletype wires to his various newspapers. The list of Ben Strong's enemies must be endless. Mr. Maddox was wondering how much the moat, drawbridge and stone walls were conceit, and how much fear of retribution, when the massive door opened on silent hinges and a girl stepped out.

She gasped slightly at the sight of his big figure looming before her. "Y-you startled me," she stammered.

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "I'm harmless, sister." He eyed her with smiling appreciation. She was a dark-haired girl, but not the one who had come from the south on the plane with him. She was several years older than the other girl who also knew Ben Strong, Mr. Maddox recalled. This girl used more

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lipstick, more rouge. She had a harder, more mature look, from experience rather than age, he guessed. There was no denying she was good looking.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked.

"Ben Strong."

"He's not here."

"He's supposed to be here."

"I'm sorry but he's not here."

She said it smiling, but she was forcing the smile. Mr. Maddox looked at her blandly. "Ben Strong sent for me, young lady. I'll wait for him."

She swallowed. "There's no one here. I went in and waited, and gave it up. You see, I'm leaving."

"I see," Mr. Maddox agreed. "Good night, young lady."

Her smile was a twisted thing, forced, unreal. She walked past him slowly. She was afraid, Mr. Maddox suddenly realized. Deep inside she was tight and shaking. She was walking away because that was the only thing she could think of at the moment. He made a shrewd guess that what she really wanted to do was back up against the door and bar his way into the house.

CHAPTER TWO

Corpse-Burning Fireplace

MR. MADDOX pushed the bell button, and then again. No one had let the girl out of the house. Not even a servant. That was queer, too. His rings were not answered. Mr. Maddox thoughtfully tried the door, and when it opened he stepped inside.

He was in a vaulted hall, narrow and high. Ahead of him a suit of armor stood on a pedestal with the cold, unreal suggestion of life and action frozen through the centuries. The hall was warm enough but the chill of stone and vague unwelcome lay heavy in the silence.

"Anyone here?" Mr. Maddox called.

Not even servants it seemed. Mr. Maddox muttered impatiently under his breath. Ben Strong and the bad check seemed to go on and on—and all of it was unpleasant.

The telephone message had been explicit. Ben Strong must be on his way here. Mr. Maddox bit off the end of a thick cigar. He was about to strike a match when a telephone rang upstairs. A wall stand near the suit of armor held a telephone, but only the bell upstairs rang. The sound was somewhat muffled, as if beyond a door.

Mr. Maddox waited, thumbnail against the match. Anyone in the house would answer that ringing telephone upstairs. But the bell rang again, and then again . . . and the silence

lay heavy through Strong's miniature castle. On an impulse Mr. Maddox started up the stone stairs, overcoat over one arm and cigar unlighted. Ben Strong or Harris Forney might be calling.

Near the head of the stairs a door standing slightly ajar led in to the ringing telephone. The room inside the door was a study, and quite an unusual room at first glance. Mr. Maddox went to a great walnut desk across the room and caught up the telephone. He spoke only a noncommittal: "Yes?"

A distinct lisp, a guarded and furtive lisp, said: "Ith thith Forney thpeaking?"

Caution stirred back in Mr. Maddox' mind. At the moment he was not sure why. The guarded voice might have been the reason. Some memory he could not place might have had something to do with his caution. He put fingers over the mouthpiece and spoke through them as nearly like Harris Forney's smooth voice as possible. "What is it?"

"It ith hard to understand you," the lisping voice complained. "Are you thure no one ith lithening to uth?"

The lisp was infectious. "I'm thure," Mr. Maddox answered, with a grimace of grim humor. Back in his mind, memory was trying harder to get at something.

"Hath that doublecrothing little jockey Vinthy Braddo thowed up there yet?" the lisp inquired.

"No," Mr. Maddox said into the partially blocked mouthpiece.

"He will thooner or later," said the lisp. "He ith dangerous, I tell you. Better do thumbing about him. I'm taking the train for you know where."

"Where?" Mr. Maddox asked guardedly.

"I thought tho!" the lisp exclaimed with sudden suspicion. "You ain't Harith!" The receiver clicked down at the other end.

Mr. Maddox lit the thick black cigar as he turned away from the telephone. His memory was finally working. Vinthy Braddo, the jockey, was the key. Braddo meant racetracks.

There were two well-known characters around the racetracks who lisped badly. One was a tall, lanky Negro named Sam. The other was Lithpy Ligget, who had been a jockey agent and indifferent trainer, an owner of dubious horses, and a tout of no mean ability when it came to ferreting out stable secrets.

A teletype machine in one corner began the rhythmic slap of type against the endless paper which fed through it. This high-ceilinged room was evidently Ben Strong's Washington lair. Massive beams with the dark and smoky look of age supported the arched ceiling. A great stone fireplace was at the left of the room, and above the mantel was a life-sized, lifelike picture of an armored knight,

shield on left arm and right hand holding a great sword. The knight's head was bare, wind ruffling his hair as he gazed fearlessly into the distance.

Mr. Maddox stared at the painting and said rudely: "I'll be damned! The nerve of him!" The features of the armored knight were those of Ben Strong.

Unburned logs waited in the fireplace for a match. Several chairs were ranged before the fireplace. The biggest and most comfortable chair was in the center, placed squarely so that the occupant could admire the fire and the armored knight above. When one stopped behind the chair and looked at the fireplace as Mr. Maddox did, he could see the painting and the logs—and after a moment he could make out the pale white hand which lay across the end of one of the logs.

For long and silent seconds Mr. Maddox stood motionless staring at that hand. The teletype machine chattered over in the corner. The chill at the back of Mr. Maddox' neck spread to his temples and down his spine. The body to which the hand belonged was in the fireplace, down behind the big logs.

"I might have known it!" Mr. Maddox said aloud. "His lousy four-grand-check buys me into murder! I knew he was going to get it sooner or later, but why did I have to find him?"

Mr. Maddox was moving to the fireplace while he said that. He had to stoop and bend over the logs to see clearly. His guess was wrong. The dead man was not Ben Strong. Not Harris Forney. Nor was it Vincy Braddo, the flat-faced, shifty-eyed little jockey.

The dead man was a stranger, middle-aged, with the diminutive build of a jockey, with the pinched, sly, lined face of a character not always used to the gentler ways of life. His head was twisted around at an unnatural angle. His purple tongue was protruding. He was very dead, from a broken neck among other things, Mr. Maddox guessed. And it required only a bit of imagination to visualize the logs roaring with flame and the evidence of murder vanishing up the great chimney in greasy smoke. While, perhaps, Ben Strong sat in the big chair and admired the fearless armored knight.

Mr. Maddox stood up slowly. Imagination was giving him a queasy feeling. He went to the busy teletype machine and scanned the typed words that were being swiftly recorded.

It was a routine circulation and financial report from one of Ben Strong's newspapers out in Ohio.

"Wonder what they'd think if I cut in and gave them a news report of a body in the boss's study here," Mr. Maddox muttered. He smiled bleakly at the idea and picked up the telephone. Then he changed his mind. Quickly,

he wiped fingerprints off the handset, picked up his overcoat and walked out of Ben Strong's study and out of the house.

The taxicab was not waiting at the end of the drawbridge. Mr. Maddox cursed softly. The night chill was driving through his overcoat, and part of it was a chill of the spirit. The girl, he guessed, had persuaded the taxi driver to take her away. Mr. Maddox walked with long strides toward the nearest streetcar. He looked back only once as he left the driveway.

Ben Strong's castle had a grim and eerie look among the great trees. Windows were mere slits. The stone walls were forbidding. Upstairs the study lights were still bright above the silent fireplace, the teletype machine still linked with distant parts of the country, while the knight in shining armor gazed fearlessly into the distance. Mr. Maddox wondered as he braced the chill wind, how fearlessly Ben Strong himself was looking into the future tonight.

JULES of the Alcazar said: "'Ow you mean, *M'sieu*? Ze young ladies wiz *M'sieu* Strong?"

"Talk Brooklyn, Jules," Mr. Maddox requested. "I can think better when I don't hear that phony Rue de la Paix accent."

Jules' smile remained as elegant, as always for the benefit of anyone in the glittering Alcazar lobby who happened to be looking. "O.K.," Jules said. "He had three dolls tonight, and I mean dolls. Real babes. If you ask me, the old goat was cutting himself a slice of trouble. Those mammas knew their way around." Jules shrugged with Gallic emphasis. "Fillies, maybe, but maidens, no."

"Was one of them about so high to me? Dark hair? Twenty-five, at least? Three-quarter-length squirrel coat?"

"Ah!" said Jules. "She sat at his right and complained about her dinner. As if she knew good food! The waiter didn't like her. The other two girls didn't like her. Phooey! What specimens we see in here!"

"Do you know who she is?"

"No."

"Did all three girls leave with Ben Strong?"

Jules shrugged. "M'sieu Strong left alone, right after he talked with you. There was a girl waiting for him in the lobby. You must have noticed him speaking to her."

Mr. Maddox nodded. "Button your lip on this Jules. But if you see any of those girls again, tonight especially, fake an excuse to find out who they are and where they live."

"Mmmmm," said Jules. "Girls on your mind, too?"

"Those four are. And no cracks. You can reach me at the Morrissy."

"*Oui, M'sieu*," said Jules grandly. "No cracks . . . But observe the caution. Fillies are hard to handicap."

Mr. Maddox taxied to his hotel with Jules' warning in his mind. Fillies were unpredictable, hard to handicap in a race. You never knew what a filly would do—but at least one wouldn't come to the finish wire with murder at her heels. The desk clerk handed him an envelope with room key. Mr. Maddox lifted eyebrows at sight of Ben Strong's name boldly engraved on the envelope.

Four one thousand-dollar-bills were in the envelope with a typed note.

Dear Mr. Maddox:

We trust the enclosed will settle everything to your satisfaction. Mr. Strong naturally regrets any undue feeling you may have had in the matter.

Sincerely yours,
Harris Forney.

Mr. Maddox stared at the bills and the note for a long moment before shoving them in his pocket. He took the elevator upstairs and, in his room, asked the switchboard operator to ring Ben Strong's home. Harris Forney's cheerful voice answered promptly.

"Maddox? . . . I missed you at your hotel. Did you get the envelope I left for you?"

"Yes."

"Everyone happy now?"

"Where are you?" Mr. Maddox asked.

Forney laughed. "Right where you're calling, I guess. At Mr. Strong's home."

"What part of the house are you in?"

"That's a queer question," said Forney cheerfully. "I'm in Mr. Strong's study."

"Where is Ben Strong?"

"Gone out of town."

"Where?"

"Sorry. I can't report Mr. Strong's movements. On the way to the train he asked me to clear that check." Forney was jocular. "I didn't expect it to bring a barrage of questions."

"You can expect anything from me," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Any servants in the house?"

"The servants sleep out." Forney seemed to be speaking with amused patience. "Anything else?"

"Is there a fireplace in that study?"

"Well, yes. Really, Maddox, what's all this leading to?"

"Call it murder," said Mr. Maddox. "And four grand won't settle it, Forney. Walk over to the fireplace and then tell me what you see."

"Just a moment." The line went silent.

Forney was jocular when he spoke again. "I see three logs in the fireplace."

"Did you look behind the logs?"

Harris Forney laughed. "I did. What's the rib? We take murder seriously. Makes fine headlines. There's a teletype in the study here always waiting to carry crime details to our papers."

"It helps to be prepared," said Mr. Maddox drily. "Was Ben Strong in that study before he left town?"

"No. I took his bag to him. Any more questions?"

"That," said Mr. Maddox, "remains to be seen. I haven't tried to spend these thousand-dollar bills. I hope they're better than Strong's check."

Mr. Maddox hung up.

A MOMENT later, fingertips tapped gently on his door. The sound was almost coy and bashful. Mr. Maddox opened the door. Cassidy was leaning against the frame. His ear had been close to the door crack.

"Keyholes," murmured Cassidy, strolling into the room, "are gifts from heaven." Cassidy folded a stick of gum into his mouth. "What was in Ben Strong's fireplace, Joe?"

Mr. Maddox groaned.

"Twice in the same night you happen to me. Strong's secretary said three logs were in the fireplace."

"What did you think was there?" Cassidy asked mildly.

"Three logs."

"What did you see when you were in Ben Strong's study tonight?"

"Who said I was even in Strong's house?"

They stared at each other. Cassidy grinned.

"I only made one mistake, Joe. When your taxi drove away from Strong's place, I tailed it, thinking you were inside. And all I drew was a good-looking dame. You stayed behind at Ben Strong's place."

Mr. Maddox walked to a table and poured himself a drink of Scotch. "Me, too," Cassidy said. They drank the Scotch neat, watching each other.

Cassidy smacked his lips. "Nice little act you and Strong put on at the Alcazar. Now you talk murder to his secretary and thousand-dollar bills." Cassidy pulled a glazed press print from the inside of his coat. "Our office got this from the *Ledger* a little while ago. You and Strong look close to murder, Joe."

Mr. Maddox studied his face and Ben Strong's face as the camera had caught them in the Alcazar lobby. "Nice start for murder," he admitted. He returned the picture. "Only Ben Strong and I are both alive."

Cassidy nodded. "I saw Ben Strong hurry through the Union Station to catch a train." He poured himself another drink. "But if Strong gets killed, and I'll bet it happens one of these days, you'd better have a good alibi, Joe." Cassidy tossed off the Scotch. "What

was it that you saw in the fireplace, Joe?"

Mr. Maddox studied him. "Can I trust you, Cassidy?"

Cassidy looked hurt. "After twenty years, Joe? Aren't we pals, practically? Brothers almost. Joe, so help me, on this I'm coming clean with you. I think you need help, Joe."

"Maybe I do." Mr. Maddox sighed. "Twenty years—that's a long time. Pals it is. That girl who drove off in my taxi, where did she go?"

"She got out at Fourteenth and F," said Cassidy promptly. "I lost her downtown. Wish I'd kept after her. Joe, what was in that fireplace?"

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Man O' War himself, galloping on the top log. Go out to Ben Strong's place and watch him, you double-crossing ape. Pals! Hah!"

Cassidy got red. "That's what I'll do, Joe! In the fireplace and all over the house! And, pal, you'd better hope I don't find what I think I'm going to find!"

Cassidy was jerking open the door when Mr. Maddox jeered after him: "If the girl got out at Fourteenth and F, what were you doing at Union Station when Ben Strong caught his train? Sleep-walking?"

Cassidy slammed the door without answering. Mr. Maddox became sober as he stood staring at the blank door. The big Masterton detective would be at Ben Strong's house as fast as a car could get him there. But Cassidy wouldn't find a body in the fireplace. Probably not a body on the premises.

Harris Forney was not a fool. No matter what he had found when he returned to the house, it would not be there when Cassidy arrived. And Cassidy would not get much information from Forney.

Cassidy was a stubborn man. He'd seen enough, heard enough to fan suspicion to fever heat. And murder was at the core of the mystery into which Cassidy was digging.

Murder. Mr. Maddox felt like groaning. He'd come up from Miami to cash a rubber check and the pay-off was murder.

Cassidy could prove Joe Maddox had been at Ben Strong's synthetic castle about the time the pinched, middle-aged, jockey-built stranger was killed. Cassidy might even get a statement from the girl who had left Joe Maddox at the house. Suppose she swore the dead man had been alive when she left and Joe Maddox had entered the house?

Mr. Maddox poured himself another stiff drink.

"It would have to happen to me!" he said aloud.

Somehow he was not surprised when the telephone rang a moment later and Jules, of the Alcazar, spoke over the wire. Things were happening faster and faster tonight.

Jules was all Brooklyn. "Only have a moment, Joe. That girl who was talking to Mr. Strong in the lobby—I know who she is. Kelly, the house dick, recognized her. She's Mary Cole, a reporter for the Strong newspapers."

"Fine, Jules! Know any more?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Plenty, Jules. Listen, if you call me again, and I've checked out, wire me care of the hotel. They'll forward it. I don't want to miss anything else you run across."

"Oui," said Jules, hanging up.

Mr. Maddox thought briefly and put through a call to George Mustoe, sports editor of the *Ledger*, who could write about horses better than he could pick them.

Mustoe's drawl was jeering. "Any dope who comes north from Florida at this time of year is all wrong. What blasted you out of Miami?"

"Dough, Georgie. What do you know about Mary Cole, on the Ben Strong papers?"

George Mustoe whistled. "You're in fast company, Joe. What I know about the little lady isn't half as much as some creaky wolves around here would like to know. That little gal is strictly hands off. I understand she's engaged to Harris Forney, chief flunky to Ben Strong. She's one of the better hens when it comes to scratching up news and loading it with punch and color. That good enough?"

"And she's engaged to Forney?"

"So says the gossip. What's steamed you up about Mary Cole?"

"She came north on the same plane with me."

"That way, huh? Stay ready to duck when she's near, Joe. Mary Cole is smooth."

In the next few minutes Mr. Maddox repacked his bag. He wrote a note to Oscar, his wizened and shrewd assistant, who was coming north by train. He telephoned for a reservation north and was granted a seat in a chair car.

The telephone directory listed Mary Cole at an apartment hotel on Sixteenth Street. She did not answer her telephone. Mr. Maddox checked out of the hotel, leaving the note at the desk to be given to Oscar when he arrived.

A LITTLE later he stepped out of an elevator on the third floor of the *Graphic* building and the noisy hubbub of a newspaper rushing to press was all about him. A harassed looking red-headed reception girl regarded his big smiling figure with resignation.

"You'll have to wait, mister. Everybody's busy."

"I'm looking for Mary Cole, sister."

"Oh, her? She ain't here."

"When will she be in?"

"I dunno, and that's a fact, mister." The redhead shook her head. She spoke partly to herself. "What has that queen got that everybody comes after her tonight?"

"Everybody?" Mr. Maddox chuckled.

"You make three or four in the last half hour, mister. They ain't all calls from the office here. The gentleman right behind you says he'll stay here till morning. Guess you better sit with him. Mr. John Wells, the editor, don't even know where Miss Cole is, and that's a fact."

The man who would wait until morning for Mary Cole was the young Navy lieutenant who had got off the plane with her. Mr. Maddox sat down beside him.

"We seem to be crossing trails tonight, Lieutenant. Or do you remember me?"

"I remember you." The young lieutenant lighted a fresh cigarette and stared glumly at the floor. His face was weathered and he had the youthful mature look of one who has been tested and strengthened by danger.

"I hope Miss Cole isn't having any trouble."

That remark got all the attention Mr. Maddox desired. Hard blue eyes regarded him. "What do you mean by that? What trouble could she be having?"

"You've seen her since I have," Mr. Maddox reminded amiably.

"Why make such a remark?" Navy was not a young man to have trouble with. He looked like trouble now.

Mr. Maddox chuckled softly. "Hold it, son. Why so worked up about Miss Cole?"

"I'm nothing of the sort."

"I'll bet you are."

Ringling telephones, voices, the fast slap of typewriters, the growl of presses in the basement throbbed around them. Young Navy and the vast and impressive Joe Maddox sat side by side and young Navy seemed to sense some of the friendly shrewdness that emanated from the big man, the result of thirty years of contact with racetrack crowds and the betting public.

A stiff and finally sheepish smile was followed by the admission: "I am worried."

Mr. Maddox took a fat black cigar from his coat pocket and was deliberate in lighting it. "Nice chap Miss Cole is reported engaged to," he commented vaguely. "Know him?"

"Engaged?"

A man had to be hit hard to say one groggy and hurt word like that. Mr. Maddox had a quick pang of guilt for meddling. Earlier in the evening he had noticed that the young lieutenant had gone overboard for Mary Cole. Now the tanned, strong young face had a sick look. Mr. Maddox grimly reminded himself that Cassidy was callously hunting facts. And the facts added up to murder, with Joe Maddox on the guilty end.

Mr. Maddox heard the young man mumble: "I guess that explains it." The wiry, tanned figure stood up slowly. His smile at Mr. Maddox was forced. "Thanks. I might have sat around all night waiting for her."

"Wait a minute, son."

The lieutenant already was heading for the elevator. Other people waiting on the reception room benches stared curiously as Mr. Maddox quickly followed.

Navy was entering the elevator when Mr. Maddox caught up with him. They rode down with other passengers in silence. They walked out of the building together. The wind was cold outside and yet neither man thought of an overcoat. Mr. Maddox had to step out with a long stride, overcoat on his arm, to keep pace.

"You're striking colors mighty easy for the Navy, son," he said calmly. "I might have been wrong about that engagement."

"I doubt it," was the stiff answer he got.

"D'you mind an old meddler butting in?"

"I should. Don't know why I'm listening to you." A shrug. "I suppose it's because you were on the plane with us, and I don't know anyone else in this blasted city."

"Those," said Mr. Maddox, "Are two good reasons. I'm curious as to what my remark about Miss Cole's engagement explained about her."

"Everything. This in particular." Still striding, the young man handed a folded note to Mr. Maddox. "I was on a cloud," he said bitterly. "I didn't know how fast and far a man could drop. You made it quite clear why she sent me that note after I left her tonight."

"Did you see her after she went to the Alcazar?"

The young man looked at him. "I didn't know she went to the Alcazar."

Mary Cole's handwriting was firm with fine slanting strokes.

Dear Phil,

I don't know how to say it—I suppose I'm a louse for having to say it—It was nice knowing you, Phil, even for so short a time. We left the ground together and had our moment in the sky. So nice in the sky, wasn't it, Phil? We were a little idiotic, weren't we? So before anyone gets hurt, the best of luck to you, Phil Hayden, and think nicely of me. I shall of you—even though we'll probably not meet again. Mary.

Mr. Maddox returned the note in silence.

Phil Hayden said harshly: "I'll never get a smoother brush-off." He swallowed. "How could a girl be like—like she was, when it was phony?"

"You didn't misunderstand, er, a little extra friendliness?" Mr. Maddox suggested.

Phil Hayden laughed with the same harsh note. "No, I didn't misunderstand. This was IT. I told her so. You don't misunderstand arms and lips and a voice that says this is IT, too." Young Hayden crumpled the note and hurled it over to the gutter. "No, you come back from hell a homesick fool who thinks any girl in the States is an angel with the truth on her lips."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Most of them are. And your Mary Cole sees too many important people to be dazzled by a lieutenant's uniform. You were there with her. Wasn't she an angel with the truth on her lips when she spoke it?"

Phil Hayden slowed his stride. "But the note! She meant that, too!"

"Talk to her before you lay a course over the horizon for good," Mr. Maddox urged.

The young man stopped and visibly wavered. "I will," he decided.

"I'd like to know the rest of it since I've meddled this far," Mr. Maddox suggested. "Drop me a telegram at the Morrissy, won't you? The name is Joe Maddox."

Navy looked at the broad smiling face and smiled, too. "You'll hear from me," he promised.

An hour later on the northbound train, Mr. Maddox weighed the matter of Mary Cole, who had rushed north by plane from Miami and had found love for a few brief hours. Only after that meeting with Ben Strong in the Alcazar had she turned away from love. Mr. Maddox stared out at the light snow which was falling in the starlight. He would have bet a thousand to a hundred that Mary Cole had been crying when she wrote the note

to young Hayden. It took some powerful reason to black out new and heady love. Some reason as strong and powerful, perhaps, as murder.

CHAPTER THREE

Stooge for Murder

NEW YORK was cold, with snow and ice on the streets through which Mr. Maddox taxied to a hotel room. He was stiff from sitting up all night and dozing fitfully. A warm tub, comfortable bed, deep sleep would have been welcome.

Mr. Maddox had the tub, then he dressed again and went out. His destination was a third-floor apartment, off Seventh Avenue, north of Times Square.

He had to ring for some minutes before the door was opened by a bleary-eyed man in violent purple pajamas and a cerise silk dressing gown which fumbling fingers were still trying to belt.

"M'God! Joe Maddox! Go 'way, Joe! It ain't hardly nine o'clock!"

Mr. Maddox walked in, chuckling. "Wake up, Ernie. It won't kill you to look around before afternoon. I'm in a hurry."

Ernie the Creep was in his late forties. The bags under his eyes would recede a little by evening when Ernie started to circulate through night-time Manhattan. Toward morning Ernie would have a new list of gossip items, most of them with sales value to the popular columnists of New York life. A little scavenging at dice and poker games or a deal turned here and there would add to the night's

YOU RATE A
STAR FOR GOOD
APPEARANCE!

THAT'S BECAUSE
I USE A STAR
FOR GOOD SHAVES!

STAR
SINGLE EDGE

4 for 10¢

STAR
DOUBLE EDGE
6NX PROCESS

take. Ernie did very well for himself and was a living directory of the noon-to-dawn world between the Battery and the Bronx.

Ernie yawned, looked out a window and shivered. "I heard you were in Miami, Joe. What's got you burned up on a mornin' like this?"

"I bet myself a thousand you could keep your mouth shut and work fast," Mr. Maddox said cheerfully.

Ernie blinked. "For a grand I'm a clam an' a ball of fire. Wait'll I get a drink in me."

Ernie took gin straight, half a glass of it, and a scant swallow of water. His hands were steadier as he lighted a straw-tipped cigarette.

"I want to find Lithpy Ligget," Mr. Maddox said. "Know him?"

Ernie had to think a moment. "He's got gold teeth, an' he's always peddlin' a horse when he's in town."

"That's Lithpy. He took a train out of Washington yesterday. That's all I know. Maybe he's in town, maybe not. Somebody might know where he is." Mr. Maddox took a thousand-dollar bill from his wallet. Ernie licked his lips. His face fell as Mr. Maddox tore the bill in half. "Not that I don't trust you, Ernie. But I'm in a hurry and you won't be the only one I have looking for Lithpy. Get me something I can use before I find out somewhere else, and you've got the rest of it."

"That ain't no way to do business, Joe."

Mr. Maddox chuckled as Ernie the Creep pocketed the torn half of the bill. "That's to keep you awake and worrying about the rest of it. Call me at the Astor."

Two hours later, Mr. Maddox was in bed. The meshes of a net he had spread were screening all that part of New York which might have any knowledge of Lithpy Ligget. And for good measure he had added another thousand for information about the jockey Vincy Braddo.

It was big money. But time was racing. There was no top to the cost on murder. Ben Strong, Lithpy Ligget, and probably the girl in the squirrel coat had all left Washington. Here in New York where all threads of the sporting world centered was as good a place as any to intercept those scattered strands of murder.

The telephone bell blasted Mr. Maddox out of uneasy sleep. His watch said it was two-thirty as he yawned and heard the hurried voice of Ernie the Creep.

"You paid out yet for findin' that guy, Maddox?"

"No."

"Bring the other half of the grand to Hoyt Street station, over here in Brooklyn."

"Brooklyn? Is Lithpy Ligget over there?"

"Come over an' see," said Ernie. His yawn came over the wire. "I'm walkin' in my sleep.

This sure is a hell of a way to earn dough."

Mr. Maddox hurried. He hadn't really believed that Ernie the Creep or anyone else in town would locate the little track tout so quickly. New York had been only a hunch to start from.

The Seventh Avenue subway sped Mr. Maddox under the East River to Brooklyn. Ernie the Creep, in a belted camel's hair coat, cream silk muffler, tan gloves and a snap-brim hat, was waiting on the subway platform.

Ernie's pouchy eyes looked as though the night and day had been long and hard. He yawned again before he spoke, and then it was brief. "Let's go." Ernie led the way to a taxi, gave the driver an address, and collapsed in a corner of the seat, eyes closed. "Ain't another guy in New York could'a run that guy down so quick," Ernie said, eyes still closed. "Lemme feel the rest of that money, Joe."

"I'll let you look at it," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "No Lithpy, no dough. When you pay off I pay off."

"You'd think," said Ernie, eyes still closed, "I was a heel with my hand in your pocket."

Mr. Maddox chuckled again and did not dispute the statement. Ernie grinned faintly and yawned again. They were riding toward Flatbush Avenue.

"He keeps a room in a flea bag over here," Ernie murmured. "His key ain't in the rack. The clerk says he musta come in early this mornin'."

"Did you talk to him?"

"An' maybe have him lam an' cost me a grand?" Ernie said reproachfully. "I found where he is. You buy the admission with your grand an' do all the talkin'."

They wheeled down Flatbush Avenue and around a corner, then stopped. Ernie paid the fare and pointed to a small, dingy, brick hotel across the street. A faded sign said *Garden Terrace Hotel*.

"Top floor," Ernie said. "Room 507, at the back. I'll go up with you an' collect when he answers the door. Then watch me sleep a year."

Ernie was stepping off the curb when Mr. Maddox stopped him with a big, emphatic hand. "Keep quiet" Mr. Maddox snapped as Ernie started to protest.

ONLY one man in the East had that slender, conservative, brisk look, hat just a shade at an angle. He should have been in Washington. But here he was, coming out of the dingy Garden Terrace, off Flatbush Avenue, in Brooklyn, and hurrying to the corner without looking to right or left. Harris Forney looked all business, without a moment to waste.

"You know that guy?" Ernie asked.

"He looks familiar."

Mr. Maddox started to cross the street, still watching Harris Forney. Ernie the Creep's hand snatched at his elbow just as a taxi horn blared. The fender missed Mr. Maddox by scant inches.

He caught a glimpse of the girl inside. She was leaning forward, speaking to the driver. He couldn't be sure whether she had noticed him or not. But he was sure about her fur coat. Her fine and clean-lined profile was unmistakable. She was Mary Cole and her taxi turned into Flatbush Avenue in the direction Harris Forney had taken.

"You won't last long sleep-walkin' that way," said Ernie. "That hackie pulled out from the curb quick. He was listenin' to the dame inside an' didn't see you."

"I've been away too long," Mr. Maddox said. "Let's see if Lithpy's in, to cinch your thousand."

An elderly and seedy-looking clerk was reading a newspaper behind the desk. Ernie punched a button in the elevator and they went up slowly.

On the fifth floor a threadbare carpet over creaky boards led back to 507. A radio was playing loudly at the front of the floor. Ernie sniffed and wrinkled his nose. The stale smells of the years seemed layered on the dingy walls. A baby was screaming on the floor below, and a key was in the lock of 507.

Ernie poked a finger at the key and grinned with satisfaction. Mr. Maddox knocked, then knocked again. Ernie turned the key and walked in.

"I'm too sleepy to wait," Ernie said. "If the guy is here he's here. If he's down the hall he'll be back. I want that dough—" Ernie stopped moving and talking so suddenly that Mr. Maddox bumped him from behind.

Over Ernie's head Mr. Maddox saw what had frozen Ernie to the spot.

A hand lay on the worn carpet beyond the open door of the clothes closet. Only the hand was visible from where they had stopped, like the hand that had rested at the end of the fireplace log in Ben Strong's study.

The fingers of this hand were curled very slightly, peacefully, so that the deep red nails almost touched the palm. The owner might have been sleeping there on the floor behind the open door.

Ernie shuddered. He backed a step into Mr. Maddox's big figure. The baby still wailed on the floor below. The radio played loudly.

"I don't like it!" Ernie's thick whisper said. "Let's get outa here!"

Mr. Maddox put a big hand between Ernie's narrow shoulders and pushed. They both stepped forward until they could see behind the door.

Her squirrel coat was in a heap on the floor of the closet, beside her. Her black hair was neatly parted, waved back, caught up behind the ears. The lipstick and the rouge were not so vivid on her face now as they had been the night before.

The unnatural flush in her cheeks was the reason. Her swollen tongue protruded between clenched teeth. She had bitten hard as she died. A trickle of blood wandered over the lip rouge. On her neck were the dark marks where rough hands had choked her.

"God!" Ernie said in a strangled mutter. He shuddered again. He would have bolted, past reasoning for the moment, if Mr. Maddox had not caught his upper arm.

"Running won't help," Mr. Maddox said softly. "Use your head, Ernie."

"I got the sh-shakes!"

"Go on and shake. I'll look"

Ernie shook, biting his lip. Mr. Maddox stood big and blank-faced, studying the dead girl. It was easy to understand now why she had been taut and fearful the previous night as she hurried across the dim, cold courtyard of Ben Strong's Washington castle.

The baby stopped wailing. Down the hall the elevator doors opened. Ernie stiffened, they both listened. Steps went forward in the hall and a door opened and closed.

Mr. Maddox sighed. "For a thousand," he said softly, "I bought *this*."

"They'll say we done it!" Ernie whispered. "I was askin' about this room a while ago!"

"Keep quiet!" Mr. Maddox ordered.

If the girl had a purse, it was not visible. If Liggett had a suitcase around, it was not in sight. Mr. Maddox urged Ernie the Creep toward the bureau. He used a handkerchief between his fingers and the drawers he opened.

The drawers held a few odds and ends of shirts, socks, underwear, some old racing papers and racetrack charts of the late summer months. There was not a sign that Lithpy Liggett meant to return to the room.

Ernie the Creep knew his New York and what he could expect. Mr. Maddox knew more than that. Arrest would mean newspaper headlines and the quick arrival of Cassidy from Washington. Joe Maddox would be locked up without a chance to get bail.

Try and tell hard-boiled Homicide men about Lithpy Liggett. What was there to tell? A phantom phone call in Washington the previous night? Ask them to get Ben Strong's confidential secretary into the picture? Just ask them—and hear the laugh.

"I gotta have a drink!" Ernie the Creep moaned. "They'll sweat us! You know what they'll do to us if we don't confess to this, Joe?"

"First," said Mr. Maddox, "they'll have to arrest us."

Ernie licked his lips. "I don't getcha."

"We're going out of here, Ernie. I'll do the talking. Not a word from you."

Ernie's pouchy eyes indicated little faith, but he nodded. The hall was empty when Mr. Maddox stepped out first. He closed the door quietly after Ernie had dropped the key in his pocket.

"Remember the key," Mr. Maddox said. "No tag on it."

THE creaky elevator bore them slowly down. Mr. Maddox stepped out first. He was chuckling as he veered toward the desk and caught the curious eye of the elderly clerk.

"Mr. Ligget doesn't seem to be in his room. Know when we can catch him?"

"Nope. Don't even know him. I ain't been workin' here but three days." The clerk peered past Mr. Maddox at Ernie. "Ain't Ligget the one in 507? The one that man there was askin' about a little while ago?"

"Correct," said Mr. Maddox heartily. "Has Ligget had any other visitors today?"

"Don't know. His key's out. If he ain't in his room, I don't know where he is. We're short-handed. I keep busy an' don't see everyone that goes up an' down. Want to leave a message?"

"We'll try him again," said Mr. Maddox blandly.

They walked out.

"All the keys in the rack had metal tags," Mr. Maddox said. "I wonder why that key in the door didn't have one?"

"T'hell with that. I gotta have a drink!" Ernie said desperately. "God! If I'm picked up on a juicy murder like this, I don't know how I'll come outa it!"

"The more reason to keep your mouth shut," Mr. Maddox suggested.

He was thinking hard. Harris Forney had entered and left the hotel without leaving much trace. It must have been Forney who had left the key in the lock.

Only two people could swear that Forney had been here. One was Ernie the Creep, who sold hot news to the highest bidder. And what a price Ernie would put on this if he were sure he wouldn't be charged with murder!

The other person who knew about Forney was Mary Cole, who intended to marry Forney and had evidently come to Brooklyn with him.

They stopped to get Ernie a drink. It became two drinks and would have been more if Mr. Maddox hadn't ordered a stop.

"Do you want to burn for killing that dame?" Mr. Maddox asked as they went to the subway.

Ernie shivered. "What are we gonna do, Joe?"

"First you keep sober. Keep awake. You

won't be able to sleep anyway. Then circulate and find out where Ligget might be."

"I asked too many people already where he might be. Soon as his name gets in the papers they'll start rememberin' I was lookin' for him! Joe, the heat's on me!" Ernie gulped. "I'm gonna come clean at Headquarters!"

"You dope! Why ask for trouble when you're doing all right now?"

"The hell I am!" Ernie groaned.

"Well, come up to my hotel and we'll think it over."

Ernie nodded. He seemed to want company. Mr. Maddox didn't blame him. Only Ernie didn't know how bad it was. Two cold-blooded murders were going to put someone in the electric chair—and Joe Maddox seemed to be the people's choice.

On the subway back to Manhattan, Mr. Maddox had a thought. He steered Ernie the Creep out at Chambers Street and looked in a telephone directory. His hunch was right.

The Ben Strong papers did not have a New York paper, but they did have a New York office.

Lucian Holmes, of Brown, Bonesteel, Buckner and Holmes, advertising, had once borrowed fifty from Mr. Maddox at Belmont track so his girl wouldn't suspect how broke he really was. Lucian had been a young copywriter in those days.

Holmes was in conference when Mr. Maddox telephoned, while Ernie waited nervously outside the booth. "Tell Lucian it's Joe Maddox and important," Mr. Maddox said.

His man was quickly on the wire.

"This will sound screwy," Mr. Maddox told him. "Can you call the Ben Strong news bureau and find out where Harris Forney, Ben Strong's secretary, stops when he's in town? I want the same thing about Miss Mary Cole, one of their feature writers. Might as well add Ben Strong himself to the list. I want to know if they're in New York now, and where I can reach them."

Lucian Holmes whistled. "Some order, Joe! I'm curious."

"Might tell you later. No can do now."

"I'll call Ed Mather, their advertising representative, Joe. He'll know if anyone does, or he can find out. What's your phone number?"

Mr. Maddox had to wait almost ten minutes. Ernie the Creep was badly in need of another drink before Lucian Holmes called back to the booth where they were waiting.

"Ben Strong," said Lucian, "is at his breeding farm, near Galtville, New Jersey. At least he was before lunch. Harris Forney is at the Chadwick. Couldn't find out anything about Miss Cole."

"I gotta have a drink!" Ernie said desperately.

"You can last until we get to the Astor bar," Mr. Maddox said flatly.

At the Astor, Mr. Maddox left Ernie to the company of a gin bottle and walked in to the desk. Other sources might have uncovered more information about Lithpy Ligget. There were no messages. Mr. Maddox turned away from the desk and bumped into a waiting figure.

"Pardon," Mr. Maddox said politely.

Cassidy's voice answered: "No hurry, Joe. You're not going anywhere."

It was the way Cassidy said it, cold and determined, without any friendliness at all, that warned Mr. Maddox what to expect.

"WE'LL talk in your room," Cassidy said stolidly.

Mr. Maddox shrugged. All that was needed now was Ernie the Creep talking, confessing. Ernie was still in the bar when they reached the elevators. Cassidy was silent on the ride up. When they were in Mr. Maddox' room, Cassidy pulled out a police photo.

"Know this man, Joe?"

Mr. Maddox studied the narrow-shouldered stranger. There was the thin, lined face, the build of a jockey. It was a younger looking man than the stranger whose body had been doubled out of sight behind the fireplace logs in Ben Strong's study. But it was the same man, beyond a doubt.

"Why should I know him?" Mr. Maddox asked calmly.

"I got it out of the *Ledger* files in Washington," Cassidy said, taking back the print. "It's been there for years, in case something should break."

"You don't say?"

"Yeah," said Cassidy. "He's Ben Strong's half-brother. Name is Waldo Strong. Know where Waldo is now, Joe?"

Cassidy's cold blue eyes watched Mr. Maddox' face.

"You tell me, Cassidy."

"Last night I didn't do so good at Strong's place," Cassidy said, watching closely.

"Didn't think you would."

"This morning I went back. The Forney guy was gone. Out of town, the servant said. You know me, Joe. When I want a body, I got to have a body. Isn't it funny?"

"It kills me."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Cassidy. "Last night it turned a lot colder. There was a little snow. It was dry snow. You could brush it off easily with a hat. When I got through brushing, Joe, guess where Waldo was?"

"I wouldn't miss it," Mr. Maddox said cordially. "Surprise me."

"It won't surprise you the way it did me, Joe. The water froze over again after Waldo

was dumped in. But the broken ice stayed a little rough. Looking close, as I was, you could see where Waldo went in. It's clear ice, Joe. Window-glass ice, but you can stand on it this morning. Waldo's back there in the moat, with his eyes staring up at the sunshine. I was standing on his face when I saw him."

"Poor Waldo," Mr. Maddox murmured. He took off his hat piously. "I'll bet you tried to kick his face, Cassidy. You'd go for a little touch like that, wouldn't you?"

"I'm keeping my temper," Cassidy said. "Waldo's face was clear enough so that I could describe him to the servants. They still think he's alive. When they spilled who he was, I got the dope on Waldo from the *Ledger*. Newspapers are like people—your competitors know more about you than you do. And Ben Strong's not one to have friends cover up for him."

"I'm listening."

"Ben Strong inherited a small newspaper and some cash from his old man," said Cassidy. "Waldo got the rest of the cash and blew his share in fast. Since then Waldo's been hitting the high spots when he had it and putting the touch on Ben Strong when he was broke."

"The perfect half-brother."

"Yeah," said Cassidy. "Now Waldo's dead and you're the guy who was talking murder last night. And a little blackmail, too, I guess. Did you think Waldo was Ben Strong when you killed him, Joe? They're about the same build. A man could make an honest mistake when the light wasn't right."

"Nuts!"

"And right after you went to Ben Strong's house and walked away on foot, you were talking four grand to Harris Forney," said Cassidy. "That sounds like blackmail—as though you weren't paid enough."

"Nuts!" said Mr. Maddox again.

Cassidy smiled coldly.

"Your Washington hotel said you'd left the Astor as a forwarding address. I grabbed a plane, Joe. Let's go back and get Waldo out from under the ice and sign a confession."

"Nuts!" said Mr. Maddox a third time.

"If it's got to be an extradition I'll pick up that telephone and blow everything sky-high," said Cassidy.

Mr. Maddox put a hand in his pocket. Cassidy stepped back quickly and dragged a revolver out of a shoulder holster.

Mr. Maddox pulled out a roll of candy mints and put one on his tongue. He chuckled. Cassidy watched him, scowling.

"First I kill Ben Strong," Mr. Maddox said. "Then one way or another I kill his half-brother and put the body under the ice in the moat. That needs a strong alibi."

"Hah! Strong is right, Joe!"

"Why not? I had an escort last night. Remember? A fat-headed flatfoot followed me to Ben Strong's house and watched me leave. A dumb flatfoot; Cassidy, but he won't swear to a lie. Will he? His right hand will go up and he'll swear I wasn't out around that moat last night."

Cassidy's face began to get red.

"Poor Waldo," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Maybe he walked in his sleep. Or he might have grown tired of it all. But why come clear up here to New York to find the one man who you can swear did not put Waldo under the ice?" Mr. Maddox offered the mints. "Why not put that gun away before you hurt yourself?" he suggested blandly.

Cassidy began to swear. For a full minute Cassidy cursed softly and intensely without repeating himself. Mr. Maddox listened with growing admiration.

"I'll lay you four to one you don't even know about the second murder," Mr. Maddox remarked.

Cassidy stopped with his mouth open. "What murder?" he demanded, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"A Masterton man is always the last to know," said Mr. Maddox sadly. "Well, no brains, no luck."

Cassidy put the gun away.

"If you're kidding me, Joe... What do you know? How do you know it?"

"Pals?"

Cassidy put out his hand. "Pals," he said. "If you've got something hot, I'll stay clean with you, Joe—all the way."

"I wish I could be sure."

"So help me, Joe! Look, who's dead now?" Cassidy licked his lips. "Ben Strong?"

Mr. Maddox whistled softly. "So you know? Why didn't you tell me instead of stalling?"

"I guessed, Joe. Where's the body? Has it been found yet?"

"I doubt it."

"Well, where."

"Go to the Waldorf, Cassidy. Room 2317. You'll have to get the house dick to let you in. Look in the bathroom. But after you break it, remember you're with me, not against me."

"I'm with you all the way," Cassidy said. "All the way, Joe—right to the chair! Do I look like a stooge for murder? I'll just put this bracelet on you and we'll look in that bathroom together."

Cassidy shook the wrist cuff open and grabbed for Mr. Maddox' left wrist. Mr. Maddox moved slightly. His big right fist hit Cassidy on the point of the jaw. Cassidy grunted slightly and collapsed.

"I don't know what you look like—but not a pal, you louse!" Mr. Maddox growled, rubbing knuckles.

He heaved Cassidy into the clothes closet and locked the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Master of South Park

IT TOOK a matter of seconds to stuff things in his bag and get out of the room. Luck was with him at the cashier window. A minute or two there and he had checked out.

Ernie the Creep was nursing a tall one when Mr. Maddox plucked him away from the bar. "Hey! I wanna finish this one!"

"Don't argue!"

Ernie took one look at Mr. Maddox' set face and came silently.

"The Chadwick," Mr. Maddox told a taxi driver outside.

"What gives?" Ernie asked with fresh apprehension.

"We're on the lam."

"I don't want to lam!" Then Ernie sighed: "Yes I do if they're gonna grab us."

"Stay with me and we've got a chance,"

Mr. Maddox said with scant comfort.

Ernie could put any meaning to that he cared to, and his expectations covered the worst by the time they reached the Chadwick. "Hold the taxi and watch my bag," Mr. Maddox directed.

The Chadwick desk clerk said that Harris Forney had checked out. Mary Cole had been registered but had also checked out.

They missed a railroad train and had to wait. Ernie lit one cigarette after another. Mr. Maddox watched for Cassidy.

"I was a hog," Ernie said bitterly. "Why did I want a grand? Why'd I open the door when you knocked this morning?"

"Because you were a hog," Mr. Maddox chuckled, and lest Ernie get a measure of control and want to leave, he added: "Stick close to me and I don't think you'll burn."

Ernie shuddered.

Galtville, New Jersey, was a small and busy-looking town, ringed with grimy factories. They walked away from the railroad station and Ernie groaned: "I need a drink."

"You're staying sober."

Ernie had dozed several times in the crowded train coach. Now in the last of the gray daylight his Broadway nattiness looked rumpless and his eyes looked blearier than ever.

Mr. Maddox regarded Ernie the Creep and sighed inwardly. Things were bad enough. Ernie made them worse. He was a liability. But left alone in New York, Ernie would surely have blown up and talked. And time would have been cut still shorter. Mr. Maddox signaled a passing cab.

"Whyn't you catch a hack at the station?" Ernie complained.

"If we were followed from New York, the station cabs would be the first ones they'd check. This gives us a little more time."

"We can't keep on the lam like this," Ernie protested miserably. "I ain't even got pajamas. In fifteen years I ain't been so far outa New York."

"You might not have time to sleep." Mr. Maddox said callously as the taxi came to the curb. "A little country air, away out west here in New Jersey, will do you good, if your lungs can stand it." And to the driver, Mr. Maddox said: "Can you take us out to Ben Strong's South Park Farm? Know where it is?"

"Everybody knows where South Park is," said the gray-haired driver cheerfully. "It's nearly fifteen miles, but I go out there every now and then. Some place!"

"Let's go."

The pale gray evening was over the snowy landscape when the taxi turned through stone gateposts. Mr. Maddox had seen many great breeding farms but he looked out with some admiration at the dimly visible barns and buildings and the neat paddock fences.

South Park was a little better than average among the larger stables of the country. It probably didn't pay, but then Ben Strong could afford to lose money. He got back publicity, interest outside his business, and a show place near New York in which to entertain, impress, relax.

The house was early English, of old red brick, ivy-covered, stately, impressive with its side wings. A fit setting for the Lord of the Manor, for the great gentleman surveying his rolling acres. A great gentleman who perhaps earlier would have been a knight riding out in brave armor.

The taxi swept up the rise on which the great house stood with huge trees surrounding it. Mr. Maddox was smiling faintly as he got out. Ben Strong's ego was a mighty thing. He had climbed far on the success ladder from that first small inherited newspaper.

But the great frame of history into which Ben Strong's ego wished to fit was like the collar of a giant buttoned on a midget. A wasp-waisted, bellowing, vitriolic midget could not snarl and buy his way into greatness and respect.

The front door of the house opened as Mr. Maddox walked toward it, leaving Ernie in the taxi. A girl carrying a light traveling case hurried down the steps.

She called to Mr. Maddox: "Is that the taxi for Miss Cole?"

"Not this one, sister," Mr. Maddox answered blandly. "Are you hurrying back to Phil Hayden?"

She stopped close to him. Her startled breath was audible. Her face was in shadow

but the gleaming house windows spilled light on the snow and the taxi headlights were on and starlight was over all. She recognized Mr. Maddox.

"What do you mean? What do you know about Phil Hayden?" she asked uncertainly. But she was shaken. She stood unceremoniously.

"You wouldn't believe the things I know, sister," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Is Ben Strong in there?"

"Yes."

"Harris Forney?"

"Yes."

"Nice," Mr. Maddox said. "Would there be a gentleman by the name of Lithpy Liggett on the property?"

Mary Cole swallowed. "I don't understand. Did—did Mr. Strong ask you here?"

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "I'm the skeleton at the feast. Stick around, kid, and watch me rattle. Or are you giving Harris Forney the brush-off this time and rushing back to Lieutenant Hayden?"

"You—you've seen Phil!"

"He was easy picking, wasn't he, sister?" Mr. Maddox said sarcastically. "One more pushover for a smart newspaper hen who had time to kill on an airplane trip."

"Don't talk to me like that!"

Mr. Maddox snorted.

"They bite easy, don't they, when they've been away from the home girls a long time?"

"You have no right—"

"Were you thinking about Harris Forney when you were cuddling up to Phil Hayden? Were you getting a laugh out of it? Did Forney think it was funny. Or did—"

"Stop!" She was crying almost soundlessly there in the starlight. "Mr. Strong told me you were Joe Maddox, the bookmaker. I—I think you're a devil!"

Mr. Maddox could have told her he was a calculating and hardboiled gentleman with murder at his heels. He had done what he hoped to do. The clever newspaper girl was off balance, her emotions running riot over her reasoning. He was relieved to see that her emotions could be so easily involved.

"I understand love," Mr. Maddox told her. "You don't kick love around, sister. You hold it. You cherish and protect it. You don't find love and then give it a quick brush-off."

MR. MADDOX watched closely while she wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"How could I know I'd meet Phil and—and care for him?" Mary Cole said unsteadily. "Harris Forney and I were ready to break up. We just hadn't bothered to say it. I was going to tell Harris about Phil last night."

"Why didn't you?"

She seemed to think it natural to be defending herself out here in the cold starlight.

"When you find that the man you're supposed to be engaged to is in trouble, you don't run like a rat from a sinking ship. You stand by. You try to help if you can, even when you know you might have to hurt because it's your duty to hurt."

"Riddles," Mr. Maddox said. "No sense to what you're saying."

"There is! I work for Mr. Strong, even if I'm engaged to Harris Forney." Mary Cole blew her nose again. "I don't know why I'm talking to you. I don't care what you think about anything."

"Why should you care?" Mr. Maddox agreed blandly. "Even if I'm thinking about murder."

"I don't know what you mean."

Mr. Maddox had his moment of doubt. She was staring at him, handkerchief in one hand, traveling case in the other hand, with surprise, concern, puzzled question in her manner. She didn't seem to recoil with any guilt at his mention of murder.

"Stick around and see what I mean," Mr. Maddox told her.

"I certainly will!" She turned back to the house with him. "There are guests inside who were invited some time ago. Mr. Strong had to come from Washington to be with them. I'm sure they'll not be interested in anything you have on your mind."

"Who are they?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Winfield, J. J. Holland and his wife, Gorthy Gough, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Scott and a Paul Bragdon."

"Three of the biggest racing stables—Gough, of the New York Racing Commission, and Bragdon, the racing writer. Anything on their collective minds?"

"Something to do with stricter rules in racing after the sports blackout is over, I think."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "I wonder if Ben Strong is going to add welshing on bets to the program. You're right, sister. I don't think Ben Strong's guests will be interested—if Ben Strong can help it."

Mary Cole looked at him doubtfully, then she opened the house door and walked in ahead of him without knocking. "They haven't dined. I think Mr. Strong is in his room."

Ben Strong, in a dinner jacket, came through a doorway on the left, saying: "Does someone want—"

He stopped short, swelling with irritation. "What the devil are you doing here, Maddox?"

"Where's your brother, your half-brother, I mean?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"How the devil should I know? What business is it of yours?" Ben Strong was working himself into one of his rages. His voice was rising.

"Waldo's dead," Mr. Maddox said curtly.

Ben Strong deflated. "Good!" he said, and seemed to mean it. "Hear that Miss Cole? Or did you know it?"

"Of course not, Mr. Strong."

"I should be sorry, but I'm not," said Ben Strong. "Kindest thing that could have happened to him. He's never been anything but trouble and worry to me. The doctors warned him that his heart would give out if he didn't stop drinking and living the kind of life he led. Waldo just laughed about it. But what business is it of yours, Maddox? Don't tell me you came here to tell me that news?"

"Why not?" said Mr. Maddox amiably. "Waldo died in your study in Washington. He was murdered. You left Washington in a hurry shortly after it happened. You wouldn't know who had Waldo killed, would you? Or have the police asked you that yet?"

Once in a lifetime you see a man turned inside out. You see the strutting, confident shell shattered and the raw fear and weakness inside laid bare and shrinking.

Mr. Maddox could have told the wasp-waisted little man more than Ben Strong himself probably realized. A knight in shining armor made a sorry figure in murder headlines. The Lord of the Estate, the Master of South Park, the shouting head of the Ben Strong chain of newspapers, would never be the same after fighting charges that he had murdered his brother.

The strut was suddenly smashed out of him, and what was left was not too pretty to see. Not in Ben Strong.

"I think you're lying, Maddox!"

"And that girl in the squirrel coat you had to dinner at the Alcazar last night—did you know she was murdered today also? Choked to death? Haven't the cops asked you about that yet?"

"Liar!" said Ben Strong. He was not blustering now. He was choked and almost furtive. He took a step back and looked into the room he had just left to see if anyone were listening. His sharp face looked drawn, bloodless.

"She was murdered in Brooklyn, in a cheap little hotel called the Garden Terrace," Mr. Maddox said.

Mary Cole caught her breath again. She had been listening with eyes wide, apparently uncomprehending. Now her face went drawn, too. She looked as though a heavy blow had struck her. Blood left her face and a deep and terrible fright came into her eyes. She dropped the light traveling case she had been holding, and wasn't even aware that it had fallen.

Something like horror was in her look as she watched Mr. Maddox.

"Come with me," said Ben Strong huskily.

HE LED them into a wing of the house, and into a library somber with dark wood paneling. The room was very quiet when Strong closed the door.

"Where's Harris Forney?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"He got in from New York a couple of hours ago with Miss Cole. They met at the Chadwick, where our people usually stay."

"Where's Forney now?"

"Said he was going over to the farm office and talk with Ed Kobbe, my trainer." Ben Strong rubbed his forehead. "Waldo murdered," he said thinly. "That Lawrence girl killed, too." He swallowed. "I don't understand. What was she doing in New York?" He looked at Mary Cole. "You told me you didn't have any luck in New York."

Mary looked subdued. She was biting her lip.

"It didn't seem like luck to me." She caught Mr. Maddox' look. "I didn't know anything about murder. How could I? You see I—well, I thought Harris went into that hotel to see a man named Ligget."

"Am I crazy, or is everyone else crazy?" Ben Strong exploded. The outburst was a hollow imitation of his usual vituperative self.

"Nothing crazy about murder," Mr. Maddox said evenly.

"You don't have to tell me! But what was Forney doing in that place? I'm taking Maddox' word that the girl was found dead there," Ben Strong said spitefully.

"She was," Mr. Maddox said, completely unmoved.

Ben Strong's spiteful anger began to build up. "Forney was at my Washington place last night, too. Waldo was murdered there, so Maddox says." A fist slapped a palm. "Damn Forney! He's worse than I thought!"

"And yet you trusted Harris," Mary said uncertainly.

"I'm not blind, Miss Cole. I don't trust anyone. I knew my half-brother was working on Forney with his ideas of easy money from shady cleverness. Forney lives around wealth and he's not satisfied with a salary."

"Any man wants to get ahead."

Ben Strong gave her an unpleasant smile.

"Forney's a good 'yes' man. He'll always work for someone else. I've been waiting to see how big a fool he could be in hunting easy money. I called you back from checking on that crooked jockey in Miami, and told you to find out some things about my brother, knowing you'd find Harris Forney involved in it before you were through."

Ben Strong had a flash of his old vindictive self as he smiled at her. "Since you were engaged to Forney, I wondered how much you'd report about him. You weren't going

to say anything, were you, until this man Maddox called your hand?"

"What jockey?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"Vincent Braddo, my contract jockey," said Ben Strong nastily. "The jockey, you recall, who rode that crooked race on another stable's horse and cost me a four thousand-dollar-bet."

"So you still think the race was crooked?"

"I'll prove it, and have Braddo put off the turf for life. I'll show him what it means to take chances with Ben Strong!"

"What made you finally decide to pay up on that bad check?" Mr. Maddox asked curiously.

"The check should have been good. Money had been embezzled from the account it was written against. I didn't know it when I wrote the check. Forney's trying to make me believe my half-brother did it, as Waldo had done before. Waldo wrote checks when he felt like it, and I had to make them good to avoid publicity."

Mr. Maddox blew a smoke ring and watched it. "What did Vincy Braddo get out of a crooked race?"

"You can be sure he was paid off!"

Mr. Maddox nodded.

"Vincy Braddo collected on a crooked race. Your brother Waldo had been writing checks against your account for years. You think Harris Forney tapped the till this time."

"I certainly do."

"Possible," Mr. Maddox admitted. "Forney gave me a runaround when I tried to get in touch with you about the check." Mr. Maddox smiled. "Who had the Lawrence girl to dinner last night, with two other young women?"

"I did," said Ben Strong, getting red.

"Yes. You had her out. But Forney was at the Brooklyn room where she was murdered. He was at your house last night when your brother was killed. You knew Forney had embezzled from you. Won't they say you put pressure on Forney to do a little homicide for you?"

A man-servant opened the library door.

"Dinner will be served in fifteen minutes, Mr. Strong. Your guests are downstairs."

"Get out!" Ben Strong blurted. "No, wait—tell 'em I'm not feeling well. Won't be able to dine with them. Don't disturb me again."

"Yes, sir."

Ben Strong looked sick as the door closed. "Damn your insinuations, Maddox!" he said thickly. "You're insinuating I instigated murder!"

"You've grown rich with that sort of insinuation in your newspapers," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "You should know how much it's worth to a grand jury. The newspapers that don't like you will give you all the break

they think a man like you ought to have."

Ben Strong looked sicker. "Those young women had endorsed checks on which Waldo had designed my name. None of the three girls knew about the others until I brought them together unexpectedly at the dinner table. Two of them were office girls Waldo had picked up. The third one was the Lawrence girl, and she wouldn't say anything. Not even when I threatened her with arrest."

"Did you ask her to go to your house from the Alcazar?" Mr. Maddox asked mildly.

"No."

"Had she ever been there before?"

"Certainly not."

"You don't know why she was in Brooklyn today?"

"How could I know?"

"Miss Cole, how did you know?"

"I didn't," said Mary Cole. "I was trying to find this man Ligget. He roomed with Vincy Braddo, the jockey, in Miami. I got his Brooklyn address in Miami. I thought if he was handled right, he could tell me something about the Lawrence girl and perhaps about that race Mr. Strong is interested in. When I saw Harris go in the hotel and come out, I didn't know what to think."

"What did you do?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"I followed Harris to his hotel. It was my hotel, too. When I spoke to him in the lobby he—he said he'd made a quick trip to New York on business and was coming to Galtsville on the next train. I said I had to come, too. I—he didn't tell me anything. I didn't say I knew he had been in Brooklyn."

"But you knew he was in trouble."

"Last night," said Mary Cole, and she was pale. "Harris said some money was missing and he expected serious difficulty—perhaps arrest. When I saw him in the Chadwick, he said things were no better, but he wouldn't explain. He asked me to trust him."

"I think," said Mr. Maddox, "we'd better see Harris Forney."

The library door opened and the same manservant spoke in a strained voice. "Mr. Strong, this person—"

"I'll tell it," Ernie the Creep's irritable voice broke in. Ernie shouldered into the room. "Maddox, he's out there!"

"Who the devil are you?" Ben Strong exploded.

Ernie's pouchy eyes were excited and frightened. "Ligget!" Ernie told Mr. Maddox. "He come *here* in a taxi. He seen me out in the open an' asked me if a guy named Forney was here. Then he recognized me an' almost had a fit. He didn't like me bein' here."

"Ligget!" Ben Strong said. "Here to see Forney!"

Mr. Maddox looked at them all and began

to smile. "I'll lay you odds this is the break," he said. "Strong, are you coming with me?"

Strong nodded uneasily and followed Mr. Maddox out of the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

Have Another Body

NOW and then life reaches a high point. Hope becomes a heady wine that sets nerves singing, and pulses pounding. Mr. Maddox had that feeling as he walked out into the night.

He could admit now that the past twenty-four hours had been a nightmare. Death was gruesome enough. Arrest for someone else's guilt was worse. You could move calmly, think calmly, but the nightmare was there behind it all.

Ernie had refused to stay behind. "If it's good news, I gotta see it," Ernie had insisted.

Mary Cole had said: "I'm going along. I want to hear everything."

Paths were cleanswept in dark lines through the starlight. The tall gaunt trees looked bleak and watching. Ben Strong's guests were quietly dining back in the big house. Here and there a light gleamed in the scattered outbuildings.

"Have you seen Vincy Braddo yesterday or today?" Mr. Maddox asked Ben Strong.

"I think he came in this afternoon," Ben Strong said crossly. "I haven't spoken to him, and don't know that I care to. He knows how I feel about that race."

"Queer he'd come here."

"He's still under contract to me. Has a small two-room cottage next to my trainer's house which he uses when he's on the farm. Keeps things in it when he's away riding."

"Did you send a message to my Washington hotel, asking me to see you at your home?"

"Blast your endless questions, Maddox. Yes, I did. Then I changed my mind and told Forney to get in touch with you. He told me that he did."

"Correct."

"I'm glad that's settled anyway."

Mr. Maddox said nothing. He was still filled with the heady feeling that the break was at hand. Harris Forney was cornered, and with him the elusive and necessary Lithpy Ligget.

The big white barn to which Ben Strong headed them along one of the walks was a majestic building. Only valuable thoroughbreds, each worth more than the home of an average man, could justify such luxurious housing of horseflesh.

The path ended in a parking space off a strip of driveway. A lighted door faced the parking area. Over Ben Strong's shoulder

Mr. Maddox could see through the door glass into the office. Walls were lightly-stained natural wood. Desk, bookshelves, filing cases were as businesslike as a skyscraper office. But then a breeding farm and racing stable of this size represented business in a large way.

Ben Strong stamped inside. He startled Harris Forney who was closing a door across the room which led into the cavernous depths of the barn.

"Where's Kobbe?" Ben Strong snapped.

"He went to his house to eat."

"Anyone else here?" Ben Strong looked suspiciously around the office.

Harris Forney smiled uncertainly. "I guess not." His eyes had widened as Mary Cole, Mr. Maddox, and Ernie walked in. "Quite a surprise to see you here, Maddox," Forney commented. He had the slender, brisk but conservative look, with dark hair combed smoothly, parted neatly. The smile stayed around his thin-lipped mouth as his glance roved from one to the other and came to rest on Mary Cole.

"You're certain no one else is here? Had no visitors?" Ben Strong persisted.

"No, sir," Forney's laugh was easy and a trifle apologetic. "Has anything happened?"

Mr. Maddox took a key from his coat pocket. A key without a hotel tag. He was like a big, expressionless Buddha as he held the key out for Forney to see.

"What's that?" Forney asked, eyebrows lifting.

"Yes, what is it?" Ben Strong asked irritably. "What are you up to now, Maddox?"

"You left it in the door, Forney." Mr. Maddox said. "Remember?"

Harris Forney remembered. It was as if hands had fastened on the smooth and genial front he kept to the world. Hands as brutal and merciless as the hands which had marked the smooth white throat in Lithpy Liggett's Brooklyn hotel room. Before their eyes Harris Forney stood in fear and stared

at the small brass key in the bookmaker's hand. "In Brooklyn," Mr. Maddox added.

"I didn't—I swear I didn't have anything to do with it!" Forney gasped. "Mary, what are they trying to do to me?"

"You were there," Mary Cole said huskily. "I saw you come out of that hotel. Mr. Maddox knows you were there."

"But I didn't do it! I went there to see a—a man. A key was in his door. I remember it now. I—I went in his room. And when I saw what was there I got out of the place as fast I could."

"Who was she?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"Glenda Lawrence." Forney had to lick his lips and swallow hard. "Don't stand there looking at me like that! She wasn't my girl. Why should I kill her?"

"Whose girl was she?" Mr. Maddox asked quietly.

Harris Forney drew a sighing breath. "Waldo Strong's girl, I guess. But she knew Liggett first. Liggett killed her, of course. I don't know why. But he did. Can't you see he did? It was his room!"

"Why were you there?" Ben Strong challenged.

"I went there to see Liggett."

"Why?"

"Well, I knew him."

"You didn't want to tell him that Waldo Strong had been murdered last night in Strong's study in Washington?" Mr. Maddox suggested.

"There you go with that again. If Waldo was killed, where is his body? I looked all over the house last night."

"He's in the moat right now," Mr. Maddox said. "Under the ice which froze over him last night. I think he was choked to death. His neck might have been broken. The same treatment the Lawrence girl got. Was Liggett in Strong's house last night?"

"I—I don't know."

"The Lawrence girl was. I met her coming out, and then I went in and found Waldo in

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the study fireplace, behind the logs," Mr. Maddox said. "Forney, did you guess Glenda Lawrence had been there and seen the body? Did you follow her to New York and kill her before she could get to Ligget and tell him? Or could squeal to the cops?"

"Of course he did!" Ben Strong bellowed. "And he hoped I'd be involved if the worst came to the worst! Not satisfied with stealing from me, he has to put murder all around me! Damn you, Forney! I'll—"

"Shut up!" Mr. Maddox said so savagely that Ben Strong flinched.

"What were you and Waldo and Ligget and the Lawrence girl up to?" Mr. Maddox asked Forney in the same savage tone.

"Why—why, nothing," Forney was cowed, frightened. His denial was not even convincing to himself.

"Shall I ask Ligget?"

"I don't know where Ligget is."

Mr. Maddox sighed and shook his head. "You're a lousy liar," he said. "What were you doing in that open doorway when we came in?"

"I—I thought I heard a noise in the barn."

"Think of that. A noise in the barn. Let's see if we can't locate the noise." Mr. Maddox opened the door.

"The barn lights go on there by the door." Ben Strong told him, and when Mr. Maddox flicked the switch and stepped into the cool fragrance of hay and straw beyond the doorway, Ben Strong was at his heels.

"The fellow's in here somewhere—undoubtedly," the publisher said loudly. "Ligget! Where are you? Come out! We know you're on the property!"

Ernie the Creep joined them in the wide runway through the center of the barn. Luxurious box stalls were on either side. Behind some of the stall doors, horses moved. One horse snorted loudly.

"I could live in a place like this myself," Ernie remarked, opening a stall door which was standing slightly ajar. "All it needs is a good mattress an' a telephone. Think of a horse—"

ERNIE yelled and jumped back. There's another one. He's lookin' at me!" Ernie's shaking hand pointed to the stall. "How many more are we gonna find?" he asked with a note of hysteria.

Mr. Maddox reached the spot while Ernie was still speaking. Clean deep straw covered the stall floor. Lithpy Ligget was stretched comfortably in the straw. But not sleeping. Lithpy's face was purple, his mouth was partly open and his eyes had a terrified, bulgy look.

Mary Cole ran from the office as Mr. Maddox went in the stall. Harris Forney was

behind her as Mr. Maddox carried the limp body past them into the brightly-lighted office. A sweep of his hand cleared papers back over the desk. He put the body there, legs hanging over the end. Mr. Maddox was a huge and hard-faced accuser as he turned to Harris Forney.

"Three in a row—and out for you," Mr. Maddox said. "You fool! Did you really think you could get by with this one, too?"

Forney was almost hysterical. He was shaking uncontrollably. Over and over he kept saying: "I didn't know he was there. . . I didn't know—"

"Keep quiet!" Mr. Maddox growled. "Ligget got out of a taxi at the house and asked if you were here. What good does it do to keep lying?"

"I'm not lying!" But Forney sounded hopeless. He was sweating, anguished. The wild look he cast at the outer door should have been a warning of the break he made an instant later.

Ernie the Creep tripped him. Forney knocked over a chair. Mr. Maddox came fast from the side and caught him by the coat collar. And at that moment the door flew open and Cassidy entered.

"What is this, charades?" Cassidy blurted. He slammed the door, glaring at Mr. Maddox. "You made a fast jump, Joe, but I got hold of the hackie who took you to the Chadwick and from there to the railroad station. I got a gateman who remembered you taking a train out this way. I figured Ben Strong's farm was about where you were heading."

"No body at the Waldorf?" Mr. Maddox asked.

Cassidy choked at the memory. "We walked in on a lady taking a bath. The house dick wanted to pinch me. I owe you one for that, too."

"Have another body," Mr. Maddox said, wheeling his prisoner back to the desk.

Cassidy was speechless. He looked closely at the limp form. "Lithpy Ligget!"

"He was a crooked little rat," Mr. Maddox said, looking down at Lithpy while he held Forney's arm. "But I don't know whether he deserved this. We found him in a stall beyond the door there a minute or so ago. He came here to see Forney."

Bits of straw still clung to Lithpy's dark overcoat. Mr. Maddox brushed some of the straw away with a sweep of his big hand. He plucked some bits of gray wool from the front of the overcoat and rolled them into a strand between fingers.

"You can't get away, Forney," he said absently. "Sit down."

"Would you mind explaining who you are?" Ben Strong asked Cassidy with suppressed fury.

"Masterton Agency. I came here to arrest Joe Maddox."

"Handcuff him and good riddance."

"I've seen two bodies already. That's good enough for me," said Cassidy. "I'm gonna run you all in."

"You can't arrest me!"

"Can't I?" said Cassidy. "What makes you think you aren't under arrest already? I've got a local deputy out there in his car."

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "You never got headlines like this will make," he told Ben Strong. Still smiling, a bit ruefully, Mr. Maddox said: "Cassidy, sometimes I think I'm dumb."

"I'll say!"

"But you're dumber," Mr. Maddox decided. "I'll give you one more chance to be smart."

"Just a pal!" Cassidy sneered.

"Step back and look in the box stall where we found Lithpy Ligget."

"Why?"

"Be dumb then," Mr. Maddox said, shrugging.

Cassidy hesitated. "All right," he decided ungraciously, scowling at the others. "I hope some of you try to get away. It'll be something for a grand jury to think about when they indict."

Mr. Maddox snapped on the barn lights, led Cassidy through the doorway and opened the stall door. "Look where Lithpy was stretched out in the straw."

"What of it?" Cassidy asked entering the stall.

Mr. Maddox slammed the stall door and fastened it.

"Lithpy was dumb, too. He trusted a pal," Mr. Maddox said through the door.

Cassidy cursed and lunged against the door. He kicked the wood furiously.

"You're the right end of the horse—but even a horse can't kick it down," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "See you later, pal."

Ben Strong and Ernie had come to watch. Mr. Maddox gestured them back into the office. He followed, closed the door and cut off the barn lights, leaving Cassidy in darkness. Mr. Maddox was big, grim, hurried.

"I hope I know what I'm doing. Strong, take me to Ed Kobbe's house. Quick! Miss Cole, you'd better come along. Might need you for a witness. Forney, you and Ernie stay here. Don't let Cassidy out. I've got to have several minutes."

"It just gets worse. I've had enough," Ernie said wearily. He sat down.

THE stars did not look like murder. The white night had a hushed beauty as they ran. Mr. Maddox set the pace.

"I don't understand what you're doing!" Ben Strong gasped.

"I'm trying to duck a murder charge."

Strong pointed ahead, "Kobbe lives in that house with the three lighted windows!"

They followed the paths and all were winded as they came to the house. Mr. Maddox kept on and wheeled to a tiny, unlighted cottage beyond the trainer's house.

"This isn't where Kobbe lives!" Ben Strong protested.

Mr. Maddox tried the door knob. The door was locked. He pounded on the door. A sleepy voice inside called: "Who's there?"

"Ben Strong wants to see you!"

A light went on inside. Vincny Braddo opened the door. He was in slippers, striped silk pajamas and blue dressing gown. He was annoyed as he yawned. "What's the excitement?"

"Catching up on our social schedule, Vincny," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Invite us in." He pushed past him.

"I ain't social tonight, Maddox. Beat it. You woke me up."

Vincny Braddo was built like a good jockey, short-legged, with power in torso and shoulders. He rode at a hundred and ten, Mr. Maddox recalled, a bit heavier than average. Vincny was older, too—in his thirties. The unending fight to hold his own in a hard profession had stamped his face with an old-wise look. He scowled as Mr. Maddox looked around the tiny living room.

"Cozy little place," Mr. Maddox remarked. "Where do you sleep?" He stepped into the small bedroom.

Vincny protested angrily: "You got a nerve! Mr. Strong, don't I get privacy here?"

"Lithpy Ligget's dead," Mr. Maddox said over his shoulder.

"Who?"

"Your roommate in Miami, wasn't he?"

"Oh, him? Where'd he die?"

Vincny had been in bed. The covers were thrown back. Mr. Maddox put a broad palm on the bed sheet and tested its warmth. Vincny's shoes were under the edge of the bed. Mr. Maddox picked them up and looked at the bottoms.

"Here's a little ice and snow that hasn't melted yet," Mr. Maddox said reprovingly. "See? Here by the heels? Ought to wipe your shoes better when you come in."

Vincny snatched the shoes.

"What the hell's going on here, Maddox? Beat it!"

Mr. Maddox opened the clothes closet door. He looked at the clothes hanging inside, then he turned, smiling, with a hand in his coat pocket.

"Why did Lithpy give you that key to his hotel room, Vincny?"

"So I—" Vincny's face went blank. "What key?"

"This key," Mr. Maddox said. He held the key out in his palm. "Got kind of rough at the Garden Terrace, didn't you, Vincy?"

"What are you talkin' about?" Vincy sneered. He turned around quickly as the front door burst open.

"Where's that dirty doublecrossing Joe Maddox?" Cassidy's furious voice demanded.

Cassidy looked through the bedroom doorway and came in, revolver in hand. "All right, Joe!"

Mary Cole and Ben Strong were at the doorway. Harris Forney and Ernie had followed Cassidy into the living room and were watching from there.

Mr. Maddox regarded the gun. "Take your time, pal."

"Pal?" Cassidy snarled. "Joe, if I hear that again, I'll slug you!"

"Look," said Mr. Maddox. He held out his left hand.

Cassidy had to look hard to see the little thread of gray wool between Mr. Maddox' thumb and forefinger.

"What's that?" Cassidy snorted.

"Wool," Mr. Maddox said calmly. "I got the strands off Lithpy Ligget's brown overcoat. There's more on his coat if you'll look closely. None of us is wearing gray wool."

"So what?"

Mr. Maddox reached back into the clothes closet. "Vincy has a nice brushed-wool sweater. Just the thing to keep a man warm if he were carrying something heavy over to the barn. But some of this sweater wool might rub off."

Mr. Maddox held the gray sweater and the gray thread together. They matched.

Vincy Braddo jumped at Mr. Maddox.

A flip of the sweater blocked Vincy's fist. Then Mr. Maddox had to drop the sweater and use all his size and strength. Vincy was steel-hard muscle, even if small.

Cassidy broke it up by snapping handcuffs on Vincy's wrists. It took all Cassidy's strength to do that.

"If I thought he'd have a chance, I'd let him take you, Joe," Cassidy panted. He swung Vincy around, pushed him roughly back on the bed. "What a sweet corpse you'd make, Joe."

Mr. Maddox picked up the sweater.

"Vincy's done well enough as it is," Mr. Maddox said dryly. "Ask him why he killed Waldo Strong—and what Glenda Lawrence was going to do about it if he hadn't killed her. Vincy might as well talk. This sweater and the wool that rubbed off on Lithpy's overcoat will pin Ligget's death on him."

"Who's Glenda Lawrence?" Cassidy demanded.

"You followed her from Strong's house last night. I met her in the patio as she was coming out and I was going in. She knew

Waldo was dead all right, didn't she, Vincy?"

Vincy Braddo hunched on the edge of the bed, staring at his manacled wrists. His seamed face twisted bitterly.

"So she squealed to you, Maddox!" Vincy held up his strong wrists and muscular hands. "Last night if I'd known she was in Strong's house, she wouldn't have gone out like she did. I never trusted that babe."

HARRIS FORNEY sighed as he stood beside Mary Cole in the bedroom doorway.

"You see, I didn't know anyone was in the house last night," Forney said to Ben Strong.

"You'd have known I was there if Strong had showed up before his brother did," Vincy said past clenched teeth. "Strong wouldn't lay off me about that race I lost. Why should I get kicked off the tracks and let you bums stay clean? I told Ligget I was going to rat on the lot of you, and I went to Strong's house to let him know his lousy brother was as bad as I was."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Harris Forney said indignantly.

"I'll remind you," Vincy Braddo said with a twisted grin. "Who was paying me to ride smart races? Didn't you know the Lawrence babe was a dope? Get a few drinks in her and she'd talk. I knew you and Waldo Strong were bankrolling your high bets out of Mr. Big's bank account. It wasn't none of my business until Mr. Big put the heat on me instead of his brother."

"He's lying!" Harris Forney said excitedly.

"He's singing," said Cassidy. "He hasn't anything to lose. Go on, Braddo. If this guy Forney wanted you to take the rap for a bum race, he'll wish plenty on you now."

"Yeah," Vincy agreed. "He'd kiss you while his hand was emptying your pocket. That's why I tried to hang Lithpy Ligget's murder on him over at the barn. I'd have done it, too, and laughed, if Maddox hadn't thought about that damned sweater."

"Waldo Strong caught you at Strong's house and tried to keep you from talking?" Mr. Maddox suggested.

"He was there—he let me in. I told him why I was there. I was going to tell Strong he was being crooked by his brother and his secretary. They were both writing checks against him and betting high on the races. Waldo and Lithpy Ligget cooked it up. Forney was so greedy to make a pile of easy money he swallowed anything they told him. This sweater had a sure thing cooked up on that race I lost. They bet plenty. It looked so good I almost bet myself. I told Ben Strong it was a sure thing." Vincy shrugged. "Ain't anything sure around a racetrack. I didn't start my drive soon enough and I lost by a couple of feet. Mr. Big lost his dough and Forney and

Waldo Strong lost plenty, too. Only the dough they lost wasn't theirs. And they all hollered 'crooked' and wanted me to take the rap for it. Waldo stood in his brother's study and told me he'd swear I had said I was going to lose before the race started. He'd have Ligget help him run me out of racing if I said anything to Ben Strong about them. Next thing I knew he was on the floor with his tongue sticking out and the door bell was ringing."

"Glenda Lawrence must have walked in the house and heard you two talking," Mr. Maddox suggested. "And fighting."

Vincy nodded.

"Yeah, and then she met you outside and beat it to New York to see Ligget. I hid in the house when you came in, Maddox. I didn't know you'd seen the body back there in the fireplace. When you left, I carried Waldo outside and dropped him in the moat. I figured maybe he wouldn't be found for weeks. But Waldo had told me Lithpy Ligget had warned him I was coming to the house. I had to get Lithpy and shut him up. He gave me a key to his room when we were in Miami. I was waiting in his room when the Lawrence babe knocked. I thought it was Lithpy and opened the door. She almost fainted when she saw me, and then she got excited and blabbed what she knew. So I had to shut her up. I guess I was so rattled I left the key in the door. Lithpy had stopped for a beer around the corner from his hotel, and when he heard a dead girl named Lawrence had been found in his hotel, it scared him blind. He came here to the farm looking for Forney, to tell him.

Forney was talking to Kobbe when Lithpy looked in the barn office. Lithpy came over here to see me. He didn't know Waldo was dead. I think he was trying to connect me with the girl in his hotel room. I thought I could make it three—and out. And if I could plant Lithpy where Forney was, Forney could do the explaining."

Vincy shrugged again. "I forgot a sweater like mine can shed wool. Guess a guy can't think of everything when it keeps coming at him."

"I know how you feel," Mr. Maddox said. "Vincy, I think I'm going to be sorry for you."

"Yeah, bring flowers," Vincy Braddo said with another twisted grin.

Mr. Maddox looked at Cassidy. "Well?"

"All right, I was dumb," Cassidy said. He added grudgingly: "Pal."

"Can I go back to Washington?"

"Why?"

"I've got a date in Havana with some sunshine."

"Can I go to Washington, too?" Mary Cole questioned.

"What's taking you to Washington so fast?" Cassidy asked suspiciously.

Mr. Maddox chuckled. "I'll lay you fifty-to-one she's got a date in the sky—and this time she'll hang on to it."

Mary Cole was blushing and some of the shine was coming back in her eyes as Cassidy snorted. "I got a date with some corpses. I should worry what the rest of you do."

"The pleasure," said Mr. Maddox, "is all yours, pal."

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DETECTIVE TALES

The Corpse Takes A Wife

CHAPTER ONE

So Long, Lora

MR. JESSIKA didn't know he was living his last hour on earth. Having climbed energetically to the top floor of the *Recorder* building, he pushed open the swinging doors of the city room and paused there, looking chipper and important, just as if he possessed a normal life expectancy instead of the much briefer one he actually faced.

Mr. Jessika gazed about in search of the person he wished to consult, his protuberant eyes

resembling those of a frog confidently expecting a fat fly. He saw twenty-odd members of the news staff at various desks and typewriters, all working under pressure—the first deadline of the *Recorder's* special Saturday edition was less than an hour away now—but the woman he had come to see wasn't among them. When making inquiries downstairs, however, he had been instructed to go to the special office partitioned off the farthest corner of the city room. He proceeded toward it accordingly, optimistic and purposeful.

Mr. Jessika paused again just outside the office because it was so small and so crowded that there wasn't enough room inside to include him. A work-table and a row of file cabinets occupied most of it. The table was piled high with mail, and there were many more letters heaped on chairs and the windowsills. Still more of them, tied into bundles, were stacked on the floor in the corners. Besides all this, considerable space was taken up by a six-foot, two-hundred-pound male who

A Bill Brent Novellette



By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Author of "Death Wears Red Heels," etc.

was so hard at work that he hadn't noticed Mr. Jessika's approach.

"Excuse me," Mr. Jessika said, putting just his head through the doorway. "I want to see Miss Lora Lorne, but quick."

The young man looked up wearily, with an expression bordering on nausea. He had a conspicuously crooked nose and the dead stub of a cigar clenched in his teeth. To Mr. Jessika he didn't seem the sort who would be found laboring over anybody's correspondence. He was built more along the lines of a sandhog or dock-walloper.

One other deduction might be drawn from

his appearance—he was heartily sick of his job.

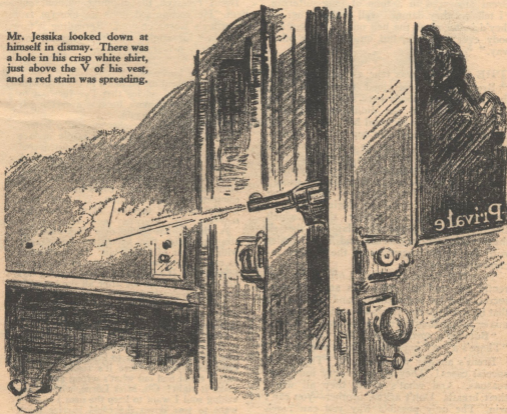
"Sure, sure," Bill Brent said sourly. "It happens every damn day."

Mr. Jessika said: "Beg pardon?"

"On bad days," Brent went on, scowling, "it happens three or four times. I mean somebody wanting to see Lora Lorne, but quick. It's always but quick. I'm good and sick of people coming in here and wanting to see Lora Lorne, but quick."

Mr. Jessika remained unruffled. This was, after all, easily understood. Lora Lorne was the conductress of the *Recorder's* most famous and most widely read department. It appeared

Mr. Jessika looked down at himself in dismay. There was a hole in his crisp white shirt, just above the V of his vest, and a red stain was spreading.



Bill Brent had scarcely dropped his Lora Lorne alias and resumed his rightful place in the Recorder's newsroom, before the new Lora pulled the prize boner of the century. Why don't you kill the louse? was her first bit of helpful advice to the unfortunate victim of unrequited passion who wrote in for comfort. And damned if the gal didn't follow it!

six times a week and consisted of two full columns of type. In it Miss Lorne solved people's problems, all kinds of them, but chiefly those to do with messed-up amours. These came to her in letters, eight or ten of which she printed daily, together with her sibylline solutions. Naturally this made her a very busy woman, particularly because she must read and consider hundreds of letters every day in order to select those most deserving of her oracular wisdom. Yes, Mr. Jessika could appreciate that Lora Lorne was much sought-after, not only through the mail, but also personally.

"And when somebody comes in here wanting to see Miss Lorne, but quick," he inquired, "what do you tell them?"

"Putting it as courteously as possible," Brent answered in a tone of long-suffering, "I tell 'em they damned well can't see her, so they'd better clear the hell out. I tell 'em nobody ever sees her, but quick or any other way."

THE statement was true as far as it went.

Brent grimly refrained from explaining the real reason nobody ever saw Lora Lorne. The fact was that she didn't exist—not, at least, as the public pictured her. The portrait of her which graced the top of her column every day, depicting her as a grandmotherly dame with snowy hair and a smugly saintlike smile, was pure imagination. Her very name was false, it being a copyrighted "house name" behind which a long series of God-playing busybodies had functioned during the past twenty-three years. Another thing which Brent took pains never to explain was that all these various Lora Lornes had been females with the single exception of the present incumbent—himself.

That Bill Brent and Lora Lorne were currently one and the same was an intramural secret, one so preposterous and humiliating that he would prefer to crawl inside a concrete-mixer rather than let the public get wind of it.

"But I'm a special case," Mr. Jessika said. "There's a very important reason why—"

Brent's answer was a growl. "They're all special cases! They all have very important reasons. And what's more, they all waste their breath. Don't argue, brother—you can't win. The only possible way you can reach Miss Lorne is through the United States postal service. If you want your broken heart vulcanized, stick a stamp on it and drop it into the nearest mailbox."

"Broken heart?" Mr. Jessika echoed in astonishment. "Not me! I'm not one of Miss Lorne's customers. I don't want her advice. What I want is a little information. Here." He produced his billfold, flipped it open and held it in front of Brent's worn-looking face. "That's my slant."

It was a license issued by the state, identifying Walter C. Jessika as a private detective.

As a private detective Walter C. Jessika did not conform to type. He wasn't tough in any particular. On the contrary, he looked cherubic, seraphic. It was almost impossible to imagine him packing a gat, resorting to strong drink or mingling with hard characters. He did have, however, an air of cheerful slyness indicating that upon occasion he might become happily unscrupulous. Noting this, Brent recalled that he'd heard of this gent. Walter C. Jessika's reputation as a private detective was somewhat overripe.

"Now," Mr. Jessika continued, producing a newspaper clipping from the wallet, "I've come in reference to this letter."

Brent received the clipping without comment. He recognized it as an excerpt from yesterday's Lorne column. Rereading it now, he looked for angles which might call for a bit of shady private detecting.

Dear Miss Lorne,

You've helped me so much in the past with your wonderful advice that I've just got to turn to you once more, because everything is terribly mixed up again.

I'm sure you'll remember my earlier letters, dear Miss Lorne—how I fell madly in love with a married man, and how he discovered he loved me, too. At first it was so beautiful, but so hopeless, until he decided to divorce his wife. We were blissfully happy together then. Now that he was free I could make my life complete by marrying him. We made such wonderful plans together, Miss Lorne—but now—

A change has come over him lately, a strange change that makes me feel frantic with the fear of losing him. He has turned so cool toward me! He seems so indifferent to me now! It hurts me terribly to think he's drifting away from me after all the heavenly happiness we've had together.

And I don't know *why* it's happening! He won't explain, won't even talk about this thing that's really ruining my whole life.

I ask myself a thousand times a day, what is it, what is it? Sometimes I suspect he's considering going back to his ex-wife—but I can't let myself believe it's really that. If only I could find out what's wrong and try to make it right! Oh, Miss Lorne, with all my aching soul I want to keep the man I love! I want to tear down the cruel barrier that's growing up between us—but I'm helpless, Miss Lorne, because of his silence. Won't you tell me some way I can get him to open his heart to me, so I can make him all mine again?

Desperately yours,
True Love

That habitual expression of revulsion was back on Brent's face. The correspondent who used the *nom de l'amour* of "True Love" was one of his worst headaches. True Love's letters

had been coming at him at frequent intervals for the past several months. Step by step they had traced the heartaches and joys of an illicit passion. Brent had sweated over them one by one in a conscientious effort to get this rapturous tangle straightened out. From the first it had consisted of a succession of emotional crises, and as soon as Brent had disposed of one of them, True Love had dropped a new one into his lap. Evidently True Love's course was destined never to run smooth. It looked like a hopeless mess. Brent gazed at Walter C. Jessika reproachfully for having brought up the subject again.

"Well?"

"I merely want to know who True Love is," Mr. Jessika said quietly.

"Ixnay! It's no go. Miss Lorne never betrays a confidence."

"And neither do I, my friend," Mr. Jessika assured him. "Whoever the writer of this letter may be, her identity is perfectly safe with me. Moreover, I'm acting for a client who's willing to pay a reasonable amount for the information."

Brent colored, resenting this reflection on Lora Lorne's integrity. "The only thing your client's money can buy you in this department," he said indignantly, "is a poke in the nose. Offers of bribes leave Miss Lorne un-

moved, but they make me mad as all hell."

Mr. Jessika wasn't discouraged. "Now, now," he said diplomatically. He wanted to sit down and talk to Brent man-to-man, but there was no place to sit, so he edged over the sill of Brent's cubbyhole with a comradely smile. "Just let me explain—"

"Listen, brother," Brent objected, "I'm busy!" Today's Lorne column was only half done and he'd been beating his brains out in an agonized effort to finish it.

"When you understand how important this matter is to me, professionally—" Mr. Jessika began regardless. "You see my client is a woman, very nice, very respectable. A few months ago she divorced her husband because she was sure he was frisking about with another woman. Since then, however, she has undergone a change of heart. My client and her ex-husband have gradually fixed things up between them. In fact, she's ready to marry him all over again, provided he still isn't playing around with any other woman. Understand?"

BRENT nodded wearily. Thanks to his insufferable job, he was perfectly able to grasp such a situation forward and backward.

"Very well," Mr. Jessika went on earnestly. "But my client, before marrying her ex-hus-

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band again, wanted to make sure he's really faithful to her now. That's why she hired me, to watch him. I did so, and in due course reported to her, saying O.K., nothing to worry about, her husband isn't seeing any woman at all. You follow me?"

Brent was following him easily but reluctantly.

"But suddenly this letter pops up in Lora Lorne's column—another letter signed True Love. My client saw it—in fact, she's read all of them, ever since Miss Lorne began printing them months ago. And they fit my client's case exactly! Follow me? Every line of every one of them applies! That is, the man mentioned in True Love's letters could be the man who is my client's ex-husband and husband-to-be. Now, my friend—"

Mr. Jessika had come to the crux of the matter.

"I don't think it's true. I don't believe my client's ex-husband is the man who is so involved with True Love. But my client feels he might be. In fact, she thinks it's so probable that I'm put into a very bad spot. Understand?"

Brent summed it up with a sigh. "You reported to your client that her ex-husband isn't seeing any other woman. But she believes he may be seeing another woman regardless of your reports. That would mean your reports are wrong, and as a private eye you're affected with a bad case of professional myopia."

"Exactly," Mr. Jessika said. "My client mistakenly questions my results. I'm obliged to vindicate my professional character. I must prove to my client that my favorable reports concerning her ex-husband are entirely correct. Although the man in True Love's life seems in every detail to be my client's ex-husband, I must satisfy her that such is not actually the case. I can do this by means of a quiet, tactful investigation of True Love herself, by showing that True Love doesn't even know my client's ex-husband from Adam. Follow me? Now, all you need to do, in return for a reasonable payment, is tell me—"

"Brother," Brent broke in, "don't say it again! Matter of fact, Miss Lorne couldn't tell you that for any amount of money. She doesn't know who True Love is, and neither do I."

Mr. Jessika stiffened. "She doesn't?"

"She definitely does not."

"Dear, dear." He seemed bitterly disappointed. After a moment's uneasy thought he tried a new angle. "Would you mind letting me see the originals of True Love's letters?"

"Yes, I would," Brent retorted. "But if it will help me to get rid of you, I'll tell you about them. As Miss Lorne's leg-man, I've seen every one of them from the beginning. They're all typewritten, including that pen-

name signature of True Love. There's never been any other name signed to 'em—no other name, no address, no nothing to show who writes 'em. Understand? Follow me? You've wasted your time and mine, and that's that."

"Dear, dear." Mr. Jessika sounded utterly woeful. Looking into Brent's adamant face, he saw no hope at all of accomplishing his mission. Brent, in fact, immediately turned back to his work, making it plain that that really was that. Mr. Jessika murmured, "Well, thank you very much just the same, my friend," and forlornly turned away, tucking the clipping of True Love's latest letter back into his wallet.

Leaving the Recorder building, Mr. Walter C. Jessika walked toward his own office, looking grim and unhappy. His office was located on a sooty side-street just off the city's main business district. The building was an old one having no elevator. Climbing a worn wooden flight, Mr. Jessika heard his telephone ringing. He hurriedly unlocked his door and crossed to his desk. His agency consisted of only this one room, and the telephone was the most modern thing in it.

The voice on the wire seemed far-away, muffled. It was a quiet, tense voice which Mr. Jessika didn't recognize. In fact, he couldn't decide whether it was a man's voice, unusually high-pitched, or a woman's, unusually throaty.

"I'm calling on behalf of one of your clients," it said quickly. "I'm a close personal friend of hers. She's told me all about the case you're handling for her. There's been a new development. She can't come herself just now, so she asked me to talk with you about it."

"Very well." Mr. Jessika was eager to get the puzzling matter straightened out. "When could you drop in?"

"Right now," the voice said. "I'm calling from a public phone downtown. I can be there inside five minutes. But I've got to see you alone."

"You will," Mr. Jessika answered. "Very well, come right on up."

He settled behind his desk and again removed the True Love clipping from his wallet.

"I know damn well," he said to himself emphatically, "he wasn't seeing any other woman, including True Love."

As Mr. Jessika studied the clipping the troubled look faded from his cherubic face. He shook his head in wonder.

"My God, what a waste of opportunity! What a setup this Lorne woman's got, if she'd only use it! What a racket she could work, if only she'd cash in on it! Compared with her chances, I'm in business for peanuts."

He continued to marvel over Miss Lorne's misguided integrity until he heard footfalls on the stairs. They were a light, quick sound, again uncertain in gender, as they turned to

Mr. Jessika's door. There they paused, and Mr. Jessika looked up expectantly.

THE knob turned, the door opened three inches and stopped there. Then something came in. It was neither a man nor a woman. It was a revolver, poked through the crack. "Here, here!" Mr. Jessika blurted. "What's the meaning of—"

The gun made its meaning clear without further delay. It spat flame. The report jarred through the office and Mr. Jessika flinched. He looked down at himself in dismay. There was a hole in his crisp white shirt, just above the V of his vest, and a red stain was spreading around it.

Mr. Jessika felt suddenly too numb to lift his head again. He heard two more gun-blasts and they seemed to come from a very great distance. He saw two more bullet-holes appear in himself, one in the region of his rotund abdomen, the other to the left, nearer his heart. After that Mr. Jessika heard and saw nothing.

He slumped forward across his desk and the stain crept down to the blotter. His head lolled against a memo pad on which were noted a few appointments he would never keep. His arms hung, but the fingers of his right hand remained pressed together, pinching the square of newsprint he had clipped from Lora Lorne's column of the day before . . .

In his atelier of rapture in the *Recorder's* newsroom, Bill Brent had also suffered a shock—minor compared to Mr. Jessika's, but nevertheless one that had hit him where it hurt the most. He had found another appeal from True Love.

Brent sat there staring at it, overwhelmed with repugnance, trying to summon up enough fortitude to read it. He felt strongly that True Love had already received far more than her share of Miss Lorne's advice, but apparently she was at her wits' end. The only recommendation Brent could think of making at the moment was that she should stay the hell out of his correspondence. He was still scowling over the letter, at his wits' end himself, when he became aware that someone had again appeared at his cubbyhole door.

It was Garrett, the *Recorder's* hard-bitten city editor. Usually Garrett's eyes were flinty, his face cold, his attitude unbending. A noteworthy change had come over him, however. He looked almost friendly. There was even a

hint of brotherliness in his deep raspy voice.

"Bill," he began—and this was also a remarkable thing. Usually he addressed Brent as "Grandma," or "Miss Lorne," with scathing scorn. But today he said: "Bill it's my pleasure to introduce to you the *Recorder's* new Lora Lorne."

Brent heard the words but they didn't really register on him. He had been Lora Lorne for so many centuries now, and he was so wretchedly resigned to being Lora Lorne for all eternity, that he could no longer imagine himself reprieved from his hermaphroditic doom. His tired eyes did follow Garrett's gesture, however, to the woman who was also standing in his doorway.

Her looks were enigmatic. Neither plump nor thin, she was of medium height, dressed conservatively and in her middle fifties, but the rest was a question. The inner woman was difficult to classify at sight. Her eyes were a bright challenging blue and they had a peculiar inscrutable quality. Her mouth was firm without being stern. In all his life Brent had never seen a more pokerish poker-face. For the life of him he couldn't guess whether this woman's reaction to him was one of loathing, compassion or simply indifference.

"How do you do, Mr. Brent," she said, and her controlled tone of voice defied analysis.

"This is Miss Frost, Bill," Garrett added. "Afternoon," Brent said automatically. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy and—" "Didn't you hear me, Bill?" Garrett sounded actually genial. "Miss Frost is our new Lora Lorne."

"Haw, haw," Brent said acidly. "Very funny. Very, very amusing."

HE told himself that this was one more example of how brutal a sadist Garrett could be. Long ago Garrett had brought him to the *Recorder*, from New York, under contract as a special crime reporter. After a very short service in that capacity, he had abruptly found himself shifted to the most detestable job on the paper, the Lorne column. This had been prompted by pure vindictiveness on Garrett's part, merely because Brent had missed too many editions. Brent had missed them only because, being a stranger in town, he had felt it his duty to get thoroughly acquainted with the city's bistros, but Garrett had rejected this as an excuse. Ever since then

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
 FOR VICTORY . . . BUY WAR BONDS
 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Brent had been masquerading behind Lora Lorne's falseface.

His city editor had never once heeded his pleas for reprieve. On the contrary, Garrett had relentlessly forced him to go on wearing Miss Lorne's petticoats despite all his suffering. Moreover, this conscienceless martinet had never lost an opportunity to express contempt for him, which had encouraged the rest of the staff to snigger at him, taunt him and treat him in general like a leper. He had endeavored in every conceivable way to escape from his intolerable position, but nothing had worked—invariably Garrett would command him to continue being Lora Lorne. That was the way it was. That was the way it would forever be, with Garrett never passing up a chance to torture him. And now Garrett was at it again.

"Why don't you just stick pins under my fingernails instead?" Brent added plaintively. "Or pull off my ears? Or peel my skin off layer by layer? Or—"

"Bill, you don't understand," Garrett interrupted with an indulgent chuckle, of all things. "Your job in this passion pillar is done. You're not going to be Lora Lorne any more. From this moment on, Miss Frost is taking your place here."

Brent stared blankly. This was impossible. It could never happen. There wasn't any Santa Claus. In this world there were plenty of doubting wives, philandering husbands, adulterous secretaries, unrequited raptures, teen-age wolves, bobby-socked joy-girls and unmarried mothers, but no justice. Take Brent's contract as an example. It was hole-proof. Brent hadn't dared to quit his soul-sickening routine, for the excellent reason that it would put him on the blacklist of every paper in the nation, get the socks sued off him, and see him exposed as Lora Lorne in public court—this last being, Brent considered, a fate far worse than mayhem. No, he was hopelessly trapped. And after having punished him so mercilessly for so long, Garrett simply wouldn't release him voluntarily. The sun might not rise tomorrow, Roosevelt might not be re-elected for a fifth term, Brent might be handed a pack of cigarettes the next time he tried to buy one, but not *this*.

But Garrett was explaining, just as if it were a reality.

"As you've probably noticed, Bill, the paper has been without a police reporter for several days now. Val's had a nervous collapse."

Garrett was referring to the girl who had attempted, under his fondest tutelage, to work Brent's old police trick. Now that Brent thought back, he'd noticed that Val Randall had been gradually going to pieces for weeks, simply because the strain was too much for

her. He began to feel, vaguely that it was just barely possible Garrett might not be kidding.

"I've had Smithers covering police as well as his regular sports page," Garrett continued, "but that's more than one man can handle. The staff's short-handed as hell anyway, because of the draft, and I can't hire a reporter with experience for love or money. It's been a headache, but the solution, of course, is to put you back on police, Bill, and get a new Lora Lorne in here—and Miss Frost is it."

Still Brent didn't dare accept such a staggering statement.

"Miss Frost is admirably qualified," Garrett informed him. "For six years she was Dean of Miss Walton's School for Girls. She has also been a teacher of psychology. In addition, she's had experience in public relations and as a personnel manager. We're fortunate to have found her for the Lorne column. If you'll just vacate that chair, now, Bill, Miss Frost will take over."

Brent vacated the chair at a jump. He stood gaping at Garrett for a moment, stunned with delight, until he found his voice. "You mean it! It's true! You're actually putting me back on police!"

Garrett gestured magnanimously. "Your old desk's waiting for you, Bill. With a deadline hanging over my head, I can't take time to tell Miss Frost about Lora Lorne's principles. I'll leave that entirely to you." He turned, wearing a rare smile. "All right, Miss Frost, you're now the one and only Lora Lorne."

CHAPTER TWO

"I'd Kill the Rat"

BRENT beamed upon Miss Frost as Garrett went back to the special Saturday edition. She was still enigmatic in aspect, but at the moment he felt certain he'd never seen a more beautiful woman. With great courtesy he stood aside for her. He bowed to her. He gently took her arm and escorted her as far as they both could move toward Lora Lorne's throne. He exercised the utmost pains to see that she was seated as comfortably as possible. He almost kissed her.

"Now, Miss Frost!" he said dizzily. "The Lorne column is guided by several high ideals. First of all, it must be genuinely helpful. Miss Lorne's readers place the most implicit faith in her. They believe she's the wisest woman on earth and absolutely infallible. You must never let them down. People's happiness, even their destinies, depend on her advice. Therefore each problem must be considered solemnly and with the greatest conscientiousness.

As far as it's humanly possible, each must be

given a solution which is constructive, practical and moral."

Miss Frost spoke no word. She did answer, however, with what seemed to Brent to be a faint sniff. He overlooked it, being anxious to get out of this loathsome cubbyhole for the last time, and hurried on.

"Morality is another of Miss Lorne's ideals, Miss Frost, since she naturally cannot condone immorality. She upholds the sanctity of the home and the family. She strives to preserve a marriage whenever possible. Highly prizing pre-marital chastity, she never encourages infidelity or promiscuity. But if someone happens to get into trouble as a result of his or her animal impulses, she does her best to salvage the wreckage. Here, Miss Frost, is a fine example of that."

With vast relief, Brent handed her True Love's latest supplication to Miss Lorne's delphic wisdom.

"I haven't read this one, but it's another chapter in a long, long story. I suggest you go back over all of True Love's letters in order to see how carefully she's been guided so far. Even though she's a decidedly unchaste young woman, this new letter of hers should be answered in the same vein of sympathetic understanding. Include it in today's column, please, Miss Frost. It's all you'll need to fill your space. You have about half an hour until our first deadline. Garrett will explain how your copy will be handled. Of course I'll help you all I can until you learn the ropes."

Miss Frost sniffed again. "High ideals or not," she said in her noncommittal voice, "I must solve these problems realistically, as I see them."

"It's a matter of insight and judgment, of course, but keeping those ideals constantly in mind—"

Brent heard Garrett calling him. He excused himself courteously, assured Miss Frost she'd make out fine and hurried across the city room, scarcely able to believe he'd finally turned his back on Lora Lorne. On the way

he paused to give an affectionate pat to the police reporter's desk which had been his so long ago and was his again. He arrived at Garrett's littered corner looking dazed and beatific.

"The Lord be praised, He has passed a miracle! Garrett, chum, you're not made of marble after all! How'd you find that dame?"

"How but through an ad in the *Recorder*?" Garrett answered. "Blind ad, didn't say what the job was. We interviewed twenty-odd women and picked Frost as the best bet because of her experience. More about her later, Bill."

Garrett was sounding brusque again.

"Miss Lorne isn't our only department with principles," he pointed out. "One of mine is that we don't antagonize the cops. We cooperate with headquarters. You've busted a few crimes in your time, Brent, but from now on you're to lean over backwards to avoid out-smarting the police."

Brent's nose for news, so long quiescent, was twitching. "Something big's broken?"

"Lieutenant Whicker, down in headquarters' telegraph bureau, just phoned in a tip. You're going back on police with a first-class murder. Here's the address." Garrett handed Brent a scrap of paper. "Victim's name is Jessika, a private dick."

Brent was halfway out the swinging doors, possessed with jubilation, when it dawned on him. Jessika! The name jolted him—but only for a moment. Nothing could keep his spirits down for long. Whatever Jessika's death might mean, Brent was more than ready to tackle the story with the greatest zest. A juicy murder was exactly his meat, now that he was back on his old police trick.

Stepping into the late Walter C. Jessika's agency, Brent found the detective's body lying across the desk as it had fallen, arms dangling over on one side, legs on the other. He was not alone.

A man was gloomily rummaging in Jessika's file cabinets. This was Captain Russo, chief



of the homicide squad. Except that he was on his feet and moving, Russo also looked like something waiting to be lugged out to the morgue. His complexion was as waxy as that of the corpse he'd come to investigate, his gray eyes were lackluster and his dry joints seemed to creak like a skeleton's. Being obliged to deal with so many corpses, he had become an incurably mournful man. He gave Brent a sad glance and spoke in a voice that seemed to echo from a tomb.

"Cleaning woman found him."

WITH his deadline near, Brent was doubly avid for details. "Jessika reputedly dealt off the bottom at times, Russo, so the angle here seems pretty obvious. Any one of his clients might have cooled him, probably to escape paying him more blackmail. For example, I happen to know of one possibility, a case he was handling for a woman who hired him to tail her ex-husband—object re-matrimony, results confusing. Any promising leads in his file?"

Russo wagged his head sorrowfully. "Nothing like that here. Very few carbons of any nature. Apparently Jessika delivered most of his reports orally. Doesn't seem to have been the letter-writing kind—probably didn't want to commit himself on paper. Except for these—"

The captain had produced three sheets of onion-skin, all carbons of letters. Re-reading them, he permitted Brent to crane over his bony shoulder. The topmost was brief, dated day before yesterday:

Mr. Vincent Blaylock,
City.

Dear Sir,

I feel our present arrangements are very unsatisfactory, now that the matter has reached a critical stage. Please call at my office as soon as convenient so that we may discuss a revision of terms.

Yours very truly,

The two other letters were dated earlier, one of them two weeks old and the other four weeks. Like the first, they were also addressed to Mr. Vincent Blaylock, City, and suggested "new arrangements."

"Promising," Russo said in his spooky tones. "Highly promising. Looks like Jessika was putting the bite on this man Blaylock and upping the ante frequently. Blaylock may have refused to go above his own ceiling price, with the bloody result you observe here." Seeing Brent heading for the phone, the captain added with morose caution: "This Blaylock lead stays under your hat until later."

Brent's call reached the city desk while Russo prowled about. Feeding his information

to Garrett, Brent remembered that he was to cooperate with headquarters and accordingly pointed out that the Blaylock lead was off the record. Garrett informed him a few lines of the story would break in the special edition, which was going to press in a few minutes now, later editions would carry Brent's own follow-ups. To Brent all this had a lovely feel—it was like a convalescence from a long, soul-deadening illness. Full of elation, he turned from the phone to find two employees of the city morgue entering the office.

They carried a long wicker basket. Looking bored, they handled Mr. Jessika's remains with perfunctory dispatch. When they rolled him over, Brent saw the three fatal punctures in his front. After flopping him into the basket they halted at a signal from Russo. The captain had taken an interest in the dead man's right hand. The thumb and forefinger were pinched together as if he were holding something, but nothing was visible until Russo pried them apart. Russo signaled again, and Jessika then left his office for the last time, lying heavily in the creaking basket. The captain studied his find—a tiny triangle of newspaper having two straight edges and a ragged one.

He promptly scouted about the office, paying particular attention to the waste-basket and ash-trays, then gave it up and again pored over the bit of paper.

"A corner torn from a clipping," he said morosely. "Jessika had it in his hand when he died and kept on holding it tight—cadaveric spasm. The killer ripped it loose and took it away, overlooking this little piece left in Jessika's clamped fingers. A fine time I'll have finding out what item this corner belongs to!"

Brent frowned over it. There were only a few fragments of words printed on the tiny triangle. Recalling the clipping which Jessika had brought to Lora Lorne's sanctum, Brent recognized them. They were the ends of the last few lines of the letter from True Love printed in yesterday's Lorne column.

Prudently, Brent thought it over. It meant that Jessika's murderer had a definite interest in the troublesome case of True Love, and that for reasons best known to himself he hadn't wanted True Love to be associated with his victim's body. It connected somehow with the female client whom Jessika had mentioned, her ex-husband also, and everyone else who might be tangled in it—including Lora Lorne. Brent winced at the thought, hoped Miss Lorne's skirts were clean and decided at once to explore the question privately as far as possible, which meant as long as that disturbing bit of evidence remained unidentified to Russo.

"Got to get back, pal," he informed the captain uneasily. He trudged out of the office mulling it over and not liking it.

HE pounded his typewriter with enthusiasm, made happy by the hustle all around him because he was again a part of it, until Johnny, the copy boy, tossed a fresh copy of the special edition onto his desk. Brent scanned it, grinning. Garrett had given his murder an eight-column banner. The story was short, and Brent hadn't actually written it, but at least he'd produced the facts. The follow-ups, beginning with the one he was writing now, would be all his. Deeply gratified, he turned next to the Lorne column to see how well Miss Frost was making out.

She had, as he'd suggested, filled in the last of today's space with True Love's latest epistle. Brent read it now for the first time, joyful in the thought that True Love was no longer his headache.

Dear Miss Lorne,

My worst fears have come true. The most tragic thing possible has happened to me. Oh, Miss Lorne, I'm broken-hearted and so desperate I don't know what to do!

As I wrote to you day before yesterday, I was afraid that the man I love so dearly might be planning to go back to his wife. I couldn't believe it until I took your suggestion and appealed to his better nature, imploring him to tell me the truth. Your advice worked, Miss Lorne, but what he told me left me utterly crushed and soul-sick. He's leaving me forever, going back to the woman he once divorced, casting aside all the wonderful happiness we've had together!

Oh, Miss Lorne, I can't let him go! Life won't be worth living without him now. What can I do, what can I do?

True Love

Brent was delighted that he hadn't had to answer that one. He read on, eager to observe how deftly Miss Frost had handled this assignment. Her answer was brief.

Dear True Love,

Don't be a fool. That man doesn't deserve your love or anybody else's. First he wrecked his own home by being unfaithful to his wife. Now he has betrayed you just as heartlessly. His ex-wife ought to kick him right out again, and as for you—well, I think death is too good for him, but if I were in your shoes I'd kill the rat.

"Hell's hinges!"

Brent bawled it out, his voice so loud and so laden with anguish that the entire newspaper stopped work and stared. Strained silence prevailed, broken only by the rumbling

of the giant machines in the basement, while Brent read the answer again, scarcely crediting his eyes. Having made sure it was true, he let out another stunned howl.

"Stop those presses! For God's sake, Garrett, stop 'em, stop 'em!"

At his roll-top desk, the city editor grabbed up his inter-office phone. The rest of the staff continued to eye Brent, sensing a major crisis, while he twisted about to goggle in Miss Frost's direction. She was gazing at him calmly through the glass of the partition, not a sign of perturbation on her enigmatic face. Brent sat there, too dismayed to move, until he heard the presses grumbling to a stop. By that time Garrett had arrived at his desk.

"Read it, read it!" Brent indicated those staggering lines of Miss Frost's and almost sobbed.

"For God's sake!" Having read it, Garrett turned whiter than the paper it was printed on. "Brent, I told you to tell Frost how to handle the Lorne stuff!"

"I told her." Brent drew a breath. "Told her as much as I could before hopping off on the Jessika murder. I expected her to pull a few boners, naturally, but nothing as ghastly as this. Don't blame me for this, Garrett! Why the hell did you let that stuff get into type?"

"Why did I let it?" Garrett was fuming. "I didn't, naturally! This is the first time I've seen it. A recommendation of murder! Advice to kill a man! Good God!"

They both stared at Miss Frost. She'd gone serenely back to work. They advanced to her cubbyhole together and stood in her doorway, continuing to stare at her until she looked up, still inscrutable.

"Miss Frost," Garrett inquired, restraining himself with a masterly effort, "how did this copy of yours get into type without having passed across my desk?"

"Why," Miss Frost said, "I saw you dropping paper down that tube over there, and that little boy was doing it, too"—she meant Johnny, the copy boy—"and that other man over there"—she indicated Adams, the chief rewrite man—"so I simply did the same thing that you did."

Garrett kept a grip on himself while Brent gritted his teeth. "You've never worked on a newspaper before, Miss Frost," the city editor said. "Obviously you weren't aware that all your copy is to be turned in to me for editing, but that's the way it must be done." In his

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.

anxiety he gave Brent a push. "We can't hold up the edition. I'll order that page replated. Stick a new answer on this letter, Brent—and make it fast."

Garrett hustled back to his telephone and Brent strode to his desk. The emergency was so acute that he didn't mind dishing out one more dose of Lorne advice, not even on the police reporter's typewriter. He made his answer as brief as Miss Frost's had been, but much more constructive and much less homicidal. In substance he simply urged True Love to be big about it, accept the inevitable and set about rebuilding her shattered life with a stout heart. Garrett hung over him until he finished it and shot the copy down the tube to the composing room.

"It's not as bad as it might have been," Garrett said. "Only a few hundred copies got out to the trucks. Some of them must have reached the newsstands, but we know the routes those trucks take and we're phoning ahead, calling the rest in. That's the best we can do."

"The best may not be good enough," Brent moaned. "A lot of those papers are going to be read by Lorne fans. They're going to see Lora Lorne actually advising a dame to murder a guy. Good Lord, Garrett! Suppose True Love herself gets hold of one of those copies? She's emotionally overwrought—she says herself she's so desperate she doesn't know what to do—suppose she *takes* that advice!"

"All we can do is wait and pray," Garrett said fervently. "Well, finish up that Jessika murder in a hurry, Brent. Then go in there and do your best to make Frost see the light."

"That," Brent said emphatically, with a grim glance toward the Lorne cubicle, "I will do!"

BRENT knocked off the rest of the Jessika murder while the presses rolled again, the Lorne page having been replated for the substitute answer. Leaving his copy on Garrett's desk, he then waded into Miss Frost's department.

She was ready for him. Before he could speak, she said: "I understood I was to handle these problems realistically, as I see them. I did exactly that. My answer to True Love is precisely what the case calls for."

"Miss Frost," Brent began, striving for patience, "it may surprise you to hear this, but I feel deeply the responsibilities of the Lorne column. I've sweated over it for years, doing my conscientious best. God knows, telling other people how to live their lives is a bigger job than any one human should ever attempt, but nevertheless I slaved over it day and night. I spared no effort because I was constantly haunted by fears—fears that my well-intended advice might wreck somebody's

whole life. Can you understand that, Miss Frost?"

Miss Frost answered forthrightly. "Life is stern," she said. "It demands stern measures. It also demands courage—more courage than is possessed by weak-spined people who write to a newspaper to find out what to do in a crisis. As I see it, my function is to give them the courage they lack."

"On the whole, yes, but that's far from all of it," Brent pointed out. "These people are all in serious trouble. They're perplexed, foundering, except in one particular—they're full of faith, faith in Lora Lorne's ability to help them. It may be a misplaced faith, true, but it's there and it's strong. The young woman who signs herself True Love has shown even more faith in Lora Lorne than most. I'm afraid you simply haven't realized how seriously Lora Lorne's advice is received, how trustfully it's followed. Yet in this exceptionally delicate case of True Love you actually advised bloody violence. Miss Frost, Miss Frost! Your responsibility is to save lives, not destroy them! Your function here does *not* include raising the mortality rate."

Miss Frost sniffed, unconvinced. Brent regarded her hopelessly. Trying to find a new angle of attack, he heard Garrett call. He promised Miss Frost grimly that he'd be back, which she answered with another sniff, and hurried to the city editor's desk. Seeing a troubled look on Garrett's face, he braced himself, expecting to hear that a man's bullet-riddled body had just been found in accordance with Miss Lorne's instructions.

"Another tip from Lieutenant Whicker," Garrett said tersely. "This time it's a girl. And it's not a murder, but a suicide. Russo's on his way there now." Again he handed over a written address, a quizzical look in his flint-colored eyes. "Does blood just naturally flow your way, Brent, or do you magically bring it forth?"

Brent shuddered and took the slip, not answering. Hurrying out, he saw that the address was a business district. Five minutes in his car brought him to the front of a building bearing a sign that read, *Blaylock Brothers—Waterproofing Processes.*

Blaylock!—the name in those demanding letters that Russo had found in Jessika's files. Brent got out of his car fast, his misgivings returning. He had parked just behind an ambulance with open rear doors, and as he neared the building entrance a white-coated interne stepped out. A second interne followed at a litter's length. Brent looked down at the pale, blood-streaked face of the girl on the litter. She was twenty-odd, pale as death, and her plain face was puckered up, as if she were about to cry.

She was carried toward the ambulance as

Brent pushed into an office. This one was large, several private offices opened off it, and several other doors connected with the plant that occupied most of the building. Again Captain Russo was present, sorrowfully examining a revolver held by means of a pencil inserted into the barrel.

"Empty," he informed Brent at once. "Six discharged shell cases in the cylinder, but only one bullet in that girl's head."

"Where did those other five bullets wind up?"

"We're working on that," Russo said in his sepulchral tones. "Not here, anyway. This end of it is an attempted suicide involving only one bullet, which is accounted for. The girl's business name is Jean March, real name Marcheselli. She tried hard but it didn't take."

"With a bullet in her brain she'll survive?"

"Those two doctors think so. She'll have to have an immediate operation. Queer thing—a girl does her best to kill herself, then a hospital goes into high gear to save her life so we can send her to the electric chair."

"Electric chair?" Brent stared. "What for?"

"Murder, I assume," Russo informed him woefully. "I mean I assume her confession's on the level. There it is, in her typewriter."

BRENT saw dribbles of blood on the floor in front of the typewriter desk. This, then, was where the girl had been sitting. Evidently she'd been writing a letter—a page of plain paper was still curled under the typewriter's roller. Brent read its salutation and a cold wave struck him.

Dear Miss Lorne—

He gripped himself and began again.

Dear Miss Lorne—

I've just killed the man I love and now I'm about to

It stopped there. All too clearly Brent could visualize the girl writing on this machine with tear-blinded eyes, full of turbulent impulses to confess a murder and declare her intention of killing herself, then becoming too overwrought to continue writing, suddenly snatching up the gun and putting a bullet into her head.

Captain Russo was eyeing Brent like a sorrow-ridden ghost. The captain had a sheaf of yellow second sheets in his skeleton hands. They were carbon copies of letters—half a dozen or more of them. Russo showed them to Brent.

"Found 'em tucked under some personal stuff of hers in the bottom drawer."

One look was enough for Brent. Sickened,

he recognized the topmost letter—distinctly remembered receiving the original of it in Lora Lorne's mail. Down at the bottom of it that fateful penname was typed—True Love. As Russo flipped through the pages, Brent saw the name again and again, signed to every one of the letters. And the last among them was the one which Miss Frost had answered in such an alarming manner only today.

Brent suddenly had an acute case of the jitters. He'd come here for news, but he was no longer thinking of that. Hastily he flipped Jean Marcheselli's last letter off the roller without touching it. He fished a piece of copy paper from his pocket and fed it in. He hit keys at random, yanked the paper out again and headed out the door. While Russo eyed him spookily through the front window he drove off in feverish haste.

Still moving fast, he thrust through the swinging doors of the *Recorder's* city room, heading straight for Miss Frost's domain. He ignored her while pawing through the pile of letters on her work table, and after a moment he came up with True Love's latest despairing wail. Now at his own desk, Brent compared it intently with the specimen of typing he'd done on Jean Marcheselli's machine. His last doubts evaporated instantly. In both the letter and the specimen the small *g* was nicked, the *i* leaned, the impression of the *w* was uneven.

"That does it!" Brent groaned to himself. "Makes it absolutely certain! Jean Marcheselli is True Love!"

He stared, dismayed, into space, numbly wondering. It seemed only too probable that Miss Marcheselli, eager to receive Lora Lorne's advice, had bought one of those first copies of the *Recorder* containing Miss Frost's homicidal advice—only too probable that Miss Marcheselli, emotionally in turmoil, had not only acted on that advice and killed her lover, but had gone Miss Lorne one step better and had decided to kill herself as well!

CHAPTER THREE

Where's the Corpse?

TELLING Garrett about it, Brent glanced now and again in Miss Frost's direction with profound reproach. She was still imperceptibly at work.

"That's the way it shapes up. I wish to God I could slant it some other way, but I'm damned if I can, so far. I didn't see one of those death-dealing *Recorders* in the Blaylock office, but that doesn't mean much. After buying one and reading it, she could have left it somewhere else. Until she's able to talk, we'd damned well better assume the worst—that she not only saw Frost's answer, but acted on

it. So there's only one thing to think—we've got a murder and an attempted suicide on our consciences, thanks to Lora Lorne."

Garrett gnawed on a pencil, hard-faced. "The guy who got murdered by this girl deserves a little attention. Who was he?"

"Nobody knows that yet. Nobody even knows where the body is. It's still waiting somewhere to be found—maybe with a copy of Frost's answer beside it, God help us."

The city editor leveled a finger at Brent. "We've got to keep Lorne clear of this. We can't wreck our most popular department by showing the whole world that Lorne's gentle hands are smeared with gore. At least we stay clammed until it's squeezed out of us. So far there's room for doubt, but even as it stands there's hell to pay from the few Lorne readers who saw Frost's answer."

"They're slightly scandalized, I take it," Brent said wryly.

Garrett groaned. "They're howling their heads off. This phone's been driving me nuts. Twenty or thirty calls already, all blistering. I've had to lie myself black in the face, telling everybody it was a practical joke played on Miss Lorne by a drunken linotype operator who's now been bounced out on his tail. But once the real inside story breaks, we won't be able to keep the truth about that letter out of our news columns. It'll turn Lorne into a bloody witch and ruin us. For God's sake, Brent, do your best to head it off."

"Sure, sure," Brent said in a hopeless tone. "A guy gets bumped on Lora Lorne's advice, so we just won't mention it. Write the story but leave out the fundamental facts. That'll be easy."

He left Garrett muttering darkly and attacked his telephone. His call to the Heights Hospital connected him with Dr. Hurd, the resident physician. He was told by Dr. Hurd that Miss Marcheselli was even then undergoing an operation, that the prognosis was favorable, but that nobody could promise just when the patient would be able to answer questions. Further, one of Russo's detectives was on the premises, having been assigned to cover her and obtain the bullet being removed from her brain.

Brent lingered, feeling impelled to unload a scathing denunciation on Miss Frost. He doubted it would have much of an effect. Her reaction to the news of Miss Marcheselli's acts would probably be one of approval. Instead, he trudged out to his car.

Again entering the office section of the Blaylock Brothers' plant, he found Captain Russo in gloomy conference with a homicide man. Since they chose to ignore him, Brent nosed about. First he poked into the desk drawer in which Russo had found the carbons of all True Love's letters to Lora Lorne. It

contained feminine odds and ends—face-powder, lipsticks, bobby pins, hand lotion and similar items. On the top of the desk lay Miss Marcheselli's purse. Inside it Brent found, among other things, a key-ring with two flat keys on it. Inserting one of them into the lock of the office entrance, he found it fitted. The second didn't. He was turning back when Russo's bony hands plucked away the keys and the purse.

The captain transferred them to his subordinate, who was named Hugo. "You've got her address. Check her apartment. You may find a dead man there. I hope you do, not that I enjoy having dead men found scattered about, but the guy she killed has got to be gathering dust somewhere, God knows."

As Hugo left, Brent asked: "You mean the victim hasn't turned up even yet?"

"But he will," Russo said, moving creakingly toward the ringing telephone. "They often do." He listened over the instrument, answering with hollow murmurs, and when he put it down he looked thoughtful. "Ballistics tells me the bullet removed from the girl's head was fired from the revolver found with her here, which is the same revolver that killed Jessika."

"Jessika!" Brent blinked. "This thing ties up in a damned odd way, Russo, considering that Jessika couldn't be the guy she was so daffy about."

"According to the evidence, she did considerable shooting for one afternoon," Russo said, agreeing with a nod. "First Jessika, next the man whose body we haven't found yet, then herself. The second one bothers me more than usual simply because I don't know where to look for it. The information I have on her so far says she has few girl-friends and fewer men-friends, she rarely received any of the latter at her apartment, and none of them even knew she was somebody's mistress, much less who he might be. Apparently she was immoral in a quiet way and highly discreet about it. More information about her, I hope, is about to walk in."

A SEDAN had stopped in front of the plant. The man who alighted from it was accompanied by another member of the homicide squad, Sergeant Delaney. Reaching the entrance, Delaney intercepted a signal from Russo and immediately turned back, having further angles of the case to pursue. The man stepped in, his direct manner indicating he knew his way around here.

"You're Captain Russo," he said, briskly offering his hand. "I'm Philip Blaylock."

Morosely acknowledging the introduction, and mentioning Brent, Russo studied him with lusterless eyes. In comparison with the captain, Philip Blaylock appeared remarkably

vital and animated. He was forty-odd, darkly handsome and fully as personable as a business executive needed to be. Obviously a man of high intelligence, he handled himself efficiently as he opened the door of his private office and gestured Captain Russo to a chair on the caller's side of the desk.

"You own this business with your brother, Vincent, Mr. Blaylock? I asked Sergeant Delaney to bring him here also."

"I don't know where Vince is right now. Neither does Elaine. Elaine is the former Mrs. Vincent Blaylock. She hasn't seen him today. I couldn't locate him anywhere by phone. We stopped in his apartment on the way over here, but he hadn't come in. The cleaning woman was there but hadn't seen him. I left a note. He'll probably show up soon." Blaylock said all this crisply, in full possession of the scene.

"Is your brother usually as hard to locate as all that?"

"Yes, he is," Philip Blaylock answered without hesitation. "Vince works long, irregular hours, mostly outside this office. He handles sales and contracts, and what little social life he has is all mixed up in business. He's probably talking to a customer at a bar somewhere right now. Vince always decides on his moves as he goes along, so it's practically impossible to know where he is, or when he'll turn up at this office. Now, what the devil is all this about Jean March?"

Brent watched while Russo produced a large envelope from his pocket, and showed Blaylock the revolver.

"It belongs here," Blaylock said at once. "The cashier kept it in his desk. Is that what she used? Out of her mind over a man, something like that? I must say I never suspected she was carrying on an affair. Quiet girl. Still waters run deep, I suppose."

"So does blood, in this case," Russo said lugubriously. "These letters tell the story."

He passed the carbons of True Love's letters across the desk. Philip Blaylock read them with eyebrows arched higher and higher.

"It doesn't seem possible," he said, returning them to Russo. "I hadn't a single hint that Jean was carrying on such a high-temperature affair with any man."

"Don't these letters suggest the man's identity to you?"

Blaylock frowned. "A married man about to re-marry the wife he'd previously divorced. A rather unusual situation, but by no means unique. It applies to a number of men in the city, I imagine. You're investigating that angle, of course. Don't you know who he is—or was?"

The telephone interrupted. Blaylock answered it at his desk and immediately transferred it to Russo. The captain listened and

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put it down again, giving Brent and Blaylock each a woebegone glance.

"Sergeant Hugo calling from the girl's apartment," he informed them. "Nothing there, particularly no male corpse. We won't know whose cadaver that is, Mr. Blaylock, until we find it, which is not yet. Perhaps you can help with more information about Miss March or Marcheselli."

Blaylock's answer was clear and emphatic. "I know practically nothing about Jean's personal life outside this office. She was punctual, did her work well, without wasting time, and talked little. She functioned as a secretary to both Vince and me, and her work often took her back into the plant. There are two other men here in the office, both in the bookkeeping department, and in the plant there are thirty-two. Still, I doubt that Jean's lover was anyone here. If he was, then they were both so circumspect about it that I saw no sign of it at all."

Russo's spectral eyes were fixed on him. "Mr. Blaylock, you're avoiding the question of whether those letters don't suggest the man's identity to you. Naturally, you'd rather not think your own brother is mixed up in such a bloody scandal."

Blaylock returned the captain's stare steadily. "Naturally not. I admit that the man's circumstances, as shown by those letters, are very similar to Vince's. But I think it's simply a coincidence."

Brent's interest sharpened as Russo got down to cases. Though he appeared to be inanimate, the captain's brain was far from defunct. He demonstrated that by a sharp attack. "Go back to the beginning of the affair between True Love and the unknown man she fell for. He was married at that time. So was your brother Vincent."

Blaylock nodded. "None too happily," he added. "Vince and Elaine were quarreling. He was too wrapped up in business, away from home too much. I tried to patch things up between them, but—"

"But then," Russo continued, "the situation became complicated by another woman. Who was she?"

Again Blaylock frowned. "I didn't know. Neither did Elaine."

"She divorced him without knowing just who that other woman was?"

"The grounds of her divorce suit were incompatibility, but her real reason was infidelity. She went through with it despite Vince's denials. He admitted nothing, including the other woman's identity."

"Then what made your brother's wife so sure there *was* another woman?"

"She was sure," Blaylock answered, getting a bit stiff. "It's a long story, and I don't believe it has anything to do with this case."

"Nevertheless," Russo insisted, "True Love's lover was divorced at just the time Elaine divorced Vincent. Go on with it, Mr. Blaylock. Did Elaine and Vincent remain friends afterward? Did they gradually patch up their differences? Did she forgive him, believing he'd cut himself off from the other woman? Were they planning to be married all over again?"

Brent saw Philip Blaylock nodding to each of these questions.

"There's the further fact that True Love, in the person of Jean Marcheselli, was working right here as your brother's secretary. And you can still doubt he was the man in her case?"

"I still think the man in her case is somebody other than Vince," Blaylock insisted stubbornly. "As this thing develops, I'm sure you'll see—"

THE telephone interrupted again. Again Blaylock answered it and passed it to Russo. As before, the captain listened sorrowfully and when he put it down he was further enlightened.

"A dead man has finally turned up," he informed Blaylock and Brent. "He begins to fulfill our specifications—that is, he was shot. Only a limited number of murders is committed in the city daily, so he's probably Miss Marcheselli's victim. His body was found a few moments ago, and reported to headquarters, by the superintendent of the building at 56 Doyle Street."

Philip Blaylock stood, smiling tightly. "That settles it, then, Captain. My brother's apartment, where he's been living ever since Elaine divorced him, is not on Doyle Street at all, but on Randolph. Jean March's man was obviously someone other than Vince."

Russo creaked to a standing position. "His name is reported as Clarkston, Howard Clarkston. Do you know him?"

"Never heard of him," Blaylock said, seeming even more relieved.

"You may recognize him regardless, as someone you've seen with Miss Marcheselli. I hope you won't mind viewing the remains."

Blaylock signified that he wouldn't mind. Russo led the way out as hastily as his dry joints would allow. Brent, following eagerly, offered them his car, and they accepted. They drove in silence toward Doyle Street while Russo mulled it over and finally came up with a question.

"What connection did your brother have with a private detective named Walter C. Jessika, and why?"

"Jessika? I don't know the name. Vince had something to do with him? It's news to me. What does it mean?"

Not answering, Russo maintained a tomb-

like silence. When Brent stopped the car at 56 Doyle Street they found a prowler car already there and two radio patrolmen guarding the entrance. They referred Russo to the building superintendent, a skinny-necked man with yellowish eyes full of bright interest, whose name was Joe Ryan. Ryan led them agitatedly to the rear of the ground floor hallway, where a door was standing ajar.

"That there is how I happened to find him," Ryan explained. "Seen the door was open. It was mighty unusual. That door wasn't never left open before. Mighty retirin' man, Mr. Clarkson. Never laid eyes on him from the day he came to look at this apartment, till today. Wouldn't 've seen him then except this door was left open a little ways, just like you see it now. Looked in and there he was, sittin' right there, lookin' awful dead."

Russo pushed the door wider. Brent drew up the rear, craning over Philip Blaylock's square shoulders. It was a one-room apartment, silent and slightly stuffy, and the dead man was visible at once. He was slumped down in a worn overstuffed chair near the kitchenette, both his arms dangling, his head lolling back. His coat sagged open, disclosing a dry maroon stain centering around two bullet-holes directly over his heart. At sight of him Philip Blaylock made choking sounds.

"My God!" he blurted. "It is Vince!"

Brent swallowed a groan. This was all the case needed. The picture seemed all too complete now—the picture of Lora Lorne as an inciter to murder.

Philip Blaylock stumbled out of the doorway, thrust past Brent to the stairs across the hall, fell to a sitting position on the bottom step and held his head in both hands. "My God!" he moaned. "Vince! Vince after all!"

The building superintendent also turned back, regarding Blaylock with less commiseration than curiosity. "Say," Joe Ryan said, "I seen you here before, ain't I?"

Blaylock looked about dazedly. "Yes. Yes, I was here once. I remember now."

"With him, too, wasn't it?" Ryan queried, poking a thumb toward the cadaver.

The questions disturbed Blaylock, but he answered shortly: "Yes, with him."

"When was that?" Brent asked.

THE victim's brother seemed to be piecing things together in his mind. "Months ago, right after Vince and Elaine separated. He was hunting for a small furnished apartment for himself. I went around with him. We came here and looked at this one. Vince was undecided about it. The next he saw was one he liked better—the one on Randolph Street. That's the one he took, not this one. I don't understand it, his being here."

"Nothin' very queer about it, mister," Joe

Ryan opined. "You say he never took this one, but he did, and that same day, too. Called me on the phone not more'n an hour later, sayin' he wanted it just as it was, on a month-to-month basis. Told me his name, then said to leave the door unlocked and to put the keys on the table inside, on accounta he didn't know just when he'd be comin' in. I did just as he said. Seemed to like to keep to hisself mighty close. Never had a quieter tenant. No complaints on either side. He just come and went. Heard him movin' around in there sometimes, but that was all."

"No visitors?" Brent asked skeptically.

Joe Ryan cocked a wise eye. "Can't say I ever suspected it, but he had one in there quite a lot, judgin' from the looks of things now. Female, too. Know what I think? He never really lived in that there apartment. It was a *love nest*, that's what it was!"

"Not quite the glamorous kind you see in the movies," Brent commented. "No luxury to wallow in. How much was the rent?"

"Fifty," Joe Ryan said. "He paid it regular as clockwork, too. First of every month I slipped his bill under the door. Same amount every time—rent fifty dollars, electric seventy-five cents, gas fifty cents. Next day regular he always left a money order in my mailbox for fifty-one dollars and twenty-five cents. Wish I had more tenants like him. Mighty sorry to lose him like this."

Leaving Blaylock still sitting on the stairs, Brent reflected again that apparently the greatest pains had been taken to keep this rendezvous under cover. Inside, he found Captain Russo sniffing out the details. A fastidious man in many ways, the captain was tracing a bony finger across the dust on the table-top. He looked out at the superintendent with evident disapproval.

"When was the last time you cleaned this apartment?"

"Cleanin' 'em ain't my job," Joe Ryan informed him, with some dignity. "Mr. Clarkson never asked me about gettin' him a cleanin' woman, so I guessed he kept it tidy himself."

None too tidy, Brent observed, looking about. He bent over the body and did an elementary bit of mental arithmetic. Three bullets in Jessica, plus two in Vincent Blaylock, plus one in Jean Marcheselli's head, added up to the six originally contained in the gun found with the girl. Rarely had Brent seen so much homicide chalked up by a single load of cartridges.

He poked about while Russo questioned the superintendent. A single key lay on the dusty table—a key fitting this door, no doubt. In the medicine cabinet in the bath he found a safety razor, a tube of brushless shaving cream, two toothbrushes, a box of tooth powder and two combs. In the kitchenette he

came upon indication that breakfast was the only meal ever eaten here. The food supply consisted of a bag of coffee partly used, a punctured can of evaporated milk, sugar, most of a loaf of bread and some jam in a jar.

There was a well-caked pipe and a humidifier half full of a smoking mixture on a small stand. In the closet were a woman's pair of rubbers and only one item of male attire, a pair of pajamas. The condition of the pajamas interested Brent. They were new, having never been laundered, but the tops were wrinkled as if they'd been slept in several times, while the bottoms had obviously never been worn.

Brent delved further. In the top drawer of the dresser he pawed over an assortment of feminine items similar to those he'd seen in Jean Marcheselli's desk drawer at the Blaylock Brothers' plant. In fact, the face-powder, the lipstick and the hand-lotion were respectively the same brands. Brent took keener interest in another drawer. It contained lingerie—a slip, several pairs of panties, a brassiere and three nightgowns, all pink, glossy rayon. One peculiar effect of the war, Brent reflected, was that sin could no longer be conducted in silk.

He was noting further that the studio couch was made up as a double bed when Captain Russo put in another comment of disapproval.

"You've got your story, Brent. Kindly leave the luscious details to the proper officials."

Brent turned to the door, but paused. "What about that bit of paper with the printing on it, the one you found in Jessika's fingers?" he inquired uneasily. "Got any dope on that?"

"In good time," the captain said.

Brent headed for the drugstore on the corner. Wedged into a booth, he made his first call to the Heights Hospital. Again speaking with Dr. Hurd, the house physician, he learned that the operation on Miss Marcheselli had been successful, although the patient's respiratory centers had suffered some derangement. She was in an oxygen tent and unconscious under anesthesia at the moment. It was still impossible to say when she might be able to talk.

Chafing under this delay, Brent next called Garrett. The city editor's worn tone of voice indicated he was increasingly harassed by deadlines. He mentioned that he'd received more denunciations from indignant disciples of Lora Lorne.

"They can't be blamed," Brent said anxiously. "We'd damned well better prepare ourselves for disaster, chum. Our worst fears are materializing rapidly. I still haven't learned whether Marcheselli saw Frost's answer, but everything points to it. I'm herewith reporting one fresh cadaver which will positively turn out to contain another bullet fired from that same busy revolver."

He delivered the details while Garrett muttered, then added a word of feeble hope. "There are other angles. I don't dare think they might pay off, but they're our only possible out. Meanwhile you might be mulling over the least of your worries—a new department to take the place of the Lorne pillar, which must be eliminated damn soon as a measure of public safety."

BRENT looked into the telephone directory, found Elaine Blaylock's name listed, hustled back to his car and drove. The home of the late Vincent Blaylock, on Maple Drive, was neither ostentatious nor modest, but a prosperous medium, done in provincial English style. Brent thumbed the bell. The door was opened by a young man with a hair-line mustache who stared belligerently at Brent with an air of we've-got-trouble-enough-here-already-so-what-the-hell-do-you-want.

"From the Recorder," Brent announced, "to interview Mrs. Blaylock."

"Leave her out of this!" the young man snapped.

"That would be a little difficult now," Brent observed, making it plain he didn't like this guy. "Sooner or later she's got to learn that the body of her murdered ex-husband has been found."

He heard a gasp in the vestibule, then a quick footfall. A woman had stepped from the living room and had paused there to gaze at him, her face set and pale. The news had evidently hit her cruelly without surprising her too much. She was thirty, blond and evidently a realist who could look a fact in the face when she encountered one. She turned back abruptly without having spoken, leaving Brent with the young man, who had suddenly gone off the offensive.

"That's Mrs. Elaine Blaylock," he said quickly. "I'm her brother, Willis Prewitt. We've been afraid of this. You'd better give us the rest of it."

He led Brent into the living room. Mrs. Blaylock sat staring across it and scarcely heard Brent mention his name. To herself she said in a dismayed whisper; "Oh, I knew I shouldn't have believed him, I knew I was right!"

"Mrs. Blaylock," Brent said gently, his long experience as Lora Lorne having taught him to deal compassionately with people under emotional stress, "the police will be here soon. They'll tell you the details. It's enough to say now that Vincent Blaylock was found dead in a small apartment on Doyle Street. There are certain traces of a woman there which are not yours, of course."

She shook her head numbly.

"Everything seems to indicate that the liaison was conducted as quietly and discreet-

ly as possible," Brent added. "Philip Blaylock disclaims all knowledge of it, for example. Again, none of Miss Marcheselli's friends were aware she was carrying on with a man. Apparently these two never gave a hint of it at the office and were never seen together in public. Evidently neither ever visited the apartment where the other lived, but always met at the Doyle Street place which was maintained for that special purpose. Yet the affair seems to have been no secret to you, except for the detail of the other woman's identity."

Mrs. Blaylock stiffened, speaking forthrightly while her brother stood behind her chair, warily eyeing Brent. "I had good reason to suspect it long ago. Vincent was away from home so much, and he kept such late hours so often. He had every opportunity, and I knew it, because—well, because by nature I'm a jealous woman, I suppose. Then I began to get those messages, those taunting notes—"

She hesitated there and Brent cued her. "Notes?"

"By mail," she explained. "Typewritten on little slips of paper. They were never more than a line or so. A note would say, for example, 'Was your husband really talking business at somebody's office last night?'—with words underscored to make the implication as plain as possible. Each time he was out late, or away from the city overnight, I'd receive one of those nasty messages after a day or two, until it got to be so—so intolerably humiliating—"

"You challenged him with it, of course?" Brent asked.

Her face hardened with indignation. "He answered with a blanket denial, that was all. He couldn't prove he *hadn't* been with another woman. He got friends of his to swear he'd been with them at the time, but I knew they were simply lying for him, as men will. Finally . . . well, we hadn't been really happy otherwise, and at last it grew to be too much to endure. I divorced Vincent. After that, of

course, the notes were no longer sent to me."

Brent smelled a nest of mice. "Do you happen to have any of those notes now?"

"Of course not. Why should I keep the filthy things?"

Willis Prewitt spoke up. "I have a few of them." He answered his sister's startled gaze by explaining: "You threw them into the wastebasket, Elaine, but I fished them out again. I thought they might be needed as evidence at the divorce trial. They're right here." He plucked folded paper out of his billfold and passed it to Brent.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Well-Traveled Gun

BRENT could taste the poison in these notes.

They were carefully anonymous, having been typed on plain paper without any sort of salutation or signature. Mrs. Blaylock hadn't exaggerated, a typical example being this: "Are you *sure* your husband was really away from the city last night, talking about *waterproofing*?" After examining the typography, Brent returned them to Prewitt thoughtfully.

"The police will want them. Mrs. Blaylock, those messages show certain peculiarities. Unquestionably they were written on Miss Marcheselli's typewriter."

She opened her eyes wide, then narrowed them. "Then she was deliberately goading me into divorcing Vincent! She wanted him free, so she could marry him herself!"

"But he didn't marry her," Brent pointed out. "He took exactly the opposite tack and began trying to win you back, didn't he?"

"The divorce seemed to change Vincent," Mrs. Blaylock said quietly. "He seemed to become his old self again—more fun, less preoccupied with business. He sent me flowers and perfume, and lovely thoughtful letters saying I was the only woman he'd ever loved. He became so appealing again, seemed so sincere



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I found it hard to doubt him any longer. He begged me to marry him again, and finally I decided I would, if—if—"

Brent drew a breath. Mrs. Blaylock was talking like a letter to Lora Lorne. Brent had shifted to the police trick only to find himself dealing again with travails of the heart. He could pick his way through this sort of stuff blindfolded. "If only those last, lingering doubts could be removed," he heard himself saying. "So you hired a private detective named Walter C. Jessika to check on your ex-husband."

Her eyes opened wide again. "How do you know that? Mr. Jessika was to keep it strictly confidential!"

"It was, until Mr. Jessika became the first corpse in this case," Brent assured her. As she continued to stare at him he went on: "Apparently you haven't seen the *Recorder's* earliest edition. The story has developed since then anyway. I know Jessika reported to you that you needn't worry about any further romancing on your ex-husband's part. You accepted that report until you saw a certain letter signed True Love in Lora Lorne's column yesterday. That aroused your doubts all over again." Brent added a question: "How did you happen to select Jessika as a detective?"

"Why, not knowing about such things, and not wanting anyone else to know I was doing it, I simply picked his name out of the classified telephone directory."

"An unfortunate choice," Brent said. "If you'd known his reputation, as it was noised around police headquarters, you'd have chosen some other agency. In Jessika's files, Mrs. Blaylock, the police have found the carbon copies of several letters addressed to Vincent Blaylock, all insisting on new financial arrangements between them."

She came to her feet indignantly. "So that's it! Until now I'd thought Mr. Jessika had simply failed to find out the truth. As you've said, Vincent and this girl were concealing their disgusting affair so carefully that even a private detective might not have seen them meeting anywhere. But now it's only too clear. They couldn't possibly have hidden it as completely as all that. Mr. Jessika *did* find out—Vincent was still seeing this girl—and he was bribing Mr. Jessika to lie to me about it! Oh, this is all so horrible!"

"The blood spilled as a consequence of it is horrible enough, Brent agreed, "but—"

"Wait a minute." This was Willis Prewitt, speaking up again. "Who killed Jessika, then, Vince? You mean Vince murdered Jessika to get out of paying more bribe money, and next this Marcheselli girl killed Vince because he was going to remarry Elaine, and then she tried to kill herself?"

"All with the same gun," Brent added.

"But Mr. Brent," Mrs. Blaylock protested, "I have to believe all the rest of it, but I simply can't believe that Vince would kill anyone!"

"Yeah?" her brother said scornfully. "How else can it add up, then?"

There had been footfalls on the walk and now the doorbell rang. Again Prewitt answered it. This time he put up no argument. He came back with Philip Blaylock, Captain Russo and Sergeant Delaney. Brent received a spooky, forbidding stare from Russo while Philip and Elaine Blaylock exchanged murmured condolences. Sergeant Delaney had a black notebook in his hands and his ominous frown meant he was taking an especially acute interest in this case.

"O.K., O.K., Captain," he said gruffly, having been arguing with Russo. "Sure, I see how the evidence reads. But the way I always look at a homicide, I ask myself, who profits from this crime? Well, we've got that angle here, not once, but twice. Him, for instance. I've been finding out about *him*."

HE pointed out accusingly at Willis Prewitt. Prewitt instantly resented the sergeant's gesture.

"Finding out about me? What the hell do you mean by that?"

Russo attempted to muzzle his assistant. "Never mind about that now, Delaney."

"Never mind?" Delaney was afire with a theory and couldn't cool off. "Listen. Mrs. Blaylock's got money in her own name. At the time she divorced her husband, they agreed on a settlement—she kept her own dough and he kept his. O.K., so what would happen if they got spliced again? Naturally and automatically, marriage would make each of 'em the beneficiary of the other in case one of 'em died. One would inherit from the other in case the other got bumped, see?"

He wasn't finished, but Brent made a sneering sound.

"Never mind, Delaney," Russo said again. Delaney couldn't be stopped now. Not liking Prewitt's attitude any better than Brent had, he favored this theory. "But Vincent Blaylock got cooled before he could remarry this woman. So how will it pan out *now*, should something happen to her? Why, her nearest of kin will get her dough, of course, meaning her brother here. Unless," he added, "she's got a will to the contrary. Has she got a will like that, bub?"

"Go pluck a duck," Prewitt suggested succinctly.

"Y' see, Captain?" Delaney insisted, demonstrating the reason he'd become known around headquarters as Hardheaded Horace. "This guy had a good reason for knocking off Vincent Blaylock. He lives high. He keeps a

string of ponies and since the ban on racing he's been taking it on the chin. It was fine for him when his sister's divorce put him in line for plenty of frogskins. That meant he could recoup some day. I know something else about this guy, what's more. He could even get an advance from her. Liking to look around the stables myself—I happen to know she's made him a couple of big loans since the divorce and would do it again. Vincent, on the other hand, never would let him get hold of her pursestrings. And here's the topper. If she married again, why, then this guy would lose all chance of collecting from her now or ever."

"You're off your nut," Prewitt said flatly. "If you want a reasonably strong motive for Vince's murder, take a good look at his brother."

Philip Blaylock turned, incensed. "What's that?"

"Don't try to gloss it over, Phil," Prewitt broke in, lips still curling. "I know all about the business muddle you and Vince were in. He told me about it. He was blocking your move, and now he's damned well out of your way."

The focus of Delaney's suspicions promptly shifted to Blaylock. "He's the other one I spoke about, all right, Captain, the other one who profits. I've been asking plenty of questions about him, too, and I picked up enough—"

"Just a minute," Blaylock interrupted him. "If your information is incomplete, let me fill it out for you." Turning from Delaney, he chose to deliver his information directly at the top. "Your man means that my brother and I had disagreed as to a possible business move, Captain Russo. It's rather simply explained. We hold patents on a certain waterproofing process. We've done well with it, but lately we've run into trouble. The materials we use are critical and we can't get as much of them as we need. Our process is comparatively expensive and it leaves the waterproofed material inflammable. Also, it's applicable to only a limited number of surfaces. We've lost several big war contracts because of that—in fact, we've been losing heavy volumes of business to other firms, particularly the Plastiproof Corporation."

Delaney was listening avidly, Russo patiently, Prewitt with an air of I-told-you-so.

"Plastiproof's product is cheaper, non-inflammable and uses non-critical materials. They use a new plastic, protected by patents, of course, which does a perfect waterproofing job when sprayed on duck, leather, fabrics, wrapping paper, paper cartons, rust-preventive sacks—everything under the sun. Well, we can't compete with it. To me, all this meant inevitable business failure. For a long time now I've been convinced there was only one

way we could survive—that is to buy into Plastiproof."

"So why didn't you?" Delaney inquired eagerly.

"That's where Vince and I couldn't see eye to eye. Plastiproof is a closed corporation. It happens, however, that one partner is willing to sell his stock. We'd have had to buy the whole block. The price added up to more money than Vince and I possessed together. I could have negotiated a loan for the difference, but Vince was unwilling to sink every dollar he owned into it. In time he'd have gotten back every cent, but he considered it a risk because he was afraid some even better process might be developed next—which I don't think is possible—and he simply refused to chance it. That was the situation."

"**B**UT now!" Delaney said, jumping at a new theory. "Now your brother's dead. Did he leave a will?"

"Vince was superstitious about such things."

"Meaning what?" Delaney persisted.

"He felt that to prepare for death, in such ways as making a will, was to invite it. It's a silly idea, of course, but it was one of Vince's superstitious fears. So he never made a will. This fills out the picture for you, of course, Sergeant Delaney. If Vince had died while married to Elaine, his estate would have gone to her. But he died before he remarried her, so his money goes to his only close blood relative—myself."

"Sure! So now Blaylock Brothers is all yours, and you'll be able to save your neck by lumping Vincent's money with yours and buying into Plastiproof!" Delaney made a gesture of cynical finality. "What else do you want, Captain?"

"Less unnecessary theorizing, Delaney," Russo said sadly. "You've overlooked something. Vincent Blaylock's death is no mystery. We know who killed him. In the Heights Hospital we have a girl who went far toward confessing the homicide. Once she's able to hold a pen, we'll probably induce her to add her signature. Lacking that, we've more than enough evidence to convict her anyhow. Under such circumstances speculations as to other possible murderers are pretty superfluous." He bowed to both accusers like a solemnly courteous specter. "Please overlook the digression, gentlemen." Then he lifted his unearthly eyes to Brent. "I'm going to ask my questions now without any further interruptions. This is the way to the door."

In the vestibule he drew a newspaper from his pocket. It was folded, Brent saw, with the Lorne column outward. With one bony finger Russo indicated the final paragraph. Brent cringed as he saw the bit of advice printed

over Lora Lorne's signature which ended with the words, "kill the rat."

"God help us!" Brent sighed. "Where'd you find that?"

"One of my colleagues at headquarters sent it up to me. Cops can read, Brent. Headquarters always gets each new edition of your sheet as soon as it's off the presses. There are twenty or thirty more copies of this one on the premises, but one is all I'll need for evidence."

Brent echoed it in an empty tone. "Evidence?"

"There's a point of law involved here," Russo explained morosely. "A murder can be committed without any sort of tangible weapon. You can use logic. If you argue another person into perpetrating a homicide, you're as guilty of it in the eyes of the law as the person who actually performed it. That applies here. If it's true that Jean Marcheselli killed Vincent Blaylock on Lora Lorne's advice, then legally, dear, sweet Miss Lorne is a murderer."

"THAT'S what he said," Brent reported restlessly to his city editor. "If Marcheselli killed Blaylock on Lorne's recommendation, then she might just as well have plugged the guy with her own grandmotherly hands."

Garrett sagged back in his chair, looking exhausted. His last edition had been put to bed. The activity in the city room had subsided, but a few members of the staff lingered at their desks, puttering about. Miss Frost was among them, not puttering. Still poker-faced, she was giving Lora Lorne's mail her concentrated attention, grimly. Brent couldn't guess what new witch's brew she was stirring up. He shuddered with every glance at her.

When returning to the city room a moment ago, he'd found Garrett exhorting Miss Frost as to Miss Lorne's brand of constructive omniscience. It was this, not his strenuous day's work, that had tired Garrett so much. He'd left Miss Frost's cubicle feeling doubtful that he'd made much of a dent in her convictions. Now having heard Brent's portentous report on Russo's view of the case, he sat with his shoulders sagging, and his eyes dull with despair.

"I've been afraid of this for years," he confessed, surprising Brent. "No matter if the Lorne column is the most popular in the paper, guiding other people's lives is too ticklish a job for the best of experts. That column always was dynamite and at last it's blown up with a loud bang. Well, Brent, it'll be a lovely big funeral. Lorne's finished. The *Recorder* will be discredited for having fostered her. We'll never survive it. Just as a misguided election poll killed *The Literary Digest*, a similar loss of public faith will turn this newspaper plant into a haunted shell."

BRENT was staring at nothing. "There's something wacky in this setup," he answered absently. "Something fundamentally screwy. I sense it, but I can't put my finger on it."

"You're wasting your brain-cells," Garrett assured him blackly. "There's no out. Our goose is cooked a beautiful golden brown. Well, it's been nice, working on the *Recorder*. Maybe we'll be able to find jobs on some other paper, provided the murder trial doesn't drag us down along with Lorne. After all, your nose and mime aren't entirely clean."

"That gun," Brent muttered. "Damnedest sequence of blood-lettings I've ever come across. To begin with, the gun was in the cashier's desk at Blaylock Brothers. The way this picture shapes up, Vincent Blaylock helped himself to it first, went to Jessika's office and plugged him. Next he lugged it to that secret love-nest, where Marcheselli took over the gun and used it to slay him. Finally she carried it back to the office it had originally come from, where she used it again, trying to kill herself. A very peripatetic weapon!"

"Skip it," Garrett suggested, his voice rasping. "You can't outsmart the cops this time, Brent. It not only violates my principles, it's impossible."

"But why did Marcheselli go to the office to kill herself?" Brent persisted. "Why didn't she do it right there in the apartment, while she was all lathered up over slaughtering the man she loved so madly? If she just wandered out in a daze, why didn't she go home instead, where she could shoot herself in more comfort? And why should she bother to write to Lora Lorne about it, anyway? Lorne couldn't solve that one for her—couldn't get her out of the murder or bring her back to life either."

"The answer to all that is simply that she did it," Garrett pointed out. "She was a distraught young woman acting irrationally upon stormy emotions, not calm common sense. There's no use fretting over it, or over her. She'll probably never see the electric chair—she'll probably just get life, along with Lora Lorne."

Brent stood up. "I can't take it. Much as I loathe the mere thought of Lora Lorne, she's an idol in the eyes of hundreds of thousands and I'm damned if I can stand by and see her destroyed, even though she may deserve it. God help me, the stretch I did as Lorne has done something to me. It's given me a heart, or something. It's shown me faith, a pure, shining faith that might be a spark of something divine, something this sorry world needs a lot of. Listen to me talk!" He sported at himself. "On the other hand, this thing I see may be just the unadulterated dopiness of the soft-headed public. But still—"

He wandered across the city room, feeling oddly inspired. Gazing at Miss Lorne's miserable cubbyhole, he saw it as a sort of temple, a citadel of unquestioning trust. The damned hole in the wall nauseated him, but at the same time he couldn't help feeling that to destroy it now would be to desecrate a shrine. His thoughts startled him. He was further startled to find that he'd been drawn unconsciously, by a protective impulse, to Miss Lorne's door. Miss Frost was gazing up at him, still as cryptic as a female Buddha.

"It was perfectly silly of her," Miss Frost said with a sniff. "Silly of her to shoot herself, I mean. If a girl has any sense at all, she simply won't kill herself over a man. He's never worth it and there are always others. If this one was afraid of being convicted of murder, that was silly, too. Do you remember how a certain young woman, in very much the same situation as Miss Marcheselli, was acquitted of murder in New York City on the same night that Bruno Richard Hauptmann was electrocuted? In just the same way, Miss Marcheselli needn't worry about being brought to trial, simply because the defendant's sex makes a great deal of difference to a jury. She'll be acquitted too, especially if she has nice legs."

Brent felt revolted. Such cynicism in Miss Lorne's sanctum, even if true, was unbecoming. Further, it showed no yielding in Miss Frost's stern attitude toward the unfortunate. On the contrary, it promised new disasters, provided Lora Lorne continued to exist long enough to cause them.

Brent pushed out of the newsroom. He drove toward the Heights Hospital, prompted by a thought fraught with finality. The whole case, after all, would depend largely on the statement Miss Marcheselli would probably make once she became able to make it. If she reiterated her confession, that would settle everybody's hash. But Brent hoped wistfully that she would deny everything. Further, he even hoped that he might somehow be able to back up such a denial—to cast doubt on the

case to such an extent that the D.A. wouldn't move against the girl, which would keep the Lorne phase of the case quiet also. It was a very large order, but Brent had a small beginning on it. That remarkably nomadic revolver still bothered him.

He searched his mind for other doubtful angles as he entered the Heights Hospital. Inquiring for the house physician at the desk in the lobby, he learned that Dr. Hurd was busy on the fourth floor. Brent took the elevator. The fourth-floor corridor was quiet and deserted until a white-uniformed man emerged from one of the rooms. He immediately disappeared into the next room as Brent headed for him. Waiting outside a screen, Brent heard a quiet consultation taking place inside. After a moment the man in white reappeared.

"Dr. Hurd?"

It was Dr. Hurd, dark, clean-cut, confident-looking. When Brent identified himself he offered a strong, antiseptic hand but looked dubious. He indicated an open door on the opposite side of the hall, beyond which a man was seated, eyeing Brent. This was Sergeant Hugo, present on assignment from Captain Russo.

"Miss Marcheselli is right in there," the house physician said.

Brent gazed past the screen. The patient lay under an oxygen tent. A nurse was bending over the tank, carefully adjusting a valve to regulate the flow. She came out, starchily hurrying to other duties. Dr. Hurd gently closed the door.

"She's regaining consciousness," he informed Brent, "Before very much longer it may be possible to question her briefly. I'll look in at her again soon. You may wait in there, with that detective, if you'd like."

Brent said he would like and turned, hearing ghostly footfalls in the corridor. Captain Russo was approaching from the elevator. Dr. Hurd suggested, "In perhaps half an hour, Captain," and Russo nodded. The house

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physician moved off to continue on his rounds. Russo moved into the room opposite Miss Marcheselli's, signaled Sergeant Hugo off duty, and sadly took over the chair. His frown at Brent was not a welcoming one, but Brent planted himself on the empty bed regardless.

"I can't help feeling sorry for Jessika," Brent said, his mind still mulling over details. "Did you know he came to the Recorder office about an hour before he was killed, wanting to know who True Love was? He didn't find out, and it really worried him. That's an odd thing, Russo. No doubt he'd put over plenty of slick deals on clients and he'd gotten away with them. But this time, sleuthing for Mrs. Blaylock, I really think he played it straight. There was hardly anything else he could do, so he'd delivered an honest report for once, and it bothered him when she doubted him."

Russo said skeptically: "Vincent Blaylock and the girl were keeping their affair under wraps very closely, so closely that Jessika might have missed it. But he didn't. Those letters to Vincent in Jessika's file are evidence of blackmail."

"They smell of halibut," Brent said. "I'm beginning to slant this thing, Russo. Look at it. According to the evidence, this massacre began when Vincent drilled Jessika. This presumes that Jessika had learned the truth about Vincent and the girl, that he was bleeding Vincent, and that Vincent was desperate to escape paying him more extortion. Then you've got to assume further that after he'd killed Jessika, Vincent was so afraid of getting caught on the spot on a dull Saturday afternoon, or so careless, that he beat it fast, leaving those letters in the file—leaving them there among so few other letters that he could have found them easily in a minute or two. Such definite evidence, too—his name on them in black and white. It could have sent him straight to the chair. Russo, that's no way to commit a murder."

"Frequently a murderer fails to make a perfect job of it," Russo pointed out. "That's why it's worth while for the city to pay me a salary."

Brent wagged his head, encouraged regardless. "Too many presumptions, all based on those letters. Keep listening, Russo. I'm feeling my way along, but I'm getting somewhere. It's incredible that Vincent would leave those damning letters on the scene, but it's even harder to believe Jessika ever wrote them in the first place. You said yourself there were very few reports on file, that Jessika must have reported to most of his clients orally, that obviously he wanted to avoid committing himself on paper. Yet among that very small number of letters on file were three making it plain that Jessika was a blackmailer. It's completely out of character for him, Russo. He simply

wouldn't have put such chicanery on record. That whole angle's no good at all. It simply won't wash."

CHAPTER FIVE

Fake Love Nest

BRENT sat up straight, electrified by his own words. "Won't wash," he repeated. "That's it! For God's sake, that's exactly what's been bothering my subconscious. *They weren't washed!*"

The captain looked at him mournfully. "What wasn't washed, and what of it?"

Brent was on his feet now, thinking fast, moving a few agitated steps back and forth. "By heaven, that is it! They'd never been washed."

He turned intently. "Letters!" he went on. "This damn case is full of letters. Letters in Jessika's file, letters in Marcheselli's desk, anonymous notes to Mrs. Blaylock. What would this case rest on without them, Russo? Largely because of those notes Mrs. Blaylock divorced Vincent. The letters in Marcheselli's desk told us she was having herself a time with a guy who turned out to be Vincent. The three in Jessika's files indicated he was blackmailing Vincent over that same affair. Letters, letters everywhere! But eliminate them and the whole case would have to be based on the identification of the bullets fired out of that revolver—which in itself is the most vagrant weapon of murder you've ever heard of."

Russo looked scornful. "And just how the hell are all those letters to be eliminated as evidence?"

"By considering them faked."

"Faked!"

"Falsified and planted," Brent insisted. "In Jessika's case the plant is obvious now. He never would have written such incriminating letters to Vincent. All right, then, he didn't write them. Since he didn't write them, they weren't in his file when he was killed. Since they weren't there then, they must have been written on Jessika's typewriter *after* he was dead and left in his file as a frame."

"Brent, you're battering your head against a completely conclusive case."

"I'm seeing the light, brother," Brent went on. "Nothing is easier to fake than a carbon copy of a letter. You simply write it in the usual way, discard the original, plant the carbon where you want it, and it looks valid as hell. Moreover, it's beautifully easy—there's no signature to forge." He looked elated. "Realize what this means? If the letters in Jessika's file were faked, then he wasn't blackmailing Vincent. Then Vincent had no reason to kill him. Even more, it means Jessika's reports to Mrs. Blaylock were right, just as he

insisted they were. Actually, Vincent wasn't playing around with any dame, including Marcheselli."

"Come back to realities, Brent," Russo suggested wryly. "Lora Lorne's column is evidence that Marcheselli's affair with Vincent was one of long standing."

"But that's based on more letters," Brent protested. "On the carbons found in Marcheselli's desk drawer, which were forged as easily as the ones in Jessika's file. On the originals of those same letters, which don't bear a single stroke of a signature! Every one of those damn letters could be a forgery and a plant, Russo, and what's more, they are. Actually, Marcheselli hadn't the faintest notion of being insanely in love with Vincent. There wasn't any such love affair at all, on either side. *They weren't washed!* My God, don't you see it?"

"It's a little difficult to ignore that apartment out of existence," Russo observed. "I mean, of course, the one on Doyle Street, where Vincent and Marcheselli held their amorous rendezvous."

"Another plant, and I can prove it," Brent declared. "Marcheselli was never there."

"A statement based on the fact that they weren't washed, of course?" Russo inquired with hollow skepticism.

Brent stared at him. "Is it possible that a man of your experience doesn't know the difference between a pair of ladies panties which has been washed and a pair which hasn't?"

The faintest suggestion of a flush appeared on the captain's waxy cheeks. "Come now," he said uncomfortably. "My familiarity with women has been largely confined to dead ones."

"I mean the female garments in the dresser," Brent reminded him. "A slip, three nightgowns, a bra and some pants. They're all rayon, all shiny. Rayon exhibits such shininess only when it's brand new, due to the sizing on it. With every washing some of that sizing is lost and so the garment loses some of its sheen. I'm astonished, having to acquaint you with such elementary facts of life, Russo. Your ignorance of such worldly matters is why you missed the significant fact that none of the underthings in the apartment had ever been washed in the bathroom bowl or anywhere else. In fact, they had never been washed because they'd never been worn. No woman was ever inside them, or even inside that apartment after it was rented in the false name of Clarkson."

"Having a case as strong as this one," Russo remarked, "I'm a little reluctant to discard it on the basis of your observations on ladies' panties."

"My God, that's far from all. There isn't a single item in that apartment that couldn't

have been planted. The stuff in the medicine cabinet and in the kitchenette, those male pajamas so deceptively mussed up—but never sent out to the laundry either, I'd like to point out. The women's rubbers in Marcheselli's size, the cosmetics of the same brands she used. One of Vincent's pipes and the same tobacco mixture he smoked. Very clever, all this, and almost completely convincing, too, but every one of those items could have been brought in by another person—and was."

RUSSO was beginning to frown darkly. "Proof that Marcheselli had never been there? The keys in her handbag, Russo. There were two of them, one to open the office and the other to fit her own apartment door. Only two, but not a third key to that love nest, which she certainly would have had if she'd been in the habit of going there frequently. Keys!" Brent gestured jubilantly. "They show that Vincent was also a stranger to the place. When you went into that place you found the key on the table. Left there by Vincent after he'd come in? Not so. Vincent wouldn't have been carrying that key loose, but on his key-ring, along with others."

Brent was pacing rapidly.

"Good Lord, Russo, how much proof do you want? The superintendent, Joe Ryan, never saw Vincent in that apartment until today, never saw him going or coming. He never saw Marcheselli either. There was no lease, therefore no signature to check. The rent was paid by money-order, obtainable readily upon application by anyone under any name. Finally, the rent bills. Always seventy-five cents for electricity and fifty cents for gas. Those, Russo, are the minimum charges, the amount payable even if no juice or gas is used at all. Burning a few lights for a few nights, or cooking a few pots of coffee, will run the bill above that minimum amount. That point's settled once and for all, Russo. Nobody was ever in that apartment for more than a few minutes at a time, at rare intervals—just long enough, in fact, to set the stage, a few items at a time, and to pick up the rent bill every month when Joe Ryan wasn't looking."

The captain was sitting very still.

"The whole thing is an elaborate, masterly false effect," Brent insisted. "Actually there wasn't any affair between Vincent and Marcheselli. That love nest actually wasn't in use. No blackmail was paid. This case is a triple murder—except that Miss Marcheselli, the third victim, wasn't killed quite dead enough."

Still cerebrating, Russo heard a step in the hall and looked up. He saw a white-uniformed figure disappearing behind the screen at Miss Marcheselli's door. He watched that door, anxiously waiting to be beckoned in by Dr. Hurd, while Brent kept pacing and talking.

"I never expected it," Brent sighed. "Never expected to find a hole in this case, but now it looks like a slice of Swiss cheese. The whole thing was rigged from the very beginning—Elaine Blaylock's divorce from Vincent, True Love's letters to Lora Lorne helping to build up the phony picture, that tricked-up apartment—"

"It's plain enough now, Russo, why Jessika was bumped. He could testify that there was no illicit contact whatever between Vincent and Marcheselli. He so reported to Elaine Blaylock, but she doubted him, which was a break for the killer. It would be quite a different matter, though, if he should insist to you that his report was absolutely true. That would have started raveling the whole fabric, in exactly the same way that it has come apart now that I've pulled on several threads. That's why Jessika was shut up, to keep him from ruining the whole setup. His killer took the Lorne clipping out of his dead hand because that angle would soon tie in anyway, and he didn't want your investigation deflected from the faked carbons in the file. He'd already killed Vincent by then, and faked Marcheselli's suicide."

"My God, Brent, you talk too much," Russo complained. "It's unnecessary. I'll get the low-down on all this as soon as Dr. Hurd lets me question that girl."

Brent was too steamed up to quit now. "Any sort of a pretext could have been enough to get Vincent to step into that apartment. Two shots and he was done for. Then Marcheselli at the office—"

"If you must sound off, Brent," Russo interrupted, "would it be possible for you to mention *whom* you're talking about?"

Brent looked astonished. "What? Is it diagrams you want? Go back to the beginning, those anonymous notes to Elaine Blaylock. They had to be written by someone familiar with Vincent's comings, goings and whereabouts—by someone to whom Marcheselli's typewriter was available in the same way it was used later for the True Love letters—by someone who could say to Marcheselli today: 'It's Saturday afternoon, but if you don't mind working overtime—' Someone, of course, who could slip up behind her unnoticed while she sat at her typewriter, shoot her in the head, then type out another faked document, that confession of murder. When she's able to talk, Russo, she'll say: 'No, of course I didn't try to commit suicide—but Philip Blaylock did try to murder me.'"

"**P**HILIP BLAYLOCK is the only one who fits all through it. Months ago, having looked at that apartment on Doyle Street with Vincent, he phoned Joe Ryan a little later and rented it, unknown to his brother. He could

get hold of one of Vincent's pipes, and he knew, or could find out, what kind of tobacco Vincent smoked, and what brands of cosmetics Marcheselli used. What a skunk! Think of how he broke up Vincent's marriage, to eliminate Elaine from Vincent's estate and put himself in line for it. Damned cold-blooded, the way he calculated killing Marcheselli with the purpose of filling out the phony picture of illicit love he'd built up against his own brother and making her seem to be Vincent's killer. Gambling his business future on murder—getting past Vincent's refusal to buy into Plasti-proof by killing the guy, so he could buy in himself, with Vincent's dough. If ever a guy rated plenty of volts in the electric chair, he's it."

"Perhaps I rate a vacation," Russo said sadly. "It would appear that Hardheaded Horace really had something, after all."

Brent lifted his head sharply, listening. "What was that?"

"A moan," Russo said, sounding like a moan himself. "A male patient in pain."

Having stepped from the room, Brent stared at a sign glowing midway along the corridor. "A male patient—in the maternity ward?"

He went up the corridor rapidly. Another moan stopped him short. Russo, drifting after him, also paused to gaze at a door standing ajar. It opened into a room adjoining a larger one where there were twenty-odd cribs containing babies asleep, squawking or sucking their thumbs. In was in there, Brent surmised, that the babies were weighed and changed, and their formulas mixed. He pushed the door open slowly, heard another groan and a scraping sound, and suddenly saw Dr. Hurd.

The house physician was a startling sight. He was wearing neither coat nor trousers. He'd been lying on the floor and now he was dizzily picking himself up, his shoes skidding on the waxed linoleum. His expression of indignation was accentuated by the livid mark above his left eye.

"Who hit me?" he said.

Brent stared at Russo. Russo stared at Brent. Neither made a move to assist Dr. Hurd. They turned away at the same instant. Brent broke into a run down the corridor, with Russo creaking alongside him with amazing agility. They sped until they reached the door of Jean Marcheselli's room. Then their tactics became stealthy. Brent turned the knob noiselessly and eased the door open, conscious that Russo was bringing a Police Special into play.

Inside the room a man wearing a white uniform—the one stripped from Dr. Hurd—was bending over the patient in the bed. He had quietly dragged away the oxygen tent. He was gripping a pillow in both hands, pressing it hard over Miss Marcheselli's face.

Brent recalled that the girl's respiratory

centers had been upset by the bullet in her brain. Death by asphyxiation might appear to be a natural consequence, not murder. Once she'd been eternally silenced, Jean Marcheselli could never accuse Philip Blaylock.

Brent blurted: "You've gone far enough with that!"

Blaylock straightened, turning, still holding the pillow. The girl lay still and pale on the bed behind him. He reacted swiftly, swinging the pillow. It twirled heavily across the room and slapped into Russo's face. The captain's gun blasted once and a fragment of linoleum flew up from the floor.

"For God's sake!" Brent howled. "Be careful of that girl!"

He leaned at Blaylock, his right fist cutting upward. It connected with the line of Blaylock's jaw at the exact instant that Blaylock's knuckles cracked home between Brent's eyes. Brent tottered, sagging to his knees. Behind him, Russo's gun boomed again. When Brent opened his stinging eyes he found the captain standing solicitously beside the bed and Dr. Hurd, still in his underwear, pushing in. Brent blinked about, dazed, without seeing Blaylock.

The house physician bent over Jean Marcheselli, rapidly checking her condition. "She's all right," he said breathlessly. "We'll bring her out of this. Help me get the oxygen tent back in place, Captain."

Feeling steadier, Brent crossed to the window. It was open. He put his head out and saw a crumpled white figure lying still on the cement pavement four stories below.

"O.K.," he said aloud. "Blaylock must have gambled there'd be a fire-escape out here, but there wasn't. . ."

THE clatter of Brent's typewriter was the only noise in the city room. He'd hurried back from the Heights Hospital with the com-

plete story, Miss Marcheselli having recovered enough to confirm Blaylock's guilt. There wouldn't be another edition of the *Recorder* until Monday morning, but Brent had wanted to get the details on paper while they were still sizzling hot in his mind. Just as he finished the last page with grim enthusiasm, he heard a step near him and looked up to see Miss Frost approaching Garrett's desk.

She had stayed late and had done something which Brent had never been able to achieve in all the years he'd been Lora Lorne—she'd cooked up a column a day ahead of its deadline. She had the copy in her hands. Demonstrating that she'd learned the proper process of handling it, she bestowed it on Garrett. Then she turned and went back to the Lorne cubbyhole while Brent gazed at her aghast. Damned if she wasn't going to work even later and probably get a second column ready, this one two days in advance!

Brent took his own copy to Garrett. The city editor promptly spiked Miss Frost's and went to work with his blue pencil on the murder story.

"Bill," he said, pausing with a sigh, "I'm a hard man. I drive my staff. I expect top-flight performances from 'em and I treat 'em tough. But when they deliver I appreciate it plenty. That goes for you now. You've twisted this case so beautifully I still can't believe it. We're completely in the clear. Lorne's reputation is perfectly safe now. Since all the True Love letters were part of the frame-up, Frost's answer had nothing whatever to do with any murder. Blessings on you, little man!"

Brent scarcely heard. He had drawn Frost's copy off the spike and was poring over it. As he read he winced. His temperature went up fast. Finally he exploded.

"Hell's hinges! Look at this stuff, Garrett! Here's a husband who's losing his wife, and

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he's desperate to keep her by his fireside, and what does Miss Lorne suggest? 'Good riddance to the hussy!' Here's an unmarried girl with a baby, and how does Miss Lorne help her out? By saying in substance that she should go ahead and suffer, she deserves it. Here's a young wife going through hell trying to get her ex-service husband readjusted to civilian life, which is one damn delicate problem to handle properly, so what does Miss Lorne recommend? 'If he doesn't treat you with due consideration, kick the heel out.' My God, Garrett, that's the last straw!

"Take it easy," Garrett suggested. "Frost is learning. Give her time."

"Learning!" Brent blurted. "Practicing on human lives, committing tragedies in the process! All right, Garrett, in time she'll improve, sure, at God knows what cost. But Frost herself is not the real trouble here. She's sterner than most women would be, but this thing would shape up in very much the same way with anybody else in her place. I mean so far as I'm concerned. It's no spot for a learner, for an amateur, for anybody who can't put his whole soul into it. Lord help me, Garrett, I've got an ingrown conscience and I've slaved so hard for so long over the Lorne column, I can't trust it to anyone else."

"Skip it, Brent," Garrett said. "Monday's follow-up on this murder yarn will—"

"I'd never rest. Just the thought of it drives me nuts—thinking what ghastly tragedies might be happening because I've let Lorne get out of my hands. God knows I'm also capable of dishing out sour advice, but at least I've painfully acquired experience and some of the understanding the job demands. Garrett,

there's only one thing to do here." Brent drew in a deep breath. "Put me back on the Lorne column."

Garrett gaped at him. "You're asking to be put back on the Lorne column?"

"I'm asking and saying pretty please," Brent insisted grimly. "Don't tell me you can't do it because you're so short-handed on the staff. Transfer Frost to society, as McNeill's assistant. That'll give McNeill enough spare time to help Smithers cover the sports news."

"Any kid can be taught to do Smithers' leg-work, and that will give him enough time to handle most of the police trick. I'll help him out with as much extra time as I can take off the Lorne column. It can be done, Garrett, and you're doing it." Suddenly Brent became vehement in his earnestness. "I'm back on the Lorne column right now and I'll break the neck of any guy who tries to say I'm not!"

As Garrett stared after him, speechless with amazement, Brent waded into the cubbyhole in the car corner of the city room. There Miss Frost was poring over a handful of Lorne letters. Looking up at Brent's fierce face, she abruptly lost her cryptic aspect. She looked frankly scared.

"Get the hell out of here!" Brent roared. "This is my purgatory!"

The force of his voice sent her skittering out the door. He stood there gazing at mounds of Lorne letters waiting to be answered and more heaps waiting to be opened. He remembered keenly how he'd loathed them all, with their tinted stationery and their passionate scents and their never-ending sob stories, yet he felt strangely glad to be back.

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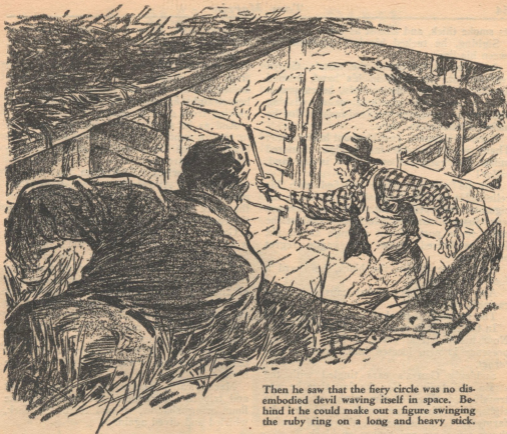


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UNITED STATES MARITIME SERVICE



Then he saw that the fiery circle was no disembodied devil waving itself in space. Behind it he could make out a figure swinging the ruby ring on a long and heavy stick.

THE HEAD OF A FOOL

By **TOM MARVIN**

Author of "The Ghost Wore His Hat," etc.

Fire! Farmers' first terror! Folks would think a bum asleep in the hay had burned up in the inferno. But one jasper would know there were two bodies—one homicidal maniac who had killed Little Emil and Sheriff Larson, then had dumped the sheriff into the barn loft and lit the pyre!

L EANING against a fence post in the strange and night-bound farmyard, Chris Ganya thought: That girl was a shipmate! Bunking in her hayloft will sure beat spending another night in a corn shock... Like Grandma says, Foul night, Fair friend... But the pretty boy giant... He won't let things lay... That jasper's out to even up with me!

His jacket was just a cobweb against the stinging night wind. Frisking it, Ganya found his last cigarette and a few wooden matches. Except for the bonfire flickering on the opposite side of the lot under a starless sky, the farmyard was as black as if daubed with a tar brush. He guessed the bonfire was the farmyard incinerator. Being a seagoing man, he wouldn't know. Smelled like trash, though,

its smoke thick, and almost as bitter as bilge.

Sighing, he tucked his last cigarette between his lips.

As soon as he struck the match, Ganya regretted it. It flared in his hand, burned dazzlingly bright. Instinctively, he cupped it with a seaman's practiced palm, wishing suddenly in a vaguely troubled fashion that he hadn't scratched the light.

Then he grinned. Just blackout habit, mate! There wasn't a sub inside eight hundred miles. Not even our own. This is dry land, sailor!

Yet he was not quite satisfied with his relief. He quickly touched the match to his cigarette, whipped it out, broke it. Farmers were fussy about fire. He leaned against the cedar fence post, almost as high as his six foot, red-haired frame, the vague regret persisting.

Somewhere out in the black, he heard a foot strike rock.

And then he knew what caused his uneasiness.

The match had marked him!

In the tar black night he had been invisible. Now his cigarette revealed him, made his presence known, located him. *Made him a target.*

Suddenly Ganya's ears tingled with the strain of listening. For the first time he was tensely conscious of the night noises, the sighs, the chirps, the rusty squeaks of the farmyard. Across the lot, the acrid bonfire threw twitching red shapes on black.

He's here! Ganya thought. But where? If he's behind me I'm a sitting duck against the bonfire. But if he's off to one side I'm still just a cigarette glow . . . Either way, I can't just stand here holding up a fence post . . . Like Grandma says, Leap or be licked!

He drew on the cigarette until it crackled. It was going to kill him to leave his last drag unfinished, he thought wryly, but on the other hand . . .

Almost imperceptibly, Ganya transferred the cigarette from his lips to the flat top of the fence post. The post stood almost as high as he, and he balanced the cigarette to leave the glowing end jutting out.

Then, silently, he eased himself to the ankle-deep grass. He crawled under the bottom strand of the fence and snaked away. He crept until he saw the indistinct bulk of the hip-roofed barn looming off his starboard. Once more he pulled himself under the wire fence, back into the farmyard. Only when he reached the huge watering trough did he dare get to his feet. He crouched in the barn door, breathing hard.

Out in the night he could see the orange dot of his last cigarette burning itself out on

the fence post. Beyond, the white farmhouse huddled in stolid blackness, but as he watched, a light blazed in the kitchen window and he saw the girl moving around inside. Even from that distance, Laura Payton's hair looked blacker than the night. He could see her straight figure, in the clover pink dress, moving from stove to pantry.

And as he watched, the farmyard erupted in orange gunfire. Flame roared through the black. It spat like a striking snake, up-fence from his cigarette.

Ganya flinched. Scattergun, he thought mechanically. At once he was conscious of the muted, haunting echo of the gunshot, then the quick silence in the farmyard, as if even the rusty squeaks were stunned into quiet.

Ganya's eyes swept to the lighted kitchen window. He saw Laura Payton's pink-clad figure stiffly holding a teapot. He saw, too, that the orange dot of his cigarette was gone from the fence post. Until then he had no way of knowing where the shot was aimed, but now he was sure. It had been intended for the cigarette smoker . . .

Ganya heard the man's slithering footsteps before he saw him. Indeed, he heard the running man's labored breathing in the night before the charging shape bobbed up before him.

Mechanically, Ganya thrust out a foot and tripped the runner. He leaped for the floundering shadow, missed it in the dark, whirled and dived again.

FUMBLING hands clawed instantly at Ganya's throat. A wildly thrown punch rocked his head, and then the fingernails were at him again. They ripped across his nose, tore his upper lip, and he tasted blood. He buried his face against the man's chest and tightened his own throttling fingers.

The squirming shadow at once changed tactics. The searing fingernails switched from Ganya's face to his straining hands, trying to wrench them loose. The shadow bucked frantically and a jolting knee numbed Ganya's stomach.

In nauseating pain, Ganya managed to hang on to the bull-like throat, even to increase the pressure. He tightened his lean fingers until they trembled. Finally, when he felt the shadow relax, he dared to tear his right hand free and hammer his fist into the man's jaw. Three times he smashed at the slack jaw with his fist.

Ganya rolled free in the dust of the barn door. Getting stiffly to his feet, he kicked metal with his shoe. He bent and picked up a shotgun. Then, puffing, he dragged the man into the barn, fished a match from his torn jacket and struck it.

Ganya experienced a mild twinge of sur-

prise as he studied the pallid and bony face in the match light. He had expected to see the surly face of the pretty boy giant. This man was big, bigger than Ganya, but decidedly not pretty, decidedly not the pretty boy giant. Sweat beaded the dust-stained face. Above the bruised chin a trickle of blood stretched into the colorless hairs of the man's ears. He was breathing stentoriously, and Ganya slapped the bony face with the back of his hand.

The man moaned. He sat up shaking his head and blubbered: "I didn't mean it, Ad! Honest!"

Ganya struck a fresh match and the man opened pale green eyes on him. For a moment the terror in them held, and then the man exclaimed: "You ain't Ad Norman! I thought that was Ad out there. Who're you?"

"Why, I'm a guest here," Ganya said. "Don't reckon I've had the pleasure of meeting you yet."

"I'm just Figgy, the hand. I work for Laura Payton."

Lantern light came bobbing down the path from the farmhouse. Quickly, Ganya hoisted the farmhand to his feet, and when Laura Payton came into the barn, shielding her eyes from the lantern she carried, he said easily: "Figgy dropped his blunderbuss. Nobody hurt, luckily."

Her dark eyes were unreadable. She said: "Figgy, I've been looking for you for hours."

"I been back in the woodlot," the hand mumbled.

"More likely you were off somewhere losing your money at poker! Finish the chores. And see that the trash fire is soaked down before you turn in."

Figgy cradled his scattergun and sidled past her sullenly. She said to Ganya: "I'm making a cup of tea."

He followed her swaying lantern. In the cheerful kitchen he helped her set out cups and cookies, conscious of the scratches on his nose, his torn jacket, the mouse under his eye.

"Figgy didn't drop that shotgun," Laura Payton said.

Ganya smiled. "Actually he was shooting at a rat."

She said without humor: "Anybody I know?"

She motioned him to a chair. "Mr. Ganya, the sheriff just telephoned me. He's coming out here tonight."

"Yes?" Ganya said politely. He watched her quick hands filling his cup. "Something on his mind?"

"He wouldn't say." Her dark eyes remained unreadable. "I hope it doesn't concern you. I'd hate to think I was giving a night's lodging—"

"In the barn," Ganya said. He added quickly: "Forgive me."

"—a night's lodging to . . . Mr. Ganya, did you do something in town that you shouldn't have?"

He reached for a smoke, remembered what had happened to his last one, and said: "Afraid I did."

"What?"

"Stole a newspaper off a kid's stand. I'll mail him a dollar soon as I get back home."

"That's all you did?"

"Swear it." He put down his tea cup. "That rate a visit from the sheriff?"

"No." She knitted her brows. "It must be something else. Why ever did you steal a newspaper?"

"Because I couldn't pay for it, naturally. Never stole anything before. But I saw those headlines about my ship."

She had a nicely shaped face, serene, broad forehead tapering to a delicate chin. She cupped her chin in her hands and looked at him.

"Merchant marine," Ganya said. "Torpedoed last week. Censors apparently just released the story. You know, survivors were landed at an east coast port and so forth. Lost everything but a few dollars. Could have borrowed some money, but that's one



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rule I always like to follow. Never borrow."
"Never?"

"Never. No matter what. Like Grandma says, Credit is a beast that devours. I'm bumming my way home. Got five hundred bucks back pay in an envelope somewhere west of Virginia."

Her dark eyes watched him steadily. "Does Grandma say you can't accept presents from strange girls?"

"Like Grandma says, Happy is the good heart."

She pushed back her chair and went to the kitchen range. "Then you're going to eat some ham and eggs. Grandma permitting, of course!"

Watching her move around the kitchen, Ganya mused: Her name ought to be Clover. Clover pink dress, clover sweet, clover fresh.

HE REMEMBERED his first sight of her, two hours earlier. He'd turned off the pike into Laura Payton's gate, his stomach aching with emptiness, his shoes two blobs of lead molded to his fiery feet, thinking: To hell with pride. Beg a bunk. It's better than shivering through another night in what's left of somebody's corn field.

She'd been standing on the porch talking with a man. A baby-faced blond giant who looked surly and flushed, as if he had tucked a few under his belt.

"My name is Chris Ganya," he'd said politely. "Do you mind if I bed down in your hayloft tonight?"

He'd spoken directly to the girl, but the answer came instantly from the surly giant. "Beat it, you damned mooching bum!"

Ganya had stood there, feeling the hot blood redden his face, for a shamed instant despising himself for begging. Then the weariness and hunger that had overpowered his pride, as these emotions often do in a man, dropped away from him. Suddenly he had become strong again with anger and well fed again with self respect.

"Beat it, sure," Ganya had said softly. "But mooching bum, no!"

He had leaped forward, seized the giant by collar and britches-seat and had thrown him down the porch steps. Watching the enraged man sprawl in the pansy bed, gobs of wet loam sticking to his hands, Ganya had felt whole again. He said to the girl: "No self respecting bum would sleep in his barn anyway!"

"This isn't Ad Norman's farm," she had said noncommittally. "It's mine, and you're welcome to sleep in the loft."

The surly giant had snarled: "You're crazy, Laura. He'll smoke a cigarette up there and likely set the place on fire."

"Beat it, bum," Ganya had said.

The blond man had started back up the steps, but gave it a second thought. "You'll regret this," he had promised. "Brother, how you'll regret this!"

As Ad Norman stormed away, Laura Payton had smiled. "That makes him even on his day's fighting. Won one and then lost one."

Watching her now, rustling his ham and eggs, Chris Ganya said: "That fight Ad Norman won today—who'd he beat, Figgy?"

"They're always fighting." She set the steaming ironstone plate in front of Ganya. "Ad owns the place across the pike. His car broke down today and he wanted to borrow Figgy's. Figgy refused, so Ad cuffed him around and took his car anyway."

The front door knocker sounded, and Laura Payton said quickly: "That must be Uncle Lars." She looked at Ganya. "I mean Sheriff Larson."

He grinned at her and she turned and moved through the long hall. He heard her warm greeting and the sheriff's mild voice responding. Their small talk drifted to Ganya in the kitchen. Then the sheriff asked: "Laura, were you home all afternoon?"

Ganya put down his fork on the red-checked cloth.

"I was at the Corners," Laura said. "Red Cross sewing day. 'What's wrong, Uncle Lars?'"

"Now, now," the sheriff said, "nothing to trouble you. Little Emil Hamman was killed in town. A fellow got into Emil's office behind his saloon. Stabbed Emil and stole a couple thousand dollars. You drive your own car down to the Corners, Laura?"

"I rode with the Westlunds," Laura Payton said. She added haltingly: "Who killed Little Emil?"

"Now, now," the sheriff repeated mildly, "long as I know who did it, that's sufficient. Little Emil leaned out a window and shot a hole in the fellow's automobile tire. The man got free, but Emil recognized the car. Told me about it just before he died."

Laura's low voice persisted: "Uncle Lars, who was it?"

"Ain't told anybody yet. Tell you after I grab him. It was just a fellow. A fellow who needed money bad."

Ganya pushed his plate aside and stood up, patiently waiting for Laura to speak. She said slowly: "Uncle Lars, sometimes hitchhikers stop here and ask to sleep in the barn." She paused. "What ought I do about that, Uncle Lars?"

"All right, if they look good to you, Laura. Ought to take away their matches, though. Nothing you can do if a cigarette sets off your barn . . . What's fretting you, child? Cheer up. Why, you're looking younger and

prettier by far than you ever have before."

Laura Payton said bitterly: "Like Grandma says, The head of a fool is never white."

The sheriff chuckled. "Sometimes it gets white pretty danged early! Look at me."

On tiptoe, Ganya moved across the kitchen and out on the rear porch. He searched his torn jacket for his remaining matches and dropped them into a geranium pot on the window sill. In the dark he padded around the house and peered through a front window at Laura's caller. The sheriff was an amiable, brown-skinned man dressed in a stiff-looking oxford gray suit, his bushy hair oyster white.

Ganya walked back through the yard to the hip-roofed barn. The acrid smoke of the trash fire smarted his eyes and he noted that Figgy had ignored Laura's orders to soak down the blaze for the night. Figgy himself was nowhere in sight.

For a moment, Ganya lingered in the barn door, watching the house. Then he took a musty blanket from the wall, climbed the ladder to the loft, loosened his belt and wriggled into the sweet-smelling hay. For a drowsy moment he listened to the field mice at play in the big barn. Then, exhausted and well-fed, he dropped off.

Ganya slept the restless slumber of the too-tired. In his half-world he could sometimes hear his own snoring, the scratching feet of the barn mice, the sighs and creaks of the yard. Faintly, he smelled the pungent bonfire, and the hay whispered and pricked him as he tossed.

Once he opened his eyes and looked out the open loft door. The night had brightened while he drowsed, the wind had cleaned the sky of clouds, and in the patch of moonlight he saw the beam and pulley and hemp of the hayloader starkly etched against the heavens like a gibbet.

Unmoving, Ganya listened to the frolicking barn mice. He blinked his eyes, coming awake, feeling disturbed and depressed.

And then he saw the man.

IN LAURA PAYTON'S barn the field mice played, scampering over the redolent hay and the face of the dead man who lay on it. The hay rustled and whispered protestingly under the mice's flying feet, but the man was beyond caring.

As in a bad dream, Ganya found himself lurching to his knees. Tossing the blanket aside, he crept across the springy hay to the patch of moonlight and looked down on the weather-browned face of Sheriff Larson.

Blood had seeped from the sheriff's nose, from his bullet-torn chest, from the crown of oyster white hair, to be soaked up greedily by the thirsty hay.

He got the whole load, Ganya thought.

How long the dead sheriff had shared the loft with him Ganya was unable to determine. He recalled the barely audible creaks and sighs in his half-sleep. Sometime during the night Sheriff Larson's bleeding body had been toted up the loft ladder and had been eased to the hay.

Sleep-fogged, Ganya asked himself: Why? Why didn't the killer let Larson lay where he fell? Why drag him aloft?

Because the jasper knew I was bunking up here, he reasoned to himself. He dropped a frame in bed with me. I'm supposed to take the rap. The ragged wayfarer, the penniless stranger. I'm supposed to take the rap.

Abruptly, Ganya was conscious of a heavy silence in the huge barn. For a moment it puzzled him, and then he was aware that the scampering feet of the mice had stilled. What sound had started them?

Carefully, Ganya sank belly-flat on the hay. He stretched to the edge of the haymow trapdoor and looked down into the black pit of the barn.

He saw the fiery circle.

He saw the fiery circle suspended in air. It moved and sputtered as he watched, licking itself with red flame.

From the door it advanced slowly in the jet black barn, a ruby red ring of fire. Like some tormented apparition it bobbed as it approached, eating itself with tiny, rippling, greedy tongues.

Slowly, then, it began to swing from side to side, a burning loop, like a snake of fire with its tail in its mouth.

For a weird instant, Ganya thought the red snake would spring apart. He smelled its bitter smoke. He saw the red lights that it threw dancing madly on the barn walls.

And then he saw that the fiery circle was no disembodied devil waving itself in space. Behind it he made out a shadowy figure swinging the ruby ring on a long and heavy stick.

In a final wild gyration the man suddenly hurled the flaming ring across the barn. It landed soundlessly in a straw pile, flickered, flared. The shadowy man dropped the heavy stick and reeled back toward the door.

In a flash the barn floor was ablaze.

Fire! Farmers' first terror!

Faster than a human runner the flames swept over the straw to the rear wall. The red runners hesitated, then hurled the concrete foundation and began gnawing the wall. Smoke poured up the well of the barn. The dazzling burst of light sent Ganya cringing.

He thought mechanically: That's the pitch. I was supposed to get caught asleep. Larson and I were to fry together. I killed him and then fell asleep smoking a cigarette. Simple.

He struggled to his knees, coughing. Why,

they'll say I killed Little Emil Hamman, too! he realized. Emil and Larson were the only ones who knew I didn't do it. Now they're both dead . . . The jasper wipes everything clean at once!

Heat boiled up into the loft through the trap door. Panicky, Ganya slid and stumbled across the springy hay to the hayloading door. He reached for the hemp, then turned and looked at Sheriff Larson's body lying in the patch of moonlight. Like Grandma says, The dead to haunt the living.

He made another trip across the shifting hay, dragging the sheriff's body. In a vague and sleep-fogged urgency he wanted that insensate body whole, he wanted it whole and dignified and decently buried.

Yet he was squeamish about dropping the dead man from the loft door. He grasped the hayloading hook, plunged it through a shoulder of the sheriff's stiff oxford gray suit. Swiftly he paid out line, easing it to the ground.

Once more Ganya grasped the hemp, prepared to swing down, then paused, thinking: That burning circle. That damned red ring. I want that, too!

He groped for the musty blanket and trailed it behind him to the trap door. Below him, the rear area of the barn was a furnace. But the draft from the open front door was pushing the flames backward from the straw pile in which the ruby ring had landed. If he could get spring into his leap he might clear the flames. Almost, anyway. Or could he?

Ganya wrapped the blanket around his head and stepped down onto the ladder. He tensed his legs and took off mightily from the ladder rung. He landed with feet thrashing, bolted forward, fell.

Instantly he had the blanket off, beating at his scorched trouser legs, gasping for air. He kicked frantically along the smoke-shrouded floor and found the pole with which the shadowy man had hurled the fiery circle. It was a long-handled shovel, the metal scoop hot as a stove lid to his touch.

The draft from the barn door still swept the fire backward, but it was losing ground. Ganya dropped to the floor and covered his head with the blanket. Pushing the shovel ahead of him, he crept toward the edge of the flames. While his eyes streamed and he coughed with great, tearing heaves of his chest, he probed with the shovel.

He hooked the ruby circle at last, fished it out gingerly. Blindly, he teetered from the barn, balancing the sizzling thing on the shovel scoop.

OUT in the clean night air, Ganya dropped the burning hoop into the watering trough. With a malevolent hissing, it sank into the

water, giving off thick and acrid smoke, bitter'n bilge. When the water ceased boiling, Ganya pushed a cautious hand into the trough. It touched a spongy mass, still hot and rubbery. The ruby ring was now just a charred automobile tire.

Little Emil Hamman had shot a hole in the jasper's tire, he remembered. The jasper changed it and tried to burn it up in the trash fire. Tires take a hell of a lot of burning . . . But once you start them flaming they take a hell of a lot of putting out . . .

Ganya stood there gasping. The fire had reached the mow now, and as the first dancing flames broke through the roof, an automobile spinning along the pike swerved suddenly into Laura Payton's driveway with a din of horn-blowing.

On wobbling legs Ganya stumbled back around the barn and bent over Sheriff Larson's body. He could feel the heat seeping through the reddening barn wall. His singed hands tore the hayloading hook from the oxford gray suit. Lifting the body with a clumsy fireman's-carry, he staggered away into the night.

Through the rough field and up the slope to the woodlot Ganya packed his burden, winded and still tasting bitter smoke. When he eased the sheriff's body to the ground and looked back, the barn was a doomed handful of fire, the sky above it ruby. A half dozen men, probably neighbors, had collected in the brightening circle to form a bucket brigade. Around the countryside, lights appeared in farmhouses and more neighbors tumbled out, half-dressed, to scamper for Laura Payton's farm. Barn fire! Roll out!

In the chain of bucket passers he could see Ad Norman, the pretty boy giant, and the overalled Figgy, towering above the other men. Laura Payton was in the line, too, helping her neighbors hurl the ineffectual dashes of water against the swirling red ball of the barn.

She thinks I'm in there, Ganya thought. She thinks a bum she befriended burned up her barn. Is she mad, or sad? She'd be extra sad if she thought her Uncle Lars was going up in smoke, too . . .

He furrowed his brow, thinking suddenly: Or does she think her Uncle Lars is in there, too? Everybody down there thinks a sleeping bum burned up in that furnace. But one jasper figure there are two bodies in there. One homicidal lunatic who killed Little Emil and the sheriff. The guy who dumped Larson on the hay with me and then touched off the pyre . . .

Ganya pulled an angry breath into his aching lungs. And that's the guy I want! he vowed silently. Like Grandma says, Repay in kind!

He looked down at Larson's torn chest, the crown of oyster white hair now darkly dappled. The head of a fool does not become white, Ganya told himself . . . Sometimes it becomes white, and then red again . . . Larson, you were a fool. You set this up. Little Emil told you who knifed him, but you had to keep it to yourself. The jasper knew you were the only man alive who could finger him. Anybody hanging around the house could have heard it, same as I did. So now you're not alive any more . . . And I'm going to be the goat.

Ganya moved through the woodlot to the pike. But I've got red hair, too, Larson, he reminded. And some day mine is going to become white, and stay that way!

As he hiked down the hard road toward the fire he saw that the bucket brigade had given up the barn. The volunteers were soaking down the roof of Laura Payton's house, her two-car garage and the cabin where Figgy bunked.

The neighbors' cars and trucks were parked crazy-quilt fashion on Laura's lawn. In one of them Ganya found a frayed mackinaw and a floppy-brimmed hat which he put on. He walked around the house just as the barn roof fell with a tired sighing and a rocketing of sparks.

Someone said, "That's all," and he saw Laura Payton turn, brushing a hand across her forehead, and go into the house. A knot of neighbor women followed, saying nothing.

He heard Ad Norman's bored voice. "Nothing we can do until it dies down. I got a jug of applejack, if anybody's got the thirst." Tired men followed him across the lot and disappeared inside Figgy's cabin.

Ganya waited until he heard the jug of applejack making its first round. Then he slipped into the garage. In the glove compartment of a dented sedan he found Figgy's driver's license and a flashlight.

He sprayed the beam on the sedan, walking around it and inspecting the tire lugs. All were coated fast with layer upon layer of caked mud. Emil Hamman's bullet hadn't punctured any of Figgy's worn tires. He shifted the beam to Laura Payton's coupe.

The left rear tire had been recently changed.

That's why Larson dropped by, Ganya realized. Little Emil recognized her coupe. Larson asked her if she had driven her own car to the Corners, or rode with the Westlunds. He was tying up his case.

GANYA climbed the steps of the farmhouse and knocked on the door. To the woman who answered he said: "Ask Laura to step



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out here." The woman turned, and Ganya said: "Wait. Tell her it's Chris."

No sense letting her walk into a ghost unwarned, he decided. Like Grandma says, Who knows who'll mourn?

She came to the door, walking stiffly.

"I'm sorry about your barn," Ganya said. "Wasn't me, though." He reached into the geranium pot on the window sill and extracted his pinch of wooden matches. "Left 'em here before I turned in. Swear it."

Her face began to work and suddenly her eyes were full. "Chris," she said. "Oh, Chris, you fool. What does it matter!"

Somehow his arms got tangled up with hers and they were clinging to each other. "I didn't have any cigarettes left anyway."

"Hush. Nobody blames you for the barn. Ad says a spark from the trash fire likely set it off. Figgy forgot to soak it down."

"Ad Norman said that?"

"We thought you were caught inside, Chris."

And *somebody* thinks Larson was caught with me, of that he was sure.

He looked back at Figgy's lighted cabin, spilling loud and laughing voices.

"Waiting for the barn to cool so they can shovel me up," Ganya said. "And a merry wake it is, too. Remember, Laura, that's the kind of wake I really want."

"They don't know you, Chris. Figgy probably set out the poker chips."

Ganya kissed her. "Go in. Don't mention me. I'm going down there and wait."

"Wait for what, Chris?"

"For a word," Ganya said.

He slipped through the dark to the cabin and stood outside, looking through a window at the six men playing poker around Figgy's table. Other men lolled on Figgy's cot or in his chairs, watching the luck. The applejack made the rounds.

Well, the boys got a legitimate night out, Ganya thought. Big excitement down on the farm. He buttoned the mackinaw and leaned against the cabin, listening to the laughter and gibes and cussing that poured from the window. Figgy lost a pot and cursed his luck bitterly.

Big talk. Heap big palaver, Ganya noted. But no mention of me. . . Get to me, mates. . . One word, one word to be uttered. . .

His ears strained, sorting out the flow of talk, examining the words, rejecting them. The words grew harsher and jumbled as the applejack delivered its licks. Ganya shrunk back into the lampblack night as a farmer came to the open window and spat. "Barn's simmering down," the man said. "When do we start looking?"

"Sit down and play your hand," Figgy's thick tongue snapped. "They'll keep."

Ganya had the mackinaw off and one leg over the window sill before the startled farmer could fall aside. He saw the card players swivel with mouths agape. He saw the liquor drain from Figgy's bony face, leaving the pale green eyes almost grass green.

On his belly Ganya went over the table, scattering cards and chips and players. He hooked a hand in the bib of Figgy's overalls, but lost the grip as Figgy wrenched violently and sprang toward his cot. A farmer was sitting there, holding the applejack jug.

Figgy knocked the man to the floor. He tore back the mattress, snatched up a pistol and pivoted on Ganya. He stood over the bug-eyed farmer on the floor, who was holding the jug as if it were a bomb, and said: "Now!"

Ganya rolled off the card table and stood up in the suddenly muted room. He looked around and saw no friendly face. He said: "Why would Figgy kill Little Emil Hamman to get a couple thousand dollars?"

"Because," said the farmer sitting on the floor, "Figgy owes gambling debts all over."

"Why wouldn't Figgy lend Ad Norman his car today?" Ganya said. "Because he was aiming to drive into town and rob Little Emil. Norman took Figgy's car anyway, so Figgy waited until Laura went to the Corners and then he took her coupe."

Ganya began to edge around the table. Men stepped back for him. "Know what will hang you, Figgy? Ballistics. The scientific guys. They'll prove it by that rod you're holding."

"You're crazy," Figgy said. "Emil was stabbed!"

"But Sheriff Larson wasn't. You think the bullets in Larson melted down in the heat? Well, Larson is lying back in the wood lot!"

The applejack settled it—what was left in the jug. Figgy's slug chewed splinters from the card table as the farmer slung the jug at Figgy's knees. Men dodged and then one roared angrily. Instantly a dozen hard fists went to work on big Figgy.

Ad Norman, the pretty boy giant, licked his knuckles and glowered at Ganya. "Don't get the idea that was a favor to you. We liked Old Man Larson. I hate your guts."

"You'll hate all of me," Ganya said, "when you find out what happened to your girl."

He strode up to the white house, into the kitchen, and plucked Laura Payton from her chair.

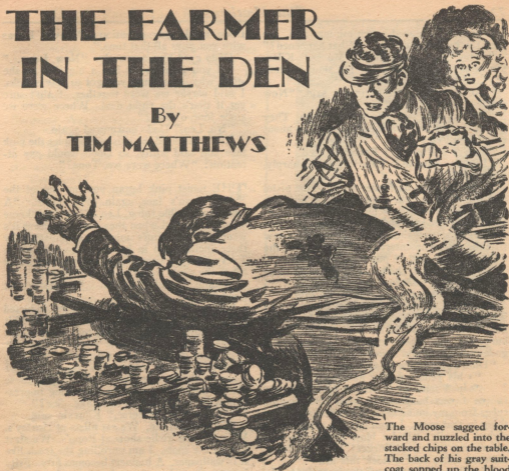
"Like Grandma says, Love not, live not," Ganya said. "Hold still, babe."

He kissed her soundly while the good neighbor ladies forgot to drink their tea. Laura Payton wrapped her fingers in his red hair. "And to quote another philosopher: 'When you see a good man, girl, snaffle him.'"

"Whoever said that?" Ganya demanded. "My grandmother!"

THE FARMER IN THE DEN

By
TIM MATTHEWS



The Moose sagged forward and nuzzled into the stacked chips on the table. The back of his gray suit-coat sopped up the blood as fast as it gushed.

"A rube is a terrible thing. Their cuffs miss their shoetops by three inches, and in between is white socks." But Kilarkin, big-time gambler and Manhattan sharp, changed his mind about hayseeds—and fast.

THE gunfire crashed and died, swift and hidden, before Kilarkin could break out his pistol. He saw The Moose sag forward and nuzzle into the stacked chips on the table. The back of The Moose's gray suit-coat sopped up the blood as fast as it gushed. A woman sitting near the wheel watched the back of The Moose's coat in horrible fascination. Suddenly she pulled her wrap around her bare shoulders. She screamed. Instantly every woman in the big, gilded room was screaming. Men began to fight toward the check room. Everyone tried to boil through the door at once.

Leo Kilarkin's pistol was in his hand by then. He saw Solly surging toward him from the door, beating his way through the terrified

customers with the side of his own pistol. Kilarkin met him and, standing back to back, they scanned the room with strained, glittering eyes. Searching for a strange face. Any strange face in the jostling crowd. Then Kilarkin shrugged and flicked the light switch. Darkness dropped over the teeming room, over the struggling men, the hysterical women, over The Moose's red-steeped coat. He nudged Solly and they clattered down the rear stairs and separated.

Kilarkin ran lightly down the inky alley and slipped into Rocco's side door. With relief he saw that the bar was empty. He glided ahead to a table, facing the front door, and said softly to Rocco: "I been here for hours."

The bartender shook his head. "No good.

The beat cop dropped in ten minutes ago. He seen the joint was empty. . . What happened?"

"Petey Weiss' guys got The Moose." Kilar-kin yanked the pistol from his shoulder hol-ster and handed it to Rocco. "Stash it."

"You're crazy," the bartender said. "Now you'll need it on you."

"The cops will want to talk with me. They find it on me, they'll ask more questions about who killed Petey Weiss."

"You're still crazy," Rocco insisted.

"It's my gamble," Kilar-kin said sharply. "Stash it!"

Reluctantly, the bartender accepted the pistol and hid it among the napkins under his back bar. Kilar-kin sat watching the front door. When it opened he picked up a deck of cards and began setting them out aimlessly. He saw that the man who entered was Dodo Tone, the fight manager, and he put the deck away.

"What kind of hell broke loose in The Moose's joint?" Dodo Tone demanded.

"I been here for hours," Kilar-kin said.

The fight manager pulled a chair up to Kilar-kin's table. He was wearing his usual pink carnation, pink as his face, and the Hom-burg that was his trademark. "There was a godawful racket and then the lights went out."

"Didn't you notice what happened?"

With his yellow pocket handkerchief Dodo Tone wiped some of the moist pink from his face. "I was busy riding herd on a couple rubes from my home town. I didn't notice anything in that mess. I even lost the rubes." He sighed wearily. "Did I blow them abners to an evening they won't forget! We been doing the stem since four o'clock this aft."

Kilar-kin took his eyes off the front door. He looked at the little man and said softly, so

Dodo would pay attention: "Maybe I was with you guys all that time."

Dodo eyed him nervously. "Now, Leo. . ."

"If you want to act like a big shot on the stem, why, sometimes you got to play snooks. I said *maybe* we were together. I ain't sure yet if that's the right deal. Where were we since four o'clock?"

"No, Leo," Dodo murmured again.

Kilar-kin seized the paisley tie under the pink face and said softly, so Dodo would pay attention: "Where were we, Tone?"

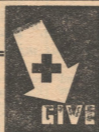
THE moist pink began pouring out of the little man's face again. He sighed. "A rube is a terrible thing, Leo. They don't know what to say and when they say something it's wrong. Their cuffs miss their shootops by three inches, and in between is white socks. Every time a waiter brings a check they sneak off to the gents' room to count their roll."

"Dumb," said Kilar-kin. "It starts out good."

"These rubes came to town to get inducted tomorrow. They drop around and say Milt Beaver down in Pigeon Lake told them to look me up, I'll be glad to show 'em the sights. At first I am going to toss them out. But Milt Beaver is always asking how much dough I make in the fight racket, and if I give these abners the heave-ho maybe the wrong impression will get around Pigeon Lake. See?"

"That would be fierce," Kilar-kin said.

"So we start out. We eat fillets at Hurley's. We catch the girlie show at Ropp's. We start hitting the spots. I am unrolling the fresh like it is wallpaper. A hunnert becomes fifty. Fifty becomes ten. I send out for a new batch, and the rubes are in the gents' room counting their



"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.



roll. Sure, they reach for a check now and then. Minor ones. Sixty-five cent cab fares. 'Let us get this one, pal.'

Dodo shrugged. "But, hell, it's only money. It'll burn, won't it? When we get to Skogel's they start clouting the champagne. Like feeding ice cream to the pigs. One of the rubes has brung a copy of the Pigeon Lake daily bugle. Every time they go count their change I catch up on the home town gossip. Milt Beaver had a fire in his garage. Mrs. Newley foaled again. But never no mention of Dodo Tone. Local boy makes good under the lights, but no mention of him in the bugle."

"Ain't that rough," Kilarkin said.

"The abners want to see my fight stable. I tell them all the boys is in the kip. They says how about the Chinatown bus? I say the bus is bedded down, too. Then they'll settle for a real gambling joint. Some high class layout where the big green falls, where the swells play, where nobody gets in unless they're known personal to the management. They're ready to bet that Dodo Tone can get inside."

"There's only one layout like that," Kilarkin amended gently. "Now that Petey Weiss is gone."

"Sure, Leo." The little man sighed. "The Moose's. So I take the rubes over there and get them past Solly at the door. Their mouths hang open when they see the color of the money. They ask me to point out the famous Moose. They ask me to point out the great Leo Kilarkin, too. But since Solly was on the door I guess you was up in the office."

"Then the waiter brings our drinks and the rubes slip into the gents' room to count their change. All of a sudden the joint goes crazy, the babes start yelling, somebody outs the

glim. I slug my way into the gents' room but the rubes ain't there. Must 'a got windy and gone out through a window."

Dodo wiped a new shine of moist pink from his round face. "Boy! Did I show them abners a night to remember." He looked at Kilarkin anxiously. "What do you think, Leo? Is it a smart deal for you? Was we together since four o'clock—you, me and the reubens?"

"What reubens, Dodo?" Kilarkin said. "The reuben wore a pink carnation. . . Tone, you still got too much Pigeon Lake on your shoes. The really sharp guys on the stem know that Petey Weiss' guys have had the knife out for The Moose for months. They know that Petey Weiss' guys got the knife sharp for me, too, on account of what suddenly happened to Petey."

Kilarkin leaned forward and said softly, so Dodo would pay attention: "Wouldn't it be awful comical if Petey's guys hired a couple outatown strangers and slipped them into our joint and they plugged The Moose?"

Kilarkin went through the motions of chuckling. He chuckled until his face began to quiver and his voice trembled. "Let's get into my bus, Dodo. You're finally going to get mentioned in the Pigeon Lake daily bugle."

The moist pink drained from the little man's face, leaving his pink carnation looking red. "I can't move, Leo." He shook his head helplessly, mumbling. "What really makes me a reuben, Leo, is I ain't carrying a gun. I feel like a nickel's worth of dog meat. A sharp guy would be packing a gun right about now."

Then his eyes began to bug and he said softly, so Kilarkin would pay attention: "Leo, a couple guys just came in the side door, behind you." He whispered: "Them rubes, reuben!"

THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED!

When Terry Shay arrived for a furlough visit to Jason's Paradise Isle, he was all set for a carefree week of hunting. But his host was harboring in his palatial haven a murderer who'd marked Terry for his special, private game!

"SLAYER, COME BACK TO ME!"

By Joel Reeve

Plus Three More Gripping Novelettes

A new Duke Danube story by Francis K. Allan, a startling mystery of the Southern Hill Country by Ken Lewis, and a swift-moving Tom Kincaid murder-thriller by William R. Cox!



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DEATH FEEDS THE KITTY

CHAPTER ONE

Shakedown Shamus

HIGHLAND PARK PRICE said irritably: "Let go my arm, you ape. I can walk without your help."

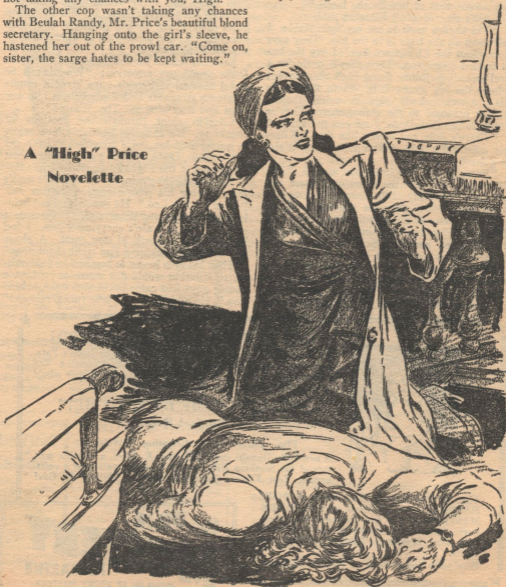
The cop clung to his arm. "Sarge Warren said look out you don't play any tricks. I'm not taking any chances with you, High."

The other cop wasn't taking any chances with Beulah Randy, Mr. Price's beautiful blond secretary. Hanging onto the girl's sleeve, he hastened her out of the prowler car. "Come on, sister, the sarge hates to be kept waiting."

Highland Park Price said, "I guess that explains it," as the bluecoat steered him across the soot-soiled sidewalk. It was a shabby side-street, given over largely to pawnshops, bean-eries, and hotels with thirty-five-cent beds. Rusted iron bars fenced off the areaway to keep drunks from falling down the flight of basement steps.

The cop started Highland Price down these steps, asking as he did: "Explains what?"

A "High" Price Novelette



By DALE CLARK

Author of "Let's Trade Corpses," etc.

Price said savagely: "Warren! He wouldn't wait while they passed out the brains! He figured he could get by with a badge and a bad disposition. What he's got behind his ears, the government is paying a reward for—two points a pound under the waste fat program!"

The tirade ended, not because Mr. Price had run out of insults, but because they'd reached the grimy door at the bottom of the steps. This door said in large capital letters: **THE LO!DOWN—"ALL THE NEWS IT'S A FIGHT TO PRINT"—ELLSWORTH SPYDER, ED. & PUB.**

The cop opened the door, ushered Highland Park Price into the dingy printshop, a long low concrete-floored establishment, thick with the pungent odor of ink.

Harsh electric light streamed from the green metal shade of a dropcord bulb, centering on a desk near the front while leaving the type cases, forms, and flat-bed press veiled in twilight gloom. A dead man lolled in a swivel chair behind the desk, his shirtfront sopped

with blood. The dead man was Ellsworth Spyder, and seated across the desk from him was a living man—beefy, red-faced Sergeant Warren of the homicide detail.

Warren pored over a copy of *Lo!Down*, perusing an inside page so that the yellow front of the tabloid was revealed to Highland Park Price's inspection. There was no war news on the front page, for editor Spyder had



Price bolted through the bedroom doorway into the death-room. With his gun in his hand, he warned the girl: "No, don't touch!"

"HIGH" PRICE TURNS "MEDIUM" PRICE! Thus might the headline read in *Lo! Down*—scandal sheet of the detective world. When a philanthropic dowager turns blue in the face from strangulation, Price, the shakedown shamus, has half-a-dozen potential clients to put the screws on—with the path of detection greased by mental telepathy!

operated without benefit of a press wire. For that matter, he even operated without reporters. *Lo!Down* was a strictly one-man paper, going to press when Ellsworth Spyder had picked up enough police and divorce court scandal to fill an issue.

The blaring headline proclaimed, **BILKED BRIDE BETRAYS BIGAMIST—TENTH WIFE TURNS IN REPEATING ROMEO.** Spyder specialized in publishing the details of such cases that a family newspaper wouldn't dare print. He also specialized in taking potshots at persons who only deserved to be arrested. And, finally, he used a column of inside dope to hint at stuff even he didn't dare openly publish.

In short, *Lo!Down* was a typical example of guts-and-gutter journalism, such as flourishes in the darker corners of half the big cities in the U.S.A.

Mr. Price spoke coldly: "So they finally got Mr. Tells-All. And the puzzled police turn to me for help, is that it?"

Sergeant Warren ignored the greeting. Clearing his throat, he remarked: "Here's something interesting. It says: *What's the difference between a certain High Price-d shamus and a shakedown artist? Or maybe the cops dunno the guy practices legal larceny?*" The sergeant lowered his paper, glared balefully. "Well, shamus, what have you got to say?"

Highland Park Price was a tall, rawhide-and-rattan operative widely known as "High" Price on account of the excessive fees he collected from clients of his private detective agency.

"Frankly," the shamus shrugged, "I'm surprised."

BEULAH RANDY had entered the doorway, and from her coral lips came the sound of a startled: "Oh, but—but—"

Warren challenged: "But what, sister?"

Beulah Randy's temptingly streamlined exterior concealed a Sunday school conscience. Blushing, she told High Price: "I'm sorry, but I can't let you tell a lie to the police in a murder investigation! You did too know about those terrible things, because somebody has been mailing us copies of *Lo!Down* for the last three months . . ."

Warren scowled doubtfully. Regarding High Price as the ace of chicanery, he found it hard to believe Price's secretary could be as innocent as Miss Randy seemed to be.

"That isn't what I meant, Beulah. I meant I was surprised to hear the sarge read it out so well." Mr. Price's angular features lighted with a jack-o'-lantern grin as he turned to the homicide officer. "I always understood your kids had to read the funny papers to you, Warren."

"Cut the comedy chatter, Price. I haven't got time to trade wisecracks with you." Warren slapped the yellow news-sheet noisily. "Look, this rag was strictly a blackmail proposition. Spyder was calling you a crook and a highbinder in practically every issue. I'd say that means he had something on you, and he was trying to blackmail you."

High Price scorned: "So I pulled out my shooter and let him have it?"

"Somebody let him have it. I don't fall for that suicide gag at all."

"Suicide?"

Warren explained: "A guy phoned headquarters at eleven minutes past four P.M. He said he was Ellsworth Spyder and he said he was going to end it all. Generally, a threat like that means some crackpot wants the cops to hold his hand and beg him pretty please don't do such a thing. But when the prowl car cops got here, they found the bozo dead with a gun on the floor beside him."

Price asked: "Then how do you figure it wasn't suicide?"

"Step around there and see what you don't see, Price."

The private sleuth moved around the desk, narrowed his gray eyes critically at the corpse. It had been hidden by the desk before, but he could now glimpse the .38-caliber revolver on the ink-stained floor. The slug had entered at about heart level and there was another blood spot branding the back of the dead man's shirt.

Warren said: "The bullet went in, and it came out lower down, but where'd it go to? It ought to have hit the floor about three feet behind him. You don't see no slug, do you?"

"No."

"O.K., that means the killer picked up the bullet. It wasn't a .38 at all, or he was smart enough to know ballistics would prove it wasn't fired from this .38 gun."

High Price shook his head.

"That slug never walked off by itself," Warren insisted. "What's your alibi for eleven minutes past four?"

Price gave a second headshake. "Wait a minute, your whole theory's wrong. A killer who knew about ballistics would know there'd have to be a bullet left here. He'd pound it out of shape so it couldn't be identified, but he wouldn't walk off with it in his pocket." He stared at the corpse in the swivel chair. "Maybe he swung around when the door opened and someone walked in. If he did, the shot would never have hit the floor behind him. It would have hit the desk."

"There's no bullet holes in the desk, either."

High Price said: "Let's see."

He stooped, bent down, pulled open a desk drawer. He said: "Oh-oh, look!"

Warren hurried around the desk. The drawer contained pencils, copy paper, cards, and a lead slug which had had just enough momentum to imbed itself in the side panel of the drawer.

Price straightened, folded his arms across his chest, looked pleased and said: "That's it. The drawer was open at the time. The bullet simply lodged there after passing through Spyder's body. You're wondering how the corpse came to be facing the other way? The answer is, of course, that a .38 slug packs a lot of knock-down. Its impact, combined with the involuntary muscular reaction of the victim, no doubt sufficed to spin the chair around."

Warren interrupted. "That drawer was closed. Who closed it?"

"I'm glad you brought that up. The killer, of course, pawed through the desk in search of something. He slammed the drawers shut after finishing his search, overlooking the fact that this one had been open in the first place. Handled right, it's a detail which can hang him."

Price chuckled. "O.K., here's how we handle it. First, we dig out that slug and see if it really matches this gun. Second, we put a tracer on the gun itself, see if it's really Spyder's. Third, we'll unscrew the drawer pulls and look inside for fingerprints . . . By the way, Sarge, you'd better grab a pencil and write all this down—"

It was too much—the sergeant burned.

"Scram!" he exploded.

"O. K. I'm going." Mr. Price caught his blond secretary's arm as he spoke, propelled her ahead of him toward the steps. "But you'll be sorry the next time you stumble over a corpse and send me an S.O.S.!"

AT THE end of the block, and around the corner, he grinned, reached between his left coatsleeve and his coat, and fished forth a small card with nothing on its face except three wavy lines.

Beulah Randy stared. "What on earth—"

"It's a clue—I hope. I snatched it out of that desk drawer with the bullet in it. That's why I folded my arms, so's to hide this."

"You can't do things like that." Beulah's Sunday school conscience was antagonized.

"Relax, Angel-Face. There's two dozen more like it left in the desk."

"But . . . What is it, anyway?"

Mr. Price became solemn. "It's a so-called ESP card used in parapsychologic tests. ESP stands for extra-sensory perception, meaning telepathy and clairvoyance and stuff like that. With twenty-five cards in a deck, you ought to be able to guess five of them by plain dumb luck. If you can hit scores of ten to fifteen, it shows you've got second-sight."

"Spyder was interested in telepathy?" the girl hazarded.

"Not that I know of. He may have been interested in exposing some fake medium. It's as good a way to get murdered as any."

The blonde protested: "So what?"

High Price shrugged, said: "I got to keep ahead of Warren. I'm afraid he's going to dig into Spyder's records, and maybe find my name there."

"Your name?"

"Yeah." Price semaphored his arm at a passing cab, lured it to the curb. "Records of money I paid the guy."

Beulah Randy wailed: "You paid . . . then it's true! That man *was* blackmailing you!"

"No. All I paid was the regular advertising rates."

Beulah Randy brooded in her corner of the cab seat. "Advertising? You never advertised in *Lo!Down*."

"Sure, I did. That was one of my ads you heard Warren reading aloud."

The girl stared, asked: "You mean you deliberately gave Spyder money to call you a shakedown crook?"

"Not exactly. The guy had to write it so it wouldn't sound too much like a paid publicity blurb. What I really put out the money for was that propaganda about me being too fast on my feet for the cops."

"It's this way, Angel-Face. The most interested readers *Lo!Down* had were people who were afraid of finding their own names in it! Spyder made a living out of other folks' troubles, so naturally folks with troubles were his best customers. I simply figured those same folks would be interested in learning the name of a shifty, shady shamus who was slick enough to stay two jumps ahead of the John Laws. I gambled some of them would remember my name and bring me troubles that they didn't dare tell the cops."

The girl's blond brows furrowed. "In spite of the 'legal larceny'?"

Highland Park Price scoffed: "Clients don't

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

mind a private dick being slightly dishonest. They want him honest enough to *stay* bought, is all. They wouldn't any more dare tell their troubles to a perfectly legitimate, law-abiding shamus that they'd dare confess to the police. Stop and think—why should anyone buy justice from a private gumshoe when justice is handed out free by the cops and the courts?" Mr. Price answered his own question. "The average client doesn't want justice. He wants to hire me to pull something so rough, tough, and illegal he's afraid to pull it himself. He wants me to be rough, tough, and for sale for filthy lucre. I'd be ruined if this town ever found out I'm a boy scout in wolf's clothing—a phony pirate whose bad reputation was boosted by his own paid publicity in *Lo! Down*."

The blonde studied him. "What are you going to do about it, Mr. Price?"

"I'm going to find out who killed Spyder. I'm going to do it before Warren digs up any little black books with my name in them." High Price leaned forward, rapped the glass partition to catch the cabbie's attention. "Let us off at the *Tribune* Building," he ordered.

"What's at the *Tribune*?" Beulah Randy asked.

"Back files. I seem to remember a personal ad that ran a month or six weeks ago. It was something about telepathy." He scowled with the effort of remembering. "Some professor wanted to hear from amateurs interested in conducting telepathic experiments."

"What makes you think there's any connection with Spyder?"

"I'm guessing—but it's a good guess Spyder followed the personal column. He could dig up a lot of dirt by investigating those agony ads. Maybe he answered this one—could be why he was interested in ESP cards."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Mr. Price had flipped back through past issues of the newspaper and found the item:

STARTING—A Circle for Psychic Research. Amateurs sincerely interested telepathy, hypnosis, kindly communicate Prof. J. J. Holland, Hillvale-6734.

High Price looked in the phone book in the *Tribune* lobby. There was no J. J. Holland in the book.

He told Beulah Randy: "You try Special Service."

Special Service was a number the police and the social service agencies were supposed to know. Beulah Randy came out of the booth and said: "Hillvale-6734 is Miss Crystal Agnew, 4900 Summit Road."

Price said: "You go back to the office. There's some of those old *Lo!Downs* piled in

the closet. See if J. J. Holland or Crystal Agnew are mentioned in any of them."

He took a cab to the Summit Road address. It was a big house in a big yard that must have cost a hundred dollars a month in gardener's bills. A big solemn man who looked like an insurance salesman and a black-clad woman who looked as if she'd be his wife came out and got into a fat black sedan in the driveway. They shook hands with a white-haired older man in the doorway as they came out. Next came a mousy female of forty and a youth young enough to be her son, but too strikingly handsome to be related to her. They shook hands with the white-haired individual, and then they got into a bright blue phaeton—the mousy female sliding under the steering wheel. The next one was a runt in canvas-colored work pants and a blue denim jacket. He shook hands with White Hair, also, and after that he lifted a bicycle from behind the shrubbery and pedaled away down the driveway. The white-haired man went back into the house, closing the door.

High Price had the license number of the black sedan and the blue phaeton. There was no license number on the bicycle, but the denim jacket wore a badge that said *CeeVee Aircraft, WZ-270*.

The detective kept walking, a block and a half to the corner drugstore. Feeding nickels into the phone there, he called first the State Motor Vehicle Bureau and then plant protection at CeeVee Aircraft. The black sedan was registered in the name of David C. Curtis, 3304 Rosamond Street. The blue phaeton belonged to a Miss Crystal Agnew, but she'd given another address, 1211 Sherman Circle. Identification badge WZ-270 had been issued to a McKinley Manner, 3737½ Comet Place, who'd been absent from work the past month.

Mr. Price rang up his own office. Beulah Randy was full of information. "I never realized there was so much sin in the world," her voice sighed. "I've already found at least fifty persons who might have killed Spyder for the things he printed about them, but Holland and Miss Agnew aren't on the list."

"Look for David C. Curtis and McKinley Manner, too," the sleuth suggested. "Better yet—make an alphabetical list of all the people *Lo!Down* panned."

He retraced his steps to the big house at 4900 Summit Road. Windmill palms, Chinese bamboo, and cockspear coral grew in the lawn. The two-story stucco walls and gray slate roof probably enclosed a minimum of five master bedrooms each with its own tiled bath. Highland Park Price reckoned that even under stringent rent ceilings, it ought to cost J. J. Holland close to three hundred bucks a month to dwell in such luxury.

Highland Park Price figured a guy who

could pay that kind of rent could also afford to hire himself a first-class private dick.

He held his thumb on the button beside the carved oak front door.

Chimes played a tune inside the house.

The white-haired man opened the door. He had a dish towel tied like an apron around his middle. He held a beaten copper silent butler in his left hand. He looked like a handyman around the house, but guests don't shake hands with the servants when they leave.

"Professor Holland?" High Price said.

"Yes?" The voice put a lot of culture into the word. Professor J. J. Holland had white eyebrows and snapping blue eyes like a retired general's. The rest of his face was smooth and sad and innocent.

"It's about that ad you ran in the *Tribune*," Price said.

"That was nearly two months ago."

"That's right. I clipped it, mislaid the clipping, then found it again."

"You mean you want to join our little circle?" Professor Holland asked.

"I'm mighty interested in it."

"I see. Come in, won't you?"

THE hallway was big enough to play handball in. Steps led down to a room big enough to hold a tennis-court. Mr. Price imagined an interior decorator had spent around three thousand dollars fixing up this room.

"It's a pity you weren't earlier," Professor J. J. Holland said. "Our little group just broke up."

He emptied an ashtray into his silent butler. In the middle of the room was a card table with scorepads lying on it. On a coffee table off at one side of the room was a tray holding half a dozen glasses containing small amounts of yellow fluid.

"When do you meet?" Price asked.

"Mondays and Thursdays. Four to five-thirty P.M."

High Price asked: "Who was late today?"

"No one." The white-haired man seemed surprised. "One man didn't come at all."

Price guessed and gambled. "Spyder?" he queried.

Again J. J. Holland looked surprised. "You must mean Mr. Slyder," he corrected. He walked over to the coffee table. He started emptying the glasses all into one glass. He got about half a glass of the yellow fluid. Turning to Price he asked: "Carrot juice?"

"I never touch it," High Price said with a shudder.

"Well," Professor Holland said, "it's no good after it sits. The histidine deteriorates rapidly in the open air." He threw the carrot juice down his own throat.

Price asked: "What happens at these con-

fers, Professor, besides drinking histidine?"

"I'll show you," the white-haired man said.

"Pull up a chair." He removed his dish towel apron, delved in his pocket, came up with a pack of cards. He showed Price the faces of the cards. Some were marked with wavy lines, others with crosses, squares, circles, and stars. He shuffled the deck, took a peek at the top card, asked: "Can you get my thought? Is it a cross, square, circle, star, or wave?"

High Price said: "Wait a minute. Hadn't we better settle about the stakes first?"

"Stakes?"

"Yeah. I only play for money."

J. J. Holland hooped his white eyebrows. "My dear fellow, this isn't a gambling game. You don't play it for money—"

"I'm playing it for five hundred bucks," High Price interrupted.

"You've been drinking. You're not interested in psychic investigation at all. I must ask you to leave this house at once."

Price grinned. "You haven't seen my hole card yet, Prof."

The sleuth reached a bony hand into his pocket, produced his own ESP card with a flourish, slapped it down on the table. "Can you get my thought? Is it a cross or a double-cross? Or is it a star that says Police Department Homicide Squad on it?"

Professor J. J. Holland made a choking sound. Then he swallowed, and tried again. "Police?" he said. "Homicide?"

"Spyder," Price said. "Or Slyder, if that's what he called himself. He's dead. He's dead with a hole in his heart, and a pack of your cards like this in his desk. The cops aren't too bright, but they play enough pinochle to know those aren't pinochle cards. They'll find out he spent his Monday and Thursday afternoons with you. Starting then, you got cops in your hair. They'll want to know how you play this little game two days a week and make enough dough out of it to live in luxury. Five hundred bucks ought to sound cheap to you."

The white-haired man stared at Price, and looked dumb, numb, and made of wood.

"You've got a nice little racket here," High Price said. "Maybe I could find who killed Spyder and throw him to the cops. They wouldn't look any farther. You ought to be willing to gamble five hundred dollars on it unless you're the killer yourself."

Professor Holland said: "Wait. I'll get the money." He walked away stiffly.

CHAPTER TWO

Paging Dunninger!

HIGHLAND PARK PRICE picked up the card deck, fanned it, noted that the edges were roughened as if shuffled by somebody

with long fingernails. He pocketed the cards.

Next, he picked up the scoresheets. He read: *C. A.—6, 4, 4, 5. M. M.—3, 6, 6, 3. D. C.—6, 2, 8, 3, 3. M. C.—4, 4, 7, 7, 3. A. F.—8, 11, 5, 7, 9.*

Mr. Price guessed that C. A. meant Crystal Agnew, M. M. was McKinley Manner, D. C. was Curtis and M. C. his wife, and that A. F. was very good at the game. He was just about twice as good as anyone else. Professor Holland hadn't scored at all, so the professor must have been the dealer.

Price got up, strolled into the hallway. In its wall he espied a niche serving as a receptacle for a telephone. There was a drawer under the niche and in the drawer he found a small leather-bound book of telephone numbers.

Flipping its pages, he located the initials A. F. only once. They belonged to an Alfred Feed, Parkview Apartments, and that was undoubtedly the handsome youth who'd left with the mousy Miss Agnew.

It was another name for Beulah Randy to check on.

Price lifted the phone from its base, listened for the dial tone with a bony finger poised over the dial. But it wasn't a dial tone, it was language that flowed out of the instrument into the sleuth's ear.

"... urgent!" Professor J. J. Holland's cultured tones pleaded. "It's absolutely vital to buy this man's silence at once, tonight."

The answering voice was feminine. "How much more money do you need?"

"I need the whole five hundred dollars."

"He won't take a check?"

"Not this man," the professor's voice said. "A canceled check would come back to us. He wouldn't like that at all."

The woman said: "Oh, dear. Wait a minute." She must have put down the phone. When she came back to it, she said: "I'll ask Helene as soon as she comes in. She usually has twenty or thirty dollars in her purse. We might be able to scrape up two hundred in all."

"Two hundred." Holland's tones were pained. He cleared his throat, "I've just had a brilliant idea. The pawnshops stay open evenings."

The woman said: "Professor, you think of just everything!" She sounded ga-ga with admiration.

Highland Park Price carefully replaced the phone in its cradle base. He muttered: "The pawnshops!" Striding back into the big front room, he bent over and sniffed the carrot juice glasses. There was no smell of liquor or dope that would have made anyone ga-ga. Maybe Professor J. J. Holland got his remarkable results with hypnotism.

The professor came in, looking worried. He said: "This is embarrassing. I find—ahem—I'm shorter of cash than I supposed. I have

only about twenty-five dollars in the house."

"Ha-ha," said High Price, sneering. "Excuse me for laughing, but I've heard that one before."

"I'll raise the money. You'll have to give me time, an hour or so."

Mr. Price pretended to think. He held out his hand. "O. K., give me the twenty-five right now. I'll be back in an hour or so."

3737½ Comet Place was the nearest address on the list. The ½ meant it was the garage back of the duplex dwelling, and apparently McKinley Manner used the garage upstairs as living quarters and the ground floor as a tool shop. Twilight was coming on, and by the electric light downstairs, it could be seen that McKinley Manner was a bald little guy in a denim jacket fussing with a screwdriver at a cylindrical contraption that looked like a used automobile muffler.

Mr. Price took a stern tone. "I'm investigating war plant absenteeism," he announced, and it was partly true—he was investigating McKinley Manner's absenteeism. "You've been off your job at CeeVee for a month. Have you got a good, patriotic excuse?"

McKinley Manner was unashamed. In fact, there was triumph spread over his pint-sized features. "I've got something better than an excuse—I've got an invention that's going to solve the food shortage. It'll revolutionize the fishing industry."

"You're knocking off work now?"

"Just starting. I do my inventing at night," the little man disclosed, "because somehow the guidance comes through better after dark."

"Guidance?"

"Sure. I work under the influence of Edison and other great geniuses of the past. They flash me ideas like this magnetic fish lure." The inventor fondly patted his contraption. In a burst of pride, he confided: "It's the marvel of the ages! A boat can drag one of these overboard and attract fish from miles around. Set it for tuna, you get tuna. Set it for herring, you get herring. It's based on the principle that fish follow natural electronic impulses. That's why they travel in schools. It's the secret of how salmon return to the stream they were spawned in. Each different kind of fish has its own radar wavelength."

Highland Park Price noted the glow of enthusiasm in McKinley Manner's sunken cheeks. The little guy was as fruity as a citrus ranch, or else he was a consummate actor.

High Price stepped over, patted the cylinder, too. "My friend, you've really got something. But why stop with fish? Why not tune it in on the human wavelength? You could influence presidential elections. You could win wars by broadcasting telepathic propaganda." Sharp-eyed, he queried: "You believe in telepathy, don't you?"

"I do, but darned if I can get the hang of it."

"Professor Holland's meetings haven't helped you any?"

McKinley Manner sighed. "It's funny. I can tune in on Thomas A. Edison without any trouble at all, but I can't make out whether the professor is broadcasting squares or circles at me!"

Mr. Price decided to play it with fruit. "It's a gift. Some have it and some don't. I'm one of the lucky ones. For instance, supposing I asked you what you've been drinking today, I could catch the answer before you answered—carrot juice!"

The inventor dropped his jaw clear to the collar of his denim jacket.

High Price chuckled. "And that's only half. I can read in your mind who squeezed the carrots—you did."

"Nope. You missed that time. The juice comes already squeezed and bottled."

"My mistake. But you went to the kitchen and filled the glasses from the bottle?"

"You're wrong again—it was Miss Agnew."

"I'm crestfallen," Highland Park Price confessed. He begged: "Give me one more chance before I go. I can read in your mind what your invention is worth—I see the figure one and six zeros. It's a million-dollar idea!"

THE Parkview Apartments had really enjoyed a view of the park when the building went up, about the time the Panama Canal was dug. Since then, taller buildings had been erected on both sides, so only the front apartments looked across the street onto green grass. Number 14 wasn't at the front, and had a view of an air shaft.

Alfred Feed took a while to answer the door, and revealed himself stripped down to his undershirt with a safety razor balanced in his hand. Up close, he was a little less young and a little less handsome. He even had a few gray hairs at his temples that couldn't have

been seen at fifty yards without a spotting scope.

Mr. Price started in about McKinley Manner, talking like a businessman who wanted a business reference.

Alfred Feed said: "That fish invention? Good Lord, you can't be interested in that?"

"Why not? Manner moves in some pretty respectable circles, so I've heard. Professor Holland thinks highly of him, doesn't he?"

Feed waved the razor. "Holland isn't a practical man. He's a nut on psychic phenomena, telepathy, and so on."

Price asked: "You don't go for that stuff?"

Alfred Feed's smile showed he brushed his teeth. "It's scientific curiosity on my part. Before the war, my family had big business interests in China—in fact, my parents are interned by the Japs right now. They shipped me home because I'd been bitten by a tropical bug. That's why I'm not in the army. I got mildly interested in Oriental philosophy while I was in the East, and that's why I've been fooling around with Professor Holland's experiments."

"Professor. What in hell is he professor of, anyway?" Price's lean-cheeked face had changed expression.

Feed said: "Why, he taught at some college in the mid-west. They kicked him out because he performed some hypnotic experiments on one of the girl students, and the girl's family raised a stink." Feed's handsome face changed expression, too. He slotted his brown eyes at the sleuth. "Pardon me for asking, but what do you want? First it was Manner's invention, now it's Holland's past. I don't believe you're really interested in either one."

Mr. Price nodded. "I'm taking up a collection, Feed."

"A what?"

"A small silver offering. Perhaps you remember a guy named Spyder or Slyder who also attended Holland's mindreading seances?"

"He attended one meeting, I believe. So what?"

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, head-

aches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

"He's dead."

"Oh. You mean you feel we should chip in and send flowers?"

High Price scowled: "Flowers can't make this one smell sweet. I'm convinced Spyder drew the black queen in Holland's little game of hearts-and-slugs. The cops are closing in fast, and it's a case of every guy find his own fox-hole. If I don't make it plain, maybe this will." He whipped out a business card, presented it to the young-old man.

Feed frowned over it, said: "Your name is Price. You're a criminal investigator. I'm afraid the rest isn't plain at all."

Highland Park Price spoke tersely. "My customary fee is five hundred bucks. It's a form of cop insurance for folks who haven't committed any murders but nevertheless don't want a policeman under their beds."

"I have nothing to hide from the law." Feed's smile didn't show his teeth this time. He raised his voice. "It's common, raw blackmail. You're sharpshooting at the wrong man, Price. Go crawl back into your rathole."

Mr. Price was unperturbed. "Keep the card just in case you happen to change your mind."

NUMBER 1211 Sherman Circle was one in a court of single-story bungalows built around a small grass plot. It was dark when Mr. Price arrived there, and the courtyard was full of radio music.

1211 Sherman Circle was a nice, respectable place to live for about sixty smackers a month. High Price stared a while at the card above the doorbell button, which said: *Crystal Agnew & Helene Agnew*.

The woman on the telephone had been going to ask Helene for some money when she came in.

Highland Park Price asked himself how come mousy Miss Agnew, who could raise five hundred bucks in a hurry, was living in a bungalow court while Professor J. J. Holland, a twenty-five dollar limit man, occupied the big house on Summit Road.

Mr. Price knocked and the door opened itself. A radio inside played faintly and emitted a faint light. The faint light showed a flesh-white patch on the floor.

High Price fumbled beside the door frame to switch up the room lights. There on the floor lay Miss Crystal Agnew. Her troubles were all over, and Sergeant Warren had troubles he didn't even know about. Miss Agnew's face was really more blue than white because she had been choked to death.

High peered a while at the bruised and blackened pressure mark around the dead woman's throat. He looked, too, at the little reddened mark which showed where a ring had once fitted her finger too tightly.

He stood and stared around the room, with its flower vase perched on the radio and neat lace tidies on the arms of its chairs. A woman had fought for her life in here, but she hadn't wrinkled the carpet any.

The telephone was in the next room, a bedroom. On the bed lay an alligator handbag. Price peered into it. There was a zipper pocket and a ladies'-size billfold in the pocket. High Price counted cash. It came out forty dollars in bills and some silver he didn't bother to add up.

She had a savings bank passbook in the bag, too. It showed a total of \$18,223.41. A month ago it had been more, but on the second of the month she had drawn out five hundred in one hunk, and ten days later—five thousand. He could see no reason why she'd have drawn it out of the bank to nest-egg it away in a bureau drawer or a coffee pot.

He heard heels clicking up the walk. The metallic rattle was someone lifting the lid of the mailbox outside the door. The next noise was the doorknob's click.

Highland Park Price waited for the scream. It was a low, choking cry when it came.

Price bolted through the bedroom doorway into the death-room. With his gun in his hand, he warned: "No, don't touch!"

The girl swung and stared at him. She was slender, she was curved, and she was pretty if you like 'em black-browed and sulky-lipped.

He asked: "Are you Helene Agnew?"

The girl rounded her inky eyes. "Yes. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask her some questions, only I got here a little too late."

"Questions?" Helene Agnew frowned. "What did you have to question my aunt about?"

High Price said: "I'm doing a little 'price' investigating. I'm interested in the rent she's been getting out of her property at 4900 Summit Road."

"She wasn't getting any."

"Holland lived there scot-free?"

The brunette said: "My aunt was too soft-hearted, too easily taken in by anyone with a hard luck story. She had no business sense. She was a small-town librarian until she inherited her money several years ago. She wanted to sell the Summit Road house, and the real estate people told her she could get a much higher price if she could give immediate possession to a buyer. Under the rent control restrictions it takes several months to evict a tenant, and she might lose a chance for a quick sale. She thought it didn't cost her anything extra to let Professor Holland live there, because the grounds had to be kept up anyway, and the insurance rate is lower on an occupied house."

"She could have lived there herself."

"Yes, but in a way it was cheaper if she didn't. The charity organizations work those wealthy neighborhoods to a fare-you-well, and Aunt Crystal was just soft-hearted enough to let herself be talked into a thousand dollars for a Home for Consumptive Cats—like the hundreds of dollars she put into that crazy invention of Manner's."

The brunette broke off, tossed her dark-haired head, said: "But, good heavens! Why am I telling you all this? We shouldn't be standing here talking, we should be calling the police!"

Price said: "You know what the police will ask?"

The girl blinked.

"Who inherits her bankroll?" High Price supplied.

THE brunette said: "I do, but I've been at a movie. I didn't dream—why, I screamed when I saw the body. You heard me, you can tell them I didn't even know you were here, and I wouldn't have screamed to play a trick on myself."

"I wouldn't bet on it." Highland Park Price spread his hands. "I'm a maligned man—the cops probably won't believe a word I say. You can deny it until Hitler grows a halo—but the cops will think you slipped me five hundred dollars retainer fee, and that I'm lying to protect my client."

He extracted a card from his vest pocket, passed it to the girl. "There. Read it and weep!"

Helene Agnew read it, nibbled some lipstick from her mouth, said: "You—you're the one—the shakedown sleuth?"

Price made a cringing gesture. "My sins have caught up with you, looks like."

"With me?"

"Yeah. You're caught with a corpse that makes you rich, and your star witness is a sharpshooter who never did a good deed for gratis in his life. The cops won't believe you're not paying me—in fact, it's going to be just twice as suspicious with me in it." He paused, let it sink in. "In other words, you've got the bad name—you might as well get the benefit by hiring me to play on your side."

Color flamed in the brunette's cheeks. She exclaimed: "It's true, every word of it! You're a cold-blooded chiseler, a—"

Price interrupted: "I know, I've got it all saved in a scrapbook. You're stuck with my bad reputation. The only question is, do you want the rest of me going to bat for you?"

He waited.

The brunette brooded—then sighed and said: "Oh, all right. I'll pay you five hundred dollars if you find my aunt's murderer before the police do."

"You wouldn't have a couple of hundred

bucks down payment lying around the house?"

"No. My aunt never keeps—kept much money in the house."

Price asked: "What became of the five hundred she drew out of the bank this month?"

"That's the money she gave McKinley Manner for a share in his invention."

"And the five thou she drew ten days later?"

The girl was grim. "It's news to me! I don't know where that went to."

"She didn't tell you all that went on?"

"No. She realized I didn't approve of her unbusinesslike methods."

Mr. Price was thoughtful. "Well, you can relax your mind about that. She got killed before she could throw away the eighteen grand she had left."

He moved toward the door as he spoke.

"Aren't you going to wait for the police?"

Helene Agnew was surprised.

"It's the killer I'm trying to catch up with,"

Highland Park Price pronounced coldly. "Nobody's paying me dough to chat with the cops."

The sleuth hastened to his downtown office and found a flush-cheeked Beulah Randy still forcing herself to read the stock of old issues of *Lo!Down*.

"No luck?" he quizzed.

The blonde sighed: "No, I've found folks called everything from apes to zorils, but they aren't the ones you named on the phone."

"Zorils?"

"A zoril is a South African polecat, and don't talk so loud." Beulah Randy gestured toward the inner, closed door. "There's a Mr. Smith to see you. I told him to wait inside. I was ashamed to have him see me reading this stuff!"

MR. PRICE entered his inner office, curled his lips into a leer as the stocky, executive-type caller swung around from peering out the window. "Smith, hell! Your right name is David C. Curtis!"

David C. Curtis groaned: "That's just the trouble. I have to keep my right name out of this murder mess. It's as much as my job is worth if it ever comes out I joined Prof Holland's screwball circle."

"Yeah? So why did you?"

"It was Mrs. Curtis . . . Mr. Price, my wife has a son by a previous marriage. The poor boy is a war prisoner in one of those hellish Jap camps. That's how my wife got interested in telepathy—in the possibility of human beings communicating with each other by means of mental radio. She believed that she could develop such powers and thus she could receive messages from her boy."

"Go on."

"She saw that ad Holland ran in the paper. It sounded like a racket to me. so I joined with

her to keep an eye out for sharp practice. My motive was solely to protect Mrs. Curtis from being victimized by some crook playing on her unhappiness."

Curtis tugged a handkerchief from his pocket, towed his perspiring features. He said: "Alfred Feed telephoned me a little while ago. He said that one of the circle's members, a Mr. Slyder, was in reality a notorious gag sheet publisher. He said that Spyder, or Slyder, had been murdered. He warned me you were making blackmail out of it."

Highland Park Price was saturnine. "So you rushed right down here to get yourself blackmailed?"

The stocky man said: "I'm over a barrel. I happen to be employed by one of the largest investment companies in the city. I handle hundreds of thousands of dollars—of other people's money. My job wouldn't last five minutes from the time those people found out I'd been monkeying around with telepathy."

"Why not?"

"Because the average person figures that kind of business is as goofy as cutting out paper dolls. They'd as soon take their money out of the bank and put it in an insane asylum to be handled by some bird who thinks he's Napoleon."

Mr. Price shrugged. "You're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Sure. There was nothing goofy about Prof Holland's little game. It was actually a cold-sober, can't-lose proposition. And for five hundred bucks, my friend, I'll prove that to you."

Beulah Randy opened the door, looking worried. "Mr. Price, I hate to interrupt, but there's a name here—I've seen it several times, and it never makes sense to me."

High Price stepped into the outer office, peered at the point where the girl's forefinger marked the newspaper page.

He read:

What's the difference between a certain High Price-d shamus and a shakedown artist? Or maybe the cops dunno the guy practices legal larceny?

Lo! Down—Spyder Col—2—W. Scott.

Speaking of what the cops dunno, there's a boot-y parlor downtown where the gals are being clipped puh-lenty. . . Seems the dice in the backroom are low-dead, ha-ha!

Beulah puzzled: "It is a code or something?"

Price shrugged. "It's just carelessness. Type is set in galleys before it's poured into the page forms, and once in a while a galley head isn't picked out." He scowled, snapped his fingers. "Holy how-much! Hey, that could be it!"

The detective chuckled softly.

"Angel-Face, you can call up all our sus-

pects. Tell 'em to meet me at Holland's house in half an hour. Tell 'em it's the pay-off."

CHAPTER THREE

Feed Is the Kitty!

HALF an hour was putting it optimistically, and it was three-quarters of an hour later when the sleuth staggered into Holland's living-room. Highland Park Price breathed heavily, for his arms were wrapped around an ex-automobile muffler.

A loud, official noise greeted him. "What in hell are you trying to pull this time, High?"

Mr. Price lowered his burden onto the nearest chair and eyed the flush-featured Sergeant Warren. "Who invited you?"

"He was questioning me about Aunt Crystal's death when the phone rang," Helene Agnew explained sulkily. "He wouldn't let me come unless he was along, too."

"Shuddup, sister. I'll handle this my own way." Warren aimed a stubby forefinger at the ex-muffler. "What kind of a doo-hickey is that there?"

"It's the invention of the ages," High Price grinned. "I'm going to solve this one by radar. It's based on the principle that all human beings are guided by certain electronic impulses."

Beulah Randy was wide-eyed and uncomprehending. David C. Curtis was narrow-eyed and skeptical.

"You can't do that!" McKinley Manner's denim-jacketed figure popped out of an antique armchair. "My machine isn't perfected yet. There's one or two details Edison still hasn't told me."

"Edison?" Sergeant Warren goggled.

Price said: "It isn't perfected enough to work on fish. All the mental radar you can find in a fish wouldn't fill half an atom. Human beings, on the other hand, are practically bursting with electronics. In fact, they've got two different kinds of electronics—receiving sets and broadcasters. The receiving set kind sees a five-dollar bill on the sidewalk, and right away gets an impulse to claim they just dropped it. They see a big empty house and they want to move in. Boost the ante up to the hundreds and thousands of bucks, and they get impulses to blackmail and murder."

Alfred Feed put in: "You know where you belong, Price."

The detective was uninjured. "I admit it—but my secretary here is the exact opposite. Beulah broadcasts good intentions all over the place. Miss Crystal Agnew was another. She'd inherited a pile of coin, and she found happiness in giving it away to every faker and phony who crossed her path. It's true—there

(Continued on page 93)

IF THE SHOE FITS—

By **KEN LEWIS**

Author of "This May Hurt A Little," etc.

Oscar Sampsel had a highly efficient one-man protective agency. The agency's name was Ricco and he specialized in "accidents"—sometimes fatal, sometimes merely disfiguring. But Ricco wasn't in business any more. Nothing much a guy with a bashed-in skull can do—except die!



Two gray-clad legs, backside up, protruded from the crack beneath the overhead garage door.

MY headlights picked up Freddie Church, the screwball lip of Hollywood, less than five hours after the grand jury indicted Oscar Sampsel for coercion and blackmail. He was scurrying along Sunset Boulevard as though someone had given him a running hotfoot.

I wondered whether his feet hurt or whether his phrenetic gait was merely the natural outgrowth of perpetual agitation. Out of court, Freddie always seemed agitated. And vague, bewildered, and ineffectual. Privately, he looked more like a startled rabbit than a top-notch criminal mouthpiece. But then, privately, he wasn't before a jury.

Anyway, something about the anguished quiver of his jib nose and pushbutton chin made me decide to give him a break. I slid the coupe to the curb and called: "Hiya, chum. Who switched feet on you?"

He paused in midstride to glare at the pointed toes of his black dress oxfords, then his harassed eyes clouded with recognition and he rushed toward me.

"Feet? Feet? *Fate!* That's what brought us together, Lieutenant! You've simply got to help me find him!"

"Find who? Charlie Ross?"

He ignored that. "Why, find Lucky, of course! Haven't you heard? Don't you know the awful thing they've done, indicting Oscar Sampsel on Lucky's testimony?"

My brows arched. "What's your kid brother got to do with the Sampsel case?"

I took the crumpled L of newsprint he handed me and shoved it under the dash light.

It was the tail-end of an item clipped from one of last week's papers, detailing the information that the district attorney had called upon one, Byron H. "Lucky" Church, well-known Hollywood broker, shortly before placing certain evidence against Oscar W. Sampsel, actors' agent, with the grand jury. Block-penciled in the margin was the succinct comment: YOU KNOW BETTER THAN THAT, FRIEND. GET AMNESIA—BUT QUICK!

I whistled and handed back the clipping. "This has all the sweet simplicity of Sampsel's little pal, Ricco," I said. "I hope Lucky had sense enough to wipe his nose after that."

Freddie shuddered. "It was too late!" he wailed. "He'd already signed the deposition! When Miss Fischer told him that Sampsel was trying to force her to sign him as her agent, Lucky simply boiled over!"

I thought of Priscilla Fischer, the rising young starlet currently engaged to Lucky Church, and began to get the picture. Ostensibly, Oscar Sampsel was a run-of-the-mill Hollywood ten-percenter. Actually, he was an expert blackmailier who used the dirt he dug up on the stars' private lives to chisel in on their fabulous paychecks as an agent.

"Well," I grunted, "if there's anything unkosher in Pris's private past, I'll eat my shiny brass buttons come next St. Swithin's Day."

Freddie collapsed into the seat beside me. "What does it matter," he moaned, "with Ricco on Lucky's trail? We've simply got to find him first, Lieutenant Gilligan! I thought perhaps Trogo's Bar—"

I saw what he meant. There were two reasons why no one had ever blown a whistle on Sampsel before. One was the fact that he usually had the goods in black and white before he put the squeeze on a victim. The second, and most important, was his highly efficient little one-man protective agency.

The agency's name was Ricco—no one had ever heard him called by any other—and he specialized in accidents. Sometimes they were fatal, sometimes merely disfiguring, but almost always they were disastrous to the career of anyone who incurred his boss's displeasure.

You saw him sometimes slipping along in fat Oscar's wake, a small gray, metallic-eyed shadow, thin lips pursed, white hands immovable. And sometimes you didn't see him at all. Sometimes you just felt him, lurking somewhere behind the scenes within easy reach of his patron's wheezy voice.

If Ricco was on the prowl for Lucky Church, then this time I could appreciate Freddie's agitation.

"Trogo's Bar it is, chum," I said.

THE neons along the Sunset Strip were splashing the early dark with surrealism as I nudged the coupe to the curb opposite the hole-in-the-wall drinkery. For some absurd reason Freddie insisted on doing the leg work while I covered the street entrance, and as I watched his spindly figure hitch through the door, I thought about the other half of the Brothers Church.

Lucky was the younger of the two, and the breadwinner. He'd started as a penny-ante gambler in his teens, run up a surprising score before he was twenty, and then had discovered the vast legalized roulette of the stock market.

He was a smart operator, and more than one moneyed maharajah of the galloping tin-types now beat a regular path to his brokerage office. The resultant commissions permitted him such luxuries as an Italian-style villa in the Hollywood hills, a fiancée like Pris Fischer, and an older brother like Freddie.

I had seen Freddie work. I knew that, when placed before a jury, the rabbit became a lion, the sardine a shark, the sparrow a veritable legal eagle. The watery eyes became clear and flashing, the apparently fumbling mind as cold and incisive as a steel trap, the fluttery voice, alternately as mellow as a con man's, persuasive as a hypnotist's, moving as a demagogue's. Under the influence of Freddie's closing pleas, hardbitten judges went wont to paw for their pocket handkerchiefs, and sobbing juries to acquit triple poisoners or take up collections to give axe murderers a new start in life.

I was still contemplating the strange Jekyll-Hyde aspect of the little shyster's personality, when the police radio dispatcher at the Hollywood sheriff's sub-station began to make noises in my dashboard receiver.

The noises were directed at Lieutenant Beau Gilligan, Homicide, so for the next few minutes I forgot all about Freddie. But when he hobbled from Trogo's Bar moments later, dolorously shaking his head, I was able to greet him with a bracing grin.

If the Shoe Fits—

"Cheer up, chum," I said. "Your worries are over. Ricco was located ten minutes ago in your garage."

"But—but I don't understand. We had to sell the Cadillac. We have no garage now—"

"Sure you do," I soothed. "That big five-stall job behind the villa. Remember?"

He shook his head bewilderingly. "But we don't live at the villa any more. Not for almost a week. The lease ran out and we—decided we didn't like the place well enough to renew it. What was Ricco doing up there?"

"Nothing," I told him. "Just lying there. There's a rumor that his skull was bashed in by a defective garage door. Shall we go?"

HALF a mile back along Sunset, Freddie plucked hesitantly at my elbow. "If—if there's no special hurry, Lieutenant," he stammered. "I wonder if we could drop by the Elite Hotel a moment..."

I shook my head, knowing what bothered him.

"There's no use worrying now," I said gruffly, swinging the coupe into Crescent Heights Boulevard. "If Ricco was still looking for Lucky when he got it, well and good. If he'd already found him—well, there's still no use worrying about it now."

Ten minutes later, a narrow, looping side-street brought us to a white pile of architecture overlooking the milky way of valley lights below.

Aside from a lone prowler in the drive, the bulk of the homicide hierarchy was apparently still on its way. I beached the coupe behind the radio car, loped through an intervening rose garden toward the garages at the rear.

Freddie was trudging virtuously along the graveled semi-circle to my left when I reached the uniformed deputy guarding the garage.

"Nolan," I acknowledged. "Who tipped us?"

"Dame in the next house up the hill. Thought she heard a scream down here and phoned in."

I shined my flash at the white expanse of garage door behind him. The door, an overhead type, had caught about six inches above ground level. Two gray-clad legs, backside up, protruded from the crack beneath it.

Freddie came up, saw the legs, gurgled unhappily and stepped back, perching on one foot like a distressed stork. "Any other way inside?" I asked.

Nolan nodded and led us to a small side door in the left garage wall. "Ain't been used much," he pointed out. "Farther from the house. Guess they mostly came and went through the big door."

Light from a ceiling bulb inside spilled

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bleakly across oil-smudged concrete, glinted from rusty tools lining the walls. It bathed in light a gray bundle with red-and-black melon attached which sprawled against the crack at the bottom of the far door, its position matching that of the legs outside.

The bundle was Ricco's torso—the melon, his head. The black was hair—the red, something that looked like ketchup but wasn't.

"Door's steel, Lieutenant," Nolan said. "Operates automatically. Electric eye in a post outside opens it, pushbutton just inside the wall there shuts it. Speed controlled by those spring balances under the roof. Only the spring that's s'posed to keep it from bangin' down has worked loose. You can see it hangin' there . . . Looks like the door fell on his head when he reached back from outside to push the release button. Busted his skull, knocked him flat an' pinned him across the hips as it came on down."

I tiptoed gingerly along the wall, knelt by the corpse. Then I shook my head. "The door might have knocked him out, even cracked his skull," I said, "but it never made that round, ragged hole in his crown. Better start frisking the grounds for the proverbial blunt instrument, Sergeant."

I WAS studying a pair of rubber heelprints caught in a pool of crankcase sludge beyond the body as he sighed and went out.

Freddie peered around the edge of the side door, stared greenly at the corpse. "F-find anything, Lieutenant?"

I pointed to the heelprints. The tread of the left one was almost completely worn off, while the right appeared to be new. "Fresh," I said. "No dust on 'em, though the rest of the puddle's fuzzy with it."

Freddie bent forward to look at them, blinked rapidly three times and looked away.

"Ricco's?"

"Too big."

"The—the murderer's, then?"

I nodded.

"But, who—"

I eyed him silently for a long moment. "I think we both know that," I said at last, gently. "Lucky told me once about his right leg. Meningitis, wasn't it, as a kid? He'd learned to cover up the slight difference in length by walking almost entirely on the ball of his right foot. That explains why that heel's so little worn."

Nolan appeared abruptly in the side door swinging a ball-peen hammer. The ball at one end of its head looked as though it had been dipped in a mixture of putty and red lacquer. "Found this in the weeds outside," he announced.

If the Shoe Fits—

I examined it thoughtfully. "Brains," I said. "Good work, Nolan. Sounds like the others coming, now. Hold 'em off a minute, will you?"

He nodded and went out whistling. I suspected that he'd misunderstood my allusion to brains.

Freddie was gnawing his lower lip. His eyes swung unwillingly to the hammer, and for a minute I thought he was going to lose his supper. Then, in mid-heave, his jaw clamped shut and he stopped shaking. His watery eyes cleared, his jib nose jutted out, and his voice deepened resonantly.

"You'll never make it stick, Lieutenant!" he warned me theatrically. "I see it all, now—a clear case of self-defense if ever there was one! Somehow Ricco found out our new address. Disguising his voice, he phoned Lucky, announced himself as the new tenant here, and lured him out here on some pretense of irregularity about the way we'd left the place. He meant to kill him in the garage, then make it look like an accident caused by that broken door spring. But somehow Lucky sensed a trap, armed himself with that hammer, and, in defending himself, accidentally killed his attacker instead—"

My grin stopped him. I suddenly felt a lot better, hearing him spout off in his best courtroom manner that way. "If anybody can sell that to a jury, it's you," I said. "But personally, I'm not interested. My job's just to bring them in. What happens to them after that is the D.A.'s worry."

He eyed me austere. "I feel it my duty to warn you, Lieutenant. Any mistreatment of my client at the hands of the police will promptly be reported to the proper authorities."

"Sure, sure," I grinned. "Let's go find him, first."

THE Elite Hotel was one of the shabbier walkups in one of the more rundown districts of East Hollywood. A hard-eyed landlady leered after us speculatively as we mounted the stairs to Room 313.

The door scraped back at Freddie's shove, and a lean, tousled figure in red pajamas stirred on the bed inside, opened one dark eye.

"Oh, Beau. Greetings. So Hollywood's favorite bloodhound has tracked us to our gruesome lair! I hope you're alone in that—"

Freddie fled toward him. "Don't say a word, not a word!" he shrielled. "Gilligan's going to arrest you for the murder of Sampsel's man, Ricco. You simply mustn't talk till I say so, Lucky!"

The second dark eye opened. "What the hell—"

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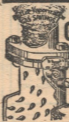
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"Please, Lucky! You've got to listen to me. I know about these things! It looks bad now, but I'll take care of it, all right. Don't worry. We'll talk it all over, privately, after Gilligan has you booked—"

Lucky Church stared at his brother as though insanity had suddenly cropped out in the family. Then, gradually, the bewilderment in the black eyes was veiled behind the set, inscrutable mask of the professional gambler.

"Right, Lieutenant?"

"Right," I nodded.

With a prodigious sigh, Freddie sank into an overstuffed chair beside the bed, reached unconsciously for his shoelaces. Then he stiffened, his eyes darting toward me nervously.

"Go ahead, Freddie. Take 'em off," I said.

"They don't fit worth a damn, do they? They've been bothering you all night."

"Take—what off, Lieutenant?"

"Lucky's shoes, of course. The ones that made those heelprints in the garage oil. Sorry I couldn't stop by and let you change 'em on the way to the villa."

The thin, high overtones of panic began to edge his words. "Why, Lieutenant, whatever makes you think—" Lucky's barely audible gasp of recognition cut him off.

Freddie's watery eyes jittered miserably across the carpet. "It's not what you think, Lucky!" he babbled. "Honest it's not! It's not what you think it is at all!"

"I don't think anything—yet," Lucky said grimly. "I haven't seen enough cards."

"Well, I think," I said. "Believe it or not, Freddie, sometimes thinking is almost a frequent occurrence with me. You've been hopping around all night as if you'd been given a hotfoot. And you were damned careful to stick to the drive, back there at the villa. You didn't want to leave any heelprints in the soft turf beneath the roses—heelprints that could definitely be traced to you."

"So I think, for instance, that when I picked you up on Sunset you weren't heading for Trogo's Bar in search of Lucky, at all. You were heading for the nearest bus stop, hoping to get back here and change shoes before Rico's body was found."

"I think you planned to kill him as soon as you heard the newscast about Sampsel's indictment. You knew that he'd head for the villa as soon as it got dark, believing Lucky still lived there, and when he found nobody home he'd probably make for the garage, planning to wait there till Lucky returned and gave him a chance to stage his fatal 'accident.'"

"So you merely went up and hid in the garage first, conked him with the hammer when he showed up, then jimmied the door spring so it would look as if he'd been caught by one of

If the Shoe Fits—

his own infernal contraptions. And you wore Lucky's shoes to throw us off the trail, in case any doubt arose later."

FREDDIE had slumped to his knees beside the bed. "No—no!" he sobbed. "Believe me, Lucky, I didn't plan to involve you at all! I knew my feet hurt, but I didn't know why till Gilligan called attention to them back there on Sunset. Then I looked down and saw that in my excitement I'd put on your shoes by mistake when I ran out of the apartment. I was taking a bath when the newscast came over and—"

He turned to me. "I'll admit I went up there hoping to find Ricco," he said dully. "But I didn't mean to kill him—not at first. I was going to make a deal—offer to defend Sampsel in Superior Court. I'd figured out a way to get Lucky's deposition ruled out as evidence, and I was going to promise that Lucky wouldn't testify in person, if only Ricco'd lay off us."

"I hid in the garage, like you said. But I— I was scared stiff. I didn't know what he might do when he found me, whether he'd even give me a chance to talk. By the time I finally heard a noise in the drive outside, I didn't want any part of the setup any more. . . ."

"I'd purposely left the main garage door up. Now, in my panic, I frantically pushed the release button, hoping to shut it again before he could reach me. But I was too late. I didn't know how close he'd got, creeping up on me that way in the dark. And the door didn't come down slowly, as it should have. I guess that spring really had worked loose by itself. Anyway, it fell. . . ." He shuddered.

"He must have just started through when it hit him—knocked him flat, pinned him there on the floor, his head bleeding. . . . I lifted his wrist. I couldn't feel any pulse. I twisted him enough to put my ear against his chest. I couldn't hear his heart at all. I felt wonderful. . . ."

"And then another thought hit me. What if he wasn't really dead, after all? What if he was just stunned? I didn't know enough about such things to be sure. I looked down at him lying there on the floor, so quiet now, so harmless—for the moment. And I thought what would happen if he ever got up again."

"I'd lost my chance to bargain with him. I knew that. He'd never trust me now, after what happened. He'd go right on hunting for Lucky, and sooner or later he'd find him. And then Lucky would die, no matter what I tried to do to stop it. I saw the hammer hanging on the wall, and I thought what a filthy little rat Ricco really was, and—well—he looked dead enough, all right. But it seemed a shame not

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to make sure. . ." His voice trailed off to a whisper.

I studied him ironically for a long moment. "He was no more of a rat than a dozen others you've got off scot free in court," I said. "You know that, don't you?"

His face fell. "Yes, I—I suppose so. But it just seemed like a kind of a game, then. It didn't seem like this, at all. Honest, Lieutenant, I'll never again have anything to do with a m-murderer."

I nodded. "You're right about that, anyway," I said grimly. "Oh, I believe your story, all right. Even the part about the busted door spring. After all, those things do happen. But you'll never be able to make a jury believe it—not even you."

His eyes shifted wretchedly. "I know. But when I saw those heelprints, and knew you already suspected Lucky, I was sure I could get him off O.K. Well, it's over, now. And I'm glad. Somehow I'm glad it's really me going to jail, instead of Lucky." He held up his wrists for the cuffs. "Do your duty, Lieutenant," he said.

I scratched my ear. "I'm trying," I said, "to decide just what it is. When you knocked off that lousy little creep tonight, you did more for the cause of justice than you and your kind have ever done in a thousand court appearances. It doesn't seem right to arrest a man for a thing like that. . . I've got a good notion to take Lucky in, after all, and let you spring him with that self-defense plea you dreamed up back in the garage."

His eyes began to shine again. "The case'll never even reach the manslaughter stage, Lieutenant! I promise!"

He was right. The case, in fact, never got beyond the inquest. The coroner's jury found that Alonzo Ricco—they'd dug up a first name for him somewhere—had met his death while attempting to commit a homicide. Lucky wasn't even held.

So Freddie Church, the screwball lip of Hollywood, had won another phony case. I felt a lot better about it when the coroner informed me privately that Ricco really had been dead before the hammer hit him.

I was also highly gratified to note the following question in a local gossip column two weeks later:

What rising filmland mouthpiece has given up his successful criminal law practice to take a job in the legal department of one of our major studios?

It was the first time I'd ever known the answer to one of those things. And me a detective!

THE END

Death Feeds the Kitty

(Continued from page 84)

are scientists who'd sacrifice their own lives to find a cure for cancer, just as there are crooks who'd cut your throat for a nickel. In this case, the mixture of the two produced a couple of murders."

"You're not saying anything new." Sergeant Warren shrugged his burly shoulders. "Every cop knows that there are right guys and wrong ones. So what?"

"Yeah. But can a cop tell the right from the wrong guy?" Price asked.

"Can you?"

"With what's inside this machine, yes."

"Pfui!" said the sergeant.

"Don't underestimate this mechanical marvel. Its magnetism is going to astonish you. I'll start easy and work up to the sixty-four-dollar answers." Price turned to the white-browed J. J. Holland. "It's your shuffle and deal, Professor."

Holland blinked as Mr. Price pulled the ESP pack from his pocket and proffered it. However, he took the cards and shuffled them.

Then as he placed the first on the tabletop, High Price called: "It's a square—turn it over and see."

Holland turned the card. It was marked with a square.

The next was a circle. "Circle," Price stated.

"Another square," Mr. Price said. "A wave. A cross. A cross and a circle."

J. J. Holland's eyes rounded like poker chips. He said raptly: "Seven hits in a row—and in front of official witnesses! This is making parapsychologic history. It couldn't be luck, the chances are five million-to-one against it."

"Oh, nuts!"

The derogatory explosion came from Alfred Feed. The handsome man strode to the table, snatched up the seven pasteboards. "You cheap crook, you marked these cards. The edges are thumbnailed—it's an old cardsharp's trick. . ."

Highland Park Price shook his head. "You're wrong, they were marked before I ever touched them. But we'll skip it and try something harder." He rested a hand on the cylinder's flank. "I get vibrations that tell me you've got five hundred bucks and a pawn ticket in your pants pocket, Feed."

Feed laughed aloud.

"You're willing to let Warren search you without a warrant?" Mr. Price quizzed.

"It's a pleasure to prove how wrong you are."

The sergeant stepped forward. A fast fanning, and the homicide officer contributed: "Yeah, you're nuts, Price. He's got a hundred and thirty bucks in his kicker, and that's all."



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Dale Clark

HIGHLAND PARK PRICE'S lean-checked face betrayed no discomfiture. He said: "Hold everything. There were two guys standing right beside the table. The vibrations must have meant Prof Holland has five hundred bucks and a pawn ticket."

Warren's scoffing jeer melted down to a pleased, "Oh-oh," as he spotted Holland's expression. The professor had gone as dead-white as his eyebrows.

Price said: "You're hooked, Prof. It's going to be easy to identify the ring Miss Agnew had on her finger, and it's going to be easy for the pawnbroker to identify you."

"I didn't kill her. She was dead when I got there. I took the ring because I was desperate." The ex-scholar's voice climbed as he faced High Price. "You drove me to it, you damned scoundrel! You demanded blood money, or else you'd have exposed me and ruined my life work..."

Beulah Randy wailed reproachfully: "Mr. Price! You didn't, did you?"

Warren grunted: "Don't he always?" He glared at Price. "Well, sharpshooter, what were you going to expose?"

High Price said: "I hadn't found this machine yet. I was guessing—guessing Spyder had something on somebody here. I didn't even know that Holland was a disgraced professor living on a rich woman's bounty. He's not the only one, either. There was Manner shaking the old girl down so he could invent instead of working for a living. There was Curtis, liable to lose his job if his company found out he was playing with pseudo-science instead of playing golf on his afternoons off. There was Helene, trying to stop her aunt from being taken by one and all."

Sergeant Warren scowled: "Whoa. One at a time." He aimed an index finger at the shrinking professor. "O.K., jack-roller, what's your alibi for eleven minutes after four P. M., today?"

Before Holland could muster voice, David C. Curtis threw in the answer. "He was right here in this house, in this very room. We all were, from four o'clock on."

Warren stopped like a man who'd been going to plant his next step on top of a land mine. Abruptly cautious, he queried: "Who all?"

"Professor Holland, Mr. Feed, Mr. Manner, Miss Agnew, and of course my wife and myself," the stocky man of finance asserted.

Warren rolled Highland Park Price a bogeyman stare. "Shamus, what've you got to say to that?"

"Let's ask the machine. Maybe we can get an electronic thought-wave from inside it."

Mr. Price draped his fingers on the cylinder, closed his eyes in self-communion.

Death Feeds the Kitty

Sergeant Warren said: "Damn it to hell, will you cut out the moonshine and—"

"Sh-h-h! It's talking to me!" Price's gray eyes flew open. He confided: "It says eleven minutes past four was when Crystal Agnew walked out to the kitchen to pour the carrot juice."

Warren said: "That's dandy. That makes it all as clear as mud."

High Price explained: "Look here at the score sheets." He pulled the scorepad from his pocket. "They're all scored the same—five games apiece. It means the game wasn't being played when Miss Agnew was out of the room. It also means more than one party slipped out of the room."

Warren said: "That's good. Somebody ducked out for a minute, ran about forty blocks downtown to bump off Spyder, and ran back before anybody noticed he was gone."

"That isn't what the machine says." High Price stroked the machine affectionately. "Spyder was killed a few minutes before four o'clock. The slayer rushed here as fast as a car or cab would haul him. Before the party really got going, he ducked out to the back of the house and used the extension phone to dial police headquarters. He simply said he was Spyder calling from the print shop and that he was going to do the Dutch. Of course, he listened for the telltale click so's to hang up if anyone lifted the hall phone. What he didn't hear in time was Crystal Agnew mousing into the kitchen after the carrot juice. Maybe she didn't hear anything, but at least she knew the guy had used that phone. The killer had gambled that the murder would pass as suicide.

When I showed up shooting questions, he killed Miss Agnew before she could put the finger on him."

HIGHLAND PARK PRICE twinkled a glance around the room. A camera would have said the open-mouthed, blushing Warren was the guilty party. The others looked surprised, including the one who wasn't.

Mr. Price chuckled. "Of course, folks, I'm just kidding."

"Kidding?" chopped Warren.

"Sure. About what's in the machine. Actually, the killer made a terrible mistake. He assumed all he had to do was eliminate Spyder, overlooking the possibility the blackmail story might already be in print."

Warren fidgeted. "Don't try and make me out dumber than I am, High. I had the boys pull proofs of every bit of type in the shop. If there ever was such a story, the murderer made off with it."

"Thanks, Sarge. You're saying so makes Helene owe me five hundred bucks. You and

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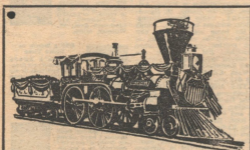
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Dale Clark

the killer overlooked the same little detail. Spyder had a job press in his shop but no linotype machine. He farmed out his copy to be set in type by a commercial printer."

Price turned to Beulah Randy. "So all I had to do was check on that galley slug you found in *Lo!Down*. A galley is simply a tray of about fifteen inches of type, identified with the name of the operator who set it. What I did was call the typographical union headquarters and find out they had a member named W. Scott working for the Specialty Publishers Company. It seems there's a strict union rule that a galley proof has to be saved so the linotype operator can't be charged with mistakes he didn't make."

Highland Park Price grinned. "Now I'm going to roll up my sleeve and show you the rabbit punch." He rolled up his coatsleeve, reached inside the cylinder, brought out a roll of glossy, six-inch-width paper. "Here it is—the blow-off Spyder was going to print unless Feed bought him off."

Alfred Feed took a stumbling step toward the sleuth. He panted, "That's a lie—" and stopped, swayed, clutched a hand to his lapel. He blurted: "My God! My heart! Water!"

Warren blurted: "Somebody get the guy a glass of—"

Feed's knees buckled. He half-doubled himself, his hand straining inside his coat lapel over his heart. Suddenly he wasn't doubled-up, he was crouching with a short-barreled blued steel shooter in his tensed fist. He covered Warren first, yelled: "Throw 'em up, copper!"

Highland Park Price had figured maybe it was going to be a gun. He'd dropped the proof sheets and wrapped his bony fingers around the ex-automobile muffler.

Torpedo style, he hurled the missile at Feed's graying temples.

Feed pitched in a sidewise, ear polishing fall. Mr. Price hopped with one foot onto the hand that clutched the gun, swung the other foot as Feed raised his head and tried to bite the sleuth's ankle. Feed flopped back and lay still.

Price said: "What a pony! He was from China because that's a story nobody could check on while the war lasted. He's the answer to where Crystal Agnew's missing five grand went, and after he killed her he figured he could marry the rest of it."

The sleuth accused the glassy-eyed Helene Agnew: "You fell for him as hard as your aunt did! You were in his apartment tonight when I talked to the guy. It was from listening to him you got the idea I was the shakedown champion of the world."

She didn't deny it.

Death Feeds the Kitty

Price said: "He's the guy who marked the cards, of course, so's to make a big impression with his chatter about Oriental philosophy. The rest of you fell for it, but Ellsworth Spyder was an expert himself of cold decks and loaded dice games. He simply checked up and found out Feed was a common con man."

Sergeant Warren scowled. "Yeah, you know it all. Give me them proof sheets and I'll read it for myself."

"No, you won't. It isn't there." High Price had himself a laugh. "The clunk didn't know it, but I was really kidding. Spyder never put the story in type at all."

The wandering comment was Beulah Randy's. "You really solved it by electronics?"


"Hell, no. I used arithmetic." Enjoyably, the sleuth recited. "Miss Agnew said she could raise two hundred cash as soon as Helene got home with twenty or thirty bucks. But she only had forty smackers in her own handbag. Forty plus thirty makes seventy, and leaves a hundred and thirty to go—and a hundred and thirty is just what Feed had in his hip pocket."

"So I figured Feed rode home with her and was still there when the phone rang. She put down the phone and asked him how much cash he had. Then, after she hung up she must have told him what the money was for—to hire a private dick to turn up Spyder's killer. Naturally, he wasn't going to pay for his own hanging! He hoped that with her dead and Helene and Curtis both warned against me, the money wouldn't be raised at all—and I'd drop out, because I don't work for free."

Beulah Randy said eagerly: "So that's the real reason you tried to hijack all the suspects. You wanted to find out which one had exactly one hundred and thirty dollars?"

Highland Park Price winced. After all, he had a bad reputation to live up to.

"Wait a minute. I'm not through doing arithmetic. Let's see now, who all here owes me money?"



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