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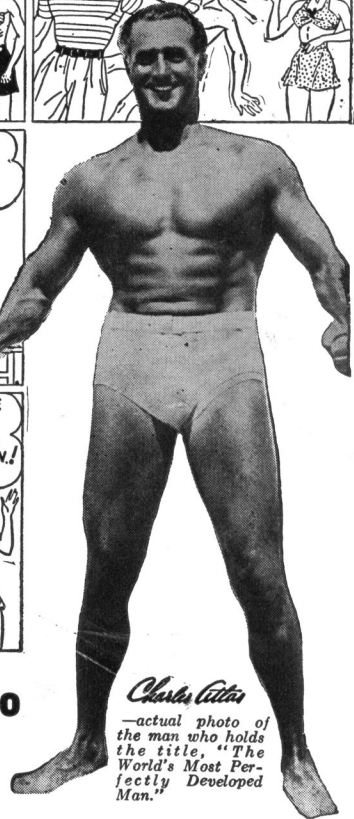
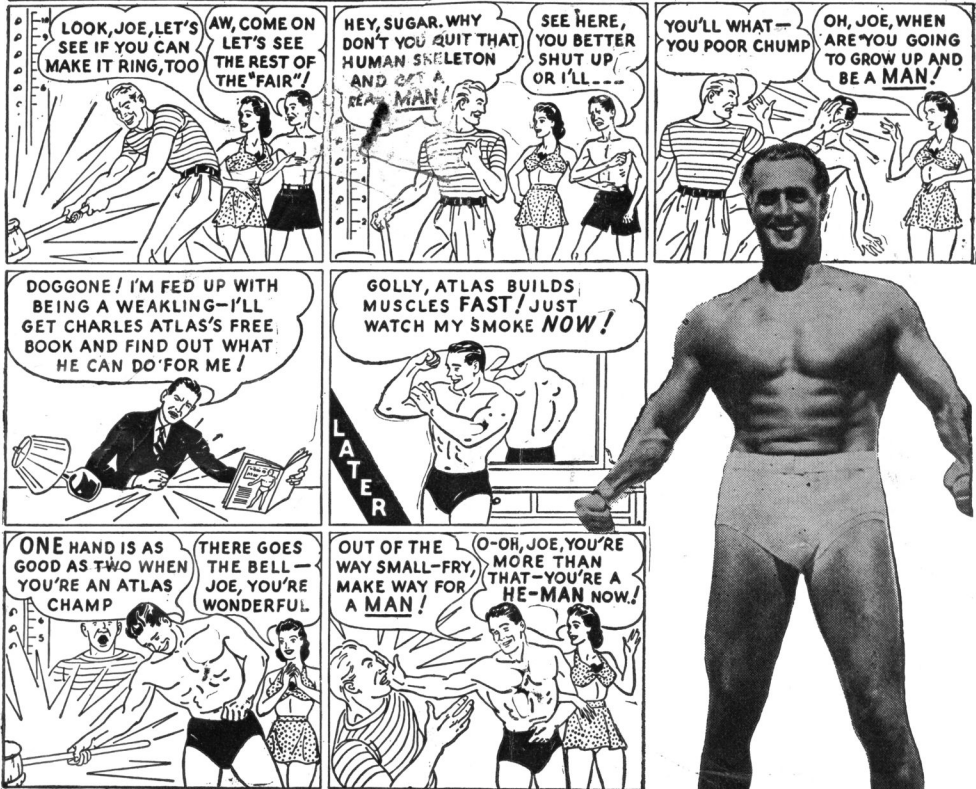
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THE GOOD MURDER POLICY
by **H.H. STINSON**
FREDERICK C. DAVIS



THE RIDDLE OF PAPA RIO
A CASH WALE NOVELETTE
by **PETER PAIGE**

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Vol. 49

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Cover: "A feathered arrow pinned Papa Rio to the archery target."

From: *The Riddle of Papa Rio.*

The September issue will be out August 3rd

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THE SEPTEMBER THRILL DOCKET



IT was only a matter of brief moments from the time the first torpedo bored its way into the bowels of the *Franklin Brownell* till the second fatal fish exploded against the wounded freighter's waterline to sink her among the keys. You'd have thought every man aboard would have used the precious interval between the two for nothing but escape, but human rats—even when about to leave a sinking ship—can always find time for a final rodent exploit. Which explained why—three years later—Tim Collins found himself in a diving suit, prizing open a locker in the purser's cabin of the drowned *Brownell* with a wrecking bar, in a skeleton-in-the-closet hunt on the seat-bottom.

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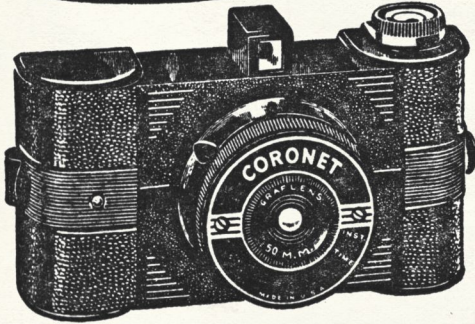
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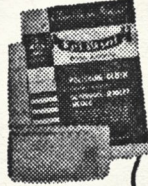
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THE RIDDLE OF PAPA RIO

By **PETER PAIGE**



**A Cash Walo
Novelette**

"When a dick hires a dick, that's news," Cash Wale told Ramón. "What's the gag?" The gag was a one-man missing persons job to provide Ramón's bride-to-be with a past. But at the moment Cash had more pressing problems—figuring out who had shot the crossbow arrow that had pinned Papa Rio to his own archery target, and trying to wriggle out from taking the rap for the old caballero's murder.

CHAPTER ONE

The Arrow from Nowhere



I swiveled and looked over the twin barrels of a shotgun into the good eye of the bartender.

IT WAS one of my bad days. After three hours of San Antonio, following forty-eight hours of day coaches that were packed like cattle cars, I was ready to battle my way back to Manhattan and air conditioning. That whole vast sky was filled with sun. The pavement fried my shoes. Sweat dripping off the battered end of Sailor Duffy's nose and the puddle forming where my shoulder holster pressed against my chest and the local atmosphere lounging in the driveway were just irritations added to irritations.

The driveway started with an arch and curved to the front of a rambling structure that had been decrept when the Alamo was a babe.

The local atmosphere was posing for trouble inside the archway, a sun-dried character in faded tan slacks, tan shirt and tan felt hat.

"No visitin', fellers," he drawled as we started past him. "We hain't buyin' or sellin'. We hain't lonesome or hospitable. Good afternoon, fellers."

"It talks," I told Sailor.

Sailor registered a slow doubletake.

"Yeah. I t'ought it was makin' funny noises, Cash."

I said: "You gonna keep us from knocking on that front door, pal?"

The man looked up at Sailor, then down at me. "Ef you're determined, Ah'll jest foller along," he drawled mildly.

The driveway led to a porch of irregular flagstones and a tall oaken doorway that featured a wrought-iron knocker. My fingers were still on the knocker when the door pulled away, revealing a wizened old Mexican woman.

I said: "Hello, Mamacita. Long time no see."

The maze of brown wrinkles remained immobile for almost a full minute while tiny black eyes bored steadily into mine. Then the big wrinkle under her nose parted and she cackled: "*Es El Pistolo!* Papa Rio see you dam' queek, I t'ink! Eenside!"

She drew back to let us pass, a chunky little woman with a black dress that started at her

neck and swept all the way down to the floor.

The local atmosphere breathed noisily as she shut the door behind us.

"Hain't hit a mis'able note?" he brooded. "Ah'm hihed t' keep folks off'n him an' the greaser lets in th' fust folks as wantster see 'im!"

"Mis'able," I murmured.

"Hey, Cash," Sailor questioned, "who put cotton in dis guy's yap? Huh, Cash?"

I postponed initiating Sailor into the wherefore of a Texas drawl while Mamacita crossed a covered patio of more flagstones and cackled a torrent of Spanish down a stairway.

Papa Rio's abode was a revelation. Fine oil paintings spaced the high, paneled walls. Ancient suits of Spanish armor, dating from Cortez, stood guard at the head of the stairway down which Mamacita called.

A fountain tinkled in the center of the enclosed patio. Small palms and rambling patches of garden gave the place an atmosphere that the better night clubs in Gotham vainly try to duplicate.

But the main attraction was twentieth-century air conditioning. I raised appreciative eyebrows at what Papa Rio had done with his ill-gotten gains.

Then his voice boomed from down the stairway: "*Digale a El Pistolo que venga aquí, Mamacita.*"

She babbled some more Spanish down at him, then nodded at me. "You go, Papa Rio say."

I motioned to Sailor and we started down the stairs. There was a soft twang as if someone had plucked an untuned violin string below us and the dour doorman drawled in my ear: "Bows an' arrers, th' crazy ol' greaser!"

There was a short, damp hallway at the foot of the stairs and a partly opened door at end end. I pushed open the door, then dropped to a crouch and muttered: "Sailor!"

Back of me I heard a swift intake of breath and the sound of feet scuffling.

I did not look back. Somehow the .32 had left my holster and was now angled in my fist.

Still crouching, I took one swift step into the room, jerked my pistol to the right. I slammed the door shut and snapped my pistol at what lay behind it.

Wall lay behind it.

Wall faced my pistol to the right. Nothing else. No doors. No windows. Just walls, floor and ceiling, framing a long, low archery range. Bows and arrows and trophies and pictures framed the two side walls.

AN ARCHERY target was propped from the floor against the far wall.

Papa Rio was propped from the floor against the target. He looked like a brown

gnome trying to embrace the target, one chubby leg bent under him, the other braced sideways. A red feathered arrow held him like that against the target.

He wore nothing but a pair of tan shorts.

I opened the door behind me and saw the drawling guard frightened and motionless in Sailor Duffy's arms. Most men remain motionless in the Sailor's arms. Those arms had traded punches for fifteen rounds with the heavyweight champion of the world.

I said: "Turn him loose, Sailor." And, to the man, as he rubbed his arms: "That was to keep you from queering my play in case the killer was still around. He's gone. Where's the other way out?"

The man had an Adam's apple. It was shuttling between his chin and chest now.

"Theah hain't no otha way out," he finally choked. Then, for no evident reason: "Ah'm Irv Footlick. Him daid, hit'll cost me muh job. Fohty-fave bucks ev'y week."

"Don't brood, Footlick," I told him. "It costs me exactly forty-five hundred bucks."

Sailor butted in. "He's dead, Cash? Huh, Cash?"

That was a good question.

I went over to Papa Rio and felt his wrist. I gently rolled back his head until I could look down into his swarthy, eagle-nosed face. I thumbed back an eyelid and then held the glass of my watch against his parted lips. The glass did not cloud. I let his head roll back against the target.

No blood showed where the red feathered arrow entered his side.

"I'd say he was dead."

The only bows visible were hanging on the two side walls.

I went back to the door and started a tour of the range's perimeter. I knocked on the wall every foot of the way and did the same to the cement floor.

Even if it had been his inclination, Papa Rio could not have pushed that arrow all the way through his trunk and into the target by himself. And, unless the man had changed radically, he was the last guy in the world to seek a short-cut out.

Someone had shot that arrow through him and there had to be another exit.

But there was no other exit. The walls and floor were solid stuff. The ceiling was solid stuff. I even looked behind the target. There was nothing else large enough to conceal a killer.

I went around that room three times. Same result each time. How to go crazy in three easy lessons.

Somewhere along the tour Mamacita came into the room. No hysteria or histrionics. She merely squatted near him, then mumbled something about "*policia*" and left.

Sailor was eager for some archery practice and every few seconds I had to pull his hands away from the paraphernalia on the walls.

Footlick muttered about the air conditioning and opened the vents of the small screened inlet over the door, but the natural dampness of the cellar room made air conditioning unnecessary.

I was starting my fourth tour of the room when a quiet voice in the doorway said: "Leave that to us. It's our business."

The man in the doorway was tall, slender, blond, and of middle age. He had a deep tan and wore a large white sombrero to set it off. The revolver in his belt holster featured nickel carving.

"It's your headache," I told him.

He moved into the room and the doorway erupted a dozen-odd more characters. I spotted a photog, a print man, the coroner and some newsmen. The others wore two-tone blue uniforms and Sam Browne belts—just so many pistol packing stooges.

The room was suddenly crowded.

The white sombrero gave no orders but there was organization, standard homicide routine. The print man spread his dust. The photog shot Papa Rio's corpse from various angles at quick intervals. The coroner fussed over the arrow.

I started toward the white sombrero and a Mexican grin got in my way, one of the blue-uniformed characters. Another faced the Sailor. Another was grabbing vainly at Footlick. The animated drawl clawed at the white sombrero's shoulder.

"Yo're Deppity Sykes outta the commissioner's office," Footlick drawled. "Irv Footlick. Whitey Holderness down Nogalitos way mentioned yuh. Ask Whitey."

The white sombrero nodded and allowed his hand to be pumped.

Then some blue uniforms were moving Footlick toward the door. Some others began herding the Sailor the same way. My smiling Mexicano pointed with his eyes. We joined the parade.

It was nice organization. They kept us apart. No chance for us "suspects" to frame a story.

The Mexican indicated a door leading from the patio and as I passed him, his hand whipped under my lapel and snagged the .32. He grinned at me, closed the door behind him and lounged against it.

That left the bed for me, the room's sole furnishing.

"You could have asked," I growled, sprawling on the bed.

"Why have trouble?" he shrugged. "Some people try handing it to you wrong end first when you ask."

"What happened to your accent?" I asked.

"I lost it in the University of Texas," he grinned. He had a nice grin. He suddenly lost his grin and said: "I liked the old man. In the old days he kicked up a lot of fuss. But lately he fiddled with his archery, ran some magnificent feasts for the local poor and was strictly a solid citizen. I liked him."

"That makes two of us," I said. "In the old days I kicked up some of his fuss."

My Mexican whistled softly. "With Pancho Villa? You're not old enough, chum."

"After that. Booze. Papa Rio used to go south of the border when no one was looking. Then hijackers began looking and he sent for me. In the old days that was my business, too."

"What did you do?"

"I hijacked the hijackers. Some of them died."

My Mexican grinned and extended a tan palm.

"My friends call me Ramón," he said. "Don't worry about Deputy Sykes. He's reasonable. It's just that he's squeezed three ways—politics, graft and voting publicity. He has to be careful."

"O.K., Ramón," I said, gripping his palm.

We exchanged some pleasant chitchat about where to get the biggest steaks in San Antonio and, through the door, I could hear people moving around the patio and Mama-cita's voice racing in shrill cackles. Then the door thrust open and Deputy Sykes was in the room.

THE white sombrero was tilted far back on his blond head.

He said quietly: "Have you a permit for that pistol?"

His eyes seemed fixed on an eagle about twenty miles back of my head and he wore the most unsmiling expression I have ever seen on a man.

"In my bag at the Gunter Hotel," I told him. "Cash Wale, of Manhattan. The big guy's Sailor Duffy, also of Manhattan. We arrived a couple of hours ago on the Katy. Rio wired me five hundred as a retainer to come down here and find some answers."

"Why you?"

"That's my business—finding answers. I'm the Cash Wale Investigation Service."

Sykes said quietly: "I said, why you?"

"I found some answers for him about fifteen years ago."

Over Sykes' shoulder I caught a flash of Ramón's grin. Sykes remained silent as if I were expected to say more. I told him how Sailor, Footlick and I had come into the house together and what had followed.

When I concluded, Sykes said: "That's one version."

"Come again?"

Sykes sighed. "You were tapping the walls when I came in. You know there was no other exit. And there was nobody else on the range. Who put the arrow into Rio?"

"What's the other version?" I demanded.

Sykes brought his gaze back from that eagle until it was focused on me. His eyes were like twin gray rivets.

"That you were alone in there with Rio with the door closed behind you for about a minute before the others came in," he said.

"Ten seconds at the most," I said. "Just long enough to poke my pistol around the door in case the killer had lingered. When I opened the door, I saw Papa Rio with the arrow in him. The rest was pure reflex. I told you that was my business."

"She tells it something like that," Sykes said nodding absently.

"Who says different?" I demanded.

Sykes ignored the question. He asked for Rio's wire. I told him it was in my office back in Manhattan. He said if I would give him the date he would get a transcript from the local telegraph office.

I gave him the date and said: "What the hell! I can quote it. It's been eating into me ever since. 'PAYING YOU FIVE GRAND LOOK TO STOPPING DARK LETTERS BEFORE I DIE.' Five hundred came with it. It's almost as clear as mud."

Behind Sykes, Ramón cleared his throat and said: "Mr. Sykes, the old man had a cancer. Doc Rodguerras was handling it. Papa Rio had only a few months left to live."

"How about that 'dark letters'?" the deputy questioned without turning his head.

"The old man had quaint notions about the English language. It could mean almost anything," Ramón replied.

I said: "The five hundred will just about cover Sailor's and my transportation here and back."

Sykes' eyes were back on that eagle again.

"Is he *the* Sailor Duffy?"

"That's right."

"Figured as much," Sykes said quietly. "It's taking five of my men to hold him. I'll want both of you around a few days at least. Tell Cantello where you're staying."

That was it. Brief, to the point, and smooth. Exit the white sombrero.

I said: "Cantello?"

Ramón grinned.

"Me."

"O.K. The Gunter Hotel. How about my pistol?"

As I was settling the .32 back in the leather nest, he asked: "You too proud to work for a Mexican, chum?"

"I was working for old Rio," I reminded him. "Anyhow, I don't work for people."

"It's worth a couple of hundred to me," he

said soberly. "Suppose I look you up at the Gunter later?"

We shook hands on it and then I went out and collected Sailor from the six battered, be-pistolled characters who were holding him.

Footlick was out in the patio talking to a couple of men with pencils and pads. He was eyeing the Sailor from the corner of his eye and morosely rubbing his arms and I suddenly saw where the tale about the minute I was supposed to have been alone with Papa Rio had originated.

But it was no place for personal amenities, so I shook hands with Mamacita and guided the muttering Sailor out into the blistering noonday sun.

"Cash, it's hot," Sailor mumbled.

"Get used to it," I told him. "The way things look, it's going to be a damned sight hotter."

Which was a masterpiece of understatement.

CHAPTER TWO

Lady Without a Past

RAMÓN CANTELLO brought a quart of Three Feathers, which was nice of him. Also practical. In Texas, bars and night clubs are allowed to serve beer and wine only. The customer provides his own hooch and gets an evening's supply of ice and soda for mixing purposes for twenty or thirty dollars.

Sailor had a first-sight crush on San Antonio. The foot-square sirloin steaks they threw at him had his juices in a perpetual uproar.

Personally, I yearned for Bagdad on the Hudson!

You could paddle a canoe for a buck an hour along a narrow river that twists like a loose coil through the heart of San Antonio, or swim in a park, or ride a horse at a buck an hour, or bowl or shoot pool or go to one of half a dozen movie houses. But after that your recreation consisted of hearing Texans boost Texans.

Personally, I get more of a kick out of hearing New Yorkers knock New Yorkers.

But, as Ramón told it in our room at the Gunter: "You guys have to stick around anyhow. You may as well make something out of it. It's worth two hundred to me and it should take you less than a week."

"When a dick hires a dick, that's news," I said. "What's the gag?"

Ramón turned on the charm. He was a slick chick off duty. He wore a brown jacket, tan slacks with a tan shirt and tie to match and a tan Panama. The pistol was not in evidence.

"No gag, chum. Mr. Sykes got a wire from

New York on you this evening. You're tagged 'suspicious,' but no convictions. And you have functioned approximately twelve years. That makes you a big-time operator."

I eyed him narrowly, but the flattery oozed from him as smooth as paste from a tube.

"That's on my own stamping grounds, pal. I'm a fish out of the drink here."

"But you know the procedure whereas I'd flounder. Besides I haven't the time and it has to be done fast. I want to marry the girl. It's simply a question of tracing her parents."

"Rave on," I breathed.

But that was it. The lady apparently had been shuffled out of the family deck as a kid. She had been shuffled several times since. Recently, one of the last shufflers hinted that there had been something askew in the original shuffle.

About this time, young Ramón, with his University of Texas law degree and police job, met the lady, was smitten, to quote the lad, and proposed a legal knot.

She stalled him with the "not until I untangle this tangle" song and now I was to perform that little deed in a week. I was "a big-time operator." All I had to do was perform a one-man missing persons job that covered a span of about twenty years and probably extended over half of Texas and most of Mexico.

I drew the lad a picture in words of one syllable. He waved it aside.

"I have confidence in you, chum. Put in at least one week on it. It will be worth the two hundred, win or lose."

I said: "Listen, why throw your dough away? How would you like to buy in on a solid investment, a percentage of the toll rights on the Brooklyn Bridge?"

That grin flashed.

"Don't kid me, chum. My cousin, Pedro, bought that bridge last summer when he was in New York and the toll rights aren't for sale."

You couldn't help liking the guy.

Sailor aimed a thick talon at the quart of Three Feathers.

"You savin' that for a weddin'? Huh?"

"Call it an engagement party," Ramón grinned. "Mine. Let me introduce you to a San Antonio cocktail lounge."

I said: "My name explains itself, pal."

So help me, he counted two hundred of what it takes from his wallet to my palm—right then and there!

Half an hour later I gaped through the windshield of his Buick sedan and muttered: "This?"

It was a drive-in. In the balmy evening air, a scarlet neon sign blinked on and off—*ALAMO STEAK INN*. Around us were parked a couple of dozen other cars, trays

fastened to the doors, and coke bottles, sandwiches and glasses on the trays. Girls in sweaters and slacks sidled around with big trays of stuff for the little trays.

The heat of the day clung to the city, but a wisp of breeze touched us here.

Ramón had not been jesting. The occupants of practically every car in view were toying with bottles and flasks.

"Why not?" Ramón shrugged. "The set-ups are cheaper here than in the night clubs. Their radios get better music than any local club can offer. And then they have more privacy for romance."

A head featuring blond ringlets poked through the window at Ramón's elbow and queried: "What'll y'awl have?"

"Could you please tell Vi Dominique that Ramón Cantello is here? Ramón asked pleasantly.

She nodded and the head started to withdraw, then poked in again, eyes widening at the Sailor who sat next to me in the back seat.

"M'Gawd!" she exclaimed. "Is he real?" Sailor bristled.

"Send ten o' yuh boy-friends aroun', sister, an' I'll show yuh who's real!"

The blond curls evacuated the window hastily.

TEN minutes later, a head featuring raven black waves thrust itself in the window. The face made you think of Lupe Velez. She was chewing gum on one side of her mouth and dabbing at a slightly red nose with a handkerchief.

"Hello, Ramón, honey," she crooned. "Stella told me you were here. Miss me, baby?"

Ramón pushed his face against hers and held it there about half a minute.

"He missed her," I muttered to the Sailor. But the big guy was still brooding over the blonde.

Vi Dominique finally pulled her lips back and murmured: "God, I needed a lift like that. Introduce me to your friends, willya, baby?"

Ramón observed the time-honored ritual. Her eyes passed over me quickly in favor of the Sailor where they settled in unabashed admiration, her jaw working over the gum like mad.

"Oh, man!" she finally breathed.

Ramón became a Greek chorus.

"Baby, that's the same Sailor Duffy who stood up to the heavyweight champ for fifteen rounds in Madison Square Garden. And *Wale* is a big-time detective from New York and they're going to help us become a family. Isn't that swell?"

The lady turned her head away to disgorge a sneeze and mutter about summer colds.

"Say," she inspirationed when her face was in the window again, "why don't we all go down to my place and have a party?"

She didn't do things by halves, this gum-chewing sweater girl of Ramón's. He muttered something about her job, but she called over her shoulder that she could handle "Louie."

She returned with the blonde and a third sweater girl who looked ten years younger than the heavily lipsticked, heavily mascaraed face over it. Marie, *my* dish for the night. Sailor drew Stella, the blonde.

It was all impulsive and quick and then we were driving through the night and Marie, on my lap, was asking: "Love me, honey?"

And I telling her: "How could I help it?"

And Sailor was muttering to the blonde on his lap how it took a long time for a bottle to get opened in Texas.

The street at which our journey ended was not subject to boast in the Chamber of Commerce brochures. GI prowls cars loaded with MP's kept it clear of GI's.

It was a bit of old Mexico wallowing in heat, filth and nakedness. Rickety wood frame houses crawling with babies and women and old men. You looked in a wide open door at a mother nursing her baby. In another unshaded, fully lighted window, a middle-aged couple were preparing for bed. There were no secrets and there was no privacy on this street.

The Buick was immediately surrounded by a dozen black-haired barefooted kids commenting about us in Spanish.

We pushed through them into a darkened wood frame house. Vi hit a light switch, then went to the kitchen for ice.

I don't remember too much about the party. The Three Feathers didn't last long. But there was a gallon of tequilla to wash it down. Marie looked younger with each drink. I reacted accordingly.

I remember raising the question of Vi's lineage once or twice. At one point Vi muttered: "Aw, hell! All we need to become a family is a padre."

Ramón grabbed her and another round of tequilla toasted the occasion.

There must have been more said about the subject since when Ramón's hand on my shoulder snapped in half a dream I was having about Times Square, he was all business.

That dream had been about the Times Building and the latest news flashes girdling it in lights. I had been reading about Papa Rio being shot with an invisible arrow when someone in front of the Rialto jostled my shoulder. Then Ramón's face came into blurred focus and he was saying: "Hey, chum, you'll starve to death if you sleep much longer."

"I fall asleep?" I muttered sleepily.

He plumped down on the adjoining bed and thrust a folded San Antonio *Evening News* at me. Sailor lay on his back behind Ramón, snoring gently.

I raised myself and gaped at the gradually recognizable interior of my own room at the Gunter.

"Fifteen years ago I could handle tequilla," I said. "What time is it?"

It was two in the afternoon of the following day. But Ramón was impatient.

"Read it," he urged.

I read it.

The stuff about Papa Rio's untimely demise was the usual pap fed the jaded palate of a thrill-hungry public. There was the bootlegging background and historical color that splashed back to the days when Papa Rio had held Pancho Villa's horse.

There was also an imposing list of charities to which the old man had contributed in his effort to become a respectable citizen in retirement. There was the mention of his archery hobby, and a large number of civic organizations, such as the San Antonio Symphony Society, listed him as a patron.

That he had, to a great measure, achieved respectability was indicated by the mealy-mouthed comments on his death by civic leaders, from the mayor on down.

The "locked room" mystery aspect of his kill was played to the hilt. *INVISIBLE ARCHER STRIKES*, was one headline. There were diagrams of the house and cellar range.

The only reference to us was a line about Deputy Sykes "holding three important witnessesses."

Also, not to violate the hoary tradition of police-public relations, the usual bearded gag was prominently displayed. *Police hint important developments within twenty-four hours.*

I looked up at Ramón and said: "Very interesting. So what?"

"There," he pointed.

I looked where he indicated and became thoroughly awake.

A tiny news item at the bottom of the page. It seems that after Sykes and his stooges and the remains of Papa Rio had departed from the premises, the man left behind to guard the mansion had investigated a sudden outcry.

He had found Mamacita in the patio, face down in a pool of her own blood.

She was now in St. Mary's Hospital and, while her condition was critical—someone had fractured her skull from behind with a "blunt" instrument—she was expected to pull through.

"What it doesn't say is that Mamacita is still in a coma," Ramón elaborated. "Of

course you'll want to see her. But you'll have sufficient time to visit Paso de Burro before she revives."

"Why should I visit Paso de Burro?" I asked.

"To look up Mrs. Ludwig," he said.

I said: "Let's do this again. Why should I look up a Mrs. Ludwig in Paso de Burro?"

Ramón said, patiently: "Because you have two hundred of my hard-earned dollars. And because that's the lady who told Vi there was something special about her folks. At least that's what Vi told you last night. As far back as she can remember, Vi lived with Mrs. Ludwig in Paso de Burro? Remember?"

"No."

He said: "Well, do you remember, on the way back here, making me stop the car while you shot out a street lamp on West Commerce?"

I crawled painfully out of bed and to the chair where my clothes lay piled. I dug into them for my holster, extracted the .32, removed its clip and pulled back its slide.

I became convinced. There was no question about it. One cartridge was missing from the magazine and the bore was stained black.

I fetched a tumbler of water from the bathroom and emptied it on Sailor Duffy's up-turned snore.

"Just one question," I demanded of Ramón as Sailor spluttered to a sitting posture behind me. "What happened between me and that Marie job?"

"Before or after you knocked her out?"

I scowled at him but his expression remained calm and bland.

"O.K., O.K.! Skip it!" I said.

IT WAS a sprawling log cabin on the edge of Paso de Burro. Neon glare proclaimed it to be *Ludwig's Tavern*.

An MP with a circular jaw movement stood under the neon, in front of a cardboard sign on which was printed: OFF LIMITS TO ALL MILITARY PERSONNEL.

A jukebox wailed from the building and the night air was filled with occasional squeals of female laughter.

I approached the MP and said: "Pal, could you tell a guy why it's off limits? What's bad for a GI could burn a feather merchant, too."

The MP shifted his quid from his right cheek to his left and said, from the side of his mouth: "The hustlers began rolling the boys."

I said: "Thanks."

He said: "Don't mention it."

Sailor was in Ramón's Buick sedan, parked, along with a few other cars, in a clearing between the road and tavern. I pointed at

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the tavern's door, then at myself, and the big guy nodded so I entered.

I passed from the starlit night into a cloud of beer fumes, cheap perfume and stale smoke.

Four rows of dimly-illuminated booths squared in a small dance floor that held two couples swaying in a mutual death clutch. A small bar stood to the left, tended by a big man in a white jacket. Several Latin females, made up to resemble Hollywood spies, maintained contact between the bar and the booths.

One of them, a tawny thing with the face of a madonna, wearing a green strapless evening gown, appeared before me.

"This way, sir."

I followed her to a vacant booth. When I was seated, she leaned over the table and asked me if I intended to drink alone.

I said: "Some other time, baby. Now I want to see Mrs. Ludwig."

My spy was replaced by a female mountain topped by a peroxide bun. The female mountain bellowed: "You ask for me, Shorty? I don't know you."

She was in her forties. Her jowls were the last of a sequence of bags that commenced under her eyes. Her voice was the product of about thirty years of gin.

"I want to ask you about Vi Dominique," I said.

"She don't work for me any more, Shorty. What's the matter with Lulu?"

Lulu, I presumed, was my strapless Latin spy.

"This is business, not pleasure," I told her. "I saw Vi last night. In San Antonio. She told me that something you said about her folks worried her. I'm here to get her unworried."

Mrs. Ludwig shook her peroxide coil slowly.

"I don't know you at all, Shorty."

"What's the difference? I'm Cash Wale and Vi knows me. All I want to know is where she came from and what you told her. I want to trace her back to her papa and mama."

Mrs. Ludwig said: "What'll you have to drink, Shorty?"

A voice at my elbow, that seemed to emerge from a grave, asked: "Havin' any trouble with this feller, Mame?"

It was the big bartender in the white jacket. There was a scar on his cheek and the eye over it was fixed on me. The other eye, I noticed, was glass and slightly off tint. When I started to rise, he nudged me with his elbow. I sat down again in the booth.

The next instant he was stumbling back into the dancers on the floor and grabbing for his hand where a bright streak of scarlet was beginning to appear.

There was another dab of scarlet on the muzzle of my .32. I was on my feet and halfway out of the booth after him. The dancers had broken their death clutch. They gaped. There had been squeals from some of the booths, but now there was dead quiet.

Only Bing Crosby's voice broke the stillness. He did not want to be fenced in.

"I do not like to be touched," I said. "Particularly, I do not like to be touched by vermin."

Mrs. Ludwig began to laugh. "I guess he told you, Rog!" she boomed.

I interrupted her girlish laughter. "Suppose you tell me, toots."

"Siddown and act grownup," she said. "And you, Rog, go back of that bar and don't come out 'less I call you. Goodness gracious, you'll have these folks scared half to death!"

Wordlessly, the bartender whirled and carried his bleeding hand back to the bar. Mrs. Ludwig waddled over to the jukebox, deposited a handful of nickels and pressed a handful of buttons to give Crosby a following. Then she waddled back to the booth. This time she settled opposite me.

THE couples on the dance floor clutched each other again.

"For a feller just an inch taller than a midget, yuh sure manage to handle yourself," she said admiringly.

I waited while Lulu set a bottle of beer before each of us then reminded her: "Vi Dominique."

"That tramp!" Mame Ludwig sniffed, inhaling her brew from the the bottle's neck.

I said: "Why play cozy over a thing like that? You give me a name and that name gives me a name and so on until I come across a birth certificate and that's that. What's to lose?"

She lowered the bottle and said: "What's Vi up to now?"

"Marriage," I said.

"Omigod!" she said.

We stared at each other a while, then she sighed and said: "I ain't no lily, sweetheart, I reckon you can see that. I been earnin' a livin' the hard way since as long as I can remember."

She brushed aside her empty bottle with a forearm as thick as my leg and resumed:

"I came here to Paso de Burro and opened my own place. After that came a long string of cafes and taverns. It was when I had a little restaurant on Crockett Street that Vi came to me.

"She was just a shaver then and I needed someone to keep my rooms clean and sweep out. Two years ago I caught her rolling a marine and kicked her out."

I recalled what the MP had told me.

"O.K. What brought her to you in the first place?"

Mrs. Ludwig grunted. "Family passin' through. Man named Hernandez, I think. Said they were gonna settle in New Braunfels. Said they were scared the brat's folks would want her back some day and they didn't want no trouble. She was wild even then an' they were glad to be shut of her."

"Hernandez. New Braunfels. What happened the other night in San Antonio?"

Mrs. Ludwig snorted disdainfully. "I was at that drive-in and she turned out to be the car-hop I drew. She passed a crack an' I told her it woulda been better all around if her original folks had kept her in the first place."

"What did you mean by that?" I prodded patiently.

"Well, that Hernandez man, he said her pop was *muy mal hombre*."

"Very bad man," I translated. "O.K. Who was her pop?"

Mrs. Ludwig shrugged massive shoulders. "You have the whole story, little man. Keep your finger easy on that trigger, Rog. I told you t'stay back o' your bar."

Her voice the same level below, but her eyes were over me and I swiveled and looked over the twin barrels of a shotgun into the good eye of the bartender.

He was pointing that thing down at me and from where I sat it was like looking into both lanes of the Hudson Tubes.

I sat very still.

"Ah want you tuh tell him all ah do is tend bar, Mame," that grave-like voice poured down over the gun.

"That's right, Shorty," Mrs. Ludwig boomed. "Rog don't do nuthin' here but tend bar. Now put down that gun, Rog."

"Ah want ter heah th' man say he made a mistake," the bartender purred.

"I made a mistake, brother," I told him. "It's just that I can't stand hands on me and I drew the wrong conclusions. I hereby apologize."

He nodded at once, then both he and his artillery vanished. I turned to Mrs. Ludwig. She was on her feet. She indicated the bottles on the table.

"That will be fifty cents, Shorty."

I laid four bits on the table and walked out of the place.

The MP nodded to me and Sailor kicked open the door of the Buick. I spent about five minutes studying a road map of Texas, then I turned the Buick onto the road and started for New Braunfels.

It was only nine in the evening and there couldn't be too many men named Hernandez in a town that size. I was making phenomenal progress for a missing persons case.

Halfway there, Sailor said: "Hey, Cash, yah see that cotton-mouthed monkey in dat joint?"

"What cotton-mouthed monkey?" I queried "Footlick," he said.

I brought the Buick to a halt alongside the road.

"You mean the guy who was guarding Papa Rio's place?"

"Yeah. 'At's the monkey. He walks inter de joint about five minutes after you go in."

I thought it over a while, then decided there was no real reason for me to see that bird yet. We continued on to New Braunfels.

Talk about Kismet. That decision practically cost me my life.

On the other hand it saved my life.

CHAPTER THREE

Bird in a Guilty Cage

IT WAS easy. It was too easy. It was so easy it stank. On ice.

Right off the plaza in New Braunfels, on the road to San Marcus, I spotted a store front with ENRIQUE HERNANDEZ lettered on the plate glass. I parked and both the Sailor and I went over for a look.

It was a gunsmith's, and right out of the Alamo. Davey Crockett would have had a time with the stuff featured in that window—old flintlocks, powder horns, stuff to stock a museum. The store was blacked out, but it ran into a ramshackle dwelling behind and there were signs of life there.

A young Mexican with a perpetual gripe on his face opened the door. A half naked brat clung to his back. The Mexican was gripping a tortilla in one hand.

"Hernandez?" I asked.

"That's me," he said. "What do you want?"

"An older Hernandez," I said. "Someone who left a little girl in Paso de Burro about twenty-five years back."

"I t'ink you crazy," he said, shutting the door in my face.

He opened it on my third knock. This time the brat was on the floor and young Hernandez carried a carbine easily under his arm.

"I tell you go away," he said earnestly. "No troubles here. Onnerstand?"

I showed him my .32. The carbine had been pointing at the floor. It still pointed at the floor while my .32 centered on his chest.

His eyes brightened.

"Very nice," he said. "You show me how do that, I feex you brand new barrel for it."

I said: "I'll show you. But first you'll introduce me to papa, or grandpapa—the first Hernandez to arrive in New Braunfels."

"Tio Simon," he said. "My uncle."

We shook hands on it. The boy was an enthusiast. He ran into his shop for a shoulder holster and pistol and then we had lessons. Sailor became a saddle horse for the brat.

It was a madhouse for a while. The Hernandez clan, male and female, of all ages, were constantly in and out. I had occasional mouthfuls of chili and tortillas and frijoles and occasional gulps of pulque and warm beer, but the lad had a knack for it.

I showed him how drawing a pistol was like going into a boxer's stance, how to drop to a crouch, one foot a little forward, but retaining enough balance to swing the upper half of the body in as wide an arc as possible, swinging the right hand with it.

I showed him how to oil the inside of his holster, then wipe it, then angle the holster.

Maybe an hour passed like that and we were both tired.

"Practice," I said. "Try it in front of your mirror. Eliminate every unnecessary motion. But mainly, practice."

I had been wrong. The gripe wasn't perpetual. He wore a crooked grin now. The lad was an enthusiast.

"You're O.K.," he said, "to meet Tio Simon."

That, I gathered, was an accolade. Gravely, I was ushered back through two bedrooms, then into a third room inhabited by an ancient, wrinkled Mexican in an arm chair, wrapped beneath layers of brightly colored blankets.

It was like meeting the high lama of *Lost Horizon*, the one who had lived for hundreds of years.

Young Hernandez respectfully poured out about three minutes of Spanish at the mummy-like figure, then a stream of slow, measured syllables issued from the leathery, toothless mouth.

Young Hernandez turned to me and said: "My uncle say he wanting to know why so many people have ask for this girl."

"Ask him who else." I said.

A minute later, Hernandez relayed to me: "My uncle say he who answer question with question is wanting egg in beer. But he who has answers is sitting pretty."

I said: "A friend of mine wants to marry the girl. He likes to know what he's getting into."

There was a heavy interchange of Spanish here and finally young Hernandez faced me and said: "My uncle said it has been long time. After Villa, much go back and forth across border without tax, you onnerstand?"

"Smuggling," I said.

"Si," nodded the old head. "*Contrabando, contra el ley—*"

"That's right," chimed in young Hernan-

dez. "One man pretty good smuggler. Thees man come to rancho one time with baby girl. Say mamma across river in Mexico kill by police. Girl who work at rancho keep baby a while, then smuggler make girl to run away with him.

"Tio Simon, he take care baby, but she grow up very bad girl. When Tio Simon move up here, lady in Paso de Burro say: 'What nice young girl! I like keep her for help work in house.' Tio Simon he say: 'Good riddance, please,' and give little girl to lady."

"That's fine," I told young Hernandez. "Now ask him just three more questions. How did she get the name Dominique? Did your uncle ever hear about the smuggler again? And who else asked him about this girl?"

I waited through another long exchange, then Hernandez passed the ball to me again. "My uncle say girl who run away with smuggler named Dolores Dominique. My uncle say other man who ask question two weeks ago is of police, working in other direction. You coming from girl, looking for papa. Police coming from papa, looking for girl. Papa, my uncle think, is smuggler. But not sure."

That was fine, I thought. That was just dandy. If a cop had tracked Vi Dominique this far, how could he miss finding her?

All he had to do was find Mrs. Ludwig and throw the fear of a badge at her.

All I had to do was go find one of the thousands of smugglers Pancho Villa had left in his violent wake thirty years back!

Or find a Mexican moll named Dolores Dominique!

I thanked the old man and young Hernandez and took one last gulp of pulque. Sailor was a train now and three brats were riding him when I reached the front room. I collected him and we shook hands all around, then we parked overnight in the Faust Hotel down the street and returned to San Antonio in the morning.

Instead of going to the Gunter, I went to the St. Mary's Hospital.

The girl at the desk said: There's nobody named Mamacita registered here, sir."

I said: "The old Mexican lady who was hit on the head in Papa Rio's house. The papers were full of it. Said she'd been brought here—"

"Oh, you mean Miss Dominique," the girl said. "I'm sorry but she is in police custody. You would have to receive permission from them, I believe."

I said: "What's that name again, sister?" "Dominique," she said. "It's right here on this card. Miss Dolores Dominique."

So that was it.

Stink? I could have smelled it through a gas mask.

SOMEONE called: "Wale!"

I turned around and Ramón, in his powder blue uniform, was striding across the marble floor toward me. The smile was off his smooth face now. He was frowning.

"You're my boy," I told him. "I want to see Mamacita."

He nodded and told the girl at the desk: "Tell Mr. Sykes I am bringing Cash Wale up to the old lady's room, will you?" Then to me: "But not the Sailor. Only one visitor at a time."

I told him the Sailor was outside in his Buick.

In the elevator Ramón asked me: "Have any luck?"

"Don't worry about Vi," I said. "She's sitting pretty."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Wait till I powwow with Mamacita," I said, following him off the elevator.

Mamacita under a starched hospital sheet was an anachronism. But her sharp black eyes had lost none of their intensity under the white bandage that engulfed her head.

"El Pistolo!" she cackled. "Good you come see old friend."

The nurse in the room, a tall redhead, said: "Don't excite her."

I said: "Baby, if I should slit your throat wide open with a butcher knife it wouldn't excite this old gal. What hit her?"

Ramón said: "A crossbow, Wale. One of Papa Rio's collection—the same from which the arrow in him came. No fingerprints."

I turned my full attention to Mamacita.

"Listen to me, Mamacita. A long time ago Papa Rio had a baby girl, no?"

The black eyes widened.

"Sí, Viola."

"Your girl?"

"No. Otra."

"Where is Viola now?"

"No se."

"But Papa Rio was trying to find out?"

Mamacita laughed. The nurse and Ramón both tried to talk but I waved them quiet and Mamacita continued.

"I theenkng so. You pretty dam' smart, El Pistolo. You come sooner, Papa Rio no die, I theenk. Sí, Papa Rio knowing he die pretty queeck anyhow, he looking to find baby to leave monies. I don't theenk she get now. No?"

I said: "Why did he send for me, Mamacita?"

The bright black eyes never wavered from mine.

"Money troubles, I theenk," she cackled. "Hijack troubles."

"Wait a minute. He wasn't crossing the border again!"

"He saying somone trying rob all his monies," she insisted stubbornly. "He saying he get El Pistolo stop thees foolishness queeck, you betcha!"

I tired to make sense out of this, but it didn't fit any of the rest of the picture at all. There was a lot missing—too much. I had too much leg work ahead of me. I needed time.

I said: "The wire he sent me spoke of dark letters. What did he mean by that, Mamacita?"

"Eet beats th' hal from outta me!" she said.

The red-headed nurse took over.

"That's enough visiting for now. You will have to leave."

A quiet voice behind me took over.

"I think Mr. Wale will do just that," it said.

I turned to gape at Richard Sykes in the doorway. He still wore the white sombrero and those pile-driver eyes were boring right through me again. But that nickel-plated revolver was different. This time it was out of its holster and pointed at my middle.

Ramón smoothly yanked my .32 from its holster. He jerked back the slide, dropped the magazine into his palm and made a solemn show of peering through the barrel.

"I'd say a shot was fired out of this recently, Mr. Sykes," he said. "And it's a thirty-two."

The white sombrero nodded. "Very good work, Cantello. Hang onto it. I'll remember this."

"Wait a minute!" I yapped as Ramón stuck my pistol in his waistband. "What goes on?"

Deputy Sykes spoke quietly: "You're under arrest for the murder of Miguel Rio."

"You're crazy as a jitterbug!" I howled at him. "Your only evidence is that crumb Footlick's lie about me spending a full minute alone with Papa Rio in the archery range before Footlick walked in. It won't stand up. And suppose my rod was fired recently? Papa Rio was killed by an arrow. Remember?"

"Where," monotoned Sykes, "was your pistol fired?"

"Ask your boy, Cantello!" I raged. "He told me!"

"I told you?" asked Ramón, raising his brows innocently. "Listen, Wale, aren't you presuming on a brief acquaintance? I loaned you my car for a small tour you wanted to take of the neighboring towns. Aside from that I know nothing whatsoever about your actions. How could I have told you where you last fired your pistol?"

There was no question about it. I would

have needed a crowbar to pry the truth from Ramón Cantello at that moment. That much was evident from his expression of injured innocence.

And where could I find a crowbar to outweigh Sykes' drawn revolver, the six-gun in Ramón's holster and my .32 in Ramón's belt?

"O.K.," I said wearily. "Let's hear the rest of it. Papa Rio was killed by an arrow and apparently I'm elected. Why does it matter when my thirty-two last went boom?"

Sykes' voice was a low monotone. "You are also under arrest for shooting to death Irving Footlick in a tavern in Paso de Burro with a thirty-two-caliber pistol last night. Bring him along, Cantello."

Something hard prodded the small of my back.

"Follow Mr. Sykes quietly, chum," ordered Ramón softly.

Mamacita's cackle followed us into the corridor: "Capture *El Pistolo* is like capture bomb, you crazy peoples! He shooting you all dead queeck, I theenk!"

IT WAS a nightmare come to life.

That tobacco-chewing MP was there. He picked me out of the makeshift lineup in Sykes' office.

"That's your man. Talked to me a little, then went in. The dead man went in about five minutes later. I heard what could have been a shot about ten minutes after that. Then this feller came out, got in his car and drove away. After that the big lady over there came out and asked if I'd seen a short guy run away. He killed a man, she said. I guess she meant him."

His finger pointed at me.

The one-eyed bartender, the one who was so meticulous about his duties in Ludwig's Tavern, picked me out of the next lineup.

His voice still belonged in a tomb.

"Ah'd say the little feller's him."

"Which little feller?" Sykes prodded.

There were half a dozen short men in the room. Window dressing.

The bartender walked over and put his finger an inch from my chest.

"Him. He come in an' asked for a man named Footlick. Missus Ludwig, who runs th' place, said as how no sech man was theah. A little while later this otha feller come in an' this one had some reckless words with him an' drew a pistol an' shot him daid."

Exit the bartender.

It was all going down in shorthand. Later it would be typed in legal terminology and the witnesses would add their signatures.

Witnesses. The place crawled with them.

Mrs. Ludwig had no trouble identifying me in the lineup. There was no expression in the watery hollows that were her eyes,

no tremor in the assorted bags and folds on her face. She waddled to a chair and solemnly intoned the identical fantasy her bartender had told. With one embellishment.

"When Footlick fell," she said, "and Shorty, here, ran out the door, I went over to Footlick and he told me a name."

"And what was that name?" prompted Sykes quietly.

"Wale. Cash Wale."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ludwig," Sykes said.

Lulu, my madonna-faced siren, had similar success in finding me in the lineup.

Same story.

There were six others—three couples, native rawbones and three of La Ludwig's femme fatales. Claimed they had been occupying booths when all this imagined mayhem had transpired. They may have been in the booths at that—the booths had been so dimly illuminated. But it really made no difference.

It was the same story. Six more times.

They brought in Sailor Duffy and then three of them had to hold me down.

He was cuffed to two of their biggest men, but that precaution was not necessary. Not now. They had learned something from their first brush with him in Papa Rio's patio. This time they had employed blackjacks. There were new lumps amid the usual lumps that were his face.

Their billies had loosened the already loose marbles the heavyweight champion of the world had displaced in fifteen rounds of mauling. I could tell by the way he winced and ducked that he was listening to noises that were not there, noises that blotted the rest of the world from his consciousness, except for isolated fragments.

He knew me and relaxed a moment.

"Hi, Cash, don' worry. I take this bum easy. I catch him wit' a uppercut in de nex' round. Watch!"

He ducked and I could see the noises close in again.

It took three of them to hold me down. Call it the mother in me. The big guy had been my problem since a certain day, many years ago, on a breadline out of which he had muscled a guy who was trying to muscle in ahead of me.

But now they led him away and the rest of the people evaporated, except for the three men holding me, Richard Sykes, and the police stenographer at a typewriter.

There was a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter.

"I'm ready for your story now, Wale," said Sykes quietly.

That was almost too ducky to stand. He was ready for my story! With nothing more than his vocal equipment, he said it all by himself.

Bring me to trial with that array of witnesses and I would be as good as dead. Me, a slicker from the big city, a smoothie out to unload some gang stuff on the local population. Cash Wale, of whom the wise guys along the stem remarked: "He is as unscrupulous and as underhanded and as vicious as he looks."

Any jury of Texas longhorns would hang me on my looks.

As a motive for erasing Footlick, they would say he was the only witness who had placed me where I could have shot an arrow into Papa Rio—the seemingly only logical explanation for that baffling one-exit kill trap. Who else could have done it?

And that would do it, brother. That would fit the manila cravat to the neck of Mrs. Wale's little boy, Cash.

Now all I had to do was tell how I had done it.

I said: "As a matter of fact, Footlick had to die. Dick Tracy had told me Footlick was working hand in glove with Fu Manchu. It was a question of eliminating Footlick or seeing all humanity perish!

"With the assistance of The Dragon Lady, Fu Manchu had discovered a chemical that set air on fire. One pound of this chemical would burn up all the oxygen in a thousand square miles.

"Consider what this would have meant to Texas. Ten pounds of the stuff might have eliminated three cowboys, two hundred steers, one coyote and a gopher in one fell swoop! Furthermore—"

I stopped then because Deputy Richard Sykes had torn the page from the typewriter. "Put him in cell eighteen," he said patiently.

CHAPTER FOUR

Forced Exit

FROM the barred window of cell eighteen I could see where the San Antonio River passed under a bridge and then rolled over a waterfall. I could see the back of the Plaza Hotel, most of an empty lot and a patch of sky.

Cell eighteen featured a metal cot hinged to the wall, furnished with one torn army blanket and a blackened commode. I spent an hour studying the poetry, inscriptions and art work left on the walls by former inmates.

It took that hour for Ramón Cantello to arrive. He was dubious about entering at first.

"Don't flatter me," I told him wearily. "Without my heater I'm at your mercy. Sailor is the muscle in the Cash Wale Investigation Service. You could cripple me with one hand.

Do come in and make yourself at home."

Ramón entered warily and the turnkey dourly locked the door behind him. Ramón was out of his powder blue ensemble—he was a slick chick again. That smile oozed across his face.

"You understand my position," he said easily. "Maybe you fired your pistol since I saw you last, maybe you didn't. How could I tell? It would have been foolish for me to go out on a limb and say I knew when you last fired it, wouldn't it?"

I told him: "Drop it. We have no time for formalities. You're on my scum list and we both know it. To get down to business, you heard me question Mamacita. You know that I know the score. Papa Rio had already been dead two days. Have you told Deputy Sykes that Papa Rio hired you to find his daughter?"

He still wanted to be cute, Ramón did.

"Papa Rio hired me, Wale?"

I said: "Don't crowd me, pal. Old Hernandez, in New Braunfels, would identify you easily enough, no?"

Ramón decided not to crowd me.

"You can't make anything out of that, Wale."

"No?" I grinned wolfishly at him. "Listen! You traced Papa Rio's long lost chick all the way back from the Hernandez ranch that was. You found Hernandez and, from him, Mrs. Ludwig and, from her, Vi Dominique. There she was, a penniless car-hop who didn't know she was heiress to a pile of dough shortly to be released from Papa Rio's clutches via cancer.

"It gave you ideas. You probably told Papa Rio the trail was too cold. Then you set about to win the lady's hand. After Papa kicked off, son-in-law Cantello would put in his claim and move in on the beautiful patio with the tinkling fountain and palms. No?"

He was very smooth, this lawman from the University of Texas.

"Your reasoning is sound, Wale, but hardly a pressure to make me act in your behalf, which, I presume, is your primary object. I can admit that much and be only slightly soiled. A dubious venture on my part, yes. But hardly criminal."

"You'll act in my behalf, pal," I grinned at him. "Save your oil for Sykes and let me continue. When Papa Rio kicked off ahead of schedule it became a little awkward. You couldn't come forward without your claim because la Dominique was not yet your wife. And even if she was you couldn't press your claim because they would ask you: 'How did you learn that Vi Dominique was née Rio?' And such a question, in a murder case, might prove unduly embarrassing.

"So you employed the dodge of sending

me over the trail you had followed, but backwards, from her to the old man. Your pretext, that she wouldn't marry you unless her parentage was cleared up, stank. That tramp would marry Dracula. And I heard her say all you needed to get spliced was a padre."

Ramón shrugged.

"All this is granted, *Wale*. I can admit as much freely. So what?"

I winked at him.

"You sly young devil, you! Let's put it another way. Suppose you did tell *Papa Rio* the truth. Suppose you told him: 'I have found your daughter. She's a bum who was kicked out of a job for picking the pocket of a marine. You have become respectable, *Señor Rio*. You are a pillar of your church. You belong to the best clubs. You are known as a philanthropist and all the notables of *San Antonio* are proud to call you by your first name. If it became known your daughter was a tramp all this would be lost. People would laugh at you and avoid you. But you need not worry about all this, *Señor Rio*. If you pay me enough, your secret will be mine forever.'

"Let's put it that way," I said, "and we learn about *Papa Rio's* money troubles that *Mamacita* mentioned, the ones that caused him to send for me."

FOR a moment, *Ramón Cantello* no longer looked smooth. His brows wrinkled, his lower lip trembled. Then he relaxed.

"But, of course, that is all pretty thick, *Wale*. All assumption. Not a shred of evidence."

"I'm just thinking of the wheels that will start turning in *Deputy Sykes'* mind when he hears all this," I went on. "For instance, I have solved the riddle of *Papa Rio's* telegram to me. I know what the old man meant by, 'Dark Letters.' That was his own brand of English, the way he might say, 'Black Mail'. Blackmail. It fits my assumption. It would interest *Deputy Sykes*. No?"

I let *Ramón* stew over this a while. He was becoming a deep thinker, this Mexican who was a nephew of *Uncle Sam*.

Then I continued talking. I extended my "assumption" to include the deaths of *Papa Rio* and *Footlick*. Maybe the old man told *Ramón* he could go to hell, that he intended to expose him. A man might kill to avoid a blackmail rap.

And *Footlick's* death could be linked easily enough. The fellow would have known who came and went around *Papa Rio's* mansion. Possibly he put two and two together and reasoned how *Ramón* could have shot the arrow. *Footlick* may have asked money for this information. A man might kill to avoid being blackmailed.

And then it would be easy enough to link *Ramón* to *Ludwig's Tavern*, where *Footlick* met his *Maker*. *Vi Dominique* was a solid link to *Ludwig's Tavern*. And that *Ludwig* crowd could be had—for a price they could be had.

In fact, they *were* had!

It was just talk between the two of us on a rusty cot in the *City Jail*, but it began to twist into *Ramón Cantello*. It began to make him feel like me—alone in a cruel, friendless world.

Then he laughed uneasily and said: "Between ourselves, you know your first premise was correct. I never told old *Rio* I had found his daughter. I intended to marry her and collect when his cancer killed him. There was absolutely no hint of blackmail."

I said: "Me, I'm just a guy who wants to leave *Texas* by a train instead of a trapdoor."

Ramón brooded over this a while. He was a good brooder. I could see by his expression that his thoughts were descending a steep spiral to the very depths of his soul. He finally said. "*Wale*, suppose I go to *Deputy Sykes* and tell him how your pistol was really fired?"

"Funny guy!" I said.

I almost felt sorry for him. I could see unhappiness seep into his eyes. I would have pitied him, if I did not need all of that commodity for myself.

His eyes were wide and miserable now.

"*Wale*, I don't see a way. I don't see any possible way for you to get from under. If there is anything I could say or do—without taking your place in this cell—I would do it!"

"Now," I sighed, "you make sense!"

"But how?"

"Where's *Sailor*?"

"Cell sixteen. That's two cells down."

"That's fine," I said. "All you have to do is help spring us."

His eyes remained blank.

"Help us escape," I said. "Catch?"

He caught. He was not cut out for this work, this lad who sought a short cut to wealth.

"That's impossible, *Wale!*" he pleaded. "It would put me in your place in this cell."

"Now we're back where we started," I sighed. "A jury can't convict me if I establish a reasonable doubt. You're my reasonable doubt. A good shyster will crack that *Ludwig* mob's collection of lies. Dough bought those lies. Maybe I can dig up even more dough to make 'em forget, or, better still, change their tune to include you!"

"But, *Wale*—"

"Take off, pal! This is 'way over your head. Beat it!"

I turned toward the window and stood looking through bars at the *GI's* paddling their

girls around on the San Antonio River below. It was dusk and growing cool and I began to feel hungry.

After a while I felt a hesitant hand on my shoulder.

"All right, Wale," Ramón Cantello said. "Tell me what to do."

IN MANHATTAN, a dozen people could not have been assembled on such short notice to collaborate in a mass lie such as those Ludwig stooges had done. Back home a parade of shysters would have led to my cell door and there would have been angles worked out for bailbonds, habeas corpus writs and ways and means of engineering a "fix."

Here in San Antonio it was all very lonesome, very cut and dried, a one-way ride to a jury of cow chasers and then the black exit. This was bottom. A move in any direction had to be up-hill.

Breaking jail, for instance.

The turnkey had a lantern jaw, beady gray eyes and a dirty gray stubble that crawled down his face and neck to his open collar. He also had an empty holster, to avoid tempting prisoners. He swung open the door of my cell after Ramón called him. Then the turnkey froze in his tracks when Ramón said: "You didn't search him well enough, Bob. Wale is holding a gun in my back."

I leaned around from behind Ramón where my fist prodded the small of his back and said: "Sailor Duffy's cell, monkey, and make it quick!"

The beady eyes tried to X-ray through Ramón's middle, then came up to meet my eyes. What they read in my eyes made the turnkey slide a thick tongue over dry lips, then nervously hop to the Sailor's cell while I pushed Ramón through the door.

Sailor emerged from cell sixteen knuckling his eyes. The big guy had been asleep. I could see some of the marbles had rolled back into place. There was recognition in his eyes.

"Sailor," I said quietly, "I want that guy to

take a ten-minute count right here and now."

Sailor pointed with his left hand at the turnkey.

"Him, Cash? Huh, Cash?"

"That's right."

Sailor's left hand closed and became a six-inch blur. The turnkey lost interest in the proceedings. He closed his eyes and lay down on the floor.

"Get his keys," I instructed the big guy. "Then put him in your cell and lock it."

Sailor appropriated the ring of keys, then raised the limp turnkey off the floor and tossed him easily into the cell. Sailor slammed the door, locked it, then grinned broadly at me.

"We blowin' dis joint, Cash? Huh, Cash?"

The drunk in the adjoining cell ignored us. He was using the commode and muttering about it. Across the way, a boy had both hands on the bars and a cynical twist to his gaunt features.

"You'll never make it," he said softly.

We ignored him. There was an elderly Mexican in another cell who eyed us fearfully and kept crossing himself. We ignored him also. The remaining cells were vacant.

One of the keys on the ring fitted the barred door at the end of the cell block. There was an empty corridor beyond. For the sake of appearance, my fist was still buried in the small of Ramón's back. I whispered to him: "What's around the corner, pal?"

He was recovering some of his color, this lad who saw his future crumbling into ashes.

"Guard room, elevator and stairway," he whispered back.

"What's under the stairs, pal?" I prodded.

"Turn right to the sergeant's desk. Left to police garage," he whispered.

I considered that, then told Sailor to hang on to Ramón. I took the key ring and went back to the cell holding the boy. He still clung to the bars.

"What are you here for?" I asked him.

"Drivin' a car," he replied and grinned crookedly.

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



"That doesn't rate a pinch," I said.

"I'd borrowed the car," he said.

I asked him if he wanted out.

"Sure."

"It means borrowing another car. A police car."

"O.K."

I keyed open his cell door and now there were four of us.

The guard room was a problem. Its door was open and I could hear men's voices inside. Two men.

I winked at the boy, whispered, "Hold this gun on the guy," and stepped back to show him my forefinger in the small of Ramón's back.

The boy's eyes widened, then a broad grin wreathed his face. His finger replaced mine in Ramón's back and he winked at me.

I was probably corrupting his morals no end, but this was no time to worry about juvenile delinquency.

I whispered to Sailor, then strode boldly into the guard room.

THEY were sitting in shorts around a table and playing rummy for pennies. One was bald. The other had a black mustache.

They ignored me. I kept walking and said: "This is one hell of a way to run a jail."

The bald one grunted: "Aw, take it easy, brother. It's a hot night an' the commissioner's up Kerryville swimmin'."

The one with the black mustache said: "Who the hell let you up this far? Visitin' hours ended at eight, bub."

They caught on about then, but they lacked the proper reflexes. Sailor was too far into the room behind me.

There was hand artillery on the walls behind them and they crawled for samples.

The chair I lifted caught the bald head where it joined the guy's neck and he lost interest in the wall artillery. He slumped against the rack of tommyguns with both arms flat against it.

Behind me I heard a faint moan and turned to see the mustache bow to the floor in slow motion.

It had taken about two seconds in all.

I asked Sailor: "Ten minutes?"

The big guy brooded down at the mustache, limp now on the floor.

"Easy, Cash," Sailor mumbled.

I pointed at the bald head.

"How about him?"

Sailor was an expert in his line. Almost lovingly, he pulled back the bald head and peered into the relaxed features. He gently brushed his fist across the man's jaw. The jaw traveled east and snapped west again. Sailor let him drop alongside Mustache.

"'At's two of 'em, Cash. Let's blow."

Ramón's face was a study in perspiration when we emerged from the guard room. His eyes didn't like the .38 in my hand, one I had borrowed off the wall. The boy behind him winked broadly at me.

I led the parade downstairs.

It was so simple it was almost absurd. The desk was out of sight to the right. In the garage, there were some motorcycles and prowl cars and only one man visible, a cop in shirt-sleeves and suspenders sitting on a tilted chair at the entrance.

It was a question of motioning the others into a prowl car, then sidling along the wall toward the cop. I was ten feet from him when he heard me and turned his head.

I beckoned.

The revolver in my hand did it. There was one on his hip. Seconds later that was in my other hand.

I did not need the Sailor for this one. I motioned the cop toward the prowl car and when he passed me I touched the button behind his ear with the muzzle of his own revolver.

Then I stepped over him and into the prowl car.

"Let's go," I told the boy behind the wheel. "Where?"

"Around the corner to that empty lot back of the jail," I told him. "We'll leave you there."

"What about me?" he questioned, hitting the starter and rolling us toward the entrance.

"What'd you do before you borrowed that car?"

"My folks have a ranch near Uvalde."

We were out the entrance now and circling the block.

"The cops know that?" I asked him.

"No."

"They know your name?"

"No. I gave 'em John Smith."

"Your folks know about this?"

"Not yet."

"Don't tell 'em. Ever." I sighed. I dug into the roll of bills remaining from Ramón's two hundred and Papa Rio's five hundred. I selected five tens and thrust them at him.

"After we get off, ditch this heap," I told him. "Then go home and sin no more, dope!"

He crumpled the bills against the wheel and nosed the car into the empty lot. As Sailor and Ramón and I scrambled out, the boy was trying to say something.

"Beat it!" I snapped. "In about five minutes the heat'll be on! *Scat!*"

Sailor slammed shut the side door and the boy swung the prowl car out of the lot and into traffic.

Ramón was on the verge of the screaming meemies.

"Holy God, Wale, now we'll be hunted down

like rats! This isn't New York. There's no place to hide!"

"Who's hiding?" I growled at him. "I want to get to Papa Rio's house. This entire mess starts and ends in that archery range. I want to spend a quiet hour there in order to figure out how arrows fly from nowhere."

"Impossible, Wale!" Ramón agitated. "It's 'way the hell across town. You and Sailor stick out like sore thumbs. You'd be picked up before you reached Houston Street."

"Not in canoes!" I said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wale's Last Stand

YOU descended a flight of steps and then you were on a walk that paralleled the San Antonio River. Half a block along this walk you could rent a canoe for a dollar an hour. A two-dollar deposit made it yours until they found it again.

Under different circumstances I might have enjoyed that ride. Since I knew from nothing about paddles, Ramón navigated from the rear while the Sailor supplied muscle up front. I lay in the middle and absorbed a lot of Texas moon. There were palm fronds overhead and occasional willows and Spanish moss that glistened silver in the moonlight.

The river wound, snake-like, through the heart of San Antonio, but all you saw of the city were shadowy walls jutting up and a bridge every block. You could see faces poking down at you from the bridges and the tops of cars beyond them and traffic signals flicking red, green and amber. The river was alive with canoes, manned mainly by soldiers and their girls.

At about the fourth bridge, I began to hear bells ringing and glimpsed the amber "wait" lights at street crossings winking on and off.

"That's it," whispered Ramón grimly. "Traffic all over San Antonio is stopped now while the police search—"

We could hear sirens climb the scale of screams, then descend again.

"Just keep pushing that paddle," I told Ramón.

Sailor injected his two cents. "I hope de kid makes it wid de cop buggy, Cash."

That was the kid's headache.

We had our own. I ignored the sirens, closed my eyes to the Texas moon and brooded about the crossbow arrow that had pinned Papa Rio to his own archery target.

In my mind's eye, I reviewed everything I could remember about that impossible deal. Papa Rio had been alive and hearty and suspicious of no ill when we started down the stairs to his range—so much had been evident from his voice.

Nobody could have been with him. Nobody preceded us downstairs, nobody passed us on the way down and that range was a one-exit trap.

Yet, in those few seconds between hearing his voice and seeing his corpse, someone had fired an arrow into him and returned the crossbow to its hook on the wall. And that somebody had vanished into thin air!

Something occurred to me and I sat up, almost upsetting the canoe.

That same crossbow had later been applied violently to the rear of Mamacita's head!

Why?

I WAS still brooding over this when the canoe bumped gently against an embankment and Ramón spoke. Relief made his voice unsteady. "We've crossed the city, Wale! We've crossed the city!"

It was certainly out of traffic. It was past the noise of sirens, beyond the tall buildings. Even the street lights were widely spaced. Nothing here but rows of small, darkened residences.

Shortly after that, we stood on the irregular flagstones that floored the porch of Papa Rio's darkened mansion. Everything was dead or sleeping here. No police guard, no passersby, no traffic in the street beyond the archway.

But no key. And the heavy oaken door was locked.

I found a loose bar in the grille that protected one window at the side of the hacienda. Sailor put his massive hand on it and the bar twisted free of the masonry. Sailor held it toward me.

"Break the window with it," I ordered him.

He did that and we listened to see if the noise had aroused any curiosity. But nobody was overly curious in that neighborhood.

I could hardly squeeze between the bars now. That put me in the bedroom where Ramón had first guarded me. I let the others in the big oaken front door. We felt our way through darkness across the patio to the stairway, then down the steps to Papa Rio's archery range.

Ramón found a light switch and that put us in the heart of the mystery again.

Bows and arrows still lined the walls. The target remained propped on the floor against the far wall. It was damp and cool down here. One more time I made that impossible tour of the walls.

All solid.

"Wale," Ramón said softly, "if your behavior hadn't convinced me to the contrary, I would swear that the only possible explanation of Papa Rio's murder was Footlick's."

"That I did it?"

He nodded.

"I'm beginning to believe I did," I told him

soberly. "The only difference between now and the first time we were here is that now I know Papa Rio had hired you to trace his daughter and his mention of 'dark letters' in that wire to me probably referred to blackmail."

"Hardly enough to explain that arrow," mused Ramón. But I ignored him. I was suffering from an acute case of inspiration.

"Blackmail!" I howled at him. "It was in my hand all this time and I couldn't see it!"

"See what, Wale?"

"The picture, dope! Sykes has one picture, with me in the middle. I drew you another, with yourself in the middle. But blackmail is a democratic institution. Fit the pieces together with everyone else in the middle, one at a time, and one picture clicks!

"Put Old Lady Ludwig in the middle, or Footlick, or Lulu, or Vi Dominique, or Mamacita—I could draw you a dozen pictures, *but only one clicks!*"

Ramón shook his head dumbly.

"I can't see it, Wale."

"Listen," I urged, "why was Footlick killed? To frame me? Don't kid your old uncle, Cash! That was an afterthought. Footlick knew who came and went around Papa Rio's."

"Maybe he had tried to use that knowledge. He wouldn't know a killer's psychology—commit one murder and then they can't hang you twice for two."

"I still don't see it, Wale."

I yelled at Sailor, who was trying to open the vents of the air conditioning inlet over the door. "That ain't working, dope! Keep your hands to yourself and let me think!"

"Aw, Cash!"

I whirled on Ramón.

"Listen, you're going to collect a lot of people and bring them here. Sykes. Mamacita. Vi Dominique. Mrs. Ludwig and her bartender, Rog, and her assortment of floozies. I want 'em all here. We're going to blow this mess higher than a B-29! Tonight!"

Ramón looked sick.

"They'd crucify me if I turned up now, Wale," he pleaded. "Sykes would toss me in your cell and hide the key. Anyway, Mamacita won't be released from the hospital and Vi's got a bad cold. The others are probably back in New Braunfels by now."

I said: "Don't toy with me at this stage of the game, pal. You tell Sykes you've got me, and he'll come. Tell him you've figured Papa Rio's death and he'll bring the others."

"Don't go and, so help me, pal, I'll leave you here in little pieces while Sailor and I head for the border."

"If you go and try a doublecross I'll crucify you! I'll collect that Uvalde kid and get him to help us swear you engineered the jailbreak

for a stipulated price! Do as I say and you emerge with a clean bill of health. Make a choice quick, pal!"

He had no choice.

I spoke to him carefully for about ten minutes, outlining what he should do, what he should say.

Then he was gone.

Sailor and I spent about three minutes making an experiment in that range—enough to convince me how Papa Rio was murdered. Then I told Sailor to go upstairs and wait for Ramón and the others and to keep his big yap shut when they arrived.

"Aw, Cash," Sailor protested. "I wanna be wid you."

"Beat it!" I ordered.

He beat it.

That left me alone with the bows and arrows. I selected a crossbow arrow with green feathers. Then I doused the light, felt my way across the range to where the target was propped against the wall and crouched behind the target.

Everything that could be done had been done. Everything to be said had been said. All I could do now was wait.

I waited.

FIRST I heard them trooping down the stairs, then the lights flicked on and I heard Ramón say: "Mr. Sykes, you have gone along this far. Just let me develop my idea a little farther. I am going to show you how Papa Rio was killed."

I heard Deputy Sykes' quiet voice demand: "Where's Cash Wale? You told me you had Wale, Cantello."

Several of them began talking at once. The female mountain, Mrs. Ludwig, was sounding off about her closed tavern in Paso de Burro. Vi Dominique was coughing and sneezing. I heard some of Ma Ludwig's biddies whine about the money they were losing. I even heard Mamacita cackle something in Spanish.

Out of the babel emerged Ramón's voice pleading: "Please be quiet for a moment, everybody. I am going to demonstrate how a murderer could disappear in this room."

They quieted down.

"Cantello, I'll give you five minutes," Deputy Sykes said quietly.

"Five minutes will be enough, Mr. Sykes," Ramón assured him. Then: "You can all see that the target is blank. There is nobody in here besides ourselves. Now let us back out of the door for a minute."

I could hear them, muttering and protesting, shuffle out the door.

When the door slammed, I stepped from behind the target. I planted the green feathered arrow firmly in the face of it, then swiftly returned to my hiding place behind the target.

This was one of the few times I enjoyed being, to quote Madam Ludwig: "One inch bigger than a midget."

I heard the door open and the feet shuffle back in. Then silence.

Then Richard Sykes' voice. "You made your point, Cantello. How did that green arrow get there?"

"Cash Wale put it there!" spoke Ramón, struggling to repress the excitement in his voice. "At this moment, Cash Wale is hiding where the killer of Papa Rio was hiding!"

That was my cue!

Nobody saw me step from behind the target, both revolvers cocked in my fists. They were all in there—Deputy Sykes in his white sombrero, Mamacita in her white bandage, the Ludwig crowd and their bartender with his glass eye, a couple of Deputy Sykes' gun-packing stooges in their powder-blue uniforms and Sailor Duffy looming big and ugly in the background.

But they were all looking at Vi Dominique.

A red dress had replaced the sweater and slacks and the dress was swirling now. A red purse was open on the floor at her feet. And the small pistol she had extracted from it was a silver blur climbing around and up.

"I keel that son of a——" she screamed.

A hole appeared in the air conditioning inlet over the door!

At that instant everything was frozen in its tracks. Sick dismay made a gray mask of Ramón's face. The others stood with eyes bulging, bodies rooted. A faint swirl of smoke rose from her pistol.

"Here!" I called loudly. "I'm back here!"

She spun like a startled cat. That pistol was a silver streak, terminating in a lick of molten flame.

Then it was tumbling to the floor and she was clutching at her wrist. My second revolver became alive and both her hands clawed her side. She sat down heavily, staring dumbly at the blood oozing from her wrist where my first slug had caught her and at the darker

crimson staining the red of her dress where my second bullet entered.

Thunder from my fists dwindled to faint echoes and the stink of burned cordite seared my throat.

Later, I found the hole in my sleeve from her slug, but just then a lot of hands were clawing at holsters and I sang out: "If you think Texas has a monopoly on gun play, just try me!"

I found myself addressing statues.

"Sailor, collect that hardware," I told the big guy quietly. "And don't get between me and them."

Sailor started the rounds and Mamacita's cackling laughter echoed in the range.

"I telling you *El Pistolo* shoot you all dead, you crazy peoples!"

I said: "Mamacita, if I saw to it that all Papa Rio's money went to you, would you pay me the forty-five hundred he promised me?"

No flies settled on Mamacita. The bandaged head nodded vigorously.

"You betcha!" she cackled.

Ramón's head was shaking violently, his face still a gray mask.

"Wale," he called out. "All that money goes to Vi. She was his daughter. I can prove it!"

"You married her tonight!" I said grinning at him.

He was out for the main chance, this smooth son of a *paisano*.

"Correct," he said triumphantly. "I went for her first, before I collected the others. I already had the license. It took five minutes at a Justice of the Peace. The lady is Mrs. Ramón Cantello. And she collects!"

"You need a post-graduate course of the University of Texas," I grinned at him. "The law says a person can't profit by her own crime. She collects a noose for bumping her old man. Mamacita gets the dough as old Rio's common-law wife!"

(Continued on page 90)

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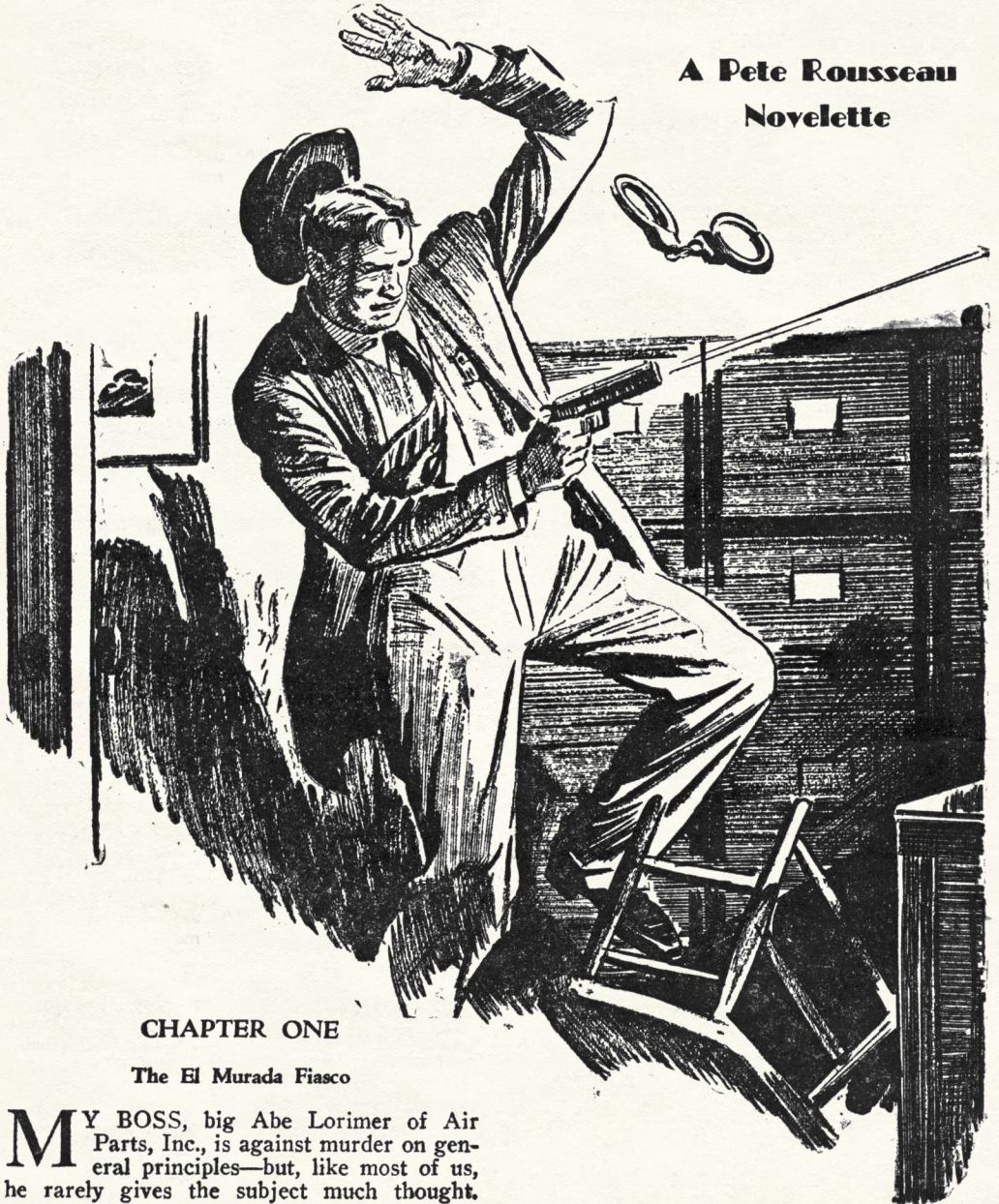


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THE GOOD-MURDER

The girl was luscious and smart. Only, she had a money-mania. And Pete Rousseau, chief shamus for Air Parts, Inc., was a very conscientious guy who couldn't avoid the consequences stemming from the murder of Mike the Mex, who had died of lead poisoning from a .25 automatic.

**A Pete Rousseau
Novelette**



CHAPTER ONE

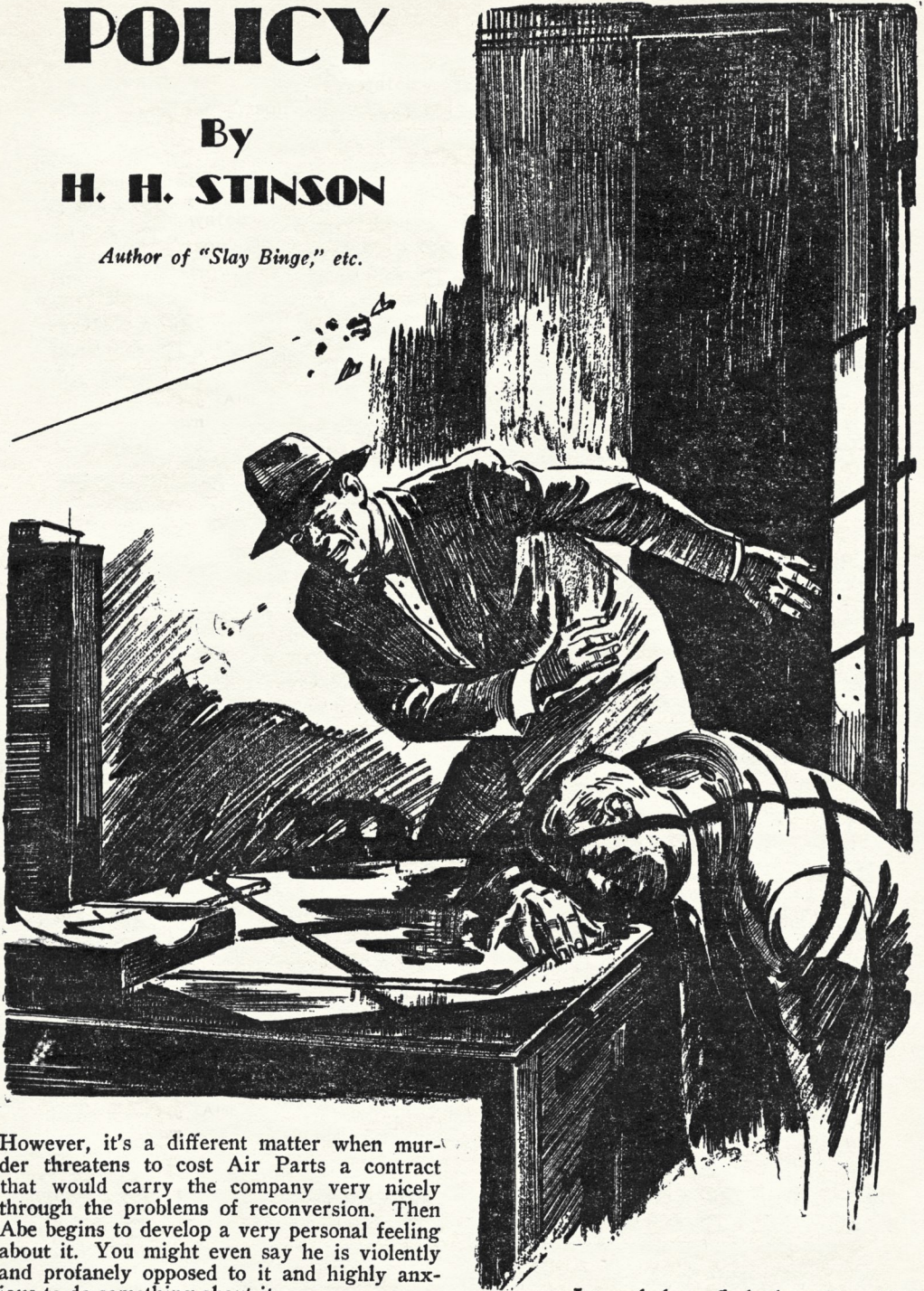
The El Murada Fiasco

MY BOSS, big Abe Lorimer of Air Parts, Inc., is against murder on general principles—but, like most of us, he rarely gives the subject much thought.

POLICY

By
H. H. STINSON

Author of "Slay Binge," etc.



However, it's a different matter when murder threatens to cost Air Parts a contract that would carry the company very nicely through the problems of reconversion. Then Abe begins to develop a very personal feeling about it. You might even say he is violently and profanely opposed to it and highly anxious to do something about it.

That was the reason I was on the way to his office from the cubbyhole where I officiate as head of Plant Security. He'd phoned

I tossed the cuffs back at him. He ducked, twisted, his gun exploded and the slug went snicking by my ear.

me just three minutes before and, having grown to know what various tones of his voice signified, I had come halfway across the plant on the double. He was swearing at dried-up and fiftyish Bessie Lyman, his secretary, when I arrived outside his office. Bessie didn't mind a little thing like Abe's explosions, having been with him ever since Air Parts had started in a converted garage. She looked over her shoulder and gave me a warning wink as I came in. She said: "Here's Mr. Rousseau now, Mr. Lorimer."

"Damn it, Bessie, I can see that myself," Abe growled. "What the hell took you so long to get over here, Pete?"

"I've got a flat wheel on my roller skates, boss." I sat down. Bessie stifled a grin, went out and shut the door. I said: "What's the trouble? Would it be the killing of one Señor Francisco Perez?"

"You already know about it?"

"I read this morning's paper. And there's always plenty of gossip around the plant. The paper said that Perez was one of two men heading the Purchasing Commission of the Republic of El Murada. Gossip's been saying for the last month that the commission was doping out a big deal with Air Parts. So, when I read this morning that someone had scored a bull's-eye on Perez, I tried to find out things about it."

"Learn anything?"

"Well, the paper says he was shot to death in his quarters at the Hotel Diplomat, presumably about midnight, and that the body was discovered a couple of hours later by his associate on the commission, a lad named Trullo. What the paper didn't say was that the cops have Trullo down as Number One suspect. I got that, off the record, from a newshawk pal of mine. He didn't know what the cops have on Trullo but he says the only reason the guy isn't in the clink now is because he's a representative of a foreign government. They're waiting to hear what Washington says."

Abe nodded his big, gray-thatched head. "Right, Pete. And we've got to do something about it—fast!"

"For instance?"

Abe growled: "You're hired to be the detective around here." He swung his chair around and gazed out over the expanse of buildings and shops that had turned out an eighty-million-dollar volume in the last year. "Pete, we've got about four thousand folks down there depending on us for paychecks and that contract from El Murada would help a hell of a lot when war orders stop coming. El Murada is going to spend plenty of millions after the war on highways, airports, industrial plants, mines and so on. We have a chance at a fair share of that business—in

fact, the contracts are ready and Trullo has the authority to sign them. But he won't do it. I talked to him this morning and he says the cops are shoving him around and watching his every move and it has him too upset to think of business. Furthermore, if he's jailed, Lord knows how much delay there'll be and we might lose out. So get busy and get the cops off the guy's neck. That's all you have to do."

"I'm glad that's all," I said. "I'm glad you didn't ask for anything tough."

"What're you hanging around for? I want it done today!"

That was Abe all over. When he wanted something, he wanted it in a hurry and if you could manage to back up and do it the day before yesterday, that was about quick enough. But on this I didn't blame him. With Army and Navy cutbacks looming, he had plenty of worries and the El Murada deal looked like a life-saver.

DOWNTOWN at the Homicide Bureau I found that Lieutenant Ben Gort was handling the Perez case and that he was at the moment doing something about it at the County Morgue. That news didn't make me feel any better. Ben is a good-enough cop, I suppose, but he has prejudices and one of them is against private shamuses, even industrial cops. We'd had a run-in at the plant a year before about a death in the foundry that he'd figured to be murder. I'd been lucky enough to prove it had been an industrial accident. I'd taken my proof to the Homicide skipper, Cap Baker, and Ben burned plenty about that. I'd gathered that he didn't like me.

At the Coroner's office I showed my credentials, said I wanted to see Ben Gort and was escorted into the autopsy room by a little old man who was as pink as a cherub and as cheery as a cricket. Ben Gort was there, talking to old Doc Thistle, the autopsy surgeon. Doc was divesting himself of his white gown, apparently having finished his job on a small, dark-skinned body that lay on the table. I'd met Doc several times before and he nodded to me. Ben Gort didn't nod. He was a compact, red-faced man with a tight mouth and straight eyebrows, almost too pale to be seen.

He said: "What are you busting in here for, Rousseau?"

I grinned or tried to. "Take it easy, Lieutenant. I wanted to talk to you about this Perez case."

"What's your interest in it?"

"Air Parts," I said, "is sort of in the middle on this. You know that Perez was on the El Murada Purchasing Com—"

Ben cut in nastily: "Naturally I knew it."

"The commission has a deal on with Air

Parts and this has slowed things up so that—"What should I do—bust into tears?"

This, I decided, was going to be even tougher than I'd figured. I said: "Abe Lorimer thought we might be of some help in the case and sent me—"

Some time perhaps Ben would let me finish a sentence but this time wasn't it. He said: "Do you or Lorimer know who committed the murder? Do you suspect anyone? Have you got any other information that might be of value?"

I had to say "no" on all counts.

"In that case," Ben said, elevating the colorless eyebrows, "suppose you stick to making your gadgets at Air Parts and I'll tend to things like murder." He walked away from me and began to scribble notes from an autopsy report at a desk at the far end of the room.

Doc Thistle winked at me. He was slipping into his suitcoat. "I haven't seen Abe since I beat his ears off on the handball court at the club last month. How is the old monkey?"

I said Abe was fine.

"That's more than I can say for his friend there." He jerked a thumb at the body and we moved over to the table to look down at it. In life Perez had been an ugly little man with pouting lips, a flat nose that slipped quite a bit to one side, small and lobeless ears and fuzzy dark hair growing low on his forehead. Underneath his left eye was a small purplish hole.

Doc looked at Ben Gort's back and winked at me again. He said: "Entrance wound left ethmoid sinus, bullet ranging upward and lodging in the left section of the corpus striatum. The gun was a twenty-five and apparently the person who fired was sitting down while Perez was standing above the killer."

Ben Gort's back was stiff and he grunted under his breath in an outraged way. He knew he was getting a pushing-around from Doc Thistle but the doc was someone he couldn't get back at. Doc said: "Perez was killed, I'd say, sometime along about midnight. The police, I understand, found out that his associate, Trullo, had had some sort of a violent disagreement with him and since Trullo can't seem to account for his time from ten to around one, they're keeping an eye on him. Are you listening to me or is that vacant look natural?"

"Sure I'm listening, Doc." That wasn't entirely the truth. Part of my mind had been hearing him—the other part was spinning around dizzily, trying to tell me where I had seen the face of Señor Francisco Perez before. It hadn't been at the plant and it hadn't been recently. It had been a long time ago and it had been under circumstances I should remember. But I didn't. "Go ahead, Doc."

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A little huffily, Doc said: "That's enough, isn't it? Well, give my best to Abe, the old horse-thief."

He marched out and I didn't linger, either. I could tell that Ben Gort was building up a nice head of blood pressure and there wasn't any reason for me to stick around and wait for the explosion.

I HAD two coffees and part of a third at the Quick and Greasy across from the County Building before I found the right slot in my memory for the face of Señor Francisco Perez. And then I didn't believe it. The thing was too incredible, too fantastic. My memory kept insisting it was right but, privately, I thought my memory was crazy. However, I couldn't let the thing go without a check. A nickel and Mr. Bell's gadget very quickly had me talking to a lad by the name of Jack O'Keefe. Jack was police reporter for the *Evening Record* and if he wasn't slopped up most of the time, he'd have been the best crime reporter west of the Mississippi. He was still the best in town. We'd always gotten along.

"Hi, Pete," Jack said. "How're the arches these days?"

"Round on the bottom, *hombre*. Want to do me and you a favor?"

"If it isn't too much work. I've got a hangover that rings like a gong every time I blink my eyes."

"Can you—on the quiet—get the fingerprints of a morgue patron named Francisco Perez and—"

Jack's voice came to life. "The El Murada big-shot? What makes on that, Pete?"

"Do what I say and we may find out. Get the prints and run them through without advertising whose they are."

"Hell, they wouldn't have his prints locally, Pete. You mean you want me to run them through Washington?"

"I mean through the Los Angeles bureau. And keep it as quiet as you can until I call you."

"You wouldn't care to drop a hint what you're trying for?"

"Not over the phone."

A few minutes later I traded two bits for my car at a parking lot and drove out to the Diplomat, which is a hotel that looks like a Spanish hacienda with an aggravated case of gigantism. It sprawls over a lot of expensive acres with wings here and wings there and a score of cute little bungalows dotted around the grounds. The room rates leave the average guy breathless while the bungalow rates would make anyone think an adding-machine had gone berserk. At the desk they told me that Señors Perez and Trullo had been occupying one of the bungalows, Hidalgo Court,

something that set the taxpayers of El Murada back a pretty peso, and that Trullo still occupied it. I walked down a curving path and knocked on a door.

A guy you couldn't miss as a plainclothes cop sat on a bench nearby and watched me. Another guy was doing a little clumsy work at one of the flower beds and watching me.

The door was opened by a very swell sample of Latin blonde. The girl was about twenty-five and she had gold hair and a pair of brown-velvet eyes and a skin that was faintly olive. She had a figure, too. Yes, quite a figure. The brown eyes looked me over thoroughly before she said: "What is it, please?" I liked her voice, it was a little on the husky side.

I gave her my card. "I'd like to see Señor Trullo."

She read the card twice. "What's Plant Security?"

"It's a fancy name for the company police department."

"Oh," she said, "so you're a detective?"

"I've heard the point argued," I told her. "Now, sis, how about taking the card in to Señor Trullo? Tell him Abe Lorimer sent me to see if I could be of any help."

"I don't think he'll see you," said the girl. "He doesn't feel well and he's had about all he can stand in the way of detectives."

Nevertheless she opened the door wider and I went into a living room that had been fixed up as an office with one big desk, a typewriter desk, files and a couple of phones. She left me there and went into another room. I could hear her spout a flow of smooth Spanish. A voice, a high and quavering mate voice, answered her. Then she came back to me.

"He'll see you," she said. "But don't stick around for the week-end. He's having butterflies and he should be kept quiet."

I followed her into a big bedroom that opened onto a walled and flower-banked patio. A man was propped up against bed pillows, a small and plump South American with white goatee and up-ended white mustache and, believe it or not, a white nightcap to top off the old-fashioned nightshirt he was wearing. He'd have looked like an illustration for *The Night Before Christmas* if his face hadn't been drawn and lemon-yellow and scared. His hands fiddled with the bedcovers.

With scarcely a trace of accent he said: "It is kind of you to call, *señor*, with your offer of assistance."

"Mr. Lorimer asked me to do what I could."

"Please arrange, then, for those policemen to stop watching me. I cannot think, I cannot breathe, I cannot rest when I am being spied upon—and unjustly, *señor*."

"I think I can fix that," I said, sounding optimistic. "First I'll have to know some

further details about the case, however."

"What is it you wish to know, *señor*?"

"Exactly what took place last night and why the cops are being obnoxious."

"*Señor*, for hours I have gone over and over such things with the police. I cannot do it again." His eyes closed and he shivered a little. Then he said without opening his eyes: "Miss Wingate is my loyal and trusted associate. Perhaps she will be good enough to supply you with the information."

THE girl sat down where a bar of sunlight turned her gold hair to live flame. Her brown eyes looked at me frankly. She said: "Make with the questions, chum." She might be Latin-American, I thought, but she hadn't picked up her Americanese in any classroom.

"First," I said, "just what happened here last night, who saw Perez last, who found the body?"

"I was probably the last one to see him alive," Miss Wingate said. "I mean except for the killer. Señor Trullo had an engagement for dinner and he left here just before six. I worked with Señor Perez until shortly before eight, getting out some figures on bids. Then he put me in a cab and I went to meet some friends for dinner. Señor Trullo came back here about one A.M. He let himself in with his key—"

"The front door was locked?"

"Yes, but it has a snap lock so that doesn't necessarily mean anything. He saw a light burning in the other bedroom suite and he called out to Señor Perez. When there wasn't any answer he went into the room and found the body on the floor."

I nodded at the French windows opening onto the patio. "Is the room layout the same as here?"

"Exactly. And the windows were open. It would have been very easy for anyone to get in and out by climbing the patio wall."

"How about the gun? And had anything been taken?"

"Señor Trullo found no gun and, so far as we've been able to determine, nothing was taken. That includes a couple of valuable rings Señor Perez was wearing and several hundred dollars in his wallet."

"Do you know of anyone who didn't like Perez in a big way?"

"If he had any enemies, he didn't tell me about them. And Señor Trullo doesn't know of any, either."

"Now, I've been told that the cops found

out about a quarrel between Señors Trullo and Perez."

Trullo opened his eyes. They were black and pin-pointy and steady in spite of the quivering of his hand as he brushed off the idea. "Francisco Perez was my trusted and honored friend. One does not quarrel with a friend."

"Where did the cops get the idea then?"

"We Latins, *señor*, are excitable, highly emotional. We had a discussion recently over a matter of procedure and unfortunately one of the servants overheard and misunderstood."

"I think this has gone far enough," said the girl.

"There's just a couple more things. I understand that Señor Trullo declines to account for his whereabouts during the evening of the murder."

Trullo got really excited. He waggled his small fist at me and shouted: "*Señor*, I do not propose to be questioned on that. It involves not only my honor, sir, but that of someone else. No matter what it costs me, I shall remain silent."

Miss Wingate grinned at me. "Señor Trullo means that he had a heavy date and he isn't the sort who kisses and tells."

Trullo said stiffly: "Miss Wingate, I must ask you not to speak so frivolously of a matter that affects my honor."

"*Señor*," said the girl, "I had to put it in language that an American detective would understand."

"One more question. Was Perez a native of El Murada?"

The girl looked blank and Trullo seemed a little puzzled. He said: "I've always assumed so. I met him first in the early Thirties and never heard him mention having come from another country. Why do you ask, *señor*?"

"I merely wondered about his background." I said good-by and thanks and I'd see what I could do with the cops and then I followed Miss Wingate out of the room.

She opened the outer door for me and said under her breath: "Meet me at the Casa Hernandez at five. I can't talk with the old goat around." In her normal voice she said: "Good-by. And I hope you'll be able to help Señor Trullo."

I probably stuttered a little saying good-by. I've been around long enough so that I'm not easily surprised but I hadn't expected a change of pace like that from the golden-haired Miss Wingate, loyal and trusted associate of Señor Trullo.

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.

CHAPTER TWO

Flop-ears and the Hundred Grand

DRIVING from the Diplomat north to Santa Monica Boulevard, I added up what Trullo and the girl had told me and got a total of nothing at all. If that was the yarn Trullo had handed the cops, I didn't blame them for aching to throw him in the clink. And, unless the girl had a swell alibi, they were probably eyeing her with some enthusiasm.

I hadn't even got to first base on my hunch about the real identity of Perez but that didn't bother me. It wouldn't be long before I'd find out whether I was right or wrong.

On Santa Monica I parked near a small stationery store over which a painted sign said, *Morris Rice—Stationery, Novelties, Soft Drinks*. The store was narrow and inside there was a musty, faintly sour smell. A teenage kid was behind the counter.

"Morrie around?" I said.

"He'll be back in twenty minutes."

"I'll wait."

I went into a back room that was furnished with half-a-dozen chairs and two telephones. It was in this room that Morrie had pursued his real career. I sat down and slung my hat over one of the phones, relaxing while I could. Presently the kid poked his head into the back room.

"You a friend of Morrie's?" he asked.

"We're old buddies."

"Then maybe you'll watch the joint for him. I got a date."

"You better keep it."

The kid went out, pocketing two comic books from the rack as he left. I got smoke-hungry and, on thinking it over, decided that Morrie probably had plenty of packs under the counter for regular customers at twice the right price. I went into the store. Rum-maging around under the case, I found several cartons. I hadn't heard anyone come in but when I straightened up I was staring at a flop-eared citizen with a pointed nose and buck teeth that were parted down the center. The front door was closed now.

Flop-ears said: "Hello, Morrie."

He was holding a dirty-looking automatic of Spanish make directly in line with my Adam's apple.

"Hello," I said. "What'll you have?"

"You know, bub. Make with the hundred grand and fast."

"Hundred grand?" I said.

I probably sounded flabbergasted because I was flabbergasted. "What hundred grand you talking about?"

"I ain't got time to argue," Flop-ears said. He sounded nervous. "I'd just as soon take

it off a stiff as not." He grinned shakily and squeezed the trigger of the Spanish rod. The gun went off loudly and the slug smacked into a cabinet above my head.

It had missed me only because I'd already fallen down and backward, shoving my knee against the edge of the cigar case. It wasn't secured to the counter and it went over with a great crash of breaking glass. Down below the counter I had my gun out and got very busy blasting holes through the cabinet in the general direction of Flop-ears' legs. I heard him yelp a bit and go for the door. I tried to get up fast and cracked my noggin against one of the cabinet doors I'd opened looking for cigarettes.

Down I went again. This time I got up slower. Flop-ears had disappeared and the street door was standing open. When I got outside there was nothing in sight but a Santa Monica street car. And I didn't want a Santa Monica street car.

Apparently nobody had been around to hear the shots so I went back in, shut the door and took two more packs of cigarettes to even up for the scare I'd got by being in Morrie Rice's shoes. Then I shoved magazine racks around so that the various bullet holes in the wall didn't show. That was for Morrie. I wanted to throw some questions at him before he was on his guard.

All the while I was saying to myself: "Hundred grand? What hundred grand?" For years Morrie had been a small-time bookie, operating for the syndicate, and he had as much chance of having a hundred thousand bucks legitimately as he had of being the next Mayor. There was only one way he could have acquired a bundle of cash like that and the notion didn't fit in with my hunch on the death of Francisco Perez. Or, on second thought, maybe it did!

Jack O'Keefe, I figured, had had time by now to finish the job I'd given him so I went to the back room and phoned him. I said: "How're you doing, Jack?"

He sounded sober and excited. "Mission completed, Junior. And who did you guess the guy was?"

"I guessed he was Mike Valdez. Back in the Twenties they called him Mike the Mex, although he wasn't Mexican. He was born and raised right here in Los Angeles. He had a bootleg record and later he made book with a guy named Morrie Rice. One day he disappeared with the partnership bankroll. It set Morrie back on his heels and he's been small time ever since. So naturally Morrie has hated his innards since then. Did I guess right on the identification?"

"You weren't wrong. Now what do I do?"

"Pass the word to Cap Baker in Homicide and get some dicks headed for Rice's joint on

Santa Monica. Unless I'm crazy, they'll want to talk to him."

TEN minutes after I'd hung up Morrie Rice parked a shiny but pretty old Chevvy in front and came in. He was a fairly youngish-looking guy in spite of his fifty years and he put up a good front, although as I said, he'd been strictly five-and-dime for years. He looked at the shattered case on the floor and then at me.

"Hello, Rousseau," he said. "What happened here?"

"I leaned against the damn thing too hard," I told him. "Do you know a guy with buck teeth and flop-ears? He was in here asking for you." Morrie said he didn't know any guy like that, which made sense, inasmuch as Flop-ears had mistaken me for Morrie.

"Where's the kid I left here?"

"I relieved him," I said. "I wanted to see you, Morrie. I thought you might like to know Mike the Mex is back in town."

I was watching his face and eyes carefully and I got the impression he was genuinely surprised. It could have been an act but it was at least a good one. He cursed in a very pleased way. "Rousseau, I'll spot you a century here and now for his address."

"Save your dough, Morrie. He's in the morgue. Lead poisoning."

Morrie didn't say anything for a moment. Then he swore again. "And before I had a crack at him! Who did it?"

"I wouldn't know. But I wouldn't be surprised if there were some cops on the way out to see you right now."

I thought maybe Morrie might take that as a hint to go other places in a hurry. Maybe that wasn't giving the cops a fair shake but I figured they'd turn Morrie up eventually and a good long chase would take their minds off our Señor Trullo, at least for the time we needed to get his signature. And I felt that Air Parts needed that contract more than the cops needed Morrie Rice. But Morrie didn't take the hint.

"To hell with the cops," he said. "I don't know a damn thing about any killing. I didn't even know Mike was back in town until you told me." He thinned his gaze at me. "What's your angle in this?"

"Don't worry about me."

Morrie said harshly: "I still want to know your angle. I've got a hunch you're the guy throwing me to the cops and I want to know why."

Any further argument was stopped when the door opened and Cap Baker, the Homicide skipper, came in, followed by Ben Gort and two other dicks and Jack O'Keefe. Ben Gort looked at me as though he wished me a very merry throat-slitting.

Baker nodded to me and to Morrie Rice. He said: "We want to talk to you downtown, Morrie. Maybe Rousseau has told you why."

Morrie looked sullen. "He told me Mike the Mex was back in town but if he's dead, I'm clean. I didn't even know he was back."

"We'll talk about that downtown," Baker said. He was always quiet but he didn't waste words and every word meant business. "What happened to that cigar case on the floor? You have trouble here?"

I said: "I leaned on it too hard, skipper, and shoved it off." I didn't say anything about Flop-ears and the hundred grand because I've learned never to play all my cards at once when I want to do some trading with the cops. If by some chance Morrie Rice managed to talk himself onto the street by morning, I could still feed Cap Baker the information on Flop-ears and keep the Homicide boys interested in something besides Trullo. Meanwhile I could do a little work on Flop-ears myself.

Baker left a dick in charge of the store and they piled Morrie into a squad car. I walked out toward the car with Jack O'Keefe, who is a tall, very thin guy and looks as though he might collapse into a heap of bones any moment.

Jack said in an undertone: "Ben Gort caught hell and hallelujah from the skipper for not putting the Perez prints through the ID Bureau and letting you slip one over on the department. Ben doesn't love you, pal, and even Baker is a little sore at you for not coming to him with it. But me, I love you, shamus. It's a swell story and some night we'll go out and have some drinks. I'll even pay for some of them."

Cap Baker got me and Jack at the curb. He looked mad and he said a little bitterly: "Rousseau, why didn't you come to me with that hunch instead of taking it to a news-hawk? When the story comes out, people will think Homicide is a lot of damn fools—not that Ben Gort isn't!"

"Why the hell should I have come to the cops? This morning Ben practically kicked my teeth in for offering to help with the case." I waited a moment to let that sink in. Then I said: "However, I'm not in this for any glory. I'm just trying to help a good customer of Air Parts. So there's no reason Jack shouldn't forget me and give all the credit to the Department."

Baker grunted a couple of times and thawed a bit. "Well, maybe it would look better that way."

"Consider it a deal." I figured I had him softened up enough by now. "Maybe you can give me a little break, Cap. Air Parts is all set to conclude the deal we have on with Trullo but those men you have on his tail are

driving him nuts. Take them off for a while so he can get down to business."

Baker looked dubious. "Trullo's not clear yet by a hell of a ways."

"A guy like that can't disappear. You can always get him."

Finally the skipper nodded. He and Jack O'Keefe climbed into the squad car. Baker hadn't mentioned anything about me coming downtown so I just moseyed along to my own car and drove back to the Diplomat. After a while I saw the two cops who had been watching Hidalgo Court come down the walk to the street. They climbed into a bureau car and started in the direction of headquarters so I knew the skipper had kept his word. From a drugstore nearby I called the Diplomat and got put through to the brown-eyed girl.

I said: "This is Pete Rousseau. Tell your boss everything is fixed. Those two shadows have been called off and he's as free as air. So maybe he'll come out to Air Parts this afternoon and sign some contracts."

"Pete," said Miss Wingate admiringly, "you don't beat your gums for nothing, do you? Wait until I tell Señor Trullo the news."

Where did she get that Pete stuff? Not that I didn't like it. Presently she came back to the phone. She sounded disappointed. "He says he doesn't feel well enough to do business today. Maybe in the morning."

Well, I didn't know what would happen by morning but I had to accept what was offered. I said: "Thanks, sis. I'll be seeing you."

Then I phoned Abe Lorimer and gave him the high spots.

"Swell," said Abe. "Hop back to the plant and, by golly, I'll buy you a drink for cleaning it up."

"It may not stay cleaned up," I told him. "I'll buy my drink here—on the expense account—and go on digging."

"O.K., Pete. You're the doctor. I mean the dick."

UNTIL the day watch went off and Cap Baker and Ben Gort cleared out of headquarters, I couldn't go down there to work on Flop-ears. So, having nothing to do until five o'clock, I took in the first movie I'd seen in a year. Things hadn't changed in pictures. The boy was still chasing the girl and still getting her in the last reel. Not having to pay much attention to the picture, I had a chance to think.

What I thought was that the hundred grand Flop-ears had wanted from Morrie Rice was a shakedown Morrie had put on Mike the Mex, alias Francisco Perez. Maybe Morrie had then killed Mike the Mex, just for old times' sake. But who was Flop-ears? And how did he know that Morrie might have a

hundred grand? I couldn't answer that so I just watched boy catch girl.

At four-thirty I left the theater and bought an *Evening Record*. Jack O'Keefe had whipped up a swell story on the identification of Señor Francisco Perez, government representative of the Republic of El Murada, as Mike the Mex, one-time Los Angeles police character. They'd had time to get a cable to and back from El Murada. It seemed that back in 1927 Mike the Mex—under the name of Francisco Perez—had arrived in El Murada on a Spanish passport. He'd bought in on a mining concession (undoubtedly, I thought, with the bankroll that belonged to Morrie Rice) and the mine paid out big. From there he'd gone on into ranching, banking and finally politics and had come back to the old stamping ground as a Latin-American big-shot.

There was only one thing wrong with the story.

Morrie Rice had proved a complete alibi and had been released. And that, I knew, tossed Señor Trullo right back into the laps of the cops.

When I got to the Casa Hernandez, which is a small but high-class drum on the Strip between Hollywood and Beverly Hills, Miss Wingate was waiting in a booth. A fantastic little hat of brown straw matched her eyes and set off the gold hair. A silver fox jacket was on the seat beside her. All in all, she was a very elegant pigeon.

She grinned and cocked a derisive eyebrow. "You told me there was some argument about your being a detective." She had the *Evening Record* open to Jack O'Keefe's story. "Now I believe you."

I sat down. "Yeah, the Rice angle sort of came unglued," I admitted. "How's Trullo taking it?"

"I don't know. He went out to keep a dinner date before the paper arrived. But those two cops are right back on the job and he'll feel sick again tomorrow."

She ordered a Stingaree and I made mine Scotch-and-water. When the waiter left, I said: "For a Latin-American señorita, Miss Wingate, you talk a very swell brand of jive."

The girl laughed, "You can call me Lou, which is short for Luisa. And I'm not Latin-American. I'm as USA-American as a hamburger-with-onions. I was born in Chicago."

"Where'd you pick up the Spanish?"

"Dad was English but Mother was Spanish. I picked it up from her. It's what got me the job with Perez and Trullo."

The drinks came and I said: "Well, here's to crime—if you don't mind drinking to the industry that insures me a job."

"I don't mind." We drank and she said: "I'm going to tell you something."

"I hoped so when you made the date."

"Not about the murder. About me. I want to be a detective."

I laughed. "You've been reading those Operator Thirteen ads."

"I'm not kidding. You're my chance, Pete. Give me a job in Plant Security at Air Parts and by the time I've had a year's experience I can go to any agency in the country and get a job."

I said: "You're as crazy as you're pretty and that's very crazy. Why should you have a yen to be a gumshoe gal? With looks like yours you could have something really good."

"For instance? I've tried the stage and pictures. I'm a lousy actress and I can't live on what an extra makes. So where do I get off—do I take dictation the rest of my life at twenty-five a week?"

"You wouldn't have to work hard to grab a good man."

She shook her head. "I don't like babies or housework and that's what you get from a good man. And I hate the other kind. They paw you. They've been trying to paw me since I was fifteen and whenever it happens, I see red. No, I want excitement—and money."

"Where did you get the idea a private dick makes money?"

"I'd make money. I'm going to make some out of this Mike the Mex killing." She sipped her drink and looked at me over the rim of the glass. "Your angle on Morrie Rice has washed out. What would it be worth to Air Parts if I told you who probably did the job?"

"Maybe fifty bucks."

She pretended to gasp. "How can you toss money around like that? Look, I've got bigger and better ideas. A thousand if the man I name can be proved guilty, five hundred if he keeps the cops' attention off Trullo long enough for you to complete the El Murada deal. It's dirt cheap, considering Air Parts will make six-figure profits from it."

She wasn't far wrong at that. I said: "I guess I can guarantee the dough on that basis. Who's the man?"

"Do you know a private detective named Harry Blue?"

I knew Harry. He had a small agency specializing in divorce evidence and—off the record—blackmail. No cop had ever got close enough to Harry to throw mud on his skirts. He was too clever for that. But he also didn't have enough guts to slap a mother-in-law, much less knock anybody off.

I said: "You're off base, Lou. Harry might take a guy's shirt but he wouldn't take his life."

"I don't mean Blue killed Perez. He was hired by Perez to watch a man named Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz."

"Who is Vinaroz?"

"I don't know much about him except that he's from El Murada and that Perez was scared to death when he learned the guy was here. If Perez was that worried about him, then Vinaroz is a good prospect as the killer."

"Could be. What did Blue find on him?"

"I only saw one of his reports. It said Vinaroz was renting a furnished place in Horseshoe Canyon above Hollywood and had a man-servant, a combination valet-houseman-chauffeur, to take care of him. Also that Vinaroz went out every night around nine, driven by the man-servant, and played various night spots until they closed."

THE waiter was hanging around now so I ordered more drinks. When he'd gone, I said: "Why didn't Trullo tell the cops this?"

"He didn't know about it." Lou laughed noiselessly, showing small, white teeth. "Trullo's an awful dope. He was practically a figurehead on the commission. Perez ran things and told him nothing and that was O.K. with him because he never thinks about anything but women."

"Why didn't you tell the cops this and take the heat off Trullo?"



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"I'm not that dumb. Cops don't hand out money for information. Pete, you're going to check on Vinaroz, aren't you?"

"I'll probably get around to it."

"I think it's a swell lead. Now I have to run. I've got a date."

"Not yet. You've still got business with me. Did Mike the Mex—Perez—have any local bank accounts?"

"He had a personal account and the commission had one."

"Had he made any big withdrawals lately, say in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand bucks?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"O.K.," I said. "We'll see what sort of shamus you make. Can you find out if he did check out a big bundle of cash recently?"

"Maybe." She looked puzzled. "The hundred thousand is something new. Where does it come into the picture?"

"Let me worry about that. Here's one more thing." I put my hand on her knee and it felt just as round and soft as it looked. "I know a sweet little gadget like you wouldn't kill a guy—"

She struck my hand away and for a moment I thought she was going to spit like a cat. Then she grinned. "Don't be too sure. I said I didn't like being pawed. Now what was on your mind?"

"Not what you suspect. I was just wondering where you were when Mike the Mex was ushered into eternity."

"You don't trust anyone, do you?"

"Sure—exactly as far as I can see them on a foggy night."

"Well, smartie, the police felt the same and I satisfied them. Perez put me in a cab at the hotel—they found the driver to corroborate that. He drove me to a cafeteria where I had dinner with my roommate and another girl. Then we went to a picture at the Ravenna. We'd planned to go to an after-curfew party at a friend's place later but I got a bilious attack at the show, so my roommate took me home and fed me bicarb. That was a little after twelve and I was there until the detectives arrived at one-thirty. And don't think the cops didn't check all that."

"O.K. Give me a ring tomorrow about the hundred grand."

"All right. And don't you forget about my money and the job."

I promised I wouldn't forget. She headed for the door while most of the males in the joint watched her. I didn't blame them. Just looking at her was enough to make almost any guy's pulse do a boogie beat.

I GRABBED a bite at a drive-in and drove down to headquarters where I put in a couple of hours with the ID collection of

muggbooks. Flop-ears wasn't in any of them, indicating that either he was a newcomer to our fair burg or else a beginner at his trade. I favored the latter. A really hot gungsel wouldn't pack a cheap Spanish gun.

From there I dropped out to Horseshoe Canyon and along about nine-thirty I was sitting on a brush-covered hillside opposite the address Lou Wingate had given me for Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz. Horseshoe takes off from Laurel Canyon and comes to a dead-end high in the hills. There are only half-a-dozen houses its entire length, all of them nice affairs with swimming pools and the other Hollywood necessities of life.

There was a light burning above the garage entrance and it showed me a car on the ramp. A dim light shone behind the front door of the house and there were other, brighter lights in what I took to be a bedroom wing. Things had been like that for an hour, ever since I'd parked my car a half-mile farther up the canyon and walked back to a spot where I could see without being seen.

I'd begun to think this would be the one night of the year that the colonel would stay home and be a good boy but finally the front door opened. The hall light showed a short, blocky man in a chauffeur's uniform and cap. He walked to the garage, got the car going and rolled it to the front of the house. Meanwhile the house lights had gone out and the front door had opened, slammed shut again.

The headlamps of the car showed me a tall, slim man on the front steps. Vinaroz—I figured he couldn't be anyone else—had a swarthy but handsome face with too much sideburns and perhaps a little too much jaw. He wore a tux, something you don't see much these war days except on headwaiters and band musicians, but he didn't look fancy pants. He looked wiry and alert and sure of himself, the kind of a guy that Mike the Mex might well have been scared of.

He climbed into the car and it whipped out of the drive and down the canyon road. When the tail-light vanished I started across the road. Then I changed my mind in a hurry. A jalopy came around a curve just above me, going very fast. It missed me about a foot as I jumped back to the side of the road. I was too busy taking care of my skin to notice the make or the license and it went chattering down the canyon, the single tail-light blinking insolently at me through a crack in the crimson lens.

Crossing the road to the house, I began prospecting. I wasn't exactly happy about a house-breaking job but if it would help Abe Lorimer keep four thousand paychecks going, I wasn't going to be too finicky. Finally I located a window that worked for me and by the light of my pencil flash found I was in

a bedroom. I checked off three more bedrooms, a couple of baths, a dining room, kitchen and living room and kept going. I was looking for something like a desk to begin with and I found it in a small, pine-paneled library off the living room.

A secretary-bookcase stood between French windows there. In the center of the room was a flat-topped desk, flanked by a typewriter on one of those movable metal stands. I got busy on the desk. The drawers in the pedestals weren't locked and they yielded, among some unimportant things, a collection of lush letters in half-a-dozen different specimens of female handwriting. There were also lots of receipted bills for perfume, flowers, jewelry, lingerie and even a mink coat. Apparently, as a Casanova, the colonel kept himself busier than a tomcat during a long Arctic night. I made a note of the signatures on the letters just in case and dumped the collection back.

The center drawer was locked but I took care of that with a slim, steel letter opener. Inside the drawer there were half-a-dozen typed letters, addressed to Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz. This was what I'd been looking for.

It was swell—except that the letters were in Spanish and my Spanish is strictly limited to expressions like *chile-con-carne* and *slip-it-to-me-without-beans-amigo*. I looked them over and finally stuck one in my pocket because the name of Abe Lorimer, which you spell the same in any language, was in it.

After that I took on the secretary-bookcase. The first drawer I opened was a stopper for me. It contained as pretty a little .25 Mauser as I'd ever seen. The grip was inlaid with mother-of-pearl and little filigrees of gold wire like Oriental lacquer and the rest of it was chromiumed so that it hurt my eyes when I turned the flash on it. It looked like a toy but it would kill anybody at the right range.

And Mike the Mex had died with a .25 slug in his noggin.

I draped my handkerchief around my hand, picked up the rod and started to transfer it to my pocket. Then I had a better idea. There was a length of discarded cord in the wastebasket by the desk. I looped the cord around the trigger guard and then worked loose the grille of the hot-air radiator in the wall by the secretary. When I got the grille back in again, the .25 Mauser was hanging in the air-duct. If I decided to tell the cops that Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz owned a .25 automatic, I wanted them to be able to find it still on the premises.

I was starting on the other drawers of the secretary when the sound of a car door latching shut brought me up straight. The sound was either very distant or very hushed and I didn't think it was distant because there wasn't another house within half a mile.

Thirty seconds later I was outside and moving through the shrubbery toward the road.

I hadn't been too fast. Two dark figures were oozing up the driveway and there was enough light from the star-dusted sky to show me that the colonel and his little helper had come home again. They hadn't come home aimlessly, it seemed, because the dark splotches in the right hand of each of them were guns or I didn't know the posture of a guy carrying a rod. The servant went around toward the back of the house and the colonel went mously up the front steps. He waited there for maybe thirty seconds, probably timing the other guy's progress to the back door, and then he keyed his way silently into the house.

I was pretty happy that my ears had been good enough to catch the sound of that car door latching. Otherwise I'd have been trapped and forced to shoot my way out or be scooped up and tossed to the cops on a burglary rap. And I wouldn't have wanted to let either the colonel or his Man Friday have a slug. Maybe they were mixed up in the murder of Mike the Mex but that was something I hadn't proved and I have never yet shot a guy on suspicion.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood from the Blue

I WAS walking toward the old and creaky elevator in my hotel lobby when a man sitting on a lounge nearby put his paper down. He rose and came to intercept me. He was a nondescript little man, maybe five-feet-five, dressed in an unpressed gray suit and having a meek face, faded blue eyes and mousy hair that had gone uncut a week too long. He was Harry Blue.

I said: "Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Pete." His voice was as inoffensive as his appearance. "Could we go upstairs and have a talk?"

"Come along."

Upstairs in my bedroom-and-bath I said: "Could I persuade you to have a drink, Harry?"

He grinned, showing ragged yellow teeth. "Are you kidding? I mean, about persuading me?"

There was some Scotch and rye in the closet but I didn't owe Harry Blue anything. I dug out a bottle of gin and some mix. When the drinks were ready, we sat down. Harry took a long pull and glanced at his wrist watch.

He said: "Haven't seen you much lately, Pete."

"Look, Harry," I told him, "I'm a very worn-down guy tonight. At the moment I

think an inner-spring mattress is the greatest invention since the steam-engine. What's on your mind?"

Harry hemmed and hawed a bit because it wasn't in him to come to the point by a direct route. Finally he said: "Air Parts would like to have this killing cleaned up, am I right?"

"It's possible."

"If I clean it up for you, is it worth twenty-five grand?"

I choked on the gin and not because it was Cuban gin. "You could wash up the Perez job and be one of our vice-presidents for a year and you'd still owe us dough at that price."

"What would it be worth?"

"I'd have to talk to Abe Lorimer. But I won't waste his time unless I think you have something."

Harry's blue eyes were cagy. "I've got something."

"Where do you fit in?" I didn't say a word about what Lou Wingate had told me. Anything Harry said would just be an addition to that. "Give me an idea."

I could see Harry's mind working, trying to decide how much he had to tell me. Finally, looking down his nose and not at me, he said: "Perez—I didn't know then that he was Mike the Mex—hired me to watch a certain party."

"And this certain party stopped Mike's clock?"

"I'm not saying," Harry told me with a crafty grin. "But Mike is dead and I'm out a fee and I've got to get my dough somewhere. If Air Parts puts up interesting cash, I'll clean it up for you."

"Meaning," I said, "that you'll take the heat off Trullo?"

"I'm still not saying." He finished his drink, glanced at his wrist watch and then looked suggestively at his empty glass, a suggestion I skipped.

I started to take my tie off. Yawning, I said: "I'll call you tomorrow after I talk to Lorimer."

At the door Harry said: "It's got to be real dough."

"So long, Harry."

When he'd closed the door behind him, I re-knotted my tie and slid into my coat. All that watch-checking business indicated that Harry had a date. I wanted to know about that date. I heard the elevator stop at my floor and then descend so I went out and down the stairs. My room is on the fourth floor and I made the lobby almost as fast as Harry did in the elevator. He was pushing through the revolving door to Sixth Street as I ducked out the side door to Harley Place.

He got into a small, shabby car on Sixth and wheeled it north into Harley and I jog-

ged along after him in my car. The single tail-light of his car winked at me through a cracked lens just like the tail-light of the jalopy that had almost run me down in Horse-shoe Canyon. Maybe there were two clunks in town with a red lens cracked in that fashion but I doubted I'd accidentally run into both of them the same night on the same case.

So I began figuring. If Harry had seen and recognized me in the moment it had taken me to duck out of the path of his car in the canyon and if he had passed the word along to Colonel Vinaroz, it would explain why the colonel and his man had made their unscheduled return with guns in their fists, looking for someone. Why would Harry tip them off to me? Well, I couldn't expect to have all the answers.

Harry parked his car north of the intersection of Third and I parked mine to the south. He stepped into a Third Street bar run by an Irishman named Conmy. After a bit I walked by and, over the curtain at the window, I could see Harry on a red-leather stool at the bar.

He was talking to Lou Wingate who sat on the red-leather stool beside him.

HALF an hour later the gold-haired girl came out alone. She went along Third to the next corner and up a side street. She hadn't gone very far when I fell into step beside her.

I said: "Hello, sis."

She jumped a foot. When she recognized me, she looked half-apprehensive, half-sore. She said: "You goon, do you have to frighten the wits out of a gal?"

"So sorry, please."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Relaxing now. Up to a few minutes ago I was tailing Harry Blue."

"Oh." She was silent for a moment. "Well?"

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

"I suppose you think I tried a fast one, meeting Blue without letting you know?"

"Oh, no. You just got thirsty and went out for a drink and there Harry was."

I could see her getting mad. She sputtered: "You big lug, I tried to call you at your hotel but you were out. I even left a message and if you didn't get it, that's probably because you're a dope."

I remembered I hadn't stopped at the desk when I got to my hotel so she could be telling the truth. I said: "O.K., I accept your apology, sis."

"I'm not apologizing!" If she had been the foot-stamping kind, she'd have stamped her foot.

I laughed. "If it makes you happier, I'll apologize. Now how come this meet with Blue?"

She said sullenly: "He phoned around nine and asked me to meet him."

"What did he have on his mind?"

"He didn't say until he showed up at Conmy's. Then he told me he could clear up the killing of Mike the Mex and wanted to know how much Trullo would pay for the job."

"Why didn't he proposition Trullo direct?"

"I asked him that. He said he figured I could help him put it over. So I told him I'd talk to Trullo."

I looked down at her. "For a nice cut, of course."

"Naturally. I told you I like money so why would I be stupid enough to turn him down?"

"Yeah, that's right."

She put her hand on my sleeve. "Pete, please don't be mad at me. I was going to talk to you first thing in the morning."

"How much dough did Harry suggest?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Did he give you any hint of the guy he planned to turn in?"

"No. What shall I do? Go to Trullo in the morning?"

"Why not? Then let me know what his reaction is."

All this time we'd been walking. Now Lou turned toward the door of an apartment house. "This is where I live, Pete."

We went up to the third floor in an automatic lift and Lou keyed her way into a front apartment. As we walked in, a lanky brunette in panties and bra leaped off the living room couch and, uttering yelps of alarm, scooted into a bedroom. From the vantage point of a nearly-closed door, she stuck her head out and surveyed me.

Lou said: "Sandra Smith, my cellmate here. She works at General Finance. Sandra, this is a guy named Pete Rousseau."

Sandra and I said howdy-do.

"You can go to bed now, Sandra," Lou said. Sandra looked disappointed but she pulled her head in and shut the door. I looked around the place while Lou watched me with a wry smile. She said: "I knew you'd want to look my place over and that's why I let you come up. But you can run along now, Pete. I haven't got a single etching to my name. And, besides, I've got Sandra."

I laughed at her. "You didn't have to let me come up. I got in here this afternoon to look around." I hadn't but I didn't want her thinking she was a mastermind.

"You're a louse," she said. "You really did suspect me of something, didn't you?"

"I'm just thorough," I told her and headed for the door.

Maybe I sounded pretty curt because she

stopped me at the door. She took one of my hands in both of hers. "Pete, don't be sore at me. Because I like you—better than any guy I ever met. I think you're swell. It'll be the thrill of my life to work with you."

"I'm not sore," I said. "Night, sis."

The faint but seductive perfume she used was still in my nostrils as I went down in the elevator. Her hands had been warm and soft and clinging. I caught myself wishing I could fit her into my staff at Air Parts. I knew I was foolish. With her around it would be too hard to concentrate on business.

Back at my hotel I stopped at the desk and the clerk handed me, among other things, a message slip. It noted that a Miss Wingate had called at nine-twenty. Lou, it seemed, hadn't lied about that. I was sure she hadn't lied about Harry Blue and his proposition because it was like Harry to try to harvest half-a-dozen fees where only one would normally grow. Probably he was even trying to nick the roll of Colonel Vinaroz in some fashion before throwing the colonel to the cops.

I had a shot of Scotch and went to bed.

IN THE morning I took the letter I'd borrowed from the desk drawer of Colonel Vinaroz to a friend of mine in Air Parts' foreign department. He typed out a translation for me and then I hiked over to Abe Lorimer's office.

I tossed the translation on Abe's desk and said: "Never mind how I got this, boss, but I think you'll be interested. Here's the gist of it: A guy in El Murada by the name of General Rolf Cristobal writes to one Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz here. He thanks Vinaroz for keeping an eye on the negotiations of the El Murada Purchasing Commission with various American companies, including ours. He says that all goes well in El Murada for their side and if the commission could just be hamstrung for a few months, the chances are that the Circle of Generals will have things under control. He admits that any direct action here would be difficult, inasmuch as the American authorities are often very crass, crude and non-understanding, whereas down in El Murada it would all be very simple. But he comes right out flat-footed and says that if Vinaroz should accomplish the desired result, he would be enshrined in the hearts of his countrymen and—that was probably even more to the point—the Circle of Generals would find ways to show their gratitude when there gives a change of administration in El Murada."

Abe had been nodding from time to time, not seeming surprised. I said: "But maybe this isn't news to you."

"Vinaroz is," said Abe. "The Circle of Generals isn't. They were the guys who start-

ed the revolution that put President Padilla in. They gave it the usual propoganda build-up—freeing the nation from a dictator, giving the masses their rights, raising the standard of living for the peons. The difference was that Padilla believed his own propoganda and actually started the program. Now he's so popular that he has been able to say nuts to the Circle of Generals. I knew about that situation but I didn't have any idea there was someone here keeping an eye on the Purchasing Commission. Maybe I should have told you about the set-up."

"You should have," I said.

Abe grinned at me. "Now that your racketeer brainstorm has blown up in your face, you think maybe Vinaroz did the killing?"

"Could be. But so far I haven't tipped the cops to him. I wanted to get your reaction."

"Go ahead. Anything to get the heat off Trullo for a while."

"O.K. Now here's another angle. A guy offers to clean up the case for us for twenty-five grand. I think I can handle him for twenty-five hundred."

"You're running it," Abe said. "Make it ten thousand if you have to—it's worth at least that much to us."

"Hell," I said, "if the guy doesn't sprain both ankles jumping at five thousand, I'm a bad judge."

Back in my office I put a call through to Jack O'Keefe.

He said: "Well, smart boy, your Morrie Rice theory went pffft. But it was still a swell story for me."

"I'm not so sure about Morrie," I said. "What kind of an alibi did he have?"

"Good enough to satisfy Ben Gort. Morrie said he was in Frisco the day before and came down on the Owl. He was miles and miles out of town when Mike the Mex got it. He's out of it."

"Well, thanks for everything, Jack."

"Thanks to you, kind sir. And if you get any more hunches that mean stories, count me in."

Following that, I called Harry Blue's office. Harry answered the phone and I said: "Pete Rousseau, Harry."

For a guy who had been expecting me to call him, Harry seemed pretty distant. And jumpy. He said: "Oh, yes. Yes. How are you?"

"I'm fine, if you're really interested," I said. "About that job you mentioned—"

"Sorry about the delay, Mr. Abbott," said Harry. "We've had a man on Mrs. Abbott steadily but so far no evidence."

"Someone there with you?"

"That's right, Mr. Abbott. Well, we'll keep on trying if you want us to. At our regular rates, of course . . . O.K., sir, we'll send

you complete daily reports. 'By, Mr. Abbott."

I cleaned up a few paper-work chores around the office and then went down to the Air Parts parking lot and headed my car for Harry Blue's office downtown. Something pertinent might very well have been going on down there—Harry wouldn't have been quite that cagy with me if some ordinary client had been across the desk from him.

His office was in an old building on Flower Street between Sixth and Seventh. It took me a while to get down there and induce a colored boy in the parking lot across the street to give me a check. Then I headed across the pavement for the building entrance. I'd reached the opposite curb when Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz came flying out of the doorway, his long legs moving in a hurry.

He was just as slim and elegant as he'd been the night before, except that this time it was in dove-gray, pin-striped flannels that contrasted nicely with his dark skin. The big difference was that he didn't look or act nonchalant now. His black eyes snapped warily to the right and then to the left and when he passed within a foot of me I could see that his lips were gray and there were big globules of sweat on his forehead and on his cheeks just where the long sideburns ended. He looked at me without recognition as he went by.

I watched him cross the street to the parking lot and climb into a brown convertible that came rolling down the lot to meet him. The convertible was driven by the blocky man in chauffeur's uniform and when it got onto Flower Street it scooted west, just managing to sneak through the first gleam of a red light. I could have tailed the convertible but I skipped it. I had a hunch it would be more interesting just then to talk to Harry Blue.

HARRY had his offices, two small, low-rent rooms, on the sixth floor. The hall door wasn't locked so I walked in. There was nobody in that office, which was a sort of a reception room without a receptionist. There was no sound in the place although the door to the other room was ajar. When I called out, "Harry," and got as an answer only more silence, I slid my gun into my hand and went on into the private office.

Then I put my gun away. There was nobody in the room except Harry, seated at his desk, and he was dead.

Someone had practically blown the top of his head off. He was bowed forward, one arm crooked on the desk and his face pillowed on that arm while the other arm dangled by his side, the knuckles dragging on the floor. There was a veneer of blood and gray matter on the desk, some of it very crimson in a

triangle of strong, hot sunlight from a south window.

I stood there looking at all of it and thoughts began to swim up in my mind. Not professional thoughts, because I hadn't had time to get around to those yet. I thought: *Hell, it's like a picture in primitive, brutal colors—the dead white of Harry's neck, the hard yellow sunlight, the crimson of the blood where the sun was on it, the darker red to the left of Harry's head, the ochre of the blood to the right of his head.*

About then I began to think shop thoughts, began to wonder why I was seeing so many different shades of red in blood that had spilled at the same instant. I thought about that for maybe a minute while the bar of sunlight moved steadily and almost imperceptibly from right to left. Then I figured I had it. I figured that for once I was almost as intelligent as Sherlock Holmes or Philo Vance. I'd figured something out.

Where the hot sun had shone, the blood had coagulated faster. I could detect an area like that to the right of Harry's head—there wasn't any sharp line of demarcation but I could see a very definite although gradual blending of lighter into darker color. With my eye I made a stab at measuring the distance of the darkened blood to the edge of the sunlight. I watched the bar of sunlight move for five minutes and I looked at my watch again and saw twenty minutes of eleven. I'm no astronomer but I figured I knew just about when someone had spilled Harry Blue's blood and brains over that desk.

It had been not very many minutes after I'd talked to Harry on the phone around nine forty-five.

When I'd convinced myself that for once I was a mastermind, I let my eyes rove around the office to see what an ordinary, garden-variety shamus might do before yelling copper. There was a big steel file, unlocked, in a corner behind the door, there was Harry's desk and there were Harry's pockets, all of

them presenting opportunities to a seeker after knowledge. I went over to the file but I didn't get to do anything about it because I heard the hall door opening just then. My gun came out again and I froze by the file.

The hall door slammed and there was a moment of silence. Then a voice said from the waiting room: "Boss! Hey, boss!" There was another silence and after that a few rapid steps. Flop-ears walked into the private office. He didn't see me but he did see Harry Blue and it set him back on his heels. I watched his Adam's apple flop up and down.

Then he said, "Jeez!" his breath whooshing out of his lungs.

I must have made some small sound then because Flop-ears whipped around toward me. His eyes sprang wide-open with alarm and his hand went for a gun at the same instant. I'd had as much of Flop-ears' Spanish rod as I wanted, so while he was still fishing for it I took two long steps and gave him my gun across the jaw. He fell down and lay on Harry Blue's cheap linoleum, groaning. I took his gun out of a shoulder holster and prodded him with my toe.

He yelped: "For God's sake, mister, don't kill me! I never done nothin' to you."

"Except try to blast my noggin off yesterday. Get up!"

He got up and whined: "Jeez, why'd you knock Harry off?"

"I didn't," I said. "Did you?" I didn't believe he had because, if he'd done it, he wouldn't have thrown such a fit when he walked in on the body. But I thought he might let slip a lead.

He was trembling all over now. Even his big ears seemed to move. He said: "I swear I didn't. I ain't been near the office this mornin'."

For about a minute I gave him the silent treatment, grinding him down with a nasty sneering look as though I were debating whether to knock his buck teeth down his throat or kick his ribs in.

THERE'LL BE NONE FINER

Motorola
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He squirmed. Finally he said: "Jeez, mister, whatta you want with me?"

"Some straight answers."

"What about, mister?"

"About you and Harry Blue, about you and a hundred grand, about a hundred grand and Morrie Rice."

Talk came bubbling out of him like water out of a cracked sewer. I'd already guessed most of the story. It involved a hundred grand shakedown of Perez—Mike the Mex—by Morrie Rice and the decision of Harry Blue that Morrie might be spoiled by all that dough. So Harry had assigned Flop-ears, his odd-jobs man, to relieve Morrie of the lettuce right after it was supposed to have been passed. But Harry hadn't been thorough, which is probably why he'd always been small-time in the agency business. He hadn't stopped to think that Flop-ears, whose name I learned was Willie Schultz, had never seen Morrie Rice. And he hadn't got around to calling Flop-ears off after Perez was killed, the night before the money was to have been passed.

Flop-ears looked relieved when he'd unburdened himself. He whined: "Mister, let me get the hell out of here. I ain't done nothin' an' I told you all I know."

"But you haven't told the cops, brother. Come on."

I marched him out into the waiting room where there was a phone that wasn't bloody. I reached for it with my left hand and Flop-ears thought I'd taken my eyes off him. He lunged toward the hall door so I clouted him with my gun and he dropped. I didn't know whether he was playing possum or was really out so I was standing over him when the hall door opened.

LIUTENANT Ben Gort looked at me, looked at Flop-ears on the floor and dragged out his gun all at the same moment. A smile of pure delight creased his red face. He said: "This was something I didn't expect. But it's a pleasure. What'd you shoot the guy to death for, Rousseau?"

I stuck my gun away and growled: "In the first place, I didn't shoot him. In the second, he's not dead. And, lastly, I knocked him out to save him as a present for you. Now what the hell brings you here?"

"I'm looking for Harry Blue. I found out he did some work for Perez." He swallowed distastefully. "I mean Mike the Mex."

"Well," I said, "as long as you're here, you might as well see Harry Blue. But first stick your handcuffs on this lug here."

"Why should I? I might need 'em for you."

"O.K.," I said. "Then I'll donate my cuffs to the cause. He happens to be valuable property."

I cuffed Flop-ears' left wrist to his left ankle. No guy ever walked very far with a decoration like that.

Ben Gort was saying meanwhile: "Whaddya mean, see Harry Blue? Where is he?"

I walked ahead of Ben into the private office and pointed. "There he is."

The sight kept Ben quiet for maybe fifteen seconds. Then he said, almost prayerfully: "Boy, do I get a kick out of this! I suppose you didn't shoot this guy, I suppose this guy ain't dead, I suppose you were saving him as a present for me! Oh, brother!"

"Don't be a damn fool, Ben. I didn't knock the guy off."

"So you say, so you say." He gloated at me. He took his cuffs off his belt and tossed them to me, wagging his gun in the other hand. He said: "There's a set of bracelets for you. Stick one on your wrist and get the other around that steam pipe just to hold you while I call the skipper and get help over here."

I said irritably: "Nuts, Ben. If you won't go off half-cocked, I'll prove I didn't kill Blue." I tossed the cuffs back at him and they went wild and shot toward his face. He ducked, twisted and one foot slid on the office linoleum. For an instant he tried to regain his balance and then went down and sideways into Harry Blue's desk, his gun exploding and the slug snicking by my ear.

His skull met the corner of the desk with a solid sound and then there was Lieutenant Ben Gort on the floor, as completely out as a shucked oyster. Blood seeped down his temple from a gash in his scalp and his mouth fell open so that his breath made a sucking noise in his throat. I swore as I knelt to feel his pulse. It was plenty strong but I swore again as I got up.

You can be either right or wrong in dealing with a cop. But you're always wrong if you sock him. And, knowing Ben Gort, I knew he was going to insist, when he woke up, that I'd deliberately tried to bean him with the handcuffs.

I couldn't win now unless I came up with something hot enough to take the collective mind of the Homicide squad off me. I thought maybe I had a chance to do that.

I got out of there fast and crossed to the parking lot. When the colored boy brought my car out, I slipped him a dollar and a few questions about the chauffeur-driven convertible that had pulled out of the lot with Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz.

"Sure, boss, I remember that job. Was here not over five minutes. I'll look up the stub and tell you for sure."

"Never mind," I told him. "Just put the stub aside. Could be somebody else will be asking you about it after a bit."

I got six blocks away before I stopped in front of a drugstore and called Jack O'Keefe.

I said: "Hi, Junior. If you'll take a couple of Homicide dicks and maybe an ambulance surgeon down to Harry Blue's office, you might get yourself a story."

"Hey, hey," Jack said. "What gives?"

"Go down there and find out. But do this for me first. Tell Cap Baker there's a guy by the name of Colonel Alfredo Vinaroz who didn't like Mike the Mex." I gave Jack the Vinaroz address and told him about the .25 automatic I'd found and where it was and how to steer the cops to it without seeming to. I also told him about the hundred grand and possibilities connected with that. I said: "Be seeing you."

Jack yelled: "Don't go 'way, stupid. It's my turn to have some news for you."

"What?"

"Homicide got the green light from the State Department and they picked up your friend, Trullo, at six this morning. They've got him sweating it out down here right now."

I swore and then I said, "Thanks, kid," and hung up.

About a minute later I was talking to Lou Wingate, who had answered the phone at Trullo's Diplomat quarters.

After she'd said, "Hello," she said: "Pete, where's Trullo? He's not here. He's disappeared. What's happening?"

"The cops picked him up early this morning. How long have you been at the hotel?"

"I got here at nine forty-five as usual."

"Can you prove it, sis?"

"Of course." She sounded puzzled. "I picked up the mail at the hotel desk at nine forty-five. Why?"

"Meet me at Wilshire and Carter Drive in ten minutes and I'll tell you why. Incidentally, did you dig up anything on that hundred grand?"

"I think so. I found a withdrawal of fifty-five thousand from his personal account three days ago and a draft for fifty thousand went through on a bank in El Murada."

"Swell," I said. "Get on your hobby-horse and meet me. I'll give you a little practice on detecting as she is done."

CHAPTER FOUR

Boy Gets Girl

WHEN I got to Wilshire and Carter she was waiting on the corner, fresh and summery in a yellow silk dress. She climbed in and I turned north on Carter.

She said: "What's all the excitement about, pardner?"

"Harry Blue was knocked off in his office about nine forty-five to nine fifty. Now I'm

attempting to make like Sherlock Holmes."

Her nicely-shaped red lips had sprung open for a moment. She looked up at me. "Who did it?"

"Maybe my brain isn't on the same shelf with Sherlock's, but I work it hard. First we start with the fact that Harry Blue was going to turn somebody up as the killer of Mike the Mex."

"Go ahead."

"That gives us a nice list of folks who might have liked to shut Harry's mouth. First, there's Trullo and we can skip him because he's been in the clink since six this morning. Next there's Colonel Vinaroz and his Man Friday. I know they were in the neighborhood at least but I also know it was half an hour to forty minutes after Blue had upped anchor for eternity. Maybe Vinaroz was there earlier and did the job and then came back for a second look. But I don't believe that gag about murderers returning to the scene of their crime, at least not that quickly. Then there's a guy named Willie Schultz, who worked for Blue, and I'm relying on my own observation to clear him. Then there's me on the theory that Blue might have been going to turn up Trullo and thereby spoil the deal for Air Parts. But I know I didn't do it. Then there's you."

"Me?" Her eyes opened wide.

"I know you didn't do it. You couldn't be getting the mail at the Diplomat and knocking off Mr. Blue at the same moment. So calm yourself. I was just naming everyone I could think of who might be involved."

"I suppose I ought to collapse with relief. But I'm too curious to know whom you're talking about."

"There's only one guy left. Morrie Rice."

"Morrie Rice?" The girl looked really astonished. "But the police cleared him. The paper said he had an unbreakable alibi."

"There are very few alibis that are really unbreakable. And, anyway, we're talking now not about the murder of Mike the Mex, but the killing of Harry Blue."

"If Rice didn't kill Perez—I mean, Mike the Mex—then Blue couldn't have been turning him in and Rice would have had no motive to kill Blue, would he?"

"Go ahead, discourage me," I said. "As a matter of fact, Rice could have had plenty of motive. I got the story from this Willie Schultz I mentioned, a flop-eared guy who did odd jobs for Blue, the sort of jobs that Harry didn't have the guts to do personally. To make an interesting story short, Blue usually spent as much time watching his clients as he did his suspects, on the theory that there's always more profit in blackmail than there is in the average fee for detective work. He was tailing Mike the Mex one night when

the guy ran into Morrie Rice in a night spot. Blue got an earful—don't ask me just how. He found out who Perez really was, he learned that Rice had put the bite on him for a cool hundred grand to square up for what happened years ago. Mike the Mex was supposed to have turned over the dough yesterday morning at ten o'clock. So Harry assigned Willie Schultz to show up at Rice's joint afterward and lift the dough from Morrie. The whole thing fizzled out because Mike the Mex was killed before the money could be passed. But, unless I'm a dope, Harry Blue's agile brain figured out how he could salvage some dough by pressuring Morrie Rice."

"How?"

"By threatening to go to the cops with his information about the attempted extortion. If the cops had learned of that angle, they'd have thrown Morrie right back in the can and really gone to work to bust his Mike the Mex alibi. Maybe they could have knocked it down. So Harry threatens Morrie, so Morrie knocks Harry off. Does that sound like sense?"

"Ummm—maybe."

"At least it's a guess worth working on." We'd almost reached Melrose. "We'll try a few tricks of the trade on Morrie if we find him at home. There's the apartment building he lives in."

We pulled up at the curb just behind Morrie's old Chevy.

"Here's one of the minor tricks," I said. I felt the radiator as I walked around in front of the Chevy. The radiator was warm. "Now we know that Morrie has been around and about this morning."

We walked into a stereotyped lobby and looked at letter boxes. Morrie Rice's name was on that of Apartment 3N. Going up in the automatic elevator, Lou looked nervous.

"I'm sort of scared," she admitted. "What do I do when we see Rice?"

"Nothing. And no matter what I say or do, just keep quiet."

I pressed 3N's bell push and after a moment there were scuffling footsteps the other side of the door. The door came open six inches and Morrie Rice peered out at me. He was unshaven, his hair was tousled and he wore a snappy maroon robe over silk pajamas.

I said: "Top of the morning, Morrie."

He scowled at me. "What the hell do you want?"

"Just a little talk."

Morrie grimaced. "After yesterday the only kind of talk I owe you, Rousseau, is a kick in the kisser. On your way."

He tried to close the door but I had my foot there. I said: "The lady and I are going to be very disappointed."

"Lady?"

I gestured Lou Wingate around into view and Morrie said: "Who the hell is she?" He didn't sound quite as tough as before—in fact, he sounded somewhat interested.

"My helper," I said. "How about inviting us in? It's just a question of whether you want me to kick the door down or have the cops do it."

MORRIE relaxed his pressure on the door a little so I took advantage of that to shove my way in. The girl followed me. Up to that moment she hadn't said a word. We shut the door and followed Morrie into a room that was all cluttered with an unmade bed, one of those beds that swing down out of the wall. I sat on a lounge, Lou Wingate took a chair, Morrie sat on the unmade bed.

I said: "For a guy who hasn't shaved yet, Morrie, you've put in a pretty busy morning."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I just got up ten minutes ago."

"In that case," I said, "your car must have been driving around by itself. The radiator's warm enough to boil eggs."

That shook him a little but he said: "By God, then someone took it without my permission."

I laughed at him. "Morrie, you foxed the cops on the Mike the Mex job but you can't get away with that one *this* morning. Someone is bound to have seen you."

"Nobody saw me," Morrie growled, "unless they peeked through this keyhole. What the hell are you talking about?"

I laughed again. "Don't be a dope, Morrie. Do you think you didn't leave any fingerprints there?"

I could see he was getting more uncomfortable by the moment but he managed to keep his voice sardonic. "Nuts to you. If I should ever pull a swifty—which I haven't—I'm smart enough not to leave any prints around. Now tell me another."

I could see worry creeping into his eyes now.

I said: "Morrie, you're undoubtedly a very brainy young feller but even the best of us slip some time. That car with the warm radiator leaves you caught with your alibis down, for one thing. But what's going to hurt you most is that you're the logical guy, the only guy who had a reason for it." I sneered at him. "You're cooked, my dumb friend."

Now he was getting mad as well as worried, which was what I wanted. He snarled at me: "I can name fifty guys who had reason to hate Harry Blue's guts."

I grinned at him this time and looked sideways at Lou Wingate. I said: "That's another one of the little tricks of the trade I mentioned." To Morrie I said: "You've got a swell crystal ball, pal."

"Huh?" said Morrie. But I could tell by the look on his face that it had hit home.

I said: "I didn't tell you I was talking about Harry Blue being bumped off. There hasn't been time for it to be in the papers or on the radio yet. There's only one way you could know Harry's killing is the job I meant. You must have been there."

For almost a minute Morrie didn't say anything. Finally he cursed me. "O.K., I was a chump to fall for that."

"What was the deal?" I said. "Was Harry putting the squeeze on you for that hundred-grand extortion you thought up for Mike the Mex?"

Morrie nodded. "The guy wanted ten thousand bucks. I don't have ten thousand bucks."

"You were wacky," I told him. "You could have beaten it."

"Sure—after the cops had kicked me around and I'd spent six months in the can and used all my dough for a mouthpiece."

"That would have been better than winding up in the gas chamber at Quentin, which is where you're headed now, Morrie."

Morrie sat there on the bed, thinking. Finally his right hand on which he'd been leaning slid under the bed pillow and out again. It held a big dull-metaled .45 automatic.

He said: "Maybe I won't wind up there. I've been figuring things out. Maybe you two are the only guys who've put the finger on me. If the cops had, they'd probably be here by now. Anyway, three won't make it any tougher for me than one."

From the chair at my side there were two sharp but not very loud explosions. A ragged wound appeared on Morrie Rice's cheek, a small and bloody hole appeared magically just

over his right eye. He fell forward, slowly at first and then faster and faster until he tumbled off the bed and hit the floor.

I looked around at Lou Wingate. She had her right hand still in her big purse and a little tendril of powder smoke weaved up from the hole torn in the leather by the bullets.

I said: "Why the hell did you shoot Morrie?"

She looked at me, astounded. "That's gratitude! He was going to shoot us, wasn't he?"

"He hadn't done it yet. I could probably have talked him out of it anyway." I shrugged. "Well, it's done and it was pretty snappy marksmanship, at that. I guess I'd better go call the law. You stick here."

I went out to a phone in the hallway and got Cap Baker on the wire and had quite a confab with him. Then I went back very quietly to Morrie Rice's apartment.

Lou was busy going through the drawers of Morrie Rice's dresser. His wallet was still on top of the dresser but it looked a lot thinner than it had before.

I walked in and said: "No-no, sis."

She jumped and made a face at me but she didn't resist when I took her purse away from her. The purse held, among other things, Morrie Rice's gold wrist watch and better than three hundred bucks in cash.

Lou said: "Aw, Pete, the guy is dead. He doesn't need that money any longer."

I chuckled. "Nice girls don't do such things."

"O.K., I shouldn't have done it but a girl always needs money." She grinned sheepishly. "What did you find out from the cops?"

"Everything, it seems, is working out swell. (Continued on page 92)

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ALL THIS AND



CHAPTER ONE

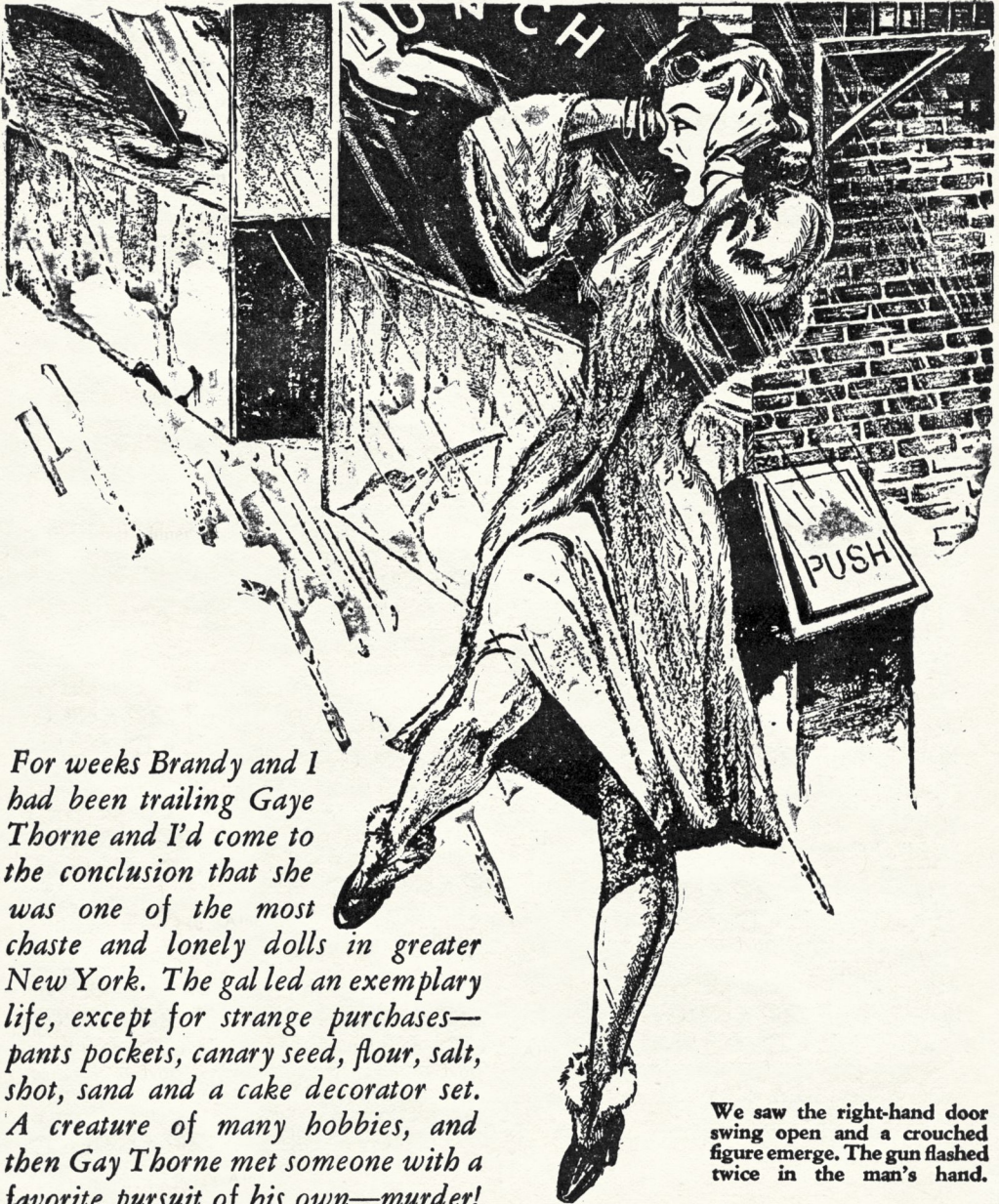
Slayer Cake

IN NEW YORK, that thing called a "brown-out" was with us again. It had been coming on gradually for the past couple of weeks, backed by emergency orders from Washington, but tonight it was official,

HOMICIDE TOO

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

Author of "The Corpse Takes a Wife," etc.



For weeks Brandy and I had been trailing Gaye Thorne and I'd come to the conclusion that she was one of the most chaste and lonely dolls in greater New York. The gal led an exemplary life, except for strange purchases—pants pockets, canary seed, flour, salt, shot, sand and a cake decorator set. A creature of many hobbies, and then Gay Thorne met someone with a favorite pursuit of his own—murder!

We saw the right-hand door swing open and a crouched figure emerge. The gun flashed twice in the man's hand.

complete and a headache. It saved plenty of electricity and coal, no doubt, but it also made my assignment much tougher. Tailing a doll in female-mobbed Manhattan is hard enough in broad daylight, but at night, with the street lights out, the theater marquees switched off and all the store windows dark, it was like pursuing a half-materialized ghost through a dim nightmare.

Making it still worse, I had in tow an incipient case of the screaming meemies. His friends called him Brandy.

Captain Dennis Brandy, ex-Army Intelligence, discharged to the reserve, was the newest man on our staff and the most jittery. Battle nerves. He'd brought back a fine skinful of 'em. He couldn't sit still or stand still, so it was a good thing the girl was keeping him on the move.

She was really his case, not mine. Brandy's job was to shadow the babe, and my part, as outlined to me by our chief, Mr. Humbert Drumm, director and sole owner of the Drumm Detective Agency, was to keep a comradely but wary eye on him. This I had been doing so long now and so faithfully that my feet felt worn off up to the knee-caps.

It was a few minutes past nine. The girl had just come from the Sutton movie theater on Fifty-seventh Street and now she was headed down Third Avenue toward the Forties, walking fast. Mr. Drumm hadn't told us why we were watching her—his policy was to guard his clients' confidences even from his own operatives when possible—but we did know her name was Gaye Thorne.

Miss Thorne had glossy, raven-black hair which made her easily discernible in a crowd. She also had a very pretty face which we'd glimpsed with regrettable infrequency because we'd viewed her almost exclusively from the rear. We'd become thoroughly familiar with most of the many expensive hats, shoes and coats she owned, including two minks, as seen from the back. Her calves were a pleasant pair to keep in sight, but they were very much like any other pair of calves, and in time they'd become a little monotonous. This had turned out to be a very dull assignment. It was in fact, except for Brandy, who made it simultaneously nerve-racking in his own peculiar way.

All the information we'd picked up about this young woman was innocuous and completely routine. All the paid spying we'd done on her had produced no reports which wouldn't have been heard calmly if read to her grandmother from a pulpit.

I'd come to the conclusion that Gaye Thorne was probably one of the most chaste and certainly one of the most lonely dolls in greater New York. She hadn't had a single visitor in her apartment and most of the time she'd

gone her solitary way unsquired. On those few exceptional occasions when she'd gone out accompanied, her companion had been a middle-aged female of the maiden aunt type, and they'd had tea together at Schrafft's. Considering that she was a particularly luscious bit of wolf-bait, I looked on this as a remarkable circumstance, but I didn't let it throw me. Brandy, on the other hand, was constantly bothered by this girl. There was something about her that kept him on edge.

"I can't stop thinking about those pants pockets she bought," he said.

I'd become more or less resigned to hearing Brandy mutter about those pants pockets she'd bought, but I was tired. It had been a long, hard day, during which Miss Thorne had led us a merry chase to nowhere and back again, that is, she was finally on her way home now. The weather was a mess—a raw February wind loaded with melting snow that plastered slush over the sidewalks and flooded the clogged gutters with unavoidable, icy puddles. I wanted to go home, change to dry socks and hoist my feet onto a radiator. I didn't want to hear Brandy brooding any more about those pants pockets she'd bought.

You probably know the kind I mean. Assuming you're a male, you eventually find a hole worn through the bottom of a side pocket of your trousers. If you're a bachelor who's impatient about such things, like me, you fix the hole by sticking a piece of adhesive tape over it, which won't stay there long. If you're fortunate enough to be married to a domestically inclined woman, she buys a separate side trousers pocket for a dime, cuts out the old one, sews in the new one, and you're all set, until the new one springs a new hole. That's the kind of pants pocket Brandy had on his troubled mind.

"MY GOD," I said, "it's a week now since she bought 'em and you're still in a stew over 'em!"

"She'd never been inside that particular five-and-ten before," he pointed out. "She didn't know her way around. She had to ask a clerk which counter the pants pockets were on. Then she bought six. Six extra pants pockets all at once. I keep wondering what for."

As a subject for speculation I could take it or leave it.

"The next day she bought six more," Brandy persisted. "They didn't have that many more at Woolworth's, so she had to shop around until she found 'em. That made a total of twelve extra side pants pockets and somehow they were very important to her."

"Maybe she wanted to send 'em to some guy in the service," I said, stepping into another frigid puddle of slush, "and I hope I don't hear any more about 'em."

"She hasn't mailed any packages," he reminded me. "She hasn't seen any men. If she wanted those pockets put into some slacks of her own, she wouldn't do it herself, because she's not the type who'd know how to sew that well. She'd have it done by a tailor. But she hasn't—" He stopped short. "Look at her, Sam! There she goes again!"

I looked at the girl and saw nothing to become alarmed about. Gaye Thorne had merely stepped into a little pet shop.

Brandy, however, took this as a signal to action. He slogged across the avenue after her, eased himself into the shop.

As usual, the girl hustled out with her purchase and ignored Brandy. Presently, while I continued to stalk her on my frozen feet, he caught up with me.

"Mixed canary seed," he reported.

"So all right," I said impatiently. "What's so worrisome about that?"

Brandy replied: "She doesn't own a canary."

"How do you know?"

"She hasn't acquired one since I began shadowing her," he explained. "If she'd had one before that, she'd know about feeding it by now. But when the clerk asked her what kind of bird seed she wanted, she was completely blank on the subject. She didn't know there are different kinds—special seed to stimulate singing, seed for conditioning birds, seed for nesting birds and seed for moulting birds. She chose one kind at random. It didn't matter what sort she got, she just wanted some bird seed—a five-pound bag of it!"

Aching to call it a night and head for home, I just kept plodding after Miss Thorne in the snowy gloom, with Brandy splashing along beside me, still bothered.

"What can a girl do with five pounds of mixed canary seed," he ruminated out loud, "besides feed it to a canary which she hasn't got?"

Not attempting an answer, I gratefully watched Gaye Thorne disappear into the swank little apartment building where she

lived. Brandy and I waited until the lights came on behind her Venetian blinds on the second floor. I assumed she'd be staying there the rest of the night, as she always did, but Brandy was fidgety with an uncertainty which I couldn't account for.

He headed back to the all-night hamburger emporium on the corner. I absorbed a cup of hot coffee while he shuttered himself inside a phone booth. He was making his nightly report to our boss. When he came out he didn't look any easier in his mind.

"We're called off," he informed me.

"Mr. Drumm said that?"

He nodded. "Mr. Drumm's client has decided the girl has had enough watching."

"Thank God! Now I can forget her."

OBVIOUSLY, however, Brandy wasn't going to stop fretting over her. He perched on a stool from which he would watch her lighted windows, ordered coffee, worried it with a spoon and then left it untasted. Now and then he glanced at me in a wistful way, as if appealing to me to join him in his peculiar perturbations.

"The thing that bothers me the most is that cake decorator and cookie maker set," he said.

What can you say to a guy who broods over somebody else's cake decorator and cookie maker set? To me it seems a very useful little gadget to anyone who likes to decorate cakes and make cookies. The cookie making part of it is simply three or four dough-cutters in various fancy shapes. The cake decorator, as you probably know, consists of a cloth bag open at one end and having a funnel-shaped metal device at the other. Onto this you screw one of the nozzles that come with the set. Then you stuff the bag with whipped cream and gently squeeze it. The stuff comes out in a stream and can be dabbed and trailed about in artistic designs on pastry. Or you can fill it with mayonnaise and beautify your salads.

"Brandy," I said, "if a girl wishes to prac-



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tice making whipped cream rosebuds on lady-fingers, I think it's a nice, harmless way to spend her spare time."

He gave me another of his queer looks, reproaching me for not seeing more in it than that. "Miss Thorne has never baked a cake or a cookie in her whole life," he said. "She's definitely not the batter-whipping type. She never cooks anything at all in her kitchen, but eats out three times a day, even including breakfast. Obviously she comes of a rich family who have always had that sort of thing done for them by the hired help. Miss Thorne has a maid, but a non-cooking one who comes in for only an hour a day to tidy up. She hasn't bought any bakery goods to decorate, either. Besides, she wouldn't do that. If she wanted a fancy cake for herself, or to give to somebody, she'd pay a baker to trim it up. No, Sam."

"So?"

"So she wanted that cake decorator for something special, to use in some way the manufacturer never intended."

"For God's sake," I protested, "what else could it be used for?"

"I don't know." He sounded forlorn about it, but now he was looking at me hard and earnestly. "Sam, I noticed the janitor poking into one of the refuse cans in front of her apartment this morning. He fished something out. The cookie makers. She'd thrown away the dough cutters without having used them, but she's keeping the cake decorator." Brandy's mood was getting darker than the brown-out, thanks to this. "You know what else I saw in that refuse can? The pockets. Not all twelve of them. Just eight. She's still got the other four. But every one of those eight had a little hole cut in the bottom corner of it."

This was news to me. Brandy had made this mysterious discovery before I'd joined him this morning, and he'd been mulling it over for the past twelve hours. Well, I could see how a strange but trivial thing like that might get tangled up in a peculiar mind like Brandy's. He was so persistently interested in it that it began to bother me, too, a little.

"She'd had something inside some of those pockets," he added. "One of them was all white inside, white with flour. What would a girl want with a pocketful of flour, particularly when the pocket's been ruined by a hole cut in the bottom and isn't attached to anybody's pants?"

"Look, Brandy. You weren't hired to explain this girl's preoccupation with such things as spare pockets and cake prettifiers. Your job was merely to report her movements, which you've done—expertly, too, I may add. You've earned your money and a nice fee for Mr. Drumm, and now it's all over, remember? We needn't give a moment's

thought to the flour in Miss Thorne's discarded pockets, and I for one am not going to dwell on the subject. Let's go home."

He didn't move. "But Sam, that flour is the only foodstuff I've seen her buy at any market. In fact, it was the first of her strange purchases. Five pounds of flour, but nothing else. Except the salt. She went back next day for the box of table salt. And that isn't all. Don't forget the shot she bought at the gun store. Ten pounds of that, each time—first ten pounds of Size Twelve shot, then ten pounds of Size Eight the next day. And when she bought it she didn't know any more about the different kinds and sizes of shot than she did about bird seed tonight."

"Let's simply assume she's a girl of many hobbies," I suggested. "She not only likes to put whipped cream frills on gingerbread men, she also likes to reload old shotgun shells. Please, let's go home."

This earned me another of Brandy's hurt looks. With him it was no kidding matter. "But she didn't buy any gunpowder, Sam," he reminded me seriously. "Just the shot. The Size Twelve shot wasn't right for her purpose, whatever it was, because it's too small, so she tried the larger Size Eight next. That couldn't have been right either, or she wouldn't have bought the canary seed tonight."

"All right, Brandy," I said, feeling sorely tried, "but be a good boy and call it a night."

HE STILL hadn't moved. Looking more worried by the minute, he gazed across the street at Gaye Thorne's windows. "Something's on that girl's mind, something serious. She's not going to stay home this evening. She's going to come out again pretty soon and go somewhere."

"Let her." Then I couldn't help asking: "What makes you so sure of that?"

"I've come to know her moods, just from the way she carries herself. Sometimes she just sauntered, killing time. At other times she had normally interesting things to do, like buying books or going to a concert or having her hair done. All the while, though, she's been thinking about something, planning something. When she started buying that odd assortment of stuff, she was feeling her way with it somehow, making decisions, moving toward an objective. These last few days she's come closer to it and it's grown more important to her. The quick way she went home tonight told me it's urgent now. I think she's going to keep some sort of appointment."

"And you want to see if she does?"

He looked uncomfortable and apologetic. "I know I shouldn't. She's no business of mine any more. But I can't help worrying about her, somehow. You go on home, Sam,

and I'll be along later. Don't bother to wait."

I couldn't conscientiously do that. He had me worried about *him* now, and besides, my instructions from Mr. Drumm were to watch him pretty carefully.

At first glance you'd never have suspected that Brandy's gears were out of mesh in some peculiar way. I'd known him before he'd gone into the Intelligence service, and he hadn't been this way then. Naturally he'd come back changed. He'd acquired the box-shouldered, rod-backed bearing of the military but he was still a rather wistful-looking, boyish sort of guy. He seemed normally self-confident, too, but he wasn't. Actually he was a hundred and forty pounds of jerky nerves. Sometimes he was as cocksure as he'd formerly been—at other times he couldn't make up his mind at all, even about trivial things, such as which tie to wear today. And he had extreme ups and downs. He could be blackly moody to an almost suicidal degree, or feverish about nothing important, as now.

Certainly he wasn't nuts, but just as certainly he was queer in his thinking and his reactions. I didn't fully understand him, because he hadn't talked about himself at all, but I liked him. He was genuinely friendly, understanding and plenty smart, although inclined to go off on odd tangents.

I'd been warned about this. In fact, it was why I'd been ordered to haunt Brandy while Brandy trailed the girl. Mr. Drumm, who is academically old-fashioned in spite of his efforts to be one of the boys, had put it to me in this way.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say Brandon's a psychopathic case, Sam. He is suffering from combat shock, however, and in fitting himself back into civilian life he does have many difficult adjustments to make. Gradually he'll return to normal. I was glad to take him on because I need trained men here at my agency, and having a job will help him psychologically to a considerable degree. His experience as a private detective with the Shurr Agency before the war, plus his experience in Army Intelligence, will in time make him a very valuable operative. Meanwhile, however, he's inclined to be erratic. He must be guided, watched and steadied down in case he's hit by an attack of nerves. That will be your assignment, Sam, as long as Brandon's shadowing the Thorne girl."

That had been two weeks ago. Day and night for two weeks now Brandy had been tailing Miss Thorne all over town, and I'd been spooking along, ready to pick up the pieces in case he exploded. Although he was still in one piece so far, I'd spent those two weeks wondering just exactly what was screwy about him. I'd come to the conclusion that, chiefly, he was afraid of himself. He

was nursing some sort of secret dread and didn't dare let it out in words.

Tonight he'd mumbled to himself: "That's the trouble. I'm too smart for my own good." Maybe that *was* the trouble, in some obscure manner—maybe that was the key to his present condition. I didn't know. But I was sure of one thing—I couldn't leave him on his own now, with that girl's cake decorator preying on his mind. My move was to try to persuade him away from it.

"Suppose she does go off to keep some sort of appointment and you find out what it is," I said. "What'll it get you? We're off duty now and not being paid. It's a cold, wet night. We both need some rest. Anyway, this hunch of yours may be entirely off the beam, in which case you'd sit here all night without—"

Just then the lights in Gaye Thorne's window went out. Brandy grew tense. I told myself again that this little guy certainly had a way of figuring things, even if he did do it in a wacky way, and we both watched the entrance of that apartment building. Within a minute, sure enough, Gaye Thorne showed. Brandy didn't put on an I-told-you-so grin. He didn't even seem pleased with himself. Instead, he looked scared.

MISS THORNE went past in a hurry, heading east. Then Brandy slid off the stool and I knew for sure my night's work wasn't finished, even though I wouldn't get paid for the rest of it. We dodged out into the snow and ice again.

The girl was walking at a fast, steady clip. At Second Avenue, she turned south. The brown-out was a deeper shade of brown over here and the farther she went the darker it grew. She was in the Upper Thirties when she turned toward the East River again. The gloom was so thick I could just barely see her. We were halfway down the block toward First Avenue when Brandy tugged at my sleeve.

"She's stopped."

The girl was now only the vaguest shadow. The only lights at this intersection were the traffic signals. I could see just the upper half of Gaye Thorne, mink-coated and faintly red in the glow as she crossed to the farther side of the avenue. Brandy and I moved closer, quietly, but the visibility didn't improve.

"She's waiting there," Brandy said.

She seemed to be moving her arms and bending over, but that's all I could make out. Brandy wasn't seeing any more than I, and I could feel him getting jumpier with the uncertainty. Then the girl straightened quickly and, after standing still a few seconds, went southward on First Avenue at a run.

At the next intersection she stopped. A glow appeared around her feet. She had a small

flashlight and was using it for no reason that I could figure out, except possibly to inspect her galoshes. This went on for ten seconds or so, then she was off again—not running this time, but walking fast, still southward.

At the next intersection she did that business with the light all over again. Although I still couldn't see how this girl's actions concerned us, I began to agree with Brandy that her behavior was something to puzzle over.

While she made off farther down First Avenue, Brandy stopped at the spot where she'd stood for a moment. He struck a match, cupped it against the wet wind and held it close to the soot-blackened slush. His upward glance at me, full of nervous astonishment, brought my head down close to his. He pointed to several straw-colored pellets. They looked like amber wampum beads.

"Canary seed," he said.

He was up and off again. The girl was still rushing southward, using her light at irregular intervals. At the next three corners Brandy got another match going and each time he found more canary seed.

"Brandy," I said, "I admit all this is pretty interesting in a cockeyed way. But why are we pursuing a girl who's chasing herself all over the east side on a miserable night, planting bird food in the slush?"

He didn't answer. Trying to keep the girl in sight, he was once more on his way. This crazy race was getting to be more than I could take. Gaye Thorne couldn't have picked a gloomier, boggier section of New York for her crazy peregrinations. The avenue here was lined with garages, warehouses and second-hand car lots. One place we passed smelled like a slaughterhouse and was one. Although the very hub of Manhattan, including Grand Central Station, was not many blocks away, this section looked and felt like a metropolitan jungle. When Gaye Thorne finally turned westward into a cross-street in the Twenties I was ready to let her go altogether, bird seed and all.

Then the car came cutting through the slush of the street in the same direction, from behind us. Its headlights stayed on until it was almost abreast of us. They were switched out as the car gathered speed. Its license plate was unreadable and we couldn't see the driver at all. Plainly enough, however, his interest was centered on the girl. He swung to the curb just ahead of her and stopped. Very dimly, we saw the right-hand door swing open and a silhouetted figure emerge. It came out crouched and stayed crouched.

Brandy gasped. He broke into a frantic run, slipping in the half-melted snow, yelling at the girl: "Look out, look out!"

The gun flashed twice in the crouched man's

hand. I'd lost the girl among the dark tenebrous fronts. I couldn't see her at all now. The car was easier to discern, a shape outlined against the glistening wet of the street. Its door slammed shut and its engine whirred. It cut away again and was skidding out of sight at the next corner, its lights still off, when I caught up with Brandy.

He was bending over Gaye Thorne. His breath was fast, his eyes had a white glitter in them, he was slapping his hands together, all twitching nerves. The girl had fallen backward and her mink coat had spread open to show us where the two bullets had hit through her white blouse squarely between her breasts. She was dead.

Then, having heard footfalls tramping rapidly toward us, I looked up into a strange face—a cop's.

CHAPTER TWO

All This and Homicide Too

IT WAS long past midnight when Sergeant Hanley of the Homicide Squad escorted us back to the starting line of that murder-race—Gaye Thorne's apartment.

We'd been questioned searchingly at the precinct station. Heads had wagged over the written statements we'd signed, and with reason. Brandy had told them all about everything, including the twelve pockets, the bag of bird seed, the twenty pounds of shot, the cake decorator set and the rest, and I had verified every cockeyed detail of it. I hadn't wanted to, but I'd had to—it was all the gospel truth. It seemed just as dizzy to them as it did to me, but they went to work on it with efficient persistence anyway, just as if it might possibly make sense some day.

"I hope you're satisfied, pal," I said ruefully while we were on our way back to Gaye Thorne's apartment. "Thanks to your fretting over that girl we're messed up in a murder case, which is something Mr. Drumm won't approve of."

"She'd have been murdered anyway," Brandy answered, "but I guess you're right about the rest of it. Why didn't I mind my own business? Why don't I stop worrying about things? If I weren't so damn smart I'd be just smart enough to let well enough alone. I'll never learn."

I mulled that over, watching him. He was in one of his black, despairing moods of self-censure. Ever since the moment of the girl's death he'd been bleakly heartsick. Jumpy as a cat, he seemed to fear a new disaster might happen at any minute and it would be all his fault.

Three members of the Homicide Squad were methodically poking about Gaye

Thorne's apartment when the sergeant steered us in. He left us standing near the door and reported to the oldest of the three, a compactly built, kindly-mannered man with curly, close-cropped white hair. I recognized him as Deputy Inspector Knapp, chief of the squad. He nodded to me genially. "Evening, Squire," he greeted, then his curious gaze turned on Brandy, who was glancing around jerkily as if he were about to jump out of his suit, shoes, skin and all.

"Do you know Captain Dennis Brandon, Inspector?" I said. "He's Mr. Drumm's newest man. Before going into Army Intelligence he was with the Shurr Agency."

Nodding companionably, the inspector gripped Brandy's hand and looked mildly startled when he felt the nerves twitching in it. The Shurr Agency was no more. A small one to begin with, it had lost most of its staff to the armed services and, more recently, Shurr himself had died of a heart attack, thereby winding up his business. Brandy had come back from overseas to find his old job non-existent. I'd heard, although I wasn't sure of it, that Brandy couldn't have gone back to it anyway, that Shurr had fired him, which was what had prompted him to enlist so early in the war. I hadn't even known he'd been given a medical discharge—he'd been avoiding his own friends since his return for some reason—until one day I'd found him wandering around Broadway like a lost soul. I'd jockeyed him into his new berth with Mr. Drumm and was sharing my apartment with him. Inspector Knapp's nod seemed to signify he knew all this, although he probably didn't, and he gestured as if to say we should make ourselves comfortable until such time as he got around to us.

He stoked his underslung pipe, took over our signed statements which Sergeant Hanley had brought along, and settled into the victim's softest chair to read them.

Brandy's agitation suddenly broke out in a fit of pacing. He marched back and forth between the living room and the bedroom, with side excursions into the bath, frowning into every corner but touching nothing. It was a classy layout with a modernized Victorian motif, and the furnishings, including the interior decorator's fee, must have added up to a very pretty penny. The Homicide boys weren't musing it up any more than they could help, but they were distracted in their careful work by Brandy's jitters.

Inspector Knapp began ticking off the odd items in Brandy's statement. "Flour," he said, speaking through his fuming pipe.

The bag of flour sat on a shelf of the kitchenette. It had been torn open and about one-third was gone. Brandy began to look scared again. His deductions were being

proved absolutely correct. The kitchenette shelves were bare except for a half dozen assorted bottles of liquor, all almost empty, a cocktail shaker, a few bar glasses and the flour, which was the only item of food in the place, unless you wanted to include the salt. Inspector Knapp ticked off that item next.

Salt—a cylindrical box of it, half full. But there was no salt-shaker in the apartment.

Pants pockets—four, in a drawer of the period secretary. Each had a little hole cut in it. The outsides of them were clean, although the insides were soiled. They'd contained something at one time but all were now empty.

INSPECTOR Knapp wagged his head over them, spent a few moments looking into closets and came back to his chair, trying to conceal a feeling of befuddlement. He'd learned that the only articles of male attire in the whole apartment were those four spare pants pockets.

Shot—two heavy paper bags of it in the same desk drawer. Brandy was permitted to take them into his hands and heft them. He said, looking around at me wide-eyed, "About half gone," and his voice shook a little.

"Sand," the inspector said next.

Sand? This was a subject Brandy had somehow omitted to mention.

Knapp was handed one of the many handbags that had belonged to Gaye Thorne. Opening it, he drew a deep breath. The purse was full of sand. He looked inquiringly at Brandy.

"That was last week," Brandy explained. "It came right after the flour and the salt. I trailed her that day over to a construction company's lot on the East River, in the Fifties. The amount of sand she wanted was so small by their standards that the foreman gave it to her for free. He didn't have anything to put it in, though, so she scooped it right into her purse."

Knapp reserved comment. He frowned down the page until he came to tonight. In a persistent but baffled tone he said: "Canary seed."

Canary seed—the bag, half full, was in the kitchenette. There was also a mound of seed in the waste-basket beside the secretary. But of course, as Brandy had accurately deduced, Miss Thorne hadn't owned a canary or any other sort of seed-eating pet.

Knapp put down the written statements, evidently feeling they weren't getting him anywhere. Brandy, however, wouldn't let him change the subject.

"You haven't asked about the cake decorator," he reminded the inspector.

The detectives shook their heads at each other.

Brandy became sharply alarmed. "No cake decorator here?"

They shook their heads again. No cake decorator here. Brandy seemed stunned.

Knapp frowned while shuffling through several other papers which his men had turned over to him. Proffering an envelope to Brandy, he asked with a sigh: "What about this?"

Feeling light-headed, I looked over Brandy's shoulder. The envelope contained the folded front page of a newspaper published in New London, Connecticut. One item was circled with pencil. The headline read: LOCAL GIRL ARRESTED FOR PRANK. The local girl was Gaye Thorne.

It seemed that a patrolman on tour had come upon Miss Thorne doing a very odd thing at ten o'clock the previous night at an intersection on First Avenue, Manhattan. She had an open gallon can of white paint which she was pouring onto the sidewalk in a thick stream to form a circle about six feet in diameter. It seemed, further, that a dog was sitting in the center of this circle. The dog was described as a smoke-colored German shepherd. Here occurred a line reading: *While Miss Thorne argued with Patrolman Hodgins, the dog disappeared, evidently having gone his own way, embarrassed. Miss Thorne asserted that the dog was not hers, that she didn't know to whom it belonged, and that it was none of Patrolman Hodgins' business why she'd poured a circle of white paint on the pavement.* She'd been hustled over to night court on a charge of malicious mischief and fined ten dollars. Throughout, she'd flatly refused to explain the incident.

This news story was one of those wacky items often used as fillers in the New York papers, and the wire service had transmitted it to Miss Thorne's home town. It had come back to her from there with a handwritten note attached. The note was sternly terse:

Dear Gaye,

Explain the meaning of this, if you please.
If you were drunk, don't lie to me.

Father

Of course Miss Thorne's answer was not on record as yet. Brandy's response, however, was to stare at nothing in deep thought, turning pale. Inspector Knapp spoke to him twice before he snapped back to the immediate scene.

"I wasn't trailing her then," he said apologetically, pushing a trembling forefinger at the date on the newspaper page. "That was days before Mr. Drumm assigned me to watch her."

The inspector then asked a question as if regretting the necessity. "Are these all the

strange things she did? Not anything else?"

Brandy shook his head quickly. "Everything else was perfectly normal. That is, she shopped in department stores, bought stockings and cosmetics, went to plays and concerts and movies and her beauty parlor, bought books and magazines, ate in various restaurants and stayed here a lot. Nothing out of the way at all—except that she was alone so much. It's all in the reports I gave to Mr. Drumm."

Knapp rose again. "We're going over to your boss's office right now."

EVIDENTLY he'd already phoned Mr. Drumm. We found a light shining through the pebbled pane of the office entrance. Mr. Drumm himself escorted us into his private sanctum and gestured us to chairs. The name of his agency was plastered in big letters of tarnished gold on every window. The suite was neat and clean enough, but still it seemed musty. It was conservative and stiff, just like Mr. Drumm.

Mr. Drumm looked shrewdly alert behind his desk. He had a very long, thin neck and wore high starched collars. With a lock of rust-red hair falling across his forehead, he looked a little like a sagacious turkey. He wore rimless pince-nez. His dress was as somber as an undertaker's and as precise as the long sharp line of his nose. You looked at him and knew the tenets of his agency were accuracy, strict conformity to the contract, and respectability. Inspector Knapp had summoned him from his bed, but he appeared wide awake and astutely capable.

"Dennis," he said in his dry tones. "And Sam." He always called us by our first names in an effort to be fraternal. "Evidently you continued to watch Miss Thorne after I'd instructed you to desist. Ordinarily I would reprimand you for failing to follow my instructions to the letter. In this case, however, we would have been involved regardless. Since my policy is to cooperate as fully as possible with the police, I hope you've given Inspector Knapp all the useful information you possess. Well, Inspector?"

"Why were you—"

"Why were we watching Miss Thorne?" Mr. Drumm not only knew all the answers, he usually knew most of the questions before they were asked. "I was retained by her father, Gilbert P. Thorne, of New London, Connecticut. He's a retired ship builder, quite wealthy. The family is also socially prominent. The girl is their only child. She came to New York about a year ago because she insisted on living her own independent life. Although she did this against her father's wishes, he kept her well supplied with money. Mr. Thorne is a godly man but he described

his daughter as a thoroughly modern young woman. As he put it to me, he had worried about her free and easy ways back home, and he feared the wicked city might be her downfall. Somehow he doubted that her letters home told the whole story of her conduct here. He wanted a more truthful report than he felt he was getting."

"So he could—"

"So he could save her from herself in time, in case she began playing fast and loose? Yes." Having anticipated another of the inspector's questions, Mr. Drumm placed his eight fingertips and his two thumbs precisely together. "My agency has now reported on Miss Thorne's activities over two different periods. The first began six months ago."

"I'd like to see—"

"Our reports on that period? Of course."

Mr. Drumm rose, pulling his key-ring from his pocket. Selecting a certain drawer of a certain file cabinet, he unlocked it and immediately put his hand on the desired folder. This he brought to the inspector, who leafed through the reports rapidly.

"On the whole—" the inspector began again.

"On the whole, thoroughly reassuring," Mr. Drumm took it up. "At that time Miss Thorne hadn't moved to her present apartment. She was then living in Greenwich Village. This place was what had really aroused her father's misgivings. Private street entrance, Bohemian neighbors—a perfect dwelling-place for sin, as it were. Miss Thorne might have had a man there all night every night and nobody would have noticed. As you see, however, I was able to report to her father that her behavior was impeccable."

"Cooney," the inspector said, reading the operative's name signed to the reports. "He's not—"

"He's not employed by this agency any longer, no. I discharged him some time ago as unreliable. He's drinking himself to death, a sorry shell of the man he once was. At the time he had Miss Thorne under surveillance, however, his information was trustworthy."

Knapp made a note of the dates. Cooney had watched Miss Thorne from June 10 through June 24 of the previous year. The inspector then turned to the first of Brandy's reports, which began on January 17. Leafing through them and coming upon additional references to pants pockets and cake decorators, he mused up his curly white hair.

"If Mr. Thorne was satisfied about his daughter's behavior the first time, why—"

"Why did he retain me to watch her again, after six months? His misgivings had returned. This was chiefly due to a very peculiar thing she did, which got into the newspapers. Taking a gallon of paint, she—" A gesture by the inspector stopped Mr. Drumm.

"You know about that, then. Well, with my client's interests in mind, I sent Mr. Thorne a clipping, making no comment on it except that I was always at his service in case he felt he needed me. He replied, instructing me to watch his daughter again."

Inspector Knapp read the carbon of the short letter which Mr. Drumm had addressed to Thorne. Then he shifted to the second batch of reports.

"Something funny here." He managed to get it out quickly, without being interrupted. "This information of Brandon's is not a true picture. Far from it!"

Brandy stood up suddenly, white as a ghost. Mr. Drumm stiffened.

"Inspector," the boss said indignantly, "that is an entirely unwarranted statement. I haven't the slightest reason to doubt—"

This time it was Mr. Drumm who was interrupted. "Please listen to me," Knapp said. "According to this information, the girl never saw a man, not even once. Well, I've questioned her neighbors and several employees of the apartment house in which she lived. She was about to be asked to move. She had men aplenty in that place—one every night, and he never went home early, if at all. There was also drinking aplenty. God knows that girl's father's fears were justified. She'd turned herself into a high-class tramp."

Brandy gaped at him. Mr. Drumm's mouth was open almost as wide.

"Why it's impossible!" Mr. Drumm protested. "In the light of all those reports it's utterly—"

"If these reports are a true record of the girl's movements, then obviously she'd been tipped off that she was being watched."

I BELIEVED it instantly. All along I'd wondered how it happened that such a luscious doll never had a wolf slaving at her pretty heels. I'd also wondered why she'd never once noticed Brandy's proximity during these past two weeks. Knapp had stated the answer. For two straight weeks she'd been putting on an act, well aware that Brandy was dogging her around. His reports were exactly what she'd meant them to be in order to fool her father.

"Tipped off!" Mr. Drumm echoed. "But that's likewise impossible. No one could have learned through this agency—"

His head pivoted on his stem of a neck and he peered at Brandy. In moments of stress his eyes, which were amber-colored, looked like those of an eagle ready to pounce on its prey. It was a very bad moment for Brandy—he began to shake in his chair—because Mr. Drumm's suspicions were evident.

If Brandy had worked the job single-handed, he could have simply falsified his re-

ports, omitting the sinful details. But since I'd tagged along, he'd had to tip off the girl, and she'd had to put on her saintly act for a run of two straight weeks—obviously a strain on one of her amorous nature. It would have been a neat if unscrupulous way for Brandy to add to his income, and for the girl to avoid her father's wrath if not the loss of her generous allowance.

I wasn't too upset by Mr. Drumm's suspicions. In the private detecting game suspicions flourish. Anybody in it can suspect anybody else of anything at all without half trying, and usually does. But it was having a terrific effect on Brandy. I could see the chill sweat beading out on his forehead.

"Wait a minute," I said quickly. "I've been in on this from the beginning. If that dame was tipped off, which she certainly must have been, Brandy didn't do it."

There was silence. My defense of Brandy did him no good. It did me no good either. On the contrary, what I'd accomplished with those few words was to include myself in Mr. Drumm's suspicions. He was thinking now that Brandy and I had both tipped off the girl on a fifty-fifty basis.

Inspector Knapp, shaking his white head, now produced another bit of evidence he'd brought from the girl's apartment. "Found this stuffed in a cubbyhole of her desk along with some other old letters," he explained. It was a letter in a woman's handwriting which said, in a few quick, perturbed lines:

June 13

Gaye, dear,

I've just learned from a remark which your father let slip that while he was in New York he hired a private detective to watch you. Please, dear, do be most careful. You know what an unforgiving man your father is and what will happen if you should make a misstep.

Mother

"That's more like it!" I said quickly. "It was the girl's mother who tipped her off both times, then."

Mr. Drumm was frowning. "A strange situation! A man engages me to watch his daughter. His own wife warns the girl her movements are being reported to him. The girl carefully governs her behavior so as to deceive my operatives and, through them, my client. That is, my reports are true but nevertheless misleading."

This, I was relieved to observe, meant that Mr. Drumm had relaxed his suspicions of Brandy and me. "It puts me in a most peculiar position, and I must say I don't like it," he added.

"Just what did her mother mean in this letter?" Knapp inquired. "What would happen to her if her father found out the truth?"

"She would never have received another penny from him. In fact, he would have disinherited her." Mr. Drumm shook his head, deplorably. "However, I shall submit Brandon's reports to him exactly as written. After all, they are the story as we know it and I see nothing to be gained by besmirching a dead girl's character. I shall let them stand unless the newspaper accounts make it necessary for me to explain the real facts to my client."

The office entrance opened. Sergeant Hanley came in, carrying an official file envelope containing another piece of evidence. He and Knapp went into a brief huddle over it. I heard Knapp ask in a perplexed tone: "You sure of that? Half a block farther along?"

"No question of it, sir," the sergeant insisted. "This thing was picked up a good hundred yards west of the spot where the girl was killed. That is, she never lived long enough to get as far along the block as this thing got. She was shot down a good hundred yards short of the point where this was dropped to the pavement."

He held up the evidence, and just one look at it made me feel I'd had more than enough for one night. It was the late Gaye Thorne's cake decorator.

CHAPTER THREE

Canine Go-Between

AFTER the second day, the Gaye Thorne murder faded out of the newspapers. The police questioned suspects without releasing any names—these being, of course, the various men who had enjoyed Miss Thorne's hospitality. The obvious angle was that one of them had fallen hard for her and killed her in a fit of jealousy, but no arrests were announced, so presumably it couldn't be pinned on any of them.

As for Brandy, he had no use whatever for such a theory.

"It leaves out the bird seed, the cake decorator and all the rest," he complained.

He kept muttering to himself about the case, unable to keep it out of those queer mulling thoughts of his. It was destined for the unsolved file and well on its way to being forgotten by everybody except Brandy.

I was relieved, after almost a week of this, when Mr. Drumm finally came up with another assignment for him, which I hoped would take his mind off the fascinating trap-pings in the Thorne case.

Mr. Drumm had instructed us to come to his office at nine o'clock that night.

Leaving the elevator, we found Ned Cooney at the office entrance, groping for the door-knob. He wasn't having much luck finding it. He swayed, wobble-kneed and red-eyed,

smelling to high heaven of cheap liquor. He hadn't worked since Mr. Drumm had fired him for drinking on the job but somehow he was still able to keep himself tanked up. I pulled him away from the door.

"Look, Cooney, Mr. Drumm ordered you to keep clear of this place. He's got a client in there. Don't make trouble for yourself."

Cooney sagged against the wall, wheezing. He seemed too soused to recognize me, although I'd worked with him for years. Never sober, he had a way of wandering back to the agency at odd intervals to beg Mr. Drumm to take him on again and to pick up a buck or two from the staff. I put a dollar-bill into his fumbling hand to get rid of him and steered him back toward the elevator.

"Cooney?" Brandy was eagerly following him. "You're the one who watched Gaye Thorne the first time. I want to talk to you about her."

Cooney blinked at him. "She's dead now," he said, thick-tongued. "Let her resht in peash."

He stumbled into the elevator and I tugged Brandy back. Cooney was too soaked to recall any details, much less talk straight. Besides, I wanted Brandy to slough off the damned Thorne murder. Happily, he remembered Mr. Drumm's insistence on punctuality, so he had to let Cooney go, with jittery reluctance. He drifted after me into Mr. Drumm's inner office, a frown on his face, the Thorne case obviously still on his mind.

"Mrs. Lambert," Mr. Drumm said, standing, with a bow toward his client, "these men are Captain Brandon and Mr. Squire, two of my best operatives. They'll handle your case."

Mrs. Lambert was the big-bosomed, jewel-sprinkled, generously-perfumed type. In her younger days, she'd undoubtedly been a perfect Gibson Girl. She was still remarkably pretty. Looking at us anxiously, she fingered a handkerchief and looked appealing. I remembered that she'd recently figured in a divorce suit, with juicy charges and counter-charges, which the papers had played up to locally sensational proportions. Whatever she had on her mind tonight, we weren't to learn about it right away.

"You drive a car, Sam," Mr. Drumm said. "Have you your driver's license? Good. You and Brandon are to go with Mrs. Lambert immediately. She'll explain to you the nature of the case. I'll wait here for your report."

She left her chair with matronly urgency and we trailed from the office in her flower-scented wake. A limousine was curbed in front of the building, a liveried chauffeur standing beside it. She told him he was dismissed for the night and ordered me to the wheel. "Go to the corner of Fifth Avenue and Eighty-second Street," she said. Brandy

followed her into the tonneau and I floated the car off. As we cruised across town Mrs. Lambert kept looking uneasily at her diamond wrist watch, but she didn't begin to explain until Central Park was unrolling on our left.

"I'm trying to find Ethel, my daughter Ethel," she began abruptly, but in rich, cultivated tones. "Ethel is seventeen. She left home two months ago, after a quarrel. She's still in the city somewhere, but I haven't seen her since and she won't tell me her present address. I don't hear from her at all except when she telephones to ask whether a letter has come for her, a letter from Jeff."

Brandy was listening, of course, but I suspected that one corner of his mind was still toying with Gaye Thorne's cake decorator.

"Jeff is my son. He's eighteen and with the Army in the Philippines. Ethel writes to him often, but she hasn't told him her new address either, because she's afraid he might tell me, so the letters he writes to her still come to my home. Ethel adores him. Every few days she phones me to ask if I have a letter for her from Jeff. She speaks to me as little as possible each time, and won't let me open the letters and read them to her over the phone. So when I do have one of Jeff's letters for her—" Mrs. Lambert spoke to me through the chauffeur's tube. "Keep the engine running after you stop, and keep the car lights on."

We were nearing Fifth Avenue and Eighty-second Street. Mrs. Lambert directed me to pull up to the curb just this side of the corner.

For a moment she looked up and down the avenue. The brown-out made this a gloomy spot. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, across the street, was all dark, but a faint glow radiated from the apartment windows above. Our client didn't immediately find whatever she was looking for.

"You must follow the dog," she said to me tensely. "Never mind the traffic lights. Drive as fast as you must in order to keep him in sight. If you're arrested for traffic violations, I'll pay the fines, of course. The all-important thing is that you must not lose the dog."

Brandy was sitting up straight. Something had begun to tick in that strange mind of his. "Whose dog?"

"Ethel's," Mrs. Lambert added in a quick, short breath: "There, he's coming now!"

AT FIRST I saw no dog. Then I sensed a movement and vaguely made him out. He was padding quietly along the side-street toward the avenue, a mere shadow. No one was leading him or following him. All by himself he jogged to the corner—a big, handsome, dark-colored police dog.

"Watch him!" Mrs. Lambert urged us.

Somehow this dog was causing Brandy to get excited. I could hear his breath whizzing in his nose, and his eyes were wide open as he watched. The dog turned at the opposite corner, came across to the one near which we were parked, stopped there and calmly sat down.

"Now!" Mrs. Lambert said.

She plucked an envelope from her purse. I got no more than a glimpse of it before she slid out of the car. She paused, looking up and down the avenue. The dog ignored her. Then she hurried up to him and did a peculiar thing.

The dog was wearing a collar to which a small leather pouch was attached. It hung down against his shaggy chest. Mrs. Lambert quickly opened this little bag, crammed the envelope inside it, then closed the clasp. Finally she hurried back into the car.

"Start off the instant he makes a move," she whispered to me. "Wherever he goes, follow him."

The dog sat there in the glow of our parking lamps, looking as if he didn't intend going anywhere at all, at least not right away.

Brandy asked: "Is this how Jeff's letters get to Ethel, then?"

"She insists on this," Mrs. Lambert explained. "It's the same thing every time. She trained the dog. It comes to a certain corner. I put the letter in the pouch, then it goes back to Ethel. In that way she gets Jeff's letters and at the same time keeps out of my reach. She doesn't want me to find her. But I must—I must persuade her to forget our silly quarrel and come back home."

"Pretty clever," Brandy said. "Ethel has unusual talents as a trainer. What's the dog's name?"

Mrs. Lambert didn't answer. This was an emergency for her. She was almost as nervous as Brandy.

We all sat watching the dog. He was a beautiful animal, with alert ears and keenly intelligent eyes, but something told me a stranger would be wise not to make a pass at him. There was a certain hint of savagery in him, although he seemed companionable enough as he sat there placidly on the corner with the little pouch hanging from his collar. Presently, as if taking his own sweet time about this peculiar business, he decided he'd be moving on.

"Now!" Mrs. Lambert exclaimed. "Don't let him get away!"

At first it struck me as not much of a job. The dog simply turned and ambled along the cross-street in the direction he'd come from. It would have been easy to keep up with him on foot. The car, in fact, was an immediate complication. The dog was going east on a west-bound street. Mrs. Lambert urged me

into it anyway, and I swung illegally around the corner. At the same moment the dog broke into a trot.

He was hard to see against the building-fronts as he went along, but otherwise I could follow him easily. At Madison Avenue a red light loomed, but I dodged through it under Mrs. Lambert's instructions, fortunately without meeting either a cop or any cars. I reflected that during my years as a private operative I'd tailed many different kinds of people, but never before a dog, and on the whole the dog made a much easier assignment. He didn't care that we were following him.

Then he put on more speed. In the middle of the block his fine pointed ears pricked up and he really stepped on it. He traveled with effortless swiftness, harder to see now and even harder to keep up with. Mrs. Lambert kept egging me on. The big car rolled with easy power, but the streets were still slippery and the dog was giving me a race.

His ears twitched again, and then he really got going. Still traveling eastward, he stretched himself out in a fast lope that would have overtaxed a whippet. Certainly the pace he set was too much for me. I weaved crazily around slower-moving cars, trying to keep him in sight, but now he was a full block ahead and already disappearing in the gloom.

Another red light was glaring a warning at me from the next corner. I squeezed more gas into the motor, preparing to wham through it. Just then a Lexington Avenue bus, northward bound and fully loaded, loomed across the intersection.

I hit the brakes with everything I had, practically standing on the pedal. At the same time I swerved in the bus's direction and closed my eyes. Behind me, Mrs. Lambert screamed faintly. I waited for the crash. After a moment I realized the car had skidded to a standstill and the only sound I could hear was the chattering of Brandy's teeth.

OPENING my eyes, I found the bus rolling on its way. It had just barely squeezed by. A few pedestrians had stopped to stare. The limousine was standing smack in the middle of the intersection, nosed slightly northward.

I kicked the starter and veered back, but the few seconds we'd lost made all the difference. The dog was out of sight. Still rolling eastward, we peered up and down every avenue we passed, without seeing him. Meanwhile Mrs. Latham had broken into sobs of despair.

"You've failed," she said through a dainty handkerchief held to her aristocratic nose. "It's no use. The dog's gone. We can't find him now."

"Mrs. Lambert," I explained, "we might be able to keep up with that dog on an open

country road, but on these busy city streets it's next to impossible. He goes too fast, the traffic's too thick and there are too many corners. It's so dark and he's so hard to see, it couldn't be done even on a motorcycle. This is a tough proposition. We'll have to think of ways and means."

"You've failed," she wailed again. "You've disappointed me bitterly."

"That's not entirely fair, Mrs. Lambert," Brandy said, sounding surprisingly unsympathetic. "This isn't the first time you've tried to trace that dog. You've done it before, on your own, but you didn't get anywhere. That's why you came to us. Well, just as Sam says, this calls for some figuring."

In a tone of dismissal Mrs. Lambert said: "Please take me home."

Brandy answered stubbornly: "Mr. Drumm is going to hear about this first. Head for the office, Sam, but stop at the *Times* office on the way."

Our client stiffened. "I beg your pardon! You'll take me home immediately!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lambert," Brandy said obdurately. "Not until we've straightened this thing out. I don't like the way you tried to fool us, and neither will Mr. Drumm." He gave my shoulder a poke. "Get going, Sam!"

Much more upset than Mrs. Lambert, he was chewing on his lower lip. He looked scared again, but unshakably determined in spite of it. Remembering that my orders were to keep him calmed down, I couldn't risk an argument. There was nothing to do but humor him. With Mrs. Lambert still sobbing to herself, I tooted back the way we'd come.

I stopped near browned-out Times Square and Brandy hustled off. After a few minutes he popped back with a pocketful of scribbled notes and an expression of high indignation on his face. He frowned at Mrs. Lambert so darkly that she shrank away from him. I had no idea what this was all about, but the sooner he cooled off, I thought, the better. I lost no time getting him back to the agency.

Mr. Drumm was still in his office, waiting for a report by telephone. He was astonished to see us trailing in with his tearful client still in tow. Her emotional state aroused his concern. Seeing her comfortably seated, he prepared to be stern with us. I signified to him that this scene was Brandy's. Brandy's face was hot, his cheeks two spots of feverish red. He knew he was doing a dangerous thing, but he couldn't stop himself now.

"This client plays tricks on us, Mr. Drumm," he said. "She hasn't taken us into her confidence. Instead, she's lied to us. She came to us under false pretenses."

Mr. Drumm's neck became as stiff as the high starched collar surrounding it. "I advise you to be most careful of what you say."

Brandy tossed the scribbled notes onto the chief's desk, then spread them out in front of him.

"These are jottings I made of the news stories about Mrs. Lambert's divorce trial. Her husband fought the suit, trying to get the custody of their only child. Here it is, word for word, just as I copied it: 'Their *only* child, Lila, five years old.' So Mrs. Lambert has no missing daughter named Ethel and no son in the service named Jeff. Everything she told us is hogwash."

Mr. Drumm peered at Brandy's notes through his pince-nez, then arched his eyebrows at his client. "Mrs. Lambert!" he said in a tone of reproach.

She looked as if she were coming apart at the seams.

"Mrs. Lambert told us that tall tale in order to conceal some of the truth, Mr. Drumm," Brandy went on, speaking rapidly. "It had a fishy smell to begin with. She didn't mention sending any money to his non-existent daughter Ethel—just letters. She didn't know the dog's name. The girl couldn't have bought a dog and trained him as well as all that in the short time she's supposedly been gone from home. Besides, it's too tricky a system, too elaborate a scheme just to keep out of her mother's reach. To top it off, the letter Mrs. Lambert put into the dog's pouch wasn't one from overseas at all—the envelope didn't have a stroke of writing on it. She'd been lying to us about that much."

Again I had to admire that odd mind of Brandy's. Nevertheless he was stirring up trouble between Mr. Drumm and a client, and he must have known it would probably cost him his job. He shouldn't have denounced Mr. Lambert to her face, of course. He should have had it out privately with Mr. Drumm first. But now he had his teeth in it, like an irrepressible pup gnawing on an old shoe, and he couldn't stop worrying it.

"She couldn't misrepresent the rest of it, though. That is, she really did want us to trace that dog back to where it came from. It's very important to her. Because, Mrs. Lambert"—he turned to her with a finger lifted—"you're being blackmailed."

She gasped. I swallowed a groan and Mr. Drumm clenched his thin jaw, glaring at Brandy.

"The envelope you put in the dog's pouch contained money, a blackmail payment. The dog is the blackmailer's go-between, trained for that purpose. By means of him, the blackmailer keeps himself completely out of sight and reach. You probably don't even know who the blackmailer is, do you, Mrs. Lambert? But this has been going on for some time now, and you've paid him through the nose because he knows plenty about you."

The lady bristled at Brandy. "I beg your pardon! How could anyone possibly black-mail me?"

Brandy's face was no longer hot, but white and clammy, covered with chill sweat. He was scaring the daylights out of himself again. But still he went on.

"The main issue of the divorce suit was the custody of your child Lila. Your husband fought to have Lila awarded to him, charging you were an improper mother. A lot of his testimony was given behind closed doors, but the implication is plain enough. As it happened, the court decided in your favor, Mrs. Lambert. You kept Lila. But that wasn't final. Your ex-husband can sue again for Lila's custody at any time. He'll get her, too, if he can prove any immorality on your side—as, for example, if he could show you're playing around with a man who happens to be married to somebody else."

A STIFLING silence followed. It was Mrs. Lambert's turn to look scared. She was too stunned to speak. I stared at Brandy, marveling and shuddering. Evidently his shot in the dark had hit the bull's-eye. His own reaction was to hold himself in, tightly, to keep himself from going to pieces over it.

"What else could it be?" he insisted, half to himself.

Mr. Drumm cleared his throat, an ominous sound. "Mrs. Lambert, is this true?"

Getting a new grip on herself, the lady was turning into an outraged matron.

"If it is true, Mrs. Lambert," Mr. Drumm continued icily, "you've committed an injustice against yourself and against me as well. My position is very similar to that of a lawyer. I cannot help a client if the client deceives me. I must know the facts in order to act on them with sound results. If you are being black-mailed under such circumstances, you should have told me the whole truth."

She actually produced a lorgnette from her handbag and inspected him through it, with haughty distaste.

"You don't deny Captain Brandon's story," Mr. Drumm continued. "Evidently he has stated the case accurately. Very well. Now, do you wish us to proceed with the clear understanding that we are to catch and disarm a blackmailer for you?"

The lady rose with a disdainful sniff. She sailed out of the office full-rigged. The outer door slammed imperiously. We were left in silence again, with Mr. Drumm gazing at Brandy regretfully and Brandy visibly shrinking.

"Dennis," Mr. Drumm began, severely—

But suddenly a dark change had come over him. I'd seen it before. At such moments he appeared to be the unhappiest man on earth.

He lost his air of alert efficiency, his thin face took on a cynical, despondent cast. I sometimes thought that in his heart Mr. Drumm was a profoundly disappointed man. I mean, he was ambitious by nature, and as a young man he must have made great plans for himself, but this musty, small-time detective agency had never been his dream. Like millions of other men, including me, he had not achieved the high hopes of his bright-eyed youth, and whenever he experienced a small frustration, as now, he was reminded despondently of his larger failure. I could feel him thinking bitterly that it was too late now. He was old and tired, and he would prefer to be anybody else on earth rather than Humbert Drumm, chief of the Drumm Detective Agency, Broadway, New York City. His spirits had fallen to their lowest ebb, and I sympathized with him. Also I blamed Brandy for having caused it.

"Dennis," Mr. Drumm began again, solemnly, "you've cost me a lucrative client."

Panic took hold of Brandy. He began scrambling to save himself. "I know I should have handled it differently, Mr. Drumm, but she got me all worked up. I don't think we've lost anything. In fact, I think we've gained something. She'll be back. She'll cool off and decide she'd better put her cards on the table. See if she doesn't."

Mr. Drumm gravely considered this possibility. "I realize, Dennis, that you're working under difficulties while adjusting yourself to your new responsibilities. Under the circumstances, certain allowances must be made, of course. Perhaps you're right—Mrs. Lambert may come back, once she recovers from the shock you gave her. We shall see what develops now. Meanwhile we shall forget the whole matter."

Brandy opened his eyes very wide. "You mean I'm still working for you? It's all right?"

"This time, Dennis," Mr. Drumm said. "This time."

I'd rarely seen the chief in such a forgiving mood. Feeling sorry for himself, he also felt sorry for Brandy. It was a real break, but Brandy didn't seem any too happy about it. Instead, he trembled a little and looked even more scared, as if he were sure that worse was still to come.

"That's all then, boys," Mr. Drumm said, rising, with a glance that warned me to keep a particularly careful eye on Brandy from now on. "Good night."

Brandy hustled out, muttering to himself. I caught the words: "No credit to me that I didn't outsmart myself again!" Seeming to forget me, he headed across Broadway, which was not the direction of our apartment.

Letting him work off steam, I strode along—

side him. He paused to fumble a newspaper clipping from his pocket. After frowning over it, he went on again, even faster. He led me deep into the East Side—all the way over to First Avenue. When he paused there, at an intersection, it dawned on me that he was still fretting over the Gaye Thorne case. The corner on which we'd stopped was the one where the dead girl had poured the gallon of paint on the pavement.

There it was, in a big circle, worn and dirtied by many passing feet now, but still clearly visible.

Then I remembered the dog—the dog mentioned in the news story concerning that strange incident. "A smoke-colored German shepherd," the item had said, one not owned by Thorne or anyone she knew. She'd been found by the cop pouring the paint all around it, and then it had disappeared.

Brandy stooped over the footprints the dog had left on the smooth cement. In leaving the center of that white circle its feet had picked up some of the sticky paint. The prints were perfectly distinct just beyond the circle, but they faded rapidly because the pigment had rubbed off as the dog had moved on. Brandy traced them with his startled eyes. The line of them pointed straight southward toward the general region where Gaye Thorne had later been murdered.

CHAPTER FOUR

How to Dog a Dog

MR. DRUMM looked uncommonly pleased when he called us into his office on an afternoon less than a week later.

"Boys, Mrs. Robert Lambert has reconsidered the matter," he informed us. "She has apologized, explained the whole situation frankly and retained me again. This time our objective is perfectly clear, exactly as you outlined it, Dennis."

At once Brandy tightened up. "The black-mailer has—"

"Has made another demand, yes. Our client has no choice but to pay and to go on paying until she learns the blackmailer's identity."

I said: "She hasn't gone to the D.A. because she's afraid it'll get into the papers, is that it?"

"Exactly. Above all, of course, she wishes to avoid losing the custody of her only child. Unfavorable publicity would give her ex-husband the means of taking her daughter from her. We must therefore handle this case as quietly as possible."

Brandy was shaking his head, lost in thought. Not knowing what mental quirk this might signify, and wishing he'd stop it, I asked Mr. Drumm: "Then Mrs. Lambert will try to

give the blackmailer a dose of his own medicine? She'll threaten him with exposure, hoping that it will add to a stalemate which will rid her of him?"

"Such is her hope," Mr. Drumm agreed.

"Oh, that much will work out all right," Brandy said, with unexpected self-assurance. "I mean, once she learns who he is, she can quit paying him. He won't dare expose her to her ex-husband if she can expose him to the D.A. in turn. Mutual exposure would ruin both of 'em, of course, so they'll both keep clammed up. The crook's got too much at stake to risk losing it."

"Too much at stake, Dennis?" Mr. Drumm echoed, puzzled. "But once Mrs. Lambert stops paying him—"

"It adds up to a hell of a lot more than that." For a moment Brandy sounded like his old cocky self, surprised that he had to explain the point. "This dog business is a clever, elaborate system. A lot of careful thought and planning went into it. The blackmailer wouldn't have set it up for the purpose of bleeding only one person. He has a number of victims and he's collecting regularly from all of them. This blackmail racket is big money, big business. That's what this guy has to protect, and that's why he uses the dog to keep himself out of the reach of his victims, including Mrs. Lambert."

Mr. Drumm looked pleased again. "It strikes me as a very sound piece of logic, Dennis. Also, it will be very reassuring to our client."

"But what're we going to do with him when we find him?" Brandy asked, now sounding fretful. "Pull him off Mrs. Lambert but let him go right on bleeding all his other victims?"

Mr. Drumm adjusted his pince-nez judicially. "As the old maxim suggests, Dennis, let us first catch our rabbit. The question you've just raised is one of policy which I'll decide when the proper time comes. Now as to our method of attacking this problem, which is a most difficult one—it appears our only means of finding our man is through his delivery dog, which is trained to elude pursuit. I confess I haven't hit on any effective means of tracing the dog so far. Give it your best thought, both of you. You'll have another chance to crack it this evening. You're to meet Mrs. Lambert here at nine sharp."

Brandy had gone back to shaking his head, but he wasn't mentioning what was bothering him this time. After leaving Mr. Drumm, he grew strangely agitated again. He paced about the outer office, saying nothing and frowning into the corners. When it was time for me to leave I discovered he'd disappeared. He'd slipped away when I wasn't looking, on one of those odd impulses of his.

I had dinner alone, went to our apartment

and waited there. Presently Brandy hustled in, looking breathless. He had two small packages. He unwrapped them and I groaned.

He'd bought five pounds of mixed canary seed. He'd also acquired a cake decorator and a cookie maker set just like Gaye Thorne's.

"Now wait a minute!" I said quickly. "I don't want to hear your reasons for buying that stuff. As far as we're concerned, the Thorne case is dead and buried. So is Miss Thorne herself. There are a few things I do want to know, though, now that you've been brooding around this place for weeks like a melancholy clam. For example, why did Shurr fire you out of his agency?"

Brandy sat, looking abashed, fumbling with the cake decorator set.

"You've been pretty patient with me, Sam. I guess I owe you some sort of explanation. Getting it off my chest might do me some good, too. All right."

BEFORE beginning, he separated the four cookie cutters from the set and tossed them into the wastebasket, just as Gaye Thorne had done.

"You see, Mr. Shurr handled a lot of industrial cases. Well, there was a man named Stewart who owned and ran a big factory over in Newark. He was Shurr's best-paying client. He suspected something was wrong with the firm's books, and thought one of the cashiers might be tapping the till, so he wanted them watched."

Brandy paused to select one of the nozzles that came with the cake decorator.

"I soon narrowed it down to one of the cashiers whose name was Norman. I saw him throwing money around pretty freely, so his books were audited and a big deficit was found. Well, Stewart paid Shurr a fat fee for the job, and Shurr patted me on the back and suggested I take a nice vacation. That was that, except—"

Brandy screwed the nozzle onto the cake decorator and viewed the combination thoughtfully.

"Except that I hadn't learned exactly how Norman had spent all that money he'd stolen. I could account for only part of it. The rest bothered me. I had to find out. Instead of going to Florida to loaf, I dug into the case a little deeper, on my own. I uncovered the inside story, all right. Norman was lavishing all that coin on a dame."

Brandy looked around, rose, poked into his closet and came up with a pair of shoes. He put one shoe back and removed the lace from the other. Returning to his chair with just that one shoestring, he wagged his head and went on.

"The dame," he explained, the recollection

making him jittery, "turned out to be Stewart's own daughter, who happened to be a married woman. Well, all this had various results. For one thing, Stewart hunted up Norman, who was out on bail, flew into a rage and shot him, not fatally. So Stewart had to drop the charges against Norman in order to keep the stink out of the papers, and make up the deficit out of his own pocket. He also had to pay Norman plenty to avoid being prosecuted himself. The daughter's husband divorced her fast. Since he was also a business partner of Stewart's, he withdrew his financial support, which put Stewart in an even deeper jam. At last reports the daughter was playing around openly, at considerable further expense to her father."

"If you hadn't nosed out so damned much information unnecessarily," I surmised, "Norman would have taken the rap like a crooked gentleman and kept quiet. But as it was, Shurr lost his best client and you got fired out on your tail. I'm beginning to understand what you mean when you mutter to yourself about being too smart for your own good. O. K., Brandy, tell me more."

He resisted the question, as if fearful of exposing too much of his soul at a time. "We've got to get over to the office right now, Sam, or we'll be late."

He was right. Going down the stairs, I realized he wasn't with me. He'd lingered in the apartment. After half a minute, however, he came out hustling, one of his coat pockets bulging suspiciously. Again immersed in his troubled thoughts, he said nothing on our way to the office.

As before, Mrs. Lambert was ensconced in Mr. Drumm's private sanctum, all frills, diamonds and expensive scent. No amenities were exchanged. The lady still felt resentful toward Brandy. Mr. Drumm took pains to reassure her that the matter was held in our strictest confidence, but at that point Brandy began shaking his head again. Mr. Drumm noticed it and frowned.

"Just what's the matter, Dennis, if I may ask?"

He caught himself. "I want to make sure of what Mrs. Lambert wants, Mr. Drumm. The thing she wants above all is to keep this whole affair hushed up, isn't it?" When they answered with nods, he shivered. "Well, I just wanted to be absolutely sure."

The lady spoke. "Please, there's no time to talk. I'm supposed to deliver the money in just a few minutes."

Mr. Drumm rose decisively. "I hope you've both given some serious thought to the problem of tracing the dog. You may tell me later about the method you've decided on. Just now you'd better get busy."

As before, the lady sailed out urgently and

we found her limousine curbed in front of the building, the chauffeur having already been dismissed. This time our client instructed me, "Go to Gramercy Park," and immediately got into the car. But Brandy hesitated, tugging me back.

"Sam," he said softly, so our client wouldn't overhear, "we're playing with dynamite. We might be able to keep blackmail under wraps, but we're asking for trouble when we begin hushing up a murder."

"Murder? What murder?" I snorted at him. "Don't tell me you mean the murder of Gaye Thorne!"

"Certainly I mean the murder of Gaye Thorne!" Brandy stared back, his hackles rising. "She was killed by this same blackmailer, of course."

I said sarcastically: "What's more, you can prove it, I suppose?"

He spent a few seconds in anxious thought, alternately paling and flushing. "The point is this, Sam," he said finally. "Suppose we find Mrs. Lambert's blackmailer, suppose he is also Gaye Thorne's murderer, and suppose I can prove it, at least to our own satisfaction. How can we keep such evidence confidential? That would be illegal, wouldn't it? We couldn't let a killer stay in the clear, could we? But we couldn't help the law to nail him, either, because then we'd be jockeying Mrs. Lambert into court as a material witness and violating her confidence."

"Good Lord!" I said. "Why didn't you let Mr. Drumm in on this angle?"

"Because whether I'm right or wrong, Mr. Drumm would have to lose Mrs. Lambert as a client again. I mean, with the possibility of the D.A. moving in, Mr. Drumm couldn't guarantee to keep the case hushed, the way Mrs. Lambert insists, so he'd have to refuse to handle it, thanks to me."

"Well, it's too late to back out now," I said, noting that our client was making hurry-up gestures. "All we can do is pray you're all wet on the Thorne tie-up."

"But I'm not!" he blurted. "Sam, can't you see—"

"Later, Brandy, later!"

I SLID under the limousine's wheel and Brandy joined Mrs. Lambert in the rear. While we rolled smoothly toward Gramercy Park he asked questions.

"No, of course I don't know who the person is who's blackmailing me," she answered his first one, "except that it must be someone who began spying on me following the divorce trial."

"Hadn't you hired a private detective to snoop out some divorce evidence for you?" Brandy inquired next, well aware of the unfortunate fact that our profession includes

many crooked operators who victimize their own clients.

"I did not. Neither did my ex-husband employ a detective. His charges against me were based entirely on several letters he'd intercepted." The lady squirmed with indignation. "Since the trial I've been as discreet as possible and so has my—my friend. There could be no gossip about either of us. I'm quite at a loss, you see, but I'm certain the blackmailer isn't bluffing. He has the facts and has proved them to me."

"How?"

"When speaking to me over the telephone he has cited times and places." The necessity of confessing distressed Mrs. Lambert. "And he was right in every detail."

"Some friend of yours may have suspected," Brandy said. "Maybe a newspaper reporter thought it was a good bet and started snooping on his own. Almost anybody at all could have smelled it out once he got a whiff of the possibilities."

Mrs. Lambert adjusted her ruffles. "I know him in only one way. He's a voice on the telephone and that's all. Every few weeks he orders me to go to a certain spot at a certain time with five hundred dollars in cash. I'm forced to do exactly as he says. I'm so afraid of him, terribly afraid he'll cause me to lose my little girl. It—it's become intolerable. I'm really desperate."

"Take heart, Mrs. Lambert," Brandy said, sounding cocky again. "I think we'll pull off this job for you."

Something was cooking in Brandy's mind, no doubt of it. He was as twitchy as a cat when we pulled to the curb on the south side of Gramercy Park. Mrs. Lambert indicated the corner where she'd been instructed to meet the dog. So far it hadn't put in an appearance.

Even without the brown-out this would have been a smart choice for such a rendezvous. The park is a small, private one surrounded by a high iron fence with locked gates to which only certain nearby residents have keys. The buildings flanking it are mostly old brownstone fronts, with a few new apartment hotels rearing among them. The streets marking it off are always quiet and tonight they were almost black. It seemed to me the dog could leave us here flat-footed, without our even seeing which way he'd gone.

"There!" Mrs. Lambert said in a sudden whisper. He's coming!"

Almost invisible in the gloom, the dog came ambling quietly from a far corner of the park. Alone again, he moved with almost human intelligence and decision. Pausing just beyond the corner where the darkness was thick, he looked all around warily, then sat down. The next move was Mrs. Lambert's.

She flicked an envelope full of folding money out of her handbag, but before she could leave the car Brandy grasped her arm.

"Wait," he said. "After you've put the money in the pouch, tie this onto the dog's collar."

He had the cake decorator and was holding it up. It was fat. The upper end of it was tied tightly shut with the shoelace. He shook it a little and a few canary seeds trickled out of the nozzle.

"Do it, Mrs. Lambert," he urged as she hesitated, puzzled. "It's practically our only chance."

Too anxious to argue, she left the car with the seed-filled cake decorator. Brandy watched her agitatedly as she approached the dog. I gazed at Brandy, enlightenment dawning.

"You see now, Sam?" he said eagerly. "Gaye Thorne was also being blackmailed. We know she was leading a fast life. If her father had learned the truth she'd have lost her allowance and been disinherited. The blackmailer had that grip on her, just as he has one on Mrs. Lambert. Also like Mrs. Lambert, she wanted to get herself clear of him. She figured the same way out, too—that is, if she could get the goods on the blackmailer he'd probably have to let up. But she was smarter than Mrs. Lambert. Instead of hiring detectives to trace the dog, she planned a way of doing it on her own."

I realized again that Brandy's thought processes, devious as they were, really led somewhere.

"Gaye Thorne had already found out that the dog traveled so fast she couldn't keep him in sight. The way to trace him, then, was to fix things so he'd leave some sort of trail. First she tried white paint, hoping she could follow the dog's footprints. It didn't work. In fact, she had a tough time finding something that *would* work, and she did a lot of experimenting before she hit on the answer."

"The pants pockets!" I said, getting excited myself. "They're simply bags made of cloth. She cut holes in the bottoms. First she tried flour, thinking it would trickle out as the dog jogged along. Then she could easily follow the trail of white powder."

"The flour was too fine and too heavy," Brandy said. "It wouldn't trickle. The salt was no good because it dissolved in the slush, disappeared too fast. The sand was too nearly the color of the pavement and there's always grit on the sidewalks anyway. The shot was also too hard to see and it was too heavy—it poured out too fast, wouldn't cover enough distance. All the time she was trying various sizes of holes in the pants pockets, but she couldn't get them just right. Then she thought of the cake decorator with the set of nozzles, each with a different size opening. Finally it

occurred to her to put canary seed inside, and that was it—the right size, the right weight, the right color."

"Wait a minute," I said. "We didn't see any dog that night."

"We didn't even know about the dog then," Brandy reminded me. "We didn't expect to see one, so we didn't look for him. But he was there. Remember how dark it was? The dog's dark-colored, too. He blended into the black building fronts and the black sidewalks. That's what the girl was doing—following the trail of canary seed left by the dog."

"It almost worked out for her, but several things went wrong. First, the seed was used up before the dog got all the way back. Second, the cake decorator worked loose and dropped off his collar. Third, the blackmailer was watching the girl and saw her getting closer and closer to the dog's hideout. She'd found a flaw in his otherwise perfect canine go-between system, and it made him panicky—the first threat of exposure he'd ever faced—so he stopped her with a bullet."

SUDDENLY I was itching for action.

"Then what're we fooling around here for? We know what street that dog dodged into. The same street the girl was killed on. Let's hustle down there and ask questions and find out where—"

Brandy was shaking his head. "I've already done it, Sam, twice. That cross-street runs from the East River to the Hudson. There are hundreds of addresses along it, thousands of tenements, apartments, offices and stores. I asked questions east and west and got absolutely nowhere. Nobody ever saw that smoke-colored German shepherd, with or without a leather pouch. Besides, it might have made another turn into another street beyond the spot where the girl was shot that night. That angle is no good at all, Sam."

"So now you're going to try to trail the dog in just the same way Gaye Thorne did!"

"That's it. This time the cake decorator is as full of canary seeds as it can get."

"Lord's sake!" I blurted. "Gaye Thorne got herself murdered doing that! You're asking for sudden death yourself!"

He nodded quickly, admitting the danger. This in itself didn't seem to scare him, somehow, so it was no use trying to warn him off. Just then, anyway, Mrs. Lambert returned to the car. As she slid in, nervously, Brandy eased out.

"This time," he said, "we won't even try to follow the dog by car. I'll follow its trail and you'll follow me."

The dog was still sitting on the corner, looking idly about before getting under way, and Brandy moved toward him. I left the car quickly, not trusting this maneuver. Brandy

paused in front of the animal to make sure his arrangements were O.K. They were. The cake decorator, tied on by the shoestring, dangled from the dog's collar beside the pouch. A few bird seeds had trickled out, but only a few. The shaking of the bag while the dog ran would sprinkle them along the way. The dog watched us inscrutably until Brandy reached out, intending to test the security of the knot in the shoelace.

Suddenly his ears went back and he snarled. His white fangs gleamed and his haunches quivered with tension as he crouched to leap. Brandy froze. Obviously, any attempt on his part to touch that dog would invite hospitalization and might even turn out to be a form of suicide. The dog had been trained to attack anyone who approached him after his pouch had been filled, except, of course, his master. We backed away but the dog kept watching Brandy, ready to spring ferociously at his throat at his first false move.

Brandy circled him, leaning forward as far as he dared, peering at the dog's collar and markings. He was shivering more than the dog. At just that moment the dog decided he'd had enough of this. His ears twitched and he lit out, heading back the way he'd come.

"Get into the car!" Brandy urged me.

I went back to it in a hurry. The dog went along at an easy lope. Brandy pulled a flashlight from his pocket and examined the sidewalk. He nodded delightedly, signifying that the bird seed was slowly trailing out as expected, marking the dog's path. It looked as if we would hit the jackpot tonight, or at least come close to it.

At the corner of the square, still ambling, the dog turned to the left. Brandy strode after it, not hurrying. Starting the motor, I eased the car after Brandy. It was a leisurely, slow chase. The dog padded along in no particular haste, Brandy followed the sprinkling of canary seeds, and I simply rolled along behind him.

At the next corner, the dog turned left again. He was now traveling westward on the north edge of the park. Brandy made the same turn and so did I. Then for the first time it struck me that the dog's behavior was not in pattern tonight. He kept twitching his ears as he loped along, and at the next corner of the park he turned left once more. I began to have misgivings. One more left turn took the dog back to the south side of the park.

Then after a moment, all of us—the dog, Brandy and I, with our client—passed the spot where we'd all started, having made a complete circuit of the park.

I sensed the strategy of a shrewd, unknown mind. I had an uncanny feeling that somebody was laughing his head off at us, silently.

The dog trotted on at the same easy pace, with Brandy trailing him and me following Brandy. At the corner, he turned left again. Then he turned left again. Then he turned left once more. When he'd made a second complete circuit of the park I knew we were taking a ride on somebody's merry-go-round.

It went on. At each corner the dog turned left. He circled the park for the third time. Then for the fourth. Then for the fifth. Nevertheless Brandy stuck to it, using his flashlight at intervals. As the dog passed a lighted doorway I saw that the cake decorator had grown much thinner. It was flapping. Brandy stooped, looked hard at the pavement in his light and rose wagging his head. That could mean only one thing—there was no more seed in the cake decorator.

Suddenly, then, the dog perked his ears and broke into a run marked by a rapid series of accelerations. He was disappearing eastward before I could swing the car. By the time I'd passed the corner he was gone from sight, leaving no trail, no trail of seeds or anything else, no slightest trail whatever. Brandy halted, making baffled gestures, and again I thought I could hear the silent laughter of mockery.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Whistling in the Dark

OUR reward was more bitter tears from Mrs. Lambert. Also, of course, Brandy had to report his failure to Mr. Drumm, whose response was more than a little caustic.

"The only move remaining to us, apparently," he said with bile in his voice, "is to try again when the blackmailer demands another payment from our client, unfortunately for her. Our bungling is costing her a great deal of money unnecessarily. However, next time you'll do better, for the simple reason that you couldn't do worse. I bid you good night."

We slunk toward our apartment with our tails dragging. Brandy had dropped into another of his despairing moods, much blacker than mine.

"Gaye Thorne's idea was damn slick," he muttered to himself. "I haven't been able to think of a better one. But now it's no good at all, because the blackmailer tumbled to it. Might as well forget about cake decorators."

In our apartment Brandy began pacing, still muttering about it.

"No license tag on the dog's collar. Can't trace him that way. We might manage it if we could have a whole army of men stationed all over town, all waiting for the dog to come along, all watching every turn he might make. But that's impractical, no damn good either."

He opened a drawer of his dresser, fished out a handful of newspaper clippings and mulled over these for a while, shaking his head.

"Possibilities for blackmail!" he went on. "A man who's looking for 'em can find plenty, in and out of the papers. Mrs. Lambert is an example. It was no secret that she'd have to watch her step in regard to her little girl's custody. Judging her to be the kind of woman who can't live without a man, our crook simply watched her until she reverted to type. Then he had her. As for Gaye Thorne, she played around plenty, her neighbors knew it, and this guy may have heard some of the talk. Maybe he'd even met her personally. Anyway, all he had to do was watch her for a while, then sink his claws into her. Those are only two possibilities among many. Our crook is making a career of blackmail. God knows how many other victims he's bleeding."

"Brandy," I said, "quit stewing over it or you'll work yourself into a nervous collapse. Let's turn in."

He kept on. "Black marketeers, for example. He'd run across them in the normal course of events, as everybody does. And suppose he knew his way around Broadway's

hot-spots and crummy dives. Inevitably he'd get wind of somebody who's peddling dope. He could follow the peddler around and see who bought the stuff. Every addict, wanting to conceal it from his friends and family, would be a candidate for blackmail. The possibilities are endless."

"I don't want to hear about any more of 'em, Brandy," I protested. "I just want to get some sleep."

He wasn't to be stopped. "Here's a specific case," and he poked a finger at a newspaper clipping. "A hung jury in a criminal trial. The jury disagreed eleven to one, saving the defendant's neck at least temporarily. That dissenting juror could be watched. So could the defense attorney. A tie-up between 'em might be found. They could both be worked on, threatened, scared out of their wits because the juror could be sent to jail if he'd accepted a bribe and the lawyer could be disbarred, ruined." Again Brandy fingered the clipping. "This is a news story about a big-shot lawyer who committed suicide when faced with disbarment, and a juror in one of his cases who had to become a fugitive from justice. Maybe they wouldn't pay up or refused to go on paying after they'd started, so the blackmailer used 'em as a lesson to his other victims—tipped off the D.A. That's what got 'em, an anonymous tip. Sam, this blackmailer we're looking for is undoubtedly a big-scale operator who hasn't a scruple in his make-up, and he's smart as the very devil."

"O.K., O.K., he has maybe four dozen victims and he's bleeding 'em for plenty," I said impatiently. "But so far we haven't got to first base with him and I doubt that we ever will. At least we're not going to crack this case tonight. I'm going to get me some shut-eye."

I piled into bed, leaving Brandy still muttering. After a long time he absently got himself into his pajamas, turned out the lights and crawled in. He squirmed and tossed, even after he'd dozed off. I finally drifted off myself, only to waken in a cold sweat because Brandy was screeching.

"Stop, stop firing! Stop firing, stop firing!"

I shook him hard. He sat bolt upright, staring all around and sighing, "Oh, oh-h," in vast relief. "Thank God it was only a dream," he murmured, sinking back. Dream or not, he was getting under my skin. A little more of this and I'd be a nervous wreck myself.

"Brandy, you make it hurt worse when you hold it in. A little mental catharsis is indicated here. What the hell happened to you, anyway, while you were with the army in France?"

He lay quietly for a moment, his eyes closed against the memory of it. "Not France," he

whispered, finally. "Germany. Behind the enemy's lines."

I WAITED, thinking I'd better not push him, and after another moment he went on.

"It was near Aachen. We'd been receiving information over a secret radio from one of our agents, a native German. It was important stuff concerning the enemy's strength in that area—troop movements, reinforcements moving up, stuff like that. We needed it badly but it wasn't coming through any more. Somehow we had to reestablish contact with our agent or set up a new station. Well, I can speak German, so I volunteered."

He was trembling.

"My orders were to restore contact, then scam back. I parachuted down behind the German front wearing the uniform of an under-officer. Everything went along fine. I found a staff car abandoned because of motor trouble, but the trouble wasn't serious, so I fixed it myself before the mechanics got around to it, and used it as my own. With my forged papers I could go anywhere. The secret radio station had been damaged by one of our own bombs. The agent hadn't been able to find or make the repair parts he needed. If it could be fixed, though, he'd go right back to keeping us informed."

The bed was shaking under Brandy and me.

"Well, just after coming down in the parachute I'd cached a brace of carrier pigeons. One of them flew back with my list of repair parts. A plane came over that night and dropped the stuff on signal. The agent and I put the transmitter into working order right away. The first cipher message to sneak through from our Intelligence headquarters congratulated me and ordered me to come right back. However—"

Here was the twist I'd been waiting for, coming now.

"Something big was cooking. Troops were moving up, not through the town, but through the woods all around it. A counter-attack was developing, and they were advancing under cover so our reconnaissance wouldn't spot 'em. Their objective was puzzling, because they were scattered, but I could see they were planning to concentrate somewhere and hit us plenty hard. I talked to a number of German officers about it, but they just shrugged and stayed clammed up. Our agent didn't know from nothing, and neither did his sources. I decided it was up to me to find out all I could. So, planning to dodge back through the lines to our side a little later, I hid my one remaining carrier pigeon in my staff car and moved up with the German troops."

Brandy wiped cold sweat off his face.

"Finally I doped out part of it—where they were going to drive—but I still didn't know

when. Having that much information, I sent it across by the pigeon. I figured that as soon as I found out the rest of it I'd be able to get back to our agent in time. The only trouble was, our command didn't wait for the rest of it. They cut loose in a hurry with everything they had—bombers, ground strafers, artillery, even rockets, all concentrated in the sector where I was."

Brandy huddled, arms around his head, as if hearing a bomb whining straight down at him right now.

"It was hell on earth, one of the worst pastings of the war. Once it began I couldn't get out. Every open space was full of sudden death. It kept coming, never stopping. The noise was unbearable, the fumes strangled me. I crammed myself for two nights and a day into the only shelter I could find, a shell-crater half full of oil-covered water with half a dozen dismembered Germans in it. Then, to top it off, our troops encircled the enemy's position. I guess I was out of my head from shock when they captured me. I got tossed into a camp along with hundreds of prisoners and had a hell of a time for a week before I finally managed to establish my identity. After that it was one hospital after another, psychiatrist after psychiatrist. I'll never be my old self again."

"All credit to you, Brandy," I said. "You staved off a stiff attack on us."

"Maybe I did," he said, "but if so I also invited the whole Allied western front to open up on me. I was too smart to scam back while the scrambling was good. I had to stick around, trying to do a better job, which I'd been ordered not to do in the first place. I think the information I'd sent back was superfluous anyhow. In spite of the enemy's precautions, our reconnaissance must have doped out the move. Anyway, if I hadn't been so damned smart I wouldn't be in the shape I'm in. All my life I've been too smart for my own good."

He sighed, having unburdened his secret soul, and settled down exhaustedly, just as if he'd experienced that hell-on-earth all over again.

Finally I'd begun to know Brandy. Having become emotionally unstable, his reactions were erratic and exaggerated, but at bottom they were understandable. On the one hand he couldn't be satisfied by half-measures—he wanted earnestly to do the best job he knew how. On the other hand he was fearful, as he'd learned to be through painful experience, that he'd do too good a job. He couldn't tolerate failure but at the same time he dreaded outsmarting himself. For Brandy, apparently there had never been a happy medium, and that was what he was trying to find. Since his greatest successes had boomeranged on

him, he was desperately trying to save himself from himself.

For a while he slept. Then I was awakened again by his voice. He was whispering to himself: "That's it. That must be it!"

I mumbled: "What's it?"

"Remember how that dog's ears twitched?" he asked me excitedly.

"Oh, my God!" I groaned, and pulled the pillow over my head.

WHILE I slept he must have sneaked out of bed, for when the alarm clock went off he was gone. So were his clothes. I was having breakfast in our usual place, a little lunch counter around the corner, when he hustled in, looking worried but elated, too. He perched on a stool beside me and produced something from his pocket. At first glance it seemed to be just a thin metal tube a few inches long.

"It cost five dollars," he said.

He put one end of it to his lips and blew through it. There was a soft, sibilant sound of his breath coming out, but that was all.

"You paid five dollars for a whistle that won't whistle?" I inquired.

"It's a supersonic whistle, Sam," he explained. "I remembered reading about 'em. It makes a sound all right, but we can't hear it. That is, it's pitched 'way above the auditory limit of human ears. Dogs can hear it, though."

"So?"

"I'm not sure, but the blackmailer probably uses one of these to signal instructions to that dog of his. It's the only way I can explain the dog's actions. Suppose he's taken by car to a certain spot near the corner where the victim is to come. Then the guy lets him out of the car. How does he know where to go? He doesn't know, naturally. He has to be directed. So the guy stays in the car, not far away but where he can watch, and toots on a whistle like this one, giving off signals which can't be heard except by the dog. A certain kind of tooting, or combination of tootings, tells the dog to go ahead, to turn right or left, or to stop, and so on. O.K., Sam?"

"I wouldn't know, Brandy," I said with patient skepticism.

"Well, once the dog has the money in his pouch he's given the signal to head for home, and then the guy doesn't have to toot at him any more. Naturally the dog knows where to go. He's trained to come back from wherever he's been taken, and to shake off anybody who might try to trail him. Last night was different, though. The whistle was used to send the dog around and around the park in order to drain all the bird seed out of the cake decorator before he struck out for his kennel."

"I still don't see how this five dollars'

worth of whistle is going to crack our case for us," I said. "How can you use it for giving the dog instructions yourself, for example? You don't know the signals he's been trained to respond to."

"No, I don't," Brandy murmured. "That's right, I don't know the signals."

He lapsed into a mood of brooding silence. It lasted all that day and showed no sign of abating. It didn't help Mr. Drumm to feel more kindly toward him, either. The chief, in fact, was decidedly frosty to him. Evidently Mrs. Lambert hadn't yet signified her intention of buying any more of our expensive bungling. The case seemed headed for a dead-end.

Days later, Brandy was still brooding. I came into the office that morning, having worked on another assignment, to find him asking Mr. Drumm's permission to read the reports in the Gaye Thorne file. The chief lectured him to the effect that the Thorne case was closed so far as we were concerned, but he let Brandy have the file anyway, evidently as a means of keeping him occupied. Brandy pored over the reports and when I came back from lunch he was still at it.

"Sam," he inquired, "how do you spell the word 'gauge'?"

I spelled it for him.

"Cooney had trouble with it," he observed. "He was always gauging something—the girl's expenditures or her sleeping hours or something. Some of the time he spelled it right, but mostly he transposed the *a* and the *u* and made it *g-u-a-g-e*."

"Look, Brandy," I said. "Even though Mr. Drumm told Inspector Knapp that Cooney was in good shape then, he was actually drinking himself blind. He probably got his facts straight, but I wouldn't bet an expired sugar stamp on his spelling. Anyway, you'd better lay off. You're running away with yourself again. You want to keep messing into the Thorne murder until you cause Mrs. Lambert to lose her little girl?"

He took a grip on himself. "You're right, Sam. I should let it alone. Thanks for reminding me."

He immediately returned the file to Mr. Drumm, but he didn't stop brooding. I was delighted when the chief told us he'd had another telephone conversation with Mrs. Lambert. She was willing to try us again. This gave Brandy and me another chance to save our faces and also made it legitimate for him to fool around with the case some more, which he would have done anyway.

Mr. Drumm frowned across his desk. "Have you by any chance evolved some promising means of trailing that dog?" he inquired.

Brandy didn't mention his supersonic whistle. Evidently he'd decided it was no good

after all. He just sat there without speaking and looked jittery.

"Well, I can't blame you too much for that," Mr. Drumm said, surprisingly. "I confess I'm also at a loss. We might train another dog to trail the blackmailer's, but that would take more time than we have at our disposal. However, I must point out that this will be our last opportunity to get the results which Mrs. Lambert is paying for. She has told me in so many words that she'll squander no more money on our services if they prove ineffectual again. A dissatisfied client is bad business, boys. A failure reflects seriously on this agency. All things considered, I expect you to produce the best results possible."

"The blackmailer's hitting Mrs. Lambert pretty hard and fast, isn't he?" I asked.

"He is, indeed," Drumm frowned. "He knows she's employing private detectives. It hasn't frightened him. On the contrary, he seems to have taken it as a challenge. He's taunting us and bleeding her all the more, which shows how daring and fearless he is, how confident he feels that he can outwit us. The unfortunate lady, I must say, is in a worse predicament for having consulted us." He looked hard at Brandy. "All the more reason you must exert yourself to the utmost to reach that blackmailer."

Brandy nodded, shivering and looking miserably unsure of himself.

"Very well, then," Mr. Drumm said in a tone of finality. "As before, you will meet Mrs. Lambert here at nine o'clock this evening."

SO it was bank night again. Waiting for the zero hour gave Brandy the shakes, but once nine o'clock arrived the procedure seemed routine.

For the third time we met Mrs. Lambert in the chief's office. For the third time we got going in her car. This time she directed me: "City Hall, the Broadway side."

As we had already done twice before, we went to the designated place and waited. This time, however, it was going to be even tougher than before. City Hall is surrounded by a square of open space. The adjacent streets are narrow and some of them come into the plaza at odd angles. Moreover, although this section of the city teems with people during the day, it's as deserted as a graveyard at night. It was even darker and quieter than Gramercy Park had been. So this was to be our last chance, was it? My impression was that we were licked right now—there was no use even trying. Brandy, however, was having another attack of the shivers, which meant that his peculiar mind was grappling with the problem.

For the third time Mrs. Lambert warned

us: "Here comes the dog! He's coming now!"

As before, he was difficult to see. He appeared with a sort of arrogant deliberation. Having emerged from the gloom deep within the plaza, he ambled past City Hall, came to the corner of Broadway where we were parked, and sat down. Again the next move was Mrs. Lambert's. She dug a third parcel of cash from her handbag, left the car, approached the dog and tucked it in his pouch.

Brandy stayed in the car, jerkily peering all around. If the dog's movements had been directed by someone near by, as he had theorized, that person was effectively concealed in the darkness. There were a few cars parked about, but nobody was visible in any of them. To prowl around and give each one a closer look wouldn't get us anywhere. The dog would certainly get going before we could finish, and anyway the blackmailer would have too many chances to slip away unseen. Besides, Brandy's unpredictable reasoning processes seemed to be working along another tangent. He waited until Mrs. Lambert returned to the car, then produced the trick whistle from his pocket.

"That thing?" I said wryly. "What good can it do us?"

"I don't know," Brandy admitted. "But I can at least try it. This time follow the dog again, Sam."

The three of us watched the dog. As before, he sat quietly at the corner for a few minutes, looking about him as if he didn't have a care in the world. Then his ears twitched and he rose. I agreed with Brandy that the faint flick of the dog's ears might really mean that someone near by had whistled a supersonic signal to him. If so, it was the last signal the dog's master need give him tonight—he would handle the rest himself. So I swung the car from the curb and we rolled up Broadway while the dog headed north at a leisurely pace.

City Hall was a block behind us when Brandy placed his whistle to his lips. He blew on it once, producing a note lasting perhaps two seconds. I couldn't hear it, of course, but the dog did. To my amazement there was an immediate response. He lifted his magnificent head as if caught by surprise himself, and stopped short.

Brandy stared at me, scarcely daring to believe he'd hit on something at his very first try. He was pale and held the whistle gingerly, as if it were an instrument of black magic. The dog stayed exactly where he was, apparently waiting for further instructions.

"Now what do you do?" I asked quickly.

"It's got to be simple, Sam," Brandy said, his voice quavering. "I mean, this is just a dog trained to answer to certain signals, so there can't be too many of them and they

can't be too complicated. We've just found out that one long note makes the dog stop. Well, there must be another one that starts him off, a third to turn him to the right, and a fourth to turn him to the left. Those are about all any trainer would need. Anyway, we've got him under control now, to a certain degree, and from here on we'll have to feel our way."

"Try a short toot, then," I suggested. "Just one."

Brandy did it. His breath whizzed out of the whistle in a single soft spurt. My amazement grew. Again the dog responded. It went off at an easy pace, as before, heading north along Broadway.

"Good Lord!" I said. "A short note means *go*, a long note means *stop*. Just like red and green traffic lights! It seems obvious now. We don't even have to try to find out what the other signals are. We've got all we need already!"

CHAPTER SIX

Death in the Dog House

BRANDY perched on the edge of the seat, eyes fixed on the dog. Mrs. Lambert didn't quite understand what was happening, but she was also tense and hopeful. I kept the car rolling after the dog. At the next corner he hesitated, but his ears didn't twitch and so I felt sure he was making his own decisions as to which way he would take back home. He apparently decided on an eastward course, for he turned right and ambled on his way along the dark cross-street.

Behind me, Brandy gave another short, sharp, inaudible toot on the whistle. Its effect on the dog was galvanic. Instantly he quickened his speed. He went darting through the shadows so rapidly that for a moment I thought he'd got away from us. But then I glimpsed him again, dark against the dark buildings, traveling like the wind.

"Stop him!" I gasped.

Brandy blew a long note. I drew in a long, deep breath of relief. The stop signal had worked again. The dog came to a skidding halt, puzzled, but he obediently stayed there.

"You see, Sam?" Brandy said, full of agitation. "A short note starts him going and another short note tells him to go faster!"

"O.K., but don't experiment with him any more!" I said. "Let well enough alone, Brandy, please. Just start him, let him go along slowly, and stop him whenever I need to catch up with him. He's heading for home now, and he'll probably lead us right to it—unless you ruin everything by trying out some new tunes on that whistle."

"I won't do it again, Sam," Brandy prom-

ised me. "Get ready, now. Here we go again."

He blew another short note. Immediately the dog began traveling again. Lacking any signals to the contrary now, he seemed to feel like taking his time, and I was glad of it. He didn't try to lose us. Because of the whistle he evidently thought it was his master following him.

He continued eastward toward the terminal of the Third Avenue El, then turned north. We skirted Chinatown. By that time he was too far ahead for our comfort, so Brandy signaled a stop until we pulled closer. Then he sent the dog ahead again by another short toot. It seemed we could handle him exactly as we wished.

I held my hopes down, though, being afraid something would go wrong, but it went on without a hitch. We drove up Third Avenue half a block behind the dog. We passed Twenty-third Street and kept going. It was in this general neighborhood that Gaye Thorne had been shot dead, so it was reasonable to suppose the dog would reach his destination soon. We were all tense, including Mrs. Lambert, and as the end of the trail approached Brandy stopped the dog at more frequent intervals so we could keep even closer to him.

The dog turned east again. Now we were almost alongside him and watching him like hawks. The street was dark and dingy, lined with tenements and small rat-holes of stores. There were doors below the sidewalk level, and sometimes narrow passageways or other warrens into which the dog might disappear instantly, by a single quick turn. He was slowing a little now, as if about to arrive. Then he paused, looked at us curiously, turned and dodged under a flight of brownstone steps.

He'd gone to a basement entrance. As I scrambled out of the car, I warned Mrs. Lambert to wait. Brandy had slipped out first and was already ducking under those stairs.

The dog was gone.

We faced a sooty, unmarked door. I thought it must have been opened for the dog by someone who'd been waiting. If so, this meant we were about to walk in on a crook who didn't welcome visitors. Apparently he'd kept this place of his a close secret. The dog had evidently been kept inside at all times, except when he did courier service. This was, then, the kennel, the headquarters of the blackmail system, and it seemed very likely to me that we were about to ask for plenty of trouble.

Then a sound came from inside the door. It was a long, mournful wail—the howl of a dog, rising and falling, an uncanny song of woe.

It startled Brandy. Shaking all over, he tried the knob. The door was locked. The dog went on howling his weird song while

Brandy rapidly felt the door's surface. When he pushed at the lower panel it swung inward. It was hung on well-oiled double hinges, and simply by pressing against it, the dog could pass inside, after which a gentle spring would swing the panel shut again.

Brandy went down on his knees. He began squeezing himself through the opening. He squirmed while I pushed at him. He drew his feet in and the panel automatically closed. A latch clicked and Brandy opened the door.

We were in a dark, narrow hall. Another door was open on our left. Reaching into the room, Brandy found a switch. A glare came from a single light-bulb hanging from the ceiling. The windows facing the street were closely shuttered. This was the dog's room, as we could tell from the smell, the pan of drinking water with an automatic float control, and a gravity feeder which could serve up biscuits for probably as long as a week. The dog was crouched in the center of the floor, head lifted, still howling his death song.

He shied from us, dodged aside and streaked out into the hall. We heard the trap swing back and forth. He'd slipped outside and was gone again.

There was another smell in the air, that of raw liquor. This came from the man lying face down on the floor. The sprawled looseness of his body told me he was dead even before Brandy gently turned him face up. We stood there wagging our heads over Ned Cooney, who had at last, apparently, succeeded in drinking himself to death.

BRANDY, I thought, ought to feel jubilant about this. But he didn't. Instead of being proud of himself, and happy that the case was finally cleaned up, he took a nose-dive into another of his utterly dejected moods—this one the blackest yet.

He had nothing at all to say when Mrs. Lambert poured lavish compliments on us. After we'd gone back to the agency to report our success to Mr. Drumm he sat with his shoulders sagging and his chin drooping on his chest. Mr. Drumm's congratulations didn't bring even a smile to his woeful face. He just sat there, steeped in despair, and aroused my misgivings by shaking his head again while I summed it up for our chief.

"Cooney evidently managed to keep himself sober at times, Mr. Drumm, so he could manage the racket," I said. "The way he used to come around here and ask for his old job back, and bum a few bucks, was just a cover-up. After all, it had to be someone like Cooney—someone who could begin with small hints, do a good job of snooping and build a strong case against a victim. Well, thank God our last chance paid off. We've wrapped it up."

"Excellently, too, Sam, excellently," Mr. Drumm said, beaming.

"Cooney couldn't have drunk himself to death at a better time," I said. "Now the whole thing can be quietly buried along with him, without any police action at all. We've solved it not only for our client, but for the rest of Cooney's victims as well."

Brandy was getting under my skin. Still silent, he kept shaking his head.

"What the devil's the matter with you, Brandy?" I said. "We've hit the jackpot. Everything's lovely. It couldn't have wound up more beautifully. Don't you realize you ought to be patting yourself on the back instead of—"

"Everything's *too* lovely," Brandy said abruptly. "Maybe Cooney died of too much drink, Sam—too much drink handily provided him within a short space of time. If it wasn't done that way, then Cooney was poisoned."

I gaped at him. "Poisoned?"

He nodded. "The medical examiner probably won't find it. Cooney's insides are so corroded by liquor that the usual symptoms of poison wouldn't show. Some poisons are hard to recognize anyway, and you can be sure the man who killed Cooney chose one of them. That's just a guess, of course, but I think it's close to the facts. Anyway, Cooney's death was just too damned lucky for us. I can't believe in it. Things don't break that way for me. We haven't got the blackmailer at all. We haven't even stopped him."

I kept staring at him, trying hard not to blurt out: "You're crazy!"

Mr. Drumm said patiently: "Come now, Dennis. You've worked hard on this case. It's been a strain. However, your worries are all over now." He smiled paternally, his amber eyes twinkling, and he turned his head on his long, thin neck, looking toward me for agreement. "Better take a week off with him, Sam. See that he gets plenty of sleep and rest. Then I'll have new assignments for you. As an operative, Dennis, you're developing splendidly, splendidly."

Brandy didn't seem to hear. He still shook his head, his whole face pale and white. "The dates are wrong, Sam," he went on. "Remember the first time Gaye Thorne was watched, six months ago? The date on the first of Cooney's reports is June tenth. But remember the date on the letter which Mrs. Thorne sent to Gaye, warning her she was being watched? It was June thirteenth. That letter couldn't have reached her before the next day, June fourteenth. That's a stretch of four days between the time Cooney began watching her and the time she was warned about it. We know she was playing around plenty, yet Cooney's reports on those first four days don't show anything out of the way."

"He falsified them," I said. "He made Gaye Thorne pay him for whitewashing her to her father. That's when he began operating his blackmail mill, probably."

"But the spelling is wrong too, Sam," Brandy insisted. "On the first four days Cooney's reports show the word gauge spelled correctly. After that, for ten more days, he consistently spelled it wrong, transposing the *a* and the *u*. That wasn't the result of drinking. It was falsification, all right, but Cooney didn't do it. It must have been done by Mr. Drumm."

I was struck speechless. Mr. Drumm shook his head slightly. "Dennis, Dennis," he said gently. "You've got yourself all tangled up with groundless worries. Please, don't fret over it any more." He turned to me again. "Take him home, Sam. Give him a couple of good, stiff drinks and see that he gets plenty of rest."

Brandy was completely disinclined to go home, have a couple of stiff drinks and get some rest. He stayed put, looking unshakably stubborn. Also, he was trembling again. His whole body quivered so that he gripped the arms of his chair in an attempt to stop it. And he couldn't stop.

"Of course Mr. Drumm didn't tell Cooney he'd falsified the reports. Cooney had no way of knowing his first four reports were destroyed by Mr. Drumm and new ones substituted. This, of course, with the change in the girl's behavior following her mother's warning, made all of them satisfactory to her father.

"After Cooney was called off, Mr. Drumm watched her himself, saw her revert to her immoral ways, then began blackmailing her. He kept on blackmailing her, along with his other victims, including Mrs. Lambert, until the night he had to kill her."

"For God's sake, Brandy!" I blurted. "Will you lay off this brainstorm and come on home?"

Mr. Drumm had begun to look sad. He wagged his head a little, which caused his rust-red forelock to fall across his forehead,

and he puckered his thin lips gravely. It was as if he were at the bedside of a seriously ailing friend.

"Don't you see how it worked out, Sam?" Brandy continued, unable to stop talking. "Gaye Thorne's father decided to have her watched again as a result of that newspaper story about the paint-pouring episode. Her father decided on it because Mr. Drumm suggested it, as is shown by a carbon of a letter in the file. It had become very important to Mr. Drumm to watch that girl. He would have done it even if her father hadn't retained him for the job the second time, but the retainer made it easier and safer for him. He wanted the girl watched by someone other than himself, so he could personally keep out of it. But he *had* to watch her, Sam, and watch her closely, because that newspaper story had warned him she was trying to find a way of tracing his dog."

I FELT chilled. Mr. Drumm still looked regretful, but his face had hardened. Again I was experiencing that upheaval of the brain that always happened when I began to see things in Brandy's peculiar way.

"You know the real reason Mr. Drumm assigned me to watch that girl? He wanted to learn about any further attempts she might make to trace his dog. When I turned in my reports about flour and salt and shot and pants pockets and the rest, he knew exactly what they meant, exactly what she hoped to use them for."

The chill in me grew sharper. Mr. Drumm was slowly, soundlessly opening the top drawer of his desk. No longer watching Brandy, but still listening intently, I kept my eyes on Mr. Drumm.

"Gaye Thorne was trying very intelligently to find a way of reaching the blackmailer," Brandy said, "and in case she found it Mr. Drumm wanted to be forewarned, through me. He had you keep an eye on me as well, Sam, so he'd make doubly sure my reports were reliable and doubly sure of preparing himself against her."



Mr. Drumm's thin hand lay motionless inside the drawer. Brandy had seen the move. His face grew even whiter. But he didn't stop.

"He couldn't keep the girl from using the bird seed and the cake decorator, but he could stop her in case it worked too well—and he did."

I asked quickly: "Mr. Drumm, haven't you anything at all to say about this?"

He answered: "I consider it very unfortunate, Sam. It's no use trying to shut him up. Let him rave on until he gets it out of his system."

Brandy swallowed hard. "Then, when Mrs. Lambert turned up as a client, Mr. Drumm had another reason for putting me on the case—which was really the same case, of course. I suppose it was inevitable that sooner or later one of his blackmail victims would come to him as a client. Anyway, I'm sure he'd been waiting for it. Sam, he wanted to handle the search for himself. Why? *To test the flawlessness of his own blackmail scheme.*"

I was feeling sick.

"Mr. Drumm is weary of this agency of his, and has been for years. We've seen him show it. He'd like nothing better than to close it up and live the rest of his life in luxury. That's what started him on his career in blackmail. But naturally he didn't want to get caught. Being a very shrewd man, he planned ways and means with great care. He trained the dog as an absolutely foolproof means of collecting blackmail. It worked perfectly for a time, but still he couldn't be completely sure there wasn't a hole in it somewhere.

"Well, Gaye Thorne found one, so he took steps to protect himself against that trick. We saw his counter-strategy work at Gramercy Park when the dog shook all the seeds out before really starting off. But there might be a second hole in the scheme. If so, he wanted to learn what it was, so he could plug it up. Mr. Drumm never once suggested to us any means of trailing the dog. He wanted new ideas, ideas he'd never thought of him-

self, to come from us. You know what I've actually been doing on this case, Sam? I've been teaching Mr. Drumm, the blackmailer, how to make his plan actually flawless!"

Mr. Drumm shrugged slightly.

"All along he knew my work on the case would have to turn out in either one of two ways. Either I'd fail to get through to him, or I'd succeed. If I failed to identify him after doing my best, then he'd be that much surer he was safe from investigation, whether it was done by some other agency, or the D. A., or any of his victims. On the other hand, if I succeeded in tracing the dog, then he'd have learned of a flaw in his plan and how to remedy it.

"That's what happened tonight. We actually got to the dog's home. Mr. Drumm knew we'd manage that when he saw the dog begin to obey signals from a whistle not his own. Then he had to set the stage, as he'd previously planned to do if it became necessary. That is, he needed someone to fob off as the blackmailer while he stayed behind the scenes. That accounts for Cooney, of course. Mr. Drumm was keeping him supplied with drinking money against the day when he'd need a corpse to set up as the dog's master.

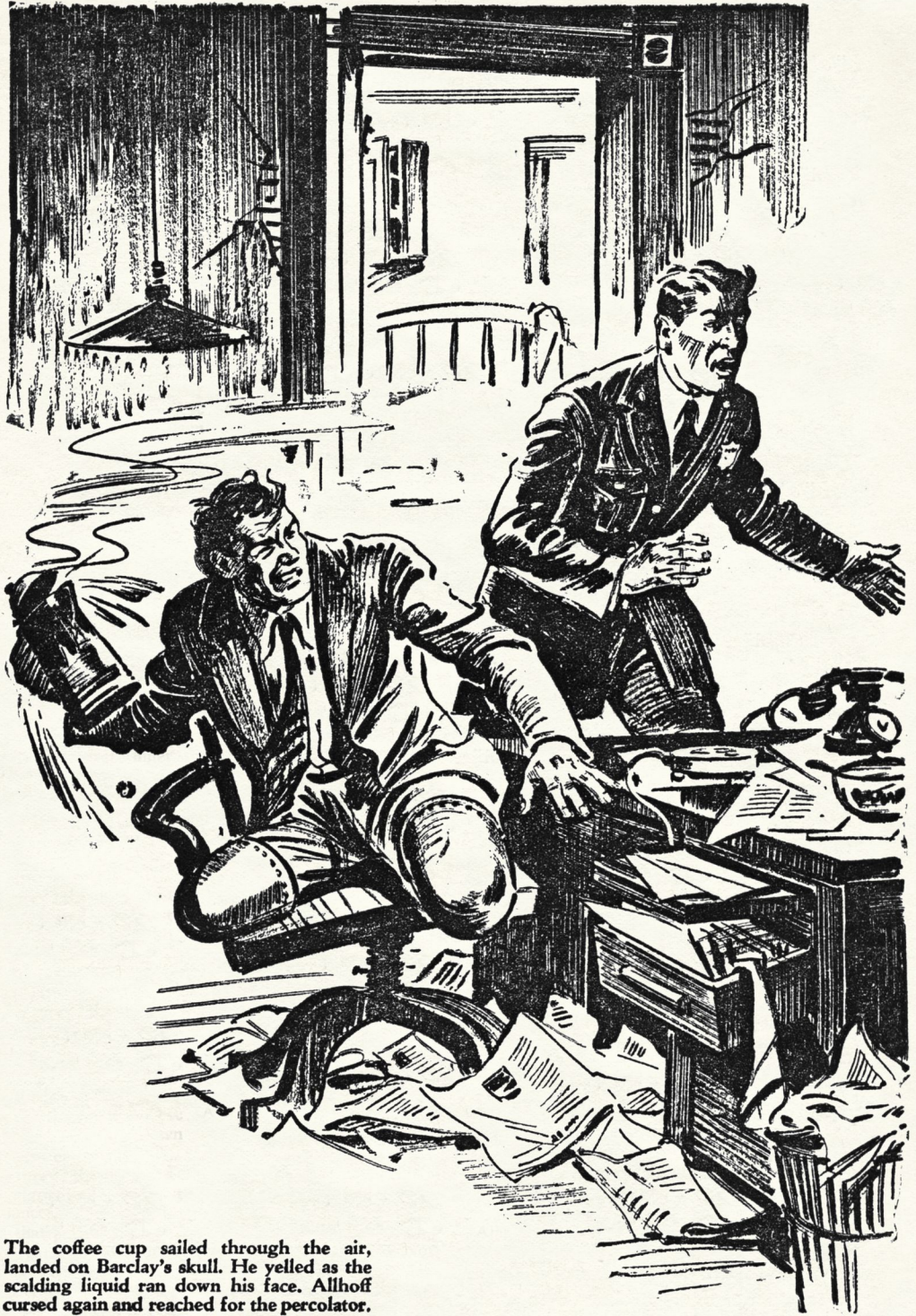
"But Mr. Drumm's plan goes even farther than that. What would he do in the event that his operative actually saw past the frame on Cooney and identified Mr. Drumm himself as the blackmailer? Well, that accounts for me, Sam. You've worked for Mr. Drumm a long time. He needs you here and likes you. That's also true of all his other men. But I'm new. Since I'm something of a strange case anyway, it wouldn't seem too unlikely if I should happen to make an erratic mistake that would get me killed."

BRANDY had stopped trembling now. He seemed suddenly sure of himself, and calm, and strangely unafraid.

"I think it's come to that now, Sam," he said. "You see, the dog's still usable. Mr. Drumm called him out of his kennel when we

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The coffee cup sailed through the air, landed on Barclay's skull. He yelled as the scalding liquid ran down his face. Allhoff cursed again and reached for the percolator.

One Killer Too Many

By D. L. CHAMPION

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An Inspector Allhoff
Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

It's Murder—He Says

A motiveless killing! Homicide, thoroughly baffled, called it suicide and for a while it looked as if they were right. Who'd kill a guy who had only two months longer to live anyway?

MIDSUMMER was the most unpleasant time of the year at Allhoff's. The damp city heat pelted down on the tar roof of the tenement, shone hotly on the ancient brick walls, and what little air the two small windows admitted was sullied immediately by the dirt and disorder of the rooms.

A fragrance, pleasing only to the battalion of cockroaches who gravitated thither, arose

from the unwashed dishes in the sink and the unemptied garbage pail beneath it. From the bedroom, where Allhoff's laundry was piled against the wall like a gray mountain, came the unappetizing aroma of soiled clothes.

Battersly's uniform collar had already wilted by noon and my shirt and underwear were sticking to my body like diluted glue.

However, Allhoff didn't seem to mind. He bent over his desk, his chest pressed against its edge and poured black and scalding hot coffee down his gullet. His brow was dry, his little eyes clear. He looked like a man breathing in the crisp air of the Arizona mountain country rather than the gagging moist atmosphere of New York City in late July.

At least I was glad that things were dull. Allhoff had been engaged upon no case for the past two weeks. That fact saved Battersly and me a lot of leg work. It also saved us from listening to him. He was notoriously more garrulous while working than when not.

I sat at my desk by the window trying to catch some of the dispirited breeze which moved feebly along Centre Street. Battersly mopped his forehead and pored over the comics in the evening paper. Allhoff scowled through sheer force of habit and filled his coffee cup from the blackened percolator.

It was a little after three o'clock when I heard heavy footfalls mounting the rickety stairs outside. The door opened without being knocked upon and Lieutenant Roger Barclay entered.

I glanced up and registered mild surprise. Barclay was one of the big-shots on Homicide. And the Homicide Squad and Allhoff never spoke to each other—except loudly. Allhoff's opinion, constantly voiced, was that on the entire squad there were not enough aggregate brains to equip adequately one half-wit. Homicide, on the other hand, considered Allhoff an arrogant, pompous psychotic who should be in an asylum. Neither of them was entirely inaccurate.

Barclay advanced into the room with an amiable smile on his face. He said in a tone which dripped affability: "Well, well, Inspector, and how are you?"

Allhoff looked up over the chipped brim of his cup. Suspicion welled into his eyes. He said: "Is this an official visit?"

Barclay shook his head. "Not at all. Between us we get all the murder cases in town. Yet there's been a wall separating us. We ought to work more closely, Inspector. Or, if not that, we should be friends. This is purely a social call."

Allhoff blinked. "Am I supposed to offer you tea and biscuits?"

Barclay unleashed a phony laugh which lasted much too long, considering Allhoff's weak irony.

"No, no," he said. "I just happened to be passing and I thought I'd drop in and see how you were."

"I'm fine," said Allhoff, transferring his attention to his coffee cup and, to all intents and purposes, closing the interview.

Barclay flushed. He looked as if he was about to say something biting, but he caught himself in time. When he spoke he was still using a honeyed tone which was completely alien to him.

"You know," he said, "all of us in the Department should stand together."

Allhoff ingurgitated coffee and neither looked up nor replied. Barclay cleared his throat and continued: "What I mean is, we should stand together against outsiders. Shoulder to shoulder."

Allhoff sighed and laid down his cup. "Look," he said, "if you have something specific to say, say it. Don't stand there like a pompous idiot spouting Boy Scout sentiments. They don't impress me. Now what's your trouble?"

Barclay flushed again. "It's really nothing," he said, "except I understand Doc Abernathy's coming over to see you about some silly technicality in a suicide. A gag about the position of a knife. It's ridiculous and certainly not worth bothering you about."

Allhoff's little eyes glittered. A mirthless, gloating smile flickered across his lips.

"I get you. You bright boys have called a death a suicide. Abernathy, of the M. E.'s office says it isn't. And if he's upheld, the commissioner will be howling at you lads again."

"Well," said Barclay most uncomfortably, "what he's got is so damned slim. Naturally, if it was anything solid, I'd be only too glad to admit we were wrong. But—"

"Get out," said Allhoff. "The only difference between what you're saying and a bribe is that you're not offering me any dough. I'll listen to Abernathy. And if I like what he's got I'll break my neck to pin your ears back with it. It was doubtless a murder, not a suicide anyway."

"How can you say that? You don't even know what case I'm talking about."

"I don't have to," said Allhoff blandly. "I know you boys called it suicide and you haven't been right in ten years. Now, will you get the hell out of here?"

The affability fell from Barclay's face. Anger and bitterness replaced it. He glanced across the room to Battersly, said: "It's a damned shame you only half did that job ten years ago."

ALLHOFF'S frenzied oath ripped out across the room. His right arm drew back and the coffee cup, leaving a black trail behind it, sailed through the air. It landed on Barclay's

skull. He yelled as the scalding liquid ran down his face. Allhoff cursed again and reached for the percolator. Before he could hurl it, the door had slammed behind Barclay's retreating figure.

I heard Battersly's sibilant intake of breath. I sighed and silently cursed Barclay. He had revenged himself on Allhoff most effectively. Unfortunately he had dragged Battersly and me into the mess as well.

Allhoff pushed his chair away from the desk and rolled to a halt in the middle of the room. At the edge of his seat, the pair of leather stumps where his thighs should have been wriggled horribly.

His burning, intense eyes glared at Battersly. He lifted his voice and shouted in a key a couple of points this side of hysteria.

"You yellow dog! It's your fault that I'm exposed to a swine like Barclay. It's you who put me in such a position that I have to listen to his mockery. You—"

He delved into the murky depths of his vocabulary with both hands and came up with paragraphs of filthy epithet. Battersly, white-faced, took the barrage in silence, as always. I sat and listened, aware of the nausea at the pit of my stomach which this scene invariably induced.

Eventually he became completely out of breath. Only then did he stop. He returned to his desk, hunched over it and poured another cup of coffee with a trembling hand. He swallowed it loudly and stared broodingly at the far wall.

Battersly went back to his comic strip but I knew he wasn't reading. I sighed and filled my pipe.

The whole ghastly situation had its inception several years before when Allhoff had been a genuine police inspector with a normal quota of legs, and Battersly a raw recruit. We had learned through a couple of stool-pigeons of the whereabouts of a pair of killers wanted in four states. They were hiding, we were informed, in a rooming house on upper West End Avenue.

We had been informed further that they were in possession of a Tommy gun which was mounted on the stairway of the house as protection against a raid.

Battersly's assignment had been to effect a rear entrance, disable the operator of the machine gun at precisely the moment that Allhoff came crashing through the front door at the head of the raiding squad.

Battersly had carried out the first half of his assignment well enough. He had entered the house unseen. He had climbed in a bathroom window, then, at zero hour, had undergone a quite understandable attack of buck fever. Panic had taken hold of him. Instead of closing with the thug at the gun, he had

retreated in ignominious disorder up the stairs.

The obvious and immediate result of this action was that Allhoff, upon battering down the front door, had been greeted by a hail of lead, most of which found bloody refuge in his legs. Gangrene had set in and amputation followed shortly thereafter.

Naturally, a police inspector minus his nether limbs is an outrage to the entire Civil Service system but the commissioner was of no mind to lose his best brain merely because of a physical deficiency. Political wangling and devious bookkeeping devices had seen to it that Allhoff continued to draw his usual pay. He had installed himself in this miserable tenement because of its proximity to Police Headquarters.

At Allhoff's insistence, Battersly had been assigned to him as an assistant, while I, ostensibly performing the paper work, had been sent along to keep an eye on things.

I had always believed that Allhoff had lost more than his legs on that tragic night. He had lost some of his mind as well. His hatred of Battersly, as the man who had caused him to become a cripple, was an awful and consuming thing.

He never lost an opportunity to remind the younger man of that single moment of cowardice which had wrecked both their lives. Over the years he had extracted an incessant and bitter revenge.

The net result of it all was that Allhoff had no legs, Battersly had no happiness and I had no peace. I looked forward wistfully to that day when I could draw my pension, write my memoirs and never set my tired old eyes on either of them again.

At a quarter to five, just when my dreams of a cold shower and a bottle of beer were about to come true, I heard someone coming up the stairs. A moment later Doc Abernathy entered.

I didn't know Abernathy very well. He was a young guy—the junior medico in the M.E.'s office. He was tall, thin and wore a huge pair of tortoise-shell glasses which made him look even more serious than he was.

"Inspector," he said, "I need your help."

Allhoff put down his coffee cup. "Of course," he said. "If you say it's murder and Homicide says it's suicide, I am firmly convinced it's murder."

Abernathy gaped at him. "How on earth do you know why I'm here?"

Allhoff assumed the expression of a Roman seer, said: "I have my sources, Doctor."

Abernathy, properly impressed, sat down. Allhoff refilled his cup and said: "I understand it concerns the position of the knife. Do you argue that it was impossible for a man to have stabbed himself with the knife in the position in which you found it?"

Abernathy shook his head. "No," he said,

"that's what Homicide is arguing about. It wasn't impossible. It was, however, damned improbable. The hilt was almost exactly at right angles to the dead man's breast. He'd plunged it into his heart. Normally, the hilt would angle upward, in the direction of his face."

"But not at right angles?"

"Try it yourself," said Abernathy. "I'll grant it's quite possible to stab yourself in the heart that way. But you would be forced to twist your wrist around and cramp your fingers. Why would a man do that?"

"He wouldn't," said Allhoff. "Homicide just doesn't want to go to work, that's all. They realize it's probably a tough case. It's easier to call it suicide, close the case, and go back to that bowling alley where they hang out."

"Well," said Abernathy, "I'm no detective. I know nothing about the case, except what I've told you, but on the basis of the position of the knife I insist it was murder. I haven't the time, however, to conduct a personal feud with the police department. That's why I hoped you'd look into it, Inspector."

Allhoff nodded. "Consider it looked into, Doctor. I'll start at once."

ABERNATHY shook his hand, thanked him and left the room. Allhoff turned to me. I knew what he was going to ask and I was already thumbing through the onion-skin reports which were sent us daily from Headquarters across the street.

"All right," I said, "I have it. Here it is. The guy's name was Revere. He was fifty-five years old and an invalid. He lived with his middle-aged sister who acted as his nurse. His doctor was a guy named Hamilton who swears that Revere's heart was in such bad shape that only a miracle could have kept him alive for another two months. And that," I added maliciously, "seems to indicate that Homicide is right."

"Why?"

"Who'd kill a guy who was only going to live two months longer anyway?"

"Idiot. There must have been a number of people who didn't have access to the doctor's opinion."

"Well, perhaps. However, it seems he had no money. He's been bedridden for three years and saw no one except some close friends and relatives which would preclude his making any enemies. So what are you going to do for a motive?"

"I'm going to send Battersly and you over there to look for one."

My heart sank as the vision of a shower and cold beer faded. "You mean *now*? Tonight?"

"Why not? The trail's probably cold enough

as it is. Go over there right away. See the sister. Case the joint. Ask every question you can think of. See what relatives and friends there are. Find out something. Then come back and report to me. I'll wait up until you come back."

I sighed, stood up and reached for my cap. Battersly followed my example and we both headed for the door. I opened it to find a tall, dark, well-dressed man of about thirty-five on the threshold.

He looked at me inquiringly, said: "Is Inspector Allhoff here?"

I indicated Allhoff. The stranger stared incredulously about the room, as strangers invariably did when they entered this slum. Then, uncertainly, he walked over to Allhoff's desk.

He said, without preamble: "My name is Horace Murdock. My lawyer is a friend of the commissioner. He communicated with him today regarding the mysterious death of Albert Revere. The commissioner suggested that I see you."

I gestured to Battersly and returned to my desk. Perhaps we could pick up some information now which might make it unnecessary for us to devote our evening to the investigation of crime. I wasn't too hopeful but we had nothing to lose.

Allhoff regarded Murdock and said: "Just what is your interest in the case?"

"Well," said Murdock, "I happen to be the fiancé of Elsie Revere. She's Albert Revere's niece."

Allhoff's eyes lighted up. "You do not believe that the old man killed himself?"

"I do not."

"Why?"

"For several reasons. First, he just wasn't the type. He was a tough old guy who clung to life. Moreover, he was exceedingly religious. That in itself would forbid such an act."

"Did you know him well?"

"Quite well."

"Did Homicide question you?"

"No, they only questioned Revere's sister who was far too overwrought to answer intelligently. But since they called the matter a suicide and closed the case I have done some investigating of my own. What I've learned corroborates everything I believed when I first heard of his death."

Allhoff actually rubbed his hands. "Now, Mr. Murdock, what is it you have found? What is it you believe about Revere's death?"

"First, there's the window. Mr. Revere only permitted it to be opened slightly because of the draft. However, when I went to the house it was *wide* open. His sister assured me she did not open it. Unless it was opened by the police, it seems to me it must have been opened by the killer. There is a fire-escape outside.

Moreover, there are scratches on the sill as if someone had climbed over it in a hurry. Second, his sister told me that he had just sent off a check to renew a magazine subscription. Certainly that is not the act of a man who contemplates suicide."

Allhoff was cackling now. "Good," he said. "Go on. Have you any idea of a motive?"

Murdock hesitated. At last he said: "I have. Maybe it's going to sound screwy to you, Inspector, but I can tell you what I know."

"A week or so ago, Revere told me that an Austrian refugee, a friend of his, had just arrived in this country. He had imparted important information to Revere regarding certain Fascist agents in this country. Since this friend did not know to which authorities to take his knowledge, he asked Revere to do it for him."

"Anything else?" snapped Allhoff.

"Isn't that enough, Inspector?"

Allhoff nodded abstractedly. "I guess so," he said. "Give your address and that of Revere's niece to the sergeant there. I'll get in touch with you when I need you."

I listened to Murdock's receding footsteps going down the stairs and watched Allhoff as he stared broodingly at the far wall.

"Well," I said, "you certainly are Fortune's fool."

"What gives you that idea?" he said.

"Why, you've got your case solved for you. You have a motive, the killer's method of entry and Abernathy's knife theory to back you up, not to mention the magazine subscription. You're the luckiest guy in Manhattan."

He snorted at that. "You," he said, "are a fool. And I'll thank you to obey your orders."

"Orders? What orders?"

"I told you and Battersly to go out to Revere's, didn't I?"

"But, my God, you've already got everything that we could get for you."

"Probably. But get going, will you?"

CHAPTER TWO

Confession by Persuasion

REVERE had lived in an ancient Brooklyn brownstone on the outskirts of Bensonhurst. We tugged at the old-fashioned bell

pull in a dim hallway and a few minutes later an old lady clad in rustling bombazine opened the door.

Agnes Revere was a woman of about forty-five, gray and portly and her eyes were puffy from weeping. We announced our identity and she led us into the parlor, furnished in a style which had been *dernier cri* when Garfield was president.

She sat down on a stiff-backed chair and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"It's all been terribly upsetting," she said. "But after all, I can hardly blame him. He knew he hadn't long to live and I suppose he couldn't stand the waiting."

"So," I said, "you really believe that your brother killed himself?"

She glanced at me in surprise. "Why, the other policemen said so. Naturally, I believed it. Why?"

"Well," I told her, "a Mr. Murdock seems to think that your brother was murdered."

She blinked at me. "But why? Why would anyone kill Albert? He didn't have an enemy in the world."

"Money?" I suggested. "Who inherits?"

She snorted. "Who inherits what? I supported my brother on my small income. I doubt if he left a hundred dollars."

I gave that up, and switched to another tack.

"May we see your brother's room?"

She took us upstairs, escorted us into a bedroom, excused herself and left us there.

It was a large room with a high ceiling. A wide and ancient brass bed stood in the center of the room. Opposite it was a window with an iron fire-escape outside. I walked over to it, put on my glasses and examined the sill.

As Murdock had said, it was scratched and the scratches were recently made. It could well have been that someone had scuffed the paint with his shoes in climbing over the sill.

I turned back to the room to find Battersly going through the drawers and closets. I joined him. We found nothing of any importance at all until Battersly suddenly said: "Here's a funny stamp."

I took it from him. It was a German stamp, canceled, and obviously torn from an envelope. A bit of paper still adhered to its back.

I grunted. "It looks as if Murdock's right," I said. "Perhaps this was a letter from the refugee written before he got to this country."

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.

Even a guy who isn't a stamp collector will often save a foreign stamp. That's what Revere probably did."

I tucked the stamp away in my wallet, said to Battersly: "All right, come on. There's nothing more here. The sooner we get back to Allhoff's the sooner we'll get home."

We left the house, descended into the subway and rode miserably back to Manhattan.

Allhoff was still hunched over his desk, still brewing coffee, still pouring it down his throat in copious drafts.

He looked up, grunted and said: "All right, tell it as tersely as possible."

"That's easy," I said. "There's very little to tell. Murdock is right."

"Suppose you let me judge that," he replied loftily.

"O.K., judge it. Here's what we have."

I gave it to him play by play. As I finished I took the stamp out of my wallet and put it on his desk. He stared at it morosely.

"What's the matter with you?" I said. "Did you expect me to come up with the killer's name, address and photograph? Hell, you've got enough to sink Barclay's boys even if the murderer is never found. I should think you'd be happy."

"Don't be a fool," he snapped. "Now get out of here."

In twenty years' service I had never obeyed an order so promptly.

BATTERSLY and I had barely arrived at Allhoff's the following morning when the phone rang. Answering it, I found myself talking to the commissioner. I put him on Allhoff's wire. Allhoff listened for some time, said, "Yes, sir," and hung up.

He turned to me, said: "Compile a report incorporating everything you found out about Revere, plus what Murdock told us. The boss wants, primarily, I guess, to blast Homicide with it. Send Battersly across the street with it as soon as it's done."

I went to work. At ten-thirty I dispatched Battersly across the street. At ten-forty Battersly returned and just an hour later flat feet came up the stairway and Barclay burst into the room.

He was not calm. His face was red and his eyes hot as he glared at Allhoff. I gathered he had been standing on the commissioner's carpet for several minutes.

"What's the matter with you?" he snapped. "Do you have to butt in everywhere? Can't you work with us boys? Can't you let sleeping dogs lay?"

"Lie," said Allhoff reaching for the cup.

Barclay's coloring turned from flushed red to carmine. He opened his mouth to speak but Allhoff beat him to it.

"Is this a social visit?" he asked. "If so you

may get the hell out. Or has the boss sent you up to take lessons in detecting from me?"

Barclay controlled himself with an effort. He said: "I have orders to get what you have on Revere."

"Delighted to give it to you," said Allhoff. "And also to get your valued reactions."

He gestured to me and I handed Barclay a carbon of the report I had sent over to the commissioner. Barclay sat down and read it. He looked up when he finished and said: "You're one lucky guy."

"And you," said Allhoff, "are an indolent idiot. You found a guy dead. You asked three perfunctory questions of a hysterical woman, went back to your office and declared it a suicide. You didn't find the stamp. You didn't notice the window."

"All right," said Barclay. "Why should I notice the window? The old guy was an invalid. Invalids commit suicide, don't they? The old girl told me there was no dough. No insurance. Why should I make trouble for myself? It's funny about the stamp, though. I went through the room personally. I don't suppose I would have thought anything of it if I had seen it, but I didn't even see it."

Allhoff looked at him sharply.

"It looks like a cinch now," said Barclay. "I guess if we get the killer the boss won't be so sore."

"A cinch?" Allhoff repeated.

"Sure. From what you've given me, it's Fascist stuff. We'll simply send out the Alien Squad to round up every guy on their list and then put them through the wringer until we get a confession."

"That," said Allhoff, "is a brilliant idea."

Barclay nodded and walked out of the room. I looked at Allhoff.

"Do you mean that you're bowing out of the case and handing it over to Homicide now that you've got all the facts?"

"I'm not bowing out. While Barclay and the Alien Squad are rounding up their suspects I shall be hot on the trail of the killer."

"You mean you know who the killer is?"

"Perhaps, but I don't know the motive. One thing I do know, however."

"What?"

"Albert Revere's death is one crime that can't be pinned on Hitler or his philosophy."

"You mean Barclay's still wrong?"

He snorted. "Barclay's always wrong. And even I'm not right." He sighed heavily and stared broodingly at the wall. "It's really a tough one," he added.

After a while he asked me: "Who was in the house on the day of the killing?"

I looked through the piled-up papers on my desk.

"Murdock," I told him, "Elsie Revere, the niece to whom he's engaged, and an old crony

named Williams. Apparently they've all been questioned by now."

He sighed again and emptied a cup of coffee. "All right," he said. "Check on this. I know the sister said that Revere left no dough. But check it anyway. Also check thoroughly and find out if there's any insurance around anywhere. It seems to me everyone is taking everyone else's word for everything in this case. No one's doing any checking."

I said, "O.K.," without enthusiasm. I didn't relish spending a hot day checking records in the Surrogate's Court and phoning a hundred insurance companies.

HOWEVER, I spent the next day doing exactly that with the result I expected. I showed at Allhoff's late in the afternoon. He looked up eagerly as I came in. I shook my head.

"Nope. The old girl was telling the truth. Revere left slightly over a hundred bucks in a savings account. No insurance at all. Does that get you anywhere?"

"Nowhere. I've done some checking, too. The sister has some dough—about thirty thousand dollars. It gives her a small income. And all that dough eventually goes to the niece."

"So," I said, "if the sister had been killed instead of Revere, you'd have a hot suspect."

He nodded ruefully. Rarely did I have the opportunity of seeing Allhoff thoroughly baffled. He seemed to be now.

"Does it occur to you that perhaps Barclay was right the first time? Maybe the old guy actually committed suicide, and Murdock was lying."

He replied, to my astonishment: "Oh, Murdock was lying all right. At least partially, but I'll go to my grave completely convinced that Barclay wasn't right."

"Do you mean Barclay was lying? Why should he do that?"

He waved me away. "Leave me alone. This is too tough a job for brains like yours—or Barclay's."

He left it that way for forty-eight hours. During that period, Barclay with the aid of the Alien Squad had dragged in almost every guy ever suspected of Fascist sympathies. They'd sorted them, weeded them and checked them. By Wednesday afternoon Barclay was certain he'd found his murderer. The report came over to me from Headquarters.

"Barclay's got a suspect," I said. "He's been charged with killing Revere."

"Do tell," said Allhoff with utmost scepticism.

"His name is Vogel—an ex-Bund member who's served a prison term. He lives within ten blocks of the Revere place, and could give no proof of his whereabouts on the night of the killing. Says he was at the movies alone.

That was under the first examination. Later he confessed completely."

"I hope he's got enough sense to have his lawyer photograph the bruises," snorted Allhoff.

I put down the report, exasperated. "Don't you ever admit anyone can be right except you? First, you howled at Barclay because he'd said suicide. You insisted it was murder. All right, you produced evidence, through sheer luck, that it *was* murder. So Barclay believes you. He goes out and after one hell of a lot of work finds the guy and gets a confession. Now, you hint that the confession was beaten out of him."

"Of course it was."

"Why do you say that?"

"Why otherwise would a guy confess to a killing he didn't do?"

"How do you know he didn't do it?"

"Oh, Lord," he sighed. "That part of it is clear enough. Tell me, what's Barclay doing now?"

"He's gone out after Murdock."

"Why?"

"To try to find out something about that Austrian friend of Revere's. The one who gave him the information about the American Fascists."

Allhoff turned around and stared at me for a minute. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Well," I said, nettled, "what's so damned funny?"

"All of you coppers. Coppers, my God!"

I shrugged my shoulders and went back to my work. Allhoff suddenly became serious.

"At that, it's a break," he said. "This ought to start something. I'll give it another day."

IT WAS a little after eleven o'clock in the morning. Light footfalls sounded on the stairs. I looked up and caught Battersly's eye. We were both thinking the same thing. Allhoff seldom had feminine callers but obviously one was climbing the stairs at this moment.

A hesitant knock sounded at the door. I said, "Come in," and it opened.

A woman stood in the doorway, a fragile blonde of about twenty-nine. Her eyes were blue and rather vacuous. She was dressed in a light summer print and her attitude was one of incredulous amazement as she viewed the soiled chaos of Allhoff's apartment.

"Well," said Allhoff sharply, "were you looking for me?"

"Are you Inspector Allhoff?"

Allhoff nodded and the woman came into the room. She said: "I am Elsie Revere." She moved over to Allhoff's desk and sat down gingerly on the none too clean chair which he indicated.

"Inspector," she began haltingly, "I don't

know how to tell you this. But since I've forced myself to come here to help you in the interests of justice I hope you won't be too hard on my fiancé."

Allhoff reached for the coffee pot and said: "I've rather been expecting you. Go on."

"Very well," she said. "Mr. Murdock lied to you. No one killed my uncle—except himself."

"Yes," said Allhoff, "I knew he lied to me about one thing. I'm glad you've come to explain it."

"One thing?" she echoed. "He lied about everything. His whole story was one mass of lies from beginning to end."

Allhoff looked puzzled.

"Yes," she said, "every bit of that evidence he said he found was made up. He even planted a foreign stamp in a bureau drawer to help corroborate his story of the strange refugee who wanted my uncle's help."

"All right," Allhoff said sadly. "Go on. Why did he tell me this cock and bull tale?"

"Because he hates Lieutenant Barclay."

"Keep talking," Allhoff said. "It requires quite a bit of explanation."

"Four years ago," said Elsie Revere, "a man was arrested for murder. He was innocent. Barclay's testimony sent him to jail for life. He was Mr. Murdock's best friend. He knew Barclay had lied merely to protect his own record. Mr. Murdock never forgave him for that."

"So," said Allhoff dispiritedly, "when Murdock knew that Barclay's squad had announced your uncle was a suicide, he went to work to make it look like murder to embarrass Barclay? He called in the commissioner and me, as well, to get Barclay into trouble?"

The woman nodded. "That's true. And I hope you won't be too hard on him, Inspector. I hope—"

"What was this man's name? The innocent one whom Barclay railroaded?"

"Moss. Ben Moss. He's serving a life sentence at Sing Sing."

Allhoff snapped his fingers at me and I jotted it down.

"Now," said Allhoff, "what suddenly made Murdock change his mind and decide to come clean?"

"He heard that someone else had been held for my uncle's murder, that he had confessed. He realized that Barclay, a completely ruthless man, had forced a confession from this innocent man and that his plan to embarrass Barclay had miscarried. The only thing for him to do was to tell the truth."

Allhoff stroked his chin. "Do you realize that we could hold Murdock for obstructing justice? Do you know he could serve time for that?"

She nodded. "I know it," she said in a low

voice. "That's why I came to see you. I was hoping that in view of this admission he might not be punished."

Allhoff lapsed into a thoughtful silence. At last he said slowly: "You mean that Murdock not only planted the stamp but also opened the window and made those marks on the window sill? In addition to which he invented this Austrian refugee story to supply a motive for murder?"

Elsie Revere nodded her head. "He did all those things, Inspector."

"Will he make that statement in writing if I promise he will not be prosecuted for obstructing justice?"

"I'll see that he does."

"Good. It won't be necessary to write out any explanation of his motive or anything concerning Moss or Barclay. Have him simply write out that he lied to me, listing the lies, that he planted phony evidence in Revere's room. See that I get that paper tomorrow. Is that clear?"

"Quite, Inspector. And you'll never know just how grateful I am. I—"

Allhoff waved her to silence. She dabbed at her eyes with a little lace handkerchief and walked slowly from the room.

I STOOD up and scratched my head.

"So what does this make it? Suicide again?"

"It's still murder—but not by the guy that Barclay's holding," said Allhoff.

"But Murdock admits he lied."

"Maybe, but it's not suicide."

"Then who killed him?"

"I have a very definite idea," said Allhoff. "However, I have no evidence at all and I'm completely licked as to a motive."

I glanced at my watch. It was almost five o'clock. I took my coat off the hanger and struggled into it. Battersly followed suit. Allhoff looked up at us for a thoughtful moment.

"Before you guys go," he said, "I want some things."

"Some easily obtainable things, I hope," I said.

"Quite easy. Hand me the Red Book. Battersly, you go out and order me a photographer—a private one and reputable. Make a date here at any time within the next couple of hours. You, Simmonds, go across the street and bring back Vogel."

"Vogel?"

"Vogel," he said impatiently. "The guy Barclay claims murdered Revere. Bring him here and then you can leave. I'll be responsible for him."

"I'm not a complete moron," I told him. "I know what you want him for and it won't work."

"What won't work?"

"You're going to strip Vogel and photograph him. You're hoping he'll be covered with bruises inflicted by Barclay when he beat the phony confession out of him. Well, you won't find any."

He gave me his prime, grade-A, nasty look.

"Brilliant, aren't you? And how do you know these things?"

"I don't have to be a Philo Vance to figure that. Barclay's an old hand at that business. He knows enough to leave no marks. There's the rubber hose, you know, and several other methods that I don't have to tell you about."

"Suppose you let me worry about that. Now, get going, both of you."

I went across the street to the Tombs, signed the necessary paper and led Vogel back across the street, watching him carefully and keeping my hand close to my holster. Not that he looked like a guy who'd make a break for it. He was a little man with a mop of curly hair and a huge pair of tortoise-shell glasses adorned his rather prominent nose. His face was pale and he looked scared.

As we went up the stairs, he said bitterly: "What else do you thugs want of me?"

I didn't answer. Allhoff was the man who did the answering in our establishment.

Battersly had returned when I went in. He was saying: "The photographer will be here in an hour, sir."

Allhoff said: "O.K. Sit down, Vogel."

Vogel sat down uneasily. Allhoff didn't make him feel any better when he took his Police Special out of his top desk drawer and laid it down next to the coffee percolator. He said quietly: "Take it easy, Vogel. As long as you do as you're told you won't get hurt. All right, you two guys may go."

As Battersly and I were almost out of the door he asked one more question. "Hey, what's the phone number of the corner drug-store?"

Battersly, who did all his purchasing, gave it to him. Allhoff wrote it down on a scratch pad and waved us a dismissal.

CHAPTER THREE

Double Indemnity

I REPORTED the following morning to find Allhoff with the Classified telephone book open on his desk and a scratch pad filled with scrawled numbers. Evidently, he had been doing a lot of phoning.

"Look," he said, as I came in, "I've been calling the insurance companies and I think I have something."

"Don't tell me Revere had a policy. I checked every possible source."

"He didn't have one when he died. But he *did* have one a couple of years ago. It lapsed.

It was issued by Federated Life. Get over there right away and get me a copy of the policy."

I went uptown to the Federated Life and got a copy of Revere's old insurance policy. It was straight life and for ten thousand dollars. I returned to the flat, nodded to Battersly who was immersed in the comic strips and handed the policy to Allhoff. He snatched it and peered at the small type.

He remained silent for a full twenty minutes, then suddenly smote the desk top with a heavy fist.

"God," he said, "I've got it!"

"Got what?" I asked.

"The motive."

"What about the murderer?"

"Hell, I knew who he was all along!"

I blinked at him, incredulously. "Well," I said, "do we go out and pick him up?"

He shook his head. "Not right away. I have to wait for an item or two."

He put down his cup and snatched up the telephone. A moment later he had the commissioner on the wire.

"Sir," he said, "I am happy to report that I will deliver the killer in the Revere case this afternoon . . . What, sir? Oh, no. Lieutenant Barclay is wrong, sir. Vogel is innocent."

After that the commissioner apparently did a great deal of talking. Finally, Allhoff said, "Yes, sir," again and hung up. He looked thoughtful.

I said: "Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing important. The boss is sending over his deputy. And he wants Barclay and Vogel here when I break the case. He's suspicious of Vogel's confession—he thinks Barclay beat it out of him."

"Well, didn't he?"

"Yeah. But—"

"You mean you found no marks on him, eh? What did I tell you?"

He didn't answer me. Instead he scrawled a note on a sheet of paper, thrust it into an envelope, addressed it and handed it to Battersly.

"Here," he said, "take this across the street. Deliver it to Vogel—in private. No one else is to read it."

Battersly got up, took the note and disappeared. I watched him go in some bewilderment, then said: "What now?"

"Coffee," he said, picking up the pot. "I'm thirsty."

Battersly returned and sat down at his desk. A few minutes before noon a Western Union messenger came in and handed an envelope to Allhoff. He slit it open and read it.

"O.K.," he said. "It's the communication from Mr. Murdock. Get going, you guys."

"Where?"

"Get Barclay. Get Vogel. Get Revere's

sister. Get Murdock and that Elsie Revere. I'm ready."

Barclay wasn't happy when I gave him his orders. He looked at me suspiciously. "What's the old goat want?"

"He says he's solved the Revere case?"

"Him? *I've* solved it. Hell, haven't I got a guy in the can? And a confession to boot?"

"Yeah," I said. "And how did you get it?"

He grinned. "What's it matter? It's Vogel's word against mine. No one can prove anything."

"Allhoff's not the sort of a guy you can figure," I said. "Go on over. I'll pick up Vogel and join you in a few minutes."

BY THE time I had escorted Vogel back across the street, not only had Barclay arrived but also Deputy Commissioner Lewis. Lewis was a big and burly guy with gray hair and a pair of honest eyes. He was sitting beside Allhoff.

Facing them, Barclay seemed most uncomfortable. Allhoff ignored them both and drank coffee. I dragged up a chair for Vogel and went over to my desk. We sat in uncomfortable silence until Battersly arrived with Murdock, Elsie Revere and her aunt.

Agnes Revere's bombazine rustled as she came into the room. She stared around wildly, wearing the expression of a superlative housekeeper who has suddenly landed in a Bowery flop-house. Battersly disappeared into the bedroom for more chairs.

Elsie Revere seemed concerned. There was a startled expression in her eyes. She walked directly up to Allhoff's desk, said: "Are you a man who keeps his word?"

Allhoff grinned satanically. Lewis answered for him. "Madam," he said, "the inspector has many faults, but lying is not one of them."

Elsie Revere seemed satisfied. She sat down in the chair which Battersly thrust politely beneath her. Murdock lit a cigarette. He appeared calm to the point of boredom.

"Well, Inspector," said Lewis, "I have been informed that you are about to accuse someone of killing Albert Revere—and it is not Vogel."

"Emphatically not," said Allhoff.

"Yet," said Lewis, his gaze fixed on the squirming Barclay, "Vogel has confessed to the killing. Is that correct?"

"Correct," said Allhoff who appeared to be enjoying himself.

"We shall deal with that in a little while," said Lewis. "After I have heard you, Inspector."

"All right," he began. "We were confronted with an odd case. A man is killed. A man who in the ordinary course of events will die in a couple of months. Moreover, a man who has no enemies, who leaves no cash and no insurance. Homicide, in the person of

Lieutenant Barclay, jumps at the obvious and says suicide. Now, this annoys the killer very much."

"Why," said Lewis, "should this annoy the killer? It furnished him with a neat out, didn't it?"

"Not the sort of out he wanted. You see, the killer made a serious error. He assumed that Homicide was possessed of some intelligence. He assumed that they would know from the position of the knife in the body that it was murder. He assumed, further, that they would delve into the case deeply enough to find out that Revere was an extremely religious man who would never dream of killing himself."

Barclay was glaring at Allhoff like an angry headlight. I received a rather strong impression that only Lewis' presence prevented him from knocking out one of the snaggy Allhoff teeth.

"So," continued Allhoff, "we now have an exceedingly baffled murderer who didn't know that Homicide spends most of its time bowling. What does he do? He is forced to return to the scene of his crime and plant more conclusive evidence, evidence which is bound to be discovered. Moreover, he pulls a wire or two to make sure that a guy with some brains and an abhorrence of bowling is assigned to the case."

I glanced at Murdock. He didn't look well. Neither, for that matter, did his fiancée.

"Are you saying," I asked, "that Murdock killed Albert Revere?"

"Of course," said Allhoff with mild surprise. "Didn't you know?"

Barclay seemed calmer. "He's nuts," he said. "If Murdock killed Revere, why shouldn't he let the suicide theory stand? Why should he go around planting evidence against himself?"

"He wasn't planting it against himself," said Allhoff. "He was simply trying to convince you that Revere was killed and had not committed suicide. That was apparent when he first came to see me. He opened the window, planted a stamp, scuffed the paint on the window sill. He did all these things to obliterate the suicide theory. He even invented a weird tale about an Austrian refugee to supply a motive. Of course, that was where he fell down."

"How?" I asked.

"It was too far-fetched. What becomes of this refugee when his pal is killed by the wicked Nazi agents? Why doesn't he come forward? Is a guy who has gone through hell in Europe too scared to act even with the protection of the United States Government? No, I always knew that the motive Murdock ascribed for the killing was phony. But it took me some time to figure out *his* motive for pro-

viding a phony motive for Revere's murder.

"Well," snapped Lewis, losing patience, "what *was* the motive?"

"The insurance policy," said Allhoff with an air of triumph.

"But," I objected, "the only insurance policy that existed was the straight life one which lapsed two years ago."

"That's right," said Allhoff. "That's the one. That's why Murdock killed him."

"But," shouted Barclay, "how can he collect on a policy that lapsed two years ago?"

"Ah," said Allhoff, "that's just it. Murdock didn't know it had lapsed, did you, Murdock? All Murdock and his girl-friend knew was that there was such a policy. They assumed that payments had been kept up and that Elsie here would collect."

Elsie Revere uttered a little cry. "I thought you were a man of your word," she said bitterly.

"I am," said Allhoff. "I promised you I would not charge Murdock with obstructing justice. I'm not. I'm charging him with first-degree murder."

"It still doesn't make any damned sense," yelled Barclay. "Suppose he thought the policy was still in force, didn't he know that Revere was a bad bet to live another two months?"

"Oh, yes," said Allhoff, "he was quite aware of that angle."

By this time, Battersly, Lewis, Barclay and I were quietly going mad. God knows Allhoff is circuitous enough when he expatiates a case but I'd never seen him as roundabout as this.

Lewis tapped his finger irritably on Allhoff's desk. He said: "Come, come, Inspector."

"Good Lord," said Allhoff, "don't you get it yet?"

"I think you're nuts," said Barclay.

"Murdock doesn't," said Allhoff shortly.

And that was true enough. Murdock's face was the color of cigar ash. Elsie Revere was sobbing audibly into her handkerchief. Agnes sat upright in her chair, trying to make some sense out of Allhoff's conversation.

"I shall draw a picture," said Allhoff. "It is a simple matter of double indemnity."

THERE was a moment's taut silence broken only by Elsie Revere's crying. Then, to my utter amazement, Battersly, who's certainly no Einstein, got it first.

"You mean," he said, "there was a double indemnity clause in the policy for accidental or violent death?"

Allhoff took his cup away from his lips and murmured: "Out of the mouths of babes . . ."

Lewis nodded again. "So Murdock, believing the insurance policy was still in force, and knowing that Revere wouldn't live long anyway, decided to kill him, leave evidence

of murder and collect twice the amount of the face value of the policy."

"Right," said Allhoff. "But he really wasn't a tough guy. Believing his girl would collect, he could have killed the old man any time during the past few years. He didn't, though, until he knew he was going to die anyway. Then he figured he might as well kill him now and have double the value."

"Sure," I said, "but what about the switch? What about the girl coming here yesterday and changing the entire story?"

"That proves again he's not a very tough guy. There were two reasons for that. The investigation was closing in. He got panicky—thought perhaps he'd overplayed his hand, that a stringent investigation might actually pin the crime on him. And then there was Vogel."

"Ah, yes," said Lewis, fixing his gaze again on Barclay. "Vogel."

I looked over at Vogel. He was as calm as the lake in Central Park.

"Murdock didn't want to see Vogel burned for a murder he never committed. That was another reason he switched his story so that once more we'd be convinced it was suicide."

"One thing I don't understand," I said, "is this second alleged motive of Murdock's. This business about Barclay framing a pal of his back in '41."

Allhoff snorted. "He *had* to have some explanation. So he simply checked the back copies of the newspapers until he found a guy whom Barclay had once sent up for life. What could be simpler than that?"

"It all seems clear enough now," said Lewis. "Have you any other evidence?"

"Sure, I have. I have a document here signed by Murdock in which he states he planted all that phony evidence. That should be enough. Moreover, you have the girl. She can easily be shilled into becoming a State's witness. Otherwise you've got her as an accessory."

Lewis looked up and caught Battersly's eye.

"Take them across the street and book them," he said. Then to Agnes: "You, madam, may go."

Agnes Revere stood up. Her wrinkled cheeks were flushed. Deliberately, she avoided looking at her niece and Murdock. She strode to the door, staring straight ahead. We heard her footsteps echoing down the stairs.

Murdock stood up and put his arm around Elsie Revere. Then, escorted by Battersly, he led her silently from the room.

Barclay stood up and addressed Lewis. "May I go now, sir?"

Lewis waved him back in his chair. "You may not," he said emphatically. "I am here to investigate this Vogel business. You received his confession, I understand."

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Barclay said, "Yes, sir," haltingly.

"Very well," snapped Lewis, "and, since Inspector Allhoff has demonstrated beyond all doubt that Vogel is innocent, why do you think he confessed, Lieutenant?"

"I—I don't know, sir. I hope you're not thinking that I used any illegal methods, sir. If Vogel says so, he's lying. It's just my word against his. I'm sure you'll find no bruises on him, no marks of violence, sir."

Looking over at Allhoff, I saw that there was triumph in his eye and a smug expression on his ugly face.

"Well, Vogel?" said Lewis.

Vogel shifted in his chair, said: "So you've booked another guy for this killing. I guess that means you can't hold me, doesn't it?"

"Naturally," said Lewis. "But I want to know why you confessed. You don't have to be afraid, Vogel."

"I'm not. I just want to get out of here."

"If you will testify that Lieutenant Barclay beat you or obtained your confession through duress, he will be punished and you will certainly be protected."

"I'll think it over," said Vogel calmly. "In the meantime, let's go through whatever routine I have to go through to be released."

I never saw a man look as relieved as Barclay.

"See, sir?" he said. "Naturally, he'd tell you if I'd belted him. He's just crazy, I guess. I can't figure out any other reason for him to have admitted something he didn't really do."

"All right, Barclay," Lewis said, "take Vogel over to some judge and see that he's released. But, remember, I'm keeping an eye on you. Something smells slightly of halibut here."

Barclay, beaming, nodded to Vogel who rose. The two of them left the room together.

"I can't understand that," Lewis said to Allhoff. "I'm sure that Vogel underwent a third degree. I don't get his refusal to say so."

Allhoff shrugged his shoulders. He said blandly: "Baffling, isn't it, sir?"

Lewis made a gesture of futility, accepted our salute and went down the stairs. Batteredly sighed and sat down. I watched Allhoff.

HE WAS wearing his most gloating expression. I could understand his being smug over the solution of the case. That was normal enough. But one of the major factors in this affair was that he had set out not only to get a killer, but Barclay as well. No one ever tossed an insult, genuine or imaginary, at Allhoff and escaped unscathed. Yet it looked very much as if Barclay had done just that.

"I don't understand one thing," I said.

He looked up. "You mean why Vogel didn't put the finger on Barclay?"

One Killer Too Many

"No. I understand that. Barclay was careful enough to leave no marks of his work. It would have been Vogel's word against his. And the courts have a way of believing cops."

"God knows why," said Allhoff. "Well, if it's not that, what is puzzling you?"

"The fact that you seem so damned happy."

"Didn't I make Homicide look like the idiot it is? Didn't I hand Murdock over to the D. A.? Didn't I come through once again while all you dolts were chasing up and down wrong trails?"

"You did all that," I conceded. "But you didn't do the thing nearest your black heart."

"Which was?"

"Getting Barclay. You tried to photograph the marks of the beating Vogel took and failed. Then, in front of Lewis, you apparently tried to get Vogel to accuse Barclay of beating him. And you failed there, too."

He grinned. "Dope! Do you know the prime reason Vogel denied he had been beaten?"

I shook my head.

"Because I told him to. You recall I sent Battersly over to Vogel's cell with a note?"

"Yes."

"Well, I told him to deny the beating in that note."

"But, for heaven's sake, why?"

"I wanted him to get out of the way first. And keep out of the way long enough so his bruises would be healed—if he had any bruises."

"Again why?"

"Then I can show my photographs."

"You have pictures of Vogel's bruises? But how—"

"Lord," he said, "don't you ever understand anything? I got Vogel and the photographer up here. You were right—he bore no marks. But a call to the corner drugstore fixed that. I made him some very pretty bruises with mascara. Now he's out of the way so no one can check. I'll present my pictures tomorrow, saying Vogel mailed them to me. I'll give them to Lewis, saying further that Vogel called and the reason he kept his mouth shut was that Barclay threatened to get him if he talked. Simple, isn't it?"

"If you don't mind lying to frame a guy."

"Lying? Barclay did beat that confession out of Vogel, didn't he?"

"Well, I suppose he did."

"Then it's merely justice."

I snorted. "You've got a great idea of justice. But I should have known there's no one who can step on your toes and—"

I stopped, but not in time.

"Toes!" he roared. And that is one of the few words he used during the next twelve minutes that I dare set down in type.

THE END

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Peter Paige

(Continued from page 27)

THE raven-haired girl in the red dress had been oblivious to all the talk. Now she looked up wildly at me.

"A doctor. I need a doctor!" she whispered.

Someone moved toward the door and my revolvers steadied.

"Let's stick together," I said. "Let's everybody except Sailor and Mamacita and Deputy Sykes line up against that wall."

Ramón was hard to convince. He threw me a swift scowl over his shoulder and moved determinedly toward the door. He stopped dead when his Panama flew off his head.

When the thunder from my left-hand revolver died, I said: "That leaves nine slugs, which is par for the course. You people can't seem to understand that either she or I gets rapped for murdering Papa Rio. I'm electing her. Now line up against that wall!"

"She'll die," Sykes stated bluntly.

"Not if she talks," I said. "Sailor, open that gadget—like you did before."

The big guy was a walking arsenal, gun handles sticking out of his pockets and belt. Wordlessly, he reached over the door and tapped the screen of the air conditioning inlet.

It fell out, revealing the flared out passageway for cool air.

"A girl her size could fit inside," I told Sykes. "That's where she caught her cold. That's what put me on her, her cold. She hid there with the crossbow and shot the old man through the open vents. Then she closed the vents from inside. Footlick opened them later."

"She couldn't get there by herself," said Sykes quietly.

"With Footlick's help she could," I said.

"Maybe she married him also. He opened it because he was afraid she couldn't breathe. Later, she came out and ran into Mamacita. She still had the crossbow. Exit Mamacita."

"Wale," said Ramón hoarsely, "this is all conjecture. No evidence."

"You saw her shoot at where she thought I was when you said I was hiding where the killer hid," I said. "But I don't need evidence. She'll talk. Then the Ludwig mob will talk. They'll tell how she killed Footlick in their tavern and then lined them up to frame me—probably with a promised cut in the dough."

Vi Dominique was gaping hollowly at her life blood oozing between her fingers where they clutched at the side of her red dress.

"Please get me a doctor. A doctor. I need a doctor. Please!"

Sykes was beginning to lose his poise. The white sombrero was crumpled in his fist.

"Wale, this is murder. She'll die."

"She'll talk," I said. "She outsmoothed

Ramón. She knew a high-class guy like him

wouldn't propose marriage to an obvious bit of used merchandise like herself without ulterior wherefores. She must have frisked his papers and learned the wherefores. Then she probably braced the old man on her own. 'Papa Rio, I'm your loving daughter. How about an allowance?'

"But Papa Rio had been places and done things and he knew the score. But he didn't know how to handle it and still retain his local responsibility. So he sent for me.

"Maybe he threatened to expose her to the law. I don't know. We'll find out. Something made her decide to bump him, then move in and collect. She'd let Ramón do the 'discovering' that she was baby Rio. But she needed help and Footlick was around.

"So that's it. She bumped Rio and bumped Footlick and tried to hang it on me. Now she's dying and wants a doctor and she'll talk to get the doctor. A bimbo like her won't hang."

"Wale," Sykes muttered thickly, "she won't talk. She'll die. You've broken out of jail, stolen a squad car, held a dozen people under your guns and now you're killing that girl!"
back I was paying no attention to Sykes.

Buyes were on the olive-skinned girl on the floor. Her eyes were clawing at mine. Some of the words had finally penetrated. The sense of her position had struck home and she had

weighed the alternatives. Now the words were dribbling from her lips.

And that was it. The air conditioning vent. Footlick assisted. The Ludwig mob played along for some easy dough. And all because Papa Rio had made a will that left all to his lost baby if she should be found.

But now he intended to cut her off and she had to get him before he did. She laid the planning to Footlick, but that didn't matter.

Footlick had to go because he was losing nerve and was drinking heavily. She knew I was in the tavern, witnessed the brush I had with the bartender, Rog, and decided, on impulse, to frame the whole deal on me.

Then the Ludwig mob split wide open and everybody began to talk.

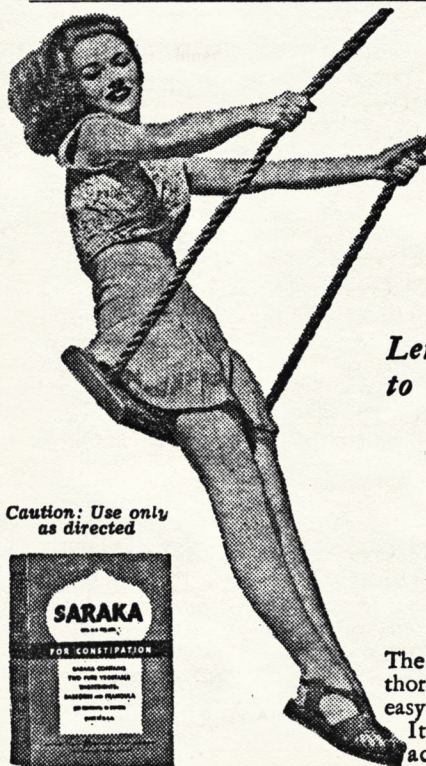
Sykes said he would overlook the jailbreak and everything else if I would only take the Sailor and myself the hell out of Texas.

"Good God, Wale," he pleaded, "you have it all. You're clear. Let someone go for a doctor!"

"To hell with a doctor," I grinned, grabbing the fabric of Vi Dominique's dress and ripping it open to reveal a two inch gash in the tan flesh at her side. "When I pink 'em they're pinked. Any druggist can patch that in five minutes."

Vi Dominique was hanged.

THE END



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(Continued from page 47)

Trullo is clear—his sweetie came forward and backed his alibi for the night Mike the Mex was killed. Vinaroz and his Man Friday have proved themselves out of it. Even Flop-ears Willie Schultz managed to whitewash himself. So everything is cleaned up."

"Cleaned up? How so? They still have to solve the murder of Perez, don't they?"

"No," I said.

"You mean that Rice's alibi broke down?"

"His alibi was all right."

"But that doesn't leave anybody as a suspect in the Perez killing."

I said: "Sure it does, sis. It leaves you."

FOR a moment the gold-haired girl didn't say anything and her face went slowly white, leaving the rouge on her cheekbones and her dark eyes as high spots. Finally she shook her head and tried to smile.

"Pete," she said, "you're just trying to scare me. Or else you're absolutely crazy."

"Sure I'm crazy," I said. "But not as crazy as you are because you're dough-crazy. I had my notions about you from the beginning, sis. From the time you tried to cash in by holding out information on Trullo, information that would have gone a long way toward helping him. I knew you weren't on the level then. And this morning when you told me—after I'd pressured you into it—that you'd found out Perez had withdrawn a hundred and five grand recently, I was pretty sure about you. If you'd been able to find it so quickly this morning, you'd have known about it before."

She was getting her color back. "Pete, don't be silly. That's no proof that I killed Perez. Besides, you know I couldn't have done it. Every minute of my time from eight o'clock on was accounted for."

I shook my head. "No, Lou. I got to thinking about the bilious attack you mentioned having at the theater. It occurred to me that a gal with an upset stomach would probably head right for the ladies' room. So this morning I tipped the cops to that possibility and they talked to your roommate. She said, yes, you'd left your seat for about twenty minutes and then came back, saying you'd been in the ladies' room. That twenty minutes would have given you plenty of time to get to the Diplomat which is only two blocks from the Ravenna Theater. I can see it now. You hustle down to the Diplomat, Perez lets you in—maybe he thought he'd made a conquest—you knock him off when he isn't expecting anything like that, just as you did with Morrie Rice. You grab the dough and beat it back to the movie house. At that time of night there'd be no cashier or ticket taker."

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The Good-Murder Policy

From her purse I took a .25 automatic which a few minutes before had spit a couple of nasty little slugs at Morrie Rice.

"Would this be the gum you used?" I asked. From the look in her eyes I saw I'd guessed right. "What was the idea of toting it around today? Was it because you had a feeling that you'd be needing it?"

She came toward me slowly and put her hands on my arms. She said, smiling a little: "Pete, what are you going to do?"

"What can I do, except turn you over to the cops? And I don't mind admitting that I don't like that. You're really too luscious to be gas-chamber material."

Her hands went up and clasped at the back of my neck. Her body was warm and enticing against mine. She put her lips up and I kissed them. She kissed me back and she kissed very good. Then she stepped away.

She said: "We could have a wonderful time on a hundred thousand between us, darling—if we just went away together now."

"Sure," I said, "except that every morning with you I'd expect to wake up dead like Prez and Morrie Rice. You shot Morrie, I think, not because you were scared but because you thought that if he was dead the cops might be happy to blame the Mike the Mex job on him and then wash the whole business up."

"Pete, darling, you know you could trust me. I told you I thought you were the most wonderful guy I'd ever met."

"Yeah," I said, "but that didn't keep you from trying to have me liquidated."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I told you I'd nosed out that matter of the hundred grand. You thought maybe that might lead to you. So, being pretty sure I was going to prowl the Colonel Vinaroz villa last night, you found some way to tip off the colonel and he came home loaded for bear. You figured maybe he'd burn me down and I'd be out of your hair."

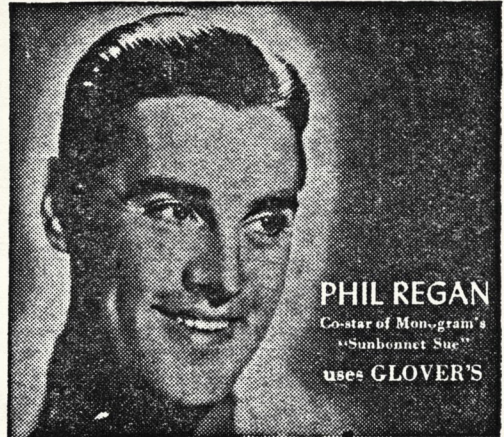
She said, her brown eyes smiling into mine: "Pete, you haven't the heart to throw me to a lot of tough cops. You know what they'll do to me. You just haven't got the heart to see me hurt."

I was still spinning from that kiss. I said: "No, sis, I haven't got the heart."

She perked up at once. She said huskily, "Thanks, Pete," and walked to the door. From the door she gave me another smile and went on out.

I'd told her the truth. I didn't have the heart to see the cops grab her. So I waited there while she walked into the arms of the flock of dicks that Cap Baker had told me would be waiting for her downstairs.

THE END



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Frederick C. Davis

(Continued from page 75)

found Cooney, and he's somewhere else now. Mr. Drumm can go right on blackmailing all his old victims, even including Mrs. Lambert. He can, that is, once I'm shut up for good—and now he sees he'll have to."

Mr. Drumm's hand rose and he pointed a revolver across the desk, at a point midway between Brandy and me, so he could stab it in either direction instantly.

"I'm sorry, Sam," he said, his voice grating. "I had no wish that you should get into all this so deeply. It was really unnecessary that you should learn so much. I'm very much afraid that now I shall be obliged to silence both of you."

Brandy hadn't moved. "It's turning out to be tougher than you'd thought, Mr. Drumm. Disposing of two bodies isn't going to be so easy. The D.A. will move in. There are certain ties between you and Cooney that can't be entirely hidden. With one ex-operative of yours already dead, and two more operatives turning up as corpses, or at least missing, you'll find it pretty hard to explain. You might as well try, though. It's your only chance of getting away with it now. Because if I manage to walk out of this office alive, I'm going to drop the whole thing squarely into Inspector Knapp's lap."

Mr. Drumm drew a slow, tired breath, but he seemed full of trigger-finger alertness. "I'm really very sorry, Sam," he said again.

Brandy's move was desperately fast. He swept his felt hat off his head and sent it flying straight across the desk to smack into Mr. Drumm's face. There wasn't much power in the blow, but it did confuse Mr. Drumm for a precious second, and knock off his pince-nez. Brandy and I were out of our chairs at the same instant. Brandy closed one hand around the gun and I swung a chair overhead.

Brandy stooped over him for a moment, then straightened, holding in his hand the supersonic whistle he'd found in Mr. Drumm's vest pocket. He tossed the whistle onto the desk and fell heavily into Mr. Drumm's chair.

"I've done it again!" he groaned. "I've outsmarted myself again. It's cost me my job!"

"Brother," I said, "that's not the half of it. I'm also out of a job. What a shambles!"

"Why, why, why?" Brandy muttered. "Why did I do it? I'll never learn, never!"

Well, the manpower shortage being as acute as it is, we'll all find new jobs, probably without much trouble. And anyway, I've finally come to know Brandy. I now understand perfectly why he scares the daylight out of himself.

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

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

NEW variations, adapted to wartime, of old gyp capers are a constant menace to the unsuspecting. Watch out for them no matter how innocent they may appear.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

A new angle of the old book game, adapted to war times, has been developed by a group of racketeers.

At the present time they are soliciting biographical data from the families of men who have become heroes or near-heroes, with the implication that laudatory accounts of the deeds of these men will be included in a volume which is to be published soon.

The racketeers' request for this biographical material is accompanied by a cleverly disguised "authorization" to be signed. The innocent families eventually learn that this wordy but legally tight paper to which they have affixed their signatures is a purchase contract for buying a set of the books at a stiff price.

J. A. J.
Presque Isle, Me.

THIS chiseler may operate for peanuts, but a lot of hay from little peanuts grows.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

One day my father received a letter, sent from one of our largest cities, saying that there had been an article concerning him in the newspaper. They went on to say they were sure it would be of great interest to him to have it. For the small sum of fifty cents they would send it to him. The city the letter came from was two or three hundred miles from ours and none of us could imagine what the news item might be unless it were some relatives trying to locate one of us.

My father sent the fifty cents to the box office number they gave. About a week later, the "important" clipping arrived. All it was was a piece we had inserted ourselves in our local paper's "Vacation News" column months before saying that my father had

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Ready for the Rackets

spent his vacation at a certain city visiting relatives.

For fifty cents people are curious enough to take a chance on a racket like this and when they find they've been "taken" they usually feel too cheap to make trouble over it. Chances are these chiselers work this racket all over the country and even if they hook only two or three people from each town, it still amounts to a sizable amount of loot for them.

Mrs. E. A.
Lowell, Mass.

IF THE person to be exploited is honest, this racket probably won't work. But if there is a touch of larceny in his heart, he is hooked.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

The racket explained below is not new. Bad checks are an old old story. But there is a new angle or twist to it, which depends on the person to be exploited.

A well-dressed man, giving a good imitation of being "tipsy", bought twelve dollars' worth of underwear and handkerchiefs in a local haberdashery store, posing as an out-of-town cattleman who had just sold some cattle on the local market.

When it came time to pay, he pulled out plenty of folding money, but then decided he did not have enough and asked the merchant to hold the goods until he could step down the street and get a sixty-two-dollar check cashed. (This check was supposed to be the result of a cattle sale.) He made a good job of flashing the check and letting the merchant see that it was not for sixty-two dollars but for eighty-two.

The merchant, thinking he was too drunk to know what the check was for and envisioning an extra profit of twenty dollars, grabbed the check and cashed it, giving the man fifty dollars and change and twelve dollars in merchandise. Needless to say the check was not good.

H. N. W.
Knoxville, Tenn.

MANY rackets have come about as a result of the cigarette shortage. Here are two new ones to steer clear of.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

I was waiting for a bus and was joined by another lady. Two gentlemen, one carrying a suitcase, came by and stopped near us. They engaged in an argument and the gentleman with the suitcase angrily picked it up and went away.

The man to whom he had been speaking looked after him, frowned and turned to us. He told us that he had thought he was doing his friend a favor—that, as neither he, his

Ready for the Rackets

wife, nor his daughter smoked, he had saved ten packages of cigarettes and had offered them to this party, at his request. He said that he had added a slight amount as he thought his trouble was worth it. In other words, he was asking 25c a package. He unwrapped the box he had with him, opened up one of the ten packages in it and offered each one of us a cigarette.

I did not approve of this sort of transaction, but the other lady with me offered to take the cigarettes and handed over \$2.50.

We waited some time until the bus arrived and then boarded same. After we had gone a short distance we saw the two gentlemen just turning into a side street, talking and laughing, their differences apparently forgotten.

The lady who had bought the cigarettes examined them and, with the exception of the package from which she had taken one of the cigarettes, all the rest had been opened and emptied of their contents. They had been slit at the bottom and neatly sealed with a narrow strip of transparent paper, such as is used for mending torn pages of books or papers. Before being resealed they had been filled with a mixture of what looked to me like sand and sawdust. It was an express bus and did not stop for another mile so the woman could not get off, and I doubt if it would have done any good if she had.

I hope others will be on their guard and not be taken in by anything like this, as \$2.50 is quite a lot to pay for one package of cigarettes.

D. H.
Chicago, Illinois

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Recently the OPA turned thumbs down on a proposed plan under which customers would pay \$1 for a card entitling them to buy three packs of cigarettes a week. This rejected plan gave a few sly swindlers an idea for a new racket.

Citizens in the midwest have been approached by smooth-talking fellows who show them a fancy printed card and inform them that one of the cards will permit them to purchase cigarettes every day from their local dealers without standing in line only to hear the storekeeper say: "Sorry, no cigarettes today."

Several persons have been suckers for this new con game, so if one of these swindlers stops you on the street or comes to your residence you will be helping to stamp out another petty racket by reporting him to the authorities immediately.

Chas. W. Menges
Columbus 15, Ohio



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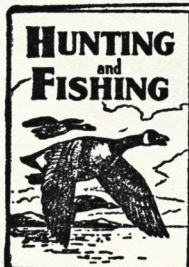


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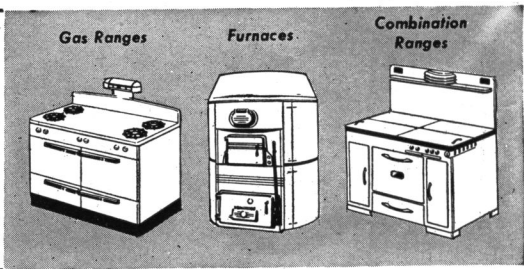
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