

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



NOV.

15¢ **DIME**
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION



MEDIUM DEAD

A JEFFERY WREN STORY
by G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

FLYNN • CHAMPION AND OTHERS



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CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE Calvert



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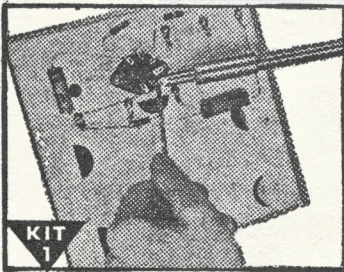
Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C. BLENDED WHISKEY

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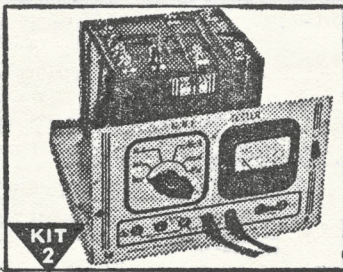


I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

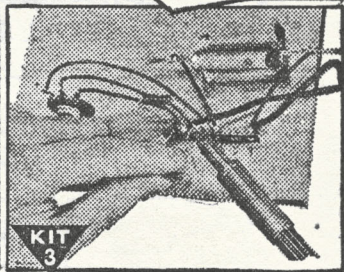
**I Send You
6 Big Kits
of Radio Parts**



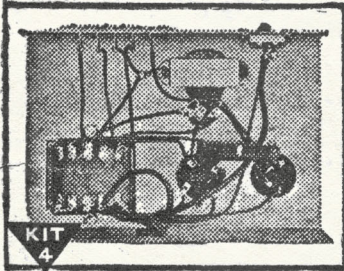
KIT 1
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio Soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



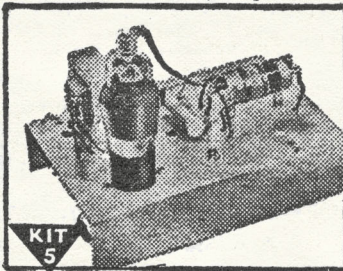
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



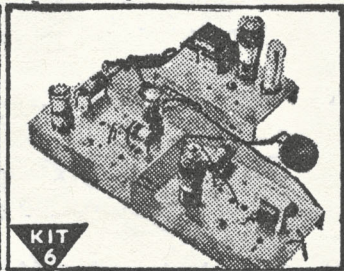
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5
Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6
You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO - Win Success I Will Train You at Home - SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Send coupon for FREE Sample Lesson, "Getting Acquainted with Receiver Servicing," and FREE 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." See how N.R.I. trains you at home. Read how you practice building, testing, repairing Radios with SIX BIG KITS of Radio parts I send you.

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with facts about opportunities for you. Read about my Course. Read letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. MAIL COUPON in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5M89, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

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15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION
EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

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Emulate the possum and play

Medium Dead G. T. Fleming-Roberts 10
 With Jeffery Wren as he opens the doors on the skeletons in the closets of the Oakley tribe—that strange aggregation of kinfolk—each with his own axe to grind and a startling yen to start using it on his sisters or cousins or aunts.

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The December Thrill Docket 6
 A preview of some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in next month's DIME DETECTIVE.

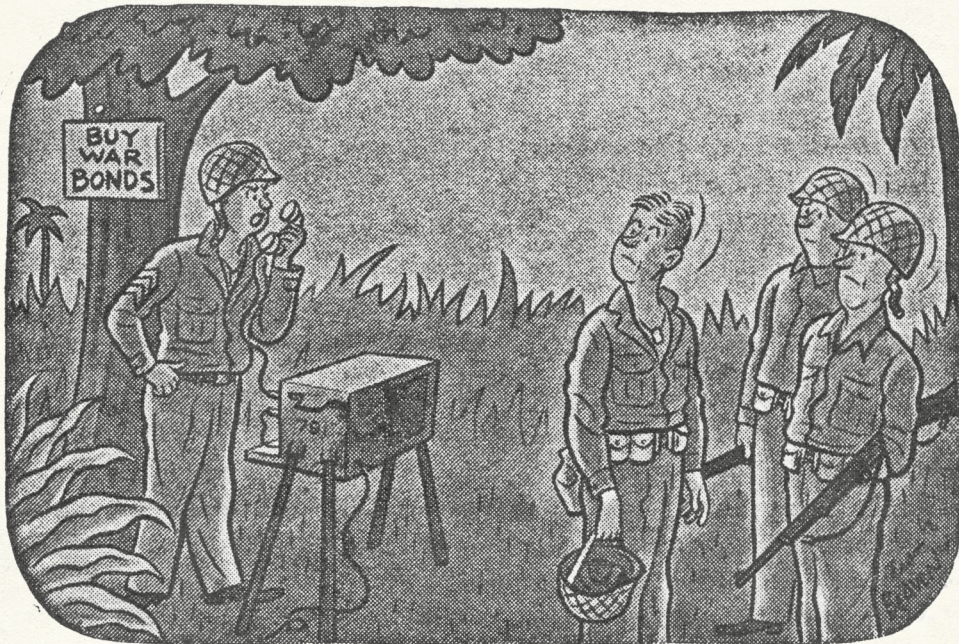
Cover: "She Found Uncle William Playing Tick-Tack-Toe with a Ghost."

From *Medium Dead*.

The December issue will be out November 2nd

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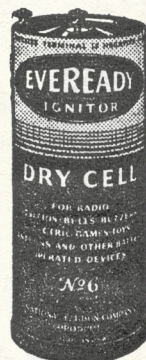
LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries



"Which one of youse guys is 'cutie-pie'?"

"EVEREADY" No. 6 Dry Cells continue to provide dependable power for the vital field telephone equipment of our Armed Forces.

But you'll be glad to know they are available in increasing quantities for civilian use—fresh, *full-powered*, long-lived as always. Ask for them at your dealer's now.



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THE DECEMBER THRILL DOCKET



JUST to wind up '45 with an explosion of crime fiction that'll hit you with the impact of an atomic bomb—

Four of your favorite series characters marshaled at the head of a thrill parade *par excellence*—

BILL BRENT (*alias* Lora Lorne)—HIGHLAND PARK PRICE—THE DEAN—and Counsellor CLARENCE DARROW MORT—What an aggregation!

* * *

Frederick C. Davis brings back the letter-ridden mentor of the *Chronicle's* advice-to-the-lovelorn cubicle in a brilliant long novelette as tightly plotted as any in this perennially popular series. *Murder Can Wait* is the title and we're betting that—dilatatory as homicide may be—you won't put the story aside till the last paragraph of the last chapter. Brent had had plenty of nightmares in which he found himself slowly smothering to death under floods of first-class mail and now it was actually happening—thanks to Little Lewie Lamont whose method of solving a delicate diplomatic situation was to haul out his arsenal and begin shooting.

* * *

In *The Kitchen of Master Lefevre* Merle Constiner sets the little man with the big Magnum—the Dean—to presiding over as fine a kettle of murder, mayhem and assorted blood brews as ever simmered. It all started with a want-ad begging for "A Poisonous Viper—Poison Sacs Removed. Small Snake Preferred—But Meaty." And ended up with the screening of a gardenplot for traces of aconite, God wot! It's the Dean and his locksmith-stooge Ben Matthews at top form.

* * *

Plus *Mostly for Murder*, a C. D. Mort novelette by Julius Long—*Slay Close to Me*, A "High" Price story by Dale Clark—*Rear View of Hell*, a gripping short story of a playboy—the kind of guy women die for—who decided to play it with reverse English and get himself killed for one of them—as well as other shorts and features by your favorite crime fictioners.

Watch for this great DECEMBER issue on sale NOVEMBER 2nd.

Here's the Greatest **BILLFOLD BARGAIN** in all America!

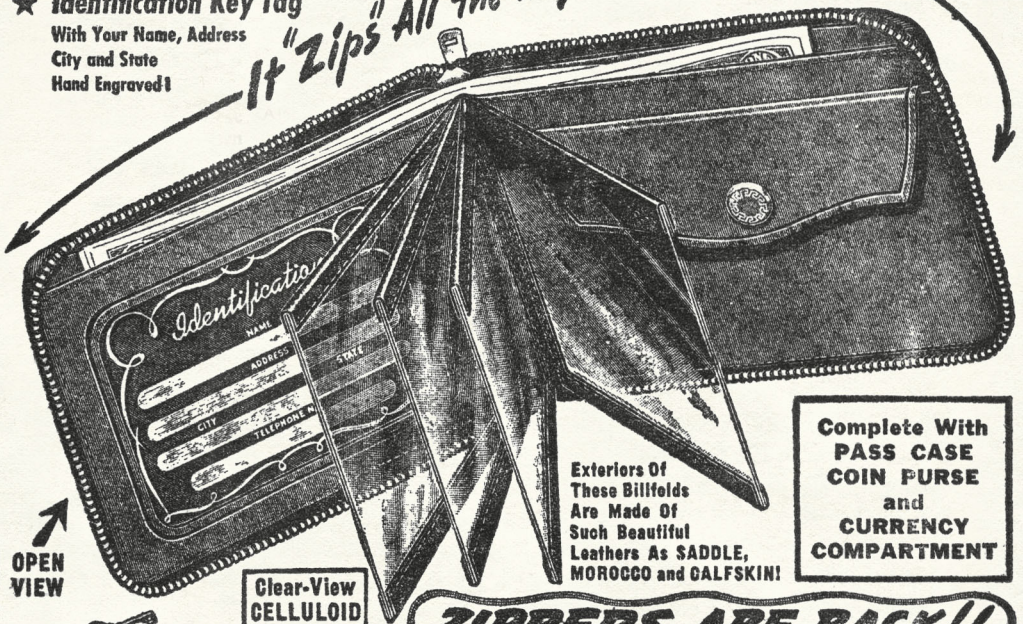
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With Your Name, Address
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It "Zips" All the Way Around



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Leathers As SADDLE,
MOROCCO and GALFSKIN!

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Included With Every Zipper Billfold!



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At Last! Here's the Billfold you've been waiting for since Pearl Harbor. Here's the Billfold most wanted by men everywhere—now for the first time offered at a price that's sensationally low for a Billfold of such unmistakable fine quality. You've never known real Billfold satisfaction until you've used this "Zip-all-around" DeLuxe Pass Case Billfold with its Built-in Change Purse and roomy Currency Compartment. When closed it's as neat and safe a Billfold as you've ever seen. Shake it all you want and nothing can fall out. Slips easily into your back pocket or coat and will not bulge out of shape. Yet when you want to get at it, the Billfold "Zips open all the way"—so that everything you carry in is full plain view, ready for instant use. No guess-work. No fumbling into tight corners to get at valuables.

Here without a doubt is the last word in a real man's Billfold. A veritable storehouse for everything a man likes to carry with him—his currency, his change, his credit and membership cards, his personal identification. Along with the all around Zipper Billfold and Change Purse, we also include a hand engraved Identification Key Tag as shown. You get the 3 Big Values in one as described all for only \$2.98. But hurry. SEND NO MONEY. Just rush your order on the handy coupon below today. On arrival, pay postman only \$2.98 plus 20% tax and postage with understanding that if this isn't the greatest Billfold Bargain you've ever seen, you can return in 10 days for full refund.

SEND NO MONEY—RUSH THIS COUPON TODAY!

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Please rush me the "All-around" Zipper Pass Case Billfold with Built-in Change Purse and hand engraved Identification Key Tag. On arrival I will pay postman only \$2.98 plus 20% Federal Tax and few cents postage and C.O.D. Charges. It is understood that if I am not positively thrilled and delighted in every way I can return the billfold within 10 days for full refund.

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ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

To save shipping charges I am enclosing in advance \$2.98 plus 20% Federal Excise tax (total \$3.58).
 Please ship my Zipper Billfold order all postage charges prepaid.

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 fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y., 17, N. Y.

THERE are some people unscrupulous enough to work a swindle on war bond purchases. This despicable pair was caught—and make sure the rest of their breed are, too.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

This racket was recently attempted at a department store selling war bonds when a drive was on. Mr. A issued his personal check to the order of the store for \$75 in payment for a \$100 bond that he bought in his wife's name. On the same day the wife came in and issued her personal check to the order of the store for \$18.75 in payment for a \$25 bond that she bought in her husband's name.

Result: although Mr. A's check was for \$75 he had a \$25 bond, and while Mrs. A's check was for \$18.75 she had a \$100 bond.

Several days later, Mr. A appeared at the store with his canceled check for \$75 and his \$25 bond and informed the bond seller that a mistake had been made—namely that he was entitled to a \$100 bond but had received only a \$25 bond for his \$75 check.

He would have received the additional bonds he claimed but for the alertness of the manager who happened to be present. The manager asked for two days' time to make a thorough check. Of course the true story of the attempted swindle was discovered. Mr. A has not yet appeared to press his claim for additional bonds.

Jacob Taub,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

MOTORISTS beware!—of this war-born racket which flourishes under the guise of "O.P.A. regulations."

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

This swindle is being perpetrated by many unscrupulous fire and theft insurance companies. Cars are getting scarcer all the time and, if yours is burned or stolen, you're mighty glad you have the loss covered by insurance. That's what you think.

The insurance company thinks differently. "There's a ceiling price on used cars," says the adjuster, pulling out a little book. "Here's

the ceiling price on your car. That's all we can pay you for the loss of your car, even if our policy does guarantee you a specified amount, minus monthly depreciation. You know, the O.P.A. is boss, because there's a war on!"

Most motorists have heard about price ceilings, so they not only accept the statement, but also whatever the company decides to give as the "ceiling price."

But it isn't so! Right now, the Office of Price Administration is warning motorists who have had a car stolen or burned *not* to accept an adjustment or settlement based on the ceiling price of the car if sold.

"You have a valid contract with your insurance company and it must live up to it," is the O.P.A. ruling. "Ceiling prices have nothing to do with it. So don't accept the ceiling price on your car from an insurance company. Make the company pay what its policy guarantees. And, if it won't, tell the adjuster to go out and replace your car with one of the same class and condition. Then watch him squirm! If he won't do that, bring suit on your policy, which is a valid contract between you and the insurance company."

So, Mr. Motorist, if you suffer the loss of your car, don't let the insurance company "gyp" you. Don't become a victim of this war-born racket!

Arthur H. Labaree,
Hollis, N. Y.

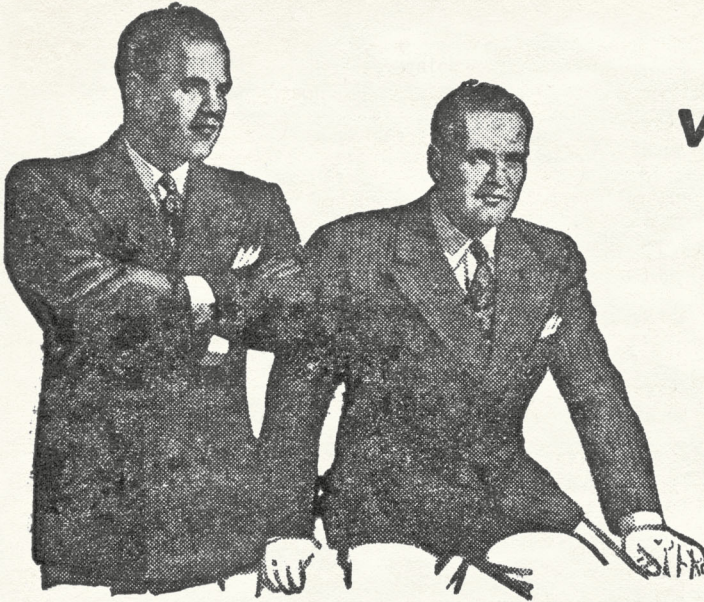
"SWINDLING the consumer"—a petty gyp which preys on the customer's eagerness to purchase war-scarce food commodities.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

The petty, conniving food dealers who ply their nefarious trade during a war and when food is short or rationed, are swindling the consumers of America out of millions of dollars annually.

This type of dealer understands the psychology of Mrs. Consumer and takes full advantage of that knowledge. He knows how gullible and easy the average housewife is especially when food is scarce or when there is a shortage of this or that item.

There are a thousand and one ways of swindling consumers and the practice is not
(Continued on page 96)



If YOU were Boss would YOU promote "YOU"?

Be honest now—

suppose that a better job had opened up in your company—carrying with it promotion and more money—could you qualify?

If you were boss, would you select "YOU" for that better job?

Consider before you answer.

First of all, could you *fill* the job? Has your experience fitted you for the step forward—have you been preparing for promotion apart from experience gained on the job?

Or have you just been filling a niche, doing daily tasks well but making no real and intelligent effort to learn and qualify for the job ahead so that if an opening should occur you would be ready to fill it?

The man who gets real promotion is the one who makes his own breaks—the man who slaves in the ordinary job at low pay just wishes and dreams of promotion and more money. Which are you?

Business is always willing to pay the man who knows—and pay him well. The man who is ready and willing to take responsibilities—and capable of

directing the efforts of other men is a valuable asset to any business organization. He never wants for a good job and above average earnings. He gets ahead.

We have helped thousands of men achieve promotion and more money—success sometimes beyond their dreams—a success that was started by a coupon similar to the one below.

Get out of that rut—don't be satisfied with a mediocre job at small pay—be a success in business—this coupon may be your first step.

So send it today—right now—tomorrow never comes for the man who consistently puts things off.

La Salle Extension University A Correspondence Institution

Dept. 11334-R

417 S. Dearborn, Chicago 5

If you can help me get the ability and knowledge for real promotion, I want to know it. Please send me your free 48 page booklet telling how I can succeed in the field I have checked below. I understand you will send this without obligation to me.

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Name.....Age.....

Position.....

Address.....Zone, if any.....

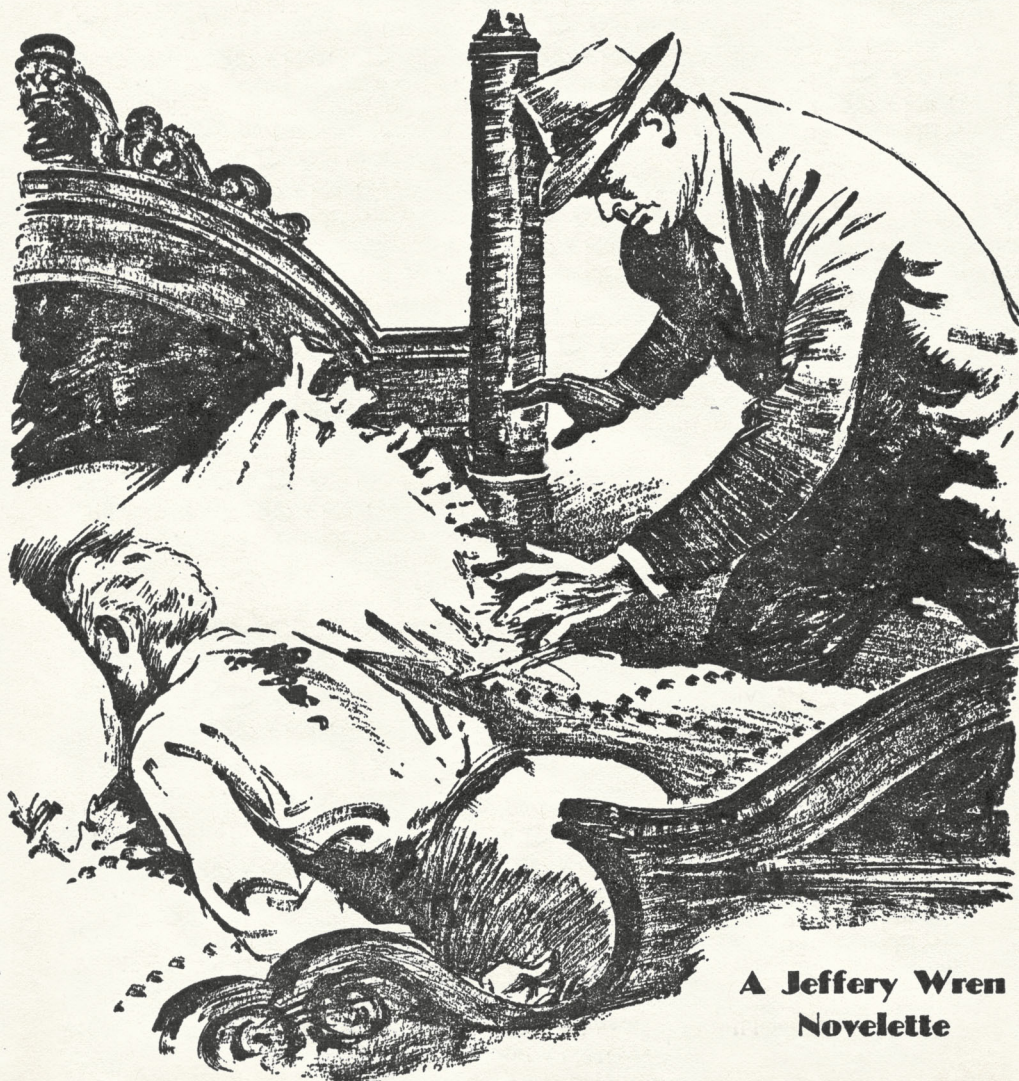
City and State.....

MEDIUM DEAD

by **G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**

Author of "He Couldn't Stay Dead," etc.

Jeffery Wren knew that the whole Oakley clan had axes to grind and if somebody didn't do something pronto they'd start using them on each other. First there was poison, then wire planted across the basement steps—and a panicky old man who desperately wanted to die.



**A Jeffery Wren
Novelette**

CHAPTER ONE

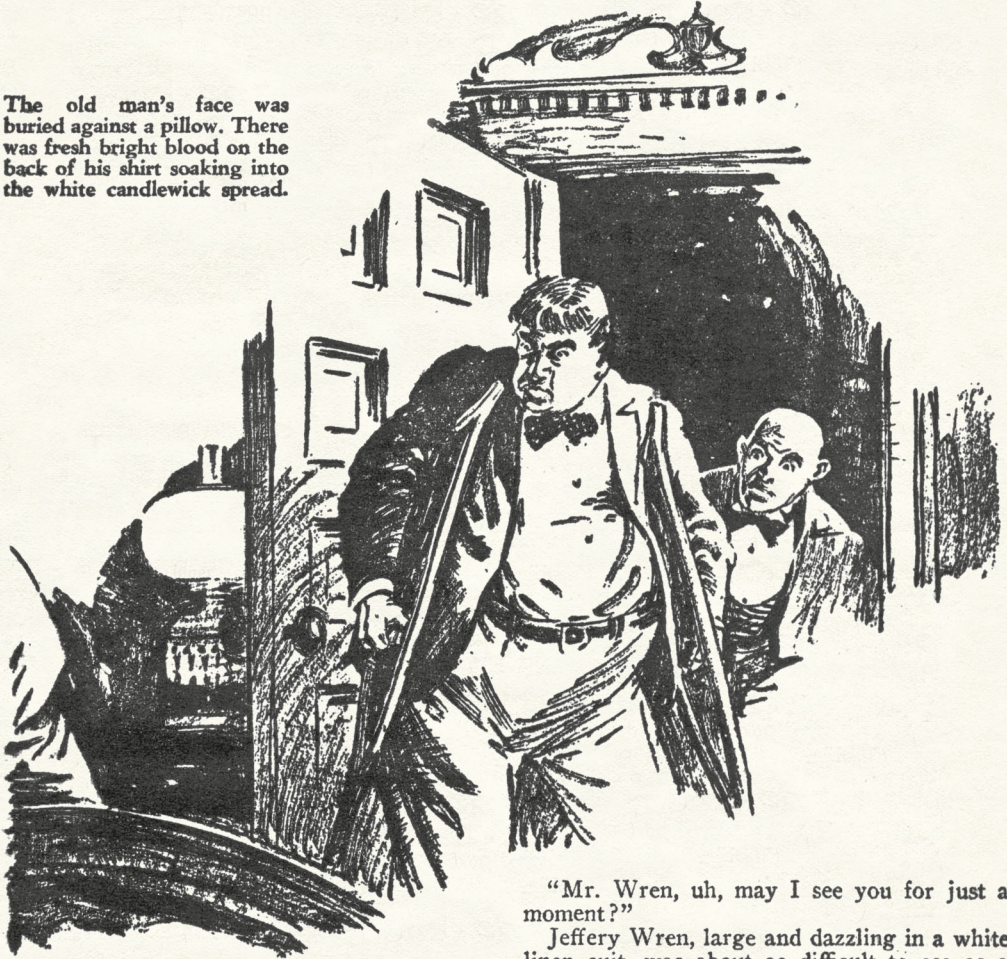
Spirit-Bottling Seeress

IF ANYONE has a hair to split Jeffery Wren is a good man for the job. Consider the bloody affair that stemmed from Madame Zorinda's spirit bottles, in which he pointed out some nice distinctions between birdhouses and doghouses, and discriminated between Rosicrucian pigpens and the common

Too much competition from Oakley's relatives!"

The beginning was one of those breathless July mornings that account for the prominence of "phew!" in the Hoosier vocabulary. Promptly at eight-thirty, Wren descended from his apartment-hotel suite, bound for his magic shop downtown in spite of the summer slump. He was crossing the lobby when the carpeted hush about him was broken by a male voice thickly laden with self-importance.

The old man's face was buried against a pillow. There was fresh bright blood on the back of his shirt soaking into the white candlewick spread.



variety constructed by William Oakley on the front lawn.

There is still some argument about the pigpens, Wren must admit. Certain Indianapolis citizens contend that, far from common, Oakley's were the damndest hog domiciles ever invented. They had no roofs, no doors.

"No pigs, for that matter," Wren assures anybody incautious enough to lend an ear. "Naturally not. They'd have starved. Quite!

"Mr. Wren, uh, may I see you for just a moment?"

Jeffery Wren, large and dazzling in a white linen suit, was about as difficult to see as a concrete safety-zone abutment at high noon. He turned, his genial smile stirring the surface of unfathomable dark eyes.

The person who had addressed him was no pygmy. He was shorter than Wren, but what he lacked in height he made up in a couple of other dimensions. He was fat, middle-aged, and equipped with a pair of crutches that were a great deal too long for him. His multi-legged gait suggested that of a maimed spider that has consumed far too many flies. His black hair,

parted far to the left and combed straight across a shallow brow, made his flat, uninteresting pink face resemble a dirty thumbnail.

"Mr. Wren, the magician, I believe," he said, his quiet brown eyes looking about slowly but not missing a thing. "And you are also a detective of no mean ability, I believe."

"Quite," Wren acknowledged.

"Uh-huh." The fat man nodded slowly. "A man of utmost discretion, I presume?"

"Unquestionably." Wren's chunky black brows gathered into a slight frown of annoyance. He said drily: "You've a name too, no doubt?"

The fat man had a small smile. It showed small, evenly-spaced teeth. "Rees," he said. "George Evan Rees, secretary to Mr. William Oakley of the Oakley Fence Company. "May we"—he looked about—"may we sit down? These abominable crutches are tearing my arms from their sockets."

They sat down on a nearby sofa, Wren on the edge of the cushions, and George Rees as far back as his short legs would permit. Mr. Rees' right foot was tenderly encased in a blue felt slipper. He wore carefully-blended tones of blue and gray, the latter predominating in his suit.

"I shall try to explain the reason for my oblique approach, Mr. Wren," he said, "realizing that I may have given offense."

"Oh, no," Wren assured him quietly. "Not at all." He found George Rees neither offensive nor attractive. Mr. Rees simply did not matter. Blah, he thought, was an excellent word for Mr. Rees.

"This morning I fell down the basement stairs at my employer's home and gave my ankle a nasty sprain," said Mr. Rees.

"Ah?" Wren maintained a polite interest, nothing more. His deft fingers absently manipulated a half-dollar, alternately causing it to vanish and reappear in a manner that would have distracted anyone but a bore.

"It was not unintended," said Mr. Rees.

Jeffery Wren gave the distinct impression of having flipped his half-dollar into thin air. He said: "Oh, come now. You've better sense than that. Surely."

"No-no," Rees said hastily. "You misunderstand me. I didn't say I fell down stairs on purpose. I simply meant to imply that someone set a trap for me. There was a length of piano wire stretched across the steps."

Wren elevated his eyebrows. "Oh? That's crude. Almost primitive. Though sometimes wholly effective. . . But why bother me with it?"

"I wish to employ you," George Rees explained, his brown eyes earnest. "Naturally I cannot call the police to my employer's house. It is a matter that calls for the utmost discretion. I should expect you to call at the

Oakley residence shortly after the luncheon hour today. I would introduce you as a personal friend. You could make a quiet little investigation, and incidentally earn for yourself a handsome honorarium of, uh, fifty dollars."

Wren made a little steeple of his fingers and blew softly into it. He mentally transferred George Rees from the pigeonhole allotted to people who didn't matter into one he reserved for persons he did not like.

"Naturally," went on Mr. Rees, "I want to find out who attempted to murder me."

"Naturally."

"And," Rees added with a smile, "I want to find out before it's too late."

"That's understandable. Entirely so."

Wren looked at the flat, pink face as though seeing George Rees for the first time. "My! You've quite a body there. And priced at only fifty dollars—including tax." His slow, bouncing stride carried him to the street door.

George Rees' smile lingered, as though he had forgotten he was wearing one.

JEFFERY WREN descended grandly from a North Meridian bus at nine o'clock and strode along West Ohio Street to approach his novelty store. Horace, the lean, bloodless-looking clerk, was holding open the screen for a couple of customer's—a man in a wheelchair propelled by a sweet young thing in a lime-green linen frock and a big-brimmed leg-horn hat.

"This lets in lotsa flies," Horace was protesting, "an' I betcha got the wrong address. I wouldn't think a gen'leman in his condition would be in'ested in itch powder an' stink bombs an' snappy pin-ups—"

"Goodness!" the girl's voice snapped as she crossed the threshold. "All we want to do is hire Mr. Wren to investigate a spirit medium who's trying to get her hooks into the Oakley fortune."

It was the second time that morning that Wren had heard the name Oakley, and he thought it was reasonable to assume that something was cooking on the back burner. He stepped briskly into the store, divided a benign smile impartially among Horace, the girl, and the man in the wheelchair. The latter was about fifty. His seersucker suit had lapsed into tired wrinkles and heat had made a rag of his collar. There was a lifeless expression on his gaunt, sallow face.

"My!" Wren said cheerfully. "Well!"

Horace designated the man and girl with a limp wave of his faintly blue hand. "They wanna see you, boss," he said around the soggy, unlighted cigar he clenched in his teeth.

The girl caressed a dimple in the center of her chin with the tip of a gloved finger. Her

wide, blue eyes took in the bigness of Jeffery Wren while he in turn appraised the prettiness of her. She was about twenty, her blond hair two shades darker than the natural straw of her hat. Frank tan freckles bridged her tilted nose. Twinkling, he thought, was the word for her, and when she smiled he thought the word even more appropriate.

She said: "You're the Mr. Wren who's an authority on spirit mediums and stuff."

"Quite," he admitted. "Unquestionably. Especially stuff."

"An' you can say *that* again," Horace mumbled as he returned to his accustomed position behind the joke counter.

The girl had her own conception of "stuff" and it brought an unseasonable chill to her shoulders. "Well, it hasn't come to murder yet, but you've got to give somebody an A for Effort. First it was poison—"

"That's plain nonsense, Wanda Swithy!" the man cut in. He tipped forward in his wheelchair and shook a rosy finger at the girl. "The old fool gets a bellyache and right away he thinks he's poisoned. He's pixilated, that's what. Pixilated." The thin lips found the word bitter, but he seemed to enjoy the taste of it.

"Well," the girl returned sharply, "what about that wire across the basement steps this morning? I suppose, Uncle Gordy, that comes under the heading of plain nonsense, too. Or maybe we all imagined it! You know perfectly well it was just a matter of luck that Mr. Rees fell down the steps instead of Uncle William." She switched about to face Jeffery Wren. "You can't tell me somebody isn't trying to murder Uncle William."

Wren shook his head. "Wouldn't think of telling you. Somebody's trying. Assiduously. . . . But can't we name names and all that sort of thing?"

The girl flipped a white-gloved hand to indicate the man in the wheel-chair. "Mr. Wren, this is William Oakley's brother."

A pale flash of resentment gleamed in Uncle Gordy's sunken eyes. "William Oakley's brother, William Oakley's brother!" he parroted. "I suppose that's what they'll carve on my tombstone—'Here lies William Oakley's brother.' Have I no identity of my own just because I'm an invalid and a pauper?"

The girl sighed wearily. "I'm sorry, Uncle Gordy. Mr. Wren, this is Mr. Gordon Oakley."

"How're you?" Wren put out a big genial hand which Mr. Gordon Oakley considered a moment before putting something that felt rather like a dead fish into Wren's palm. Mr. Oakley said: "Humph!"

"And I'm Wanda Swithy," said the girl. "Mrs. Donald Swithy, that is. When I married Donald six months ago, I acquired two

great-uncles—Uncle Gordy here, and Uncle William. They live in the *new* Oakley house on Kessler Boulevard, and as long as my husband is stationed at the naval air base near Peru, Indiana, I'm living in the *old* Oakley house out on Eagle Creek. That's Oakley Fences," she added disjointedly. "Uncle William made scads in fences. You know . . ." She made an encompassing gesture no doubt intended to represent a fence.

Wren nodded. "They keep people out. Keep some people out. Keep some people in, for that matter." He chuckled. "Never bothered me one way or the other."

"Well," she said, "Uncle William has the sort that keeps people *out* all around the new Oakley place. He hasn't left the property in a month. And he keeps a bodyguard, so you see—" She broke off and nodded her head significantly.

"He's pixilated," Uncle Gordy shrieked. "Got some sort of a complex. Wanda, we don't have to go into that. All we want Mr. Wren to do is to put the kibosh on that spirit medium."

An angry pallor crept into the girl's face. She deliberately turned her back on the man in the chair. "Mr. Wren, I want to talk with you alone. Can we go somewhere . . ." She gestured vaguely at Uncle Gordy.

Wren got the idea. He nodded, took buoyant steps to the rear of the store where a flight of steps led upward. Uncle Gordy pushed himself forward in his chair and railed at Wanda Swithy as she followed Wren.

"Don't you dare!" he shouted. "Don't you dare breathe a word to Mr. Wren unless I'm present. This is an Oakley family matter, and you've no right to butt in!"

She paused, glanced over her shoulder at the helpless man. "Oh, I won't breathe a word, Uncle Gordy," she promised sweetly. "I'll talk to Mr. Wren in sign language—like this." She thumbed an impudent nose and then fled up the steps.

WREN pushed open the door at the top of the stairs, that bears the legend *WREN'S MAGIC*, led the girl into the little reception room adorned with photographs of Jeffery Wren as he had appeared on Keith's circuit.

"I was afraid Uncle Gordy would try to convince you that Uncle William is crazy," the girl said. "That's because of the pigpens Uncle William is building in the front yard."

Wren stopped at the double glass doors that led into the magic shop proper. He looked back over a great square shoulder and cocked an incredulous eyebrow.

"Pigpens?" he murmured. "On Kessler Boulevard? Won't there be some strenuous objections from the City Fathers?"

"Wel-l-l . . ." Wanda Swithy fingered the

dimple in the center of her chin. "Uncle William told my husband in a letter that they were pigpens. But what's the difference so long as they keep Uncle William amused? Uncle Gordy shouldn't tell people that his brother is crazy."

"No," Wren agreed. "It's hardly the nice thing to say. Still, Uncle Gordy may have an axe to grind."

Wanda nodded vigorously. "They all have axes, and if somebody doesn't do something pretty soon, they'll start using them on each other."

"Oh? Those kind of people."

"Smart, sophisticated people," she insisted.

"No doubt of it. But with homicidal tendencies." Wren unlocked the glass doors, led Mrs. Swithy into the shop where everything from all but invisible gimmicks to stage-size illusions enticed thousands of dollars from amateur and professional conjurers. Wanda Swithy took a nervous step away from a black art skeleton that wore a white derby hat at a tipsy angle and grasped Jeffery Wren's arm impulsively. He laid a large hand on top of her tiny one.

"Now, now, my dear." His voice was deep and gentle. "No spooks, here. They can't abide me." And he conducted her toward the door of that thoughtful brown room that is his office.

She said: "There're spooks aplenty in the new Oakley house. You wouldn't believe it, would you, that it's the *new* Oakley house that's haunted!"

He chuckled. "That's an innovation. Streamlined spooks, no doubt. Probably operated by remote control." He opened the office door for her, followed her in. She sat down in a chair and dropped one bare, smoothly made-up knee over the other. Wren settled himself on the edge of the desk where he appeared as solid and competent as a paperweight.

"Now," he prompted gently, "about the spooks. About murder."

She frowned innocently at the white purse in her lap while she ordered her thoughts. "Remember, I can only give you scraps of information, because I don't live with the Oakley brothers, thank heavens. It'll be pretty mixed up, but I think you'll see a definite pattern in all of it, if you're as clever as I think you are."

He accepted the orchid graciously.

She said: "It was last March that Doris Merman, that's Uncle William's niece who lives with him, found Uncle William playing tick-tack-toe with a—a ghost, I guess."

"My!" Wren was astonished. "What a pastime! Who won? Uncle William or the competing spirit?"

"Doris didn't wait to find out. She had accused Uncle William of playing tick-tack-toe

by himself, and Uncle William pointed to an apparently empty chair beside him and said that the spirit of his dear departed sister was there, playing with him. Doris got out of the library in a hurry. She was pretty much upset."

Wren nodded sagely. "Probably. No end upsetting. Then what?"

She worried her gloved fingers. "Then I have to skip to about a week ago. That was when Madame Zorinda brought that awful bottle to Uncle William."

"Bottle?" Wren frowned. "Madame who?"

"Zorinda," she said. "She's a fat gypsified woman who lives out in Broad Ripple. She"—her voice dropped to an awed whisper—"she sells *things* in bottles."

Wren managed a Mephistophelian expression. "*Things*," he intoned mysteriously. "Horrific, isn't it?"

Wanda thought it was. "Madame Zorinda takes anything intimately associated with a dead person—imagine that!—and suspends it inside an empty bottle by means of a piece of hair-wire to form a pendulum dangling from the cork. She seals the bottle with wax so she couldn't possibly manipulate anything. Then she stands the bottle in the middle of a table with maybe six or seven other spirit bottles like that. She sits at the side of the table, rests her fingertips on the table-top, and pretty soon the pendulum in the bottle starts to sway."

Mrs. Swithy swallowed audibly and her eyes got round. "Just the *one* bottle is affected, understand? All the pendulums don't swing—just the one she's staring at. I don't know what it is, magnetism, spirits, or what."

"Telekinesis," Wren dropped in. "A five-dollar word the spirit mediums invented. Has an awesome sound. 'Fraud' is shorter and more apt in this instance." He drummed softly on the edge of the desk with his fingertips. "And Madame Zorinda brought such a spirit bottle to Uncle William?"

She nodded. "A week ago. And she gave him a lesson on how to develop his powers so that he can make the thing in the bottle sway. The pendulum clinks against the side. It can spell out words by a sort of code and answer questions—one clink for 'no,' two clinks for 'yes.'"

"My!" Wren exclaimed cheerfully. "You've a number of clinks there. We might throw Madame herself into one! . . . How did William Oakley get in touch with her?"

Wanda Swithy lowered her eyes. "I guess Donald, my husband, and I are guilty there. We took Uncle William to Madame Zorinda's place over a year ago, just for fun. He scoffed at the whole thing then. And now— Well, you can see it's leading up to something perfectly terrible. Because it was just two days after the bottle came into the Oakley house that

Uncle William was poisoned. At least, I know he thinks he was poisoned. He was awfully sick to his stomach. And Dudley Merman, that's Doris' husband, gave him mustard water and made him—"

HER nice mouth rebelled at the word "vomit", but Wren got the idea. He said: "Quite. . . Then this morning, there was a wire across the basement steps. Why the basement, pray?"

"Uncle William's office is down there," she explained.

He nodded thoughtfully. "Ever occur to anybody that Uncle William mightn't have been the prospective victim? Wasn't it George Rees who fell? Possibly bounced a bit, too."

Wanda didn't think so. "Who would want to kill Mr. Rees? He hasn't any money. He's just Uncle William's secretary."

Wren saw no reason to inform her that Mr. Rees considered himself a potential murder victim. He raised his dark eyes from Mrs. Swithy's pretty face as the office door was unceremoniously opened by Horace. The clerk's pale eyes gravitated to Wanda Swithy. He lipped his soggy cigar away from that side of his mouth assigned to speaking.

"Lady, your Uncle Gordy's got prickly heat. I tried to en'tertain him butcha can't satisfy

some people. He wants to go on home now."

Wanda Swithy sighed and stood up. "That's Uncle Gordy for you. Well. . ." She gave Jeffery Wren the nicest smile. "You'll try to get to the bottom of this?"

He nodded agreeably. "The utter bottom. Ought to be some intriguing echoes down there."

"And whatever your fee is—" she began, only to have Wren break in with a gesture that made light of filthy lucre. "Don't mention it. Not now, at any rate."

"Boss," Horace still lingered in the doorway, "the Large Look from Headquarters is inna magic shop with a gleam inner eye."

Wren stood up, pleased. "Ah. The estimable Mrs. Osbourn. That's convenient. Also coincidental." He followed Wanda Swithy from the office, watched her cross the magic shop in the company of Horace.

Zoe Osbourn, the police department's nemesis of fortune-tellers and phony mediums, presented a box-car silhouette against one of Wren's illuminated counters. She fixed covetous eyes on a rainbow production silk displayed on a T-standard.

Wren observed that Mrs. Osbourn was wearing a cap-sleeved summery dress with sleepy little Mexicans in red sombreros imprinted against a dazzling yellow background.

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CHAPTER TWO

Medium Dead

It did very little for the Good Neighbor Policy and even less for the good Mrs. Osbourn. The open-crowned black straw hat atop her vividly-hennaed hair might have originated in Jerry's Tin Shop, resembling as it did a piece of battered furnace pipe with a width of satin ribbon to conceal the joint. As Wren approached, she turned and said, "Phew!" in a loud voice.

Wren chuckled. "How're you?" he asked. "How're all the dirty crooks?"

"I'm broiled!" Her voice was harsh, her delivery emphatic. "And it's a bad day for one of the dirty crooks." She took a newspaper-wrapped package from beneath a bare and muscular arm, scowled furiously at it as she began to unroll the paper. "Look at this, Jeff, and get your mind off that little squab you were entertaining in your office."

"This" was a whiskey bottle empty of its original contents but containing an odd little mass of gold and porcelain suspended by a fine wire from the wax-sealed cork. Zoe Osbourn stood it on the counter.

"Oh," Wren said lightly. "One of those. One of Madame Zorinda's spirit bottles."

"Yes, I—" Zoe Osbourn broke off. Her prominent, gullible-appearing blue eyes glared at Wren. "How did you know, master-wit?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "An ill wind gets around. Or something." He bent over the bottle, frowned slightly as he indicated the dangling object within. "That has me baffled. Utterly."

Zoe Osbourn snorted. "Zorinda wanted something intimately connected with a dead person. That's a piece of the late Mr. Osbourn's bridgework. It's been stepped on."

"My!" He was appalled. "What a fate! . . . You had Madame contrive this? You'll use it as evidence of fraud against her?"

"Right!" Zoe's bulldog jaws closed with a snap that boded no good for the spirit-bottling medium. She re-wrapped the bottle, giving the neck a good hard twist. Inside, the dental remains of the late Mr. Osbourn emitted a faint tinkle of protest.

"Well, Jeffy—" Zoe was noticeably pleased with herself. "Since you haven't much business, perhaps you'll ride out to Broad Ripple and watch little Zoe make an arrest."

He drummed thoughtfully on the edge of the counter, finally turned to the policewoman and delivered his best smile. "Mightn't we give the Madame a little rope? There's big game afoot. You're popping at clay pigeons."

"Ha!" she exploded. "Rope, he says again! The trouble with you, Jeff Wren, is that you're not to be satisfied with anything less than murder!"

He was not deeply offended. "There'll be murder," he promised cheerfully as he went toward the office for his hat. "It's unavoidable. Might even be a *fait accompli*, for all I know."

IT was a narrow, unpaved street with a sleepy, peaceful aspect that suggested a country town. A faint gray haze lay above the shadowing maples, and the odor of wood smoke lingered in the hot, still air. Zoe Osbourn steered the Department car over against a sod curb and killed the engine. Her explosive sigh was the only breeze Jeffery Wren had felt in a long time.

"Why wasn't I made thinner and less beautiful!" Zoe complained. She fanned her large-featured face briefly with a bejeweled hand. "This heat has just about—" She broke off, her eyes narrowing.

Wren looked at her curiously. "Now what?"

"Well, fry me a banana!" It was Zoe's conception of a whisper. "Do you see what I see?"

He didn't—not until she pointed over his right shoulder and a little to the rear. A stocky, red-haired man in a too-blue suit came through the gate of a white picket fence that fronted a squat brown cottage. Wren brightened perceptibly.

"My! Thomas Hogan, isn't it? Detective-Sergeant Hogan, long associated with Homicide."

"Too damned long associated with Homicide!" Zoe Osbourn squirmed energetically around on the seat cushions the better to glare at Sergeant Hogan. "What's he doing here?" she demanded of anybody.

Hogan looked up, squinting. He spat out a match he had been chewing, thrust his hands into hip pockets, and sauntered toward the car.

"If he's blown my arrest—" Zoe left the threat unfinished, and Hogan, nearly always a gentleman, tipped his Baku straw hat.

"How're you?" Wren asked the sergeant.

"I'm just fine," said Hogan heartily. "But you now, Mr. Wren, you're slipping."

"Oh?" Wren was concerned. "Does it show?"

Hogan laughed. "You know the standing joke we've got about how you're always finding bodies? Well, you missed a whopper."

"Hell's fire!" Zoe slapped herself across the forehead. "Not Madame Zorinda?"

"The same. She's in the morgue right now."

"And I traipsed clear out here in this heat—"

"And," Hogan cut through Zoe's bellow, "I would just like to see you make something funny out of this one, Mr. Wren."

"Oh? Madame met a prosaic end?"

"She was back there in a shed, milking a cow and it trampled her," Hogan said. "You just can't beat that for prosaic."

Wren was dubious. "Oh, come now. A cow is a placid creature. Or don't you think so?"

Hogan rested an elbow on the sill of the car window. "It's like this," he explained tolerantly. "The railroad track runs right back of her place. She was milking at around six-fifteen this morning when the train came by. Moser, the fire battalion chief, figures a spark from the locomotive set off a pile of hay she had back of the shed. There was an oil drum, too—the lady had a kerosene stove—and the whole thing went up like that." Hogan snapped his fingers. "A cow trapped in a fire is not exactly what you would call an awfully placid animal."

"A cow with a hot-foot, huh?" Zoe contributed.

"Tsk! You've no soul, Mrs. O. But Sergeant, no one bashed Madame? Or ignited the hay?"

"Now look here, Mr. Wren," Hogan was noticeably less tolerant, "the lady next door was out in her garden at the time and witnessed the whole thing. Nobody went near the shed except the Zorinda dame. So that's that!" He turned stiffly, stalked across the street, got into a waiting police car, and drove off.

Jeffery Wren stared soberly ahead through shimmering heat waves that rose from the radiator.

Zoe Osbourn said: "Hm. . . A penny for your thoughts, Jeffery."

"Oh?" He turned his head, and his smile twitched. "My dear lady! You're contributing to inflation."

"I doubt it," she said drily. "That scrawny little man in the wheel-chair who was in your novelty store this morning—isn't he one of the Oakleys?"

Wren nodded. "Uncle Gordy. The pauper. And the girl is a grand-niece by marriage."

"Well," Zoe said, "the tip-off I got on Zorinda came from another branch of the same clan—a Mrs. Merman, William Oakley's niece. With so many members of the same tribe out for her scalp, it's pretty damned convenient that Zorinda got kicked to death by a cow."

"Precisely. You've a happy thought there. And here's another—both cows and trains operate on schedules."

She scowled over that for a moment, shook her head. "So what, master-wit, so what?"

He shrugged as he reached for the latch of the car door. "It's monotonous. Nothing less. Especially for the cow."

THEY got out of the car, headed for the white picket fence, Zoe Osbourn pegging along on heels too high and slim for her piano ankles. Beyond the gate was a mossy brick walk edged with toppling blue grass. Madame's cottage needed paint. A section of scalloped fretwork sagged away from the eaves like lace

from a bedraggled petticoat. Two closely-trimmed catalpas cast stiff little blots of shade before the front porch.

Wren tunneled the way through rank-grown forsythia on the south side of the house. The pungent odor of simmering catsup from the kitchen of the house next door gave pleasant assurance that life in the neighborhood went on, unhurried and unchanged, in spite of Madame's sudden demise.

They paused in the welcome shade of an apple tree at the southeast corner of the house. The back yard extended as far as the railroad right-of-way. At the extreme rear, an old windmill tower of rusted steel stood out starkly against the pitiless glare of the sun. The cowshed had been located twelve or fifteen feet this side of the tower. It hadn't been a large structure, judging from the charred embers that remained.

"It's beyond me how that fat fraud got away with keeping a cow in the city limits," Zoe Osbourn commented.

"She probably greased a palm or two," Wren said, chuckling. "With butter." His bouncing strides crushed rotting apples underfoot and disturbed the swarming flies. Zoe followed him around what was left of the shed, came to a stop near the foot of the windmill tower. Black dust from burned hay and grasses smudged their shoes.

Wren looked north and then south. The wire fence that bounded the property was naked of vines. There was no doubt that the elderly woman weeding her zinnia bed in the yard next door had enjoyed an unobstructed view of the fire. Wren looked up at the windmill tower. The fan blades had long since fallen off the hub, and there was no linkage leading down to the pump. A small, brown birdhouse was suspended from a weathered wood beam wired to the metal supports of the tower, and Wren noticed that the door of the birdhouse was arched rather than circular.

Zoe Osbourn shielded her eyes from the glare. "Phew! Can't we find something to investigate in the shade?"

Wren was agreeable. They went back toward the house, this time straight across the debris of the burned shed, Zoe picking her way along with a daintiness that was altogether unexpected. Near what had been the west side of the shed, she stopped. The toe of her shoe turned over some blackened bit of rubble, and for a moment she scowled at it. She swooped suddenly and picked the something up.

Wren cocked an eyebrow. "Something illuminating?"

"Damned illuminating!" The expression on Zoe's face was, peculiarly, one of awe. "If this is what I think it is, Jeff, somebody played the Madame a very dirty trick!"

She handed Wren a small convex oval of

steel not unlike the bowl of a miniature spoon. Where the handle of the "spoon" would have been was a sharp burr in the metal indicating that some portion of the original object had been cut nearly through with a file and had broken off entirely under pressure.

"That's a thumb lever off a simple latch, isn't it?" Zoe asked, goggling at the piece of metal in Wren's fingers.

"Precisely! It's obviously from the inner side of the door of the shed." Wren looked up, unreasonably happy about the whole thing. "Diabolical, wasn't it? Imagine! There were the flames. There was the cow, kicking the bucket. Kicking Madame, for that matter. Madame ran to the door only to have this dingus break off under her thumb. She was trapped. Locked in with a terror-crazed animal!"

Zoe snatched the piece of steel from Wren's hand and dropped it into her purse. "Well, it certainly looks like murder to me!" she told the world.

"Upsetting, isn't it?" Wren said softly. "Especially for Sergeant Hogan. It's apt to ruin his day."

"Ha! I'll ruin his whole weekend!" Zoe trumpeted. She forgot about the heat. Her high heels dug at the baked earth like tractor treads, stirring up small clouds of dust in their wake. Wren, however, had no great difficulty in keeping abreast of her. Near the house, in the shade of the apple tree, he threw out a solid arm and checked the policewoman.

"Now what's wrong?" she demanded, scowling at him.

He pointed toward the foundation of the cottage. A fat mother cat crouched beside a weed-choked basement areaway, the extremity of her tail twitching. Somewhere above their heads a bird chattered anxiously and then, in desperation, dived at the cat. The cat hugged the ground until the futile attack had passed. The hungry chirp of fledglings came from the areaway, and the cat knew a good meal when she heard one.

"Well?" Zoe said stridently. "What's it to us? I'm damned if I'm going to police the bird and cat world, too. I'm a believer in the survival of the fittest."

"Naturally," Wren murmured. "You're one of the fittest." His gesture indicated that the moral question was beside the point. "Madame had birds in her basement. That's the provocative thing."

"It is, huh?" Zoe stormed. "You've got bats in your belfry, and if you don't think *that's* provocative you ought to try and pal around with yourself for a while!"

Unperturbed by her outburst, Wren stepped to the areaway and shooed away the cat. He stooped, reached down into the weeds, picked up a brown birdhouse by a length of rusty bail-

ing wire attached to its roof. The end of the wire, he noticed, was bright, sharp as though newly severed. He looked up toward the eaves of the cottage but failed to see any dangling bit of wire that might indicate the original position of the birdhouse.

He glanced over at Zoe Osbourn. Her lips were set, and her eyes blazed furiously at him.

"All right, Jeffery! Whenever you get through learning about the birds and the bees maybe we can go downtown and convince Tom Hogan he's got murder on his hands."

He straightened, holding the birdhouse at arm's length. His smile was benevolent. "Look. Baby wrens. . . Let that be a lesson to me."

"Horse liniment!" She turned on her heel and strode toward the corner of the house. Wren took a moment to suspend the birdhouse from a twig of the apple tree which he hoped might prove inaccessible to the cat, and then followed the policewoman.

Zoe, the irresistible force, went barging ahead through the overgrown forsythia to collide squarely with someone. Zoe's apologetic "Oops", the somebody's grunt, a wooden clatter, and a fleshy impact were all but simultaneous. A vaguely familiar masculine voice started a profane tirade only to end it abruptly with a wheezing intake of breath.

"Go right ahead, mister," Zoe Osbourn said evenly. "You don't know any naughty words I haven't heard."

WREN parted the branches. That same obese citizen who had stopped him in the lobby of the apartment-hotel that morning was sitting in the middle of the brick walk. Gravity had temporarily deprived Mr. George Rees of some of his self-importance but hadn't disturbed a black hair on his rather flat head. His injured ankle was thrust straight out in front of him.

"Well!" Wren said cheerfully. "Mr. Rees, isn't it? The fifty-dollar body. . . Mr. Rees, this is simply not your day."

Mr. Rees, in the process of getting back onto one foot and two crutches, allowed his quiet brown eyes to wander leisurely over Jeffery Wren. "I consider your remarks very uncalled for, Mr. Wren, and not at all kind."

"Oh, come now." Wren smiled. "Simply making light of a heavy subject. . . You've met our Mrs. Osbourn?"

George Rees brought forth a cool how-do-you-do for Mrs. Osbourn, who returned a curt nod. He reached through the crutch on the right-hand side and thumbed a long envelope that protruded from his suitcoat pocket.

"I have a message from my employer, Mr. Oakley, for Madame Zorinda—a letter that missed the early mail. Can either of you good people tell me where I might find her?"

Wren cocked an eyebrow. "That's a ques-

tion. Highly debatable. Not for our puny minds."

"She's dead," Zoe said flatly. "Murdered."

If she expected any kind of a reaction from Rees she was disappointed. His face remained flat and pink and blah. He gathered his crutches closer to him, warping his heavy shoulders upward. It gave the impression of a shrug.

"And we'd better have that message you've got for her, Mr. Rees." Zoe advanced a step toward the fat man, and Rees took two crabbing steps backward.

"That is impossible, even assuming that you are the person in authority here," he said gravely.

"It is, huh?" Zoe's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I cannot betray my employer's confidence," Rees said.

Wren stepped to George Rees' side, dropped a hand on the fat man's shoulder. "You're right. Entirely so. . . Mrs. O, you're out of order." He gave Zoe Osbourn a significant look which, as it turned out, she misinterpreted.

Rees said: "Thank you, Mr. Wren." He inflated himself somewhat and addressed Zoe Osbourn. "I am rather particular about any trust assigned to me."

"A person of integrity," Wren said. "A credit to your profession. Of course, if some dirty crook were to take advantage of us, possibly picking our pockets—"

Wren was the dirty crook who picked Rees' pocket. So deftly did he manage it that neither Zoe Osbourn nor Rees was aware that the job was done. Zoe had been occupied with getting her credentials out of her purse. Her flaring nostrils suggested the weak spot in a boiler that has gone beyond its rated pressure. She took a belligerent step forward.

"I advise you to hand that letter over, Mr. Rees," she said.

Rees scuttled backward. "I believe you are exceeding your authority," he said with less assurance.

"My!" Wren murmured. "Illuminating! No less!" He was standing a little apart from the other two, examining the letter. It was addressed to Madame Zorinda and bore an uncanceled stamp. At the edge of the envelope flap on the reverse side was a tiny brown smear of hardened glue. The letter had been previously opened and re-sealed, and Wren was so engrossed by this discovery that he was not aware of Rees' move until it was almost too late.

He glanced up, mildly startled, saw Rees pivoting on one foot, one crutch sweeping toward Wren like the boom of a sailboat. Zoe Osbourn lunged, caught the crutch at the same instant it struck Wren's shoulder. Even then Wren was thoroughly jarred by the blow be-

cause of the weight of the man behind it. He stepped back quickly, his smile twitching.

"Tsk-tsk," he clucked at Rees. "You're a sight! Your center of gravity is showing."

Rees was well aware of that. He was poised on the toe of his sound foot, leaning far forward like the least graceful of ballet dancers. If either he or Zoe let go of the extended crutch it was reasonable to assume he would fall on his face. If the policewoman decided to push, Rees was pretty apt to land on the opposite end of his anatomy.

Zoe let him suffer a moment, watched maliciously while the pink of his face changed to a deeper shade. Then she gradually permitted him to return to a state of equilibrium with both crutches firmly planted on the ground. She immediately turned on Wren and hurled ocular knives at him.

"Believe it or not, I'm the representative of the law around here, Jeff Wren!" she exploded. "Hand that over."

He gave her the envelope, which she looked over carefully to make sure he hadn't accomplished a switch.

"You—you can't do that," Rees protested, but not too vigorously. "It's a Federal offense to tamper with the mail."

Zoe gave him a look. "What do you think you are, the pony express?" She put the letter into her purse. "I'll have to take your full name and address, Mr. Rees," she said more quietly. "You'll probably have visitors from Headquarters."

WHILE Rees was meekly giving Zoe Osbourn the information she wanted, Wren was striding toward the front of the cottage. A black Cadillac sedan, with a gray-haired chauffeur at the wheel, was parked directly behind the policewoman's car. Across the street and somewhat south stood a canary yellow Nash convertible, its engine idling. There was a small dark woman with a sleek hair-do sitting in the front seat of the Nash. A tall blond man in fawn-colored slacks and a sky-blue sports shirt stood beside the Cadillac, talking to the chauffeur.

"He's here, isn't he?" Wren heard the blond man ask the chauffeur in a soft insolent voice.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Merman, sir. He went around back of the brown cottage a while ago." The chauffeur pointed. "He had a letter Mr. Oakley wanted him to deliver."

The blond Mr. Merman—Wanda Swithy had said his first name was Dudley—glanced over a shoulder and noticed Wren. Merman had a handsome face but one that matched the insolence in his voice, with its proud crooked brows and superior one-sided smile. He thrust head and shoulders into the Cadillac and continued his conversation in a whisper.

Wren came out of the gate, crossed the

street to the yellow roadster, and tipped his hat to the woman passenger. "How're you?" he asked. "Mrs. Merman, isn't it?"

Doris Merman, Oakley's niece, was under forty, as trim and sleek as a Manchester terrier in her brown slack suit. Her eyes were black, close-set, alert. Wren was not at all surprised when she yapped, "Yes? Yes?" implying by inflection that he had a hell of a nerve.

"The name is Wren," he announced pleasantly. "A magician by trade. Occasionally, I find bodies. May even delve into the whys and wherefores of some particular body, ultimately deciding whodunnit."

"A detective," she interpreted at once. Her slim body and the muscles of her face tensed, then she started barking questions at him in a manner calculated to take him completely off guard. "What, pray, has this to do with me? Why am I accosted in this rude fashion? What crime have I committed that I find a detective yapping at my heels? Can you state one good reason for it? Can you? Well? What did you say?"

Wren had said: "My!" Nothing more.

"What was that?" She all but thrust her sharp nose into his face. "Just what do you mean by 'My!'? What is it you intend to imply by that ridiculous monosyllable?"

"Oh, stop that," Wren said gruffly, and Doris Merman drew back as though she had been slapped. He took advantage of her shocked silence to slip in a few words. "Last March you discovered William Oakley playing tick-tack-toe. He claimed to be playing with spirits beyond your mortal ken. How many spirits, precisely?"

Her shrill laugh was not long lasting because it was forced. "Suppose I ask you how many players could possibly be involved in tick-tack-toe?"

"Two," he said. "No more and no less. Represented by X and O on the playing field. But"—he frowned slightly—"were there other letters?"

Doris Merman's black eyes were momentarily narrow, suspicious and crafty, like those of a terrier guarding a bone. She looked up suddenly, saw Dudley Merman approaching at an indolent, ambling gait.

"Who is this man, my dear?" he asked, managing to put "man" on a lower biological plane than that inhabited by a Merman.

"Oh," Wren got in casually before the woman could answer, "merely an innocent bystander. Bystanding at a murder. A rather clever murder, too, considering those other crude attempts with wire and poison."

He left the Mermans exchanging glances, crossed the street again. Zoe Osbourn was coming out of the gate in the picket fence with George Rees hobbling behind her. Rees paused and stared at Doris and Dudley Merman.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded coldly.

Dudley Merman uttered a nasty-nice laugh. "Keeping a weather eye on you, dear fellow. I have long suspected you were the connecting link between Uncle William and this spirit medium. Now I'm convinced you're the master lever behind the whole stinking scheme."

Merman got into the yellow car, meshed the gears, and took his peeve out on the accelerator pedal. Rees, his flat, pink face devoid of expression, swung off toward the chauffeur-driven Cadillac.

"Delightful people!" Wren said softly to Zoe Osbourn, who was regarding the retreating figure of George Rees distastefully. "Utterly charming. Such devotion! Especially to Uncle William's cash drawer."

Zoe grunted. "What gives here, Jeff, what gives?"

He shook his head. "Haven't the foggiest notion. Unless—" He broke off, his puzzled frown fading. "Well! What a thought!" he said suddenly.

"What's the thought?" she demanded, scowling.

"That possibly somebody's turned William Oakley's fence inside-out."

She goggled at him, nodding her head significantly. "Well, that settles one thing that's been bothering me. You're just plain and unadulterated nuts!"

"Oh?" He was scarcely offended. "But add it up. Take the spirit bottles. Take Madame's lesson in telekinesis. Take the spot of glue on the envelope in your purse. Add the game with the ghosts. Not to mention the pigpens. It's all faintly sinister. . . Or don't you think so?"

CHAPTER THREE

If a Body Find a Body . . .

AT high noon Jeffery Wren got out of a taxicab on the heat-softened asphalt of Kessler Boulevard where it climbed the high west bank of White River. He dismissed the driver with a generous tip and crossed to the entrance of a crushed-stone drive blocked by a forbidding gate. He stood there a moment looking through the bars at the new Oakley house situated on the side of a hill. It was an English-type mansion of somber red brick with steel casements painted a cheerless tone of green—an imitation of age lacking all the mellowness that time provides. It would stand barefaced against the sun for decades before the small Chinese elms planted about the grounds could possibly soften the harsh newness of its walls.

The grounds comprised some seven acres—Wren's own vague estimate—all enclosed by

Oakley steel fencing eight feet high and topped with barbed wire set at an angle so as to prevent anyone from climbing over from the outside. Fifty feet beyond, on William Oakley's front lawn, was a group of the queerest structures Wren had ever encountered. There were thirteen of the things, all about three feet high and arranged in four parallel rows. White-washed planks formed walls without roofs. Three were square with no conceivable entrance except through the top. Five had but three walls set at right angles, and the remainder only two walls. As pigpens go, Wren thought, these were nothing less than unique.

The lock of the wrought-iron gate presented an obstacle to Jeffrey Wren for thirty seconds by anybody's watch, and he would have managed it in twenty-five except that the metal was hot to the touch. He opened the gate a little way, went sidling through, and pulled it shut again. Then he left the blistering stone of the drive to walk across the sun-browned lawn toward the pigpens. Five feet from the nearest row of pigpens Wren all but stumbled over an expensive-looking golf bag of russet leather. He stooped, picked it up, wondered hazily why the five clubs it contained didn't rattle around. He stood the bag on end, conscious of a disagreeable animal smell that mingled with the not unpleasant odor of fine well-cured leather. He held the bag so that the blazing rays of the sun penetrated its depths, stared into it, and quite properly shuddered.

Something stark white and spattered with brown bloodstains was wedged into the bottom of the golf bag. Two scrawny yellow claws extended upward and seemed to beckon in a manner which Wren found most disturbing.

He lowered the bag carefully into the exact position in which he had found it. He said, "My!" to his own astute self, and then sauntered toward the odd whitewashed plank structures. He walked along each of the four rows, looking into the open tops of the pens as he passed. In the row farthest from the boulevard, the second and third pens from the right

each enclosed one large fieldstone coated with the same heavy white paint that protected the wood planks. The square pen in the third row also had a similar stone in its center, while the last in the bottom row enclosed two stones.

Wren nodded sagely. "Definitely not Rosicrucian," he commented.

That was when something struck the planks of the nearest pigpen with such a resounding crack that Wren thought for an instant he was a target for some inaccurate rifle practice. His startled glance followed a small white missile that went bounding off into the brown grass. A golf ball—nothing more.

He looked up the hill toward the house. The tall, well proportioned figure of Dudley Merman ambled down the slope and toward the pigpens, that same insolent smile tilting one side of his handsome mouth. As he walked, he idly swung a golf club, chopping off the heads of seeding dandelions. Wren gave the blond man a severe look which he felt was probably wasted on so superior a creature.

"Look," he said, "aren't you supposed to call out something? Almost anything would be acceptable."

Dudley Merman nodded coolly. He had stopped a few feet from Wren and was leaning on his club. "That's the ethical thing to do on a golf course. This doesn't happen to be a golf course, and I should very much like to know how you got in here."

Wren smiled slyly. "By pole-vaulting—obviously. I've a telescoping steel pole, of course. Concealed at present in the hollow of my wooden leg."

Merman whacked viciously at another dandelion. "I don't find your patter particularly amusing. What's your business here?"

Wren flipped a gesture toward William Oakley's pigpens. "These. I'm associated with a Federal bureau. The OPU. It's devoted to better housing for underprivileged pigs. Keeps me safely out of the draft." He added vaguely: "These are pigpens?"

Merman uttered a soft, unpleasant laugh and

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ambled around the pens toward the spot where the golf bag lay. Wren followed him.

"I haven't any idea where you got such an absurd notion," Merman said as he picked up the bag. "That's simply a paint-weathering test which William Oakley set up this spring when he became interested in a new water-thinned paint formula."

"Oh?" Wren elevated his chunky eyebrows. "And I think it would be advisable, Mr. Wren, if you'd toddle off somewhere and get on with that silly business of pulling rabbits out of silk hats," Merman suggested loftily.

Wren's chuckle verged on the malicious. "Impossible. There's a shortage of silk. And consequently of toppers. Magicians are using golf bags this season." He concealed a grimace, reached down into the open mouth of the leather golf bag, seized the yellow claws, and pulled the white-feathered body out into the sunlight. "My!" he said, as surprised as anybody. "There's a shortage of rabbits, too!"

JEFFERY WREN held a great white cockatoo at arm's length. The big parrot-like bird was stiff in death. Feathers had been plucked from its neck and there was a small pink-lipped wound in the bare flesh.

"Good God!" Merman breathed. "Toodles!"

"Toodles?" Wren watched Merman pale beneath his tan. "Ah, yes. Toodles. Cockatoodles, no doubt. But whose?"

"William Oakley's pet," Merman said. He jerked a handkerchief from the pocket of his fawn-colored slacks and daubed at the sweat on his brow. His smile came back suddenly as if he had put on a mask. "Don Swithy gave it to him. Don always did have grotesque notions about gifts."

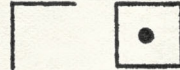
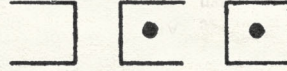
"Quite," Wren agreed. "Imagine giving a rich uncle the bird. That's sheer bravado. But look. What's it doing in your golf bag?"

"That doesn't happen to be my golf bag," Merman denied. "It's William Oakley's bag, and his bird, and it couldn't possibly concern me in the least." With that he hooked the strap of the golf bag over his shoulder, turned his straight back to Wren, and ambled up the hill toward the house.

Wren went to the nearest square pigpen and dropped the bird into it. Then he took out pencil and paper, walked around to the first pigpen in the row farthest from the boulevard. As he moved along the row, he mentally projected himself above the odd structures and drew the floor-plan of each in consecutive order with straight lines to indicate walls, and dots that designated the position of the white-washed fieldstones. The result was, in Wren's opinion, quite illuminating.

Wren put the sketch into his pocket and started up the slope toward the house. He

hadn't taken more than five steps when the sound of tires on crushed stone drew his attention back toward the gate. The black Cadillac sedan had stopped at the entrance to the drive and the aged chauffeur was moving stiffly toward the closed gate. Wren turned, quickened his pace to reach the sedan just as the old man was climbing back in under the wheel. Fat George Rees, a Churchill-size cigar clutched in his small teeth, leaned forward on



the rear seat cushions. His quiet brown eyes first showed surprise and then displeasure as Wren coolly opened the door of the car.

"Well!" Wren beamed happily. "You're a friend indeed. The hill ahead looks formidable. Mountainous, even." He got in uninvited.

George Rees took a final puff on his cigar and put it carefully into the armrest ashtray. "I am not a man of extremes," he said meticulously, "but since our previous encounters this morning I am beginning to develop a violent dislike for you."

"Pooh!" Wren scoffed. "You want protection. Not personality."

"You intend to attempt to discover who tried to break my neck this morning?"

"Quite," Wren assured him. "Precisely. For fifty dollars. You've a rare bargain there."

The chauffeur had turned his head, awaiting orders. His profile, Wren thought, would not have discredited a Roman coin. George Rees said loftily: "You may go on, Gilbert. Drive into the garage. With this ankle of mine I think I shall find Gordon Oakley's elevator convenient for a while."

"Ah?" Wren murmured. "Gordon Oakley is entirely helpless?"

The fat secretary nodded. "He cannot leave his wheelchair without assistance, I understand."

As the car rolled on up the drive, Wren glimpsed Doris Merman in pleated yellow shorts, halter bra, and dark glasses sunning herself on the eastern slope. There, he thought, was a little woman who might give Sergeant Hogan a lot of trouble when Hogan finally came to the realization that here was murder

done and more murder doubtless brewing. "M-m-m—incidentally, Mr. Wren"—Rees' confidential whisper broke in on Wren's musings—"you must use discretion. It is imperative." His brown eyes were strangely worried. "I have no desire to lose my excellent situation here over a—a trifle. After all, it's only a sprained ankle."

"You're lucky," Wren commented. "Luckier than the cockatoo."

"The uh—cockatoo?" Rees repeated, puzzled. "You mean something has happened to Mr. William Oakley's pet?"

"Something? Oh, yes. Quite!" Wren just managed a lugubrious expression which he accompanied with a throat-slitting gesture and the appropriate death-rattle. But for all his dramatics, Rees' flat, pink face was still as expressive as a bowl of tapioca pudding.

The garage was at the rear of the big house, built into the basement. The chauffeur berthed the sedan between the yellow convertible and a maroon Chrysler station wagon. George Rees, preceded by his crutches and breathing like a leaky bellows, got out first. He led Wren around the front of the station wagon and up a low concrete ramp that had probably been constructed especially for Uncle Gordy and his wheel-chair. Rees pressed a button beside a steel panel, and they had perhaps a thirty-second wait before the door rolled back from the entrance to a small elevator. They got in, and Rees pressed another button.

"You will be introduced to William Oakley as a personal friend of mine," Rees decided. "Please conduct yourself accordingly."

The elevator climbed slowly and without sound, passed the ground floor to stop at the one above. It opened on one end of a narrow and rather gloomy hall that extended to the top of a stairway at the opposite end. The floor was softly carpeted in jade green. There was only one article of furniture—a brown leather lounge chair, curiously out of place beside a closed door that looked as if it led into a bedroom. Wren got out first to allow George Rees the necessary room in which to manipulate his crutches. As he waited for the secretary to take the lead, he noticed that the door beside the lounge chair was opening.

ORDINARILY when a door opens somebody comes out or in, or there are sounds indicating that somebody intends to come out or in. This door just opened. As though, Wren thought, it had been pushed by unseen hands. He had entertained that pleasant notion for about three ticks of a watch when the hands put in their belated appearance. They groped blindly backwards, stubby fingers fluttering as though unaware that a moment before they had opened the door. A short muscular man with a bald head and a Mussolini jaw backed out

of the room. His gaze, however, was dead ahead, fascinated, horrified.

"Seibert!" George Rees had seen the man. He plunged forward on his crutches, his fleshy shoulders undulating queerly. "Seibert, what are you doing?"

The bald man spun around. He threw up a protesting hand. "I didn't, damn it! I swear I didn't!" He started to back away from the fat man as though, like a crab, he had learned no other means of locomotion, and as a result he fell heavily into the lounge chair.

Wren outdistanced Rees in a couple of bounding strides, reached the door, went through into the bedroom. He got a sketchy impression of brown walls, Chippendale-style heavy black mahogany furniture, and narrow glaring windows that for an instant blinded him to details.

And then he discovered the bed and the long gaunt man stretched out upon it, his face buried against a pillow. There was blood—fresh bright blood—on the back of the man's shirt and soaking into the white candlewick spread. He lay with his right arm under him, his left stretched stiffly back, palm upward.

"I tell you, I was just goin' to see what Mr. Oakley wanted for his lunch!" came to Wren's ears from the hall. "And there he was, stretched out like that. Stabbed, he was. Knifed in the back, and I didn't do it!"

"Stop that, Seibert," Rees said ponderously. "You are not being accused of anything except gross negligence."

"But, geez—I mean, how the hell— With me sittin' right there. . ."

It was evidently much too much for Mr. Seibert, Wren thought as he approached the bed. The murder weapon, an odd, slim blade of steel with a small wooden ball for a handle, lay at Wren's feet. He stepped carefully over it which brought his thick knees against the edge of the bed. He couldn't see William Oakley's face, of course, but judging from the gnarled hand and the thin corded neck beneath the heavy shock of snowy hair he guessed Oakley's age to be around seventy.

Wren put a finger on the exposed wrist but failed to detect even a faint thread of pulse. He was on the point of trying the pressure spot on the left side of the man's throat when sounds of a scuffle broke out in the hall. George Rees' "Mr. Wren!" was the partially suppressed gasp of a man who is too proud to call for help, yet reasonably sure that he needs it badly. There was a clatter of crutches, then Seibert shouted desperately: "Leggo me, damn it! I ain't goin' to get mixed up in no killin'! Leggo!" By which time Wren had come bounding into the hall to see how things stood.

George Rees had his right knee on the cushion of the leather lounge chair, which kept his injured ankle from painful contact with any-

thing. His left foot was firmly planted on the floor. Fat arms reached over the back of the chair and his hands had a grip on Seibert's belt. Seibert was punishing the flat pink face with short driving lefts and still insisting that Rees "leggo."

"Here," Wren said gruffly, "stop that." He stepped between Seibert and Rees, reached for Seibert's left arm. Rees relinquished his grip on the other's belt. Seibert took in all of Jeffery Wren and was evidently not impressed. He described Jeffery Wren in terms which didn't signify any vast amount of respect, and then added, "Why, you big beer truck—" which was shockingly inappropriate.

Seibert's right hand came out from some place where it had been up to devilment and briefly revealed a stubby black automatic. It occurred to Wren that this was going much too far for fifty dollars, considering the relatively short distance fifty dollars would go for him. Not constructed for convenient ducking, he ducked nevertheless. The automatic in Seibert's hand came down like an axe. It clipped Wren on the side of the head. Wren went spinning off into darkness and, for all he knew, remained suspended in it. At least he was never conscious of striking the floor.

He couldn't have been out very long. Returning to agonized consciousness, he got the notion it was raining. Two warm drops struck his cheek, and he thought vaguely that this was nice for the farmers. He opened one eye warily and looked straight ahead—a direction that proved to be up. The only cloud against the gray ceiling of William Oakley's upstairs hall was George Rees loosely propped on crutches. There were faint lines of strain in Rees' face and two little knobs of pallor at the extremities of his small, tight mouth. Rees' left sleeve had a bullet hole in it. His coat was spattered with blood. A little crooked trail of blood followed the inner side of his wrist into his palm, and collected at the tips of puffy fingers. A third warm red drop hit Wren's chin.

"Must you?" Wren protested mildly, rolling his head to one side.

"I'm afraid I must," Rees said. "That devil Seibert got a bullet into me. I—I think I fainted."

Wren sat up on the floor, bracing himself with his arms. He was acutely conscious of the exact location of a hamburger he had eaten for lunch.

Rees said helplessly: "Somebody ought to call a doctor. And also the police, of course."

Wren nodded, the cracking pain in his head protesting against this activity. "Somebody ought to. It's the conventional thing. Or you might ring for a servant." It was odd, he thought, the dead silence that pervaded the house.

"Yes," Rees sighed. "I'll—I'll do it." He

turned himself about painfully and started down the hall.

Wren stood up, a gradual process that left him hanging onto the back of the lounge chair like a shipwrecked sailor to a spar. He was trembling inwardly in spite of a physical construction that suggested the solidity of Gibraltar. He forced himself to let go of the chair, tottered to the open door of William Oakley's bedroom, and clutched the door frame. The glare from the windows knifed his eyes, glinted cruelly from some dazzling object on the floor beside the bed. Wren frowned. He couldn't remember having seen anything on the floor at the side of the bed except the murder knife.

He lurched over to the bed and, as his angle of vision changed, the thing on the floor stopped glittering, became a two-inch sphere of glass like a crystal-gazer's globe, except that it was somewhat flattened on one side to form a stable base. A paperweight, he decided, which probably also doubled as a magnifying glass. His gaze lifted to the corpse on the bed, and then he turned away, shuddering.

There were two doors on opposite sides of the room. He moved over to the one on his left, opened it. A light came on automatically to illuminate a large closet. The empty birdcage, once occupied by the unfortunate white cockatoo, hung on a brass standard in the center of the closet.

Wren closed the door. He walked to the other side of the room, opened the second door. Beyond was a bathroom, the walls and floor set with tile in restful shades of green. He surveyed it for a moment, then walked back into the bedroom.

HE was not alone. Gordon Oakley in his wheel-chair had rolled silently into the room. He faced the bed, and while it was difficult to discover exactly what his sunken eyes were up to, it was reasonable to assume that he saw his murdered brother. His thin, bitter lips were set. The only outward sign that might have been interpreted as one of emotion was a fluttering of rosy fingers as they moved absently along the polished circular handrails of the large wheels on his chair. A pair of field glasses was suspended from a strap about his scrawny neck and they moved up and down with each quick shallow breath.

"So he finally did it!" Gordon Oakley said faintly.

"Who?" Wren asked. "Did what?"

"Killed himself," the invalid snapped.

"What did you suppose I meant?"

Wren shook his head. "Hardly. He couldn't possibly have stabbed himself in the back."

"Yes, sir," Uncle Gordy chose to confirm his own opinion, "that's just what I figured he'd do. He was working up to suicide. Just plain pixilated, that's what he was. Well," he

sighed, "there'll be plenty of changes around here now. Yes, sir, plenty of changes. Plenty of changes. . . ." His voice drifted off like the rustle of leaves in a dying wind as he skillfully maneuvered his chair around to face the door.

"Wait." Jeffery Wren could not only cock an eyebrow, he could aim and fire it as well. Uncle Gordy meekly waited. "Look. It's murder. Nothing to shrug off like the loss of a postage stamp. Just where have you been?"

There was a faintly defiant gleam lurking somewhere in the deep-set incalculable eyes of the man in the wheel-chair. "In the attic," he replied. "I go up there to watch the birds. Just sparrows mostly. There was sure a heap more birds at the *old* Oakley place. Tree branches up mighty close to the windows. I could sometimes look right down into their nests." He gave his head a regretful half-shake.

Wren said: "Seibert, your brother's bodyguard, pinked Mr. Rees making a getaway. You didn't hear the shot?"

Gordon Oakley uttered a dry laugh. "I'm not all fool, no matter what I look like. Sure, I heard it. I just wasn't going to rush in and maybe get shot myself. And"—his voice became shrill—"don't you start badgering me with questions, d'ya hear? I could have a stroke mighty easy if I get my dander up."

Wren shook his head. "No. Wouldn't think of it. Wouldn't want your life on my conscience, too."

Gordon Oakley straightened in his chair in order to reach down to his trouser pocket. He took out a leather case, removed a cigarette which he lighted with steady hands before propelling himself out into the hall. A door-chime sounded downstairs, and then the thumping of Rees' crutches in response. Wren walked out of the murder room into the hall where for a moment he simply stood and stared at Gordon Oakley.

Uncle Gordy was having trouble with his cigarette. Either he had dropped or thrown it on the floor. The footwork he was going through without leaving his chair was a panicky attempt to extinguish the butt or possibly hide it. He succeeded in neither. Smoke billowed up from the cigarette in the most unnatural manner, filling the air with fine feathery particles of something white. Gordon Oakley batted frantically at the drifting flakes but with no effect.

"Well!" Wren brightened considerably as he approached the invalid. "What's your trouble? Lost in a blizzard? Or is that a bad case of dandruff?"

Incredibly, the old man snarled at him: "Never your mind, you—you big—"

"Big anything," Wren said good-naturedly. "Anything but beer truck." He picked up the

cigarette, placed it deliberately in his left fist, then showed two empty hands. Chuckling, he turned his back on Uncle Gordy and walked toward the stairs to welcome Detective-Sergeant Thomas Hogan.

Hogan came up the steps, a weary but resigned man. He looked dourly at Jeffery Wren and shook his head.

"I've got to hand it to you, Mr. Wren. When it comes to finding bodies you sure take the cake."

"Oh, now," Wren protested with what passed for modesty. "It's nothing. Anyone could have found this one. The poor man died so many times!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dark and Deadly Thing

SERGEANT HOGAN had preceded the rest of the Homicide Squad by about ten minutes. In the interim, the Oakley family physician, a brisk though pot-bellied old man, arrived to dress the flesh wound in George Rees' fat arm. Hogan heard Wren's story and then Rees', after which he phoned Headquarters to have Seibert, the bodyguard, picked up.

After that there was a session in William Oakley's library which didn't produce anything very satisfactory in the way of an alibi for anybody. Gordon Oakley had spent an hour in the attic, but he couldn't prove it by the nesting sparrows he had been spying on. Old Gilbert, the chauffeur-butler, admitted having heard the shot that pinked George Rees, but he had been in the basement at the time and had thought it the slamming of a door. Wren got the impression that doors in the Oakley mansion were quite regularly slammed. The bosomy cook was, by her own admission, "almost stone deaf" and anyway if the poor man was stabbed with a knife what was there for anybody to hear?

Hogan turned warily to Doris Merman, who was perched on the edge of a stiff Jacobean chair. Hogan already had her number but she instantly multiplied it. "Of course I saw Seibert dash from the house while I was sunbathing. I'm not blind, am I? But just what would you expect me to do—run after the man? Do I appear to be the sort of a person who would do that under any circumstances? Just what are the police for, I should like to know?"

Backed against towering shelves of books, Thomas Hogan appeared to be the last person in the world to answer Doris Merman's final question. He made his escape from this snapping terrier of a woman by turning to her blond husband. Dudley Merman stood opposite Wren on one side of a window, coolly trimming his nails with a patent clipper. He stated

simply that after his golf practice he had spent thirty minutes in a shower. And you couldn't be expected to hear anything in a shower, especially if you were singing. He had on a blue plaid broadcloth dressing gown over a pair of shorts which ought, he said, to substantiate his story.

Hogan said, "Uh, huh," which didn't mean a thing. Then he dismissed the two servants.

Wren stood with his big, stubborn chin in his hand and stared at the bright blades of Merman's nail clippers. They were not cutting any too well, possibly because there was a minute semi-circular nick in the center of each of the jaws, as though somebody had employed them to cut some tougher substance than fingernails. Merman looked up suddenly, discovered where Wren's attention was focused, and slipped the nail clippers into the pocket of his robe.

"Now," Hogan said, "I'm not going to hold you folks in this room much longer. I'd like some sample hairs from Mrs. Merman's head and from Mr. Rees' head." His grin was friendly. "No objections? You can pull 'em out yourselves."

Wren's interest quickened. "My!" he said softly.

"Any objections?" Doris Merman had stiffened. "There certainly are objections! Why is it that I am singled out in this manner? Do you mean to imply—"

"Because you've got dark hair," Hogan interrupted. His red face was no longer pleasant. "And listen, lady, you're what my grandmother used to call a big noise from a little whistle. You can either give us a sample of your hair or we can take it. You've got a choice."

She put nervous fingers into her tailored coiffure and winced as she pulled out two or three black hairs. Hogan, brusque with his thanks, put the hairs in an envelope which he carefully marked. George Rees, his flat, pink face impassive, furnished samples of his hair without a murmur, and these went into another envelope. Hogan turned, went to the door where he paused to look back at Jeffery Wren and grin.

"You got black hair, too, Mr. Wren. You want to bring your scalp upstairs in person?"

Mr. Wren was agreeable. He followed Hogan out into the hall. On the stairway Hogan said, presumably of Doris Merman: "Isn't she the damnedest female you ever saw?"

"Quite. But this hair business. Is it significant?"

Hogan did not immediately answer. Internes from the City Hospital were approaching the head of the stairs with the remains of the late William Oakley, and he and Wren had to quicken their steps in order to clear the way.

"Well, I don't know how significant it is," Hogan said as they approached the murder room, "but we got to make pretty sure. Mr. Oakley had a few short black hairs clutched in his right hand—the hand that was under him—"

Hogan broke off as they entered the death room and gave the hair samples to a detective. "Get what you can with a hand glass, Murph," Hogan directed. Then he conducted Wren across the big room to the bed. A white square of cloth had been spread out on the bed and in the middle of it lay the odd murder weapon and the glass paperweight.

"The dead man's prints on the paperweight," Hogan announced. "But the knife is clean, as you'd sort of suppose it would be. What you think the knife is, Mr. Wren—or was?"

Wren stared down at the slim flexible blade with its wooden ball handle. He shook his head. "Haven't the remotest idea. Something off of something?"

Hogan grinned, enjoying the puzzled expression on Wren's face. "That knife used to be an old-fashioned shoe-tree. The mate to it is in the closet. The wooden ball goes to the heel end of a shoe and a toe-shaped piece of wood is on the other end. That flexible steel is what applies the pressure to keep the shoe in shape. Why the hell the killer would take a thing like that and go to the trouble of grinding a point on it instead of just getting the bread-knife out of the kitchen, I'm damned if I know. But it proves the crime was premeditated."

"Oh?" Wren elevated his eyebrows. "You think so?"

"Well, hell—" Hogan broke off, stared at Wren's unfathomable eyes. "Now look here, Mr. Wren, let's not start having trouble right away. It took time to make that shoe-tree into a knife."

"Quite," Wren said softly. "No argument there. None at all." He raised his eyes from the bed, took a quick glance about the room, and stepped to the open casement that overlooked the front lawn. The window was equipped with a bronze screen that rolled up like a window shade. Wren raised the screen, thrust head and shoulders out, and examined the stone window ledge. A large irregular portion of the stone was worn smooth and darkened as though with oil.

"Here," Wren said, pointing. "Here's the point. Where the knife point was made, to be precise. You see, Sergeant?"

Hogan stared at the window ledge and his face fell. "Aw-aw," he sighed. "And we were getting along fine. We could at least see daylight. Then you step in, Mr. Wren, and it gets screwy."

Wren chuckled. "No 'aw-aw' indicated,

Sergeant. Hardly. And it isn't screwy. Not at all. It simply means William Oakley contrived the knife himself. Made it from the handiest material. Rather resourceful. He needed a murder weapon. He needed a sharp point to cut the cockatoo's throat."

HOGAN tossed off a gesture which was, in Wren's opinion, some relic from the sergeant's earlier days on Traffic Detail. "Now wait a minute, Mr. Wren. Hold everything. We got trouble enough without dragging in cockatoos and maybe even some cuckoos." He sighed, turned from the window, and dropped down onto a chair. "O.K.," he said. "I'm sorry. If you say there's a cockatoo in this, I suppose we got to put up with it. I did notice that empty birdcage in the closet. Now, why the hell did Oakley have to kill a cockatoo? You mean the bird could talk and had some blackmail evidence against Oakley?"

Jeffery Wren allowed Hogan and his imagination to run wild for a moment. He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of it. He was not feeling particularly pleased with himself, and his head was splitting.

He said: "You realize somebody turned William Oakley's fence inside out? Figuratively. The fence ordinarily keeps people out."

Hogan scowled over that. "You mean they were keeping William Oakley a prisoner in his own house?"

Wren nodded. "Precisely. Very well put. They. Most dangerous people in the world—'they.' Always spreading rumors. Always killing other people. 'They.' Very nice alternative for 'person or persons unknown.'" Wren paused, glanced toward the door. A plain-

clothesman was standing there, and his face looked as though his feet were killing him.

Hogan said: "Sit down, Murph. Mr. Wren and I are up to our necks in something. . . You go on, Mr. Wren. I suppose William Oakley's being a prisoner explains why that letter Mrs. Osbourn gave me had been steamed open and re-sealed with glue?"

"Quite. Exactly. All of Oakley's outgoing mail was censored. What was in that letter to Madame Zorinda, by the way?"

"Oakley just asked the Madame if she would be willing to give him another lesson in tele—tele-something."

"Telekinesis," Wren concluded. "Refers to the tapping of the pendulum in a spirit bottle, in this case. But William Oakley didn't need another lesson. He knew how the trick was worked. Understood it, no doubt, the first time he saw it. A simple law of physics is involved. The medium stands the bottle on a table. There may be other bottles on the same table, but each has a different length pendulum and therefore a different period of vibration. The medium rests her fingers on the table. By pressing her fingers on the table-top repeatedly, she sets up a vibration. Only one pendulum swings in response to that particular vibration. It takes practice, but not much. You might try it sometime, Sergeant."

Hogan shook his head. "No, thanks. But I'm way ahead of you on this spirit bottle stuff. William Oakley knew how to make the pendulum tap. Instead of taking a lesson from Madame Zorinda, he was coding her a message telling her he was a prisoner, and asking for help."

Wren bestowed a smile on the sergeant.



"Most astute of you. That's it. Madame, instead of helping, thought she would resort to blackmail. Got herself murdered for her pains. Kicked by a cow, as you say."

Hogan flushed. "Well, damn it, she was. But let's not go over that right now, Mr. Wren. What about this cockatoo business? Where is the bird, anyway?"

Wren gestured toward the window. "Out in one of the pigpens. There was no other convenient spot. One can't call on a millionaire lugging a dead cockatoo. Not even during a meat shortage. Oakley wouldn't have wanted it found dead, so he concealed it in a golf bag. Dudley Merman borrowed the golf clubs, which led to my finding the cockatoo. But—"

He broke off because of Hogan's puzzled scowl. The sergeant said: "Where did you say you put the cockatoo? First time I thought you said you put it in a pippen—"

"Quite," Wren said, his smile twitching. "The pigpens on the front lawn. They're not Rosicrucian pigpens, incidently."

Hogan flung himself out of the chair and took a quick turn around the room. He came back to where Wren was placidly sitting on the edge of the bed. He said, "Phew!" and not altogether because of the heat. "Pigpens! Rosicrucian pigpens! Mr. Wren, I've asked about that pile of whitewashed lumber in the front yard here, and everybody says it's a weathering test for some new kind of paint William Oakley was thinking of marketing. Naturally, being in the fence business, he'd be interested in such things."

"Why?" Wren asked blandly.

"Because, damn it, people paint fences!"

Wren nodded. "Tom Sawyer, for one. But I've seen no painted fences recently."

Hogan stuck his hands in his hip pockets and kicked moodily at a caster on the bed. "You always have to confuse things so. Here we are going along fine, and you have to throw in something completely nuts like Rosicrucian pigpens."

Wren appeared offended. He shrugged wide shoulders. "Eliminate the pigpens. Forget about them. Suit yourself in the matter. . . Shall we get back to why William Oakley killed his pet cockatoo?"

"O.K." Hogan dropped back into the chair. "I'll bite. Why did he kill the cockatoo?"

"To get blood," Wren said simply. "He was going to stage a murder with himself as the corpse. There had to be blood. The cockatoo was at hand. Oakley had made a knife. There was the bathroom basin to catch the blood. He didn't have to leave the room to manage it. It was his last resort. Madame Zorinda had failed him. You can be sure *they* wouldn't let him get near a phone. But if he could fake his own murder convincingly enough to fool Seibert, the police would be

called. It's the opossum's trick—with elaborate details."

Hogan sat with his mouth gaping. Across the room, Detective Murphy of the aching arches shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His shoes creaked.

Wren said: "It may not have been William Oakley's first attempt to attract police attention. Four or five days ago he was taken ill. He intimated that poison was the cause. At least one member of his family took it seriously and came to me—"

He paused, regarding the two detectives soberly. He shook his head. "It's not pleasant for me," he said, his voice deep and quiet. "Hardly. Because William Oakley wasn't dead when I first came into this room. He was shamming. Playing 'possum. Oh, there wasn't any pulse in his left wrist. But"—he turned slightly, pointed to the round glass paperweight on the bed—"that did the trick. It's an old trick. Goes clear back to the Hindu fakirs. With that round glass knob concealed in his left armpit, William Oakley could exert pressure on an artery and cut off the pulse in the wrist below. Like a tourniquet.

"Another moment and I'd have found a pulse at William Oakley's throat. Might have saved him. Might have blocked the killer. But Seibert started brawling with Rees. . ." Wren sighed heavily. "Most unfortunate. Regrettable. Altogether clumsy of me."

HOGAN reached out and patted Wren's big knee. "I know just how you feel, Mr. Wren. I've been too late myself. It's the breaks." He stood up. "Hell, you couldn't help getting knocked out, Mr. Wren. No more than Rees could help fainting. And while you two were out of the picture, somebody walked in, picked up the shoe-tree knife, and stabbed Oakley in the back. The real thing this time."

Wren's smile was slight. "My, Thomas! You're not the doubting type of Thomas at all! Who says Rees fainted? Anybody besides Rees?"

"By God!" Hogan whipped around to the patient man with the tired feet. "Murph, what about those hairs we found in Oakley's hand?"

Murphy shifted his feet. "Sure. About five minutes ago I could've told you they were Rees' hairs."

Wren stood up and Hogan slapped him on his ample back. "What the hell are we waiting for!" the sergeant roared gleefully and started for the door.

Murphy said: "Huh-uh, Sarg. Nothin' doin'. The hairs we got out of the old duck's hand were dead. No oil at the roots like with a live hair you pull out of somebody's head. Rees' hairs, see, but some that somebody had taken out of Rees' comb. Hairs that just fell out, see?"

Hogan saw. He saw the whole case blow up in his face. He turned around, walked back to the chair and sat down in a lump. He looked at Jeffery Wren.

Wren said: "Upsetting, isn't it?"

"Hell, it's nauseating!" Hogan said. "Somebody framed Rees. Somebody just walked in there when Oakley was shamming, stuck the knife in him, and planted hairs from Rees' comb in Oakley's hand. . . Look here, Mr. Wren, who around here hates Rees' guts?"

"Somebody," Wren said. "Somebody hates him enough to string a wire across the steps and trip him. And of course Dudley Merman's nail clippers have been used to cut wire. You might look into that, Sergeant."

Hogan didn't move from the chair. He frowned thoughtfully at Wren. "I'm damned if I'll go off half-cocked this time. These folks are smart. I got to take it easy."

"Quite." Wren lighted a cigarette. "Smart people. With homicidal tendencies. A bad combination. Very bad."

"Yeah," Hogan sighed. "You sure missed something this time, Mr. Wren."

"Oh?" Mildly.

"Uh-huh. Sure, it sounded swell when you were giving it out a minute ago, but now"—Hogan shook his head worriedly—"now it stinks. It's as illogical as hell. The whole family can't be in the plot. And nobody could have kept a gun at Oakley's head all the time. Why couldn't he fight back in the open? Why all this subterfuge? This playing-dead stuff?"

Wren chuckled. "Now you're popping questions. Just like the Merman lady. . . But you're right. We've missed something. Some dark and deadly thing. Something Oakley was more afraid of than the gun at his head." He moved to the door, not at all pleased with the affair and his part in it. Once out in the hall, he started for the stairway, smoking his cigarette.

At the head of the steps was a window, and as Wren started down, an English sparrow alighted on the windowsill outside. It chirped, flitted its tail, and flew away again. Wren stopped, one foot on the top step. He frowned at the blue sky. Gordon Oakley had been watching the sparrows from the attic window. Gordon Oakley had said—

Wren took a step back. His pulse quickened, brought throbbing pain into his head. Because now he knew of the thing he had called dark and deadly—knew where it waited and who it waited for. And in spite of the heat a chill crossed his broad shoulders and along his spine.

He turned, went bounding along the hall to the elevator shaft at the back. He put his thumb on the starter button, kept it there until the door slid open. He stepped into the elevator car, pressed the button marked GARAGE.

He needed a car the worst way—beg, borrow, or steal.

Fortunately, the ignition key was in the lock of the station wagon. Wren got in, switched over the key, watched the gas gauge crawl to the quarter mark as he touched the starter. The engine sprang into life. He backed out, headed the car around, sent crushed rock scudding as he accelerated around the curve in the drive and down the hill. The police had left the gate open and there was no delay getting out onto the boulevard. He turned west and poured on the gas.

Old Michigan Road was his first stop sign, but he merely slowed the car for a quick look both ways, then turned north on the blistering concrete. He went west again at the first side road for a short-cut across to the national highway. Another stop sign, and again he turned north. He pulled in at a gas station at Traders Point where a red-faced woman in coveralls eyed him suspiciously and asked if he had his ration coupons. He wondered what she would have done if he had told her he didn't even have a driver's license. But all he wanted of her were directions to the old Oakley house.

The woman knew. "Maybe three quarters of a mile north," she said. "Only the name on the box ain't Oakley. A young couple moved in, name of Swithy. She's right nice and her husband is in the Navy. Got a long lane of poplar trees. You can't miss it. This William Oakley who built the place is in the fence business and right on to bein' a millionaire—"

"Yes," Wren cut in. "Quite. Thanks no end." He touched his hat vaguely and got back onto the road.

The woman had been right about the old Oakley place. You couldn't miss it because of the poplars that marched along the lane, half dead and half alive, their pale green leaves twinkling in a breeze too slight to be felt by sweating mortals. There was an Oakley fence but the gate stood wide and welcoming. The house stood two hundred yards back from the highway in a grove of oak and beech, three stories of solid brick, square and plain and substantial. To the perspiring Jeffery Wren it looked inviting in spite of the deadly thing within its ivy-mottled walls.

Wren drove up in front of the house, got out, bounced up three stone steps to hammer on the screen door. He aroused an echo and nothing more. He went banging into the cool, dark hall. "Mrs. Swithy! Wanda Swithy!"

More echoes. The potent fear of failure lumped in his stomach. He moved to the broad stairway extending up from the hall, went pounding up the worn treads. The square hall above was bewildering with its many doors.

"Wanda!" he shouted.

"Yes?" came faintly from the attic floor

above. "What's the matter? Who is it?"

He took a deep breath and sighed it out. "It's Wren," he called back to her. "Stay where you are. Where are the stairs?"

Her footsteps tack-tacked on the floor above. "Up here, Mr. Wren. The stairway is in the southeast bedroom."

"Stay where you are!" he warned again as he hurried around the hall to its southeast corner. He opened a bedroom door. The door of the attic stairway stood open. He crossed to it, climbed steep steps. Wanda Swithy in a bright blue jumper dress was waiting for him, her smile twinkling. She put out both hands to him and he grasped them absently, his dark eyes on the prowl. Cobwebs, piles of old books, dusty trunks, a dress form, discarded furniture—and at one end of the barnlike attic he saw the dark and deadly thing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Remote Control

IT was like a closet or cupboard that had no architectural excuse for being, built out into the room with heavy plank walls extending clear to the ridge pole fourteen feet above. The door stood open. Standing virtually on the threshold was a thin, pallid man with a limp cigar clutched in his mouth. He was beaming a flashlight into the interior, spotting what appeared to be the door of a safe on the opposite wall of the closet.

"Horace!" Wren's voice, ordinarily deep and gentle, became a roar. "Horace, get back!"

Wren's clerk simply turned around. He leaned precariously against the frame of the door that was Death's and his pale eyes blinked.

"Whyncha yell at a guy?" he said acidly. "Whyncha scare a guy's pants off?"

"Mr. Wren—" Wanda Swithy began, her blue eyes round and bewildered.

Wren brushed her aside, started toward Horace. "Get away from there," he ordered grimly. "What are you doing here?"

Horace didn't move. His eyes shifted toward Wanda's petite figure. "Aw, naw," he said. "Whatsa matter witcha? I'm a gen'leman. I got ethics. She's got a guy inna Navy. You think I'm gonna tear downa morale of the Navy? Huh, boss?"

Horace entirely misinterpreted the gleam in Wren's eye. He became apprehensive. He lifted one foot tentatively, started to back into the dark closet behind him. Wren lunged heavily. His arm shot out. His big hand clutched the fullness of Horace's shirt, yanked Horace toward him.

"Boss, whatsa idea?" Horace yelped as Wren swung him around.

Now Wren's back was to the closet, and he kicked the door shut. He said: "All right," and let Horace go. Then he crossed to the nearest trunk and sat down on it. All of his forty years descended upon his broad shoulders in a lump. He sighed heavily.

"Well my goodness!" Wanda Swithy stared from Horace to Wren. "Didn't you—didn't you—"

Wren was shaking his head. "No. Hardly. But somebody did. Obviously." He looked at Horace. "Somebody phoned you?"

"Sure," Horace admitted. "And for chrissakes, whatsa matter?"

"Who phoned?" Wren wanted to know.

Horace shrugged. "Coulda been a man or a dame. Whichever it was said you wanted me to close up the shop an' come out here. I was to get a key outa the clock on the mantel, go up in the attic, open a closet. You wanted me to open a safe in the closet—"

Wren cut him off with a gesture. "That's enough. Plenty. But why you, Horace? That's the thing. It was intended for Wanda."

"What was?" Wanda asked eagerly. "I didn't even know anything about it. Oh, I knew the closet was there and I thought Uncle William may have had some valuables stored away because there was a Yale lock on the door. But I didn't know where the key was, and I figured it was none of my business."

Wren nodded. "Exactly. It's been here all the time. Just waiting. A phone call would have sprung the trap. A voice over the wire would have told you where the key was. The safe is a dummy, no doubt. It's bait. It provides a logical reason for your entering the closet. You see? That was the sword of Damocles over William Oakley's head. The chain that bound him. The whip—" He broke off, shaking his head. "But never mind. Suffice to say that if William Oakley had made one move contrary to the killer's wish, the sword would have fallen—would have fallen on you, my dear," he concluded softly.

"I—I don't understand."

"You an' me both, toots," Horace put in.

Wren said: "Make it three. Who does un-understand? Horace—"

"Yeah, boss?"

"You don't, by any chance, know the identity of the murderer?"

Horace wagged his head back and forth. "Once I knew a guy hit his ol' lady on the head with a beer bottle—"

"Not that," Wren said. "Hardly. Horace, did you have a pack of cigarettes loaded with Sno-Flake pills in the shop this morning?"

Horace nodded. "Sure. Customer comes in and' wantsa demonstration, I'm all set, see? I always got a pack fixed up on a shelf back behind the counter."

Wren turned to Wanda Swithy. "William

Oakley," he said gently, "is dead. Murdered."

Wanda sat down weakly on the trunk beside Wren, her lower lip trembling. He was conscious of that sweet fresh fragrance about her that reminded him somehow of a high school picnic. She didn't cry—not quite. She hadn't known Uncle William so awfully well, but he had been kind to her which was more than she could say for the other members of the Oakley household. And she was sure he had loved her husband, Donald.

"Quite," Wren said. "Thought a great deal of Donald. His favorite relative. Rather a remote one, however. He took out the envelope on which he had drawn the floor plan of William Oakley's pigpens, handed it to her. "Can you read this?" he asked.

She blinked, stared down at the envelope. Horace, who had moved over to stand behind them, said: "Looks a helluva lot like Greek to me. How's she gonna read it?"

"Well?" Wren prompted.

She said: "Why, yes. I think I can read it if you give me a pencil."

HE handed her the pencil, watched her draw parallel lines at right angles to the end of the envelope and cross them with another pair of parallel lines. She paused, stared at Wren, her lips slightly parted.

"How—how did you know!" she gasped.

He shrugged over the simplicity of his thought process. "Always eliminate the impossible. Anything left is factual. It's impossible to play tick-tack-toe by oneself. Equally impossible to play the game with a ghost. What Doris Merman caught Uncle William doing was making a key for the pigpen code. Just as you're doing. Then he intended to write in pigpen with whitewashed lumber in characters about four feet high on the front lawn. He felt reasonably safe no one would recognize it as a message. Certainly not from terra firma. Not if he told everyone it was a weathering test for a new paint. The message was intended for Donald Swithy, your husband. Donald

might view the pigpens from a Navy training plane. You see?"

Wanda nodded her head. "And especially when he told Don in a letter that he was building pigpens on the front lawn." She looked down at the envelope and a slight frown marred her perfect forehead. "But ought we to translate this, if the message is meant for Donald?"

Wren chuckled. "Why not? What's his is yours. For better or worse. And this is decidedly for better. Finish your key, my dear."

"Sure," Horace urged. "I wanna find out how you're gonna make sense outta those angles an' dots."

Wanda rapidly filled in the key figure with letters. "Sometimes," she said, "instead of a third row of letters with dots after them, you use a big X and put the last eight letters into the four angles of the X."

Wren nodded. "That's the Rosicrucian form. Introduces acute and obtuse angles. Uncle William stuck to right angles."

She had completed the key and handed the envelope over to Wren for his approval. What she had drawn looked like this:

A	B	C
J.	K.	L.
S..	T..	U..
D	E	F
M.	N.	O.
V..	W..	X..
G	H	I
P.	Q.	R.
Y..	Z..	

"Very good," Wren commended. "In fact, perfect . . . You see, Horace, the square stands for the letter E. A square with one dot in it is N. With two dots it becomes W. That's pigpen. And so extremely clever of Uncle William."

He took the pencil from Wanda Swithy and rapidly applied the key to the drawing he had made of William Oakley's pigpens:

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE *F-N TEST?



***The Famous Finger Nail Test**

1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.

YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW WILDROOT CREAM-OIL



2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Your hair looks good and feels good too!

NON-ALCOHOLIC CONTAINS REFINED LANOLIN!



3 Refined LANOLIN is a soothing oil that closely resembles the oil of the human skin. Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or drug counter.

D-O-N
D-I-G
I-N
E-I-G-H-T

"Which is still Greek to me," Horace said. "How's a guy gonna dig in eight? Eight what?"

"The eighth pigpen," Wren said. "That's an N—" a square with a dot. There's a white-washed stone to represent the dot. Under the stone there's a pot of gold. Or something. Probably the bulk of the Oakley fortune." He turned to Wanda Swithy, his face wreathed in smiles. "For you and Don, my dear . . . You'll have a bill to settle with me. Naturally. A relatively small bill."

Wanda didn't understand. "But why couldn't Uncle William just make out a will?"

"Oh, that. There's probably a will somewhere. No probably about it. There *is*. The killer would have insisted upon it. But the pigpen arrangement was made *before* the killer stepped into the picture. Uncle William was conscious of vultures overhead. Vultures all about him, for that matter. His brother, for one. His niece for another. He didn't want them to get their hooks on the money. And with Donald Swithy in the Navy, they might have—will or no will. At least," Wren concluded, "that's a possible explanation."

Horace said: "I wanna know what would a' happened to me in that closet."

Wren stood up. "You'd have vanished. Pffft! Look." Wren touched the trunk he had been sitting on with the toe of his shoe. "Anything of value there, my dear?"

Wanda shook her head. "It's got some old books in it. School books mostly, I think." She got up, watched Wren push the trunk across to the door of the closet. He opened the door, beckoned to Horace.

"The baby spot, please," he said. "Some creepy music, Professor."

"I got a spot," Horace said, turning his flashlight on Wren, "butcha gotta furnish your own music, boss."

Wren thought they could dispense with the music. He bowed slightly to each of the two members of his audience. "Presenting a brilliant illusion. The vanishing of a trunk full of school books. Ought to be a great hit with the kiddies."

He turned suddenly, put a foot on the trunk, booted it into the closet, and slammed the door with his right hand. The slam of the door was lost in the roar of sound from the closet itself—the tear and crash of timbers, the thunderous rumble made by the trunk itself, a distant thud followed by the pattering of light wood on concrete. Wanda Swithy screamed as full realization broke over her. She backed into Wren's waiting protecting arms, her horrified

gaze fastened on the closed door of the closet. Wren encircled her shoulders with his right arm, put out his left hand to open the closet door wide. Swirling dust rode out on the yellow beam of Horace's flashlight.

"The trunk has vanished," Wren said. "To say nothing of the closet floor. You see, my dear? The elevator shaft. William Oakley moved the elevator from here into the new Oakley house. That left a hole clear to the basement. The other entrances were plastered over, no doubt. This was boarded up, made into a storage closet. The killer probably did the extra carpentry work before you and Donald Swithy moved in. He provided the fake safe back there as bait. He took out the solid floor, substituted one of light wood scarcely nailed in place. Then, as soon as you moved in, the killer was set to take over William Oakley's life. The ever-present threat to you was the whip he cracked over William Oakley's head."

"But why—why couldn't Uncle William have told me last week when I was at the new Oakley house for lunch?" the girl wondered.

Wren smiled. "You're naive. But that's all right. You're probably happier that way . . . My dear, any time during the past month that you may have been in the new Oakley house, you were being watched. Watched by a gun."

"Gug—golly!" she stammered. "I'm scared!"

"Tut!" Wren said. "You've got Wren." He added somewhat regretfully: "Not to mention the Navy."

"But—but who is it that's doing all these terrible things?" the girl asked.

"Ah," Wren said mysteriously. "That's a question. No handy answer lying around. At least there was none until the killer tried to eliminate Horace. The killer is afraid of Horace. Incredible, isn't it?"

Horace shuddered. "It's mutual, boss. Why's a killer scared of me?"

"Because," Wren said, "you can identify our murderer. You helped with the murder of Madame Zorinda. Inadvertently, of course."

"Well for chrissakes!" Horace gasped. "Shame on me! I must 'a walked in my sleep."

THE police car pulled up in front of Madame Zorinda's squat brown cottage at eight-forty-five that evening. Zoe Osbourn stuck her head out of the right-hand window of the car. Jeffrey Wren, who had been waiting on the sidewalk, observed that her hat looked like a very small white birthday cake mounted on a disproportionately large white doily.

She said to the man at the wheel: "I told you we were keeping him waiting. First thing you know he'll have flat feet and want a job on the Force."

Wren stepped over to the curb, touched his hat vaguely. "My!" he said. "Well! Is that Sergeant Hogan with you, Mrs. O.?"

"The same," she said drily. "Ireland's gift to the Homicide Squad. Come on, Tom. Let's get the agony over with. The master-wit wants to slay us."

She got out from one side of the car and Hogan from the other. As he joined Wren on the sidewalk, Hogan said: "I've uncovered a queer thing on this case."

"Ah? You have?"

The sergeant nodded. "William Oakley died a comparatively poor man. He'd mortgaged his fence factory to the roof and was living on an annuity. Unless his brother or niece can scrape up something like five hundred thousand bucks—which doesn't seem likely—the W. J. Hornaday Steel Company will take over the Oakley Fence outfit next month. Hornaday holds the mortgage."

Wren hummed softly. "Astounding. Especially to the murderer. Well, best-laid plans, you know." He turned, led Zoe Osbourn and Hogan through the gate in the picket fence and around to the back of the house. Hogan had a flashlight and it picked out the remains of the cow shed in the gathering gloom.

Wren stopped at the foot of the old windmill tower. "Up there, Sergeant." He pointed. "The birdhouse. See anything significant? Anything, uh, funny, as you would say?"

Hogan pointed with the flashlight at the birdhouse, started to shake his head. "We-l-l-l, I never saw a birdhouse with an arched door like that. I've got to admit that's what you might call funny if you wanted to go clear out of your way."

Zoe Osbourn snorted. "Jeff always goes clear out of his way to find the funny things . . . All right, Jeffery, go ahead and slay us."

Wren's smile twitched. He turned to the windmill tower, seized one rusty steel upright with both hands. "Shed a tear for my white suit," he suggested. Then he stepped up onto a cross-brace where it angled down to meet the upright. His weight on his left foot, he took the long straddling step up to the center of the X-brace.

"He's got more faith in his tailor's seams than most people," Zoe remarked inelegantly as she watched him climb one X-brace to another.

Wren, his head on a level with the swinging birdhouse, clung tightly to the rusted steel. "Pretend I'm a train," he called down to them. "If that's not asking too much."

"Ha!" Zoe exploded. "If that's not asking too much, he says! Go ahead, Jeffery, be a choo-choo."

"On second thought, no," he said. "I don't have the breath. Not after that climb. Merely remember that there was a train through here

at six-fifteen, when Madame was milking. Also assume our murderer knew the schedules of both the train and the cow. And another thing to remember—trains make noise. More even than our Mrs. Osbourn."

"Horse liniment!" Zoe said, loud enough to prove Wren's point.

Hogan kept the light steady. He saw Jeffery Wren do a totally mad thing. Wren put his face close to the front of the birdhouse and called, "Here, Rex!" in a loud imperative voice.

Zoe Osbourn slapped herself across the forehead. "Well, fry me a banana! The man's lost his mind! I didn't think I'd ever live to see Jeffery Wren up on a windmill yelling, 'Here, Rex' into a birdhouse!"

"Rex isn't at home," Wren said cheerfully. "In fact, Rex was burned. Along with Madame and her cow." Hanging onto the angle iron with one hand, he reached down into his pocket and took out a package of cigarettes. He thrust the pack, end-first, through the arched door of the tiny house, pushed it all the way back until he heard a faint metallic ping.

"And Zoe," he called down to them, "this is no birdhouse. Birdhouses have circular doors. Only doghouses and churches have arched doors. Haven't you heard?"

Hogan uttered a quiet but heartfelt damn. "Here, Rex!" Wren said again.

There was an audible snap as of a spring released, a faint whisk of sound as the pack of cigarettes shot from the door and arched over the heads of the watchers below.

Up on the tower, Wren chuckled. "You see? Rex was a small celluloid dog. But with extra equipment. Rex was filled with gasoline. Possibly match heads were glued to his four feet. And there's a carpet of sandpaper stuck on the floor of the kennel."

"One of them damn radio dogs!" Hogan gasped. "Why, it was a regular incendiary, Mr. Wren! And the noise from the passing train set it off!"

"You're telling him?" Zoe said drily, and Hogan's face crimsoned in the light of the torch.

WREN took a pair of wire cutters from his pocket, wrapped one arm around a steel upright to bring a hand in under the miniature doghouse. He cut the wire, leaving a few inches still attached to the roof of the tiny kennel. He clenched this remaining bit of wire in his teeth to hold the doghouse as he climbed down the tower.

"Let's see that thing," Hogan said excitedly as soon as Wren had both feet on the ground. "How's it work—an electric eye, or something?"

Wren brushed hopelessly at the rust stains

on his white jacket. "Hardly," he said. "It's a simple electromagnetic circuit. Doesn't even involve the incredible wonders of radio. Two flashlight batteries inside energize the magnet. When you push the celluloid dog into the house, the dog backs against a spring hinge, depresses the hinge to complete the circuit. The magnet holds the hinge back." He pointed to a copper diaphragm suspended rather loosely behind a round hole in the wall of the tiny house. "Any sound striking that causes vibration, breaks the circuit, and the hinge kicks the dog out.

"No," he went on, as he carefully retrieved his pack of cigarettes, "there's no electric eye. Hardly. Not for a dollar and a half."

"Jeffery Wren, you son of a witch!" Zoe Osbourn ripped out. Her prominent eyes were two blue steel daggers of suspicion pointing at him.

He cocked an eyebrow, asked mildly: "Something troubling you?"

She pointed an accusing finger at the miniature doghouse in Hogan's hand. "That came out of your shop, didn't it?"

"Quite," he admitted. "But don't look at me. Horace sold it to the killer. Horace can identify the man. So Horace's death became imperative. Of course, the killer originally had other plans. Had he returned tonight, he would have climbed the windmill tower and replaced the doghouse with the birdhouse. Remember, Zoe? Remember the birdhouse we found this morning carefully concealed in the basement areaway? That indicated the killer's intention. But circumstances altered his plans. He couldn't do that. He knew it might be a matter of weeks before he could. More than that, he knew we realized Madame Zorinda had been murdered. Further investigation would uncover the murder device and trace it to its source—to my novelty store where the purchaser could be identified."

Hogan was deeply perplexed. "You mean he wouldn't dare come around here at night and switch birdhouses because he might run into the police?"

Wren smiled slightly. "No. Not quite. You're not that frightening. Take me literally for once. The killer *could not* climb the windmill tower to get hold of the evidence that damned him. Therefore he had to eliminate Horace. There's only one of our suspects who couldn't climb the tower."

"You mean Gordon Oakley, the old duck who couldn't get out of his wheel-chair?" Hogan, swimming in a fast current, grasped at straws.

"Ha!" Zoe Osbourn scoffed. "Somebody's nuts. How could anybody chained to a wheel-chair get the doghouse-birdhouse up there in the first place?"

Wren said: "There's nothing wrong with

Gorden Oakley's legs. He apparently got out of his wheel-chair long enough to take some cigarettes from behind the counter of my novelty store this morning. They happened to be trick cigarettes. He was no end embarrassed when they gave him away. Should imagine he's one of those odd individuals who has discovered advantages in being an invalid. A hypochondriac, no doubt."

"But you just said the killer couldn't climb the windmill tower to remove the evidence," Hogan objected. "Leave out Gordon Oakley and nobody's left. Except—" Hogan apparently choked on something. "Now look here, Mr. Wren," the sergeant said hotly, "we've already cleared Rees, remember? He's temporarily lame, sure, because Merman rigged that wire across the steps and tripped him. Merman admitted that to me. But those dead hairs found in William Oakley's hand prove conclusively that Rees was framed. You can't beat scientific detection. Those hairs were a plant, see? They came out of Rees' comb. They—they—"

Hogan broke off. A match flared in Wren's hand, touched the tip of a cigarette, illuminated the unfathomable dark eyes.

"Clever, wasn't it?" Wren said. "Even brilliant. Shows that Rees had a thorough knowledge of scientific detection. He had to do that. Had to frame himself. Because for all he knew I *might* have discovered that William Oakley was not dead when I first entered the room.

"Remember, Rees had been shot in the arm by Seibert. Rees was bleeding. He must have gone into William Oakley's room and found that Oakley was faking. He picked up the knife, stabbed Oakley in the back. You'll find, no doubt, that part of the blood on Rees' suit is William Oakley's blood. Then, of course, Rees took dead hairs from his own pocket comb and put them in the dead man's hand. After which, he arranged the body exactly as it had been when Oakley was playing dead.

"No-no, Sergeant. Rees is your man and Horace will be identifying him for you. You'll find Rees forced William Oakley to make a will in his, Rees', favor. You'll find Rees hired Seibert to assist as jailor. You'll find that Rees hired me to investigate the wire-on-the-stairs business chiefly to keep me out of my shop so he could lure Horace into a booby trap. You'll find out, in short, that we were entirely right the first time."

Hogan said simply: "Let's go. We'll pick up that clerk of yours and make the pinch. We got him cold." He turned, beamed his light ahead, and led the way back toward the house. It was when they were tunneling through the overgrown shrubbery at the side of the house that Zoe Osbourn exploded.

"Why that mealy-mouthed tub of lard on crutches!" she trumpeted. "All those pious words he was spouting this morning about protecting his employer's confidence! Remember how he struggled to hang onto that letter, Jeffery?"

Wren remembered. "He simply brought the letter as an excuse for being here. He was worried. Worried about the damning evidence on the windmill tower. Nothing else. But did you notice, Mrs. O., he didn't ring the madame's doorbell? We would have heard it if he had. Didn't that strike you as faintly suspicious?"

Zoe grumbled something about not being a magician and pegged on along the brick walk. When they reached the car, Wren stood on the curb and said goodnight.

"What's the matter?" Hogan asked. "Aren't you going to get in on the kill?"

Wren shook his head. "No. No, thanks. I'm not a bitter-ender. After all, the man's temporarily one-armed and one-legged. The police shouldn't have too much trouble."

He turned and walked off into the dark.

THEY came into the magic shop the next morning—Wanda Swithy and her Donald, a tall, good-looking Navy officer.

"Well," Wanda said happily as soon as Wren had conducted them to his office, "we dug it up, Mr. Wren. The eighth pigpen. And there was more money in that steel box than I ever dreamed existed.

"And it's ours," the girl went on. "That was down in the will, the will that Mr. Rees forced Uncle William to write. It bequeathed all the land in front of the new Oakley house to Donald and me."

"Ah?" Wren murmured. "Rees let Uncle William get by with that? Well, it probably made the will look a little better. Anything else in the will that I should know?"

She said: "It was pretty terrible. Uncle William said in the will that he considered Uncle Gordy and Doris and Dudley three parasites. So he was leaving his fence company to George Rees. And that was when the police came in with that clerk from your store. They pinched Mr. Rees, and he confessed to the whole thing when your clerk identified him as the man who had bought some sort of a funny trick doghouse in your store. I didn't get that part exactly, did you, Donald?"

"No," said Donald. "It was mixed up."

"So," Wanda said, opening her purse, "we want to pay you . . . We've got a joint checking account," she added irrelevently.

Donald said: "Wow! Five hundred thousand berries!"

Wanda leaned forward to rest the brand new checkbook on Mr. Wren's desk. Brassy sunlight streaming through the window was converted to purest gold as it touched her hair. Wren breathed the faint fragrance of her, watched her sweet mouth silently spelling out his name—J-E-F-F-E-R-Y W-R-E-N. She tipped her face up to him.

"How much—" She broke off, frowned innocently. "Aren't you feeling well this morning, Mr. Wren?"

Quickly he elevated his eyebrows, brought out his most benign smile. "Oh, quite."

"How much shall I make the check out for?" she asked. "Five thousand? We're awfully rich—Donald and I."

Wren frowned. "Two thousand, please. Not a penny more. Call it, uh, heart balm."

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DETECTIVE TALES

The Corpse in the Golden Shay

By FERGUS TRUSLOW

Author of "Knit One—Kill Two," etc.



A jutting, gray billy-goat beard wavered out of the shadows first. The rest of the body was nothing but a limp pile of dirty clothes.

Bacchus Anstruther had a date with a trout stream in the High Sierras, but first there was another matter to be taken care of—clearing a shaky ex-Marine of a double murder rap—even though the discharged leather-neck was convinced of his own guilt.

WITHOUT rising from the boulder where he sat wiggling grateful bare toes in the cool canyon stream, Anstruther lifted his derby politely.

The girl stood there, her blue eyes amazed. She took in the chunky set of his body in the shiny serge suit, the stiff collar, and his lobster-red face beneath short graying hair.

"Pretty hot morning for a city man to be riding shank's mare." She smiled. "How many miles do you get to the gallon—of sweat?"

Her shoulder-length hair had the burnished gold of the California desert sun in it.

Anstruther grinned back at her, still wiggling his toes in the water. "I got off the San Diego bus up in Julian, on top the mountains," he explained. "I walked down the Banner grade. My dogs were barking, so I doffed the shoes and dunked the tootsies."

He dug into his blue serge coat and handed the girl a business card.

"B. Anstruther," she read aloud. "Private Investigations."

Her eyes widened. "Why, you must be Bacchus Anstruther, the mine detective," she said quickly. "Everybody out here knows about Bacchus Anstruther."

Anstruther winced. The girl glanced at his round, red face. "That's a tough handle to carry, isn't it?" she sympathized. "Do people make cracks about you putting vine leaves in your hair?"

The crimson of Anstruther's jaw deepened. "They do," he admitted grimly. "And I don't like it. You can just call me Mr. B. if you want to."

"O.K., Mr. B. You can call me Kitty. Kitty Judd. I live with my father on that ranch you passed, two miles back up the Banner grade. We take boarders from the city who come out here for their health."

Feminine curiosity quickened her next words. "Say, Mr. B., you're not out here on the edge of nowhere for your health, are you?"

"Are you kidding?" gloomed Anstruther, looking down the canyon's mouth toward the flat shimmer of the desert stretching away like a white-hot stove lid to the Salton Sea and the Chocolate Mountains.

"If it hadn't been for a long-distance call yanking me over here," he added, "I'd be headed for a week's fishing in the best trout stream in the High Sierras. Maybe I'll wet a pair of gray hackles yet, if—"

Anstruther snapped his teeth shut on the words. If he could find out what kind of trouble the Golden Shay had, and was able to fix it overnight.

The caretaker who had long-distanced the mine's insurance company had refused to tell his troubles on a party telephone wire.

KITTY JUDD'S blue eyes were wide. "These canyons are honeycombed with old gold mines, Mr. B. But they're all played out or closed down. Only the Golden Shay bothers to pay a caretaker. All he does is let the water wheel turn the stamp mill for a while once a week, to keep the bearings from freezing up."

She pointed up the canyon. "Pietz, the Shay's caretaker, lives up there in the bunkhouse. His only worry is his feud with Old Mort."

Anstruther saw smoke wisping away from a tin pipe on the roof of a weathered pine shack, driven up-canyon by the hot breeze rising from the desert floor.

"Who's Old Mort?" he wanted to know.

"Just an old desert rat who lives over across a dry lake. Every time Pietz hears a pebble rattle down in the canyon he thinks Old Mort is rolling boulders off the mountain at him. You know the way lonely men get."

"Their brains get warped," Anstruther said, nodding. "But just the same, in my business trouble is like gold—where you find it."

"Say," he grunted, "I've told you what I'm doing here but you haven't shoved your ante in the pot."

Kitty Judd flashed him a smile. "You want to know why I'm loafing around up in the canyon? O.K., I'll sing. You don't have to use a rubber hose on me. I'm waiting for Bob Herndon. He's a—I mean, well, he boards with us. Bob hikes up in the hills every day. I brought lunch along for him."

She showed Anstruther a picnic basket in the shadow of the white-barked sycamores by the edge of the canyon stream.

"Something the matter with his health?" Anstruther queried.

The girl's inner happiness seemed to cloud over. She shrugged. "He's just not feeling like himself these days."

A halloo rang from the high, brush-clad mountain walls.

She pointed up the canyon. "Here comes Pietz, now. It's a wonder he hasn't got his shotgun."

"Why?"

The girl laughed. "Nothing. Only a couple of days ago, Bob Herndon, Doc Fremont and I were fooling around the stamp mill and Pietz came after us with a double-barreled shotgun. He got so mad and excited he sputtered when he tried to talk."

The detective pricked up his ears. So Pietz is touchy about the Shay's stamp mill, he thought.

"Is that you, Anstruther?" bellowed the caretaker, hurrying down the rocky road.

Pietz was a tall, pale man whose big belly bunched as he walked. He started across the creek, stepping from stone to stone.

"Is your name Anstruth—"

He never finished. Something smacked him between the shoulderblades like a wet hand. Dust flew from his blue shirt, front and back.

The pale, big-bellied man went down headlong, wallowing in the foamy stream.

Like a gut-shot moose. The thought flashed through Anstruther's head even before the crack of a Springfield bounced off the canyon walls.

When a man goes down like that he never gets up.

Bacchus Anstruther jumped forward, his bare feet sliding and slipping on the wet stones of the creek bed. He grabbed the caretaker's wrist and heaved the man's face out of the water.

Kitty Judd was beside him, tugging at Pietz's other arm.

"Get back under cover!" the detective ordered shortly.

"No!" she panted. "Pull, now, Mr. B.!"

They dragged Pietz across the stone into the shadows of the sycamores, his sodden clothes leaving a dark trail.

Anstruther rolled him over, face up. The man flopped on the stones at the creek's edge like some strange kind of big fish. Pink, bloody froth bubbled from his nose and mouth.

The girl shrank back, white-lipped at the noises that came from Pietz's throat. "I'll run home to the ranch," she panted, "and phone Doc Fremont's office!"

Anstruther let her go. Her cotton print dress flickered through the dappled sunlight under the trees.

"Gets her out of the way, anyhow," he muttered to himself.

Pietz blew a last red bubble, quivered once from head to foot, then lay still. He was dead, before the lingering echoes of the Springfield's shot died away, far off in the head of the canyon.

Bacchus Anstruther settled his derby hat over his eyes and squinted up at the steep side of the mountain spur.

Nothing moved up there in the sun-scorched brush. Dead brown spikes of yucca swayed, and the silver leaves of desert lavender rippled, but it was only the wind. . .

ANSTRUTHER balanced the Springfield in his big red hands. Pointing the muzzle up at the bunkhouse ceiling, he yanked back the bolt, threw it forward and clicked the trigger on emptiness.

Everybody in the room jumped.

"When I found this rifle up in the brush," Bacchus Anstruther growled, "she had one round fired out of a clip of five in the magazine."

Five hours of plodding search on that sun-blasted mountainside had left a livid mark on his forehead from the derby's sweatband. Below that Plimsoll line, his face was a par-boiled scarlet.

"You mean when *we* found the rifle, don't you?" Doc Fremont put in coldly.

The country physician leaned forward, on the edge of his chair. His thatch of graying hair stuck out, stiff as a horse's roached mane, above sharp gray eyes and a decisive mouth.

Anstruther's smile had a grim edge. "You get credit for a technical assist, Doc," he said. "If I hadn't heard your toe connect with

this steel butt-plate"—he slapped the rifle's stock—"she'd still be up there, hidden in the brush."

"Do you intimate I tried to kick that rifle further out of sight?" Doc Fremont snapped. "If so, you can go to hell!"

Anstruther shrugged, turning to Kitty Judd and Bob Herndon, the other two persons in his bunkhouse audience.

Herndon had come hiking down the trail over the mountain spur in mid-afternoon, two hours late for lunch. That had been shortly after Adams, a neighboring rancher, had taken Pietz's body away to the little town of Ramona, over the mountains.

"Gotta get 'em to the undertaker pronto in this weather." Adams had grinned, his skinny face a maze of squint wrinkles. "Less you got ice."

"Be back with the sheriff if he ain't busy," he'd added, spitting a jet of amber tobacco juice. "Be back myself anyhow."

And the rancher's truck had rattled off with Pietz's body taking the bumps limply in the back.

Anstruther, still fondling the Springfield as he paced the bunkhouse floor, stopped in front of Bob Herndon. "Now then, son," he said.

"Yes, sir," the youth gulped, standing up.

Bacchus Anstruther noted that his skin looked pale and clammy under the sunburned cheekbones. The youth's black eyes seemed a little out of focus.

Kitty Judd's hand went to her throat as if something there choked her.

"You know how to handle a Springfield?" Anstruther asked Herndon.

Kitty Judd's knuckles whitened on the arms of her chair. "Why should he?" she countered quickly. "He—Bob is a bookkeeper from San Diego. They told him he had a lung spot so he came to board with us. The desert is good for—"

"Yeah," Anstruther grunted. "I know."

He noted the rugged set of Herndon's shoulder muscles and the strong column of his neck. *If this bird is a T.B. bookkeeper, he thought, I'm the King of England.*

He handed Herndon the Springfield. The younger man took it awkwardly.

The detective snatched it back, shot the bolt crisply and flung the military weapon straight at Herndon from a distance of three feet.

Automatically, Bob Herndon's hands closed on stock and barrel, holding the Springfield at inspection arms.

He bit his lip. His knuckles showed white under the skin. "O.K.," he said huskily. "Now what?"

Kitty Judd gasped. "I—I don't understand," she protested.

Doc Fremont answered. His words snapped out like somebody biting icicles. "Very sim-

ple, Kitty. He tricked the lad. Any man trained in the Manual of Arms develops reflexes—automatic actions he performs without thinking. Catching a rifle tossed at him is one of them."

A sick, queasy feeling had sneaked in under Bacchus Anstruther's belt-buckle. "Army, or Marines, son?" he queried.

"Marines," Bob Herndon said dully. His black eyes had lost something, gone hopeless. "Just out of PN ward in the San Diego Navy Hospital at Balboa Park."

"PN ward?" Anstruther grunted. "What's that?"

"Psycho-neurotic," the ex-Marine told him. "I—I guess I'm a nutsky."

"Bob!" Kitty Judd whispered. "You know that's not so!"

Doc Fremont cut her off. "I'll do the talking, Kitty. The lad's my patient."

THE country physician turned to Anstruther. "I'll make it brief. During the second year of the war a survey-party of Marines landed in rubber boats on a Jap-held island off the coast of New Guinea. The Japs cut them down. All but one—Bob Herndon. He lived in the jungle for weeks on rice he took from Japs, whom he killed with their own weapons or his bare hands. When our Navy picked him off the island he was out of his head with blackwater fever."

Herndon ran trembling fingers through his black hair. "Tell him the rest," he said bitterly. "Tell him how I had to be strait-jacketed so I couldn't snap the spine of every corpsman who came near me."

"Blackwater fever alone could do that to a man's head," Doc Fremont snorted. "Let alone this fancy combat fatigue and guilt-neurosis tag they hung on you."

Bacchus Anstruther sighed. "Whose Springfield is this?"

Kitty Judd answered him. "Mine. That is, Dad's. He was in the last war. Bob Herndon was using it to teach me to shoot. The last time any of us saw the gun it was in the back of my car."

"When?"

"Yesterday," the girl gulped. "Oh, Mr. B., Bob didn't shoot Pietz. I know he wouldn't!"

The detective ran his tongue around dry lips and got a faintly bitter taste of alkali. "Sorry, Kitty. It looks bad. The Springfield was shoved into the brush within ten feet of the trail at the crest of the spur. The sights had been set for just enough windage for a four-hundred-yard shot at the place where Pietz got it. I tossed up a handful of leaves in the wind, to check it."

Anstruther turned back to the ex-Marine. "You were two hours late for the picnic lunch you and Kitty planned. Why?"

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"I—I went to sleep in the shade of a big rock up there a couple of miles," Herndon said dazedly. "I didn't sleep so well last night."

The youth looked at his physician. "Doc," he gulped, "I want to get it off my—"

"You've talked enough," Doc Fremont said decisively, standing over the youth, taking his pulse. "I'm the boss and I say you've had enough for one day. Get over there in Pietz's bunk and lie down. You're going to sleep if I have to slip you a mickey."

Kitty Judd's fingers closed hard on Bacchus Anstruther's arm. "Mr. B., why did you come here? What was it? Who sent for you and why?"

For some reason the look in the girl's eyes made Anstruther's shoulders feel heavy and tired. He straightened defensively. "Where can I find this Old Mort character whom Pietz feuded with?" he countered.

Doc Fremont looked up from fumbling in his black medical bag. "You'll probably find him holed up with a quart of whiskey over in his shack across Mason Valley. I dug some hunks of quartz out of his right arm three days ago after a powder accident."

"My car's outside," Kitty Judd offered quickly.

"Let's go," Anstruther suggested.

They went down the bunkhouse steps and past the outdoor stove where Pietz's pots and pans hung from a tree limb in a neat row. "Pietz did all his hot-weather cooking out here huh?" the detective said, trying to make conversation.

The blond girl nodded, swallowing hard.

Anstruther tried again. "The breeze has changed since this morning. Blowing down the canyon now."

Her voice sounded taut and dry. "It changes every day, same hour," she told him politely. "You see, in the morning the hot air rises off the desert through the canyons. In mid-afternoon the sun goes behind the Coast Range right over your head, almost. Then the cooler air starts funneling back down the other way."

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears as they climbed into her battered, dusty sedan. She kicked the starter.

Bacchus Anstruther spoke through tight lips. "Now then," he said softly, "we're gonna find this Old Mort character if I have to turn bloodhound and learn to wag my tail."

THE yellow, bent flame of a candle in Anstruther's hand sent shadows wavering over the rough timbering of a mine tunnel. "So Old Mort dug himself a nice little back door into the Golden Shay?" he muttered more to himself than to the girl behind him.

"You—you think he's in here, Mr. B.?" the girl asked, swallowing audibly.

"Why not? We find his desert shack empty. We follow his car tracks up a dry wash, and find the jalopy parked in a clump of smoke trees, just outside an abandoned mine tunnel next to the Shay."

Anstruther held the candle flame low. The black hole they had just crawled through to emerge into the timbered mine tunnel looked no bigger than a coyote's burrow.

"It must've cost the old rat plenty of time and sweat to punch through from the south slope of that abandoned mine to get in here.

"By the way, Kitty," he added, "you're sure this is the Shay we're in?"

"Of course," Kitty Judd whispered. "I grew up around these mines before they folded. I used to play in here with the super's kids. This tunnel we're in isn't far from the last drift the company ran to try to find the ledge when it pinched out."

"That's the drift I want to see," Bacchus Anstruther said evenly. "You walk behind me. If my candle goes out, you douse yours. But quick."

They started forward. She touched his sleeve. "Mr. B.—a murderer wouldn't have a personal citation from Admiral Halsey, would he?"

Anstruther didn't answer. She tugged at his sleeve like a small girl. "Would he?"

The sick, queasy feeling sneaked back under Anstruther's belt buckle. He set his derby a little firmer on his head and held the guttering candle higher. "Come on," he grunted. "Tempus is fidgeting."

They passed the mouths of several cross tunnels before Kitty Judd spoke again. "Left at the next corner," she told him.

He stopped. Candlelight disclosed a mass of fallen timbering and loose country rock barring their way. "Are you kidding?" he wanted to know.

"I don't understand," she told him, puzzled. "This is the way we ought to go."

The detective sniffed. "Smell that? Powder gas. Somebody's shoved a few sticks of dynamite into this timbering to bring it down. Recently, too. Or the stink wouldn't be here. Is there any way to go around this?" he queried.

"Yes," Kitty gulped. "Two ways. One is to go back and take one of those cross-cuttings and go out almost to the main tunnel mouth. It's all around Robin Hood's barn that way."

"You mean there's a shorter way?"

"Yes. The Glory Hole. But it's dangerous," the girl whispered. "You have to climb up two levels on an old creaky wooden ladder bolted to the side of the shaft years and years ago."

"Show me," Bacchus Anstruther ordered, his lobster-red face stubborn in the candle's glow.

She led him to the edge of nowhere—a wide vertical shaft where dead gray light filtered down from far above. "This is the Glory Hole. They took two million dollars in gold out of it. It comes out 'way up on top the mountain."

Anstruther snuffed his candle, shoved it in his pocket. "Two levels up, you said?" he asked, swinging out on the wooden ladder.

Its joints groaned under his weight. Anstruther looked down. Far below, a black mirror of still water reflected a pale patch of sky. Two or three specks of silver floated on the pale patch.

"You stay back there, Kitty," the detective ordered, and began to climb, the ladder creaking under his hands and feet at every rotten rung.

Fifteen feet up, he froze. He held his breath, listening for a sound above in the Glory Hole. His heart pounded a couple of inches too high in his throat and a cool breeze played along his spine under the blue serge.

It was unmistakable this time. Above him in the gray twilight, steel tapped against steel. He heard a bolt come free from its shackle.

The ladder swayed a little, sickeningly.

Kitty Judd's voice came up to him, edged with urgency. "Mr. B.! Come back!"

By that time Bacchus Anstruther was drop-

ping like a gibbon from rung to rung. He made it. Kitty Judd caught his blue serge sleeve and yanked him to safety in the cross tunnel as loose rocks whizzed by like shrapnel.

Steel shackles and bolts raked red sparks from the sides of the shaft. Crashing like summer thunder, the old ladder went to the bottom of the Glory Hole. From black water far below a beaming splash came back.

A thousand gibbering echoes awoke. Bats fluttered in the gray light of the shaft. Anstruther felt the breeze of a leathery wing fan his face.

He clapped his hand to his derby to settle it firmly on his brow, and swore. His brand new ten-dollar derby had been damaged.

"Kitty," Bacchus Anstruther said thickly, "we'll just take that long way around to the last drift. I want to find out why visitors aren't welcome up there where the ledge pinched out."

A QUARTER mile and many turns later, Anstruther peered around a corner into a cross tunnel, yanked his head back and snuffed his candle.

"What's the matter, Mr. B.?" Kitty Judd whispered, putting out her own candle.

"A light ahead of us, around this corner. You stay put. This is my game."



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He slid the candle into his pocket and went forward alone.

The light, a hundred feet ahead, wavered low on the rocky tunnel floor. It moved, yard by yard, away from him. *He's looking for something*, Anstruther thought.

Keeping his eyes on the yellow light bobbing along ahead, he found a loose ground apple with his toe, and sent the stone rattling before him.

The light winked out. Anstruther, swearing, broke into a run. So did the man who'd been looking for something on the tunnel floor. His footsteps were only blurry echoes in a cross drift when the detective reached the spot.

Swearing at his own clumsiness, Anstruther lit his candle. Step by step he went over the broken rock of the floor.

Something caught the candle's rays. He picked it up. An empty hypodermic syringe lay bright in his palm, the needle like a short steel fang on the end.

"What's up, Mr. B.?" Kitty Judd's anxious voice wanted to know.

Bacchus Anstruther wrapped the glass barrel of the syringe in his blue bandana and put it in the crown of his derby. He'd clapped the hat on his head by the time the girl reached him.

"Hold it," he warned. "I see something in this stope in front of us."

He walked a few cautious steps forward, holding the smoking candle low, close to the floor.

A jutting, gray, billy-goat beard wavered out of the shadows first. A pair of gnarled hands, one of them bandaged, clutched stiffly at nothing. The rest of the body was just a limp pile of dirty clothes.

"Is—is he dead?" the girl asked in sick tones.

"Yeah," Bacchus Anstruther said, holding the candle closer. "Dead for about twenty-four hours, I'd say."

The gray beard jutted from a face burned to a crisp by sixty years of desert sun. Alkali dust had turned even the dead man's lips and eyelids to leather. The nails on his broken-knuckled fingers looked like horny growth.

"It's Old Mort!" the girl gasped. "Look, Mr. B.—he even left his old red underwear and overalls hanging up in the corner of the stope. And there's a gunnysack of hay to sleep on. He must've practically lived down here."

"High-grading a finger vein of quartz takes plenty of time," Anstruther grunted, bending over the dead man.

"You mean Old Mort ran a drift all by himself, and managed to pick up the gold ledge again?"

"Yep. Only his name wasn't Old Mort.

This desert rat's mother christened him Humphrey. McKinley is the rest of it."

"You know him?"

"I ought to. I sent him up to the Arizona state pen once. He's had a crack at high-grading every gold mine between Picacho and Dos Cabezas."

Anstruther didn't add that the old desert rat had died of a snapped spine. Somebody with strong hands had taken him from behind. . .

THE bunkhouse doors and windows stood open to the late afternoon light. Bacchus Anstruther paced the floor, thinking.

Adams, the skinny rancher who had taken Pietz's body away, pursed his lips and sent an amber jet of tobacco juice into the dead ashes in the bunkhouse stove.

"Sheriff said to tell you folks to sit tight and wait. He'd get a man here soon's he can. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime," Kitty Judd said, her voice taunt and trembling, "all you men are so excited about finding Old Mort's body you're just taking it for granted Bob killed Pietz!"

Anstruther glanced at Bob Herndon, sitting tense on the edge of Pietz's bunk. The ex-Marine was pale and sweating.

Doc Fremont, tight-lipped and silent, occupied a chair close to him. The medico stared at the detective with unfriendly eyes.

Anstruther squatted in front of the open stove, peered in at the charred embers of the previous winter's oak fires.

Absently, he got up and prowled out onto the bunkhouse porch, where a canyon wren sang, dropping a scale of liquid notes from a sycamore tree over Pietz's outdoor cook-stove.

Anstruther walked back inside, picked up the Springfield rifle leaning in the corner, examined the sights carefully.

"Doc," he said, "you looked at Old Mort's corpse in the mine. How long had he been dead?"

Doc Fremont's snapping-turtle mouth bit off his words. "A good guess would be twenty-four hours."

"Why guess?" Anstruther grunted. "Why not just tell us?"

Silence thickened in the room. The medico's lean cheeks turned red. "Just exactly what the hell do you mean?"

The mine detective took off his derby, unwrapped the blue bandana handkerchief and held out the glass hypo syringe. "Well, Doc?" he said dryly.

The country physician shook his stiff thatch of graying hair. "All right. It's a syringe. What about it?"

"The manufacturers put serial numbers on

these things," Anstruther reminded him. "The law can prove it was sold to you."

Doc Fremont snorted.

Bacchus Anstruther said: "I watched you when I brought you into that stope to examine the body, Doc. You did some quick looking around in the rubble of loose stone on the floor—as if you'd lost something."

"Are you insinuating I had anything to do with murdering that old high-grader in the mine?" the physician snapped.

"Yes," Anstruther said.

"This is it, Doc!" Bob Herndon choked huskily, getting up from the edge of the bunk.

The medico whirled on him. "Sit down and shut up!"

"Sorry, Doc," the ex-Marine whispered. "I can't obey that order. You're not going to take the rap for me."

The youth's black eyes looked feverish. He shook like a wet bird dog. "I killed Old Mort," he said simply.

Kitty Judd spoke in a dry, matter-of-fact voice, but her words ran together. She took hold of Herndon's shirt sleeve. "No you didn't, Bob. No you didn't. I know you wouldn't—"

"Kitty!" Bacchus Anstruther said, without getting up from the edge of the table, where he sat with the Springfield across his knees.

The blond girl sank into a chair. Her blue eyes looked dazed.

"O.K., son," the detective told Bob Herndon. "Begin at the beginning."

Herndon shrugged. "I slipped back into one of my spells, I guess. I broke Old Mort's neck for him, that's all."

"When did it happen?"

"Yesterday about this time of day," Herndon confessed, his voice taut and husky. "I'd been out walking in the hills, same as every day. I'd gone down through the brush past the mouth of an old mine tunnel when all of a sudden boulders and rocks began to come rolling down at me. I looked up and saw Old Mort's red underwear and old felt hat in the tunnel mouth."

Adams excitedly squirted tobacco juice. "Tried to get ya, did'e?"

Herndon shrugged. "It looked that way. It made me sore as a pup. I started back up. By the time I got to the tunnel mouth he'd gone inside. I followed. That's the last I remember. I must have blown my top."

"What do you mean—the last you remember?" Anstruther growled.

Doc Fremont cut in. "I'll take it from there, Anstruther. The boy's higher brain centers slipped a cog—blackened out. He's no more responsible for what he did than—"

"I couldn't believe I'd done it," Herndon gulped. "I just couldn't believe I'd blacked out for that long a time until Doc showed me my own watch and took me to a shaft and showed me the stars beginning to shine, 'way up outside."

"How did you happen to find him?" Anstruther asked the physician.

Fremont snapped: "I didn't 'happen' to find him. I searched for him. I've been running a check on the lad's heart after his daily hike. When he didn't turn up on time I started looking. He left a lot of broken brush scrambling up to the mine tunnel."

ANSTRUTHER looked at the shaken ex-Marine. "How did you kill Old Mort? Was there a fight in that stope?"

Bob Herndon shook his head. "I don't remember. I can't remember anything except going in the tunnel. And then Doc was shaking me, trying to snap me out of a sort of dream. Old Mort's body was lying there, all crumpled up. I got the shakes pretty bad when I realized what had happened. Doc had to give me a hypo to relax me. That's how the syringe got left in the mine."

Anstruther fiddled with the Springfield absently, snapping the safety from side to side. He took one of the brass cartridges from his pocket, slipped it into the breech.

Adams spat in the stove. "How did you come to shoot Pietz?" he wanted to know.

(Continued on page 94)



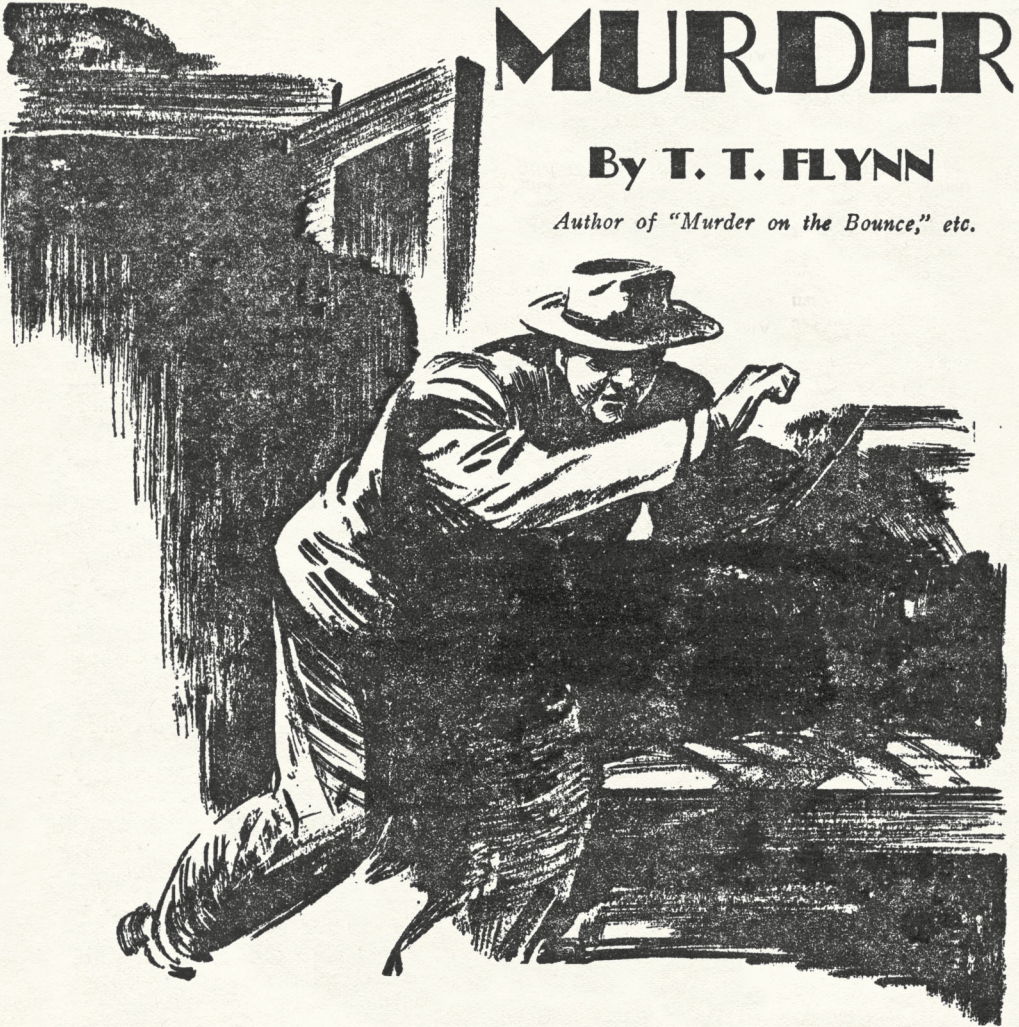
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MURDER

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CHAPTER ONE

Belgian Brodie

MR. MADDUX, the genial and celebrated bookmaker, was strolling along the broad and beautiful Prado, which is Havana's main street, and not at all the sort of place where you would expect to encounter violent death.

In this late winter season, Havana had sunshine, beauty, pleasant days. For the first time in years Mr. Maddox was relaxing.

There was horse racing out at Oriental Park, which Mr. Maddox had not bothered to attend. He would probably drop around for a visit before going back north. Around the track stables he would find old friends, and horses that had once been well known and popular on the American tracks. But there

was time for that, *mañana*. Tomorrow was as good as today in this tropical climate.

Meanwhile, the Prado, where Mr. Maddox strolled, was a busy street, with fine buildings extending out over the sidewalks, so that one moved in a shady arcade, open on the street side.

Traffic was heavy in the street and on the walk where Mr. Maddox moved. It was mid-morning. The blinding sunlight that drenched the wide Prado gave promise of anything but the shrill and piercing scream that came from somewhere behind Mr. Maddox.

Pedestrians halted in astonishment. Alarm began to spread as other shouts, screams, cries, lifted from the crowd. Mr. Maddox wheeled to see what was wrong. His big and prosperous figure was shoved and jostled as others pushed past him.

Suddenly the screaming had stopped. A

IN THE SADDLE

"I don't like it, Joe," Oscar brooded. "Let's go back to the States. Too many things are happening." Mr. Maddox might have done well to heed his wizened assistant's words, since sunny Havana wasn't very healthy for the big, bland bookie this season. Knockout drops one night — perhaps a knife the next, and death was closer than ever before in his long career.

A Mr. Maddox Novelette



The Cuban went clear across the room, staggering, with his arms waving helplessly.

smartly-uniformed policeman came running across the Prado, frantically blowing a whistle. Mr. Maddox' Spanish was not good enough to catch the excited comments that began to fly through the crowd about him. He heard a blond-haired man in a white linen suit talking in fluent Spanish to a Cuban. Mr. Maddox pushed close and tapped the blond stranger on the shoulder.

"Would you mind telling me what happened, friend?" Mr. Maddox inquired.

"Eh? Oh, sure." The stranger shrugged.

"Man jumped out of one of the windows upstairs. Dived head-first to the street pavement. He's over there, where they're crowding around him. Dead, of course."

"Too bad," Mr. Maddox commented.

"Rather unusual for Havana," the stranger said. "A Havañero would do it more—well, shall we say, with more imagination? I'll bet fifty dollars it's a refugee."

"Even money?" Mr. Maddox asked from force of lifelong habit, rather than any macabre interest in a dead man's choice of suicide.

The stranger had sun crinkles at the edges of his eyes. He was golden tanned and his white linen suit fitted smoothly over broad shoulders. His smile indicated that he understood Mr. Maddox' remark.

"I'll take the short end of eight-to-five," he offered.

"It's a bet," Mr. Maddox said readily. "Mind telling me how you're so sure?"

"Not at all. We can settle this with a call on the police shortly. Care to have a drink while we're waiting? I don't suppose you're interested in the gruesome sight over there in the street."

"No, indeed," Mr. Maddox agreed quickly. "I only hope the poor devil found whatever peace he was after."

The stranger said his name was Barott. William Barott. He was in sugar, over Camaguey way. They had sought out a cool and comfortable cocktail lounge, and were seated at a table, drinking rum sours.

"I really think I've as good as won your money," said Barott, smiling. "For one thing, I've lived in Cuba a long time. I think I'm on sound ground in making my guess. Havana, as you probably know, has received a great many refugees in this war."

Mr. Maddox nodded.

"They've arrived in all stages of hope and hopelessness," said Barott. "Some almost broke, many well-heeled. Most of them want to move on to the States. Few have any chance to make it. Some of the stories are pitiful. Havana hasn't much for them. As long as they have money, they do well enough. When money goes, then hope goes. I've seen it happen. Wrings your heart. Some of them take the one sure way out. You see why I made such a quick guess?"

"Makes me wonder what business we have sitting here enjoying life," Mr. Maddox remarked soberly.

"I know the feeling," Barott agreed. "Had it myself—but what the devil can any one individual do? It's one of the minor kickbacks of war. I still think I guessed right about the chap who stepped out the window. We'll take a taxi in a few minutes and see."

THEY were received with smiling courtesy at the police station where the taxi dropped them. A Señor Rojas, who seemed to be a detective, since he was not in uniform, and who spoke perfect English, talked with them.

"Yes, of course, we have a report of the matter. Regrettable. Are you gentlemen friends of the dead man?"

"Not exactly," Mr. Maddox said. He was feeling uncomfortable about the whole matter. "But we would like to know who the dead man is."

Señor Rojas was a slender man with direct,

dark eyes. His smiling glance rested a moment on Mr. Maddox. Apparently satisfied, he became businesslike and direct.

"He was a Belgian, I believe, by the name of Renard. We're looking into his papers now. He has been living in a hotel apartment, there on the Prado, with his daughter. She hasn't been able to talk much since it happened. It seems she was in another room in the apartment, and had no idea her father intended to jump."

"Refugees, I suppose," Barott suggested. "With a spot of money, since they were living on the Prado."

"It looks that way," Rojas agreed. "Now may I ask why you gentlemen are so interested in a man and his daughter whom you evidently do not know?"

"A very foolish reason," Barott confessed, and he was frank about the casual bet that had been made.

"I see," Señor Rojas remarked good-humoredly. "A natural thing, eh? We Cubans, who have our own lottery, understand such matters."

Outside the police station, Mr. Maddox paid the bet he had lost. "I'll give you even on another fifty," Mr. Maddox said wryly, "that our friend Rojas is still wondering what we are really up to."

"I won't bet on that one," Barott refused, laughing. "Rojas struck me the same way. Another drink? . . . No? Well, I'll walk to the corner with you."

Barott continued, as they moved off together: "A little bit of everything happens in Havana. It's been a crossroads in this war. Threads from Europe, South America, Latin America, and the States, run through Cuba. You can't blame men like Rojas for wondering about hidden motives in every unusual occurrence. From what I've heard, they're very often right. Some of the stories that will come out of Havana when the war is over should be classics."

"I'm beginning to wonder," said Mr. Maddox, "if this incident might not be one of them."

"Let me know if you find that to be the case," suggested Barott. "I'm leaving town tonight, but I'm in and out quite a bit." Barott scribbled on the back of his card, while walking. "You can get word to me at my club. The Planters, on the Malecon."

They shook hands at the corner and parted. Probably they would never see each other again. Mr. Maddox spent a pleasant day, the latter part of it out at La Playa beach.

It was at La Playa, under a shady arcade facing the beach, that Mr. Maddox wondered if he were being followed. He was walking toward a table. Two couples occupied the table first. Mr. Maddox turned back, looking for

another place to sit down. He noticed a small, thin-faced Cuban in a brown suit, who also seemed to be vaguely looking for a table.

That same brown suit and small black mustache had been at another table when Mr. Maddox had lunched in town. He was sure of it.

Mr. Maddox filed the thought for further attention. When he returned to the city, and stopped for cocktails and early dinner at a well-known hotel, he was not surprised to see the same brown suit and small dark mustache loitering outside the cocktail lounge. Mr. Maddox chuckled, and dined well, then taxied to his hotel, more interested than annoyed.

Oscar, Mr. Maddox' short, sharp-faced, shrewd assistant, was waiting for him in their comfortable suite, and highly annoyed.

"Some lug has gone through our things," said Oscar indignantly.

"Take anything."

"How do I know? But we sure took a frisk. You know how I always put the eye on the way we leave a hotel room."

Oscar had gathered his share of knocks and experience from the fringes of the underworld. Oscar's rule was to be suspicious of everything and everyone.

"We didn't have anything worth taking,"

Mr. Maddox decided.

"I still don't like it."

"Forget it."

Oscar grumbled some, then broke off as a knock sounded on the halfdoor of the big and airy sitting room. Oscar looked toward the door and nodded silently.

Mr. Maddox lifted eyebrows at the sight of small feet and very trim ankles showing under the door. He opened the halfdoor and confronted a pale girl dressed in black whom he had never seen before.

"M'sieu' Maddox?"

"Yes?"

"I am Renée Renard."

She spoke with an accent, quaint, soft, pleasing. Her pallor seemed more pronounced because of the black dress, and the black half veil she wore across the upper part of her face. Yet she was too young for black, too young even for the veil. They could not hide the fact that she was, as the gentlemen of any racetrack press box would say, an eye-ful.

"Renard?" Mr. Maddox said, at a loss for an instant. And then memory struck him. He stepped back, bowing slightly. "Come in, Miss Renard." Mr. Maddox indicated Oscar. "This gentleman is sharing the suite with me."

She walked in hesitantly, saying: "My father, today—"

"Of course," Mr. Maddox helped her. "I happened to be on hand this morning. Here, sit down."

SHE looked at them appealingly from the chair. "I should not be here," she said with an effort. "I—I can hardly think. It still seems like a bad dream."

"You shouldn't have bothered to come," said Mr. Maddox kindly. "I would have been glad to have called on you at your pleasure, young lady."

Inwardly, Mr. Maddox was doing some fast conjecturing. How had she known where to find him? How had she known anything about him? What interest could this girl have in a Yankee stranger?

She said, with a strained, wan smile: "You are very kind, *m'sieu'*. You make it, I think, a little easier for me. I thank you."

It sounded very quaint and old-world. Very touching. Mr. Maddox, who could be as hard-boiled as any thug back in the States, was moved. Rojas, of the police, had not known much about her or her father. But Rojas had

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known enough to make it clear that this pale girl had probably suffered much before coming to Cuba. Now she was alone in a strange country with her grief.

"Maybe," said Oscar, "I better scram?"

"I do not understand this 'scram,'" the girl said doubtfully.

"I mean blow," said Oscar.

"He means," said Mr. Maddox, "he feels he should leave. I don't think it's necessary. He can stay here—and keep quiet," Mr. Maddox added, with a cold look at Oscar. Then he said: "You can speak plainly, Miss Renard."

"But yes, thank you. I will." Her throat worked for a moment, then she said: "You—you—how shall I say it? The police have been asking me questions about you."

"So?" Mr. Maddox said. He silently and heartily damned the impulses which had led to the harmless bet between himself and Barott, the sugar planter.

"But yes, *m'sieu'*. They say you were interested in the death of my father. They wished to know if you and the gentleman who was with you had been friends of my father." She caught her breath in the faintest whisper of a sob. "And so do I, *M'sieu'* Maddox. I—I must know."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Maddox told her gently. "More sorry than I can say, Miss Renard, that you have been put to such cruel inconvenience. I never heard of your father. Nor did he know me."

"Oh, but yes. I heard him speak your name once."

"My name?" said Mr. Maddox weakly. "Impossible. That is—was your father ever in the United States?"

"Not since I was a child."

"And what did your father say about me?"

"Oh, I am ashamed. How shall I say it? . . . He said: 'I do not think this Maddox is a good man.'"

Mr. Maddox chuckled ruefully.

"Miss Renard, your father was probably right. I doubt if I am a good man. But how did he happen to say so? How did he know anything about me?"

"That I do not know, *m'sieu'*. He was speaking over the telephone."

"To whom was he talking?"

She shrugged expressively. "I do not know. But the police have asked questions. I am grieving, I do not know why my father went from me as he did. And I say to myself: 'Renée, my poor one, perhaps this Mr. Maddox, who asks about my father, will know why he had to die.'"

Mr. Maddox wanted a drink. A big one. "I can't tell you a thing," he said, and felt like mopping his face and turning away from the appeal in her voice. "But I can tell you how the police happened to be interested. I

asked one of them who your father was."

"But I don't understand. . ."

"I happened to be near when—when it, er, happened, this morning," Mr. Maddox explained. "I asked a member of the police who the unfortunate gentleman was. You understand, Miss Renard? It was unfortunate curiosity. Nothing more."

"But if my father knew you?"

"He couldn't have, ma'am."

She stood up. Mr. Maddox had the impression she doubted him, much as Señor Rojas had doubted him at the police station. "You will forgive me," she said. "But I had to come."

"Naturally. I quite understand."

She was wiping her eyes under the bit of veiling as she left the suite. Oscar was already mixing iced water and Scotch in two glasses when Mr. Maddox turned from the door.

"It ain't none of my business, but who's goopy around here?" asked Oscar sourly. "I thought I was listenin' to double talk."

"Her father did a Brodie out of a high window onto the Prado pavement this morning," Mr. Maddox growled. "Get the idea? They were refugees from Belgium. Didn't you notice the French-sounding way she talked?"

"Yeah."

"She's an orphan. All alone now, evidently. Still dazed. She's trying to find why her father killed himself." Mr. Maddox told about the bet, and what had caused it to be made. "I knew that cop was curious," Mr. Maddox said. "But I didn't think he'd have the nerve to start pestering a grief-stricken girl about me."

Oscar was walking around the room, glass in hand, scowling as he thought. "I get sense out of that," Oscar said. "But how did her old man start gabbin' about you over the phone?"

"She must have been mistaken."

"She seemed to know what she was talkin' about," Oscar insisted.

"Couldn't have," Mr. Maddox said. He added more Scotch to his drink. "She heard something that sounded like my name—and now she's all twisted up inside and snatching at straws. If the police hadn't spoken of me, she probably never would have thought of the thing her father said over the telephone, whatever it was."

"I guess you're right," Oscar agreed. "Let's take in a movie."

"You come to Havana and go to the movies?" Mr. Maddox chided with fine scorn. "Come over to the Malecon with me, and look across the water at Morro Castle in the moonlight."

THE Malecon was the sea wall, backed by a broad promenade. The grim old walls of El Morro were there across the entrance

channel to the harbor, frowning at the seaward approaches and all ships that sailed into Havana harbor. Racetracks and thoroughbreds, detectives, bookmaking and bets, and all the colorful associations of a colorful career faded for a time in Mr. Maddox' mind as he strolled with the wind on his face and thought back through the centuries that had rolled over El Morro and the harbor channel, and old Havana.

A terrific nudge from Oscar made Mr. Maddox gasp. "I think I see Cassidy giving us the eye from that hack that just passed!" said Oscar excitedly.

"Where?" Mr. Maddox snapped.

"There!"

The taxi toward which Oscar pointed was already past them, rolling with a stream of traffic. Impossible to say who was in it.

"You're mistaken," Mr. Maddox said flatly.

"I know that guy's mug," Oscar insisted doubtfully.

"Cassidy isn't even in Havana."

"He could be."

Cassidy was one of the top men of the Masterton International Agency, which, before the war, had maintained offices in the principal cities of the world. The Masterton race-track detail covered all the big race meets. The detectives of the detail were veterans and first-class men.

They kept crime away from the racetrack crowds as far as possible. They were a warning and a threat to greedy owners, slippery trainers, crooked jockeys. One of their most important tasks was to discourage bookmaking at the pari-mutuel tracks. Cassidy was one of the veterans, one of the best. For thirty years and more, Cassidy and Mr. Maddox had been friends—if one could call friendship a state in which Cassidy was ready at any moment to arrest the big bookie for taking a race bet around one of the big tracks.

"Cassidy could be in Havana," Mr. Maddox assented. "Oriental Park is open. But I don't think the Masterton men are covering Oriental. So tell me why Cassidy should be here."

"Why," countered Oscar, "should we be here? We ain't makin' a book."

To that Mr. Maddox had no good answer. But when they shortly returned to the hotel, the first thing Mr. Maddox did was telephone the branch office of the Masterton Agency. A man answered in Spanish. Then shifted into slightly accented English.

"Cassidy?" he repeated. "No, we have no man weeth this office named Cassidy."

"He works in the States," Mr. Maddox explained.

"Then, sir, I suggest you find him in the United States? Not here. Of that I assure you."

Mr. Maddox hung up. "Fix another drink," he suggested to Oscar. "Cassidy isn't around. But I'll tell you one thing—if you see a small chap in a brown suit with a little black mustache, a Cuban, don't give him a tumble, but keep an eye on him. He was following me today."

"Why?" asked Oscar, alert at once.

"How do I know?"

Oscar passed over the drink. "I don't like it, Joe. Too many things are happening. They don't make sense—but they don't sound so good."

"We're doing all right. Forget 'em." Mr. Maddox turned as a timid rap sounded on the door.

Oscar looked, too, and then he looked at Mr. Maddox. A neat pair of feminine legs showed once more below the halfdoor.

"Give her a drink this time," Oscar muttered. "Tell her to stick around until she gets all her questions asked."

Mr. Maddox opened the door. Like Oscar, he expected to see the pale girl in black. He saw, instead, a young lady who had an excellent creamy sun-tan, and a figure that should have been on a magazine cover. Her simple blue silk dress was not simple, solely because she was wearing it.

She smiled hesitantly. "I know it is late. Is this Mr. Maddox?"

"It is," Mr. Maddox said, smiling back. She was the kind of girl one smiled at easily.

She said: "I am Miss Renée Renard. Could I talk with you, Mr. Maddox?"

CHAPTER TWO

Double Feature

OSCAR sounded as if he were choking on his Scotch and iced water. Mr. Maddox opened his mouth, then closed it. He had only bland welcome on his broad face as he motioned his visitor into the sitting room.

"It will be a pleasure, Miss Renard." And when she sat in the same chair the other girl had occupied, Mr. Maddox chuckled. "I'm wondering," he said, "how you happen to know who I am. I don't believe we have met, have we?"

This girl had dark hair, too, very fine and softly waved, under a small straw hat that was one of the better grades of Panama weaving. She was about twenty, Mr. Maddox guessed, perhaps a bit older, or younger. But her self-possession would have done credit to a much older woman. Not so pretty either—or perhaps she was pretty, in a classic way, with clean sharp planes to her features.

She smiled again, apologetically, although she was not ill at ease.

"I know this is very unusual," she said.

"You're very curious, of course. But the Havana police asked me about you this afternoon. I felt I must talk to you."

The girl looked at Oscar. "Am I doing right to speak in front of this gentleman?" she asked.

"Quite right," Mr. Maddox assured her. "He is my associate. No secrets from him, Miss Renard. Now then, the police were speaking about me? Of course I'm curious. How did it happen?" Mr. Maddox had seated himself in a nearby chair and was leaning forward with smiling attention.

She opened a shell-beaded purse and took out a package of American cigarettes. Mr. Maddox whipped out a match and lighted her cigarette for her. He was all smiling attention as he sat down and waited.

She drew on the cigarette twice, studying him, before she said evenly: "I think you know that my father killed himself this morning. The police tell me you were asking questions about him after—after it happened."

"Yes, I did," Mr. Maddox assented. "But how it is you were told about my questions? Unusual, isn't it?"

She leaned her head back for a moment, looking at the high ceiling. "Everything about it was unusual," she said slowly, and for the first time a trace of huskiness tinged her voice. "He was with me—and then suddenly he was gone, forever."

"A great shock, I'm sure, Miss Renard."

"Yes." She gestured with the hand which held the cigarette. "But there have been so many shocks. We are Belgians. We lost the rest of our family, our home. We got into France by a few hours, into Spain by a few days. We had some money and valuables. You would not believe what it took, and what it meant, to reach Havana finally."

"I can guess," Mr. Maddox said. "You were trying to get to the United States?"

"Yes." She gestured again, smiling thinly.

"I had an American governess as a child and in the two years we have been here in Havana, I have studied and practiced on my English. Everyone says I am very good. I know you have been wondering that I speak so fluently."

"Slightly," said Mr. Maddox. "Although, in a way, I'm getting past wondering at anything."

She smiled politely, as if the remark were over her head. "The questions," she reminded, "that you were asking about my father. Do you mind telling me why you were interested?"

"Curiosity, young lady."

"Is that all?" She shook her head. "It is hard to understand. You knew him?"

"Never saw him," said Mr. Maddox. He could almost answer by rote.

"The police," she said, "were so certain you must have known him." She took a breath. "And so was I."

"I know," said Mr. Maddox blandly. "You heard him speaking over the telephone about me. He said: 'I do not think this Maddox is a quite man.'"

"Oh, then you *did* know him. You must know why he killed himself. I am glad I came here tonight."

"No," said Mr. Maddox. "I don't know why your father killed himself. I never talked to him over the telephone." Mr. Maddox stood up, still smiling, but if the girl had looked closely, if she had known Joe Maddox, she would have noted the hard and steady gaze he was fixing on her.

"No, of course not. He was not talking to you over the telephone. He was talking about you, when I heard him. So he must have known you, and you must have known him. And—and you must have some idea why he killed himself."

"No."

"But you spoke to the police about him."

Mr. Maddox asked: "To whom was your father talking when my name was mentioned?"

"I don't know."

"Too bad," said Mr. Maddox. "And it's been a very fine performance. Now, sister, loosen up and tell me what the racket is. Or shall I pick up the telephone and call the police?"

She came to her feet, swiftly, frightened for an instant. Then, with a deep breath, she was under control. "I don't know what you mean."

"You understand copper, don't you?"

"Cop—copper? Police, you mean? . . . Yes."

"Well give, kid. You could get a screen contract on the performance you've just given. But it's no dice. I know you aren't this Renée Renard. What's the pay-off?"

She said: "Have you lost your mind? Of course, I am Renée Renard."

"Not even in mournin' for her old man," Oscar commented. "Looks like she was huntin' a date instead of bein' sorry he's gone."

"I don't believe in wearing black," she said to Oscar. "And as for tears, grief—I don't think you would understand. One cries so much and then there are no more tears. One dies inside with grief, and there are no more deaths inside. One takes the will of God as it comes. If there is grief, it is inside, and not for strangers to see."

"Nice line," Oscar remarked cynically.

Mr. Maddox picked up the telephone. "Spill it, sister—or the cops. What are you up to?"

Now she was not smiling. For all of her sun-tan, she looked pale. Her face was set.

But she was calm and her voice was steady.

"I have been questioned by Gestapo agents, when a wrong answer meant torture or death. I have seen more horrible things than you will ever know. I am not even impressed by what you threaten. Call the police."

Mr. Maddox put down the telephone.

"No," she said. "I did not think you would. I am only sorry I could not learn anything from you. Good night."

She walked out swiftly, and Mr. Maddox let her go. When she was out of earshot, he spoke briefly to Oscar. "Tail her. See where she goes. Don't let her spot you, if possible."

Mr. Maddox was already at the Scotch bottle, frowning, thoughtful. "Two of them," he muttered as Oscar departed. "Same stories, same purpose." Mr. Maddox took the Scotch straight, double measure, and turned to his bedroom. "We'll wait," he said, "and see who blows this thing open. They seem to be coming to me anyway."

IN the morning, with the sun like a golden tide outside, Oscar was not in his room. Oscar's bed had not been slept in.

Mr. Maddox stood a long moment in the doorway of Oscar's bedroom. His broad face was sober, thoughtful, as he wandered around the sitting room in slippers and violet cerise silk pajamas. He lifted the telephone and asked the desk if a message had been left for him.

There was no message. The desk clerk had Oscar paged, and there was no return on that. Mr. Maddox had not expected an answer, and was already partly dressed.

He was wearing creamy white when he left

the suite. Havana had never seen a man more distinguished, in a vast and rich-looking way, than Mr. Maddox when he stepped from the elevator into the lobby.

A bell hop who hurried toward the big man with a copy of the morning newspaper got the half-dollar tip that he received each morning from Joe Maddox.

"A beautiful morning, Señor Maddox."

"Terrific," Mr. Maddox agreed. "José, will you have the chef poach four eggs? The toast just so? And melon and iced coconut milk?"

"Four eggs," José breathed. "Ah, sí, señor. As you like them."

Mr. Maddox had not forgotten Oscar. But, without food, little could be done actively or mentally. He thought of calling the police, but had put that aside for a time. Oscar was a shrewd and tough little man, usually able to take care of himself.

"Well, Joe! How are you this morning? You look tops."

Mr. Maddox' reluctant hand was being wrung before he could thrust it in his pocket. This had happened before and probably would happen again, as long as he and Major John Patrick Pohlson lived at the same hotel.

The "major" was an honest military title from the last war. The Pohlsons were a sporting tribe. Old Pete Pohlson's Van Atta Lawn stable was a good one, well-known on the Big Apple tracks. Major John Patrick was a third cousin, on the shady side, or perhaps, doubtful side, of the family.

The major apparently had a small income. He lived well, dressed well, moved among the best people when he could. He was reputed to be a keen bridge player. At any rate he

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had a bronzed, military fitness, and assurance, heightened by a close-cropped white mustache. He was a hard man to collect a lost horse bet from, Mr. Maddox had discovered some years back.

"I'm doing all right," Mr. Maddox said without enthusiasm.

"Cigars?"

"No, thanks."

"I saw you out at La Playa yesterday. Did you have a whirl at the Casino?"

"No," said Mr. Maddox. "Glad to have seen you this morning. I was just going in to breakfast."

"Just a minute. I want you to meet a couple of friends of mine. Hollanders. Fine chaps." Major Pohlson lowered his voice. "They were in diamonds before the Germans took Amsterdam. Very important. They got out of Europe with a stock of diamonds by the skin of their teeth. Rode out the war here in Havana, y'know."

Mr. Maddox did not have much choice in the matter, unless he became actually rude. This had happened before also. Major Pohlson was always turning up with strangers whom he liked to introduce, and about whose importance he could prattle expansively. The major spent his life, Mr. Maddox had long ago guessed, basking in the reflected importance of others.

"Mynheer Vanderstein, Mynheer Pruyn—Mr. Joseph Maddox, one of America's most celebrated bookmakers to the sport of kings."

There was no use being annoyed. Pohlson always worked that in, until one would think Joe Maddox handled all the bets in North America, and moved in a blizzard of thousand-dollar bills.

The two Dutchmen were pink-cheeked, rather stolid but friendly-looking men. Their handshakes were firm. They were pleased at the introduction, and no little impressed. You could see it in their manner as they gazed at Mr. Maddox' vast and distinguished figure. Each man looked keenly at the huge diamond ring on Mr. Maddox' left hand. If they were expert diamond men, they must have seen instantly that the stone was blue-white, probably free from flaws, and one of the best.

"Race horses," said Vanderstein politely, "are interesting." They spoke English with an accent, but extremely fluently, as could be expected from men who had moved in the international trade of diamonds.

"You take the big bets on race horses?" Mynheer Pruyn asked with interest.

Major Pohlson touched his close-cropped white mustache and laughed at the idea. "Joe Maddox never turns down a bet, no matter how large. He's had that reputation for years."

"Ja? So?" Pruyn asked Mr. Maddox.

The eggs were poaching, the toast was surely crisp by now. Mr. Maddox shuddered inwardly at the prospect of having this three-course at the breakfast table with him.

"I follow one rule," Mr. Maddox said. "Any size bet, on any horse, and I pay off at track odds."

"It must take much money."

"Now and then it does. People win bets as well as lose them," Mr. Maddox said, chuckling.

"But you *always* pay?" Mynheer Vanderstein pressed, as if he found it hard to understand how anyone could take unlimited risk and be certain of meeting the obligation.

"We have a system called laying off," Mr. Maddox explained. "If I think the bet is too big and the risk too great, I place some of it with other bookmakers."

"Ah, like insurance? Like Lloyds of London?"

"Exactly."

"You can always make this—this lay-off?"

"Always," Mr. Maddox said.

"But if you could not?"

"Then I'd only take what money I could be sure of paying off, if I lost."

Major Pohlson laughed. "I've never heard of Joe turning down a bet. I see you looking toward the dining room, Joe. Breakfast, eh? We won't detain you. It's been a pleasure though."

Mr. Maddox shook hands again, and escaped with relief to food and his thoughts. He made a mental note to shift hotels. Pohlson was getting on his nerves.

LATER, Mr. Maddox walked the Prado again, his mind busily sorting everything that had happened since the suicide the day before. He was trying to fill in the gaps, and make some sort of a picture, but he had little luck.

He turned into the Isle Royal Hotel, where the dead man had lived, and asked a desk clerk to telephone his name to Miss Renard. She was in.

"Señor," the clerk said, "Miss Renard wishes to know if it is important."

"It is."

"You will be received, señor."

The Isle Royal was not one of the best on the Prado. It seemed more of a family hotel. Renée Renard herself opened the door. The first Miss Renard. She was still wearing black, and looked pale this morning.

She said, with the old-world accent: "I pack, you see. I—I must leave."

"I dislike bothering you," Mr. Maddox said as he entered. "Would you be surprised to hear that a young lady called on me last night, after you had left, and claimed to be Renée Renard?"

"No! How could it be?" She was surprised and alarmed. "Why should another do that, *m'sieu'*?"

"I wondered if you could tell me."

"Oh, but no!"

"It was very peculiar," Mr. Maddox said slowly. "She spoke good English, and she repeated, almost word for word, the very questions you asked me."

"But—but how could she?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"I do not understand, *m'sieu'*." She was getting more nervous. Her large dark eyes were wide and frightened as she looked at him. She was twisting her hands together.

"I don't understand it either," Mr. Maddox admitted, frowning. "I threatened to call the police, and she seemed willing."

"You did call the police?"

"No. I changed my mind."

"But why?"

"I wanted to wait. Wanted to think it over." Mr. Maddox smiled thinly. "As a matter of fact, I wanted to see where she went. My friend followed her."

"And where did she go. Oh! Must everything happen to me?"

"I don't know where she went," said Mr. Maddox ruefully. "My friend hasn't returned. I'm wondering if something hasn't happened to him." Mr. Maddox shook his head. "It's beginning to look like a case for the police."

"Oh, no!" she said. "Must there be more police? More questions?" She pointed to open bags on the floor, to trinkets and other small things she had been packing. "I was hoping, *m'sieu'*, to go from here and find quiet and peace."

"I'll try my hotel and see if my friend has returned. Then, I'm afraid, I'll have to take action," Mr. Maddox said regretfully. "For your own protection, I think the police had better know about the girl who impersonated you."

"I do not wish more police. She may have heard me talking. Yesterday I talk to all who come—and I hardly know what I say."

"She certainly knew what was in your mind, young lady."

"It cannot be, unless—unless—"

"Yes?" Mr. Maddox urged, caught by the promise of something on her face.

"The newspapers," she said. "A woman asking for the—the newspapers? Or—or for the police themselves? I speak yesterday with the police and the newspapers."

"You may have something there!" Mr. Maddox exclaimed. "Should have thought of it myself. No wonder she bluffed me out on the police call. Nothing would have happened to her if the police had come." Mr. Maddox frowned. "But, my friend!—he should have come back last night."

She shrugged, hands fluttering helplessly. "Please, before there are more police and more questions, you will see carefully—make sure he is missing?"

"I will," Mr. Maddox promised. "Sorry to have bothered you."

As he waited for the elevator, he mentally berated himself for not thinking as fast as the Renard girl. The other girl had probably been a reporter. Mr. Maddox chuckled. A good reporter. A neat little actress.

MR. MADDUX was crossing the lobby when a man stepped quickly from the desk and spoke his name. It was Señor Rojas, of the police. Rojas shook hands. He was smiling.

"Surprising to meet you here, Mr. Maddox. The place must have an attraction for you." Rojas coughed. "Or are you still settling bets?"

"I've had a few words with Miss Renard."

"Ah, but you did not know her. Or did I misunderstand?"

"I know her now," Mr. Maddox said blandly. He studied the direct dark eyes of the slender man. "You wouldn't, for any reason, be suspicious of my motives, would you, Señor Rojas?"

Rojas laughed. His slender hand made an expressive gesture of denial. "Do you have motives, *señor*?"

"Usually."

"I am interested."

"My motive at the moment is to locate my friend, Oscar Magee, who went out last night and hasn't returned."

"And you think Miss Renard has word of the gentleman?" Rojas questioned with more than a semblance of amusement.

"She doesn't seem to have."

"But you thought she might?"

"I shouldn't wonder if you knew as much as anyone else does about Oscar," Mr. Maddox said.

"I have ways of finding out things," Rojas agreed. "He is really lost?"

"Unless he's returned to the hotel since I left. He went out last night and wasn't back this morning. And by the way," Mr. Maddox said, "Miss Renard was put to the trouble of calling on me last night. It seems the police insisted she must know me. Are you always so suspicious of a stranger who asks a casual question?"

Rojas laughed again. "I did question her, Mr. Maddox. You must admit we are thorough in our police work. A man kills himself—a stranger asks questions about him. We have a mystery added to a mystery, and so we investigate. You might say we are curious, also—as you claimed you were curious about this man Renard."

"It's a good argument anyway."

"Now then," said Rojas briskly, "I must see Miss Renard for a few minutes myself. I was just going up. If you will meet me at the police station where you came yesterday, we will see about the friend who is missing."

"I'll be there," Mr. Maddox agreed.

During the next hour, while waiting at the police station for Rojas, Mr. Maddox twice telephoned the hotel, and each time was informed that Oscar had not returned. By that time Mr. Maddox was chewing impatiently on a big loose-rolled Havana cigar, of *maduro* leaf, black and heavy with flavor.

Not even the *maduro* leaf could quiet his growing worry about Oscar. One of the blue-uniformed policemen, with holstered revolver at hip and highly polished leather puttees, approached with a slip of paper.

"Señor Rojas has telephoned, asking that you come to this address, *señor*. It is the police station in Vedado. You will take a taxicab."

"I know how to get there," Mr. Maddox said, more shortly than he intended.

He was frowning as he went outside for the taxi. Vedado was one of the newer, luxurious, and certainly beautiful suburbs of Havana, to the west, along the seacoast.

Mr. Maddox missed some of the beauty, however. He was remembering that Vedado was near the sea. A body picked up along the coast might well be taken to the Vedado police station. Oscar had been a faithful little man. If Joe Maddox had sent Oscar to his death...

CHAPTER THREE

Slayed-Belle

MR. MADDOX shouldered his way into the Vedado police station hurriedly, the stump of the *maduro* cigar still clenched in the corner of his mouth. The smiling face of Señor Rojas was one of the first he sighted.

"Is Oscar all right?" Mr. Maddox demanded.

"That is a question," Rojas said. His direct, dark eyes were not smiling. "Your friend," he asked, "was feeling well when he left you last night?"

"Quite well."

"You cannot think of any reason why anything—shall we say, unusual?—should have happened to him?"

Mr. Maddox used the cigar stump as a pointer to emphasize his words. "Has anything happened to Oscar?"

"You are worried, *señor*."

"Of course I'm worried. He's my friend. He should have been back long ago. I don't know why you're stalling. All I want is a plain answer. Is he all right?"

"I will let you judge," Rojas answered po-

lately. He led the way through a short corridor, and opened a door. He stepped through first, then turned, watching Mr. Maddox' broad face.

The room was small, but high-ceilinged. It contained two wooden benches and a single chair. On the right-hand bench, against the wall, Oscar's body was stretched out limply, hands folded across the chest, a sheet of newspaper across the face.

"He was found this morning under a guanabana tree, on the grounds of Señor Andres Arellano," Rojas said. "The Arellanos are, at the moment, at their country home, in Pinar del Rio. You see how puzzling it becomes? Señor Arellano is one of our greatest raisers of fine *Vuelta Abajo* tobacco. It is unthinkable he could have any knowledge of a business like this."

"At the moment," said Mr. Maddox gruffly, "I don't give a damn whether he has knowledge or not. But after I bury Oscar, I'm going to find out who does have knowledge." A thought struck Mr. Maddox. "I wonder if his body can be sealed up and taken back to the States."

The newspaper slid off to the floor. Oscar sat up groggily. "I'll swim back," said Oscar thickly. "Drop me in the water an' give a push. Havana—*ooohhhhh* . . ." Oscar put his head in his hands.

"He will not even drink water," Rojas said, with a certain lack of sympathy.

"Talk!" Oscar groaned. "Shut that guy off, Joe. He's been talkin' for the last half hour. Questions, questions—an' my head floatin' up around the ceiling somewhere, and him lookin' like three guys half the time." Oscar looked up sourly. "An' talking' like three guys, too."

"I wondered why I waited so long to hear from you," Mr. Maddox said bluntly to the detective watching them.

Rojas shrugged his regret. "A visitor to Havana leaves his hotel. He is found in a peculiar state of unconsciousness the next morning, and when he is able to talk, he is unable to say what has happened. Questions first, *señor*. We must protect our visitors." Rojas looked, smiling, at Oscar. "Even when they do not seem to wish protection."

"Is there a charge of some sort against him?"

"Sleeping under a guanabana tree, even on the lawn of Don Andres, is not an offense."

"He can go?"

"Oh, *sí*. Where there is no memory, there is no information." Rojas pushed a finger along the side of his chin. "I am unfortunate this morning. Not even Miss Renard was in her rooms when I called. At least she did not answer. And so soon after you left her. She was there, I believe you said?"

Oscar stiffened slightly at the mention of

the mention of the Renard girl. Mr. Maddox wasn't sure whether Rojas noticed it or not. He nodded. "I talked to her."

"Oh, well. Another time," Rojas laughed. "In Cuba there is always tomorrow—and a delightful tomorrow, we always expect."

Oscar got unsteadily to his feet. Mr. Maddox helped him out of the station. The taxi was waiting. They started back to Havana.

"Now," said Mr. Maddox, lighting another cigar, "what the devil happened?"

"Goof ball," said Oscar.

"What?"

"You heard me. Someone slipped me a goof ball."

A goof ball, as Rojas might or might not have known, if he had heard them talking, was a small white pill, dropped into a drink, and followed by oblivion for an appreciable length of time.

"You were tailing a dame," Mr. Maddox reminded grimly. "Don't tell me she asked you in for a drink, and you felt you had to accept."

"Lay off," Oscar groaned. "Every time we hit a bump, my head bulges five sizes."

"It should bulge ten for being dope enough to inhale a goof ball," said Mr. Maddox coldly. "And me worried about you and already planning to spend plenty on a casket."

"I did what you told me," Oscar said sourly. "I tailed that dame. A guy was waitin' for her outside the hotel. I got out just in time to see him helpin' her into a hack."

"What did he look like?"

"He looked American. Big fellow. Tanned plenty. He wore a white suit."

"How big was he?"

"Tall as you are. Broad shoulders." The taxicab struck a slight bump. Oscar groaned. "His eyes was squinty at the corners," said Oscar. "Like he was out in the sun a lot."

"Did he," asked Mr. Maddox, "have on a blue and gold necktie?"

"Yeah. I remember. He did."

"It can't be—but it sounds like a chap

named Barott, who was leaving town last night, and had no business with Miss Renard anyway. He was the one I made the bet with about her father."

"Don't know about that," said Oscar. "But they went to the Maribou, past the Plaza, goin' away from Central Park. You know the joint. We were in there one night."

"Micky Zastas owns it," said Mr. Maddox. "Micky's brother was Buddy Zastas, the Cuban Flash, who was riding twenty-two per cent winners on the Eastern tracks until he had a spill at Bowie and broke his back."

"I remember the Cuban Flash," said Oscar. "His riding money helped start the Maribou. Buddy will never ride again. But with some bracing for his back, he gets around and enjoys life."

"Well, this babe I'm tailin' goes into the Maribou with the guy."

"She couldn't have been mourning much in the Maribou," said Mr. Maddox. "Micky keeps a noisy, lively place." Mr. Maddox frowned. "I wonder if the man with her was Barott."

"I should know. The Maribou's got tables an' those plushy booths, an' the horseshoe bar near the door. The babe an' her pigeon hole up in a booth an' order. I stake out a bar stool where they can't look out 'an make me. But they don't bug around. They're too busy gabbin'. Guess who comes in, gawps around the booths, an' goes over to beat the gums with them?"

"Rojas?" Mr. Maddox guessed.

"Cassidy!" said Oscar with emphasis. "Cassidy knew that dame!"

Mr. Maddox swore softly. "So Cassidy sent her to pump me! I might have known, after you spotted him in a taxi."

"He's around, anyway," said Oscar darkly. "Up to somethin', too. I'm takin' it all in when a guy parked on the next stool asks me who the gent is standin' back there at the booth. This new character wears a little black mustache an' a brown suit. He suggests a

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drink. We drink an' watch Cassidy an' talk about this and that. He says he works for a newspaper—an' then I suddenly feel terrible. I have to bust for the door. This guy goes out with me an' gets a taxi. He says somethin' about my hotel an' gets in with me. The next thing I know, I wake up in a room full of cops an' this Rojas comes in with questions." Oscar groaned. "That guy an' his goof ball last night! Why did he louse me up an' plant me under a tree?"

"Do you always have to be so dumb?" Mr. Maddox asked coldly. "He wanted you out of the way. Out from underfoot. Be glad he didn't drop you in the water somewhere." Mr. Maddox was scowling. "Cassidy, eh? That means horse races."

"An' trouble," said Oscar dismally.

AS soon as they were in their hotel rooms, Mr. Maddox telephoned the Isle Royal. He was informed that Miss Renard had moved. The clerk supplied a forwarding address in the city.

Next, the Planters Club said that Mr. Barott had been there within the hour. He was staying at the Sevilla, on the Prado. The Sevilla was one of the best hotels in Havana. Barott, evidently, found sugar a well-paying business.

Oscar was lying in a cold tub, a towel around his head. Mr. Maddox looked in long enough to say: "I'm going to find Miss Renard. I'm not too bright myself—I saw her twice and didn't even ask her if the police know her father had mentioned my name over the telephone. That may be the real reason Cassidy and Rojas are so interested in me."

"I think," said Oscar hollowly, "I'll live. But don't count on it."

A taxicab took Mr. Maddox past Central Park and the bright stone pile of the Capitol, so like the Capitol in Washington. Beyond Fraternidad Park the taxi sped through streets not familiar to Mr. Maddox. It swung around one last corner and pulled up in front of a shabby, two-story apartment building.

The neighborhood was not good. Faded blue stucco had cracked off the walls. Mr. Maddox verified the address as the one given him by the Isle Royal clerk. He stepped inside and found stairs faced with gaudy pink tiles ascending from a center hallway. Mr. Maddox found the door he wanted upstairs, near the back, on the right.

Lack of money after her father's death must have made Renée Renard move quickly to a shoddy place like this. Mr. Maddox was feeling sorry for her as he started to knock—and then he stiffened and did not knock.

Near the toe of his left shoe, a tiny trickle of red was barely visible under the bottom of the door. Less than half an inch of the sluggish stream had crept into view. But, as Mr.

Maddox looked, a chill sensation spread over his broad back. He had seen enough to know what must be beyond the door.

Mr. Maddox was turning away from the door, willing to let someone else knock and enter, when he heard steps approaching from below. He stopped, listening intently, with the feel of new trouble spreading through his big frame.

The steps hesitated—and then they started heavily up the stairs.

The feet were heavy, such as Cassidy's feet would be. Mr. Maddox had a gruesome moment of wondering what Cassidy would say if he found Joe Maddox here at this door. Then he thought of Rojas, the alert little Havana detective, and the feeling got worse.

There was no place to go. Without much hope, Mr. Maddox tried the doorknob. The door opened at his touch.

Slowly, Mr. Maddox turned and surveyed the girl lying on the floor.

She still wore the black mourning, and from the looks of things she hadn't struggled much. Not even when a sharp blade had entered her throat. Her life had flowed sluggishly across the cheap floor tiles and edged its mute testimony beneath the door.

The stranger's footsteps came nearer down the hall. Mr. Maddox moved quietly across the room to another door. It was a bedroom and a living room, and when he passed into the next room, he was in a small kitchen, smelling of meals long ago cooked and eaten.

The knock Mr. Maddox expected came, and silence followed. The slow seconds dragged. Through a half inch opening, Mr. Maddox watched the limp body of Renée Renard, her legs shapely in sheer silk, the smooth white skin above the knees showing where her dress was disarranged.

He saw the hall door open quietly. Then a figure stood hesitantly in the doorway—the stolid, pink-cheeked diamond man, from Amsterdam, Mynheer Vanderstein. The sound of his explosive, indrawn breath told Mr. Maddox that Vanderstein had not expected this. Astonishment and fear, flowed across the Hollander's face. His retreat had all the look of panic.

Mr. Maddox waited a moment. He had toyed with the idea of showing himself to Vanderstein, but had thought better of it. Now he looked intently about the room. The girl had not unpacked her bags. Her hat and gloves had been tossed carelessly on the bed. A half-smoked Cuban cigarette had gone out in a glass ashtray. There was no purse. She had carried a purse last night. One should be here, and it was not.

Mr. Maddox gave a last thoughtful look about the room, and at the body. The blade which had stabbed her had been taken away.

He listened inside the door, opened it cautiously, and then stepped out into the hall, carefully closing the door behind him.

Renée Renard might have been killed for the contents of her purse, but Mr. Maddox did not think so. If her father had been stabbed or shot, one could guess that the same reasons had brought death to the daughter. But what motive for this cold-blooded killing after her father had jumped to his own death? Mr. Maddox looked calm as he went down the stairs, but inside he was wire-tight. Now he would never know if she had told the police her father had spoken Joe Maddox' name over the telephone. She would never be able to tell him anything.

THE taxi was still waiting, parked a few feet beyond the doorway. Mr. Maddox said: "Plaza Hotel." The Plaza was as good a place as any to leave the cab. He only hoped the driver didn't read newspapers or remember the people he carried.

Mr. Maddox walked out of a side entrance of the hotel lobby and continued to the Maribou.

The Maribou, this noon, had a huge luncheon crowd. Micky and Buddy Zastas had made their place a gathering spot for racetrack fans. Many a sure tip was exchanged over drinks and food before driving out to the races at Oriental Park.

There were several faces that Mr. Maddox recognized. He nodded to two familiars, and then Micky Zastas was at his side, with a thin, polite smile.

"Want to talk to you, Micky," Mr. Maddox said blandly.

"A pleasure, Señor Maddox. Privately?" Micky was short, like his jockey brother, but heavier. The Cuban sun had never tanned him.

"I'll have a double Scotch at the bar while we talk."

They went to the rear of the inner side of the horseshoe-shaped bar. Micky perched carelessly on a stool. Mr. Maddox leaned against the bar, where he could watch the customers, and Micky. "Oscar was slipped a goof ball in here last night."

"We don't do that here," Micky protested mildly.

"Oscar was on the other side of the bar, having a drink with a stranger. A Cuban, wearing a brown suit. The fellow had a small black mustache."

Micky's shrug denied knowledge. "Who can tell about a stranger? Is your friend all right?"

"Fortunately he is. He woke up on the ground this morning out in Vedado. He hadn't been robbed."

"Strange," said Micky, and he really seemed puzzled. "You're leaving Havana soon?"

"Not that I know of."

"Havana," said Micky, slowly, "is not always healthy. Sometimes a change of climate . . ."

Mickey knew something. He was trying to say something.

"The climate suits me, Micky." Mr. Maddox drank from the tall, cold glass and put it down gently. The strength of the double Scotch was warming through him. "But I'm interested," said Mr. Maddox. "Not healthy, eh?"

"Who knows?" Micky murmured. "A pill from a stranger one night—perhaps a knife the next."

"Knife?" Mr. Maddox questioned, wondering if Micky were speaking of the dead girl. Could Micky know something about that crime, so soon?

"Or a bullet," said Micky, smiling. "This is not a good year to make a racetrack book in Cuba," he observed, looking out at his tables and his customers.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't been making book this winter."

"No?" said Micky politely. "I thought you had been. Not even on that race Blue Gold lost about two weeks ago?"

"Blue Gold?" said Mr. Maddox. "Is that horse still running? I remember his maiden win at Churchill Downs, as a two-year-old. Old Man Stag Butler owned him. Blue Gold must be—let's see—eleven years old now." Mr. Maddox looked intently at Micky. "I don't know anything about that race two weeks ago."

Micky frowned. His look, too, seemed searching, probing to see what was behind the broad, bland face of Joe Maddox.

"My brother is out at the track now," said Micky. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind. His smile had a flash of warmth that had previously been lacking. "Buddy can't ride, but he must visit the horses. He can tell you how Blue Gold lost that race."

"I'll see him," Mr. Maddox decided promptly. Now he was sure that Micky knew something. As soon as he had denied knowing anything about Blue Gold, Micky's manner had changed.

"Do you know Cassidy, the Masterton Agency detective?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"No," Micky replied.

"How about a chap named Barott? He has something to do with sugar."

Micky chuckled. "Half of Cuba has something to do with sugar. I don't recall the gentleman's name."

MR. MADDOX hardly heard that last. A girl had leaned out of one of the booths, looking toward the entrance and toward the bar. She saw Mr. Maddox staring at her and

was startled. She turned quickly back into the booth.

"Excuse me, I see a friend," Mr. Maddox told Micky, not quite accurately. He went toward the booth.

She had been lurching alone. "Well, kid," asked Mr. Maddox blandly, "where's Cassidy?" He sat down opposite her without being asked.

She had the same magazine-cover figure, the creamy sun-tan of the night before, when she had impersonated Renée Renard. She had been toying with a chicken salad, hardly touching the food. Her manner was cool, her dislike a visible thing.

"Get out!" she said calmly.

Mr. Maddox wondered if she could be goaded into losing her poise. "Neat trick you tried last night, sister," he remarked. "Cassidy put you up to it, I suppose. And met you in here for the report."

That made her glance waver. Color came into her face. "You can tell Cassidy he's as thick-headed as ever," Mr. Maddox said, chuckling. "He's not smart, he never was smart, he never will be smart. Tell him Joe Maddox said so, and ask him for me why he doesn't do his own snooping, instead of sending a cutie around for bait. Can you remember all that?"

"I can remember it," she said, her voice suddenly unsteady. "I won't forget it. Now will you get out?"

"No," Mr. Maddox said genially. When he looked up, the man who had stopped at the booth was not a waiter. It was Barott.

"What's this?" Barott said crisply. His friendly manner of the previous day was gone. He was surprised, on guard.

"This," said Mr. Maddox blandly, "is old home week, it seems. Friends getting together. I thought you were leaving town last night."

"I changed my mind," Barott said curtly. "What is it, Renée?" he asked the girl. "You look upset."

It was the way he looked at her, spoke to her. *The dope*, Mr. Maddox told himself, *is in love with her*. You couldn't mistake it in Barott's manner—possessive, tender, concerned. But that, for the moment, was a minor manner.

"Did I hear you call the young lady Renée?" Mr. Maddox asked.

"You did," Barott said shortly. "For your information, now, and finally, this is Miss Renée Renard." He added, with more than a touch of anger: "Last night, I understand, you acted like a damned rowdy when Miss Renard called on you. Insulted her. If I ever hear of it happening again—" Barott swallowed the rest of it. The girl's slight warning gesture had restrained him.

"Sit down," Mr. Maddox said. The calm force of his unruffled request brought Barott down beside the girl. Mr. Maddox bit the end off a thick black cigar with a snap of his teeth. He was not so calm inwardly. Too much was happening. "Yesterday, you apparently didn't know anything about Miss Renard," Mr. Maddox reminded Barott.

"I didn't. We met later," Barott scowled. "Miss Renard came to me, as she did to you. I treated her more courteously."

"I see. She came to you and said she was Miss Renard." Mr. Maddox leaned forward a little, watching them both. "This morning," he said, "I went to the Isle Royal to see Miss Renard. I did see her. I talked with her. This is not the young lady."

Barott began to look bewildered.

"How much do you know about a dumb and tricky detective named Cassidy?" Mr. Maddox asked. "I know you were with him last night—but how much do you know about him?"

"You seem to know a lot of things," Barott said. He looked at the girl beside him. "But *this* is Miss Renard. She told me so." His hand, Mr. Maddox could see, clasped hers, under the table edge. "I was with Renée this morning," Barott said, "when her father was buried."

CHAPTER FOUR

"You're It, Joe"

THE girl bit hard on her lower lip, and looked away, blinking. Mr. Maddox sat there, frozen, a sick and guilty feeling taking hold of all his vast middle. There was the plain truth on her face, in quiet and controlled grief.

And because he was an honest man and a kind man, Mr. Maddox said quietly: "I can't say more than that I'm sorry. I seem to have made a cruel mistake. I thought I was right. There was another girl, last night and this morning. She called herself Miss Renard. She was dressed in mourning. She looked and talked convincingly."

The two of them stared across the table at Mr. Maddox. The real Renée Renard looked at Barott.

"Bill, it must have been Georgette, my maid, posing as me."

"Why should she pretend to be you?"

"I—don't know."

"Have you moved from the Isle Royal?" Mr. Maddox asked her.

"Yes. I moved to a cheaper place."

So that was all in order. Mr. Maddox wanted to ask his next question loudly, violently.

"Then why is your maid at the new place with her throat cut?"

He had to keep the question locked in. Joe Maddox, just now, didn't dare admit he had been in that shabby apartment with the dead girl. Time enough later, if he should be connected with the crime by the taxi driver's evidence.

Mr. Maddox did ask: "Where can we find your maid?"

"She packed and moved my things while I was—was busy this morning," Renée said. "I am to meet her at the new apartment and pay her. I can't afford to keep her any more."

Mr. Maddox wanted to ask: "Is there any reason why someone would want to kill *you*?" He couldn't. It would be too revealing.

"Now that you are straightened out as to Miss Renard's identity, would you mind leaving?" Barott asked coolly.

The man's feeling for the girl could hardly justify his rude display of feelings. Not after his friendly manner the day before. Not after Mr. Maddox' frank and reasonable apology to Miss Renard.

"You don't like me," the big bookie remarked. "There must be a good reason—a better reason than my mistake about Miss Renard."

Barott nodded stiffly. "You're quite right. I don't like you. I suggest again we'd like to be alone."

Mr. Maddox sighed and got up. "Good luck," he said, and left them.

He telephoned Oscar. Nothing more had happened to Oscar. "I'm going out to the track," Mr. Maddox said. "You sit tight and keep your mouth shut if anyone asks you to talk. Don't be surprised if Cassidy drops around."

"Why should Cassidy—"

Mr. Maddox hung up.

The track was out in the Marianao section, some miles down the coast, reached by a fast and beautiful boulevard, which was an extension of the Malecon, along the sea wall. It was early, but already Havana society was lunching in the dining room of the Jockey

Club and at the tables on the club terrace. Turf fans were appearing in the grandstand. Dust was drifting from harrows that were smoothing the fast mile oval. Charley Abbott was at the clubhouse bar, white apron spotless, bald head shining, as in past years.

Charley beamed as he reached across the bar and shook hands. "I heard you were in Havana, Mr. Maddox. Been wondering why we haven't seen you."

"I've been having a vacation," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Who knew I was in Havana?"

"Several people," said Charley heartily. "Mike Waugh, for one. And then that Masterton man, Cassidy, was asking about you. Several times Major Pohlson wanted to know if you were out for the afternoon. In fact just yesterday he was asking."

"What did Pohlson want, Charley?"

"Lord knows, Mr. Joe." Charley rubbed his bald spot. His wink was the merest flicker of an eyelid. "Business, maybe. He had a couple of men with him. Dutchmen, I think."

"I met them."

"Well, you know then," said Charley.

"Is Pohlson betting much this winter?"

"I wouldn't know," Charley admitted. "I don't hear of anything big around the track here. He's running around with a bunch of these well-heeled foreigners this season. Seems to be thick with a lot of them." Charley winked again, and again said: "You ought to know. Pohlson usually wonders if you're around, and gets me to talking about what a swell guy and a big operator you are. That Major Pohlson thinks a lot of you. It's worth ten bucks to me every time I give his guests a fine spiel about you." Charley grinned. "Sometimes I wonder if he ain't toting up some business for you."

"That calls for a drink. Scotch, Charley," Mr. Maddox said. And while Charley was serving the drink, a wild and breathless thought suddenly struck him. He pushed the frosty Scotch glass aside, untasted. "Has Pohlson been in here recently with a Belgian?"

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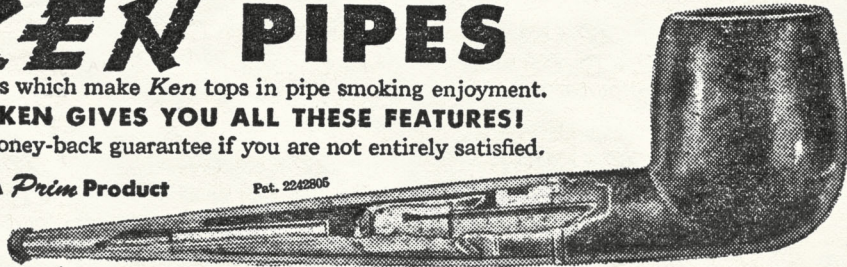
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A man you may have heard him call Renard?"

Charley thought a moment. "By golly he was. About four days ago. Maybe five. You know I got an ear for names. Have to remember 'em in this business. Major Pohlson called the man Renard."

"You're sure of that?"

"Ten bucks sure," said Charley. "Pohlson wanted Renard to know what a swell man you were, and what a big operator. And did I ever hear of a time when you didn't pay off." Charley pushed a damp towel over the bar. "I didn't say nothing that wasn't the truth. It's easy dough, Mr. Joe. You and the major stay around a while longer an' I'll head back to the States well-heeled."

"Charley," said Mr. Maddox, "you're wonderful. I always knew I liked you., Keep the change."

Charley took the bill Mr. Maddox handed him. His eyes widened when he saw it was a fifty. He was stammering thanks when Mr. Maddox left the untasted Scotch on the bar and hurried out.

BUDDY ZASTAS was not around the clubhouse or the grandstand. Long strides took Mr. Maddox across the infield toward the stables. He shook half a dozen hands before he located Buddy Zastas, standing in the bright clear sunlight, watching a blacksmith change heavy iron training shoes for thin aluminum racing plates on the hoofs of a bay gelding.

Buddy saw Mr. Maddox. His nod had the same lack of warmth his brother had displayed at the Maribou. In the past Buddy's grin had been broad and welcoming.

"I'd like to talk to you, Buddy."

"What about?" Buddy asked without warmth.

"Micky suggested it."

"O. K.," said Buddy, moving off into the open, where they would be beyond listening ears between the stable lines.

Buddy still had the slight, boyish figure of a good jockey, powerful in arms and shoulders. But he limped slightly and did not stand quite erect. There were lines and folds in his face that not even increased weight should have brought. One could not see the steel and rubber bracing Buddy wore for his back. He was a quieter, sadder, more mature boy, different from the restless, laughing Cuban Flash who had passed in one second from fame and glory to oblivion under the chopping hoofs of the racing pack at Bowie. Buddy would never ride again, but his heart would never leave the stables and the horses.

"Micky told me to ask you how Blue Gold lost that race about two weeks ago," Mr. Maddox said bluntly.

Buddy's look darkened. "I rode Blue Gold

in the Candlewood Memorial, fifty thousand added, at Arlington, in Chicago," Buddy said. "He was four years old. It was my first big race—I mean, for that kind of money. Neither of us had a chance, but Blue Gold didn't know it. We started at thirty-to-one odds and the favorite at two-to-five."

"The favorite was King High," Mr. Maddox recalled. "I was in New York and missed the Candlewood that year, but I remember King High and those two-to-five odds." Mr. Maddox smiled. "All the money in the country on King High. My book had plenty of it—and I almost got heart failure along with a lot of others over what happened."

A glow had come on Buddy's tanned face. His voice picked up. "Blue Gold didn't know he was outclassed and didn't have a chance. He almost ran the heart out of King High—and out of me. He was still coming on when he reached the wire and lost by inches." Buddy struck a fist into the other palm. "And he did it by heart alone. He just wasn't the horse for races like that. But he always had heart. He always tried. And here he is in Havana, this winter, still trying, when at his age and with his bum legs he should be out on pasture."

"And two weeks ago?" Mr. Maddox suggested.

"Tony Amondo owns Blue Gold. When they come any more crooked than Amondo, they're locked up, as you ought to know," said Buddy. "Two weeks ago Blue Gold had a soft spot. He got a good push from the clockers and touts and turf writers. His odds were nice, and he could have taken that field of broken-down platers, even at his age. Because he's still trying. He still doesn't know when he's outclassed. But he didn't have the chance. He started that race loaded with water and feed and his jockey sitting like a sack of raw sugar. He was a sure winner but he lost by two lengths. And his crooked owner and crooked bookies cleaned up."

"Interesting," Mr. Maddox said. "Buddy, did you ever hear of me breaking my word?"

"Well, no," said Buddy after a moment. "I always heard you delivered when you said you would."

"I never heard of that race two weeks ago, Buddy. I'll give you or any one else fifty thousand cash if he can prove I had any knowledge of the race, made a dime out of it, or was in anyway connected with it. I'll put it in writing, Buddy, and the cash with it, as soon as I can get that much from New York. Any-one from the President of Cuba, on down, can hold the money and agreement, and pay out when all the facts are in. That's no bluff."

Buddy Zastas looked bewildered, and then vastly more respectful. "But Mr. Maddox—I thought—"

"I don't know what you thought, or why you thought it," said Mr. Maddox calmly. "But there's a chance to earn fifty grand if you can prove what you seem to suspect about me."

"The hell with the fifty grand!" said Buddy. "It was the horse. He always kept trying—and they didn't give him a chance this last time. There were whispers around that you covered plenty dough on that race. And other races before and after that one. It's sounded like you've been cleaning up on the quiet this winter."

"Who whispered about me?"

"Tack-room chatter," said Buddy. "A guy catches a word here and there, and tells it, and it gets passed along. You don't know where it gets started. A stable boy for Tony Amondo told me he heard Amondo telling some visitors he always bet heavy with Joe Maddox when a good thing came along, and he always got paid off, and the odds were never hurt. Amondo said it had to be kept quiet, because Joe Maddox was not supposed to make book in Cuba. But for the right people, it could be arranged."

"Who were the visitors?" Mr. Maddox questioned, his broad face hard.

"The boy didn't know. They looked like they had money." Buddy Zastas looked at Mr. Maddox intently. "I believe you."

"Thanks, Buddy. I wish you'd have believed it sooner and told me."

"How was I to know?" said Buddy, shrugging. "Anything can happen around a race-track. Blue Gold lost that race. I got it straight out of the stable how he was made to lose. Everything clicked, like it was true all the way."

"I don't know this Tony Amondo. I'd like to meet him."

"His horses are a couple of barns over," said Buddy, and when they walked over to that line of stalls, Buddy nudged Mr. Maddox' arm. "That's Amondo watching the leg bandage being put on Blue Gold. He's entered Blue Gold again today."

"So?" said Mr. Maddox under his breath. "Again today, eh? Buddy, you give me ideas."

TONY AMONDO was a thick-built, dark-skinned man, with a fairly heavy black mustache. He was bareheaded. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up on muscular arms. Knuckles on hips, he watched a kneeling Cuban carefully bandaging the right front leg of a tethered chestnut horse.

Amondo's glance shifted to their approach without interest, and then stayed on the big and distinguished man beside Buddy Zastas. A smile showed white teeth as Amondo lifted his hand to Buddy.

Mr. Maddox looked at Blue Gold, now a worn-out, cheap plater, still racing gallantly on

bad legs, when he should have been taken out of racing years ago.

"This is Joe Maddox, the bookmaker," Buddy said. "Maybe you know him already, Tony."

"No," he said. "But I am ver' happy now, *señor*. Oh, *sí*."

"How are you?" said Mr. Maddox. "You must be the owner whom Renard mentioned the other day. I suppose you've heard he jumped out of his hotel window."

Tony Amondo looked uncomfortable. His glance wavered before he smiled regretfully.

"Oh, *sí*. In the paper I read about that. Ver' bad, eh? But I don't know you are friend of thees Renard. He don' say."

"His daughter, too," said Mr. Maddox. "Renard's death was tough on her. Did you know she was left without any money?"

Amondo pulled out a handkerchief and patted his perspiring forehead. "No," he said. "The daughter I don' meet."

Look her up some day," Mr. Maddox suggested. She's moved to a cheaper place." Mr. Maddox looked at the chestnut horse. "Buddy says this is Blue Gold, who used to run in the States. I remember him well. Pretty old now, isn't he?"

"*Sí, sí*," agreed Amondo. "But a good horse still, *señor*. He weel win many races."

"They'll fool you sometimes," Mr. Maddox said chuckling. "Buddy says he's running today. Going to try for a win?"

"*Señor*, I am always trying for a win."

"Naturally, when you have a chance," Mr. Maddox agreed humorously. "I haven't been paying attention to the horses this winter. But if I'm around when he starts this afternoon, I might put a ticket on Blue Gold's nose for old times sake, if he has a chance."

"We will win, *señor*. Of that I am sure. But I do not tell you to bet or not to bet. One can never be right always."

"I found that out thirty years ago," Mr. Maddox said drily. "Glad to have met you. Good luck this afternoon."

"Thank you, *señor*. A thousand thanks."

"Can Blue Gold take his race this afternoon?" Mr. Maddox asked Buddy when they were out of earshot.

"He has only one horse to beat. Laelo, who hasn't the heart of a great horse. He'll quit, while a horse like Blue Gold keeps trying." Buddy Zastas spat. "But," he added gloomily, "a horse can't win when it's decided he will not win."

"Amondo isn't too smart," Mr. Maddox said thoughtfully. "He can't think fast enough. He admitted knowing Renard before he could duck the question. That was all I wanted to know."

"I'm curious," Buddy admitted. "What goes on about this man Renard?"

"You're a square one, Buddy," Mr. Maddox mused as they strolled slowly between the busy stable lines. "You know the track here, and Havana, like the back of your hand. Want to help me?" Mr. Maddox chuckled ruefully. "I need help."

Buddy nodded without hesitation.

"Good. Now, Buddy, I never met this man Renard. He must have had money, to live on the Prado, but he died broke. His daughter once heard him mention my name over the telephone. Renard said: 'I do not think this Maddox is a good man.'"

"You didn't know him—but he spoke about you?" said Buddy, wrinkling his forehead.

"Exactly. Renard had money. He lost it. He was talking about me. He knew Tony Amondo. I have other reasons for knowing he was interested in racing before he died. Catch on what probably happened to him?"

"I guess Renard bet on the races and didn't win."

"You'll never make a better guess, son. Renard didn't have a chance to win. But who got his money? The mutuels? I don't think so. He thought he was betting with Joe Maddox."

Buddy whistled softly. "But what can be done about it, Mr. Joe? Renard killed himself. That's not murder."

"It's murder in my book," Mr. Maddox growled. "And you're going to help do something about it."

ORIENTAL PARK this afternoon was crowded and beautiful. If there was tragedy, heartbreak, cold-blooded murder, in that lush and tropical setting, not even Mr. Maddox could find it.

But Joe Maddox could sense it, like a somber thread deep in the gay pattern.

A girl had died, a man had plunged to his death. Oscar may have had a closer call than anyone suspected. Cassidy's moves in the back-ground were threatening.

Major Pohlson was not at the track today. Mr. Maddox searched the clubhouse and grandstand, questioned Charley, at the bar. Pohlson had not appeared today. From a clubhouse telephone, Mr. Maddox called Oscar, at the hotel.

Oscar sounded feverish. "That cop, Rojas, was here lookin' for you, Joe. Somethin' happened. He was loaded with questions about where you been today an' where he can find you."

"Is he there now?"

"Would I be talkin' like this? What's he got on you, Joe?"

"Hard to tell. Not as much as he thinks he has, I hope."

"I was afraid of this!" Oscar wailed. "Trouble, ain't it?"

"We'll see. Sit tight."

A minute or so after leaving the telephone, Mr. Maddox' luck ran out. A firm hand fell on his arm. The big, grizzled man who had closed in beside him said: "Tag. You're it, Joe."

"Cassidy!" Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Am I surprised! But don't paw me."

"Horse bets, yes," said Cassidy, keeping his hand on Mr. Maddox' arm as they moved through the clubhouse throng. "Larceny, maybe. But slitting a dame's pretty throat is too much."

"Your hunches were always lousy, Cassidy."

"It ain't a hunch—it's testimony," said Cassidy gruffly. "There was a fat Cuban mamma sitting inside the iron-grilled window to the left of the doorway. She saw you get out of the taxi, heard you go upstairs, then saw you leave in the taxi. There's only one guy in Havana fits her sworn description. She noticed the taxi number, too. We've already talked to the driver."

"I'm not admitting anything, Cassidy. But how did you happen to be talking to this woman, at whatever window she was planted?"

"Miss Renard and Mr. Barott found the body," said Cassidy. "It was Miss Renard's maid. A messy but efficient job with a knife, if you get what I mean."

Mr. Maddox almost broke his stride. The two Hollanders, Vanderstein and Pruyn, were entering the clubhouse as Cassidy and Joe Maddox were leaving.

The two men seemed surprised to see Mr. Maddox. They looked as if they wanted to speak, but were reluctantly going to pass on in silence.

Mr. Maddox did the speaking. "Is Major Pohlson going to be here today?" he asked Vanderstein. Cassidy had to stop, too, looking annoyed.

"Ve haf not see Major Pohlson since this morning," Vanderstein said. "Tonight ve will see him." Vanderstein had a worried look. Pruyn was stolid. When Cassidy glanced away, Pruyn winked slightly at Mr. Maddox. "Ve did not expect to see you at the track here either, *mynheer*," Pruyn commented.

"Friends of yours, Joe?" Cassidy asked with professional interest.

Mr. Maddox introduced the two Hollanders. "Cassidy," he said, "is a detective. He's just been telling me that Miss Renard's maid was killed. You gentlemen know the Renards, don't you?"

A haunted look touched Vanderstein's pink face. Pruyn looked concerned. "Belgians," he said. "Once ve met them at a gathering." Pruyn shook his head. "First the father, then the maid—iss bad, no?"

"We've got to get going," Cassidy said abruptly. "See you gentlemen again, maybe."

Mr. Maddox went before Cassidy blurted out that this was an arrest.

"If you ask me," said Cassidy, as he looked for a taxi, "you're working those guys up for a bite, too. Is this Pohlson one of the Long Island bunch that owns a racing stable?"

"Distantly."

"He must be in line for a trimming, too," decided Cassidy cynically. "I might have known you'd get greedy before you left Cuba, Joe."

"I'm humoring you," said Mr. Maddox coldly.

Cassidy kept his hand on Mr. Maddox' arm until they settled safely were in the taxicab and moving away.

"There ain't any humor in it," said Cassidy flatly. "Listen, you fat slob, did you think the lid was off just because this was Cuba? Did you think everybody got dumb as soon as the boat docked inside Morro Castle?" Cassidy leaned over and spat out the open window. "When the Masterton office here in Cuba got some telephone calls asking if Joe Maddox was actually a big-shot race-track bookie, with a good reputation for paying off in the States, our Havana office called our Miami office for the dope. I was asked to confirm it." Cassidy's smile had absolutely no humor. "I confirmed it," he said, "an' grabbed the next

plane to see what you were up to, Joe. The nerve of you, letting your suckers check on your reliability through the Masterton Agency!"

"Rot, Cassidy."

"And then," said Cassidy, "you try to find out what the cops knew about Renard killing himself. Did you think Renard left a signed statement that you crooked him out of his dough?" Cassidy spat out the window again, violently disgusted. "That poor devil had money enough to take his daughter back to Belgium and start life over again. They'd hoped for it and dreamed about it. But a smartie got his money on the races." Cassidy hit his knee with a clenched fist. "Joe, there wasn't enough proof against you on that deal—but it put the finger on you."

"I'm beginning to believe that," Mr. Maddox agreed. "Did you or Rojas have my hotel rooms searched?"

"Why should I search your rooms? I know you from away back!" Cassidy snorted. "I sent Miss Renard to question you. She got a brush-off. Maybe it looked smooth to you at the time." Cassidy turned a hateful look on Mr. Maddox. "Her maid was working for you, wasn't she?"

"No."

"Blah!" said Cassidy. "The girl had to be



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working for you—or you wouldn't have bothered to slit her throat to keep her from talking. Who else was in your mob? I know you weren't booming up trade all by yourself."

"Sometimes," said Mr. Maddox thoughtfully, "I almost think you're smart, Cassidy. Then you start talking."

CHAPTER FIVE

Deliver Us From Evil

CASSIDY'S grizzled face was hard with conviction. "Rojas met you in the lobby of the Isle Royal this morning," said Cassidy. "You told him you'd been up to see Miss Renard. We know now you talked to the maid. Did she threaten to squeal, Joe? Was that why you knocked her off?"

"When Renard said over the telephone, 'I do not think this Maddox is a good man, whom did he say it to?'" Mr. Maddox asked suddenly.

"Some friend, evidently."

"Use your brain," Mr. Maddox advised. "Those words are proof that Renard said more than that about me. He and the other person were discussing me. Do you agree?" "Sounds that way," Cassidy admitted.

"Why hasn't that other person said something about the conversation? After Renard jumped to his death, a friend would tell about that telephone talk, if I had anything to do with the suicide."

Cassidy stirred restlessly on the taxi seat. "You trying to tell me, Joe, that Renard didn't make that crack about you?"

"Let's admit he did. Renard certainly didn't say it to me over the telephone. Right?"

"I guess so. Not to you."

"But when Miss Renard came to my hotel rooms, I told her what her father had said about me. Isn't that proof that Georgette, the maid, must have told me about it?"

"Plenty proof!"

"All right," said Mr. Maddox blandly, "if the maid was working for me, why would I be dope enough to repeat words that only she could have told me? Why would I be fool enough to antagonize Miss Renard when she came to see me? I could have soaped her and sent her away purring."

Cassidy looked as if he were getting slightly confused. He took refuge in a dogged statement: "Facts are facts."

"Malarkey!" said Mr. Maddox calmly. "How many ringers have you seen win a race? The horse looked right, he ran right, the bets were paid off—only it was a phony horse running under another name."

"You ain't running under another name," said Cassidy.

Mr. Maddox lit a fat black cigar and

puffed some moments before he spoke again. "How much chance do I have to get out of Cuba on a plane or a boat if the Cuban police don't want me to leave?"

"Try it, pal."

"Not a chance," said Mr. Maddox reflectively. "I'm in Cuba and I stay in Cuba until Rojas decides I can leave. So why not forget about me for the rest of the afternoon?"

"Nuts!" said Cassidy vigorously.

"All right, stay back of me and tag me until this evening."

"I'm going to toss you in the clink and stop worrying about you," said Cassidy bluntly.

Mr. Maddox chuckled softly. Cassidy was hard but not as cold-blooded as he sounded. Twenty years and more of the past were between them. There had been many friendly hours.

The fast-driven taxicab had reached Havana. They were rolling along the Malecon in a thick stream of traffic. Cassidy had lapsed into silence. Now and then he gave Mr. Maddox a resentful look.

"Great arguments we used to have at Danny's place, in Frisco, eh, Cassidy?" Mr. Maddox mused.

"I'm old enough now to know you're workin' on me," said Cassidy gruffly. "All right, Joe. Two hours. But I'll be right with you."

"Two hours less in the pokey," Mr. Maddox chuckled. "Let's go to my rooms and have a drink."

They were in the hotel lobby when they saw Rojas, the slender Havana detective, break off a conversation with a bellhop and cut over to join them.

"Ah, our friend," said Rojas. His dark, direct eyes held a cold glint as they ran over Mr. Maddox.

"Out at the track, as I thought," said Cassidy. "We were going up to his rooms for a drink and a talk."

Rojas nodded. "There should be much to talk about with Señor Maddox. Has he told you why the young lady was killed?"

"Joe's got a line that would dizzy a big-shot lawyer," Cassidy grumbled. "He's said a lot, but he hasn't admitted anything."

"I," said Rojas, "do not dizzy easily. I would like to speak with you alone for a few minutes, Señor Cassidy."

"Shall I go up and get the drinks ready?" Mr. Maddox asked amiably.

"I want to keep seeing you," Cassidy refused.

"Why not?" Rojas differed. "An escape would admit guilt." Rojas smiled briefly. "It would be a pleasure to watch Señor Maddox trying to get out of Cuba."

Mr. Maddox felt discouraged as he walked into his suite. The dead girl had knotted a mesh of evidence around him and his efforts

to break out of the web of facts did not promise much. Oscar must still be here, since the door was unlocked. He might as well know the worst.

"Oscar!" Mr. Maddox said as he walked through the short, closet-lined foyer inside the door.

It was not Oscar who whipped out before him, quickly, quietly. Mr. Maddox was completely surprised. It seemed a long time before his eyes and brain finally recognized the small Cuban with the thin, sporty mustache.

Nothing was said. With vague astonishment, Mr. Maddox noticed the steel blade in the smaller man's hand. The blade was striking at him. Actually Mr. Maddox was not as slow as his thoughts seemed. His big arm went up in swift instinctive guard. That was all he could do. There was no time to stop and leap back.

Just a guarding arm to meet the knife blade. It was queer how the coat cloth ripped audibly as the steel cut through. The Cuban grunted with the effort of the blow. The knife seemed to hang a little in its deep and savage passage through Mr. Maddox' flesh.

IT MIGHT have been the pain which made Mr. Maddox suddenly realize he had blocked a blow which would have cut his neck from ear to ear.

Joe Maddox had never been so close to death or so quickly filled with fury. This was meant to be cold-blooded murder, without mercy or excuse.

He was a big man, a clumsy-looking man. Few strangers would ever guess that the bulk was mostly muscle. The knife was ripping out of the left arm when Mr. Maddox struck with his big right fist. All his size, weight, fury were behind the big fist. It was doubtful if the small Cuban even saw the fist. He was crouching a little, still grunting and slightly off balance. The blow caught him on the side of the face.

The Cuban went clear across the room, staggering, arms waving helplessly. His eyes were wide as he struck a wall table that held glasses, thermos jug, Scotch bottle. Glasses and the bottle fell over. The Cuban bounced off the table and pitched sideways to the floor. He had not made a sound. He did not move when he landed.

Mr. Maddox glowered at him and then noticed blood dripping from his ripped coat sleeve. The arm still did not hurt much. Mr. Maddox yanked the coat off, pulled the shirt sleeve above the elbow, and muttered at the long deep slash in his arm muscles.

He stalked into the bathroom, wrapped a towel around the arm, and returned. The Cuban was still out cold on the floor. He had dropped the spring-bladed knife. Mr. Maddox

picked up the weapon, noted that the long, thin blade was honed viciously keen, and tossed it on the table.

An alarmed thought struck Mr. Maddox. He looked through the suite for Oscar. Even in the closets. Oscar was not around, which meant he was probably still alive. Mr. Maddox felt better.

Blood was soaking the towel. Mr. Maddox adjusted it, and was wrapping it tighter when the two detectives walked in without knocking.

"I suppose it's Scotch," Cassidy said. He suddenly saw the figure on the floor and stared. "That ain't Oscar!" Then he saw the bloody towel. He swore. "*What the devil, Joe!*"

"It was almost my throat this time," Mr. Maddox said shortly. "He's the guy who doped Oscar last night. I've seen him following me. Who is he?"

"He was waiting here for you?" Rojas asked, moving to the prone figure.

"I cut myself and hit him for the fun of it!" Mr. Maddox remarked drily.

"Hit him?" Rojas murmured. He stooped and felt the Cuban's wrist. Then he looked at the big man and shook his head. "What a hit, *señor!* But his pulse is good."

Rojas seemed to be thinking hard. "This man is named Lazaro Benevedes," he mused. "He is a small-time gambler and thief. I would not have said a killer. And you, Señor Maddox—why kill *you?*"

"Ask him," Mr. Maddox growled.

The man was stirring a little. Rojas pushed him with a foot, spoke sharply in Spanish. The Cuban sat up groggily, feeling his jaw. He glared, shook his head when Rojas again addressed him in Spanish.

"He will not talk—yet," Rojas said. "Senor Maddox, a doctor, eh?"

"My arm can wait a little," Mr. Maddox growled. "Suppose you get that chap Barott and Miss Renard here." Mr. Maddox swung on Cassidy. "Listen, you flatfoot, this guy on the floor was hanging around last night at the Maribou while you were talking with Miss Renard and Barott. He was interested in you. He slipped Oscar a goof ball and then rode Oscar out to Vedado and dumped him for the night. What do you know about it?"

"Never saw him before, Joe."

"How about Barott or Miss Renard?"

"If I never saw him before, how do I know what they know?"

Rojas had been speaking over the telephone. He put it down, turned to Mr. Maddox. "Señor Barott engaged a room at the Sevilla for Miss Renard after the dead girl was found in her new apartment. They are both coming quickly. Now a doctor?"

"I want a drink and a chance to think," Mr. Maddox growled. "Don't get nervous

over a bloody towel. I've got plenty blood left." He slopped Scotch into a glass and gulped it straight. "I wonder where Oscar is? It's not like him to walk out when he had orders to stay here. An' damn funny, when he left, this pint-sized butcher replaced him."

Rojas spoke again, coldly, questioningly, in Spanish. He got only a shake of the head from the man still sitting on the floor. Rojas picked up the knife, closed it, dropped it in a pocket, and handcuffed the prisoner. The man started to get up. Rojas shoved him back on the floor.

"Your neck," Rojas said thoughtfully. "Now, Señor Maddox, you have a story that can be believed, with that arm. I would find it easy to believe what you might have to say about the dead girl whose neck was also cut."

Mr. Maddox grunted. "Well, believe it then. A bit of blood was showing under her door. I looked in and found her."

"But you did not report it."

"I thought she was Miss Renard. My name was linked to Renard's death. Why ask for more trouble over what I thought was the dead daughter? I got out of there, since she was past helping."

"Blood was showing under the door," Rojas murmured. "There is just enough guilt in not reporting the murder, Señor Maddox, to invite belief."

Knuckles rapped sharply on the door.

"Come in!" Mr. Maddox called.

Rojas stepped in front of the seated prisoner but Mr. Maddox did not see that. He was looking in broad and growing relief at Vanderstein and Pruyn, the two Hollanders, who came in eagerly, with delighted smiles.

THEY were surprised to see Cassidy and Rojas. They stopped, still smiling. "Ve intrude, eh?" Pruyn asked.

"We're all friends, gentlemen," Mr. Maddox said. "In fact I've been expecting you."

"And who," asked Rojas politely, "are these gentlemen?"

"They were at the track," said Cassidy. "Joe spoke to them as we were leaving. They knew Renard."

"But slightly," Pruyn corrected.

"How slightly?" Mr. Maddox asked. He looked at Vanderstein. "Have you seen Miss Renard today?"

Vanderstein visibly paled. "Ach, no!" he denied almost violently. "I—I vished to see her. It occurred to me she might need help after the death of her father. Perhaps a little money." Vanderstein drew a breath. "Ve who fled from home understand what it means to be alone in a strange country."

"Do you know this man on the floor?" Mr. Maddox asked abruptly. He stepped aside. Rojas moved also.

The visitors had not noticed the prisoner. Their eyes widened. Their glowing good humor left them. Pruyn shook his head. Vanderstein did the same.

Rojas spoke to Vanderstein with faint irony. "You did not happen to look for Miss Renard at her new apartment?"

Vanderstein's look was suddenly veiled and frightened. "I don't understand, *mynheer*. Who are you?"

"He was there," Mr. Maddox told Rojas. "He looked in the door and left in a rush. I was inside at the time. My guess is, he's telling the truth about why he called." Then he added: "These two men are detectives. Now, gentlemen, what's on your mind? You can speak freely."

"Police!" Vanderstein groaned. "Ach—always there are police. Gentlemen, ve do not understand. Ve have good characters." The man swallowed hard. "Always the fear of being deported, of being sent on to another country vere ve are not wanted. Please, gentlemen."

Rojas inhaled slowly and watched them silently.

"You're not being deported—yet," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Shall I talk for you both? You were feeling good when you came in. Good luck, eh? Perhaps you bet on a horse that won?"

Cassidy's attention visibly sharpened. The two Hollanders stared dumbly. They were frightened.

"Perhaps you bet on Blue Gold," Mr. Maddox told them. "To win, eh? And Blue Gold won? How much did he pay? How much did you bet?"

"He paid for a winning ticket at the race-track, eight dollars and twenty cents," Pruyn said reluctantly. "Mynheer Maddox, you haf fun with us? You know that ve bet eight thousand dollars?"

"Well, well," Cassidy said. "Eight grand!" He moved beside Mr. Maddox. "Now we're getting down inside the woodpile," he added. "Who'd you bet that eight grand with?"

"Tell him," said Mr. Maddox.

"You, Mynheer Maddox," Pruyn groaned. "You ask me to tell. It must be all right."

"Just like I thought," said Cassidy.

"Not exactly," said Maddox. "To whom did you give the money?"

"I don't understand," Pruyn said helplessly. His round, red face was a study in uncertain fear. "I must tell? Vell, you say so. The money ve entrust to Major Pohlson, of course. Ve haf his receipt. It vas all arranged as you vished, no? There vill be no trouble about paying us our profit?"

Pruyn had opened a wallet as he talked. Now he held out a slip of paper. Cassidy took it.

"How smart are you getting?" Mr. Maddox asked Cassidy. "There's some more proof. I'll bet Pohlson gave Renard a receipt, too. And God knows how many others of these refugees with money. When they lost, they had no kick coming. They all need money so they were suckers for a smooth build-up."

"Who built 'em up?" Cassidy snapped.

"Pohlson, you dope. I couldn't understand why he was always stopping me in the lobby, introducing strangers, and getting me to admit I always paid off big bets in the States. They checked on me at the Masterton Agency and with Charley, the bartender at the track, and God knows where else. They saw Pohlson was pally with me. Why shouldn't they believe Pohlson was placing their bets with me—and believe that I'd pay off without question when they won?"

"Yes," said Pruyt eagerly. "It was understood."

"Only the suckers never won," said Mr. Maddox. "And I never saw any of their dough and never tumbled to what was going on. Not until today, at least."

"But these guys won," reminded Cassidy.

"I gave a grand to Buddy Zastas and told him to make sure the jockey on Blue Gold got it if he won with Blue Gold." Mr. Maddox smiled wryly. "I thought I'd see what happened if Blue Gold won."

"Well, what happened, Joe?"

"I almost got my throat cut," said Mr. Maddox. "Suppose these two gentlemen tell what they did after Blue Gold won?"

Vanderstein was wiping perspiration from his round, red face. "Ve go to the telephone and inform Major Pohlson that ve haf von," he said haltingly. "Please? He assured us ve are to come here and collect our money from Mynheer Maddox. Quickly. He tells us he has nothing to do with the paying of winnings."

"I'd like to have seen Pohlson's face when he heard that Blue Gold had won," said Mr. Maddox reflectively. "The pay-off blew up right under his nose when he wasn't expecting it."

"Maybe," said Cassidy stubbornly. "All I see is your word against Pohlson's word, Joe. That guy's got background. He's got the Pohlson name. Nothing wrong with his reputation that I ever heard."

"Or with mine that you ever proved," Mr. Maddox reminded blandly. "You've got Pohlson's receipt there. He must have been plenty sure of his racket to have issued those things. I guess he figured refugees were hesitant about approaching the police, even in making complaints. Renard killed himself but didn't squawk."

"Can you prove anything?" Cassidy demanded impatiently.

"I'm riding a hunch," admitted Mr. Maddox. "Pruyt, you realize this is serious?"

"Ja! Now I know so," the Hollander admitted miserably.

"Here's your chance. You might get your money back." They were instantly interested. Mr. Maddox studied them. "Pohlson's room is up on the next floor. Go up there. Try to act frightened, excited. If Pohlson isn't there, go down in the lobby and look for him. He'll be around somewhere and his alibi will be good. Now get this carefully. Tell Major Pohlson you found me dead in my room. Tell him my throat has been cut. Ask him what you are to do about your money. And then come back and tell us what he says."

"A screwball idea!" Cassidy snorted.

Rojas had smoked and listened in silence. "I like it," he said. "Senor Vanderstein will wait with us."

PRUYT looked shaken when he departed. One could guess he was thinking about the lost money, the threat of prison, or at best deportation.

Rojas regarded the prisoner in cold silence. The man seemed to be growing more nervous. Barott and Miss Renard arrived. They were visibly on edge.

"What's happening?" Barott inquired when he saw the handcuffed man.

"I've just had my throat cut," Mr. Maddox said blandly. "Know this fellow on the floor?"

"No! And I don't like your humor, Maddox!"

"It ain't humor, it's desperation," Cassidy growled. He looked toward the door as Oscar burst in.

Oscar was wild-eyed, pale. He stopped short, breathing hard, at sight of Mr. Maddox. "You're dead!" Oscar blurted. "I mean, I heard—"

"Where you been?" Cassidy demanded. "Did you have anything to do with planting this guy in here with a knife?"

"I'd say he's been with Major Pohlson and heard Pruyt's report," Mr. Maddox said calmly.

"Sure!" Oscar agreed. "Joe, are you all right?" Oscar swallowed hard. His voice was husky. "I thought you really was carved."

"How did you happen to be with Pohlson?" Rojas questioned softly.

"Tell him," Mr. Maddox said, when Oscar hesitated.

"He telephoned down an' insisted I come up to his room for a drink," Oscar said. "He said he had somethin' to talk over with me about Joe." Oscar swallowed again. "Didn't seem to be no harm in steppin' out for a little. Pohlson was packin'. Said he was takin' the boat tonight back to the States. He wanted to

tell me he heard talk around the track that Joe was layin' against big bets, an' might get into trouble. We were talkin' when this guy busts in an' says he's found Joe with his throat cut." Oscar sucked in a long breath. "I go down here fast."

"Take a drink," Mr. Maddox said, jerking a thumb toward the Scotch bottle. "We're waiting for Pruyn to come back."

"I don't get it, Joe."

"Who does?" Cassidy growled, then looked toward the door as the Hollander stepped in.

Pruyn was mopping his face with a blue-bordered handkerchief. He looked shaken. "Terrible!" he exclaimed thickly. "Major Pohlson iss nod a gentleman. No! He said that Mynheer Maddox must haf refused to pay our vinning money. And that *ve* killed him. He said he had nothing to do with Mynheer Maddox. He acted only as a friend in giving our money to Mynheer Maddox. He said it vas best to forget everything—or Vanderstein and I would be in prison for a murder. He promised to forget."

Rojas sighed. "Señor Maddox, you are dangerous. First you make the horse win, so the trap is set. Then, instead of accusing, you stay dead and let Major Pohlson spring the trap himself. You will allow me to admire?"

Rojas looked at the cigarette end and then at the prisoner. "I will speak with Major Pohlson," he said mildly. "Perhaps the rest of you will wait in the hall near his room? I might wish to call one of you in."

Even Cassidy had a tight and subdued look as he stood in the corridor upstairs with the prisoner and watched Rojas walk into Major Pohlson's room without knocking. The calmness of the slender, casual-looking Havana detective seemed to add strain to the tension which gripped them all. Mr. Maddox noticed that Barott was holding Renée Renard's hand.

The halfdoor of Pohlson's room let the sound of voices emerge. Instinctively, they all edged closer to hear better. Pohlson had been surprised and annoyed, judging by the first sound of his voice. Then Rojas spoke with a calm indifference that could be misleading.

"We shall hate to see you leave Cuba, after what Lazaro Benevedes has told us, Major." "What?"

"The bloody knife was still in his pocket," Rojas said. "And, of course, after he accused you of planning the murder of Señor Maddox, he spoke of the maid employed by Miss Renard. You wish, perhaps, to add something to his story?"

"If he said I suggested he kill her, he's a liar!" Pohlson blurted. "I wasn't near her! Benevedes told me Georgette was frightened after Renard killed himself, and the daughter kept trying to find out the reason. Georgette said she was going to admit she was paid for

reporting information about foreigners who wanted to bet on the races. Benevedes lost his temper and stabbed her. He was nervous anyway, from the way things were breaking after Renard killed himself. He'd been watching Maddox, and he said that even Maddox was getting wise and making moves that looked like trouble."

"Did Renard say he was going to kill himself when he spoke to you about Señor Maddox, over the telephone?" Rojas asked, as if he had no doubt about the conversation.

"No!" Pohlson exploded. "I told him he could make up his losses by betting again—and he said he didn't think Maddox was a good man. One loss on the races was all Renard could stand. He didn't want any more of it. Georgette heard him talking to me."

"She went to see Señor Maddox."

"After you started asking questions about Maddox, we had to know why Maddox had gone to the police about Renard's death," Major Pohlson said.

"Perhaps," said Rojas. "But that is not why I am here. It may even be legal to take from these refugees the money they so badly need. They were trying to make more money easily when they listened to you. But the knife Benevedes used—you see it here in my hand?—this sort of thing is not legal even in Cuba. You will come down with me to see the body of Señor Maddox—and to explain why the friend of Señor Maddox was called to your room while the killing was done."

"That's what *you* think!" Pohlson's thick voice snapped. "Stand—"

The gunshot was a sudden and fearful crash inside. Renée Renard cried out softly. Barott's arm went around her. Mr. Maddox burst into the room a step ahead of Cassidy.

Rojas was holding a cut-off revolver and slapping at the smoldering cloth surrounding a bullet hole in his coat pocket. Major Pohlson had dropped an automatic beside the writing table. An open drawer showed where the gun had been. Pohlson had fallen back into the chair at the table and was bent over, holding his middle. His face was gray with shock. His eyes bulged as he saw Mr. Maddox.

"Fear is a curious thing," Rojas said without emotion. "Señor Renard killed himself from fear of poverty. Señor Pohlson, shall we say, tried to commit suicide by shooting me, from fear of our Cuban courts. But I think he has an even chance of living to see justice done."

"I'll give you two-to-one on it," Mr. Maddox said from pure force of habit.

"No bets, *señor*, if you don't mind," Rojas said, sliding the revolver into his pocket and picking up Pohlson's weapon. "After what I have seen of this case, I am a little superstitious about betting with Señor Maddox."

He stepped cautiously to the edge and sent the body of his uncle after the boulder.



THE PERFECTIONIST

By
JEAN PRENTICE

Harry Griner was very sure of himself. There was no motive for this murder, nothing to inherit. His trap would never be suspected. Harry didn't know, however, that you don't ever dose a wolf trap with otter bait if you want to catch yourself a racoon.

HARRY GRINER took a long, deep breath of the biting cold air. The still figure of his uncle lay crumpled at his feet, yellow light from the half-open door of the barn spilling on the frozen ground and touching his worn blue denims and tousled

white hair. Strange, Griner thought, how little he was being affected by the actual act of murder.

With steady hands, he switched off the barn lights and slid shut the great door. The sound of the cows moving in their stanchions and

the warm odor of the animals reached him now.

How he hated it! He had been a visitor in the farm for only two days but he knew his uncle's routine. He carried the milk across the moon-washed barnyard to the spring house and set it in the cooler.

From an assortment of traps and bottles in the toolshed he selected a large, two-spring trap and bottle of bait scent and stuffed them into his mackinaw pocket. He went back to the old man's body, swung it over a stocky shoulder and struck off along the dim trail that led to the wooded section over beyond the barn.

Harry Griner was very sure of himself. This murder was planned with a cold, ruthless efficiency that would leave no possible loophole for detection. There was no apparent motive. He was Hosmar Wilson's only living relative—but there was nothing to inherit. The old man had no money and the stony farm was not worth much.

He felt a cool satisfaction as he followed the trail. A respected, solid, substantial insurance broker, with a suite of offices and a business that was well established, no one suspected he was verging on bankruptcy.

Several years ago, when he had taken out an accident policy on the old man, there had been talk of oil in this section and he had thought to ingratiate himself with the old fellow. Now he wondered if his plan had begun its slow germination then. Old Hosmar had been pleased when he learned that, if he were disabled, the policy would pay him enough to live on for the rest of his life. What he had never found out was the accidental death clause for twenty-five thousand dollars.

The small life policy he had taken on the old man was just enough to cover funeral expenses and would give him an excuse for obtaining a transcript of death. There was no count on which they could pick him up.

He had even established the habit of making short visits to the farm at this season of the year.

THE trail went through the woods for a few hundred feet and then swung sharply right to skirt a ravine. This was the most hazardous part of the plan and Griner moistened his full lips as he walked cautiously forward. The path was narrow and a misstep would send him hurtling to the rocks fifty feet below. He paused at a huge stone that hung precariously on the edge. Bracing himself against a tree, he pried the stone loose with his foot. It rocked, rolled into space, and crashed on the rocky bottom of the ravine.

He stepped cautiously to the edge and sent the body of his uncle after it. The depression where the rock had rested was clearly defined.

Evidence enough that Hosmar Wilson had stepped on a loose stone and plunged to his death.

Some small animal scurried out of a brush pile above the path and Griner started nervously and felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. A slight breeze moved out of the stillness and dried the moisture on his upper lip. He felt a sudden need for haste, but there was yet another job he had to do before he could leave.

He picked up one end of a heavy log which lay beside the trail, intending to incline it against a tree. It was heavier than he expected and halfway up it slipped from his hands and dropped on the toes of his right foot. He cursed as the hot pain surged through him but there was no time to inspect the damage. He took a firmer grip on the log, this time, and propped it against the trunk of the tree, just a few feet below where the branches began. He set the trap, placed it on the upper end of the log, where it leaned against the tree, and sprinkled it with the bait scent. After that he covered it with leaves and limped back to survey the handiwork of his set with satisfaction.

It was an exact replica of one his uncle had placed in the back orchard. The old man had pointed it out to him only yesterday and seemed greatly flattered at his nephew's interest. He had explained that this kind of set would not harm dogs but a racoon would run up the log and step on the end of it preparatory to jumping into the branches.

By now Griner's foot was so swollen he could scarcely bear his weight on it, and pain was shooting up into his leg in sharp, stabbing jabs. As he hobbled back to the farmhouse he thought of a way to turn this unforeseen accident to his advantage. Since he knew nothing about milking, he could now ask the neighbors to do it.

His forehead relaxed into its customary smoothness.

HARRY GRINER was bathing his injured foot when Lige Barlow and his hired man came over from the next farm, which lay about a mile distant. They were tall, brawny men, slightly work-stooped.

"On the phone you said suthin' 'bout Hosmar dis'pearin'?"

"Lige Barlow shifted a tremendous cud of tobacco to the corner of his mouth where it nestled comfortably while the question escaped from the other side.

Griner answered with just the right degree of concern. "He left right after our noonday meal—said he was going to look over his trap line. When he didn't return for the milking, I took over." He glanced ruefully at his injured foot. "Guess I don't know much about

cows. One of them stepped on me as I was milking her."

Lige fixed guileless blue eyes on the injured foot and nodded his iron gray head understandingly.

"They sure can git you, happen they don't know you."

Griner was pleased. This was going to be even easier than he had thought. "I hated to bother you but I can't do much walking on this foot and it seemed to be getting pretty late for Uncle Hosmar to be tending his trap lines."

"No trouble. Hosmar'd do the same for us," Lige said.

They left, the hired man filling his pipe as he ambled out.

Alone, Harry Griner felt really nervous for the first time. Waiting would be the most difficult part for him. He poured more hot water in the basin. The pain had lessened and he could flex his toes. He lighted a cigarette and settled back in the rocker.

Twenty-five thousand dollars would do a lot for his business. . .

Shuffling sounds on the porch startled him back to reality. It didn't seem possible they could have found the old man so soon! The shocked expression he turned on the men as they came in carrying the limp body of Hosmar Wilson between them was completely unfeigned.

"W-what in the world happened? Is he hurt?"

As he spoke the words he realized with detached awareness that his voice held just the proper touch of shock.

The men laid their burden on the couch and covered it with a blanket.

"Hurt hell. He's dead," Lige Barlow said laconically.

"Dead! But what happened? Where did you find him?" Griner leaned tensely forward in the rocker.

"Never mind the play actin'," Lige said softly. "We know you done it." He had moved from the couch to stand menacingly beside Griner.

"Go git the sheriff on the phone!" he directed his hired man.

Griner started to bluster. These damned yokels couldn't possibly have anything on him. It was a shot in the dark.

"Why, you—"

"'Twon't do you no good to try 'n brazen it out," Lige interrupted. "Soon's you said a cow stepped on your foot we knowed suthin' was wrong. If'n you got hurt like you told us, 'twould 've been your left foot. Was you a milker you'd 've knowed she couldn't step on your right foot very handy. It's the left one usually gets it."

Griner opened his mouth to protest but Lige held up a big brown hand. "Nothin' too awful could happen 'long Hosmar's trap line so we looked in the ravine. Guess you thought you was pretty foxy, but where you dumped him over is a game sanctuary. Made apurpose last year. Hosmar wouldn't 've trapped there to keep from starvin'."

Lige Barlow paused a moment and spat accurately into the basin of water, then he shifted his tobacco cud again.

"Where you really got too big for your britches was baitin' a wolf trap with otter bait—to ketch a 'coon."



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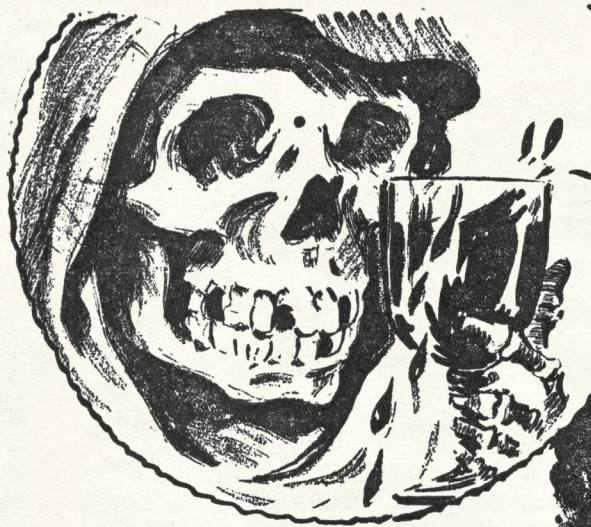
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The man's pajama coat had been pulled back and there was a neat incision directly over his heart. Blood stained the sheet and the man's chest.

CHAPTER ONE

Assault and Flattery

AS a man who has dwelt in both countries, I am quite willing to concede that the citizens of the United States are more able in several respects than their Mexican brothers. They are, like Mussolini, capable of keeping the trains running on schedule. They possess an incredible mechanical ingenuity. In the matter of sanitation they are superb.

However, I state categorically, they have no idea of how to eat their lunch. When the hour of noon strikes in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, the huge granite buildings vomit forth the hordes of workers who dash frantically to a drugstore counter and hastily shovel an unappetizing tuna fish sandwich down their dull and indiscriminating palates.

This tasteless treat is topped off by a slab of apple pie, created on the assembly line of a huge bakery, and a cup of coffee as spiritless as a slave and weaker than the mind of a retarded bobby-socker.

Now say what you will about the Mexican, but, *por Dios*, he certainly knows how to partake of his *comidas*.

First, he waits until half past one to make absolutely sure that he is really hungry. Then he deliberately locks his office or shuts his shop and ambles to his favorite restaurant. There he partakes of two or eight *habaneros*, the number depending on his desire and his capacity.

Following that he sits at a table surrounded by his male cronies and proceeds to knock the living hell out of nine full courses, washing them down with liberal drafts of tequila, *vino*



tinto and whatever other refreshment is at hand.

Following this he emphatically does *not* go galloping back to his place of labor and proceed to waste his life in toil. He goes home, repairs to his bedroom and spends the next two hours in good solid sleep. And if that isn't civilized, brother, I will eat Mr. Buckle's book on the subject.

On this particular September day, the brilliant sun shone down upon the plateau where Mexico City is situated. The sky was clear and the air was crisp. In the distance the twin peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl reared their snowcapped heads to the heavens. And the faintest breeze slid gently over the highlands from Acapulco.

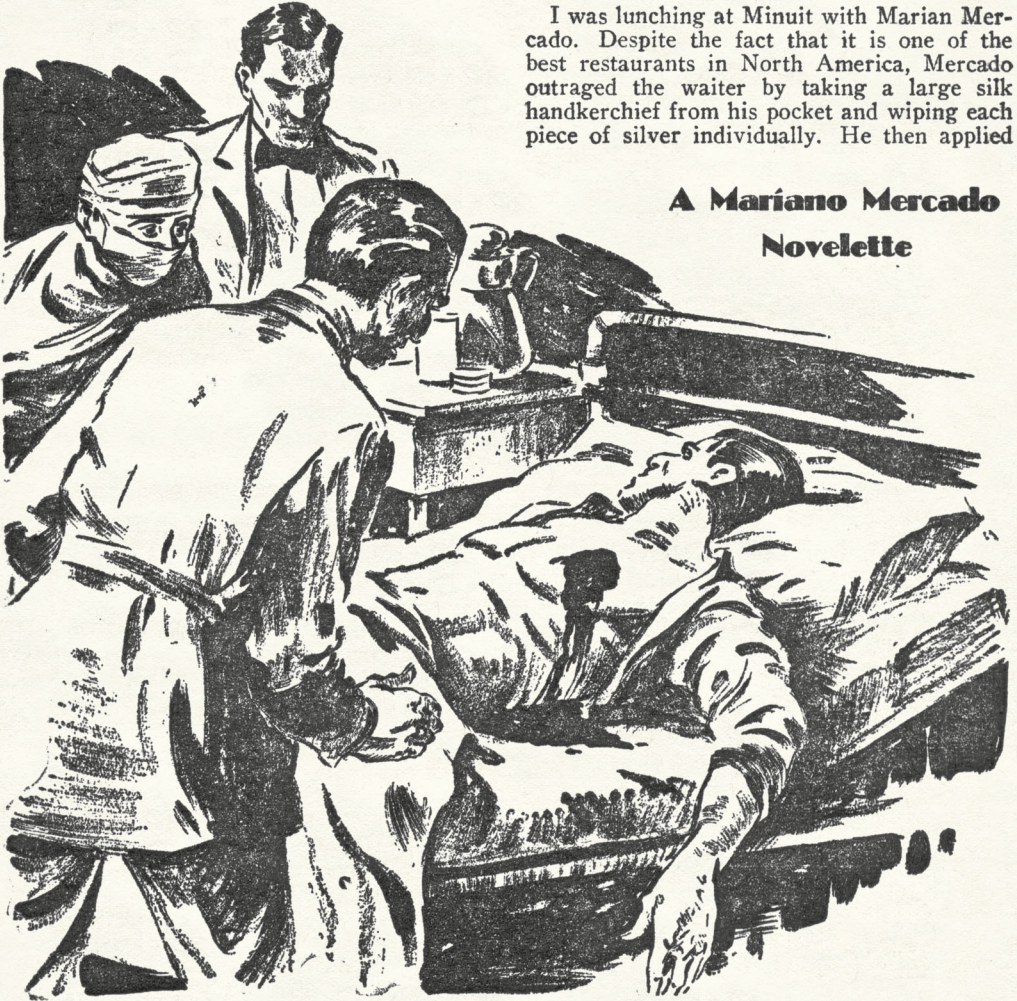
A TOAST TO THE KILLER

By **D. L. CHAMPION**

Author of "One Killer Too Many," etc.

I was lunching at Minuit with Mariano Mercado. Despite the fact that it is one of the best restaurants in North America, Mercado outraged the waiter by taking a large silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiping each piece of silver individually. He then applied

A Mariano Mercado Novelette



"It is most urgent, senor," Sanchez told Mariano Mercado. "My cousin is wounded. He is now in the hospital and I want you to stand guard over him." Might as well ask a man to jump off a rooftop as to suggest that Mercado expose himself to such dangers of disease and infection. However, there was a fat fee involved—with which the little Latin shamus could buy more antiseptics and panaceas—and the case piqued his curiosity. The patient wasn't badly wounded, yet he showed no signs of getting well. Who could—with a scalpel piercing his heart?

the same procedure to every piece of china. Completing this ritual he deigned to glance at the menu.

He ordered a lengthy and elaborate lunch and since I was his guest and had no worries about the check I did the same thing. We were halfway through a thick steak when a little dumpy man wearing a pair of black-rimmed glasses approached diffidently and stood at Mercado's elbow.

Mercado halted his fork in midair and turned his dark, liquid eyes on the stranger. Among the several million things which irritated him, being interrupted as he ate was one of the major items. He lowered his fork slightly and said: "*Qué pasa?*"

The stranger said, with a nice touch of awe in his tone: "You are Mariano Mercado?"

Mercado's stern face relaxed somewhat under this subtle flattery. He nodded his head admitting his identity.

"My name," said the stranger, "is Pedro Sanchez. I would like very much to retain you. I am in need of your valuable services, *señor.*"

MERCADO put down his fork. Clients were all very well in their place which was, of course, in his office after the siesta hour.

"*Señor,*" he said, "I appreciate your opinion of the value of my services. However, this is not New York City of the *Estados Unidos*. We of this country are not so money mad that we grub for gold during our luncheon. We are not so hungry for a peso or two that we sacrifice our siesta period in order to close a business deal. My office will open at precisely four o'clock this afternoon. I shall be happy to see you then."

He made a gesture of dismissal and reached for his fork once more. Sanchez smiled painfully. He looked to me like a man prepared to argue the point, though most reluctantly.

"Don Mariano," he said, laying it on with a trowel—it was as if he had called him "revered sir" in English—"time is of the essence. I will pay you for your time, two thousand pesos, *señor.*"

Mercado looked at him sternly. "And will money repay me for a ruined digestion? For an illness brought about by my failure to rest after my meal? Remember, *señor,* Mariano Mercado is not a gringo businessman."

Sanchez shuffled his feet uneasily. "*Pero, señor,*" he said, "you may save a life if you come with me after lunch. I want you to meet a friend of mine. He is wounded. He is in the hospital. I want you to stand guard over him."

"In a hospital?" Mercado shuddered. "Heaven only knows what germs dwell in a

hospital. Think of the poor creatures suffering from heaven knows what diseases who are lying there. There are not enough pesos in all Mexico, *señor,* to impel me to guard a man in a hospital. *Dios,* and who would guard Mercado?"

Sanchez look bewildered. "Guard you from what, *señor?*"

"From the host of bacteria in your hospital. From the frightful carriers of disease dwelling there." Here he put down his fork. "Let me give you some statistics, *señor.*"

At this point I rushed into the conversation. I knew by heart all the vital statistics Mercado was about to cite. I was in no mood to hear these depressing tables again, especially while I was eating.

"*Señor Sanchez,*" I said, "if you will return to your table I shall do my best to interest Señor Mercado in your proposition before he concludes his meal. I shall communicate with you before we leave the restaurant."

Sanchez nodded. Then he said something which proved that either he was a far shrewder operator than I had suspected or else was possessed of execrable taste.

"*Gracias,*" he said to me. He turned to leave, swung his head around again and spoke to Mariano Mercado. "If you will forgive me, *señor,* I must ask you a personal favor before I leave. Could you give me the address of your tailor?"

Mercado beamed. He fancied himself as a combination of Beau Brummel, Adolph Menjou and Lucius Beebe. Actually his taste in raiment was that of a colorblind Hottentot.

"Certainly, *señor.*" He took a card from his pocket and handed it over. He added: "I shall stop by your table on the way out and listen to the details of what you have to tell me."

Sanchez beamed back at him and left us. Mercado thrust a huge chunk of meat into his maw and cocked a triumphant eye in my direction.

"You heard that?" he said. "You heard him ask for the name of my tailor. Have I not told you that my clothes appeal to the eye of the man of fashion. You North Americans have no feelings at all for color."

If I had any feeling at all for the color of the outfit Mercado was wearing at the moment, it was a feeling of nausea.

His suit was cut sharply, with lapels that almost reached down to his hips. Its hue was something between saffron and mustard. His shirt was greener than the Amazonian jungle and his socks held more motley shades than the prism is aware of.

His shoes had buttons instead of laces and were of two tones either one of which is better left unmentioned. But the item on which he had completely run riot was his tie. No poet

dosed with hasheesh could have done justice to the Mercado cravat. The background was a delicate puce and superimposed on that was every color, every hue, every pastel and tint of which the human mind could conceive. A bird of paradise would have taken one single look at that tie and killed itself.

This sartorial degeneration was, however, his minor vice. His major difficulty was his utter and complete hypochondria. I had seen him face a thug's gun as gallantly as an infantryman at Okinawa. I had seen him fling himself at a weaving hand wielding a knife and wrench it from the killer's grasp.

But I had also seen him run howling from a room when someone coughed. I had seen him cower in a corner when approached by a peon with ringworm on his wrist. For Mariano Mercado feared a germ like a felon fears the gallows.

His pockets, his bureau, and his desk drawers were filled with lotions, antiseptics, pills and various other armament with which to combat the bacterial hosts against whom he was constantly waging war. He knew the names of more diseases than a medical dictionary and was armed with more statistics than the Johns Hopkins library.

Nevertheless, he had a keen mind and save for these two obsessions, was the sanest man I had ever met. Our original meeting had been completely fortuitous. Later, I had thrown a case in his lap, at the successful conclusion of which I had been retained as his assistant.

There wasn't a great deal of money in it. But then one doesn't need a great deal of money to live comfortably in Mexico City.

I DID some thinking over the dessert and by the time we had reached our liqueur and cigars I had come to the conclusion that two thousand pesos was a reasonable offer for the giving up of a siesta.

"Look," I said, "why don't you snap up Sanchez' proposition?"

"I shall. If he calls on me at my office in the proper manner and at the proper time."

"But he says it's urgent. He apparently wants us to go out to this hospital immediately. That's why he's offering such a fancy fee."

"It's not fancy enough to compensate me for the lost of my post-prandial rest."

I sighed. I knew this was going to be hard. But I didn't completely share Mariano Mercado's complete disregard of money. It was several weeks since we had had a client and I was not as glib in Spanish as he was when it came to appeasing landlords and divers other creditors.

A happy thought came to me.

"Look," I said, "with your cut of that fee do you know what you could do?"

"What?"

"You could buy a new suit, a half dozen ties and several bottles of vitamin pills or iodine or whatever you think you need most for you health."

He frowned thoughtfully. I knew he was weighing the loss of the siesta against the ghastly colored fabrics available only at his tailor's, against the surging war he could conduct against bacteria with fresh drugstore ordnance.

At last he sighed. "I shall doubtless regret this," he said. "However let us look into the Señor Sanchez' proposition."

I stood up and led the way to the table where Sanchez was dining in solitude.

He sprang to his feet as we approached. He pulled out Mercado's chair and, beckoning the waiter, ordered three of the most expensive cordials in the house.

He said eagerly: "Have you decided to accept my fee?"

"There is such a possibility," said Mercado. "If you will be kind enough to acquaint us with the details."

Sanchez blinked owlishly behind his glasses. "There isn't much to tell you save that my cousin, Juan Sanchez, was attacked last night as he was returning to the house where we live together. He was shot in the shoulder and left lying in the gutter for dead.

"He was taken to the hospital where he is now. I am afraid for his life. He may be attacked again in the hospital. The assassin may return to finish what he started."

Mercado frowned sceptically, said: "Do you know of any reason why someone should shoot at your cousin?"

Sanchez shook his head. "None at all. He is a simple man. A pharmacist. He has no enemies that either he or I know of."

"Then why," asked Mercado, "should you fear that someone would climb through the hospital window and shoot him again?"

Sanchez shrugged. "I have a premonition," he said blandly.

Mercado lighted a cigarette. Incredulity still glittered in his dark eyes. "I understand you want us to watch over your cousin while he is in the hospital. And after that? When he returns to his home?"

"I still want him guarded."

Mercado grunted. "And for two thousand pesos we must watch over your cousin for the rest of his life?"

"Oh, no, señor. After he leaves the hospital I will pay you one thousand pesos a week as long as you watch him. It will be for not longer than two weeks."

Mercado clapped a hand to his head. He started to say something, then closed his mouth. I squirmed uneasily on my seat. Experience had taught me that he was a most temperamental *hombre*. I was terrified he was

going to turn down a thousand pesos a week.

Rather to my surprise he said: "The matter begins to interest me. Mr. Latham, my assistant, will go with you to the hospital. He will guard your cousin until such time as he goes home. Then I shall help him."

"Good God, Mercado," I said, "I don't mind working, but that guy may be in the hospital for a month or more. Am I supposed to stand a continuous shift?"

Mercado shrugged his little shoulders. "A clean bullet wound in the shoulder shouldn't keep him there long. He will be able to leave in a few days, I am sure."

"But I can't stand a single shift for two or three days. I've got to get some sleep."

"I have observed," said Mercado acidly, "that you manage to stand two-day shifts in certain unsavory cantinas."

"Look," said Sanchez, "come and see my cousin, *señor*. Come now. I believe he is able to leave the hospital this very day. But he is afraid. He thinks he is safer there so he desires to stay. But once he sees the elegant, the brave Mariano Mercado, once he knows that Mercado will guard him at his own home he will no longer be reluctant. But come and see him. Reassure him."

Mercado expanded under the flattery. For a moment he looked as if he were going to accede without further argument. Then he frowned suddenly.

"*Pero*, a hospital! I can't venture into a hospital!"

"Don't be an idiot," I told him. "What is more sanitary than a hospital? No one is more hygienic than a doctor and hospitals are full of them."

"Certainly," said Mercado. "But they wear gauze masks, rubber gloves and sprinkle themselves with disinfectants."

"Only when they operate," I said. "Come along."

He wrinkled his brow again and appeared to be doing some heavy-duty thinking.

"What hospital?" he demanded.

"Santa Cruz."

"*Bueno!*" said Mercado with satisfaction. "I know a surgeon there. I must see him first."

To this minor concession both Sanchez and I eagerly agreed.

CHAPTER TWO

Cure Successful—Patient Dead

WE WENT out of the restaurant into the bright sunshine of the *Paseo de Reforma*. We stood for a moment at the edge of the wide tree-lined boulevard in the shadow of the immense statue of *El Caballo Bronce*, waiting for a taxi.

I hailed one at last and Mercado engaged in the customary spirited haggle with the driver, who eventually deigned to drive us to the hospital for two pesos.

Once there, Mercado insisted that we go ahead into the ward where Sanchez' cousin was bedded while he called upon his friend the surgeon. At the entrance to the ward we met a dark and diminutive nurse.

"*El Señor Sanchez sleeps*," she informed us. "Shall I awaken him?"

"Not yet," I said. "Since we have to wait for Mercado, we may as well let him sleep until he gets here."

Sanchez nodded assent. We sat down in a pair of reed chairs and waited for Mercado. We waited a full fifteen minutes.

At the end of that time a figure, which I took to be that of a doctor on his way to the operating room, approached. His head was completely covered by a gauze cap. A mask of the same material swathed his face. The rest of his body was covered by a long white robe and his hands were encased in a tight-fitting pair of rubber gloves.

He swept through the corridor like an apparition and halted before the chairs where Sanchez and I were seated. A muffled voice sounded behind the mask.

"Well, where's his cousin?"

I blinked and stared for a moment at the familiar pair of black eyes visible above the mask.

"My God!" I said. "Mercado! What in heaven's name are you doing in that get-up?"

"Am I to risk my life for two thousand pesos? Would a diver descend into the ocean without his protective helmet? Would a soldier go into battle without his tin hat? Should I enter this germ-infested hive without adequate protection? Now where in Satan's name is his cousin?"

Sanchez and I stood up. "He's asleep," I told him. "However, we'll get the nurse to awaken him?"

I beckoned the nurse who, firmly believing that Mercado was a senior surgeon, bowed politely and led us through the ward. She stopped at a bed almost in the center of the room, with, perhaps, five other beds on either side of it.

There a man lay on his back, his head twisted on the pillow. He bore a marked resemblance to Pedro Sanchez, though his coffee complexion seemed to be more diluted. His cheeks were as pale as a dark skin can possibly get.

The nurse touched his shoulder. "*Señor*," she said in a hissing whisper, "*Señor, equi están su amigos.*"

Juan Sanchez did not move. She shook him this time with no result. "*Señor*," she said loudly. "*Señor!*"

I leaned forward and looked more closely at the man. I observed that his eyes were open, staring blankly at the ceiling. I felt my pulse pick up a beat.

"Mercado," I said, "look at—"

But he had already seen it. He pushed the nurse aside, reached for the man's pulse, then remembered he was wearing gloves. He hesitated for a moment, then began to remove the rubber covering from his right hand. He thought better of it. If a life was to be risked it might as well be mine.

"Latham," he said, "feel the man's pulse."

I put my finger on the wrist which lay outside the bedspread. There was no pulsating reply. I caught Mercado's eye and shook my head. At my side Pedro Sanchez was staring at his cousin and there was something strongly resembling fear in his gaze.

Mercado spoke to the nurse. "Summon the doctor in charge. This man is dead."

She spread her palms. "But how can it be? He only had a bullet wound in his shoulder. There was no fever. How could he die?"

"We shall see," Mercado mumbled behind the gauze.

He bent over and pulled back the covers. The man's pajama coat had been pulled back and there was a neat incision directly over his heart. Blood stained the sheet and the dead man's chest.

There was a tight silence for less than three seconds. Then the nurse's ear-splitting scream shrilled into my ears.

"He's dead," she cried. "Murder! And in my ward. *Dios*, what horror!"

"*Váyase*," snapped Mercado. "Get Doctor Meana. *Apúrese!*"

Shaken, the nurse ran from the ward. Sanchez put his hands on the window sill to steady himself. Mercado, muffled up like a mummy, had a thoughtful expression in his eyes.

A few moments later, the little nurse returned with Dr. Meana, Mercado's friend, in tow.

He bent over the bed, examined the body.

He straightened up and shook his head. The little nurse made a vehement Latin gesture of despair. She pounded a fist against her breast and said: "*Dios! Murder! What a horrible thing!*"

She buried her face in her hands and began to weep.

"*Si*," said the doctor to Mercado. "It is murder, indeed. He has been stabbed through the heart with an exceedingly sharp knife or perhaps a scalpel."

I glanced over at the living Sanchez. There was an odd expression on his face. It seemed to me that he was registering half shock and half relief.

Marian Mercado's keen black eyes looked around the ward. He walked over to the window behind the bed and peered through it.

He said to the nurse: "I suppose any ambulatory case in this ward could have killed him? Also, anyone could have leaned over the window sill."

She lifted a tear-stained face. "*Si*," she said. "I myself saw half a dozen of the ambulatory cases talking to him during the exercise period."

Mercado sighed and nodded. To the doctor he said: "Let us go to your office where I shall divest myself of my protecting garment."

We left the sobbing nurse and the ward behind us and adjourned to Meana's office which was off the main lobby near the hospital entrance.

AFTER carefully closing the door against any angry germ which may have followed him, Mercado removed his mask. He peeled off his rubber gloves and struggled out of his white robe which, I may add parenthetically, was the most conservative piece of apparel ever to drape his torso.

"Well, Latham," he said to me, "your avarice, your quest for gold has brought me to this. I have given up my siesta, I have risked my digestive system. And for what? To gain

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two thousand pesos for guarding a man. The man, it appears, is dead. So I cannot guard him. So I do not collect two thousand pesos."

"But," I said, glancing at Sanchez, who was standing by the window lighting a cigarette, "if the *señor* was willing to pay you two thousand pesos to watch over his cousin, he certainly would be willing to pay you more than that to apprehend his murderer."

"*Quizá*," said Mercado. We both cast a look of inquiry at Sanchez.

He turned from the window, met our gaze and spread his palms in a tolerant gesture.

"I am not a vengeful man," he said. "As long as I may protect the living I shall do so. But a dead man cannot be restored to life. If his killer is found he will be punished. But that will not return my cousin to me. No, it is God's will. I shall do no more in the matter."

Mercado looked at him reproachfully. I knew quite well that I would not hear the end of this. My gringo greed was going to be loudly blamed for depriving Mercado of a health-giving siesta.

"*Señor*," I said "surely you have more family feeling. The incompetent police will never find the killer of your cousin. But the *Señor* Mercado, here, is a bloodhound when he takes the trail."

I laid it on, heavy and thick, for a good five minutes. But the *Señor* Sanchez wasn't having any.

"No, *señor*," he said. "If a man is ill, is hungry or is in trouble I shall help him. If he is dead he is beyond my help. I am not interested in the killer of my cousin."

Behind us, Dr. Meana hung up the telephone after concluding the call he had just put in to the police department. At that moment there was a knock upon the door.

The doctor said: "Come in."

The door opened and Juan Ibañez entered. Juan Ibañez was Mexico City's Walter Winchell. He was a tall man and the exceeding darkness of his complexion made it clear that his blood was almost pure Indian. He was dressed in a conservative gray suit which brought a sartorial sneer to the face of that distinguished man of fashion, Mariano Mercado. His face was thin and intelligent, his eyes alert. And his ears, in a figurative sense, stretched out over the entire capital. If Juan Ibañez hadn't heard of an event, in all probability it hadn't happened.

He nodded to us and bowed deeply to the doctor. "Ah, Meana," he said, "now what is this about a killing in one of the wards in your hospital."

A frown creased Sanchez' brow. He whispered to me. "*Quién es este hombre?*"

I told him, sotto voce, who Ibañez was.

Meana said, in annoyed surprise: "How

can you have known about it so quickly?"

Ibañez showed his white teeth. "I have my agents everywhere. I pay them for tips. I have someone, who must remain anonymous, right here in your hospital, Doctor. He phoned me a few minutes ago."

Meana shrugged. "Well, since the police have been called, I suppose all the papers will have it anyway."

"*Es verdad*," said Ibañez. "But my paper will have it first. Now exactly what happened?"

"Let us get out of here," said Mercado. "My bed is lonely."

He moved toward the door but before he could open it, Sanchez spoke, urgency in his tone.

"Is this story to be in the newspapers?" he asked. "Why? My cousin was no celebrity. He was a simple man. He had neither money nor position. There are a hundred unmentioned killings per month in Mexico. Why should my cousin's receive publicity?"

Ibañez beamed at him. "Because of the circumstances, *señor*. A hospital is a place for repairing injuries, not aggravating them. If a man is murdered in a hospital, where he came to get well, that is news. Is it not? I shall plaster this upon the front page. Now, Doctor, what are the details, *por favor?*"

Meana sat down at his desk and proceeded to give the newspaperman what little details he possessed. Sanchez, who suddenly appeared greatly concerned, drew Mercado over to the window.

"Look," he muttered, "I have changed my mind. I shall retain you. I shall offer you more than two thousand pesos. I shall—"

"Good," I interrupted. "This is a sensible thing. You want the *Señor* Mercado to run down your cousin's murderer?"

"Partly that and partly something else. Listen, I shall tell you—"

Mercado held up his hand and shook his head decisively.

"You will tell me nothing," he said. "Not now. You will call on me at my office in two hours as is fitting and proper. I have delayed my siesta. I do not intend to lose it altogether."

"No," cried Sanchez, "I tell you—" He broke off as a thought seemed to occur to him. To Ibañez, he said: "When will your story be printed, *señor?*"

"It will be on the newsstands about eight o'clock tonight."

"*Está bueno*," said Sanchez. He turned to Mercado. "I shall call at your office in two hours, *señor*."

He walked out of the office. A moment later, Mercado and I followed suit. I dropped off at my hotel while Mercado went on to his combination office and apartment to rest him-

self before continuing his incessant onslaught against his bacteria foes.

I, too, lay down for about an hour. Then I rose, shaved, bathed, and dressed myself. After that I set out for Mercado's place on the *Calle de Maddelin*.

I felt quite pleased with myself. I didn't pretend to understand Sanchez' about-face but he had promised us more than the original two thousand pesos and I, at least, was certainly in a position to appreciate my cut of the money.

I CLIMBED the stairs to Mercado's apartment and let myself in with my own key. Apparently, he had just dressed himself. He was seated at his desk staring moodily at the phalanx of bottles on the blotter. After some cogitation he selected one, dumped two pills in his hand and washed them down his throat with a glass of triple-distilled water.

Then he reached for an atomizer and sprayed his larynx with care and thoroughness.

He put down the atomizer and said: "There is one thing I'll hand to you gringos. You are sanitary. Almost every American family takes vitamins, buys hundreds of bottles of disinfectants a year. Ah, if only Mexico spent as much money in their drugstores."

I said: "There's some excuse for my countrymen. They are constantly bombarded by advertising copy which implies that their children will die of a horrible disease if they don't use a certain brand of toilet paper. Their doctors tell them that if they eat normally vitamins are not necessary but the doctor's sane voice is unheard in the thunder of the advertising agencies. More American intestines are ruined by laxatives than Mexican intestines are wrecked by amoebic dysentery. Yes, there is an excuse for my countrymen being a nation of hypochondriacs, but what possible reason have you?"

He looked at me reproachfully and shook his head sadly. This subject was a constant bone of contention between us. He leaned backwards and took an awesome volume from the bookshelf. He said: "Let me give you some statistics."

I shuddered, said: "No. Let's discuss our client and our case and how we shall spend the fee. But, *por favor*, no statistics."

He sighed and replaced the book. "In your grave you will regret not having listened to me, *amigo*."

"On that I'll gamble. Now, have you any idea who killed Sanchez' cousin?"

He lifted his eyebrows and narrowed his pupils. "A vague idea but only a vague one. There were two rather peculiar things I observed in the hospital."

"Namely?"

"Sanchez' attitude struck me as extremely

odd. I mean, of course, the living Sanchez."

"You mean when he changed his mind about retaining us? Hell, that was my eloquence!"

"*Amigo*," he said gravely, "you are never eloquent in Spanish. Your accent has heavy Brooklyn overtones. No, Sanchez' change of mind had something very definitely to do with Ibañez and the fact that the story of his cousin's death was to receive some publicity."

"That's reasonable. What else did you notice?"

"That I had better not mention yet. It is so vague it is ephemeral. On such a slight point I can make no accusation until I am absolutely certain."

I knew better than to press him. When he didn't want to talk he would remain stubbornly silent. He remained uncommunicative until there was a knock at the door. I opened it and admitted Pedro Sanchez. He looked far more worried than he had when standing over his cousin's corpse.

He said: "I am offering you more money now, *señor*."

Mercado lifted his eyebrows. "Payable whether I find your cousin's killer or not?"

Sanchez nodded.

"Sí, provided you carry out the other part of the assignment."

"Which is?"

Sanchez drew a deep breath. A frown wrinkled his brow. He seemed most undecided. At last he sighed heavily and said: "Well, I suppose I must tell you."

"That seems an intelligent idea," said Mercado dryly.

Sanchez ran his brown fingers through his thick hair. He shifted uneasily on his chair. He said: "First, I must pledge you to secrecy. This is an international matter. It concerns our allies and our enemy."

"Since Germany is defeated," said Mercado, "we have but one enemy left. I assume that you refer to Japan."

Sanchez nodded. "Some months ago," he said, "my cousin, Juan, lived in a certain country in Central America. There he had many friends in diplomatic circles. This country, along with us and most of Latin-America, declared war upon Japan. Naturally the Japanese consul there was interned. Since no ships were available he is still interned there."

Mercado was making a few desultory notes on a scratch pad before him. Sanchez continued.

"My cousin was fairly well acquainted with this consul who, prior to his diplomatic post, had been an officer in the Japanese Navy. Moreover, this Japanese was quite an intelligent man. He knew his country could not possibly win the war and he desired to make certain that, after the defeat of his homeland,

he and his family would be comfortably situated."

MERCADO still scratched idly with his pencil. I lighted a cigarette and reflected that international intrigue in Central America seemed a far cry from the corpse of an undistinguished Mexican citizen in the Santa Cruz hospital.

Sanchez drew a deep breath and continued.

"Now this Japanese consul knew a great deal about the present installations at Singapore which, naturally enough, will one day be retaken by the British. So he began negotiations with the English through divers secret channels. In return for the information he was prepared to give them he wanted a guarantee that his family would be permitted to leave Japan after the invasion and that he would receive enough cash to keep them comfortably in whatever country would offer him sanctuary."

"This is all very interesting," I said. "But what has it to do with your cousin?"

"I am coming to that. In this country there was no British agent of any importance. None, anyway, whom the consul could trust. So he called on my cousin. Neither of them dared put these facts on paper. After three weeks of constant talking, my cousin memorized the code which he was to repeat to the British agent when he met him here in Mexico."

Mercado said nothing. However, it all appeared plain enough to me now.

"Thus," I said, "some enemy agent learned of this and killed your cousin so he couldn't deliver the message. Is that it?"

Sanchez nodded. "That is why I was afraid another attempt might be made on his life. That is why I wanted him watched at the hospital."

It was all logical enough to me. I observed, however, that Mariano Mercado wore an expression of scepticism.

"So," he said, "and what is it you want me to do?"

"Why, find his cousin's killer," I said. "That's obvious."

"I doubt it," said Mercado quietly. "Now, Señor Sanchez, what is it you desire of me?"

"Well," said Sanchez, "if you find the man who killed my cousin, that is fine. It would be a good thing. But it will be most difficult to do. There is doubtless a strong organization behind him. I am principally concerned with your protecting me."

"You?" I said. "What on earth have you to do with it?"

"Well, my cousin and I bear the same name. We lived together in the same house. We were quite intimate. It is possible that the murderer, having silenced Juan, may believe that he confided in me—that I, too, have

memorized the code. Perhaps, there will be an attempt on my life as well."

Mariano Mercado nodded.

"Thus," said Sanchez, "I want you to watch over me. I am afraid someone may attack me."

"For how long?" asked Mercado. "How long do you expect this fear to last? There are only two of us. I cannot devote the rest of my life to working twelve hours a day."

Sanchez look worried. "I will pay you well. Moreover, it won't be for long. Two weeks at the most. Just until the whole matter has blown over. Say, twenty-five hundred pesos a week."

"Bueno," said Mercado, "we shall try it for a week anyway. Leave me your address. Then go to your home. Within a half hour, Señor Latham, here, will arrive and take up the initial vigil."

Sanchez handed me a card and left the room. I rubbed my hands and said: "This isn't bad. Twenty-five hundred pesos a week and no strenuous labor. What do you think of his story?"

"I think the story is probably true," said Mercado. "Yet, I am certain that Sanchez is an unconscionable liar."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It makes a great deal of sense, *amigo*, and that is why I am taking this case. Surely, you do not think that Mariano Mercado would endanger his health by keeping a twelve-hour daily vigil merely for money. There is more to this matter than meets the eyes. I have resolved to find out what it is."

"I don't get it. Sanchez' story was a little odd, but odd things happen these days. Why do you doubt him?"

"Let me ask you a single question. When he asked us to guard his cousin he said it would only be for two weeks. Now that he asks us to watch over him he sets the same time limit. Why? Does he expect Japan to fall in a fortnight? Does he expect them to tire of murder and treachery in that period of time?"

I thought this over and came up with no answer at all. Nevertheless, I didn't see any point in examining the teeth of a twenty-five hundred peso gift horse, either.

CHAPTER THREE

Intrigue at Casa Blanca

HALF an hour later I left Mercado's and repaired to the Sanchez home. It was a modest stucco building out in the Chapultepec section. The two-story structure was surrounded by an iron fence and a bright green garden.

I went inside and greeted Sanchez who was

relieved at my arrival. Then, acting in accordance with Mercado's instructions, I took up my position on the front porch, a vantage point from which I could see anyone who tried to enter the grounds. Sanchez announced that he was shaken and was going up to bed.

Mercado and I worked on schedule for the better part of three days. I sat it out on Sanchez' porch from midnight until noon, then Mercado relieved me and did the noon to midnight shift. Naturally, he had the better of it.

For during his vigil, I assumed that Sanchez often wanted to go downtown or to a restaurant or bar. Mercado would, of course, accompany him. My shift was straight boredom. I never even saw Sanchez. He was in bed each night when I relieved Mercado and he apparently was a very late riser. He never put in an appearance before noon, when I went off duty.

However, I wasn't complaining. It was easy work for the money I was drawing and I could hardly believe that Sanchez was in any actual danger. The killer, having disposed of his cousin, doubtless had solved his problem.

It was during the third night of my watch that I discovered I was wrong.

I had relieved Mercado a few minutes past midnight. Despite the fact that the temperature of a Mexican evening is a steady seventy, Mercado was wrapped up like an Arctic explorer. He wore gloves, a heavy coat and his scrawny throat was swathed in a thick woolen muffler.

He yawned and bade me good night. I sat down comfortably in the big wicker chair on the porch directly in front of the door. There were no lights on in the house and I assumed that Sanchez, as usual, had already retired.

The first two hours passed uneventfully. I had had a hard day out at the Hippodromo racetrack and I dozed off in the chair. I was awakened by a noisy voice out at the gate. I opened my eyes and stood up.

In the faint light of the new moon I saw a poorly dressed peon standing on the deserted sidewalk waving a bottle of *pulque* in his hand.

"Hey," he shouted in thick Spanish, "come and have a drink with me, *amigo*. Then let me in. I have nowhere to sleep tonight."

I waved him away. "*Váyase borracho!*"

He regarded the gate hesitantly for a moment. Then he said: "If you will not come to me then I must come to you."

He thrust the bottle in his hip pocket, seized the iron of the gate in uncertain hands and began a wavering climb. I swore beneath my breath and stepped off the porch. I ran down the gravel path and loosened his fingers.

"Go away," I told him. "Quickly. Or I shall telephone *la policía*."

He looked at me reproachfully. "Ah, no you must not do that. If you will not let me in, then stay here a while and talk to me. I am a most lonely *hombre*."

I certainly was in no mood for drunken dialogue. I told him again and sharply to go away. Still he demurred. Then, as he mumbled incoherently, I happened to see dark motion out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head to the left in time to observe a black figure jump from the top of the wall into the garden recover its balance and dash into the house.

I swore again and turned to follow but the drunken peon grabbed at my sleeve. "Don't leave me," he whined.

I faced him again, quite certain now that he was no more inebriated than I was. I struggled to get free but he held my coat in a tight grip. I put my body hard against the iron bars and drew back my right hand. I drove it through the bars and it landed flush on the side of his jaw.

He fell to the sidewalk with a glassy crash as the *pulque* bottle shattered, splashing the evil-smelling white fluid on his face and mine. I turned around and dashed for the house pulling an automatic out of my hip pocket as I did so.

I slid across the polished wood of the hall floor and bounded up the stairs three steps at a time. I raced down the corridor and jerked open the door of Sanchez' bedroom. I flicked on the light switch and stood in the doorway, my gun held firmly out before me.

The room was empty.

The bedclothes had been pulled back and lay half on the mattress, half on the floor. The window was wide open. I went over to it and peered out. Some three feet below it was the roof of another house. It was obvious that the intruder had left that way, but how had he managed to take Sanchez with him? I had heard no outcry and it would have been a Herculean task to have knocked Sanchez cold, carried him out the window and down from the roof of the other house in such a short time.

At that moment I heard the whirring of a car's starter. A big limousine moved down the side street and went roaring to the corner where it turned in toward the city. Doubtless it contained the intruder and quite likely the Señor Pedro Sanchez as well.

I WENT back down the stairs reflecting upon the awful names that Mariano Mercado was going to call me. In the living room I went over to the stand which held the telephone. I was just about to pick it up when it rang.

I said: "Hello."

A voice, obviously English or American,

said in Spanish: "*Está allí el Señor Sanchez?*"

"*Está en la calle,*" I answered. "Is there any message?"

"*Si.* A most important message. Will you make certain to repeat it accurately?"

I said that I would.

"Then tell him tomorrow night at the Casa Blanca, three kilometers north of La Caja—that's on the road between Morelia and Pátzcuaro. Please repeat that."

I repeated it, reflecting that whoever was giving me the message certainly wasn't guilty of kidnaping Sanchez. After that I asked the speaker's name. Curtly, he refused to divulge it and hung up.

I followed suit, then reluctantly picked up the receiver again and dialed Mercado's number. A moment later he answered sleepily.

"Listen, this is Latham. Sanchez has just been kidnaped."

To my utter surprise, he chuckled.

"There's nothing to laugh at," I told him sharply. "A confederate diverted my attention while another guy jumped the fence, grabbed Sanchez and apparently took him out the bedroom window into a limousine which just drove off. There was no chance in the world of chasing it."

"Well," replied Mercado quite cheerfully, "in that event, you'd better come over to my place. It is rather silly for you to remain there guarding an empty bedroom."

He hung up, leaving me somewhat bewildered. I had expected a salvo of insulting Spanish reflecting on my puerile abilities as a private detective.

I WALKED out of the house, through the garden, opened the gate and went out locking it behind me. I walked six blocks before I found a cruising cab. I climbed in it and went over to the *Calle de Madellin*.

I strode into Mercado's office prepared for a verbal blast. Instead of that I received a stunning surprise. Seated on either side of Mercado's desk were two men enjoying two cups of *café negro*. One of them, quite properly, was Mercado—the other, inexplicably, was Pedro Sanchez.

I stood for a full thirty seconds staring at them. I crossed the room and sank into one of Mercado's uncomfortable and thoroughly antiseptic wooden chairs.

I said: "Don't tell me that it was you, Mercado, who just snatched Sanchez?"

Mercado shook his head gravely and lifted the coffee cup.

"Oh, no," he said. "Señor Sanchez has been here all the time."

"All the time?"

"But certainly. I decided he was much safer here. If anyone had designs on him they

would not look here. Moreover, it made things simpler for me. I had no desire to sit on that porch for twelve hours a day."

I blinked at the enormity of it.

"You mean I've been guarding an empty house every night?"

"Every night," agreed Mariano Mercado with equanimity.

I felt my face become red with anger. "What have you been doing? Just playing me for a sucker? I'm damned if I think it's funny!"

Mercado waved an admonishing forefinger at me. "Don't forget," he said, "that you considered the whole deal a bargain. You thought it was an easy job for the money you were getting. Moreover, it confused the enemy. As long as he saw you standing watch at night, he assumed that Sanchez was in the house. Suppose he actually had been—it is quite likely that he would be dead by now."

Sanchez put down his cup and shuddered. Reluctantly, I was forced to admit that Mercado was right. Even at guarding nothing—I had been remiss.

Sanchez said: "God, I wish this were over! But I'm sure it will be only a few more days. Then things will blow over."

"That reminds me," I said. "I have a message for you. The phone rang immediately after our visitor had left." I gave Sanchez the message I had received a few minutes before.

As I was speaking Mercado's bright little eyes were upon me. There was a faint smile on his lips and his pupils were glittering. However, he said nothing when I had finished, he merely transferred his gaze from me to Sanchez and waited.

Sanchez, at the moment, presented a peculiar figure. In one respect I could have sworn that he looked relieved. Yet there was an expression of anxiety in his eyes which belied the look on his face.

He shifted uneasily on his chair. He said, more to himself, than to us: "La Caja. That's approximately three hundred and seventy kilometers from here. It'll take all day to get there. And it's a tiny place. There'll be no local police. There'll be—"

He broke off and stared thoughtfully at Mercado's bare and completely germless walls.

"Señor," he said abruptly, "there is one more thing I ask of you. Accompany me to La Caja. After that I shall bother you no more. Naturally, I shall give you a bonus for this."

Mercado nodded. "I have been waiting for you to ask me that ever since I heard the message Latham delivered to you. Go home and pack your bag." He saw Sanchez start. "There is nothing to fear now. Your enemy is certain that you have moved from the house."

Go on. Then get back here at dawn and we shall start."

Sanchez stood up. He walked out the door and closed it behind him. I ran my fingers through my hair and said: "What's going on, if I may be permitted to ask? This doesn't seem to have any connection with the death of Juan Sanchez at the Santa Cruz hospital."

"It is connected very definitely."

"You mean that Juan confided in Pedro? That he, too, has learned the code by heart?"

Mercado shook his head. "Juan never confided in his cousin. Primarily because he had nothing to confide."

"You mean that whole story was a lie?"

"No, *amigo*. Save in one respect it was true."

I sighed. No mountain road in Yucatan was as circuitous as Mariano Mercado when he was explaining a mystery. "Go on. Tell it in your own roundabout way."

"The lie, my friend, was when Pedro told us that Juan had been entrusted with the code. It was Pedro himself who received the information from the Japanese consul."

"That's ridiculous. Why, then, was Juan murdered?"

"It was an error. Remember each cousin bears the same name. Each lived in the same house. It was simple enough for the assassin to become confused. He took a pot-shot at Juan and left him for dead. Then discovering he still lived and was in the hospital he had his agent kill Juan there. Later he found out his error."

"How?"

"Through Ibañez. You will recall that at first Pedro Sanchez seemed undisturbed by the murder of his cousin. The reason is obvious. He believed that the killer, satisfied he had murdered the man who knew the coded information, could consider his job done. The instant he realized that Ibañez was going to print the story mentioning the fact that Juan not Pedro, was dead, he became extremely anxious for us to protect him. Is it not obvious?"

I thought it over. It seemed reasonable enough. Then Mercado clinched it.

"You will remember, too, that when Pedro first asked us to look after his cousin he specified that it wouldn't be for longer than two weeks. He specified the same length of time when he asked us to watch over *him*. How could he know how long either he or his cousin would be in danger?"

"I get it," I said. "Simply because he had some idea of when the contact with the British agent was to take place, is that it?"

"*Naturalmente.*"

"Well, when does it take place?"

"Now, of course. Why do you think we are going to La Caja?"

"Check," I said. "It all adds up now. And do you think that our enemy, whoever he may be, will show up along the way?"

"I hope so," said Mercado gravely. "It is the only opportunity I have of bringing Juan's killer to justice."

"You mean that same guy who dashed into Sanchez' bedroom tonight killed Juan?"

"I do not," said Mercado. "But enough of this. I have to pack."

"Pack? How long will we be gone?"

"A day."

"Then why pack?"

"Do you realize that La Caja is near Lake Pátzcuaro where mosquitoes breed and in the area of the volcano of Paracutin which sheds dust all over the countryside? I shall need several things."

He stood up and regarded the bottles on his desk. Carefully, he selected a half dozen. This, I knew, was merely a start. When he went to work on the vast array in his huge bathroom closet, he would be certain to choose at least a score more.

WE PICKED up Sanchez, ate a quick breakfast at Sanborn's and set off in a hired car a little after dawn. I drove.

There was a pile of baggage in the rear. One small suitcase belonged to Sanchez. It contained, he had told me, a tooth brush, a clean shirt and a pair of socks. The rest of the luggage belonged to Mercado. He had brought along woolen clothing in case of a sudden change in temperature, light clothing, in case the sun became tropical. He had brought citronella and a dozen variations of that lotion to defend himself against mosquitoes, cathartics, aspirin, and a host of other medications to cope with any emergency except possibly leprosy.

The luggage compartment in the rear was heavy with two five-gallon jugs of the triple-distilled mountain spring water with which he gargled and quenched his thirst.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at Morelia, a thriving city named for Morelos who fought and died for Mexico's freedom from Spain. There Mercado bade us stop for provisions.

"Provisions?" I said. "How long are we going to stay in La Caja? Surely we can get coffee there. And *frijoles* and *torillas*. We can eat here in Morelia on the way back."

"*Dios!*" said Mercado. "Do you think I would eat the native produce of such a place as La Caja? *Hombre*, those natives never heard of bacteria. They are alive with it. I shall tremble in their presence. To eat their food is to poison oneself."

I shrugged my shoulders and stopped at a store. Mercado went inside. A moment later a sweating peon loaded the car with enough

canned goods to feed a platoon, a case of beer and half a dozen bottles of *habanero*.

Now, in addition to being prepared for any onslaught of disease, we were also ready for a famine. We all drank a bottle of beer and set off again.

If you recall the shanty Hoovervilles of the Thirties and in your mind's eye add a hundred tons of dirt, you'll have a vague idea of La Caja. Some of its inhabitants dwelt in home-made tents, some underneath old box cars, others in ramshackle huts made out of old boxes and tin cans.

The streets were unpaved and filled with slops and filth. The stench was redolent of decay. Greasy cooking smells emerged from the home-made chimneys. I was glad when we went through it and again reached the open country. For once I was prepared to agree with Mariano Mercado. It surely would have been impossible to have eaten in La Caja.

The Casa Blanca lay deep in a dried-up valley some two miles out of town. Once it had been the ranch house of a vast hacienda. Now, since the land had been broken up and distributed to the peons, it was undergoing slow disintegration.

I drove the car up a macadam driveway that had tufts of grass growing all over it, and came to a halt.

Sanchez looked at us nervously. "Perhaps," he said, "you had better wait here until I come out."

"Ridiculous," snapped Mercado. "I need rest. I need to sit in the shade. Moreover, I need food and drink. We shall go in with you, Sanchez."

Sanchez still appeared uncertain. Mercado spoke again. "It is unnecessary to keep your secret from us any longer. It never was a secret to me. I know quite well that your cousin was killed in error. The assassin was seeking you. I know, further, that it is you who knows the code, that you are now about to relate to the British agent. Come, then, let us go inside."

He stepped out of the car as Sanchez gaped at him in consternation. I wrestled with the bottles and some of the canned goods and followed.

A moment later, after wandering down a dirty, neglected stone hallway, I entered a vast chamber open to a patio on one side. There, seated at a table, was a tall, bulky man in the uniform of a British naval captain.

He stood up and saluted as we came in. He said: "I am Walters. Herbert Walters of His Majesty's Naval Intelligence. Which one of you is Pedro Sanchez?"

Sanchez admitted his identity, then introduced us.

Walters said: "I didn't expect so many people but since I understand our principal,

the consul, has had you memorize his information in the British Navy's confidential code, which he obtained from his own spies, I don't suppose an audience matters."

He sat down again and accepted the bottle of beer I handed him. Despite the heat he seemed cool. Moreover, his clothes looked as if he had just left a first-class tailoring establishment. I decided that the legend of the British officers who invariably dress as if they were on Bond Street even while in the heart of the jungle must have some basis in fact.

Mercado had opened a suitcase and selected a Flit gun with which he was valiantly attacking the flies that came in from the patio. Without interrupting his labors, he offered the captain some refreshment.

The Englishman glanced at his watch. "Thanks," he said, with an Oxford accent that you could cut with a knife, "I don't mind if I do. It's rather hot and sticky and I'm hungry. I've got a couple of hours to kill before I'm due back to meet the plane."

I wondered what plane and where. However, I decided it would be indiscreet to ask.

I said instead: "How did you get out here?"

"Motorbike. It's parked at the back of the house."

I dug out a couple of bottles of *habanero* from the luggage. Sanchez had been investigating a huge cupboard at the far side of the room and had discovered a dozen crystal glasses in various states of dirtiness. He went out of the room to clean them at the well. Mariano Mercado, however, produced a collapsible silver drinking cup from his pocket and wiped it off thoroughly with a silk handkerchief.

Footsteps sounded suddenly in the desolate corridor. An instant later a voice said: "Don't move, any of you."

CHAPTER FOUR

Solution in Habanero

WE ALL looked toward the doorway. The first thing I saw was a heavy .38, its muzzle pointed straight at us. Behind it was a disheveled figure, of about the same build as Walters. Blood ran down his face from a jagged wound in his scalp.

He was clad only in a singlet and a pair of dirty denim trousers. His face was stained and his hands grimy. There was an unpleasant grin on his face as he spoke—in an accent as Oxonian as Walters'.

"Which one of you is Sanchez?"

Before anyone could answer, Sanchez himself appeared in the doorway to the rear of the stranger. The latter pivoted around expecting an attack from the rear. As he did so Mercado

hurtled across the room in a flying tackle. He hit the intruder's knees. The stranger in turn hit Sanchez. The three of them went to the floor.

I dashed over and grabbed the .38. Then the three of them rose slowly to their feet. The stranger glared at Walters.

"You didn't quite pull it off, did you?"

Walters blinked at him.

"I hope, said the stranger to us, "you haven't given this spy and imposter any information yet."

"Sir," said Walters, "are you implying—"

"I'll deal with you later. I—"

Here Mercado broke in. "You, *señor*, came in here with a gun. I think the first explanations should come from you."

The stranger said: "Of course, you're right. But I'm so damned furious with that spy, that impostor—"

Walters glared at him. "Damn you," he began, but Mercado interrupted.

"I take it that both you gentlemen are claiming to be Captain Herbert Walters. Is that correct?"

"I'm Walters," said the captain. "And I can prove it. I have my credentials with me."

"Sure you have!" shouted the other.

"Since you stole them from me along with my uniform a short while ago, after leaving me for dead at the side of the road."

"Sanchez," said Mercado abruptly, "do not forget that I am your paid advisor. Therefore, you will tell neither of these men anything until I tell you to do so."

Sanchez looked relieved to have the decision taken out of his hands.

"I have the credentials," said the uniformed man again.

"I am Walters," shouted the other. "I am the only man authorized to pay Sanchez."

"I have that authority," said the man in uniform.

Mercado sighed. "Sanchez," he said, "why are you doing this? For cash or reasons of patriotism?"

"Both," said Sanchez.

Mercado nodded. "That I can believe. Then, since one of these men is obviously an impostor, since they both offer you cash, I take it that you wish to deal only with the bona fide agent. Is that right?"

"That is right," said Sanchez.

"Damn it," said the newcomer. "I—"

Mercado silenced him with an upraised hand. "Let us not argue. Sanchez says nothing until I give him the word. I am not giving him the word at this moment. So, we shall eat and drink in a civilized manner as we discuss the merits of the case."

The intruder nodded and sat down. I handed him a glass of *habanero*. Walters, quite red in the face, drained his drink as did Sanchez

and myself. Mariano Mercado stood thoughtfully immobile, his glass in one hand, the Flit gun in the other.

At last he slowly emptied his glass and put down the Flit gun. He said: "May we, over another convivial drink, hear both your stories?"

"Yes," said the newcomer grimly. "You certainly shall hear mine. Eventually it will send this traitor to the firing squad." He glared at Walters who met his gaze angrily.

"A few hours ago," said the man with the cut on his scalp, "I was landed secretly by a plane which in a little while will take me out to the Pacific with the information I am to get from Sanchez. I had with me a sum of money to pay Sanchez and was naturally bearing credentials and wearing my uniform.

"Some ten kilometers from here I was stopped on my motorbike by a tree which had been placed across the road. As I was removing it, this chap"—he indicated Walters with a contemptuous thumb—"jumped me, slugged me with the butt of his gun, stripped me, took my credentials, money and uniform. Then, obviously, he came on here and impersonated me. Luckily, I'm a tough chappie. I regained consciousness and made my way here to the rendezvous, luckily in time."

Mercado nodded gravely. "And, of course," he said, "since you have been robbed you have nothing at all which would indicate the truth of your story."

"No, I haven't." He paused for a moment and his eyes lit up. "Wait a minute. He didn't bother to take my undershirt. Here, take a look at this label."

He bent his neck forward and fumbled with the back of his singlet collar. Mercado and I peered at it. There was a label on it which read *Jno. Crowther & Sons, Ltd. Bond Street, London. W. C.*

Mercado nodded gravely and turned to the man in uniform. "And your story, sir?"

"I have no story," said the captain testily. "I was brought here in a plane. I was given a motorbike and sent here to meet Sanchez. I never held up this man. I never saw him before. Here are my credentials."

He laid them on the table. They seemed to be in perfect order but, if the first story we had heard was true, that point was of no significance whatever.

THERE was a moment's silence, then Mariano Mercado achieved what appeared to me to be one of the most amazing non sequiturs of his career. He reached for the bottle and filled everyone's glass with *habanero*. Then he stood up and said: "Señores, to His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Mexico—Avila Camacho!"

Dumfounded, we all stood up and gravely

drank the toast. Then we all sat down again, staring at Mercado. He sighed heavily, said, "I must consider for a moment," and walked out into the patio. Burning with curiosity, I followed him.

I said: "That was a rather odd moment to drink a toast, wasn't it?"

He grinned at me and his eyes twinkled. "I think not," he said. "After all there are three nationalities present this afternoon—Mexican, American and British. In the interests of international amity, I intend to offer more toasts before the day is done."

"You have something up your loud and badly cut sleeve."

I was certain I was right when he failed to register indignation at this slight upon his clothes.

"How do you figure it?" I said. "I'm inclined to believe that our latest caller is the rightful Captain Walters."

He regarded me with interest. "How so?"

"His story sounds legitimate. Moreover, a phony wouldn't dare walk in here cold and accuse the man who is in possession of the uniform, the credentials and everything else of being an imposter."

"Maybe he would," said Mercado. "Perhaps the imposter planned to hold up the real captain and, for some reason, failed. Then his only recourse would be to arrive here and tell the story which our second guest has told."

"Have you made up your mind?"

"Pretty well. But I could be wrong. I will have to wait a short while before I can be quite sure which Walters is which."

"How can you definitely prove it?"

He shook his head mysteriously. He said: "You know I am a very well-read man."

That much I knew. He was, and in two languages. But I didn't see how all the reading in the world could possibly aid him in resolving the problem which was before us now.

Mariano Mercado walked back into the room, with me tagging along at his high heels. The two Walters and Sanchez looked up as he entered. Mercado filled the glasses once again.

"You know," he said, "the simplest solution to this is for us all to go back to Mexico City and face the British ambassador. He should be able to tell us which of you gentlemen is which."

"That is impossible—" began both Walters in unison. Then they stopped and glared at each other.

The man in the uniform said: "I don't know how this fellow knows so much. But a plane from Texas dropped me here on this secret mission. It is a bomber which is scheduled to pick me up at a definite time and fly me to

Guam where I will give my information to the commanding American admiral."

The man with the cut scalp swore. "You know one hell of a lot, my friend. What he says is true. Only it is I who must do these things. Not he."

Mercado shook his head and clucked like an old hen. He lifted his glass, said: "To Harry S. Truman, the President of the United States of America!"

Both Walters stood up along with Sanchez, all eyeing Mercado as if he were slightly mad. We drank Harry Truman's health and sat down again.

Sanchez said: "Señor Mercado, I do not wish to rush you, but this is a serious situation. What are we to do?"

"Eat," said Mercado, "and drink."

"I have a plane to catch soon," snapped the man with the cut scalp.

"I have been thinking of that," said Mercado. "Would the pilot recognize either of you gentlemen?"

The man in uniform shook his head. "He's gone to Morelia to get a train to Mexico City. He will return to the States. A new pilot is relieving him. We've never seen each other before."

Mercado sighed again. He pried open a can of sardines and ate them with relish. Then he filled the glasses and we all snapped to our feet as he toasted Eisenhower.

I looked at my watch. It was getting late and I, in common with everyone else, was getting impatient. What miracle Mercado was waiting for to straighten out this matter of identity was utterly beyond me.

He walked casually past me and whispered in my ear: "Latham, fill up the glasses."

I did so, wondering who in heaven's name we were going to toast now. As soon as I had filled the last glass, Mercado swung around on his narrow heels and seized his metal cup. He lifted it and cried: "To his Majesty, King George the Sixth of England."

He drained his glass before the rest of us had time to get to our feet. I swallowed my *habanero* realizing that I had quite an edge on after all this toasting, then as I put down my glass I observed that the man in uniform had not risen. He had drunk the toast to his king while sitting down. Yet, oddly enough, he had observed the amenities when we had drunk to Truman, Eisenhower and Camacho.

Mariano Mercado brought up a sigh from the soles of his feet.

"Latham," he said, "take out your gun."

Wonderingly, I did so.

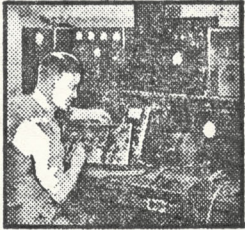
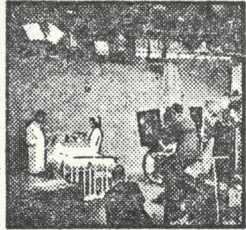
"You will keep it trained on that man, there. See that he behaves himself."

He pointed toward the man in the singlet.

"Now," he went on to Sanchez, "you will take Captain Walters—this gentleman in the

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uniform—out to the patio and tell him what you have to tell him."

Sanchez blinked at him. "Are you certain, señor, that he is—"

"I am certain," said Mercado calmly. "Tell him what you have to tell him."

Walters rose and saluted Mercado. Then he followed Sanchez out to the patio.

I kept my gun trained on the prisoner who glared at me. Mercado began packing up his Flit gun and those medicine bottles he had taken from his bags. Out in the patio I heard Sanchez reeling off what to me was a jargon. Obviously it was the code he had so painstakingly learned in Central America.

Walters sat down, balanced a notebook on his lap and wrote at Sanchez' dictation. Sanchez kept on talking for a good forty minutes.

My prisoner protested once. "Are you going to let that little fool betray his country?" he asked me. "How the devil does he know which of us is Walters?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said. "But I'll bet you a thousand pesos he's right. He invariably is."

At last, Walters and Sanchez returned from the patio—Sanchez looking exceedingly pleased with himself and carrying an oilskin package in his hand. I assumed it contained cash.

Walters approached Mercado and saluted. Then he shook his hand. "Sir," he said in English, "I salute a brilliant ally."

Mercado beamed at him.

"There is one more toast I would like you to drink with me before I leave," said Walters.

Mercado, who would drink to almost anything, was already reaching for the glasses. Walters filled two of them. He lifted his glass high and said, with twinkling eyes: "Sir, we drink to King Charles the Third."

They drained their glasses. Then Walters burst into uproarious laughter in which Mercado joined him. He shook hands with all of us and left the room. A few moments later, we heard the explosion of a motorcycle engine and saw Walters chugging off.

Without taking my eyes off my captive, I said to Mercado: "I hope you know what you're doing. If you're wrong you'll be in one hell of a lot of trouble."

"Do not worry," he said happily. "Now let us get everything out to the car."

SANCHEZ sat next to me on the return trip. Mariano Mercado sat in the rear seat with the man with the scalp wound. He held my gun firmly against the other's ribs for a matter of almost four hundred kilometers.

The sun was well up when we hit the outskirts of the city near Xochimilco. At Merca-

A Toast to the Killer

do's instruction, I drove first to the Sanchez house where we deposited a grateful Pedro Sanchez who pumped Mercado's hand and vowed to send us a substantial check in the next mail.

Our passenger, who had been strangely quiet during the journey, growled: "What do you guys think you have on me?"

I noted that the Oxford accent was missing now.

Mercado answered: "Murder, at least. Latham, drive over to the Santa Cruz Hospital."

Our prisoner moved uneasily in his seat, and looked for a moment as if he were about to smack Mercado. Mercado smiled at him blandly and said: "Now, listen, you. Since you doubtless do not want to tell me your name, since you apodictically are not Captain Walters, I shall call you José. So, José, remember this. There is no capital punishment in our great country. If the courts convict you, you will live. However, if you try to escape from me, you shall die. So sit quietly, *amigo José.*"

I brought the car to a halt before the hospital. The three of us disembarked and entered the institution. Mercado led the way to the office of Dr. Meana.

I said: "What are you going to do now?"

Mercado replied: "This, Latham, is so moronically simple that I am ashamed to do it. Luckily, I have an exceedingly emotional and none too bright adversary to deal with."

I looked at José. "How can you know that? You hardly know this *hombre.*"

"I am not speaking of this *hombre.*"

Inside the office, Meana regarded us oddly. We were dirty and disheveled. José, still in his undershirt with blood caked on his skull, looked like a rather badly dressed scarecrow.

"*Buenos días,*" said Mercado. "We have come to apprehend the killer of your patient. I take it that the police have got nowhere."

"Nowhere," said Meana.

"Very well. Now where is that little nurse who was with us at the time the body was discovered?"

"You mean Señorita Gomez?"

Mercado shrugged. "I suppose that is her name."

"She's up in the laboratory, performing a chore for me. Who is this man with you?"

Mercado didn't bother to reply. He said: "Will you lead us to the laboratory?"

Meana got up from his desk and led us through the long white halls of the hospital. As we walked, Mercado gave me my gun.

"Keep its muzzle in José's back," he said.

"And as for you, José, listen carefully to me. You will not speak unless I ask you a question. Is that clear? If you do, my friend, Señor

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Latham will pull the trigger. I mean that, Latham. You will kill him if he speaks."

I said, "All right," wondering what kind of a game we were playing now.

Meana opened the door to the laboratory. It was an odd place. Its walls were lined with cages containing guinea pigs, marmosets and various other animals used for experimental purposes. Its tables were filled with glass bottles and cases which held various flies, mosquitoes and other insects. Señorita Gomez looked up as we came in. She looked at Mercado, then at José. Her cheeks were suddenly drained of blood. She put her hand to her mouth and her big dark eyes were pools of fear.

I stood directly behind José with the gun muzzle pressing against the small of his back where it was invisible to Señorita Gomez.

Mercado said: "You may well be afraid, *muchacha*. After what this man has told us."

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words came. "He says," continued Mercado, "that you murdered Juan Sanchez with a scalpel. That he tried to prevent you from doing it. But since you were in the pay of a foreign power, since you were betraying your own country, you would not listen to him. Of course, there is no civilian capital punishment in our country, but this, however, is a military matter. You will doubtless be shot, *señorita*."

The girl uttered a sudden scream. I could feel José's muscles tense in front of me, saw a movement in his jaw and throat. I pressed the gun muzzle deeper into his back. He subsided.

"It's a lie!" screamed the girl. "He paid me to do it. I know nothing about treason. I don't know what his reasons were. He approached me as I went out for my lunch and offered me a lot of pesos to kill Sanchez. But I know nothing more. He's in it as deeply as I am."

Mercado exhaled a deep breath. "I told you it was moronically simple," he said. "The simplest part of the entire case. Doctor, will you pick up that telephone and call *la policia*. I think our work is done."

He turned to me and added: "You see, somehow José failed to catch Captain Walters. Apparently he watched the wrong road. So he smashed himself on the head, messed himself up to make it appear that he had been attacked. He came in with a gun prepared to kill Sanchez. However, in case that failed, as it did, he was ready to relate his cock and bull story, hoping that we would send him out alone with Sanchez to receive the message. Then he could accomplish the murder he had planned."

I nodded. "And it also must have been José who got past me into Sanchez' house."

A Toast to the Killer

"Doubtless." Mercado looked over at José and said: "You may say anything you wish now."

JOSÉ said plenty. When he had finished cursing Mercado, he turned his attention to the girl.

"Cabrona!" he screamed. "You fall for the oldest trick in the world. I had said nothing. Now you have charged us both with murder. Fool! Imbecile! Idiot!"

Over to my left, Meana hung up the telephone after completing the call to the police. "How did you manage all this?" he asked Mercado.

"Yes," I said. "Now that you have it all wrapped up and in the bag, there are a few things I would like to know, too. First, what gave you the idea that the girl had killed Juan Sanchez?"

"It was a most tenuous theory," said Mercado. "First the killing was done with a scalpel. That indicated a doctor or a nurse. But most of all was her horror when she first saw the body in our presence."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A nurse sees hundreds of corpses. Doubtless, bloodier and more horrible corpses than that of Juan Sanchez. Certainly she can view another one calmly. Yet she cried out in horror, not once but twice. And she wept.

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She overplayed her hand to convince us that murder was something so awful that she could barely contemplate it, much less commit one."

"All right," I said. "That's not too bad. But how did you know which was Walters?"

"Ah, that I knew definitely. First, consider the manner in which we met the two men. Naturally, the imposter desired principally to kill Sanchez. With Sanchez dead, British Intelligence could learn nothing. Yet the real Walters met us with friendship, while José here entered with a gun."

"Nevertheless," I said. "If José had been the genuine article, isn't it natural that he would have entered with a gun too?"

Mercado nodded. "That's why I used my test. Those toasts."

"Including the one to Charles the Third?"

"That was the really important one."

"For God's sake, explain it."

"Well," said Mercado, "I toasted our president and we all rose and drank the toast. The same thing happened on successive toasts—except the King of England. You will recall that Walters drank that toast sitting down. José, here, stood up with the rest of us."

"So what?"

"So, *amigo*, that demonstrated beyond all doubt that the man who remained sitting was really a British naval officer."

"It seems screwy to me."

"Not at all. There was a day long ago when Charles the Third of England was entertained by the officers of a ship of the line. In the tiny wardroom, he rose to acknowledge a toast being drunk to him and smacked his royal pate on a beam. Thereafter, because of the narrow confines of the ships, he granted every officer in his navy the privilege of drinking the king's health while sitting down. That tradition has grown stronger in the British Navy with the years. It is observed rigidly. However, José, of course, did not know that."

Señorita Gomez was staring at Mercado. She said thoughtfully: "You are afraid of disease. I recall your coming into my ward bundled up for fear of germs, *señor*."

She moved toward the table and snatched up a glass bottle. Within it I could see something buzzing around.

"You will let me out of here," she said to Mercado. "Or else I shall release this mosquito. He is filled with malaria germs."

She advanced upon Mercado whose face was suddenly ashen. He backed away as if she were carrying a machine gun. I realized I could not go to his aid without removing my gun from José's back.

As the girl passed me, I thrust out my foot and tripped her. She fell to the floor as Meana raced to the rescue. Mercado hesitated in the doorway. As the girl fell, she cursed

A Toast to the Killer

and her fingers unscrewed the top of the bottle. There was a high buzzing sound as the mosquito was released. Mercado uttered a shriek and ran madly down the hall.

Meana got through the doorway and slapped his hands together, suddenly crushing out the life of the insect. But by that time Mercado was at least eighty meters away.

Meana laughed, returned to the room and seized Señorita Gomez. He held her until the arrival of the police.

An hour later I sat in Mercado's office. Though he had fortified himself with tequila, he was still a shaken man.

"You're one hell of a guy!" I told him. "Suppose I'd lost my head as you did. Suppose I'd gone to grapple with the girl. José could have jumped me from behind and taken my gun. He would have sent at least one bullet into your precious body."

"A bullet!" he said contemptuously. "Don't you know that the heat of the discharge would sterilize the bullet. It would have been absolutely antiseptic as it entered my body. But that insect! Carrying death to every pore!" He paused and tossed three ounces of tequila into his gullet. "Dios," he said, "I shall have nightmares about it for ten years."

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Fergus Truslow

(Continued from page 43)

Anstruther said: "He didn't shoot Pietz." Adams nearly swallowed his quid. "Huh?" "Doc Fremont shot Pietz," Anstruther said coldly. "Doc Fremont also killed Old Mort, and framed the kid to take the rap for it."

Silence froze solid in the room. Doc Fremont's tones were brittle when he spoke. "Maybe you'd care to explain," he said.

"Not Doc!" Kitty Judd gasped.

"Yes, Doc," Bacchus Anstruther said grimly. "The world is a sinful place, Kitty. Even country doctors like to throw money across the gambling tables down in Mexicali."

"I warn you, Anstruther," the medico rasped. "You'd better be able to prove your words in a court of law!"

"I'll prove them here and now," the detective said, grinning. "When Old Mort came to your office after a powder accident, with his hand and arm full of rich bits of gold quartz, you recognized the ore as being from the Golden Shay. Any mining man in the Julian country could spot it in a pile of specimens."

"Next you came sniffing around the stamp mill, found evidence that Pietz had been smashing up a little high-grade ore on the sly. You figured, and rightly, that Pietz and Old Mort had been working partners on the high-grading racket. They kept their private feud going as a bluff."

"Pietz guessed you'd tumbled. He squawked to the insurance people just to try to hide his own guilt. But you knocked off both high-graders before I could talk to them."

"Got any proof?" Fremont asked politely.

Anstruther nodded, dandling the Springfield across his knees. "You set the windage sights just right on this baby, Doc. But you set 'em just before you drew my attention to the rifle by kicking the steel butt-plate. The wind had changed since the shot was fired. It blows up-canyon until the sun goes behind the Coast Range, then changes. You thought I wouldn't know about that. You wanted everything to look real nice, so you set the sights again, just before you drew my attention to the gun."

Doc Fremont's lips bared discolored teeth. "Why would I kill a couple of high-graders? Just for fun?"

"This morning Pietz burned something in his stove. Probably so as to lay new ashes on the old ones and hide something. I saw the smoke from the stovepipe. Right now there ought to be new white ashes on top. But, instead, there's old charcoal from last winter's oak fires. Doing a little snoopy digging, Doc?"

Anstruther turned to the skinny rancher. "Dig in those ashes, Adams," he ordered.

Adams jumped for the poker, began probing in the stove's castiron belly. Steel clinked on glass. He dropped the poker, shoved both

The Corpse in the Golden Shay

hands in. "Mason jars!" Adams yelled. "Holy Moses! The weight of 'em! It's gold!"

DOC FREMONT'S right hand had come out of his black, bulging medical bag. The twin black holes of a sawed-off shotgun swung toward Anstruther, yawning big as nail kegs.

Anstruther squeezed the Springfield's trigger. The shotgun spun across the floor, out of Doc Fremont's numbed, bleeding hand.

Bob Herndon picked up the sawed-off weapon, drew the two charges of buckshot. "I—I still don't understand about what happened in the mine," he blurted.

"Simple," Anstruther told him. "Doc put on Old Mort's spare work clothes he kept in the mine, got you to follow him in. What did you slug the kid with Doc—a sandbag?"

"I'd sure like to work you over with it!"

The detective grinned. "You trusted Doc," he told the ex-Marine. "When he showed you a dummy made of Mort's clothes, told you you'd killed the desert rat, you believed him.

"Doc told you you'd had a mental blackout. To calm you down, he slipped you the needle. That knocked you out—but good.

"Then he waited for Old Mort to show up after dark, killed him after sandbagging him, and brought you out of the mine."

"But," Herndon protested, "what about all the time I wandered around in the mine? My watch showed that hours had passed. And it was getting dusk outside. I saw the stars in the sky, up through the shaft."

"Seeing the stars in daylight from the bottom of a mine shaft is a common occurrence. Remember, the sun had gone behind the Coast Range. I saw stars reflected in the water at the bottom of that shaft in late afternoon myself. It's a well-known phenomenon. As for the watch, Doc set it ahead to help mix you up on the time angle. Later he set it back."

Kitty Judd had taken a grip on Bob Herndon's shirt sleeve as if she never meant to let go again. "You mean," she said, "that Doc planted a phony time lapse in Bob's head to make him think he'd been dropping stitches in one of those fever spells?"

"Sure," Bacchus Anstruther grunted. "The perfect alibi for Doc. He knew Herndon would confess the minute the heat went on Doc. All Doc had to do was leave the syringe in there by Old Mort's body, for us to find when we trailed Old Mort into the mine."

"Then," Herndon's black eyes came alight, "I didn't slip a cog at all?"

"Hell, no!" Anstruther chuckled. "If you can take what Doc Fremont has put you through in the last twenty-four hours, you can stand anything—even matrimony."

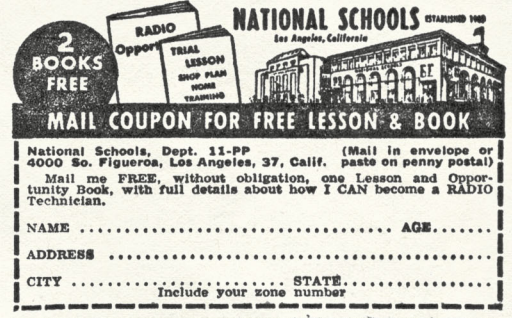
Kitty Judd whispered: "Maybe I can do something about that Mr. B."



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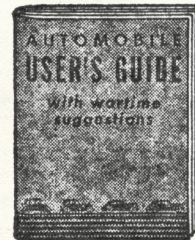
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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

confined to certain sections or to any special type of consumer. Everyone is gypped at one time or another.

Let's take eggs as an example. The health authorities and dietitians are constantly reminding the public of the health-giving qualities of eggs. But there is a shortage of this important food and so Mr. Swindling Dealer has a field day.

Here's how some of us have been swindled or gypped—consciously or unconsciously.

I ask the dealer for a dozen eggs. He knows how anxious I am to supply my family with same.

"You can have a dozen eggs if you will also purchase this package of dried peas," he answers. The price, he informs you, is eighty cents for both items.

You take the dozen (grade B) eggs and the four-ounce package of dried peas. On arriving home you look the dried peas over a little more carefully, and if you are price-conscious you discover that the peas are strictly a ten-cent item. That would mean that your grocer or dealer paid about six or seven cents for the dried peas wholesale and is getting a profit of three or four cents on that item. No complaint about the profit on the peas when sold singly. Then it dawns on you that you have been badly gypped on the egg purchase.

Here's how it works: The ceiling price for Grade B eggs runs from forty-seven to forty-nine cents per dozen. You paid the grocer eighty cents for the eggs and he threw in the package of dried peas to make the transaction look legitimate and to cover himself. He also squares himself with the O.P.A. if some enraged consumer should decide to notify that agency.

With the ceiling price of the Grade B eggs at, say, forty-eight cents per dozen you add ten cents for the dried peas and how much have you been gypped out of? Exactly twenty-two cents on the dozen eggs.

What is the remedy for such unfair-trade practices? Only when the consumer asserts himself and refuses to become a party to such petty swindling the practice will stop.

Lewis Belmore,
New York, N. Y.

AND still the contest rackets continue, bringing hope and then disillusionment to millions—plus the loss of many hard-earned dollars. Witness—

When I was fourteen I entered a contest which I saw in a newspaper. In a small space the contestant was to write in as many times as he could the name of the product sponsoring the contest. I did so and mailed off my entry. When the contest was over and all entries examined, I received a letter stating that I was one of the top winners.

Imagine my happiness! However, as I continued reading the letter, further complications set in. As an endorsement of their

Ready for the Rackets

product, they wanted each contest winner to buy the item which sold for five dollars. If I didn't buy their product I would be disqualified. The contest rules had neglected to mention any of this. Right then and there, I should have seen through their scheme. But since I had come in second, and was eligible for a prize of two hundred dollars, I thought this was too good an opportunity to pass up for the sake of a mere five dollars.

So I got down to work—did errands for the neighbors, minded their babies, collected junk from cellars which I sold—and finally managed to scrape up the necessary five dollars. I sent the money by airmail so it would get there as soon as possible.

I waited on pins and needles for a couple of weeks, but got no answer. After a month had gone by I wrote to the firm demanding to know why I hadn't heard from them. But my letter came back postmarked "No such address known." Of course I realized then how neatly I had been swindled.

Mrs. R. C.,
Monongahela, Pa.

IT'LL be a long, cold winter so don't let any unauthorized dealer take your fur coat—and you—"to the cleaners." Witness—

I was so cleverly swindled that I didn't even know it for over five months!

On a sunny day in early spring I received a friendly phone call from one of our larger department stores, asking if I wanted them to pick up my fur coat for Summer storage. Naturally I did, for it would save me the trouble of taking it downtown myself. I really appreciated the extra service.

Next day a nice-looking young man in a driver's uniform came for the coat, took an order for minor lining repairs and gave me a signed receipt.

I thought nothing more about the coat until I needed it. During the latter part of September I went to the department store and presented my receipt to the clerk at the cold storage vaults.

"Your coat isn't here, madam!" she told me, "This receipt has our name on it, but it isn't ours. The thing for you to do is to take it in to the manager."

The kindly, gray-haired manager read the receipt and shook his head. "This is the fourteenth faked receipt for coats we have received since the cool spell started a few days ago," he said. "The crooks who took your coat didn't represent our store. We've started an investigation in the hopes of catching them."

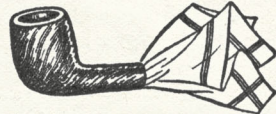
He made many notes of my description of the young man who got my coat and he had me fill out a long form, describing my coat in detail. The police would want all the information we could give them.

Spring is here again, and I am still without a fur coat—sadder, poorer, wiser!

Mrs. I. D.,
Lincoln 1, Nebraska



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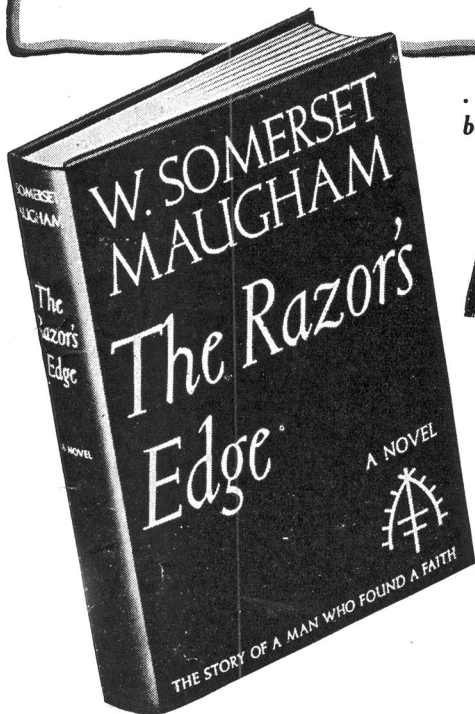
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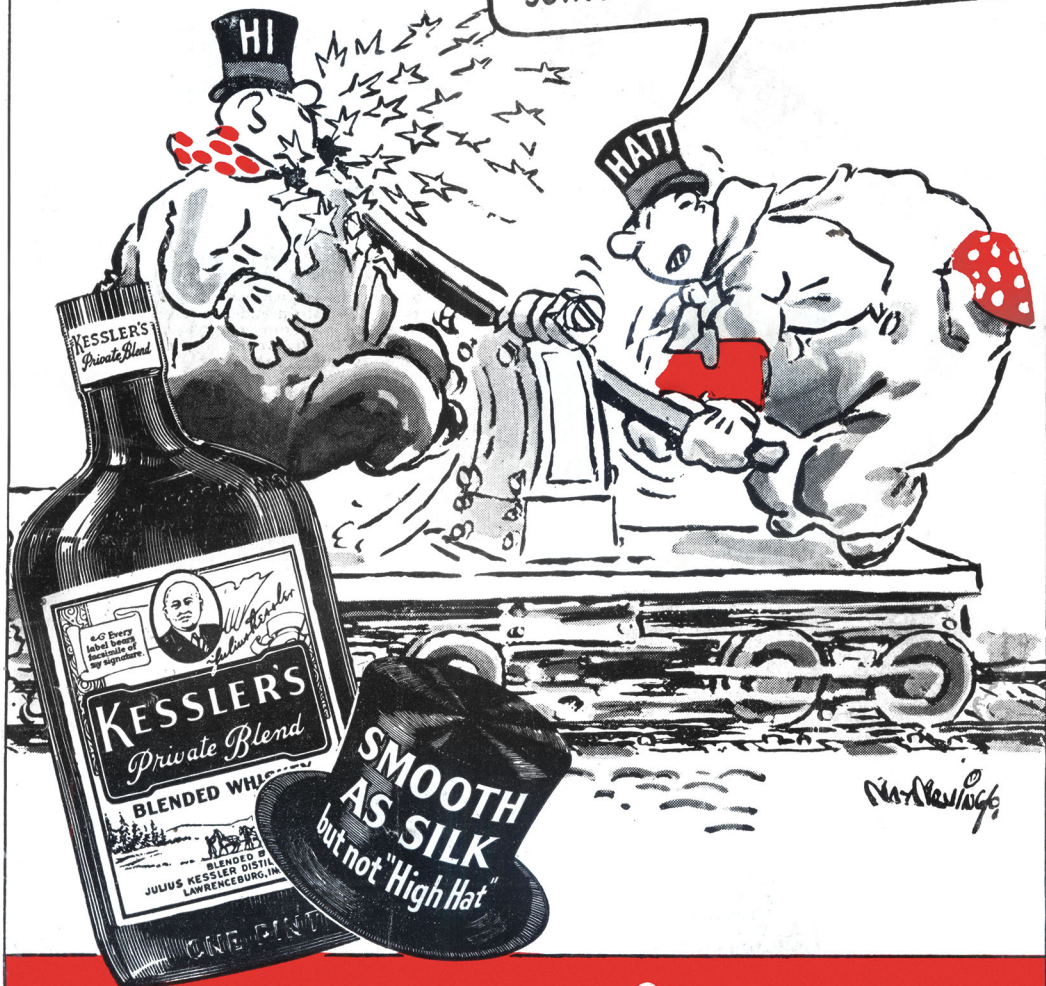
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