

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



MARCH

15¢ DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE

CONTAINING WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

**ONCE UPON
A TOMB**

by HENRY NORTON

**SOME LIKE
'EM DEAD**

A BILL BRENT NOVELETTE
by FRED C. DAVIS

A COUNSELLOR MORT
STORY

by JULIUS LONG

WILLIAM R. COX



DICK WON ALL AROUND WHEN...

HERE'S A GRAND. IF THE FLASH LOSES, I'LL MAKE IT FIVE

O.K. IT'S IN THE BAG

AFTER GUARDING HIS HORSE ALL NIGHT, DICK O'NEIL, EX-MARINE AND OWNER OF "IWO JIMA", LONG SHOT, OVERHEARS SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION ON MORNING OF BIG RACE

BETTER ACT FAST, MR. HILL. I WANT "IWO" TO BEAT YOUR HORSE, BUT I HATE CROOKS

I'LL CALL THE RACING ASSOCIATION

CAUGHT HIM RED-HANDED, MR. HILL. THE OLD SPONGE TRICK

MY OWN TRAINER! HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING?

YOU'RE A REAL SPORTSMAN. WON'T YOU JOIN MY DAUGHTER AND ME IN OUR BOX?

THANKS... I'LL BE GLAD TO AT POSTTIME

FIRST CHANCE I'VE HAD TO SHAVE-AND NO RAZOR

COME ON, USE MINE

WHAT A SWELL BLADE, EDDIE! NEVER HAD A FASTER, SLICKER SHAVE

THIN GILLETTES ARE TOPS WITH ME. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

O-O-O-O! IWO WINS!

I SURE WISH FLASH HAD BEEN AS WELL-TRAINED

I'M GOING TO HIRE A NEW TRAINER, MR. O'NEIL. ANY CHANCE YOU'D CARE TO TALK BUSINESS TONIGHT?

SOUNDS GOOD TO ME, MR. HILL

I LIKE HIS LOOKS

TO GET SMOOTH, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH SPEED AND COMFORT, TRY THIN GILLETTE BLADES. THEY'RE KEEN, LONG-LASTING AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. THUS THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES

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ALL STORIES COMPLETE 

15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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

Vol. 50

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LIGHTER MOMENTS

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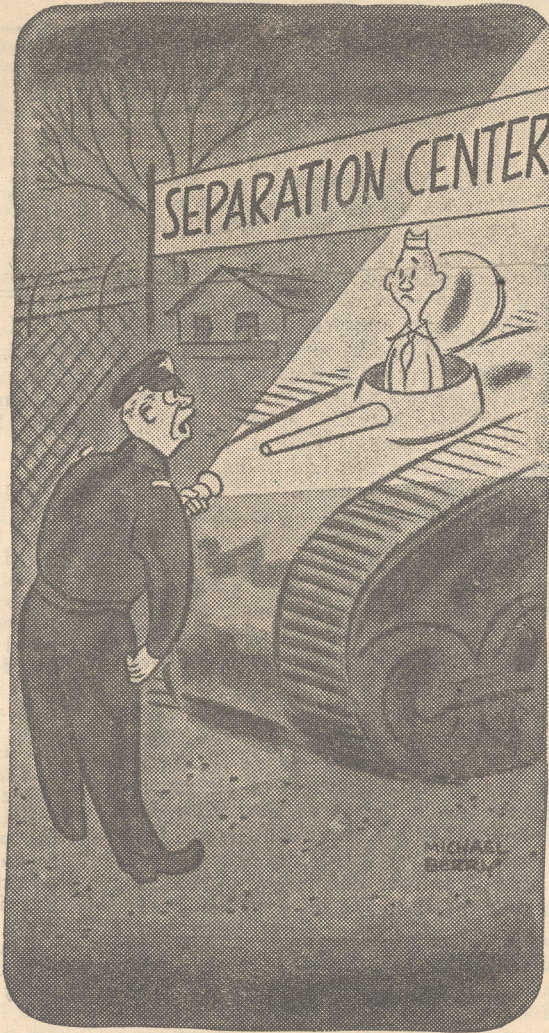
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THE APRIL THRILL DOCKET



DL. CHAMPION brings back Mariano Mercado, the little Latin shamus with the sanitary psychosis, to prove once again that there's *No Place Like Homicide*. The Mexican police didn't like dead Americans, nor did the American Embassy. Tourists' cadavers invariably cluttered up international relations. So Mercado undertook to solve the riddle of the corpse on the grounds of the Embassy in Mexico City merely from patriotic motives. Actually, he seemed rather pleased by the news of George Harkwell's untimely death. If a man had to die, Mercado reasoned, it was far better he did so from a bullet rather than succumbing to the bacterial hordes. But death by violence means murder and murderers have to be caught. Which was why Mercado and I were in New York—lured by the promise that America was a microbeless Paradise—on the last lap of a slay-trail which finally ended in a chili joint on Sixth Avenue.

John Knox, a new addition to our roster of top-notch crime fictioners, introduces us to Wild Willy Hassell in *Home Is Where the Hearse Is*. Willy, according to all reports, would have made the Dead End Kids look like so many Little Lord Fauntleroy's. Only two people had ever loved him—his neurotic sister and Florence Barnes—who paid for befriending the little moron with her life!

Murder Rides a Broomstick—at any rate so claimed Abe Whittle, the town tippler, who swore he saw a witch swoop out of the Pembroke's attic window the night old Miss Lydia was killed. "Stuff and nonsense," everybody said, but they began to doubt their words when the second corpse was found—a skinny old hag with wild scraggly hair, wearing a flapping robe—with a besom lying near the body, the favorite mode of transportation of witches since time immemorial. An exciting new story, also by a new contributor, Roland Phillips.

Plus: the latest Counsellor Mort novelette by Julius Long; a new rib-tickling Doc Pierce story, *The Doctor's Double*, by Richard Dermody; and other short stories and features by your favorite writers.

This great thrill-packed April issue on sale March 6th.

Ready for the Rackets A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17.

AS LONG as people want something for nothing, there will be rackets. Here are three swindles, all different, all operating on that sure-fire appeal to the purse-strings. Don't be fooled by too-easy pickings like these.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

A few years ago a fast talking individual representing himself as a sales promoter for a men's tailoring establishment talked me into joining what he called a suit club. It was supposed to consist of twenty-five men, each paying two dollars a week, with the understanding that each week one man would be awarded a suit.

It sounded very inviting, since even if my name wasn't picked until the twenty-fifth week, the suit would be only fifty dollars, and there was the possibility of being selected in any one of the twenty-five weeks before then. What happened, of course, was that I paid the full twenty-five weeks, as did several others, I later discovered. When I went to claim the suit, the material was as bad as you might expect, but I was invitingly shown another suit of much better material for only twenty dollars more.

Knowing that I had been clipped for the fifty dollars, I realized it would be like throwing it in the ashcan to take the first suit, so I paid the additional twenty, and thus purchased my first seventy dollar "custom made" suit—without a fitting.

James P. Hayes
Rego Park, New York

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

Some years ago a real estate dealer sold lots in the vicinity of Chicago "very reasonable." The lots, 25x100, were in a coming manufacturing district. The promise of quick returns was the incentive to buy, and many did. It was not until some curious soul went out to investigate that we realized the dealer had not mentioned feet. The lots were 25 by 100 *Inches*.

H. N. Bruun
Oak Park, Ill.

(Continued on page 94)

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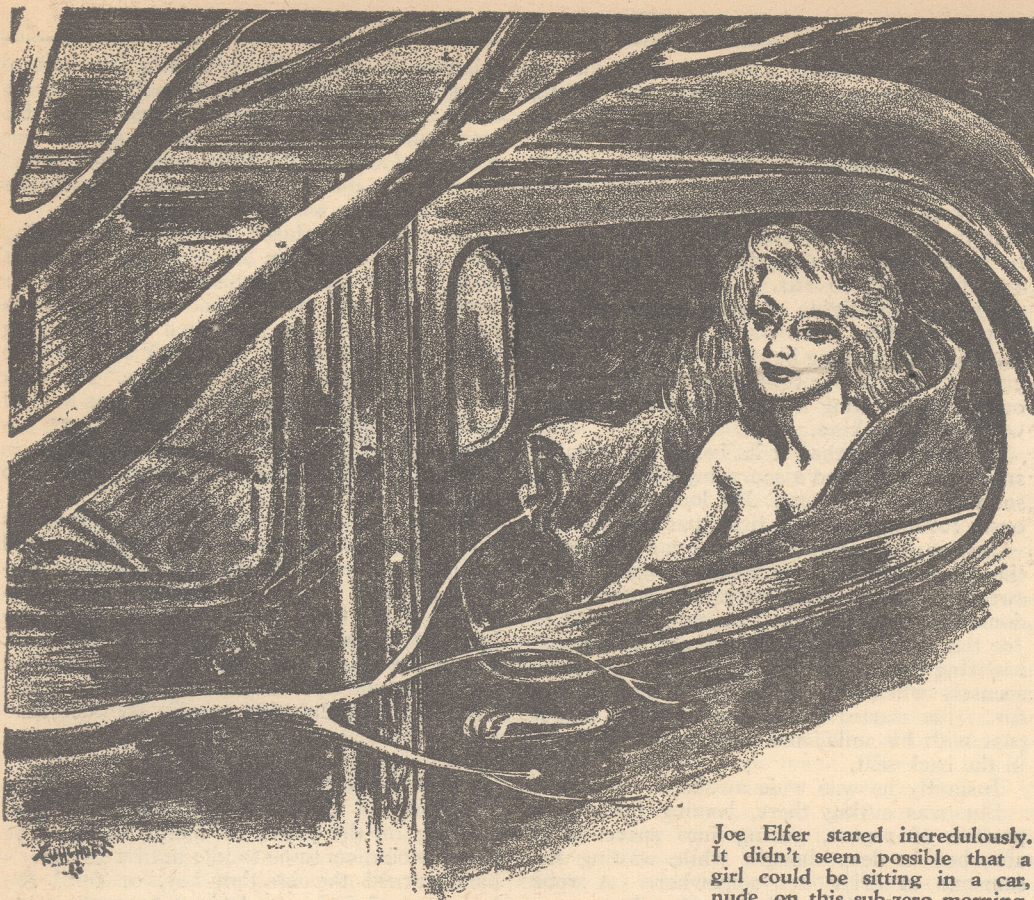
A
Bill Brent
Novelette

SOME LIKE 'EM DEAD

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

Author of "Death Can Wait," etc.

Joe Elfer, delivery man for Happy Herd Dairies, didn't expect to find anyone else around at four o'clock of this snowy December morning—certainly not a young woman completely nude except for a blanket wrapped loosely around her. Phil Platt felt the same incredulity three-quarters of an hour later, but neither he nor Joe Elfer had very long to wonder about this strange phenomenon—they were too busy dying!



Joe Elfer stared incredulously. It didn't seem possible that a girl could be sitting in a car, nude, on this sub-zero morning.

CHAPTER ONE

Nude in the Night

AT FOUR o'clock on this December morning it was blacker than the inside of a walrus and cold enough to freeze any living thing, including Mr. Joe Elfer.

A delivery man for Happy Herd Dairies, Incorporated, Joe Elfer huddled inside his old sheepskin coat as he tooted his low-slung truck along Birch Street, making his usual rounds. The truck's tires squeaked on hard-packed snow. Its dimmed headlamps glowed on heaps of week-old drifts which reared up from the gutters like miniature mountain ranges. To Joe Elfer it seemed the world was empty of everything but snow and blackness and cold and solitude and dairy products.

This was as wintry a night as Joe Elfer could remember. The white street was deserted except for him, lightless except for his headlamps, silent except for the noises of his truck. He envied the customers he served,

who were snug and warm in their beds, scarcely aware that he existed. His was a thankless job, to be sure, but Joe liked to think of himself as a man with a mission. Happy Herd milk, like the United States mails, must go through.

Taking it through, he braked at intervals and scurried out into the arctic darkness. Bottles rattling in his loaded carrier, he hustled to the doors of private homes and to the service entrances of small apartment buildings. Each time he scrambled back into the cab of his truck he felt grateful for the warmth whirring out of the under-dash heater, but he couldn't absorb much of it because he always had to duck right out again.

So Joe Elfer continued his cold and lonely course, a dutiful man and a sleepy one. Having had to pull himself out of the hay at two A. M. in order to be on the job by three, he wasn't really awake. However, he didn't need to be. After all, he'd been working this route for almost thirteen years now, winter and summer, and it was now quite automatic with him. He made his deliveries while in a state of

walking somnolence. This morning, due to the numbing cold outside and the lulling warmth inside his cab, he was functioning in even a deeper stupor than usual.

In this condition he made another in his long series of stops. Trudging along a driveway with his bottle-laden carrier—to Joe it was just another driveway in a semi-dream—he found evidence that the rest of the world was beginning to stir.

The red tail-lights of a car shone at him. It was standing just outside an open garage, with only its parking lights burning at its front end. Evidently someone had just backed it out and was letting it warm up, for its engine was quietly ticking.

As Joe approached it he heard the metallic snap of its door and a scurrying of feet on the snow-packed pavement. He looked up, curiously rousing himself a little, but saw no one.

Just as Joe began to pass the car he noticed the driver's door slowly swinging open. As it swung a switch was activated, causing the dome-light to flash on. The glow revealed to Joe that no one was at the wheel. He paused, realizing that the driver hadn't closed the door securely when leaving the car a moment before. Joe started to close it in order to get past with his milk, and then he saw the girl in the back seat.

Instantly he was wide awake.

She was sitting there, leaning back in a posture of repose, gazing into space as if absorbed in deep thought while waiting for someone to drive her somewhere. A robe covered her only partially. Her legs were crossed, exposed from above the knees, and both were bare. She wore neither stockings nor shoes. The robe trailed across her, loosely concealing her body, but above the shoulders she was entirely naked again. Her bare right arm rested in her lap, and with her bare left arm she was reaching sideways as if absentmindedly plucking at the nap of the seat cushion. Her face held a rapt expression and her bright eyes were focused on something far away.

Joe Elfer stared at her incredulously and told himself it wasn't possible that a girl could be sitting in a car, nude, on this sub-zero morning. But there she was.

"My good gosh!" he blurted.

He stood there bug-eyed for another moment, shivering inside his sheepskin coat at the mere sight of her bareness, then leaned into the car.

"Miss!" he called to her. "Hey, miss, ain't you chilly?"

Seeming not to hear him in her abstraction, she continued to sit there with that enraptured expression on her pretty face, not feeling the cold at all. The sharp air had made Joe Elfer's own eyes so rheumy that he wasn't sure

whether or not she'd given him any sort of response. He straightened, numbly wondering what he should do. He told himself that this was none of his business. After all, he was a married man and he didn't want to get mixed up with any naked young woman in anybody's car, no matter what the season.

He turned, confused and startled, wanting only to go away from there. Abruptly he was conscious of motion behind him. It was his impression that the girl had gone into quick action. At least he attributed the scurrying noises to her because he hadn't seen anyone else about, but he couldn't be sure. His back was now turned to her and an arm was hooked under his chin, suddenly and hard. Next, before he really knew what was happening to him, a blow struck him—a mean, swift clip over the head.

The first vicious impact knocked him to his knees, helplessly stunned. The second crashed while he made a groping, futile effort to support himself. The third knocked him sideward. These three merciless blows were unbearable explosions of agony inside his brain. When the fourth hit, sprawling him flat on the tire-smoothed snow, he felt it only vaguely. The fifth he didn't feel at all. By that time he was dead. . .

AT 4:45 A. M. Joe Elfer's milk truck sat empty in the street, its headlamps still glowing on the snow, its motor idling. The motor would continue to idle until a stranger's hand turned the ignition key, or until the last drop of fuel was drained from the tank.

At 4:45 A. M., miles away from the spot where Joe Elfer's truck stood, light shined from the second floor of a small apartment house on Arch Street, near the center of the city.

Now the hallway entrance of this apartment was opened. The man who stepped out was forty, handsomer than average and a little drunk. With a gratified smile on his flushed face, he turned to the blond woman who was seeing him out. Buxom and thirtyish, she wore a crimson housecoat and crimson mules. He patted her plump cheek affectionately.

"G'by, sweetie-pie," he said, beaming on her.

"'Night, Phil, honey," she answered, smiling a large smile.

Reluctant to go, he enveloped her in his arms and kissed her. Her arms circled his neck. Presently they disengaged themselves and the man began a new departure.

"'Member, y' haven't seen me t'night, sweetheart," he reminded her. "'Y' don't even know me, see? Never even *heard* of me, not a word! 'Member, now, M'rie."

"I don't know you from Adam, Phil,

honey," Marie said, stroking his cheek in turn and giving him another kiss. "'Night, now."

She waved her scarlet-tipped fingers at him from her door until he disappeared down the stairs, waving back. She closed the door then, latched it and turned out the light. Going into her bedroom, she stepped out of her mules and threw off her coat. Then she slipped into the bed and settled immediately into a weary sleep.

Phil went his wavering way down the stairs, smiling to himself, humming softly. As he descended the last few steps he heard a rattling sound from the street entrance. The door knob was being turned from the outside—someone was about to come in.

Not wishing to be seen, Phil quickly turned up the collar of his overcoat and gave a downward tug to the brim of his hat. He kept going, his heels clicking on the tile floor until he reached the entrance, where he stepped aside so as to let the other person pass.

No one came in.

After waiting a moment, puzzled, Phil opened the door. The dim light from the vestibule fell across the stoop. Beyond it, Arch Street was very dark, and a car was parked in front of the building, but otherwise there was nothing—no one was in sight.

That was odd, Phil thought. Someone had been about to enter the building, then had decided against it and had faded. Why? Scared off, maybe, by the sound of his footsteps on the tile flooring? If so, it was somebody who wished even less than Phil did to be seen at this place. Well, it was no concern of his. Realizing now, in a befuddled way, how very late it was, or rather how very early, he decided he'd better be getting along and thinking up some good excuses.

At the bottom of the stoop, however, he paused again, looking down curiously. There seemed to be a large bundle lying there. On second thought, it didn't look exactly like a bundle. As his bleary eyes adjusted themselves to the gloom, he bent over it. What he saw caused him to steady himself, wrap himself a little more tightly in his overcoat, and stare.

It was a girl sitting on the second lowest step. She was leaning backward against the railing, one leg crossed over the other, her head erect, her eyes wide open and bright, as if she were expecting someone or something to appear momentarily on the opposite side of the dark street. She seemed so intently vigilant, in fact, that she gave Phil no glance.

Interested, he saw that she had a sort of blanket draped over her, and under it she appeared to be wearing some kind of white, tight-fitting garment. Then Phil realized, with a shiver, that this wasn't a garment at all—it

was the girl's skin. She was sitting there in the brittle cold with the blanket trailing loosely over her shoulders. Otherwise she was stark naked.

"For God's sake!" Phil blurted. Continuing to goggle unbelievably, he said to the girl: "You must be a hell of a lot drunker than I am, baby!" Then, because she didn't seem to mind his stare, he added: "Say, you're not bad, no-ot ba-ad."

He leaned over for a closer look—his last look at anything in this world.

Suddenly he felt himself falling upon the girl. The thought in his liquor-numbered brain was that she had swiftly hooked her arms around his neck and yanked him downward. Not at all certain of what was happening to him, he tried to push himself away from her. One of his feet slipped on the snow and he spilled to one side.

"Cut it out, babe!" he gasped.

The brief, sharp scramble induced a wave of dizziness, and as he tried to lift himself again, his head was unwittingly bent for the blow.

It hit him with such savagery that he dropped again, flat on the steps. It left him spent but with an ember of consciousness still glowing. He was aware of someone straddling over him, of the weapon slashing down again, and he could think of no one but the naked girl. In a delirium of confusion and pain he seemed to be telling himself that the girl was a murderous maniac, that she'd been sitting there in the nude as the bait in an insanely set trap, that he'd blundered into it like a fool and that it was killing him. He couldn't know how right he was about this, however, or how very wrong. He was too busy dying.

His whole body shook as he was struck again with merciless force. He groaned and the sound, the last he would ever utter, was enough to stir his assailant to fury. He lay there dead, and still the murderous strokes of the weapon chopped at him. . .

All of which meant work for Captain Russo, chief of the Homicide Squad, and grist for the mill of a part-time police reporter named Bill Brent.

BY NOON the cold had moderated but Captain Russo's headache had not. Looking pained, he moved restlessly about his office in police headquarters, his joints seeming to creak dryly like those of an ambulant skeleton. The captain had associated with corpses for so long that he had acquired the appearance of one. Also, they had made him a chronically morose man. His idea of a felicitous day was one on which no murder occurred, but this definitely wasn't one of those. Two new homicides having been dropped into his bony lap

this very morning, he took it as an occasion to deplore anew the fact that some people went right on killing other people in spite of everything he could do to discourage them.

Bill Brent stood beside Russo's desk, eyeing him in exasperation as he nuzzled his telephone. Weighing two hundred pounds, Brent was almost twice the captain's size and at the moment he looked twice as frustrated. He gnawed on an unlighted cigar, tilted it belligerently against his crooked nose and listened to a voice berating him over the wire.

The voice belonged to Garrett, the *Recorder's* hard-bitten city editor. It sounded as harsh as hailstones pelting on a tin roof. This call for Brent had come over the captain's phone a full minute before and as yet Brent hadn't said much more than "Hello." Garrett was doing all the talking in a vein of harassed complaint.

"A headline is staring me in the face, Brent. I've got to get a paper out. I should have some local news to print in it. It seems to me that when two guys get bumped off in this city on the same night, it ought to be good for at least a column, but this stuff you've phoned in doesn't fill as much space as we'd ordinarily give to the Boy Scouts' annual pow-wow. What's the matter down there at Headquarters? Isn't the homicide bureau interested in homicide any more? Where the hell's your story?"

"I've already given you as much of it as I've been able to snaffle, chum," Brent answered sourly. "Russo is as garrulous as a tongue-tied clam this morning. Either this pair of killings has him stopped cold, or he's holding out on us. Whichever it may be—"

"Whichever it may be," Garrett cut in, "nuts to it! Our policy is to cooperate with the cops as long as they cooperate with us, but when they start censoring a big story, like this one, then we stop playing their kind of ball. You're supposed to be a top-flight newsman, Brent, and I'm counting on you to deliver. If you can't do it, with Russo's help or in spite of him—if you've been off news so long that you've forgotten how to handle it—then you'd better go back to your other job and stay there."

Garrett disconnected noisily. Brent fumed in silence, feeling he deserved no such castigation, and shuddered over the city editor's mention of his "other job." He preferred not to be reminded of it. It was labor of a peculiarly onerous character which he heartily detested, and ordinarily it kept him sweating under a form of journalistic serfdom from which he found far too few opportunities to escape. Although he was primarily a police reporter, this deplorable "other job" of his prevented him from functioning as such, except at odd moments. Brent was deeply disturbed by

Garrett's implication that it had kept him so preoccupied that he'd lost the knack of doing his stuff on the police trick. This was a dreadful thought. Trying to shake it off, he growled and frowned over the few scribbles he'd made with a pencil stub on a folder of copy paper.

"Russo, this is one hell of a thing," he protested. "For the first time in months I've managed to wangle enough free time to cover a police story, a yarn involving not merely one killing, but two. So what does it add up to? Hell's hinges, I can put the whole thing in a single sentence: 'Two guys got slugged to death in the city last night and so far the cops don't seem to know from nothing.' Russo, my friend, either you're slipping or else you're freezing me out."

Since Russo said nothing to this, but continued to pace about like a walking mummy, Brent's glance wandered over the captain's desk. A few reports lay there. These might or might not comprise all the information which Russo's assistants had garnered concerning the day's crop of corpses since their discovery five hours before. If so, the results were routine and unenlightening. If not—if more information than this had been uncovered—the captain was keeping it inside his skull. In either case Brent felt justifiably burned up about it.

As to material evidence, only one item was to be seen. Picking it up by thumb and forefinger, Brent let it dangle while he examined it with a discerning eye. It was a brassiere.

The brassiere, peach-colored and lacy, suggested contours which prompted Brent to take more than a mere reportorial interest in it. It was a subject which Russo hadn't enlarged upon during his close-mouthed discussion of the two homicides. Brent looked at him questioningly now, but the captain shook his cadaverous head in an obdurate and slightly embarrassed manner.

"There's a reason why I've given you so little news, Brent," Russo said in his funereal tones. "There's hardly any to give. These two cases offer less to work on than any others I've seen in years. Also, they're tough—so tough that I've got to be damn careful how I play my hand. The most I can be sure of is that a brace of murders was committed during the night. There's no motive apparent in either one. There are no suspects. Neither is there any evident connection between them."

"No connection?" Brent said. "Both guys got brained, probably less than an hour apart. To my mind, if not to yours, that means something."

"But the two homicides were committed in two widely separated parts of the city," Russo reminded him. "Two different weapons were used. Joe Elfer was slugged to death with an empty milk bottle—one of his own

company's bottles, of course. Philip Platt was worked over with a length of pipe, or a jack handle, or something of the sort, which I'll have a sweet time finding, if I ever do. The two victims didn't know each other. There's no relationship whatever between them. They had absolutely nothing in common except the fact that both were male and both were murdered on the same night, for no apparent reason, each by a person whose identity is not immediately clear."

"I see no reason why I can't have a hunch that the same killer conked 'em both," Brent said.

"There's nothing at all to indicate it."

"Hell's hinges!" Brent looked at him disgustedly. "How can I make a big front-page story out of the fact that you keep claiming nothing ties up? No arrests! No suspects! No motives! No evidence, except. . ."

He gestured inquiringly toward the brassiere, while Russo gazed at him with lusterless eyes.

AVOIDING the topic of the brassiere, the captain spoke in a hollow voice that seemed to echo from the depths of a tomb. "Show me somebody to arrest, my aggressive friend. Joe Elfer was found dead in the driveway of a home on Birch Street which is occupied by a Lutheran minister. I assure you, Brent, this godly man is such a gentle soul that he couldn't bring himself to slaughter a cow, much less a milkman. You think I should arrest him and grill hell out of him, even though he couldn't possibly be involved?" Russo shook his bony head again. "Somebody left Elfer's corpse on the parsonage doorstep along with the morning milk."

"O.K., then, there's an angle to work on," Brent argued. "Elfer wasn't killed at the minister's home. He got the life slugged out of him somewhere else along his route. Never mind why, for the moment, or by whom. The important thing is *where*. Right?"

Russo nodded sadly. "The spot where Elfer died is significant," he agreed.

"O.K." Bill persisted, digging for more news. "He couldn't be left where he fell because that place was too close to where the killer lives, or too close to where the killer was operating. His body had to be moved to a less suggestive spot. The killer saw, however, that merely carting him somewhere else wouldn't be enough, because you could still trace Elfer's route to the last place where he'd delivered milk, and that one, or the one immediately following, would be it. So what did this smart murderer do in order to cover up? He piled Elfer into the truck and went on delivering the dead man's milk along the street until he'd gone far enough to confuse the trail, whereupon he dumped the body at a spot

where it would cause confusion twice confounded. Right?"

"Undoubtedly," Russo agreed in a sorrowful manner, "but that's strictly off the record."

Brent groaned. "Off the record, you say! That's a hot lead and you tell me I can't print it! I get a chance on the police trick once in a blue moon and then you muzzle me!"

"It would be foolish of me to tip my mitt to a murderer who's already too close to getting away with it," Russo explained. "Besides, this tells us nothing. There's a chart of Elfer's route tacked up inside the cab of his truck. Anybody could have followed it after killing him. It covers many blocks and scores of homes. Elfer could have been killed at any one of a hundred different points. How can I find the right one?"

"Well, for one thing, I can ask questions along the way, which my men are now doing, and getting nowhere. For another, I can look for blood spots in the snow. However, there was very little blood on Elfer's body, which must have left very small traces. It could easily have been covered up, and that makes the job of finding it well-nigh impossible, especially when you consider that the weather has turned very much warmer now and we're having a thaw." Russo eyed Brent with the eyes of a ghost. "No doubt you have a few brilliant suggestions, Brent?"

Brent's frown conceded it was a tough assignment. "None right now," he admitted, "but soon, no doubt."

"In Philip Platt's case there's even less," Russo reminded him. "Platt's wife says he was out playing poker with the boys last night. So he was, but only until midnight, when the game broke up. That much you may print, Brent. The rest is off the record."

"Oh, God!" Brent groaned. "You're undermining the freedom of the press. This is unconstitutional."

"The last hours of Philip Platt's life," the captain continued with unhappy imperturbability, "that is, the seven hours between midnight and the time when the patrolman came across his body, are a blank. I don't want it publicly known that I can't account for Platt's whereabouts during that period. I'd rather the murderer fretted and worried about how much I may have on him."

"He will," Brent said wryly. "So will I. So will my city editor and the *Recorder's* readers. On the other hand, it seems to me the murderer would fret and worry a hell of a lot more if he could read in our news columns that you're right on his tail and ready to tie a knot in it."

Russo left Brent guessing as to whether he was moving into such a position. "Platt had walked from his downtown apartment to the poker game, not using his car, but his body

was found in the gutter in a remote residential section where he couldn't have arrived except by car. Nobody who lives in that neighborhood knew him or had ever seen him before. He was simply deposited there, probably at random, after being beaten to death at some other spot. As to the locale of his death, we have no clue at all—which, of course, is another detail I don't want mentioned in print."

"At least you're letting us hint that his body was more or less found!" Resentful as Brent felt, he was still fascinated by that peach-colored brassiere. Picking it up again, he insisted: "Don't tell me *this* doesn't shape up to something."

"Found under Philip Platt's corpse," the captain informed him. "What are we to surmise from it? That the murderer is a woman, and that she inadvertently lost this garment while disposing of her victim? If so, then she wears her clothes surprisingly loose. Or perhaps you have a more enlightening theory about it, Brent?"

Brent would have loved to have a more enlightening theory about it, but he shook his head sadly.

"At any rate," Russo added, "this item of evidence, an exceedingly difficult one to trace, is also off the record."

Brent groaned again, his sense of frustration heightened. He still felt that these two murders should supply him with a big front-page splash—that they were two cases on which he ought to go to town reportorially—except that somehow they didn't and he couldn't. Since Russo professed to lack theories, had offered few conjectures and had forbidden publication of the minor sidelights he'd discussed, Brent found himself in the galling position of handling a pair of local homicides which furnished him with hardly any more copy than if they had occurred in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

He was still unable to decide whether Russo was really baffled or stubbornly holding back information for his own devious purposes. In either case, Brent recognized the fact that neither of these parallel cases was a simple matter. The brassiere, for example, intriguing though it was as a bit of evidence, couldn't easily be accounted for, particularly since it hadn't been found in one of Philip Platt's pockets but in the snow under his corpse. The circumstances of the two murders showed tantalizing similarities yet they wouldn't really fuse. Brent wagged his head, still fingering the brassiere.

"So where are these cases heading, friend? Into the unsolved file?"

"As to that," Russo said, looking very sad, "no comment."

Fire appeared in Brent's eye. He pushed his square jaw toward the uncommunicative

captain. "Let me remind you, Russo, this is a rare chance for me, the first real opening I've had in many a moon to sink my teeth into a gory murder story. It's fast disappearing right now and I won't have another like it come Whitsuntide, if then. What the hell do you expect me to do, twiddle my thumbs while you sit tight, all clammed up, because you won't or can't give me more than a glimmer of the inside dope? Nuts! You're forcing me to work this case on my own."

The captain looked at him with spooky disapproval. "Brent, my job is not to make headlines for you, but to catch killers. I can't feel kindly toward an amateur Hawkshaw who gets in my way, gums up my works and tries his damndest to show me up as an incompetent dumb-head. Don't do it. Be a good boy and take the news as I hand it out."

"Nuts to that!" Brent insisted irately, moving to bring this unproductive interview to an end. "By that time my chance will be gone. I'll be sweating my head off on my other stinking job, slaving at it so hard that I won't be able to touch this yarn. Damned if I'll let you rob me of it! I'm going after it with everything I've got. If you won't or can't give me the stuff, Russo, then, by God, I'll make some news!"

"Make some news ha!"

The voice was a new one, a gruff one, speaking behind Brent. He turned and saw a man standing in the doorway which connected with the corridor. The man was burly, ox-shouldered and neckless—Captain Pape, head of the Bureau of Missing Persons. The hostile gleam in his eye disquieted Brent as he trudged closer on his short legs.

"I thought so!" he said in a tone of unpleasant discovery. "Brent, you're just the guy I'm looking for, and that remark you made tells me plenty. I know a lot about you—how you love to whip up a case for Homicide and then crack it while Russo's still trying to find out what the time is. But let me tell you something."

Captain Pape poked a finger at Brent ominously. "In my department that sort of stuff won't go, see? I'm one officer who won't take it from you, understand? I want the facts, I want 'em level and I want 'em quick, get it? All right, then, spill your stuff, you slick news-maker. Where are you hiding Sandra Sheldon?"

CHAPTER TWO

Missing Miss

BRENT looked upon Captain Pape with even less cordiality than Pape displayed toward him. "Sandra Sheldon?" he said shortly. "Never heard of her. Who is she?"

"So you don't know even one little thing about the young lady, ha?" The chief of the Missing Persons Bureau said this with broad skepticism, while poking into one of his coat pockets. He fished up a newspaper clipping and pushed it in front of Brent's crooked nose. "That'll remind you, if you need reminding, you little, innocent, news-making cherub."

It was an excerpt from the *Recorder's* most popular feature, the advice-to-the-lovelorn column conducted by Lora Lorne.

Brent gave Pape a quick, wary look. Everybody, of course, including Pape, knew that Lora Lorne was a famous dispenser of delphic

advice, whose large family of faithful readers looked to her for the solution of its most perplexing problems, principally those of an amorous nature. Her wise admonitions to the troubled appeared in the *Recorder* six days a week in the shape of two full columns of type, in which she undertook to tell all comers how to extricate themselves from every conceivable variety of passion-born misfortune. Everybody was also familiar with the portrait of her which was printed atop her column daily, and which depicted her as a venerable, vastly sympathetic dame with hair as pure-white as the driven snow and a face as sugary

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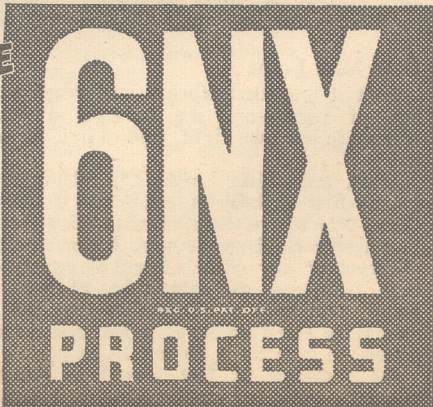
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as the frosting on a wedding cake. Very few people knew, however, that no such woman had ever really existed, or that her sibylline chores were currently being performed under conditions of self-inflicted duress by Bill Brent.

Russo was included among the few who were acquainted with this ridiculous and humiliating situation, but Brent hadn't been aware that Pape was also hep to it. That hulking, liquor-loving, cigar-savoring Bill Brent was currently hiding behind Lora Lorne's saccharine falseface was a fact which the *Recorder* had kept a closely-guarded secret—this in order to avoid inflicting a painful disillusionment upon Miss Lorne's trusting followers, who firmly believed she looked and lived exactly as represented in all her impossible sagacity. Brent was perfectly satisfied to keep it under wraps. He wouldn't have had it any other way. In fact, there was no extreme to which he wouldn't go in order to conceal from the world the preposterous truth that Lora Lorne and he, God help him, were one and the same person.

Obviously, however, Captain Pape knew exactly where Miss Lorne's admonitions originated and exactly where the responsibility for them lay. He watched with suspiciously squinted eyes as Brent glanced over the clipping.

Several inches long, it consisted of a letter which had been sent to Lora Lorne, and that oracle's response. Brent recalled that, in a purely routine manner, he had selected this missive from among the hundreds of similar appeals which descended on Lora Lorne in avalanches of correspondence every day of the year, and at the time he had noticed nothing unusual about it. On the contrary, he remembered now that he'd had a tough time scraping up enough interesting letters to fill the column on that particular day, and that this one had barely made the grade because it took a too-familiar pattern.

He reread it now, uneasily, seeking a reason for Captain Pape's ominous attitude.

Dear Miss Lorne:

Isn't it true that when a girl reaches the age of twenty-one she becomes a young woman in her own right, free to live her own life?

Well, dear Miss Lorne, I'll celebrate my twenty-first birthday in less than a week, and then I won't have to put up with being treated like a silly child any longer. I won't be any different or any wiser after I'm twenty-one than I am now, of course, but at least my family will have to admit then that I'm old enough to stand on my own feet and do as I please, so long as it doesn't harm others.

As a matter of fact, I've been doing a woman's work for months now, in a certain

plant in this city, where I'm on the four-to-midnight shift, because that's when they need me. My hours did make it terribly hard for a time, though, Miss Lorne—I mean hard to meet new boy-friends. But at last, at a dance several weeks ago, I met a boy I really went for in a spectacular way.

It was love, head-over-heels love, at first sight. It was the biggest thing that will ever happen to either of us. We really are absolutely crazy about each other, Miss Lorne, honestly. Yet my family is making me terribly unhappy about it. They've caused nothing but trouble at home. They just won't have anything to do with the boy won't even let me bring him home to meet them. They just say he's no good and he's turning me into a tramp because no decent girl would stay out with him as late as I've done. They won't even listen to me explain things, and now I've stopped trying to make them understand, because they're so mean about it and so unreasonable.

But Miss Lorne, now that I'm practically twenty-one, haven't I the right to love the boy of my heart's choice, and to stick with him, and to marry him when he finally finds the right job, even if my family doesn't approve?

Yearning.

Brent lifted his eyebrows at Captain Pape. "It's been happening for generations. Letters about this same predicament come in to Lora Lorne every damn day. Some days there are dozens of 'em."

"That I can understand, having a teen-age daughter of my own," Pape retorted. "It's Lora Lorne's answer that started all the trouble. Let's hear from you about that, news-maker!"

With sharpened uneasiness Brent reread Lora Lorne's attempt at guidance.

Dear Yearning:

Bless your young heart, you're all mixed up, but that's only natural under these troublesome circumstances. Fundamentally you're simply showing your woman's nature.

Please understand, dear, that even though you're no longer a child, your family still wishes to protect you, even from yourself, though it isn't really necessary as you see it. This very attitude, however, shows that they have made the serious mistake of failing to recognize the fact that you have become, as you say, a young woman in your own right.

In your position, dear Yearning, you must first make certain that you're facing the matter realistically. Then you must have the courage to set a clear course for yourself and follow it to the end. This means that if you are really sure, in your heart of hearts, that you truly love this boy, then you'll remain loyal to him against the whole world. It will be unfortunate if you must make a choice between your family and your sweetheart, but if they force you to that decision, you

must make it with a stout heart and your eyes clear on the future. If it means alienation from your family, then you must find all your happiness in the man you love, prove to them it could be no other way, and hope that this will bring about a reconciliation.

You're facing dangers, dear Yearning, but you'll never really become a grown woman in your own right until you challenge them and win them over.

Again Brent eyed Pape. "So she went off with the guy, I assume. What the hell, she'd have done it anyway!"

Pape was unimpressed by this cynical comment. His frown grew dark. "So that's the kind of advice Lora Lorne hands out to our young womanhood, our mothers of tomorrow! 'Nuts to your family, kid. Spit in their eye. Stay out all hours if you feel like it, drink yourself blind and let 'em squawk. Never mind all the years they spent trying to bring you up as a fine, decent girl. Go ahead and walk out on 'em if that's what you want to do, go straight to hell with a no-good bum and Lora Lorne's blessings!" Pape had become red-faced with indignation. "As a conscientious father, Brent, I ought to break your irresponsible neck for advising that poor, misguided girl how to ruin her whole life."

"Keep your wig on," Brent retorted. "If she went off and married the guy, why shouldn't she? It's *her* life. She's free, white, twenty-one now and—"

"And missing!" Pape snapped. "She went off, all right, but she hasn't married anybody as far as I can find out. As soon as this advice of Lora Lorne's was printed, it caused her to stage such a hell of a blow-up with her family that she lit out from home. That was last week, and she's been gone ever since. Missing a whole week as of today, with not a word from her, and God only knows what's become of her by now, thanks to dear, sweet Lora Lorne."

PAPE'S denunciation struck Brent as being as unreasonable as Garrett's demands and Russo's reticence, yet it hit him where it hurt. It brought into sharp focus a fear that constantly haunted him, a dread that Lora Lorne's advice, well-meant as it invariably was, might miscarry. Fully aware that Lora Lorne's readers relied implicitly upon her unflinching wisdom, he bled himself white in a conscientious effort to find a happy solution for each petitioner's problem, never forgetting that a human destiny had been placed faithfully in his hands. It cost him sweat and sleep and agonies of labor, but he did his level best, hoping fervently each time that his counsel wouldn't somehow boomerang on a trusting supplicant and precipitate an unintended tragedy.

Now Captain Pape was telling him he'd unwittingly committed the very error which he'd tried most earnestly to avoid.

"Lay off that line, brother," Brent protested, unwilling to believe it. "If this gal wanted to go places on her own, with or without a guy, and keep mum about it, nobody could have stopped her."

"Lora Lorne could have stopped her," Pape said flatly. "She'd very probably have stayed at home and mended her ways if Lorne had recommended it. But did Lorne give her such good, common-sense advice? No! Lorne egged her into this. Lorne tore this kid away from her loving family, shut the door on her and gave her a push down the primrose path. Whatever's happened to Sandra Sheldon, Lorne's directly responsible. And that's only part of it, to my mind." Pape eyed Brent icily. "Are you hiding this girl somewhere, Brent?"

The question jolted Brent. "Hiding her? Why should I?"

"You answered that one a minute ago," Pape reminded him. "To make news."

Brent considered this angle. "A good idea," he said quietly, with a dark glance at Russo. "Needing news as badly as I do just now, I wish I were hiding her."

"Ha!" Pape pounced on that remark. "You admit you're not above it! Anything so you'll have a nice, juicy scandal to write up for your paper, ha!" He grimaced, a very bad taste in his mouth. "Come level, Brent. Did this girl get in touch with Lorne again during the past week? Did you hole her up somewhere? Are you scheming to spring her out some bright day soon, when I've chased myself in circles and the time's ripe for you to print a big story about how you found her when the dumb dicks couldn't?"

"My God!" Brent sighed. "I passed one little molehill of a remark about making some news and you're turning it into a mountain of suspicion. Moreover, you're being too damn paternally righteous. I didn't even know the babe was missing until you told me, just now. I still think she has a right to go her own way, if that's what she wants. But in reference to your question as to whether she got in touch with Lorne again, the answer, surprisingly enough, is yes. I received another letter from her this morning."

Pape heard this with undiminished suspicion and let Brent continue.

"Another letter signed with the *nom-de-l'* amour of Yearning," Brent added. "I included it in today's Lorne column. The mail edition is on the presses right now. If you'd like to see it—"

"I'm going to see the *original*!" Pape interrupted. "And quick. That way out, Brent."

Captain Russo, having listened intently to

this rancorous exchange, was wearing a rare, spooky smile. "Perhaps you won't be cracking my two homicide cases on your own after all, Brent. Perhaps you'll be a little too busy with other things."

Brent moved to the door, reflecting sourly that never before had he been obliged to deal with so many utterly unreasonable people in one batch. Captain Pape fogged along with him, grasping Brent's arm to steer him toward a group of three persons who were waiting in the corridor. There Pape began a series of introductions, gesturing first toward a matronly, ample-bosomed woman of the garden-club type.

"This, Brent, is Mrs. Etta Weeks Sheldon, the stepmother of the missing girl."

They exchanged how-do-you-do's. Mrs. Etta Weeks Sheldon's clothing featured frills and artificial flowers. Although she looked bewildered and tearful now, and no doubt could be charmingly gracious when she chose, Brent sensed that she was also the type who could wax dynamic as hell on short notice and boss the roost with an iron will. Her small set chin also indicated that she could probably be as thoroughly unreasonable, in a matronly way, as Garrett or Russo or Pape.

"And this, Brent," Pape continued, gesturing toward the man standing at her side, "is Oliver Sheldon, the father of the missing girl."

Oliver Sheldon was thin, gray-templed and subdued in manner. He shook Brent's hand with a dry, furtive squeeze. Brent sized him up as a professional man, perhaps a lawyer. In any case he probably wasn't too successful, being slightly threadbare around the edges. Brent felt a vague distrust of him. His yellow-gray eyes rested on nothing for more than a fraction of a second, his glance darted here, there, everywhere and back again, as if he were preoccupied with secret thoughts. Whatever their nature might be, he definitely had something cooking on the back burners of his mind.

"And this," Captain Pape continued with another gesture, "is Tyler Weeks, the stepbrother—"

"Of the missing girl," Brent took it up wryly.

Tyler Weeks spoke at once in a querulous tone. "I don't see what all this fuss is about. If Sandy wants to stay scrambled, that's her business." His face, slightly plump like his mother's, and sallow, wore a habitual amused, contemptuous expression which plainly said: "The hell with you." Although he was over thirty, there was something juvenile about him, and he sounded a note of childish jealousy when he added: "If it was me who'd walked out, nobody'd be raising such a stink about it."

"Please, Tyler, dear," his mother rebuked

him tenderly. "After all, Sandy is only a young girl, and you really should be more concerned about her."

"What for?" Tyler Weeks said. "Hell, she can take care of herself."

Brent began to develop a sort of liking for this twirp in spite of his less captivating aspects.

Concluding his introductions, Pape said: "Mr. Brent is on his way to the *Recorder* office with us. You see, he's—"

Brent got in there desperately fast in order to forestall those fatal words: "He's Lora Lorne." He broke in, "An *associate* of Lora Lorne's," and felt vastly relieved that he'd made it in the nick of time. "Her leg-man, in fact. I'm able to speak for her. Of course she'll do everything in her power to help you."

He meant it in all sincerity, but the response he received was mixed. Pape's lips twisted in a sneer. Mrs. Sheldon raised her lorgnette. Mr. Sheldon stiffened a little, obviously pegging Brent several degrees downward in his estimation. Tyler Weeks' expression changed but little. It still said, "Nuts to you," with overtones of boredom. None of them commented orally.

BRENT trudged along as Captain Pape escorted them to an official car. Pape arranged the seating with malevolence. Before taking the wheel, he put Tyler Weeks in the front seat and Brent in the tonneau, along with the father and stepmother of the missing girl. The ride began in strained silence while Mrs. Sheldon regarded Brent in the same manner in which she might have regarded a bug in her salad.

"In advising Sandra," Brent began, against odds, "Miss Lorne scrupulously endeavored—"

"Indeed!" Mrs. Sheldon interrupted with a disdainful air of injury. "Poor Sandra. How silly of her to put such stock in a foolish old busybody who writes for a cheap newspaper. It was her undoing. But for Lora Lorne, she wouldn't have left us, I'm sure she wouldn't, the poor child."

Before Brent could rally to Miss Lorne's defense, Oliver Sheldon took up the theme.

"I don't understand it, I don't. How could Lora Lorne advise such a thing? How could she condone the way Sandra had taken to staying out all night and coming in at dawn, five o'clock, six o'clock in the morning, time after time?"

Brent swallowed. "She stayed out *all night*?" This was news to Brent, and certainly it was also a thing Lora Lorne could never approve. "But she didn't tell Miss Lorne that."

"It was frightening and disgraceful," Mrs. Sheldon asserted. "Is it any wonder we never

met this boy? He never once came to our apartment for Sandra. Instead, she always met him somewhere after her work at night, and when finally she came home it was almost dawn. Should we have got up out of our beds to be introduced to him? Most assuredly not. She made it very difficult for us, you see, and moreover she refused to confide in us."

Tyler Weeks took his turn now. "Who could blame her? The first time it happened they got up, all right," he informed Brent. "They tackled Sandra when she blew in, around six A.M., and gave her holy hell for it. She got on her high horse and told 'em off herself. It was one swell row."

Oliver Sheldon immediately offered Brent a tempered version of the incident. "Naturally we were very much concerned—naturally, with Sandra having stayed out the whole night. Moreover, when she finally came home, at a disgraceful hour, it was obvious she'd had something to drink. We did remonstrate with her, of course. She chose to resent it excessively, and stalked off to bed without explaining anything—neither where she'd been or whom she'd been with. It was very upsetting."

"Lora Lorne can't be blamed for that scene," Brent pointed out hastily. "It occurred before Sandra wrote her first letter to Miss Lorne." The Sheldons, however, seemed unmoved by this observation. Brent went on: "Since then you've learned more about Sandra's boy-friend, of course?"

"Nothing," Mrs. Sheldon answered, as if from a great distance.

"We don't know the young man's name, or his home address, or where he works, or what he does for a living, or anything else about him," the missing girl's father added.

Tyler Weeks turned to insert another remark. "Sure you know his name—his first name, anyway, if not his last. I told you I overheard Sandy talking to him a couple of times when he phoned. It's Larry."

"That's all you've learned about him, just that she called him Larry?" Brent's question was answered with troubled nods. Reflecting that nobody could accurately estimate how many Larrys lived in the city, he persisted: "You assume, then, that Sandra went to Larry when she left home a week ago? Haven't you heard from him, either?"

"Not a word," Mrs. Sheldon answered. "That in itself shows us what a selfish, cruelly thoughtless young man he must be."

Captain Pape gave Brent an inimical glance. "Never mind trying any of your amateur detecting on this case, Brent. Lora Lorne's already made trouble enough for us. All I want from her *leg-man*"—he put a nasty accent on that word, and smirked—"is information, a lead that'll help *me* find this girl."

"Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon," Brent said, ignoring Pape, "I feel you've blamed Lora Lorne unfairly, but let's overlook that. I'm sure Miss Lorne is in a position to give you some really effective help. Even though the police have produced no results, I believe Miss Lorne will be able to return Sandra to you rather quickly."

Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon found a puzzled sort of encouragement in Brent's promise, but Pape answered with a scowl.

"Listen, Brent, the final bust-up between the girl and her family, caused by Lora Lorne's advice, came on the night of the first of this month. She left home on the morning of the second. Next day, the third, after she'd been gone twenty-four hours, Tyler Weeks, here, began fine-combing the city for her. He got nowhere. On the fourth, the whole family hunted for her high and low. None of Sandra's friends had seen her. Nobody could tell 'em anything. They did a pretty good job of searching, but they didn't find so much as a hair of her, see?"

"Nevertheless, Lora Lorne can—"

Pape let him get no further than that. "That same day they put a little ad in the personal column of the *Recorder*, asking San-



dra to get in touch with 'em. Either the *Recorder's* classified ads don't pull so well, or else Sandra didn't see it. No answer. So the next day, the fifth, the family came to Missing Persons about her. Since then, for three full days now—this being the eighth—I've had the whole damn bureau trying to smell her out and so far there hasn't even been a whiff. Yet you have the gall to sit there and say you believe Lora Lorne can bring the girl back in a hurry. After the way Lora Lorne caused this mess in the first place, you have the unmitigated brass to hold out false encouragement to these worried people by promising—”

“It will really be very simple,” Brent interrupted confidently. “In fact, you should have come to me in the first place, Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon. Here we are at the *Recorder* plant. Come inside and I'll explain an effective, common-sense solution to your problem.”

This earned a glower from Pape. Brent was well aware that he was sticking his neck out, yet his confidence was quite genuine, and he was sincerely eager to vindicate Lora Lorne. Out of the car first, he helped Mrs. Sheldon alight, then escorted her into the *Recorder* building while the three men followed—Tyler Weeks looking bored and uninterested in Brent's tactics, Mr. Sheldon hopeful yet skeptical, Captain Pape fuming.

THEY climbed four flights of iron steps and passed through a pair of swinging doors. The city room was busy. A bank of teletype machines was chugging. In the reporters' section, seven men and one young woman were pounding their typewriters—the young woman being a luscious specimen named Val Randall, who attempted to fill Brent's brogans as the *Recorder's* police reporter when he was too doggedly busy with Lora Lorne's duties to handle the Headquarters trick himself. She gave Brent a glance of remonstrance, causing him to wince, and Garrett, the city editor, lifted a frown over his ancient rolltop desk. By-passing them with some uneasiness, Brent conducted his party to the remotest corner of the newsroom where they paused at the door of a partitioned space, too small to contain them.

This crowded cubbyhole was Lora Lorne's temple of Venus, where Brent spent his days and nights slaving over her erotic riddles. It contained a table heaped with thousands of letters addressed to Lora Lorne, file cases packed with more Lorne letters, a single chair which the seat of Brent's pants had shined to a high gloss, still more letters which were piled on the window-sills and in the corners. They included every possible tint of paper and of ink, and since many of them were seductively perfumed, the air was filled with a stale flowery stench, like that of a funeral parlor.

Brent immediately probed into a file drawer and came up with a sheet of powder-blue notepaper which was covered with script in indigo ink. He placed it in Captain Pape's hands. Pape allowed Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon to examine it, but Tyler Weeks wasn't interested.

“The original of Sandra's first letter to Lora Lorne, the one which you erroneously claim caused all the trouble, Captain—dated, as you see, November twenty-seventh.”

Brent next plucked a copy of the *Recorder's* latest edition from his table, opened it to that day's Lorne column and put this also in Captain Pape's hands.

“Sandra's second letter,” he explained, “which came in the mail this morning.”

“A second letter!” Oliver Sheldon said in astonishment. “I hadn't known. Let me see it.”

They all read it.

Dear Miss Lorne:

Just as you said might happen, Miss Lorne, I've been forced to choose between my family and the man I love, and now I've got to abide by my decision like a grown-up woman.

To begin with, Miss Lorne, I had a horrible quarrel about it with my family, which upset me terribly, but since then I've had a chance to calm down and look at this situation with my eyes wide open. I'm all alone in this room right now, and it's all dark except for this one light. The snow flying against the window has put me in a reflective mood as it always does, and I'm sizing myself up the best way I can.

I realize this is an important step, the most important one of my whole life. But here it is, Miss Lorne. I'm doing it, although it scares me, because there are a few bad things about it—loneliness and the hard feelings it has caused. As much as I love the boy, I know we're starting with two strikes against us.

Please, dear Miss Lorne, tell me this, because I'm really frightened. Suppose my choice is the wrong one—suppose I can't really be happy for long with the boy I love so much now. Will I have anything at all left then, or will my family forgive me?

Allowing them no time to get into Lora Lorne's answer, which assured the girl that undoubtedly all would be forgiven eventually, Brent placed in Pape's custody another sheet of powder-blue stationery covered with indigo handwriting.

“The original of Sandra's second letter, which you've just seen in type.”

Oliver Sheldon became agitated. “This is important, really important,” he said quickly, nodding his thin-haired head over it. “Yes, yes, Sandra undoubtedly wrote this. It's her handwriting beyond all question. And the date, Etta”—he turned excitedly to his wife—“the

seventh. Dated the seventh, yesterday. Yes, this is most important!"

Brent indicated the envelope which was stapled to the letter. "It's also postmarked three P.M., the seventh, which means that Sandra was in the city at that time, of course."

"It shows much more than that, much more," Oliver Sheldon explained rapidly. "You see, Sandra is coming into considerable money. It was left to her by her paternal grandfather. The will, my father's will, bequeathed me a certain amount and placed another bequest in trust for Sandra. It's quite sizable, I may say—one hundred thousand dollars. She was to receive it on her twenty-first birthday, which fell during the past week, on December fourth, during her absence from home. This letter and this postmark, both dated three days later, on the seventh, show she was alive and well at that time."

"Ah?" Brent said thoughtfully. This matter, no doubt, was the one which Oliver Sheldon had been mulling over in the back of his mind. "Suppose something had happened to Sandra prior to December fourth, her twenty-first birthday. Who would have received her inheritance then?"

"Why, no one. That is, I mean, nobody else in the family. It would have gone to certain contingent beneficiaries, certain charitable organizations, designated by my father in his will. You see, now, of course, why I've been so concerned because there was no word at all from Sandra during the past week. But now this letters proves her inheritance has legally passed to her, unquestionably."

"And possibly to Larry as well, in case he's married her." Brent took a closer look at Sandra Sheldon's second appeal to Lora Lorne and wagged his head. "The inheritance, then, is another reason why you're so anxious to have Sandra come back O.K. As I've already said, just leave this matter to Miss Lorne to handle. Sandra is a devoted reader of Miss Lorne's column, isn't she?"

Mrs. Sheldon sniffed an affirmative. "Too devoted, I must say, poor child."

"Then," Brent said, gesturing expansively to Pape, "it's very simple, as I said. The *Recorder's* city edition is about to go to press. I'll insert a special letter in today's Lorne column, one addressed to Sandra under her pen-name of Yearning. I'll ask her to communicate with Miss Lorne at once. When she does so, Miss Lorne will advise her to return home, and since she places such great trust in Miss Lorne's wisdom, I don't doubt that she'll agree immediately. And there you are." Brent looked at them in benign confidence.

Tyler Weeks shrugged as if he still thought the whole thing was nobody's business but his stepsister's. Mrs. Sheldon murmured an assent. Her husband nodded emphatically, his rest-

less gaze darting about. Captain Pape retained his look of skepticism.

"Go ahead, Brent," Pape said in a portentous tone. "Let's see you do your stuff—on the understanding that I'll be all set to clip you in case you're pulling a fast one."

"Just sit tight and watch Miss Lorne get some real results, my dubious friend," Brent retorted. "There's no time to lose." To the Sheldons he added: "I'm sure you'll soon find plenty of reason to alter your opinion of our Miss Lorne."

HE CONDUCTED them back to the swinging doors. Once they were on their way he hustled into his cubicle and attacked his typewriter. The letter he wrote was brief, simple and sincere. Using all of Lora Lorne's capacity for persuasion, Brent strongly urged the girl to return to her home and find there a better mutual understanding. Finishing, and feeling perfectly assured that Miss Lorne was already well on the way to resolving this predicament, he carried his copy toward the city desk.

On his way he passed Val Randall. She gave him a lovely frown of censure. "Tut, tut, Grandma," she murmured. "Is that nice, corrupting the young womanhood of America?"

"Nuts to that stuff," Brent observed, passing on. "You know damned well I work my head off trying to keep 'em from corrupting themselves."

Arriving at the city desk, he received a frown from Garrett. His city editor's flinty eyes turned back to a galley proof. It was Val's story concerning the missing Sandra Sheldon, written on the basis of information given her by Pape at Headquarters, and, like the story of the two murders the night before, it was not lengthy.

"It would really *be* a story, Brent, if I could mention Lorne's part in it," Garrett complained, "but I don't dare. I've been able to leave her out of it so far, but I can't do it for long. Barring a miracle, I'll soon be forced to tell the world that our wonderful Miss Lorne is a dame to be avoided like the plague if our readers know what's good for 'em. What the hell are you trying to do, Brent, wreck our most popular feature?"

"Relax," Brent suggested. "Order a remake on today's Lorne column. Put this letter right at the top and box it. It'll solve everything. We'll have Sandra Sheldon back home in a hurry and that'll give you a chance to use the news columns to heap blossoms on Lorne's venerable dome."

"I hope so, Brent," Garrett rasped.

Feeling certain of it, Brent returned to his cubbyhole to hear his telephone ringing. He dug away a mound of letters, unearthed the instrument and heard Captain Pape's voice.

"Here's something new, Brent," Pape said, "not that you deserve to hear it. Sandra's car was used during the night. When she scrambled she left it in the garage, but she took the keys with her, see? It's been there ever since, except that she must have taken it out sometime last night, used it, then brought it back. The speedometer reading shows that. This is the closest to home she's been so far, so let's see you bring her back the rest of the way if you can."

"Patience, patience," Brent answered. "The city edition's going onto the presses right now. As soon as it's had a chance to circulate over the city Sandra will connect with us, take my word for it. An hour, say. Maybe less."

Smiling, he listened to the great cylinder presses rumbling in the basement. In his mind's eye he pictured a fleet of trucks distributing the paper to hundreds of newstands and an army of boys scattering it to thousands of homes. He visualized Sandra Sheldon reading Lora Lorne's heartfelt appeal and responding at once by way of the nearest telephone. Brent expected in all eagerness that her message would come forthwith, for, he told himself, such was the power of Lora Lorne. . .

At eight o'clock that night all the city room was an abandoned cavern. Every light was out except one still burning in Brent's cubbyhole. Garrett had long since closed up his desk and gone. No one remained in the reporter's section. The whole building was deserted and quiet except for the thumping of the cleaning women's brooms in regions somewhere below. Brent sat there staring in deepest dejection at a telephone which wasn't paying off. At least six hours had passed since Lora Lorne's appeal had reached the world at large, and so far she had been scorned, completely ignored.

There had been a call hours before. Brent had snatched up the instrument elatedly, but it had turned out to be Mrs. Sheldon. He'd had to tell her that he hadn't heard from Sandra so far. Soon there had been a second call, from Oliver Sheldon. Brent had had to answer that he still hadn't heard from Sandra. A third had come from Captain Pape, and again he'd had to say he was still waiting for word from Sandra. Pape had salted his wounds with a sardonic guffaw. Since then there had been no calls at all—no word from either the missing girl or her taciturn sweetheart.

Steeped in utter despondency, Brent doggedly waited on. He gnawed a cigar stub and peered with bitter reproach at that persistently perverse telephone. For the first time in all the centuries since he'd begun functioning as Lora Lorne, his own faith in the old dame was crumbling.

CHAPTER THREE

Watery Grave

WHEN ten o'clock came Brent gave up his fruitless vigil. His spirits had ebbed to an all-time low. In serving Lora Lorne so loyally and long, he had been bolstered by his belief that her great responsibilities and influence deserved the very best in him, but now he felt that in his hour of real need she'd failed him basely, cursing her for the hollow fake she was, he put on his overcoat, switched off the light with a final frown at the unresponsive telephone and trudged out of her miserable cubicle, hoping to God he'd never see the stinking hole again.

Yet some residue of stubborn faith remained in Brent's punished soul. Driving in his car, he felt it prodding him to further endeavors. He was heading toward police headquarters with the intention of digging deeper into the case, and that very fact showed his reluctance to renounce Lora Lorne completely. Although he saw now that he'd expected too much of her, he felt also that perhaps she wasn't entirely to blame for this defeat. Something was definitely wrong somewhere, perhaps something serious which had prevented Sandra Sheldon from answering Lorne's appeal. If this was true—if the girl was unable to reappear of her own volition—then Brent was determined to find out why. And his reason for this, he recognized, was not only his earnest desire to restore the girl to her family, but also to revive his trust in that non-existent old charlatan known as Lora Lorne.

At Headquarters he trudged into the Missing Persons Bureau. The outer office was empty. The second room of the suite, Captain Pape's, was deserted. Brent seized the opportunity to pry into the few papers scattered over the desk. Most of these were interdepartmental memos having no bearing on his predicament, but one was a mimeographed list of names, addresses and telephone numbers headed, *Closest Friends of Sandra Sheldon*. Sandra's family had evidently furnished this information and Pape had undoubtedly relayed it to every man in his bureau. Brent promptly confiscated a copy and quickly strode out.

Consistently throughout the day he'd found his every move obstructed, beginning with Captain Russo's tactics toward the previous night's pair of murders. Since such obstructions invariably impelled him to try to butt them down, he headed now for Captain Russo's office. There he found the captain examining several reports with lackluster eyes and a sorrowful expression.

Looking up at Brent sadly, Russo announced

in his customary ghostly tones: "No news."

"It's a fine record of achievement which Headquarters is chalking up here," Brent retorted. "You've accomplished nothing on either of last night's killings. Pape's accomplished nothing on the case of a girl who's been missing a whole week. What the hell kind of a police department do we have in this town, anyway, heaven help us?"

Captain Russo answered in his funereal tones: "No comment."

"I hope it will be no comfort to you, chum," Brent said pungently, "to hear that I'm still working at the job of manufacturing my own news."

Russo eyed him ominously as Brent took up a telephone directory. In it he found Oliver Sheldon's name listed at an address on Birch Street. His eyebrows arched like the backs of two startled cats."

"Birch Street!" he said softly. "Last week a girl disappeared from her home at 1221 Birch Street. Last night a murdered milkman was dumped in a minister's driveway at 1819 Birch Street. The two places are only six blocks apart. It must be more than a coincidence."

"On the other hand," Russo pointed out, "Birch Street is well populated and quite busy. I am not dumfounded to learn that something happened to two persons on Birch Street at two points, separated by six blocks of space and a whole week in time."

But Brent's nose for news was twitching. "Philip Platt—"

"Philip Platt did not live on Birch Street, was not killed on Birch Street so far as I know, and was found dead on a street other than Birch," Russo put in. "Do you still smell a tie-up there, Brent?"

"No comment," Brent said wryly, and went out.

He drove again, the cold nipping at him. The day's warm spell had yielded to another sharp freeze. The heaps of snow in the gutters had diminished only a little in size

and now were crusted with new ice. Birch Street was slippery. Rolling along, Brent looked for Number 1221 and found it on a small brick apartment building. He entered a small lobby and found a small, uniformed girl in charge of a small elevator.

"The Sheldons?" he inquired.

"Top floor," she said in a small voice.

THE top floor turned out to be the fifth.

Brent's knock on the Sheldons' door brought Etta Weeks Sheldon. Tensely expectant for an instant, she wilted at sight of Brent, then assumed an air of disdain even more regal than before. Her husband had hurried to the door behind her, also expectant. Finding Brent, rather than Sandra, he looked a little ill. Neither invited Brent in, but he entered anyway and found Tyler Weeks slouched in a chair, reading a movie magazine.

"Just leave it to Miss Lorne," Tyler Weeks said with a yawn. "Oh, sure, sure, just leave it to—"

"Hold it, chum," Brent put in. "You should begin worrying a little by now. At least I'm worried. We've got to assume that either Sandra hasn't seen Lora Lorne's letter, or else she can't answer somehow."

Oliver Sheldon was facing him, his eyes darting about. "Just what are you implying, Mr. Brent? That something's happened to Sandra? But—but her last letter to Lora Lorne shows she was perfectly all right as late as yesterday afternoon."

"I don't know what I'm implying," Brent answered. "I smell something serious, that's all. Miss Lorne is deeply concerned. She sent me to find out exactly what is known about Sandra's last actions."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Sheldon said from a distance of several miles. "We've already gone over it repeatedly with the police, Mr. Brent, and it's really too painful to—"

Tyler Weeks pushed himself to his feet. "What've you got to lose? What good have the cops done so far? Go on, give Brent a

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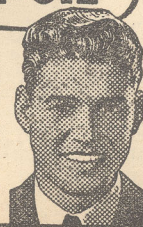
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chance." Apparently he'd found it time to begin worrying a little, as Brent had suggested. "There's nothing complicated about it. Let's take it from scratch."

"Thanks," Brent said, while the missing girl's parents continued to regard him offishly. "Begin with the night of the first. On that day a letter which Sandra had written to Lora Lorne was published and answered. A family quarrel grew out of it that evening. Sandra evidently decided she must choose between her parents and Larry Somebody. So what developed next?"

"She went into her room," Tyler Weeks answered. "That's all. That's the last any of us saw of her."

"The last? Brent said, astonished. "You mean none of you saw her leave? She just went without even saying good-by?" He suggested: "Tell me how it built up, step by step."

Weeks did so. The big ruckus, he explained, had occurred right here in the living room. Continuing to sketch the narrative, he led Brent down a hallway and showed him Sandra's room. It was a comfortable, feminine bedroom with two windows. A small desk with a lamp on it sat before one of these, and a chaise longue was placed near the other. Both looked out above the roofs of the adjacent buildings.

"She slammed the door and locked it," Weeks continued, "and wouldn't come out again or answer any of us."

The missing girl's father had followed them. "Next morning, when I left for the office, her door was still locked and she didn't answer my knock. I assumed she was asleep."

Mrs. Sheldon had come near. "I left the apartment somewhat later, at about ten o'clock, I believe, to attend an important committee meeting. I also knocked, wishing to speak to Sandra, but she wouldn't answer me either. I heard her move on her bed, but that was all."

"She was still here, then, all right," Weeks said. "I heard her, too." He brought Brent to the end of the hallway and indicated his own bedroom. Located directly behind Sandra's, it occupied one corner of the apartment. Its windows also looked out into wintry space and a fire-escape rose past the rear one. "I was still in bed when I heard Sandra get up."

"Still in bed? Brent said. "What do you work at?"

"I operate the projectors at the Tivoli Theater from six P.M. until closing, but I've taken a leave of absence since Sandra disappeared, to sort of help the family along. O.K., then I heard Sandra get up and go into the bathroom."

Next he indicated the bath, which occupied

the opposite rear corner of the apartment. Brent saw the customary fixtures—toilet, wash-bowl and a tub of the square variety, having a ledge as a seat. An electric heater sat on the floor beside the tub, toothbrushes hung on racks and from another hook Mrs. Sheldon's electric curling-iron was suspended.

"I heard her splashing around in here. She was still in the tub when I dozed off," Weeks said, "but when I finally got up there wasn't any more Sandy. She was gone."

"Miss Lorne wouldn't approve of such a departure," Brent said, frowning. "At least Sandra should have said good-by, unless she didn't intend to stay away for very long. Did she take a suitcase?"

Both men looked to Mrs. Sheldon to clarify that point. The missing girl's stepmother led the way back into Sandra's bedroom. She opened a closet and gestured vaguely. "There's a suitcase here on the shelf, as you can see. I really don't know if she had another. I'm not at all familiar with her wardrobe, either. I've been much too preoccupied with my clubs and committees to pay much attention to Sandra's personal effects. I simply can't say what she was wearing when she left, or whether she took any extra clothing with her."

Brent was beginning to understand why Pape had made so little headway in this case. Mrs. Sheldon's vagueness as to her stepdaughter's clothes had evidently left the captain without a useful description. It likewise increased Brent's difficulties, another of those obstacles he'd been encountering so consistently. The problem was to find a girl who evidently looked very much like thousands of other girls—one who, moreover, wouldn't or couldn't come back home or even communicate with those who were sifting the city for her.

FEELING stymied, Brent was about to press the matter when the door-bell interrupted. At once Mrs. Sheldon bustled hopefully back to the entrance, with her husband trailing her at a feverish pace. Tyler Weeks shook his head cynically, but even Brent dared to wish—for Lora Lorne's sake—that their hopes might be fulfilled this time. The opening of the door brought another disappointment, however. It wasn't Sandra Sheldon who had come, but Captain Pape.

Striding in choppily on his short legs, the captain brought a large brown envelope and a frown for Brent. "Brent," he said gruffly, "you don't belong here. If you belong anywhere, it's back at Lora Lorne's telephone, waiting for nothing. Go on, make yourself scarce."

Brent saw that his presence would delay the information which Pape had brought to the missing girl's parents. Since both seemed

nervously eager to hear it, he shrugged resignedly and trudged to the entrance. Pape said nothing until he'd closed the door behind him. Brent lingered, his ear close to the panel, and was able to hear their voices.

Pape said: "You recognize this purse?" "It's Sandra's!" Mrs. Sheldon cried. "I do recognize it, Captain, really."

"Hers, all right," Pape agreed. "Her driver's license is in it—a little money, too, and odds and ends, but nothing to tell us where she's been keeping herself."

"But Captain!" This was Oliver Sheldon. "Where did you find it? Where and when?"

"Restaurant. Parson's Tea Shoppe, a big place, unfortunately. It was left on the seat of a booth—a secluded booth, 'way back in a corner. Waitress found it and turned it over to the manager. He phoned us because Sandra's name was in it."

"It means, then, that Sandra had dinner there tonight," Oliver Sheldon said quickly. "Did—did you get any information from the waitress?"

"Nothing that'll help us one damn bit so long as Sandra insists on staying gone," Pape said.

Brent turned away, feeling darkly despondent again. Lora Lorne's letter to Yearning had circulated throughout the city long before the dinner hour. Sandra had evidently had her dinner in a public place without being recognized—which wasn't surprising, since the *Recorder's* first story of her disappearance had been only a few hours old then—and this had to mean she wasn't being held prisoner anywhere. Brent was even more convinced now that Lora Lorne's appeal had been scorned. She'd let him down when he needed her the most. Doggedly persisting, however, he stepped into the elevator, when its door opened, with a question for the diminutive operator.

"Were you on duty when Sandra Sheldon left that apartment on the morning of the second?"

To his astonishment, the girl's small voice replied in a weary monologue. "My gosh, mister, I've been asked that question so many times now I'm sick of hearing myself spout the answer. Yeah, I was on duty that morning. Want the rest of it, too? O.K. No, I don't see Sandra Sheldon. No, she didn't go down in this elevator. Yeah, there's the front stairs, but it so happens those stairs were being painted that morning and they were roped off. Anyway the painter said he didn't see her either. I dunno how she got out. That covers it, mister. Main floor, last stop."

Overwhelmed by this blast of information, and unable to think of any questions which the girl hadn't already answered, Brent thanked her and departed. Back in his car,

he fished out the mimeographed list of names which he'd purloined from Pape's desk.

It was not a promising lead. Brent felt sure that Pape had already canvassed all of Sandra's friends, apparently without results. Still, Brent had nothing else left to work on. He drove at random until he sighted a drugstore, parked again, went in, swapped a dollar-bill for twenty nickels, enclosed himself in a telephone booth and began a prolonged session of dial-spinning.

A few of the numbers on Pape's list didn't answer, but most did. All these gave Brent the same response—none of them had seen or heard from Sandra since her disappearance, none of them knew anything about her boyfriend except that she'd mentioned a certain Larry, and all of them were pretty fed up with the subject.

Halfway down the list, Brent became convinced that this field of inquiry had already been exhausted by Pape's men. Accordingly, he tried a new tack. He continued his calls, but this time, instead of asking about Sandra directly, he requested the names of more of her friends. Presently he began adding new ones to the page. These, comprising the fringe of Sandra's circle of acquaintances, were apparently unknown to her parents, or considered unimportant by them, and therefore they were probably unknown also to Captain Pape. An endless process, this, Brent reflected—inquiring after friends of Sandra's friends and friends of *their* friends—and so far it had got him nowhere except deep into his third dollar-bill.

However, a hunch began to stir in Brent's mind when he heard a woman answering: "Irene? Why, Irene's not home now. She's working. She's the night cashier at the Victory Grill and she won't be off the job until six in the morning."

Six in the morning? The only promising angle here was the fact that Sandra had often arrived home at an equally ungodly hour, but still it was an angle. Brent went after it.

HE DROVE into a downtown section where hotels, hot-spots and restaurants abounded. The Victory Grill was a busy, clattering establishment catering to night-owls. Even at this hour almost all its tables were occupied and waitresses were hustling. Near the door stood a glass-enclosed booth which contained a tired-looking, red-headed girl. She, Brent surmised, would be Irene Reece, the night-shift cashier whom he wanted to see.

He stepped to the opening behind the booth and said: "From the *Recorder*, Miss Reece. You're acquainted with Sandra Sheldon, I believe?"

Miss Reece gave him a wary look. "I've met her. Somebody introduced us once. I

know her just enough to say hello to, that's all. She used to come in here. Hasn't been around lately. Look, I don't want to get mixed up in anything, and besides, I'm busy."

"Did she come around with Larry?"

"I'm busy, brother," Miss Reece repeated.

Brent resorted to a tactic which no police detective would employ. He slipped a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and placed it on the counter before the girl.

"My waitress didn't give me a check, but that pays for the twenty blue-plates I've just eaten," he informed her. "What was Sandra's boy-friend like?"

Miss Reece did something with her hands which caused the sawbuck to disappear instantly, without a trace. Her next glance at Brent was warmer. She smiled a little as she went on, talking quietly as she automatically made change for the customers who continually filed past her booth.

"Sandra introduced me to him one night. Larry Something—I can't remember his last name. He must have been her boy-friend, though. At least they came here almost every night, or rather almost every morning around three A.M."

"Good." Brent urged her. "Keep giving."

"I don't know anything else about him," she said, "except that he looked like a screwball to me. The clothes he wore! He'd have on an ordinary overcoat and hat, but underneath he wore purple trousers and a lavender coat."

Brent blinked at her.

"Fact," Miss Reece insisted. "He had a funny nervous habit, too—always playing with his upper lip, as if it hurt him or something. It did look sort of tender and swollen. Haven't seen him since the last time he was here with Sandra, more than a week ago. That's all I can tell you about him."

Brent thanked her, wondering if he'd received his money's worth. Stepping outside, he resorted to thought. Something began to click in his mind. Suddenly he had it. Sandra's habit of coming home at dawn, added to Larry's odd raiment, plus his tender upper lip, could mean only one thing—that Larry was a musician. Brent surmised at once that Larry played a trumpet in a dance orchestra somewhere around town, and since he probably kept tooting until three A.M. or so every night, many things were thereby accounted for, including the fact that he had never been available to meet Sandra's family during their normal waking hours, and that none of her friends knew him.

Sleeping at least until noon, due to his professional schedule, Larry would begin work, probably at the cocktail hour, while Sandra was still busy at her plant. When she quit, at midnight, Larry would still be trum-

peting. She would wait to meet him when he came off the job, and although she'd then spend only a couple of hours with him, she couldn't help but arrive home until almost dawn—a romance far out of step with the workaday world. It was so clear now that Brent felt certain he was right. There remained only the problem of identifying the particular orchestra with which Larry played.

Brent hustled to another telephone. This time he called the Sheldon apartment. Tyler Weeks answered, sounding as bored as usual.

"In her first letter to Lora Lorne," Brent said, "Sandra mentioned that she'd met her Larry at a dance. Can you tell me the occasion?"

"Maybe," Weeks responded. "A crowd of people from the plant where Sandra worked threw a party at the Foxhole about a month ago. But what good is that? That hot-shot from Headquarters, Captain Whoozis, says Larry doesn't work at the plant."

Brent thanked him, disconnected and trudged to a corner newsstand where a few *Recorders* were on sale. He bought one. In the amusement pages he found an ad extolling The Foxhole, which was a recently renamed adjunct of the Parkview Hotel. Cookie Cook's orchestra was currently featured. Brent found encouragement in the fact that the Parkview was only a block from the Victory Grill. He headed for it on foot.

Passing through a busy lobby, he followed a neon sign into a cavernous, gloomy ballroom decorated with a jungle of paper trees and martial trappings from the Pacific battle area. Cookie Cook's orchestra was playing. Brent's spirits soared when he noticed that the musicians all wore uniforms consisting of purple trousers and lavender jackets. He brushed aside the head waiter and threaded his way between the crowded tables toward Cookie Cook. At that juncture the band tooted a fanfare signaling an intermission and began to disperse from the platform.

Cookie Cook remained, arranging the sheet music on his rack. Brent buttonholed him there. He was a thin, sallow-faced young man with a hair-line mustache, who had obviously never seen the inside of a genuine foxhole.

"Where's Larry?" Brent inquired urgently. "I want to pay him some money I owe him."

"Larry Bannon?" Mr. Cook said, made curious by this unusual phenomenon. "He's not with the band any more. Left a couple of days ago to take a different job in Chicago."

"Chicago!" Brent frowned. "Know his address there?"

The bandleader shook his curly head. "Guess if you sent him a letter to his old address here, it would be forwarded. He used to have a room on Arch Street—Number 523, I think."

Mr. Cook then hustled off toward the kitchen. Brent muttered to himself. He had done a creditable job of tracing his man, only to encounter another of those exasperating obstacles. Dispatching a letter to be forwarded to Larry Bannon in Chicago would take too long, he reflected, and even then the guy might not answer. Brent needed a short-cut, one that would get him to his objective ahead of the cops. He would have to begin, then, at 523 Arch Street.

BRENT went there in haste, his tires skidding on the icy pavement. Parking beside the snow heaped along the gutter, he found 523 Arch Street to be a three-story brownstone building which had been converted into an apartment house. In the vestibule he came upon a bank of mailboxes and bell-buttons. One of the boxes bore the name of Lawrence Bannon as the occupant of Apartment I-A—which meant, evidently, the front apartment on the first floor.

Brent punched Bannon's bell. There was no answer. Going back to the stoop, he saw that the first-floor windows were all dark and the shades drawn.

He reasoned that Larry Bannon must be holding this apartment, even though he'd left for Chicago—otherwise his name would have been removed from the mailbox by now—and decided to case the joint. He faded across the street in order to get a better view of its approaches. He sidled into a dark doorway and after standing there for a minute he saw a dark figure looming before him.

The gruff voice of Captain Pape said: "Move over, Brent."

Brent gave out a sound of disgust. "What brought you here, chum?"

"I have ways," Pape said evasively, stepping into the doorway and nudging Brent aside.

One of Pape's ways, Brent reflected pun-
gently, was to tail a police reporter on the make for news. Here he was congratulating

himself on a neat job of sleuthing and now the captain had to horn in. He fastened his gaze on a taxi which was just stopping in front of 523.

"If you've a modicum of gratitude in your make-up, friend," Brent remarked, "now's the time to express it. I think I've led you to the jackpot."

He felt Pape tensing to pounce. A young man carrying a suitcase had alighted from the taxi. Pape watched him like a hawk as he headed into the building, using a key. A moment later the front downstairs windows shined with light.

"Come on over," Brent said sourly, "and I'll introduce you to Larry."

Pape hustled on his short legs, keeping up with Brent as they crossed the street. Brent's thumb reached the bell-button first. This time there was a response—the electric lock buzzed. Pushing in with Pape, Brent found Larry Bannon peeking out of the first door on the right of the hallway. He was garbed conventionally now, looked tired and angry and in no mood for visitors.

Pape began, "You're Larry Bannon, eh?" but Brent wasted no time on formalities. He brushed past Bannon, opening the door wide. It was a reasonably comfortable but untidy one-room apartment. The air smelled stale. A silver trumpet lay on a chair in its black leather case. A table in one corner was covered with what appeared to be the parts of several dismembered radios. There was a soldering iron alongside various tools, spools of hook-up wire and a voltmeter. Brent took less interest in the technical equipment than he did in some other items which were draped over an easy chair. These included a pair of high-heeled shoes, a pair of stockings, a polka-dot dress, a coat, a slip and a pair of panties.

Brent asked at once: "Where is she, Larry?"

Larry turned to him in indignant bewilderment. "Clear out, you two. You got no

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business here. If I got company, I didn't expect it when I came in, but it's none of your damn business."

Brent glanced about curiously, hearing music. It was a tinny sound, like that of a small radio, and it was coming from somewhere inside the apartment.

He strode to another door, opened it and found a closet. He tried a third door. This gave into the bath, and here was the source of the music. Brent stopped short just inside, staring.

The girl was slouched down in the bathtub. Water covered her extended legs and came as high as her chest, and it was mirror-still. Her head lolled on one bare shoulder. Her eyes were closed as if in sleep. One of her arms drooped in the water while the other hung over the edge of the tub. Nearby, a radio chassis—a small radio set without a cabinet—sat on the closed lid of the toilet. The music twanged softly but the girl couldn't hear it.

"Here she is, Pape," Brent said. "Here's Sandra Sheldon."

Pape crowded behind Brent, straining to see. His ominous, gruff voice grumbled in Brent's ear.

"Here she is, all right—dead! A hell of a lot deader than she'd have been if Lora Lorne had told her to stay safe at home!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Amperes and New Lace

PAPE'S new denunciation left Brent speechless. He felt the captain glowering at him and could find no defense in words. That the girl was dead was a ghastly fact. Although Lora Lorne might not be the direct cause of Sandra Sheldon's demise, it was nevertheless altogether too possible, as Pape had brutally pointed out, that the girl might still be alive and well if only Lorne had guided her in a different direction. Gazing aghast at the girl in the tub, Brent reminded himself how assiduously he had always labored over the damned Lorne column, and reflected with a chill that this corpse could actually be a sample of the misbegotten results he achieved.

"God help us!" he groaned, meaning specifically Lora Lorne and himself.

He moved toward the girl in the tub, his intention to learn for certain whether she was as completely dead as he feared. He was about to touch her wrist—the wrist of the arm dangling near the little radio—when an exclamation of alarm halted him.

"Don't! Good Lord, don't touch her!"

Lawrence Bannon was standing stock-still in the bathroom door, his eyes round with shock and dismay. Brent and Pape watched

him. Automatically he fingered his upper lip and the girl's name came from his throat in a choking sound. "Sandy, Sandy!"

He pushed past Pape and Brent and bent over her. "Good Lord, she shouldn't have done that!" Then he stooped and, without touching the little radio itself, yanked at its cord, thereby popping its plug free. The music stopped. More choking noises came from Larry Bannon's throat as he tried to complete Brent's move. He fumbled with the girl's wrist, then abandoned the attempt and stumbled out of the bathroom, overwhelmed.

Pape dogged him but Brent moved toward the girl. Her wrist, he found, was completely still, cold and stiff. Her lifelessness was a thing of utter finality. It was all too clear now why Sandra Sheldon, alias Yearning, had not responded to Lora Lorne's urgent printed appeal.

Shuddering, Brent trudged into the living room to find Larry Bannon bending over the table covered with radio parts, making bewildered motions.

"I left that chassis here on my bench," he said in an empty tone. "She should never have taken it into the bathroom. By plugging it in, she connected the metal base directly to the hot side of the house wiring. All A.C.-D.C. sets are hooked up like that. When she touched it she actually touched a live wire—with her whole body grounded in the water in the tub! Nobody should ever . . ." He sank into a chair, his hands over his face. "My good Lord! Sandy, Sandy!"

Pape was fishy-eyed. "What're you trying to tell us? She electrocuted herself while she was taking a bath, is that it? Accident, ha?"

Bannon looked up, white-faced. "What else could it be?"

"Oh yeah?" Pape drawled. "Trying to make it look like you didn't kill her!"

"Kill her? Me?" Bannon sprang up. "Are you crazy? Why should I kill her? I loved her. We were going to be married soon. How could I have done such a thing anyway? I've been in Chicago. I couldn't possibly have—"

He sank into the chair again, too stunned to go on. Brent wagged his head and closed the bathroom door. Pape chopped into the hallway and headed toward a phone booth located under the stairs. Brent heard him calling Headquarters, asking for Captain Russo. Larry Bannon was still staring at the closed door of the bath, shaking his head in confusion and grief, when Pape returned, scowling.

"Electrocuted herself, ha?" the captain repeated skeptically. "The medical examiner will tell us the facts about that."

Brent grabbed at the possibility. Accidents, after all, could happen to anybody and were not dependent upon Lora Lorne's urging. "It's a convincing picture, Captain," he said

quickly. "This wouldn't be the first time it's happened, by any means. People who use electrical appliances in bathrooms flirt with sudden death. Too often such appliances are defective—maybe the insulation is worn off the cord, or the connections are exposed, or moisture provides an electrical leak. Bathrooms are full of grounded plumbing, as Larry said. If you happen to touch such an appliance and a grounded object—meaning a faucet, a pipe or even flowing water—at the same time, you get a heavy current through your body. Especially if your skin happens to be wet, which increases its conductivity, you'll be pumped full of plenty of amperes—a goner."

"Shut up, Brent!" Noncommittally but obdurately, Pape joked a callous finger at Bannon. "How long since that girl holed in here?"

Bannon stammered: "I d-don't know. I didn't expect to f-find her waiting for me tonight."

"How'd she get in?"

Brent spoke impatiently behind him. "With a key, of course."

Having probed into the pockets of the girl's coat, he extended the key on his palm. Immediately Pape took it and held it accusingly before Bannon's worried eyes.

"Hers?" Brent asked. "One you'd given her?"

Bannon nodded, admitting he'd provided Sandra with a key to his apartment. "We saw each other four, five times a week, after I knocked off work for the night. Sometimes I got her a table at the Foxhole, where I was playing, and she stuck around there until quitting time. We'd get something to eat downtown, then come here and spend a couple of hours together. But sometimes she liked to wait here, instead, until I came home. So I gave her a key, and she could come in any time she wanted to—"

"That girl," Pape broke in, "was gone from her home a whole week. She'd been here all that while, hadn't she?"

Bannon looked startled and still more confused. "Why, no, no, she hasn't been here since—" He held his head again. "Let me think, let me try to get it straight."

"Get it straight by all means," Brent suggested, trying to ignore Pape's forbidding scowl.

Bannon's predicament was very much up Lora Lorne's alley, a matter to arouse his sympathy. Moreover, he held doggedly to his hope that he might somehow justify Miss Lorne's participation in a situation which had taken a deadly turn. He continued gently: "Go back to the night of the first of the month. As I recall it, you had no date with Sandra that evening. But you knew she was

having trouble with her family, didn't you—trouble over you?"

BANNON probed into his coat pockets and produced an envelope of a familiar powder-blue color. Brent reached for it quickly. Pape growled and craned to read it. It was wrinkled from having been carried on Bannon's person. His name and address were written in indigo ink, undoubtedly Sandra Sheldon's. The date of the postmark was the second of the month. Brent extracted a letter from the envelope. This he found dated the first.

Larry, darling:

This is it, this is the showdown. It happened tonight—a terrible quarrel. Now I've got to make up my mind and choose once and for all. It's either my family or you, Larry.

You already know, darling, how very much I love you—but please, give me a little time. I don't want to make a terrible mistake which we both might regret, so please, darling, let me think it out all by myself for just a few days. I won't see you again until I've made up my mind. I won't even phone you, and please, don't try to see me or phone me either. You do understand, don't you, dearest? Just give me this chance to get it all clear in my mind—and then, if it's you I've chosen, I'll come to you.

With all my heart,

Sandy.

Pape snatched the letter from Brent's fingers. "Evidence!" he snapped. "Leave this to me, Brent, or I'll boot you out of here, see?" He turned impatiently to Bannon. "It looks like she made up her mind, all right, and came here. But when?"

Bannon was still shaking his head in stunned perplexity. "I don't know. I did just as she asked in that letter. After I received it, we didn't see each other or hear from each other for days. I didn't even try to get in touch with her when I left for Chicago. That was early yesterday morning—"

"Yesterday, the seventh," Brent said quietly. "Look, Larry, she disappeared on the morning of the second. Where was she, then, during those five days in between?"

"What? She disappeared? I didn't know that. I don't know anything about this, except—well, I got her letter on the second, and I abided by it. Then on the afternoon of the sixth the telegram came from Chicago—"

Pape cut in: "What telegram?"

Bannon pointed to the table loaded with radio parts. "I'm a musician but I'm more interested in electronics. I've been trying to find a job with a company making radio equipment. Sandra and I had talked about it a lot and she was all for it. I'd written letters, dozens of 'em applying for a job. One plant

in Chicago, Apex Electronics, had written back and said they might interview me later on. Then on the sixth I got this telegram from Apex telling me to come to Chicago right away to talk about a job in their research lab—just what I wanted. So early the next day I hopped a train . . ." A distressed expression crossed Bannon's face. "It turned out to be a floperoo. I still don't get it."

"No job?" Brent inquired.

"No job!" Bannon blurted. "They couldn't even understand why I'd come. Said they hadn't sent for me. Couldn't find anybody at the plant who knew anything about the wire. I was left high and dry, feeling like a fool, but all I could do was let it go at that. I decided to ask Cookie to take me back, and I just now arrived home, and—"

"Ah?" Brent said. "Where's that telegram?"

Bannon fished into his pockets again. This time he produced a yellow sheet of paper, as wrinkled as Sandra's note. Pape made a pass at it, but again Brent was faster on the grab. As he read the message he twisted his mouth wryly.

"In your eagerness, Larry," he pointed out sympathetically, "you overlooked something important here. All telegrams state their source. If this message had been sent from Chicago it would say so right here, in this line above your address. But it says no such thing. This message was sent to you from this city."

Bannon sat up. "From here?"

"From here," Brent asserted. "It's a phony."

Indignation reddened Bannon's face. "But— but why? Why would somebody send me a fake telegram about that job I wanted?"

"Can't you guess?" Brent said quietly. "Sandra turned up in your apartment after you'd left for Chicago, appeared here while you were gone. Therefore—"

Pape whipped the falsified message from Brent's hand. "More evidence!" he snapped again. "Brent, you get out of here before I lose my temper!"

In the vestibule the door-buzzer rasped. As Pape hustled from the room, Brent turned to the feminine clothing draped over the easy chair. The item which interested him most was the pair of panties. He was holding them to the light and examining them with profound interest when Captain Russo entered with Pape in his wake.

"Out, Brent!" Russo said at once. "I'm in charge of this case now. As for any possible developments, no comment until further notice."

"No comment," Brent repeated incredulously, "even in regard to this fascinating garment? Notice, it's peach-colored and prettied

up with lace in a certain decorative pattern which indicates—"

Pape whisked it out of his possession and bestowed it on Russo, whose cadaverous face thereupon acquired an unearthly blush.

"Just a minute, friends," Brent said grimly. "This dead girl's panties are important—this pair of panties matches the brassiere which was found under Philip Platt's body!"

Russo eyed them spookily, then stuffed them into his pocket with a show of embarrassment.

"Everything ties up now, chum," Brent persisted. "First tie-up—Sandra Sheldon disappeared a week ago from her home on Birch Street, which is the same street on which Joe Elfer was found murdered last night. Second tie-up—both Elfer and Platt were clubbed to death in much the same manner, less than an hour apart. Third tie-up—Platt was found in proximity to a bra which is half of a set of lingerie belonging to Sandra Sheldon. That's a circle of evidence if ever I saw one. To go on with it—"

"It's highly unnecessary, as I see the matter, for you to go on with it, Brent," Russo interrupted in funeral tones. "If you're assuming that the underwear indicates a certain degree of intimacy between Sandra and Platt, you're vastly mistaken. I'm quite certain, on the basis of my investigations, that Platt and the girl were not acquainted with each other. Good night, Brent."

PAPE seized Brent's arm and hustled him into the corridor. Brent permitted it simply because he desired to go. When the door of Bannon's apartment slammed in his face, he grinned. It was O.K. with him if these dicks refused to listen, for, to Brent's mind, the next logical step was clear.

Sandra's peach-colored panties having been found on Arch Street tonight, it seemed not unreasonable to assume that they had been here last night also. And if this were so, then it seemed equally reasonable to conclude that Sandra's matching bra must have been here with them. If this in turn were also true, then this address on Arch Street was directly associated in some way with Philip Platt. Brent recalled that Russo had not accounted for Platt's whereabouts between midnight, when the poker game had broken up, and seven A.M., when Platt's body had been found a considerable distance away. Brent immediately went to work to fill in that gap.

He knocked on a door directly across the hall. A wizened, bald man peered out.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Philip Platt," Brent said quietly.

"Don't know him," the little man murmured.

"Sorry to have disturbed you," Brent replied.

He shifted to the apartment directly behind Bannon's and rapped again. There was no answer. He tried another door in the rear. This time he asked the same question of a sleepy woman with curlers in her hair. She said: "Who?" Considering this enough of an answer, Brent apologized again and climbed to the second floor.

He knocked on two more doors and drew two more blanks. Persisting, he found the fifth door being opened by a buxomish blonde. As she gazed at him uneasily he thought it worth noting, from a card tacked on her door, that her name was Miss Marie Noyes. Glancing into the apartment behind her, he saw pink-shaded lamps, very comfortable chairs. Miss Noyes herself wore a red housecoat and red mules, and she seemed not annoyed by Brent's interest in all these seductive details. He decided that this was another jackpot if ever anything could be.

Quietly he said: "I'm here about Phil."

Marie Noyes opened her red lips in a silent gasp. She reached quickly, grasped Brent's wrist, pulled him inside her door and quietly closed it.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered. "I gotta keep out of it. Are you a friend of Phil's? Did he tell you he came here sometimes? Oh, my God, you gotta keep it quiet."

Brent gestured reassurance. "Take it easy, babe. I won't breathe a word. I'm just trying to find out what happened to Phil, see? So we can clam up on the right parts of it."

"I don't know what happened, honest," Marie said quickly, hand to her throat. "He came a little after midnight and left here at a quarter to five, on his way home. Whatever he ran into after that, I don't know a thing about it, honest."

Brent smiled, finding most of the gap filled in. "O.K., just keep it under wraps. One thing more. When Phil left, did he take anything belonging to you? I mean, any wearables that could be traced? Anything peach-colored?"

She blinked her lashes at him and again spoke in a whisper. "No, no, he didn't have anything of mine."

"O.K., babe," Brent said expansively. "Many thanks and good night."

He ran down the stairs and had arrived at the outer door when a latch clicked behind him. Captain Russo stepped from Bannon's apartment in company with Pape and the dead girl's boy-friend. Russo's gesture made it clear that Pape was to conduct Bannon to Headquarters for questioning. He turned a lackluster eye on Brent.

"Off the record?" Brent inquired acridly.

"No comment," Russo said.

"Brother," Brent answered emphatically, "you're asking for it. I promised you I'd

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make myself a gob of news if you didn't open up to me, and I wasn't kidding. You'll have your last chance in the morning, chum. If you don't become unclammed then, this case—or all these cases together, rather—are going to bust wide open smack in your face.”

Then he hastened out, feeling, however, less sure of himself than he'd sounded. There was one big trouble with the brash promise he'd made—Lora Lorne. Her unfortunate position remained unchanged. As a probable contributor to the death of a bewildered girl, Miss Lorne was still left squarely in the middle.

BRENT was hard at work in Lora Lorne's atelier of love long before the *Recorder's* news staff was due to come on the job. All alone there, he was sweating over the task of concocting a new heartaches column for today's editions. Only in this arduous way, by pasting his copy together many hours in advance of the deadline, could he wangle himself enough time to work the police trick. It was a feat requiring great fortitude, but he'd done it the day before, and he felt an even greater necessity for doing so again today—his last opportunity to salvage Miss Lorne's priceless reputation.

He was still belaboring his typewriter when the reporters began straggling in. Lovely Val Randall appeared and gave him another look of censure. She'd brought a few notes, which indicated she'd already visited Headquarters, and immediately settled to her typewriter to peck out a story. Brent resisted an impulse to question her. The bad news, he surmised, would hit him soon enough. He continued wrestling with Lorne until, overswept with a sense of rebellion, he stopped to take stock of himself.

Why the hell, anyway, he asked himself, was he knocking himself out for the sake of a non-existent busybody? He wasn't compelled to write the damn Lorne pillar. In the beginning Garrett had forced him to wear Lorne's petticoats, true, but recently the city editor had allowed him to shed them. He could, if he wished, say nuts to her, turn his back on her once and for all. Actually he could, at any time he chose, move over to the police trick, where he belonged, with never a need to turn out another passion column as long as he lived. Why, then, didn't he chuck the whole impossible, soul-wearing business right now and consign Lorne to her proper place in hell?

Even as he asked himself that anguished question he knew he could never bring himself to desert the insufferable old dame. The fact was, he'd tried it once. He'd quit the column cold—but had managed to let it alone for only one day. He'd discovered then, to his startled chagrin, that his ingrown conscience wouldn't permit him to abandon Lorne's loyal followers

to the untried mercies of a substitute mentor.

In suffering along with Lorne over a protracted period of time, he'd acquired the unique insight and the experienced sympathies which the cockeyed job demanded. He'd grown to feel her responsibilities so keenly that he didn't dare entrust them to the hands of an amateur who lacked these special qualities. There was always that fear in Brent that his successor might bungle and unwittingly wreck the life of a trusting supplicant. This was why he had gone on with it himself, attempting as best he could to direct other people how to live their lives. And now that he'd apparently committed the very error which he'd dreaded so much—a miscarriage of counsel which had evidently led Sandra Sheldon to a death which she might otherwise have avoided—he knew that he and Miss Lorne had no choice but to face the music together.

Finishing the column, he trudged over to Val Randall's desk. She was just then writing "30" to her own story. She twirled the last sheet from her machine and Brent went with her to the city editor's rolltop desk. Garrett had hustled in a few minutes before. With his blue pencil poised, he began editing Val's copy while she gave Brent another look of sober reprobation.

"My God, what's cooking now?" Brent said urgently.

"Nothing you couldn't expect, Grandma," Val rebuked him. "Sandra's death came as a terrible blow to her parents. Mrs. Sheldon is prostrate and under a doctor's care. The girl's father is talking for publication and pulling no punches on Lora Lorne. He insists Lorne could have prevented all this and that the whole world should know what a tragedy she's caused."

Garrett looked up, flinty-eyed. "A sweet spot this puts us in, Brent. Here's this guy, Oliver Sheldon, demanding to be quoted at length as to Lorne's unsavory part in this mess. It raises a nice point of policy, a tough question of integrity. What sort of paper are we running here? Do we print the news as it breaks, or do we suppress the news to suit our own selfish purposes? In other words, do I delete Sheldon's denunciation of Lorne, and thereby twist the truth in a way which no reputable paper would countenance, or do I print it, thereby wrecking our most valuable feature and besmirching the whole paper besides?"

"And also," Val suggested quietly, "do you add that our revered Miss Lorne simply ain't, except in the person of Bill Brent?"

Brent shuddered at the thought. He could imagine no worse calamity. Since he had first begun to live in that peculiar hermaphroditic hell of his, Brent had spared no pains to guard his ridiculous secret from the public. If ever

it should become bruited about, it would make him a prize laughingstock. He'd be greeted by raucous humor wherever he went—he'd never be able to live it down. Brent felt he would far rather expire right now than face the unbearable humiliation of being pointed out on the street as that famous handmaiden of Aphrodite who had for so long counseled the city's lovesick maidens concerning their unhappy amours.

"In the last analysis, however," Garrett added in a tone of stony resignation, "it's no problem at all. The *Recorder* is not the only newspaper on earth. If we don't print the facts other papers will. As a matter of course, the whole story will go out over the tickers. Every sheet from Bangor to San Diego will get it off the wires. It'll mean Lorne's finish. Once she's been exposed she'll be worse than worthless to us. Nobody in this man's town will ever have a grain of faith in anything the *Recorder* may print."

"For God's sake," Brent groaned, "hold tight. Let's not be in such a hell of a hurry to slit our own throats. After all, there are a few mitigating circumstances. Lorne didn't actually advise that girl to go out and die. She can't be held responsible if one of her correspondents gets struck by lightning, run over by a truck or electrocuted in a bathtub."

"But in this instance—"

"I know, I know all too well just what you're going to say," Brent interrupted. "It's been said too many times already. If Lorne had advised Sandra to stay home she wouldn't have died somewhere else. But that's an unfair attitude to take. I might argue that if Sandra had known better than to twiddle with a high-voltage device while sitting chest-deep in water, she wouldn't have died anywhere. Garrett, we need a break—we need it badly. Hold this story at least for a little while, as long as you can before our first deadline."

"For what purpose?" Garrett demanded.

"I admit I don't see any clear way out of it so far," Brent said, "but I've got to have time enough to find one. I think it's there. This picture has holes in it, and wacky details—plenty of 'em. For example, the ink Sandra used when she wrote to Lorne."

"Ink?" Garrett echoed. "Ink! What're you gibbering about? Has this thing tipped you off your nut?"

"Besides," Brent insisted, "I've snagged onto one significant angle which Russo still hasn't got. I mean the fact that Philip Platt was in a certain apartment on Arch Street shortly before he was murdered—an apartment almost directly above the one where Sandra was later found dead." Not explaining further, Brent straightened. "Look, Garrett, if it's at all possible to save the Lorne column now, I'm the guy who's got to do the job. For

that I've got to have a little time. The deadline of our first edition comes at high noon, so—"

"Three hours," Garrett said.

"Three hours at the most, including whatever time may be needed to write a new story if there should be one." Brent wagged his head dejectedly. "All right, go ahead, put Val's story in type and get it ready to roll, but keep it on ice until the last possible minute. Do this for the *Recorder*, for Lorne and for me. Besides," he added with seeming irrationality, "Sandra was a conscientious girl who took her job seriously. Yet she never went back to it after leaving home. Did she notify the plant that she'd quit? I've phoned, talked to her foreman and learned she didn't do so. Then why didn't she? And why should she quit the job anyway, since Larry's apparently no money-bags?"

Garrett and Val gazed after him in uneasy puzzlement as he hustled back to Lorne's cubicle. There he armed into his overcoat with groping motions and clapped his hat on his head at a dizzy angle. Then he wandered out of the city room as if not at all certain where he was going.

CHAPTER FIVE

For Auld Lorne Syne

OUTSIDE, sitting in his car, Brent endeavored to think. After another brittle night the cold had moderated again. It was a gray day and, while Brent cogitated, the first flakes of a new snowfall swirled against the windshield.

"One trouble here," he told himself, "is that every damn piece of evidence in these cases has been snatched out of my hands before I could get more than a glimpse of 'em. Now Russo's hoarding 'em all—off the record."

He drove urgently to police headquarters. Just inside the revolving doors, he encountered Captain Pape. Pape halted to scowl upon him. Brent grimaced, began to brush past.

"News-maker!" Pape sneered. "Girl killer! Heaven save our young womanhood from the coils of Lora Lorne."

Smouldering with resentment, Brent headed into the homicide detail's suite. There he met Larry Bannon, who was just leaving. Bannon looked worn, as if he'd been subjected to an all-night grilling, but he seemed relieved, too. Without speaking, he ambled wearily past Brent, on his way out. Brent found Captain Russo seated spectrally at his desk, meditating over various papers. He raised glazed eyes and, for a change, seemed not unwilling to tolerate Brent's presence.

"Still no comment?" Brent inquired.

"On the contrary," the captain answered, sounding sadly expansive. "The Sheldon case is closed. I see no reason why the general public should not be informed as to what actually happened to the unfortunate young woman."

Brent heard this with foreboding. It promised nothing good for Lora Lorne.

"What about the medical examiner's report," he asked warily. "Does he verify Bannon's theory?"

To Brent's relief, Russo nodded, his neck seeming to creak. "Unquestionably accidental death due to electrocution," he said in sorrowful tones. "There's nothing further to be done about the girl except to weep over her and bury her."

"The time of her death," Brent persisted. "What's that angle?"

"Undetermined," Russo answered. "Death by electricity may cause the whole body to become instantly tetanized but, when found, the girl was in a condition of secondary flaccidity, which condition may ensue after an indefinite interval. Stomach contents, none. The body was at room temperature, thereby throwing off the calorific method of calculating the time of death. All this is somewhat confusing, but the question of exactly when the girl died appears to be comparatively unimportant here."

"Is it, now!" Brent said.

Russo eyed him levelly. "You came here for news, Brent? I'm giving you our official version. It's quite simple. The girl left home, then entered Bannon's apartment while he was absent. She decided to bathe and, while immersed in the tub, made the fatal mistake of touching a piece of electrified metal. Her death is nobody's crime. That's all there is to it."

"I doubt that like all hell," Brent said. "Look at a few of the angles, Captain. Where was Sandra between the time she disappeared from her home and the time she appeared in Bannon's room? It's a matter of days, an interval completely unaccounted for. The case is full of such riddles. What about Joe Elfer? What about Philip Platt? Where does this leave 'em?"

"Both in their graves," the captain answered sadly.

Brent frowned a dogged frown. While arguing he'd glanced over the papers on Russo's desk. Among them were the originals of the dead girl's letters. Brent picked up the later of the two which she'd addressed to Lora Lorne. A rapid rereading of it caused him to arch his eyebrows. He looked at the windows, saw snow flying, muttered to himself, flipped through Russo's telephone directory, then took up Russo's telephone.

"United States weather observatory," a

man's voice announced clearly over the wire.

"When was the last time it snowed here, please, not including today?" Brent inquired.

"Our last snowfall, prior to the present one, began before noon on the first of this month and continued until late next morning, a total precipitation of six and one-half inches."

Brent stiffened. "And after that it turned pretty damn cold, didn't it?"

"Sub-zero temperatures prevailed, yes."

His own temperature rising, Brent put aside the phone and gazed at Russo with mingled elation and impatience. "That tears it, pal. This case is closed, you say? Matter of fact, this is three cases in one, all of which are still wide open. They'll remain wide open until a murderer is apprehended. Since you seem disinclined to collect him, Russo, just go on sitting there, nice and quiet, while I do it for you."

He turned away with Sandra's letter still in his hand. As he moved to the door, he stuffed it into his pocket. This brought Russo indignantly to his feet.

"Come back here with that evidence!"

Brent strode on, ignoring him. Thoroughly incensed, the captain went into one of his rare bursts of action. He dove for his hat and overcoat and fought his way into them while hurrying after Brent. The chase led him down the broad steps of Headquarters through swirling snow to the car which Brent had left in a parking space reserved for official cars only.

Brent was already at the wheel. He started the engine as Russo clambered in. "That's better," he remarked. "Since there's a killer to be nailed, we might as well make it official. You can have him. All I want is the news he'll make."

"When you're clapped into the clink for confiscating evidence," Russo said, "that will also be official."

Brent sent the car plowing through the pouring snow. "Hell's hinges, pal, there are far too many unanswered questions here. Take just one—Sandra's purse, left in a restaurant yesterday evening. It's as wrong as a purple cow. If Sandra was at that restaurant at dinner time, she must have gone to Bannon's room immediately afterward and electrocuted herself in a hell of a hurry. But this can't be true. Her stomach was found empty at the autopsy—therefore she hadn't had any dinner at any tea room.

"It's wrong on another count. At that juncture Sandra had been missing a whole week, without having gone near Larry, without getting in touch with her family, and without responding to Lorne's public appeal. Yet she's supposed to have appeared in a public place. It doesn't make sense. She couldn't sit in a booth in a popular restaurant at the dinner

hour without eating something, but she hadn't eaten anything for hours prior to her death. Therefore she wasn't there at all."

Russo was eyeing Brent with ghostly interest. "You talk too much. What you're saying is that it couldn't have happened but it did."

"It couldn't have happened and it didn't," Brent answered. "It wasn't Sandra who left that handbag in the restaurant. Somebody else did—planted it there."

"And what would be the point of that?" Russo inquired.

"You want a diagram?" Brent said shortly. "O.K., tag along."

HE VEERED his car to a stop against the mounds of snow piled in the gutters in front of 1221 Birch Street. Russo trailed him like a phantom into the lobby of the little apartment building. Pausing there, Brent pointed at nothing.

"Notice, there's no mail-chute here. Neither is there a mail-box. A tenant wishing to mail a letter must take it out of here and drop it in a slot somewhere else."

Russo, uneasy now, had returned to his policy of making a minimum of comment. He followed Brent into the small elevator, where the small uniformed girl was again on duty. Brent requested the fifth floor and on the way up he continued his cryptic expostulation.

"This young lady states unequivocally that on the morning of the second of this month, when Sandra vanished, Sandra did not use this elevator. She also states that Sandra could not have used the stairs because they were then being painted. We must accept this as fact. There is only one other way by which Sandra could have left the building—the fire-escape. Can you conjure up a good reason, Captain, why Sandra should avoid this convenient elevator and, instead, climb down the fire-escape?"

Russo made his answer as brief as possible. "No."

"Neither can I," Brent said, surprisingly. "Furthermore, I can't think of a good reason why she should then go off on foot, without using her car."

Reaching the fifth floor, he knocked on the Sheldons' door. Tyler Weeks appeared, appropriately wearing a dark suit. Previously, Weeks had reacted to Brent with indifference, but now he found Brent's presence distasteful. It showed distinctly in his childish face. Brent pushed in regardless, with Russo creaking along behind him. In the living room they came upon Oliver Sheldon. The older man was seated in a brooding posture, but at sight of Brent he stiffened to his feet and leveled an outraged finger.

"You—your Miss Lorne!" he blurted accusingly. "I consider her a murderess. How

can you have the effrontery to show your face in this home now, after the terrible tragedy she caused?"

"To answer your question," Brent said quietly, "I can be hellishly full of effrontery when the occasion demands it, as it does now. You'd like to see this situation for what it actually is, wouldn't you—or would you?"

Oliver Sheldon pointed to the door. "I'd like you to leave this apartment. My wife is confined to bed, overcome with shock. As for myself, I—I'm hardly responsible for any actions I may take against you."

"I'll risk 'em," Brent decided. "Officious as I may seem, Mr. Sheldon, you'll have to suffer with me. Murder is involved here and my time is growing shorter every minute." Sheldon went round-eyed at the word "murder." Estimating him, Brent added: "I'm going to have a look around."

He turned toward Sandra's bedroom. Russo and Weeks trailed him, both with obvious disapproval. At Sandra's desk Brent opened a drawer and produced a bottle of ink.

"Indigo in color, a special fancy shade," Brent said, indicating the label. "The first letter which Sandra sent to Lora Lorne, dated November twenty-seventh, was written on powder-blue stationery with a pen dipped in this ink. The letter which Sandra wrote to Larry, dated December first, was written with the same ink on the same stationery. Sandra's second letter to Miss Lorne, dated December seventh, is of identical description." Brent raised his eyebrows at the captain. "And you see nothing remarkable in that?"

Again Russo was terse. "No."

"Why," Brent pointed out, "on the seventh, Sandra had already been missing from this apartment for five days. She left here without a grip, without even a change of clothes. Certainly she didn't take along this fancy-colored bottle of ink. Are you willing to suppose, then, that she did take along a sheet of her distinctive stationery, with an envelope to match, and that before using these she went to the trouble of buying another bottle of ink of the same color? Nuts! Actually, wherever she might have holed herself in, she'd have used whatever writing materials happened to be handy, no matter what they were."

"As I pointed out before, Brent," Russo remarked, "you talk too much. When are you going to get around to mentioning what all this means?"

"Right now," Brent declared. "This is the way it looks—on the morning of the second, Sandra rose late, took a bath, dressed herself, didn't bother to say good-by to anyone, sneaked through her stepbrother's room while he dozed, climbed down the fire-escape and went off on foot, leaving her car behind and taking nothing along but a sheet of blue note-

paper and an envelope to match. Subsequently, she remained completely out of sight, communicating with nobody, until Larry had left for Chicago. Then she went into his apartment, transferred a radio to the bathroom, took off all her clothes, climbed into the tub and immediately electrocuted herself. This, to all appearances, is what she must have done. But from beginning to end it's entirely too wacky to believe. She did no such thing."

"No?" Russo said. "It's what she did, except that she didn't do it?"

"It's not what she did at all," Brent said. "What she actually did is quite different, as the evidence and the testimony show."

Oliver Sheldon had come to the door of the bedroom. Looking almost as cadaverous as Russo, he watched Brent warily. Tyler Weeks was listening with a frown. Russo's skepticism was beginning to wilt. Not liking this at all, the captain nevertheless allowed Brent to continue.

"The real beginning was the quarrel which Sandra had with her family on the night of the first day of this month. Following it, she locked herself in her room and refused to answer anyone. For a time she was busy in here, writing letters. She wrote two. One was for Larry, in which she said she wanted a chance to make up her mind. The other was for Lora Lorne, saying she was facing her romantic decision. That's the one I illegally confiscated from you, Captain." Brent produced it from his pocket.

"One moment," Russo put in lugubriously. "You say Sandra wrote this letter on the night of the first, but it's dated the seventh, and the envelope in which it was mailed is also post-marked the seventh."

"They are, indeed," Brent agreed. "Just the same, this letter was written on the night of the first, not on the seventh. The proof of that is in the letter itself. Sandra writes of being put into a reflective mood by 'the snow flying against the window.' On the night of the first it was snowing. No snow fell on the seventh. In case you question the point, I refer you to the records of the United States Weather Observatory."

Russo looked a trifle abashed. He said shortly: "Go on, Brent."

Brent went on.

"When Sandra finished writing these two letters, she left them on this desk. That is, she didn't hustle out of the building in the snowstorm to mail them at once. Doubtless her intention was to mail them the next morning. So she simply went to bed. I wouldn't know how well she slept. Not well, probably, because she stayed in bed until late the next morning."

Tyler Weeks spoke up. "We told you all that. She was still here when—"

"When her father was ready to leave for work she was still in bed, yes. He spoke to her through the door and she didn't answer. Next, at about ten o'clock, Mrs. Sheldon also spoke to Sandra through the door, and again she didn't answer, although her stepmother heard her move on the bed. Then Mrs. Sheldon went her way. Finally, as you also told me, Mr. Weeks, Sandra rose and went into the bathroom. That's as far as she ever went under her own power. She never came out of that bathroom alive."

BRENT'S assertion was followed by an uncertain silence. Tyler Weeks stood blinking at him. Oliver Sheldon passed one shaky hand over his wan face and drew in a deep sigh. Captain Russo soberly mulled over everything he had heard. Brent glanced at his wrist-watch and was disturbed to find that his voluble excursions had consumed a surprising amount of time. The *Recorder's* first deadline was nearer than he'd suspected. It pricked him with a sense of increased urgency.

"What—what are you saying?" Oliver Sheldon forced the words out. "Sandra died here? It—it's impossible!"

"A little confused, aren't you, Brent?" Russo inquired in hollow tones. "We know Sandra died at a place miles away from this apartment."

Impatiently, Brent left the room, brushing past the dead girl's father. The three men followed him to the door of the bath. Inside, he made a rapid survey, then turned and continued speaking with gestures.

"To go on with what you told us, Weeks. You said you heard Sandra splashing about in here. Then, you said, you went back to sleep and knew nothing more until you awoke to find Sandra gone. We're to assume, then, that the rest of this occurred while you were lying in bed asleep. O.K." He beckoned to Russo and took up the electric heater which sat beside the tub.

"It was a cold morning. No doubt this bathroom felt chilly to a girl who was naked and wet. While sitting here, probably on the ledge of the tub, she reached over to plug in this heater. It was the last move she ever made of her own volition. This heater's cord is frayed and the socket terminals are loose—two possible contacts with a live wire. That did it. The electrocution of Sandra Sheldon occurred on this spot, while she was bathing on the morning of the second."

Brent replaced the heater.

"Now we come to such a fine piece of skulduggery that it should be outlined step-by-step. First, Sandra was found dead here. The discovery naturally occasioned great dismay, and not merely because a young girl had met an untimely death. Sandra's life had ended

two days prior to her twenty-first birthday, the fourth of December, on which day she was to have inherited one hundred thousand dollars, a tidy fortune. But with Sandra being dead on the second, her inheritance would pass instead to the contingent beneficiaries, certain charitable organizations.

"Behind the series of moves which followed there was one grisly motive. That is, if it could be made to appear that Sandra had not died on the second of the month, but had lived through her birthday on the fourth, and if it could be made to appear that her death had occurred subsequently to that date, then her inheritance would pass automatically to her next of kin. In other words, if this piece of chicanery could be successfully pulled off, it would bring one hundred grand to someone who would otherwise receive not one penny of it."

Oliver Sheldon gasped, tottered a little and supported himself against the wall. Weeks and Russo peered at him. Brent gave him an apprehensive once-over, then went on, quickly.

"That plan, as I say—the plan to snag onto one hundred grand which otherwise would be lost—dominated all the moves that followed. What were they?"

"First, the two letters which Sandra had written the previous night were found. They were read. The one written to Larry fitted into the plan neatly. That is, it insured that Larry would not try to see Sandra or get in touch with her, which would help greatly to conceal temporarily the fact of her death. It would have to be mailed at once. That was done, and it worked.

"Sandra's other letter, to Lora Lorne, was also useful. In it she spoke of her quarrel with her family, but in connection with this she didn't use the word 'tonight.' In that letter there is a certain quality of timelessness. To judge from the context, it could have been written an hour after the quarrel, or days later, or a whole week later. Only two details fixed it at a given time. One was San-

dra's mention of falling snow. Well, that detail might be overlooked, or there might providentially be more snowfalls soon to come. It was a risk that had to be taken. The other detail was the date. It was written as a number, December 1. That was very easily gimmicked, simply by adding a squiggle to the top of the one, which would change it to a seven—a very small bit of forgery which almost certainly could go undetected.

"O.K., then, the letter to Larry was to be mailed that same day. But the letter to Miss Lorne must be held until the seventh, to be posted then, when it would serve as false proof that Sandra was still alive on that date."

The three men were listening in intent silence. Brent passed them again and this time crossed Tyler Weeks' bedroom to the window outside of which ran the fire-escape.

"You couldn't think of a good reason why Sandra should have gone down the fire-escape, Russo, and neither could I," Brent said. "But she didn't go down. She went up. Her body was carried up."

He opened the window. Cold air gusted in with a burst of snowflakes. Brent crawled out on the platform grille and took a hard grip on the ladder. As he climbed, Russo followed. A single section of iron ladder brought them over a cornice. They stood on the flat roof in the whipping snow while Weeks and Sheldon clambered after them. Neither Sheldon nor Weeks had taken time to put on an overcoat or hat. They shivered, watching Brent, as he swung his arm at the panorama.

"This is the highest building in the immediate neighborhood. No one was likely to see Sandra being carried up that short ladder. Once she was deposited on this roof she was completely out of sight of the world and safe enough from chance discovery, particularly since her body could be covered with snow."

Brent tramped across the white-laden roof. In one corner, formed by the cornices, there was a deep bank—old, drifted snow upon which the new snow was sprinkling now. It

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had been disturbed. In the midst of it there was a hollow, large and broadly S-shaped. Brent moved his finger through the cold air above it, tracing its outline.

"Here is where Sandra's body lay. She lay on her side. This depression is a sort of side elevation of a sitting posture. Evidently Sandra's body was tetanized by the electric current into that position, which it retained. She lay here in the snow, covered by more snow, unseen, in sub-zero temperatures which froze her corpse actually to the marrow. This greatly slowed or entirely prevented any putrefactive changes which might otherwise have indicated the time of her death. And here she stayed until early in the morning of the eighth."

BRENT and Russo stiffened. Sheldon and Weeks both gazed with cold-stiffened faces at the hollow in the snowbank. Both shuddered. The chief of the homicide squad fixed his spooky gaze on Sheldon's drawn face and kept it there while Brent continued.

"Meanwhile the plan went on, the plan to make it appear that Sandra was not dead, but still alive and merely missing. On the seventh, her second letter to Lora Lorne, with its altered date, was mailed. Next day her purse, purloined from her room, was to be found somewhere. Both these items served to show, falsely, that Sandra had lived beyond her twenty-first birthday. Finally came the unavoidable necessity—Sandra herself must be found dead under suitable circumstances. So the plan built up to its climax.

"Larry's full name and address had been revealed by the letter which Sandra had left on her desk. His apartment was an ideal spot for the discovery of her body. First, however, Larry must be removed from it for a short time in order to clear the way. The fake telegram, signed falsely by the Apex Corporation, accomplished that. Larry was watched and was seen leaving for Chicago. Now everything was set for the crucial move."

Wind sighed across the roof, clouding snow around the men.

"First, a few of Sandra's clothes. An outfit of hers had already been removed from her room and concealed elsewhere in the apartment, in preparation. Our cautious friend then waited for an hour when few people were about—four o'clock on the morning of the eighth. Sandra's clothing was taken down by way of the fire-escape and placed in her car, rolled up or loose, no grip being used. Her car was backed out of the garage. Her body was brought down from the roof and placed in it. Great care was used here. All this was a ticklish business, the crux of the whole scheme, and things might go wrong.

"Things did—they went wrong as hell. For

Sandra's body was not yet carted out of the driveway of this building when an unexpected witness happened along—the milkman, Joe Elfer. Joe must have seen Sandra. Having seen her, he couldn't be permitted to live, not when his testimony might mean the collapse of the plan, the loss of one hundred grand and a stiff jail sentence."

Brent gazed over the parapet at the spot where, he conjectured, the milkman had been slugged to death.

"We already know how Elfer's body was moved farther along his route so that the investigation of his death wouldn't tie up with this address. This move caused a delay, but then the plan went on. Sandra's body was transported to Larry's address on Arch Street. There another unexpected witness appeared, fatally to himself. Philip Platt, having spent some hours in personal pursuits in the apartment above Larry's, emerged from the building just in time to see Sandra's body on its way in. As in Elfer's case, Platt simply could not be permitted to live on after that.

"The exact sequence of events following this point isn't clear or important. Possibly Sandra's body was first taken into Larry's apartment and the stage set there for its discovery. Then Platt's body was dumped at a spot far removed from Arch Street. In the strenuous confusion of moving three corpses about, the murderer wasn't aware that one item of Sandra's clothing, her brassiere, had fallen under Platt in the car and had gone into the gutter with him also." Brent drew a breath of cold air, and spread his hands to Russo. "There it is, Captain. The case of Sandra Sheldon was nobody's crime, you said? There are a dozen crimes involved in it, including two homicides. Let's go down where it's warmer. Also, you may now steer your killer toward a place that'll be warmer still—the hot-seat."

Russo trod through the snow to face Oliver Sheldon. "That's it, then. All this so Sandra's inheritance would pass to you. Sheldon, I place you under arrest for the—"

"Hold it, chum." This from Brent in almost a groan. "Obviously there are no paternal instincts in your make-up. Pape wouldn't make such an error as that, being a conscientious father himself. Look at it! Sandra was this man's daughter. Can you really picture him in the act of lugging her dead, naked body about in such a grisly fashion?"

"Good God!" Sheldon blurted. "Of course I could never bring myself to commit such a horror. I'm revolted at the mere thought that anyone—"

He turned his stricken eyes on Tyler Weeks.

"That's a little more like it," Brent agreed quietly. "Russo, can you believe that Weeks

really slept so soundly while Sandra's body was dragged past his bed and out the window of his room—so very soundly that he heard nothing at all? He's admitted eavesdropping on Sandra's telephone conversations with Larry. That's how he learned about the possibility of the Apex job, of course. Besides, he operates movie projectors with sound systems hooked up to them, electronic devices very similar to Larry's radios, which means he knew how to rig up an authentic looking death scene in Larry's bathroom. To top it off, Captain, if you check Mr. Sheldon's moves, you'll find he was at his office as usual on the morning Sandra disappeared."

Weeks' face was screwed up with bitterness. "He collects nothing directly," Brent said. "But with one hundred thousand bucks in the family, handled jointly by a mild stepfather and a doting mother, a very good part of it is sure to come to him eventually."

Russo advanced upon Weeks like a spectre bringing retribution. "Two murders," he intoned. "Fraud. Illegal transportation of a dead body. Crimes legal and moral. One squat in the hot-seat won't be enough for you to pay—"

Weeks screeched: "Stay away from me!" He spun about, swinging into a run toward the fire-escape. The move precipitated another burst of action on Russo's part. He sprang after Weeks, hooked one bony hand on Weeks' coat collar. There was a brief, flailing tussle, then Weeks was loose again. He flung one leg over the cornice, gripping the top of the fire-escape ladder, and, as he did so, his other foot slipped on the snow. He lurched outward, yelling with fear. His fist on the cold iron ladder was too numb to grasp it strongly. His fingers tore loose. He dropped.

Brent heard his body thump against the platform below. He shrieked again, and then, after a short silent interval, another thud came, far down.

Russo leaned over the parapet and saw Weeks lying inert on a cement pavement thinly layered with new snow. Brent swung himself over, holding the ladder tightly.

"Grab him, Brent," Russo said, turning quickly to follow. "Grab the slimy so-and-so." "I'll leave him to you, chum," Brent said, rapidly descending the ladder. "I think he's just met his mortal deadline. And that reminds

me, I have a deadline of my own to scramble after."

BRENT kept at it under a full head of steam while the big presses waited in the basement of the *Recorder* plant. He hit the keys with speed and zest—and with care to avoid involving Lora Lorne.

As he finished each sheet, Val Randall whisked it to Garrett's desk, and as rapidly as Garrett edited it, the copy boy shot it down the tube to the composing room. The last page, however, was one Brent delivered himself. He slapped it in front of his city editor with a broad grin.

"The whole point here," he said delightedly, "the big, beautiful point so far as we're concerned, is that the girl died before she could act on Lorne's advice one way or the other—which means the old dame's skirts are perfectly clean."

Now it was done. Deeply relieved, Brent felt the same sense of relief pervading the whole city room. Was it possible, he wondered, that others, too, were actually glad Lorne had been saved? The thought that she was genuinely liked and respected by the rest of the staff was enough to make him dizzy. He drifted back into her cubbyhole, sat at her desk, and fondly patted her work-table.

"I hate your grandmotherly guts, Lora," he murmured aloud, "but what would we do without you?"

Automatically, he picked up a letter at random and found himself reading it.

Dear Miss Lorne:

I'm madly in love with a boy my family can't see for dust, but I can't give him up, and I don't want to become estranged from my family either—

Brent read no further. As if stirred by a blowtorch, he fed a sheet of paper into his typewriter. Skipping to the end of the letter to note that this correspondent had signed herself Distressed, he slammed into the keyboard with all the fervor in him.

Dear Distressed:

Love the boy if you must, but whatever else you may do, stay at home!

He went on grimly from there.

READ—THE ISLAND OF CAPTAIN SPARROW

By S. Fowler Wright

★ An uncharted island in a nameless sea . . . a forgotten people's war against the world . . . a man who dared to risk fantastic death for a year's lease on life and love. . . . ★

★ The big April issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* will be on sale February 20th! ★

CHAPTER ONE

Heir in the Air

PINERO PERSHING leaned back in his chair and surveyed the triumph spread out on his burdened desk. He had succeeded in driving a genealogical wedge smack through the middle of a missing generation, under circumstances which might eventually shed some light upon the disappearance of the first Roanoke Colony. It was a *tour de force*, a sockeroo, and a great day in the annals of genealogy. Pinero wondered, therefore, why his achievement gave him no more than a slight ashen taste in his mouth.

He burped tentatively, on the theory that

his odd indifference might be a by-product of indigestion.

"You should say: 'Excuse me,'" an amused feminine voice informed him.

Pinero Pershing jumped and said: "Excuse me!"

He turned around, and jumped again without saying anything. The voice came from a dark-haired girl of amazing good looks and breathtaking contours. But it was not her beauty that made him jump.

The start was a tribute to Pinero's sudden recollection of locking his office door when he had started to work on the Fullbright genealogy. Either the girl was a skilled lock-picker, or else she had walked through an inch of solid oak.

She whirled in panic to see Joe Shade's wide smile.



ONCE UPON A TOMB

By HENRY NORTON

Author of "No Tears for the Lady," etc.



Pinero Pershing couldn't believe that the latest claimant to the Andaluz fortune was a fraud—those blue eyes seemed so clear and candid. Yet the girl had some mighty peculiar friends—and where there's murder and a quarter of a million-dollar inheritance in the same neighborhood, they'll have more than a nodding acquaintance, you can be sure.

She said: "Are you Pinero Pershing?"
Pinero nodded, and she stared at him curiously.

"Well," she said, "I wonder where they got the idea you were such a smart gee. Still with a haircut and a decent necktie—"

It wasn't entirely an unjust criticism. Pinero did not have the type of mind that lent itself to remembering haircuts and shoeshines and getting suits pressed. People looked at his unruly light brown hair and careless clothing and failed to see the breadth of shoulders and slim hardness of body that had made him a handball and weight-lifting champion in college. They looked at his face, seeing the owlish gravity of his huge dark glasses, but failing to see that his light blue eyes were direct and keen, that his jaw had determination in it. He was in short, a pretty good hunk of man who didn't find much time to work at it.

"Who are you?" he asked the girl now. "How did you get into my office? What do you want?"

She crossed the room and sat down across from him in the one chair not overflowing with books and magazines. She regarded him pleas-

antly, and he saw with a spark of sudden interest that her eyes were a deep blue, despite the darkness of her hair and skin.

"I'm Nancy Gold," she told him. "I've got a little chore for you, Pinero. Some important dough."

He frowned over that for a while, and since it refused to break down and make sense, he went back to the other part of his question. "How did you get in?"

She laughed at him. "Let's not be nosy, bud," she advised, but she let him have a flashing glimpse of something in her hand that looked like a nail file. "Doors were meant to open," she said. "Never trust a two-bit lock."

PINERO looked shocked.

Slowly, he said: "What's that about a chore?"

She said: "Ever hear of the Fullbrights?"
Pinero Pershing jumped again. Heard of the Fullbrights? He had their family tree spread out on his desk for three hundred years back, including the family link to English ancestry before the oldest Fullbright boy had come over to Virginia. Heard of them? He

knew things about the Fullbright family that a Fullbright would hate to admit. But he knew things, too, that a Fullbright or his descendants would be happy to learn. Such as the direct connection to the Andaluz family and its fortune.

He tightened his lips. "Yes."

"We'd heard you might," she said with satisfaction, and then asked suddenly: "Haven't you got a nickname?"

"No."

"People just call you Pinero?"

"Or Mr. Pershing."

She grinned at the reproof in his words and said carelessly: "Well, if Pinero's all you've got, Pinero it is."

"It's a good enough name," he said defensively. "One of my ancestors was a famous dramatist. He wrote *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*."

Nancy Gold asked, "Did she answer?" and then: "Sorry, Pinero, that wasn't up to standard. I guess I've got too much Fullbright on my mind to be full bright myself."

"What about the Fullbrights?"

She leaned forward. "I want you to prove that I'm a lineal descendant of the family."

Pinero got interested. "Are you?"

"Am I?" she said.

He thought a moment. "No, I don't see how you could be, as far as I've traced the family. James Fullbright was an only child. He married Nancy Andaluz and they had four children. All four of those families have now come to a termination. Two were childless, and one family was wiped out in a hotel fire."

"Now you see," said Nancy Gold.

"See what?"

"Why I came to you for help," she said simply. "Pinero, there's a quarter of a million-dollar inheritance just begging for the descendant of James Fullbright to come along and claim it. You prove I'm the right gal, and you can have fifty thousand smackeroos."

Pinero sat and stared at this fascinating wench. Not only had she just offered him more money than he had ever seen in one lump sum, but she was admittedly a thief and a cheat. In addition, she was something of a burglar, or else his front door needed fixing.

"You don't make sense, Miss Gold," he said. "If I could chart your lineage to prove that you are a descendant of James Fullbright, it would require corroboration, in the form of birth records, family Bibles, affidavits, or some other evidence. My word"—he hesitated a moment and then amended—"even my word wouldn't be enough."

"But that's it, Pinero!" she said. "You know what's needed, and that's why we love you. We'll put the evidence right where you tell us to."

Slowly and gravely, Pinero Pershing said:

"You mean fabricate a record that would stand as legal evidence?"

"You're catching on!" she told him.

"The answer is no!"

She shook her dark curls at him. "The answer is yes, mister," she said. "You're the only man in your racket with enough front to pull this off. We've got to have you, so the answer has got to be yes."

"You'll excuse me," he said.

"For fifty grand, Pinero," said Nancy Gold.

"Still no," he told her.

She sighed. "Get your hat, bub," she said.

PINERO blinked at her, doubting his own sanity. Over the edge of the desk peeped a tunnel-sized black mouth, built to accommodate a .38-caliber bullet. In Nancy Gold's small hands the gun looked big, but not awkward. She jerked her head toward the door.

Pinero Pershing got up and backed toward the clothes tree in the corner of the room. He gazed in fascination at the blue-steel snout of the gun, but his lips went on talking as if independently managed.

"You're making a grave mistake, Miss Gold, trying to intimidate me. Believe me, this business of pointing a gun at a person is no way to make him cooperate. If you think I'm going with you, you're mistaken."

His treacherous hands betrayed him by settling his hat on his head, nullifying whatever bravery there was in his words. He reached for his topcoat.

Nancy grinned. "You're wonderful!"

She came a few steps around the corner of the desk, and Pinero Pershing brought his coat sailing up like a matador's cape. It settled over Nancy's head and shoulders. She gave one half-stifled squeal as Pinero grabbed her. He took the gun from her hand, wrapped the coat more snugly around her arms, and pushed her roughly into a chair.

"Behave," he told her, "or I'll spank you."

She looked at him, and the dominant expression in her eyes was not anger or disappointment, but approval. She looked—it sounded silly—as if she were actually glad Pinero had taken the upper hand.

"You're O.K.," she said. "You've got more on the ball than I thought, Pinero. We're going to get along just fine."

He said: "First let's see how you get along with the police."

He reached toward the phone, and stopped because she made no effort to interfere. She sat quietly, not even trying to free her arms. Her eyes were twinkling. She grinned at his hesitation.

"Go ahead and call them," she said, "if you want to get laughed at."

Stiffly, Pinero said: "I see nothing humorous about being held up in my own office."

"With a busted gun," said Nancy. "A gun that wouldn't shoot even if it was loaded."

He picked up the revolver and thumbed back the hammer. The firing pin had been removed. He let the cylinder swing open. Every compartment was empty. He laid the gun on his desk and looked at her crossly.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

She smiled and pulled the coat away from her arms, settling herself comfortably in the chair. "Now you're beginning to act sensibly," she said. "I still think we can do some business together."

She pointed a capable forefinger at him and asked abruptly: "What do you know about Merita Fullbright?"

Pinero blinked, but he answered readily enough. "She was the fourth child of James Fullbright and Nancy Andaluz. She was born in Virginia in 1853. She disappeared when she was ten years old, while the family was heading West to escape the Civil War. It's believed she was killed."

"Suppose she wasn't?" Nancy said. "Suppose she was picked up by a refugee family and brought to this very town. Suppose she grew up and married a man named Conroy, had a daughter named Merita Conroy who married a man named Simon Gold who now has a grown granddaughter named Nancy Merita Gold?"

Pinero stared at her. "In that case," he said slowly, "Nancy Merita Gold would be the heir to the Andaluz fortune of about a quarter million dollars. If she could prove that relationship!"

Nancy Gold nodded. "That's where you come in."

Pinero Pershing got up and paced back and forth across the room. He turned and scowled at the blue-eyed girl who sat with her head tilted to one side, eyeing him demurely.

He was indignant, even outraged, but some fraction of his mind told him that he was more alert and stimulated than he had been for months. The taste of ashes was gone from his mouth. He felt alive, keen, capable. He suspected, fleetingly, that his brief tussle with the girl had done it. Resolutely, he shut his mind to the remembered softness of her arms and the scent of her shadow-black hair.

"THIS is a criminal thing," he said.

"It's nothing of the kind," she said with decision. "You know perfectly well there are no other living heirs to the Andaluz money. It would simply go to the state, the way things are, and what's the sense of that? Why not let somebody have it who can get some good out of it, instead of spending it for highways and jails and stuff like that?"

"It's a case of what's right," he told her.

She looked at him soberly. "How do you

know I'm not telling the truth about Nancy Merita Gold?"

"If you were," he said, "you could prove it."

"I can prove some of it," Nancy said. "You'll find my birth certificate in my purse there, along with my father's, and my grandfather's and Merita Conroy's marriage license."

He shook his head. "The important step is to prove that Merita Fullbright was brought here—that she married Conroy and had children. Anything else depends on that one first step."

Suddenly she smiled again. "We're right back where we started," she said. "You're a genealogist, right? The best in the business?"

"I have some standing," he said cautiously.

"You're an expert on the Fullbright family?"

"The estate is being administered by the First State Bank," he explained. "Mr. Walker, the vice-president and trust officer, hired me to trace all possible lines of succession, so that they could dispose of the property on the death of Harriet Andaluz."

She pounced on that.

"Then the bank wouldn't object if you did find an heir? All they're looking for is a chance to get rid of the dough?"

Thoughtfully, he said: "I suppose that's right. However, the state would have a natural interest. They'd be inclined to look very carefully at any last-minute representations of inheritance."

"These representations," she said. "Suppose you found a tombstone for Merita Fullbright Conroy, bearing dates on it in accordance with the possibility of her having come to this town?"

"Pretty feeble evidence."

"Pretty feeble if I brought it in, yes," she said. "But suppose you found one—you, the bank-retained expert? Wouldn't that do it?"

Pinero's lips tightened. "So that's it?"

"Could be," the girl said carelessly.

He picked up the gun and peered curiously down the muzzle. It was bright and clean—the rifling in the barrel was sharp and new. It was too good a gun to have a broken firing pin.

"Who's with you in this?" he asked. "You mentioned some other parties when you first came in. Not by name—you just referred to them. Who are they?"

A spark of dark hatred showed in her eyes. Pinero realized suddenly that the girl was more than a little afraid, in spite of her nonchalant air. He felt a swift answering anger for whoever it was had frightened her.

"We'll get to that," she said.

He shook his head. "Now."

Impatience crossed her face. "There're

more important things to do," she said. "That tombstone's being cut now by a little guy named Kohler, over on East Carruthers Street. If you want to play, we'd better go out and check to see it's being done right."

"What makes you think I'm going to—play?"

"Don't kid me," the girl said airily.

Pinero considered. It was a well-made plot, but it was pegged squarely on his cooperation. It broke down completely otherwise. He felt a momentary flush of importance. He, Pinero Pershing, was the dominant figure in a plot of colossal proportions, a scheme to mulct the state of a quarter of a million dollars. His actions could either crown the scheme with success or doom it to failure. He was a romantic figure! Just like an Oppenheim hero!

He made his decision on the strength of that. He'd string them along, give them enough rope, and get such evidence as he needed. Then let them go to prison! Blue-eyed brunette and all! Hadn't she picked his lock? Hadn't she pointed a gun at him—even if it was a harmless one? Wasn't she up to her lovely ears in a criminal plot?

"All right," he said. "Let's go pay a visit to the head chiseler."

"First the tombstone—" She stopped and grinned. "Pinero," she said, "there's hope for you!"

CHAPTER TWO

Sanguinary Scrawl

SHE HAD a small, modest-looking car outside, the sort that would belong to a person of average means. She inserted it deftly into the traffic, and came in not too long a time to East Carruthers Street. A short run down that decaying avenue of repair shops, gas stations and small grocery stores, and they stopped in front of a sign that said, *Monumental Works*.

She said in a worried voice: "We were supposed to be here an hour ago, but you were so hard to convince. I hope he hasn't given us up and gone to work on the stone."

"Would he know what to put on it?"

She answered him as they crossed the sidewalk to the little building. "He could probably get it from—one of the others, but I wanted you to check on it to make sure. It takes a while to cut one of these stones, and then he has to sandblast this one to give it the proper look of age, so it'll seem to be authentic."

"Not missing any bets, are you?"

"For that much money?"

She pushed the little door open and they went inside. The lights were turned off, and in the murky dimness Pinero got the feeling that he was standing in a small stone forest.

All around him were marble and granite blocks. Some were shaped and chiseled, but many were only roughly rectangular, waiting for orders before they were smoothed and polished. At one side three stones were ready for delivery, names and dates already cut in place. The one they sought was not among them.

"Probably in the workshop," said Nancy.

She stepped around a barricade formed by a group of unworked slabs, and recoiled. She looked in horror to Pinero Pershing, said: "I'm going to be sick."

She was, then and there, among the last poor tributes to man's mortality. Pinero went past her then, to see the man on the floor.

The little guy named Kohler had had his skull beaten in with a rubber-mounted mallet he had used in his work. It had been a thorough and not at all neat job. The little man would accomplish no more monumental works. He lay crumpled close to one of his own headstones, and the killer had used Kohler's own blood to scrawl a mocking *R. I. P.* on the stone above his head.

It was that sanguinary scrawl that got Pinero—the unmistakable evidence that here was a killer who enjoyed killing, who had found in bloody murder the occasion for grim jest. For such a one there could be no mercy. Pinero promised himself there would be none.

He said: "Your friends play rough, Miss Gold."

Nancy said in a strangled, muted voice: "No, please. It can't be that. They wouldn't—"

"Don't be a fool!" he said roughly. "Who else would it be? You're mixed up in a dangerous game! You get your quarter million, or you go to jail for trying! This little man was useful in part of the scheme, but he was no good when his job was done. So they paid him off this way. Probably the way you're planning to pay me off when you've got what you want from me!"

She said, "No!" again, but she was talking as much to herself as to Pinero. Something was gone from her—the brisk assurance with which she had come into Pinero's office a scant sixty minutes before. She was a frightened girl now, frightened as someone might be who has opened an innocent appearing door to find stark horror hidden there.

"You'd better tell me the whole thing, straight," said Pinero Pershing. "Who's in this with you? Who killed the little man here?"

"You actually—think I knew he was going to be murdered? You think that of me?"

"I don't think anything," he told her impatiently. "I simply want to know what kind of a free-for-all you've dragged me into, that's all. I want to know the names of your associates, so I can report them to the police."

She said, "But you know—" and then covered her lips with her hand. Her eyes were bright and thoughtful. Slowly she shook her head.

"We're making a big mistake here," she said. "If we jump to conclusions we're going to run into something we can't handle."

He gestured. "Can we handle—this?"

Her "Shut up and listen!" had a trace of her old assurance. She took Pinero's arm and led him toward the front of the shop, thus placing an effective barrier of granite between them and the disturbing sight of the murdered man.

"Now," she said. "The people I'm working with—well, they couldn't have done it, Pinero. They expected me to meet them here. Would they have left a corpse here, knowing I'd find it? And if they can afford to give you fifty grand and me fifty grand, couldn't they have afforded to pay this man in cash instead of blood?"

Thoughtfully, Pinero said: "Not very convincing, in view of what we saw on the floor."

"That could have been done by a prowler, an ordinary burglar," she cried impatiently, "far more easily than it could have been—" Again she stopped, as if alarmed at how close she had come to mentioning names.

"So you're not going to tell me?"

"Not until I know more about it," said Nancy Gold. "For instance, the stone was supposed to be ready for them to take this afternoon. It isn't on the workbench, and what's more there's no sandblaster in the shop, so it couldn't have been finished. Do you think they'd kill him while he was still useful, if at all?"

PINERO PERSHING'S mind was something better than average. For one thing, it was semantically alert—he got as much information from the way things were said as he did from the things themselves.

He gathered from the girl's speech now that she was none too sure her associates had not committed the murder. He learned further that she had no previous knowledge of any such plan. And he assumed, from certain minor indications, that the men connected with her were playing some sort of a double game. At least, that looked like a safe conclusion in that their plans could accommodate murder and hers could not.

That they were implicated in the murder he had not the slightest doubt. Any other answer would pull the long arm of coincidence out of joint at the shoulder. Where there was a murder and a quarter million-dollar plot in the same general neighborhood, they'd have more than a mere nodding acquaintance—that was sure.

Properly now, his move was to call the

police. They could learn from Nancy Gold who the men were in the plot with her. Pinero had heard that the police were expert in persuading the reluctant to give voice. It was what she deserved—it was what he should do. But he was not going to do it.

It was an unreasonable decision to make. Always in the past Pinero Pershing had trusted his mind to decide things. It had worked very well, and he had no reason to change that policy now. But here he was, allowing his untrained and untrustworthy emotions to step in and dictate. He was going to give Nancy Gold a little more leeway, because he could not bear the thought of that tender flesh roughly held by the law, of that impish grin limned in the white glare of police interrogation.

He sighed. It was undoubtedly the wrong thing to do. He was laying himself wide open to serious consequences. The police would not approve. And there was a good chance that he might be marked next for murder himself. He sighed again, unhappily. Well, now that he was determined to make a fool of himself, he might as well do it just as cleverly as possible.

"I suppose you're right," he said. "It was something of a shock finding the man dead, but I don't see how your friends could've been mixed up in it."

She looked at him approvingly. "Attaboy," she said. "Now, here's an angle, the reason I told you we'd better go slow. It may be another faction has moved on the scene."

His surprise was not feigned. "Another?"

"Sure. Where does the money go, if not to an heir?"

"Why, to the state gov—" He stared at her. "You're not trying to tell me the state would hire a killer to get for it what it was legally entitled to? Now that's ridiculous!"

"Oh, I don't know. Look, Shade had to go to the State Referee's office to get the preliminary information about this inheritance. Surely you know it's the Referee's department which handles such estates—in fact, is supported solely by its entail and executorship fees? And in your work, you surely know who the State Referee is?"

His eyes widened. He did know the State Referee. The man was Jason Fitch, a grasping, conniving rascal who used his appointed post as a means of self-enrichment, and who had badgered Pinero many times in the past on matters of genealogy and inheritance. The girl had a point there, undeniably. If Jason Fitch scented an estate of a quarter million to be handled in his office, he would move high heaven if necessary to get his hands on it. And a generous share would stick to those hands, too.

Reluctantly, Pinero said: "I know him."

"Well, then! Suppose from the questions that were asked Jason Fitch got wind of our plan. He sees that it has a possible chance to succeed, to take the Andaluz money out of his fingers. Do you think he'd stop at murder to keep that from happening?"

"Why wouldn't he just call the Attorney General and have the whole bunch of you thrown in jail?"

She bit thoughtfully at the side of her thumb. "There might be a number of reasons," she mumbled. "Maybe he didn't think he had enough evidence to indict or to stop us. Maybe he didn't want the Attorney General to know too much about the inheritance, so Fitch would have a better chance to plunder it himself."

Pinero looked doubtful. "Show me how Kohler's death could help Jason Fitch, and I'll admit you've got an argument."

"Kohler and you were the key figures in our plan," Nancy told him frankly. "It'd take your reputation to make the discovery of Merita Fullbright's headstone stand up as acceptable evidence. But Kohler was a wizard on such things as the type of stone to use, the amount of weathering and stain to apply, where the stone would most likely be found—all that. His family have been stone-cutters here for three generations. He knew everything about tombstones."

PINERO PERSHING found himself wanting very much to believe her. Knowing Jason Fitch helped—he could believe anything of that oily crook, including murder. And Kohler's death would be the logical place for Fitch to strike to break the whole scheme apart. They couldn't go ahead without Kohler. In spite of the grimness of his surroundings, Pinero felt his spirits lighten. He set his muscles in the shape of a smile, and found it easy to maintain.

"It's good enough," he said.

"I thought so," said Nancy Gold. He saw then how white and drawn her face was. The hand she put on his arm trembled the least bit through the neat blue serge of his sleeve.

"I'll brief you on the rest of it," she said. "A man named Shade came to see me. Joe Shade—he's a local gambler. I was a little surprised that he knew so much about law and estates and all that. He'd got my name from the county records as a logical person to assume the role of inheritor. He offered me fifty thousand dollars if I'd line you up, and put in the claim."

She stopped, seeming to grope for some way to make the telling more easy. Pinero Pershing said encouragingly: "That's a lot of money."

"You're telling me?" she said. "Mister, I've made my own way in life since my aunt

died when I was fourteen. That much money would be the difference between rayons and nylons, between being pawed by some cheap cigar-smoking boss and being able to have a little dress shop of my own. The difference between heaven and hell. So I told Shade I'd do it. He said it wasn't crooked—we had as much right to the money as Jason Fitch, he said."

She paused and pushed the black hair away from her brow in an unconsciously dramatic gesture. Pinero felt a warming wave of tenderness for this brave girl, facing life and the future alone and unaided. In a way, it was too bad the plan had fallen through.

"Then I began to worry," she went on. "He gave me the gun, in case I had trouble with you. He showed me how to open doors with a nail file." She looked up with a little flash of interest. "Do you know that most combination locks can be sprung with a nail file?"

"It seems incredible," Pinero said.

"They can," she assured him. "Anyway, all this gun and lock-breaking stuff made me think things weren't as clean as they should be. But I decided to go a little further, anyway. And now—this."

"I know," Pinero said tenderly. "We'd better get out of here. As a matter of fact, we should never have come here, you delightful dope. Now would it look having me discover an important tombstone right after paying a call to a stone cutter—even a live stone-cutter?"

"Golly, that's right," said Nancy Gold. "How come you didn't think of that before we came here, Pinero?"

"At the time we came here," said Pinero precisely, "I had no intention of entering your plans."

"But you said—" She looked at him doubtfully. She seemed to wonder for the first time what might lie concealed beneath Pershing's guileless exterior.

"Come on," he urged. "It's all over now."

She hung back then, suddenly.

"That stone!" she said. "I've got to be sure it isn't here! If the police came here and found it, they'd have the evidence they need to put us in jail."

Pinero said: "What do you think they'd do if they came here and found us with a body on the floor?"

"I know, but I've got to be sure!"

She took a step away from him, then turned and held out her hand. "You're right," she said. "You've got to get out of here. But I'll have to make sure first. You take my car keys, and wait outside. If anybody comes, go on over to your office and wait. I won't be long."

He went out and sat in the little car for

fifteen minutes, while dusk made quick inroads on the light of day. Then a police car made a two-wheeled turn a couple of blocks away and came belting down the street to draw up at the Monumental Works. Quietly, Pinero kicked the motor to life and drove away. He wondered angrily why she had taken so long, and when he would see her. He thought it probable he would see her next in jail.

It did not occur to him that even tombstone shops have back doors.

NANCY GOLD watched Pinero's straight, blue-clad back go out the front door with an uneasiness she refused to admit. She made her reluctant feet carry her past the body of the slain stone-cutter. She went to all of the work pedestals in turn, but could not find the tombstone of Merita Fullbright. The shop had not been swept—stone litter and dirt lay thick about the working planes. Yet nowhere did she find any trace of the working of a sandblaster. Reluctantly, she concluded that the stone must not have been finished, that the dream was over.

A quiet voice said: "You're late."

She whirled in panic to see Joe Shade's wide smile. The big man stood in the small rear door, in the hall that housed Kohler's brooms and irons and served as a rear entryway into the shop. Shade's hat was low over his eyes, his hands were thrust deep into the patch pockets of his light coat.

"Late?" Her voice rose hysterically. "Look!"

He nodded, looking at the dead man in calm appraisal. Indifferently, he said: "Lucky he got our job done last night. We've moved the stone out to the old burying ground where it'll be 'discovered.' That is, if you've done your part."

She nodded, her eyes searching his impassive face. Her thought was a great, silent shout in her mind. If the stone were finished, there would be no barrier left to keep Shade from being the killer!

Shade said sharply: "You line up Pershing?"

"Yes."

Something in her voice betrayed her. He came to her and caught her wrist in a gloved hand, holding it in front of him, his eyes burning into her face.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "What did you tell him? What does he know? There's something wrong—what is it?"

She said: "He came here. He saw Kohler, and he thought you'd—we'd done it."

"Did you tell him about me?"

Composedly, she lied: "I didn't tell him your name, but I told him I was working with other parties. As a matter of fact, I convinced him you had nothing to do with Koh-

ler's death. Let go of me—you're hurting my arm."

Shade grinned and released her.

She said: "Now you convince me."

The man's heavy face took on a slightly shocked expression. "My dear girl," he said unctuously, "did you think for a minute I was involved in this ghastly deed? Remember, we paid Kohler for his work last night—a considerable sum of money. Unused to wealth, he doubtless showed it somewhere unwisely, and this is the result."

"Robbery, you mean?"

"I daresay you'll find no money on him."

"I daresay," she echoed dryly. "Well, if the tombstone is all done and safely out of here, I'm going to leave before somebody comes in and finds the body. I don't want to be involved any more than I am."

His glance went past her suddenly to the window and he said sharply: "Quick, out the back way. There's a car stopping in front."

Nancy Gold moved with unthinking haste ahead of him. She snatched at the back door knob, jerked the door open, and stepped into the alley. Shade followed her, closing the door gently.

"My car's across the block," he said.

They cut through a weed-grown area, grateful for the gathering darkness. There was no sound of pursuit behind them, and within a few minutes they were in Joe Shade's big, old-fashioned car, safely merged with the evening traffic.

Nancy said: "I hope Pinero had sense enough to drive away when he saw that car pull up."

The car jumped convulsively and Shade swiveled his head to glare at her. He went on driving then, with a disturbed look on his genial face.

After a little while he said in a very casual tone of voice: "What sort of character did you find this Pinero Pershing to be, Miss Gold? I've heard he's an odd one, like something you might find hanging to the top limb of some family tree."

"Don't sell the guy short," Nancy Gold warned. "He's a funny little guy, all right, but he does O.K. in the clutch. When we stumbled across Kohler there in the shop, I heaved Jonah, but this Pinero Pershing didn't even turn a hair."

"Did he prowl around any? Pick up stuff, look for clues or anything like that?"

She thought about that at some length, said finally: "I can't remember everything he did. But I don't think he touched anything. He just looked."

"What did he see?"

"There was no sandblaster."

Shade chuckled. "Little bright-eyes, isn't he? There was a sandblaster, but it was bor-

rowed and we took it back last night when we got the stone. Make a point of telling your young man that, will you?"

"All right," she said. Then, suddenly cold inside at the thought of how much she was dependent on this great hulk of a man, she said: "What next, Mr. Shade?"

Shade chuckled again. "We go ahead with our plans," he said. He glanced at her, then shifted his eyes back to the job of driving. "We go right ahead, Miss Gold. The tombstone is in place at Old Hill Cemetery. If your young man hasn't been picked up by the police in front of the shop, you can take him out there tomorrow and make the discovery. He'll know what to do from then on."

"Don't call him 'my young man,'" she said. "He isn't. And when does he get paid off?"

"When the rest of us do," said Shade.

"Why not right away?" Nancy argued. "You paid off Kohler as soon as his job was done, didn't you?"

"We did indeed," the big man said imper turbably. "And just possibly we can arrange to take care of Pinero Pershing, too. If you think there's any chance he might grow impatient, we can settle with him right away."

The words could mean much or little, but the tone was not at all reassuring. Suddenly Nancy Gold felt small and tired and frightened, and she wished with all her heart she hadn't been home the day big Joe Shade had come to call on her.

Huskily, she said: "No funny business, Shade, or I'll quit you cold. I'll blow this whole thing higher than Hiroshima. I mean that."

Politely, Shade said: "I'm sure you do."

CHAPTER THREE

Once Upon a Tomb

PINERO PERSHING drove back to his office. He parked the little car in a loading zone, got out, pulled his hat down over his eyes and strode blindly into the building. In passing he failed to speak to several acquaintances, so engrossed was he with his thoughts. He even failed to see the man in his office until the man spoke.

"Well, sir, you seem to have something on your mind."

Pinero said: "Good evening, Mr. Fitch." His head jerked up sharply in a perfect double-take. "Jason Fitch! What do you want?"

Jason Fitch was not a large man, but he looked large because the sloping planes of his shoulders and his torso blended into a compact, powerful frame, held squarely on massive legs. His face was pale, like a shark's belly. Sharklike also was the turn of his mouth and the uneven sharpness of his promi-

nent teeth. The smile he now turned on Pinero Pershing looked like the prelude to a bite.

"You have something on your mind," he repeated. "It wouldn't be a plot to defraud the state of a quarter of a million dollars, would it?"

Pinero stared at him.

"I know a great deal more than you think," said Jason Fitch. "I know all about your scheme to take over the Andaluz inheritance, Mr. Pershing. It could have come from no other mind than yours, sir, and I propose to see that it is brought to the attention of the courts."

He paused and coughed a small, suggestive cough.

"Unless, of course, you can offer me some reason why I shouldn't interfere."

Pinero said: "I don't get this."

"I think you do," said Jason Fitch. "Your man Joe Shade may be a smooth operator in his own field, but in this case he left a very clear trail to follow."

Shade. That was the name Nancy had mentioned. A tiny warning rang in Pinero's brain.

"You're at liberty to follow any trail you want," Pershing said stiffly, "including the one that leads out the door of this office."

"It leads to the police station," Fitch said.

Pinero Pershing laughed nastily.

"I never heard of anyone being arrested for what somebody else thinks about him," he said.

Jason Fitch stood up and thrust out a plump hand in what was meant to be a persuasive gesture. "Look now, Pershing," he said, "I'm not an unreasonable man. I know you're up to something on the Andaluz money, and I can conceive of circumstances in which I would be content to say nothing and allow you to proceed."

Pinero said: "You don't make sense!"

"Don't try to bluff me," said Jason Fitch strongly. "Shade gave himself away a dozen times. He asked directly about the Fullbright family, instead of doing it in a roundabout way. He insisted on learning their connection with the Andaluz strain, so that a blind man would have recognized his purpose. And whatever I am, Mr. Pershing, I am not blind."

Something wrong there, Pinero thought suddenly. The entire plan was too shrewdly conceived to admit of such stupid blundering at the outset. A thrill of discovery went over Pinero. It had been bungled purposely, he decided. There was a double game being played, and Jason Fitch had been alerted into the game to serve some deep purpose. A dupe, a pawn in the play. Or a master player!

Pinero said: "I don't know any Joe Shade."

Fitch scowled at Pinero. "Maybe you don't at that," he said slowly. "But it doesn't mat-

ter. You've got some contact. You know what's going on, even if it isn't your plan. Who's the girl? Where did she come from in the first place?"

"I'm getting a little tired of this," Pinero said. "Mr. Walker of the First State Bank hired me to run down the genealogy of the Fullbright family, so the bank could dispose of an estate. Your allusions to a plot are not only insulting, they're criminal libel as well."

Jason Fitch smiled his sharp, unkind smile. "So you're going to play it that way," he said. "I hope you have something ready to tell the authorities if they want to know about a murder on East Carruthers Street, Mr. Pershing."

He went to the door, turned back, and grinned his amusement at the surprise and shock that had found their way to Pinero's face.

"I think you'll find me useful," he said. "You know where to call me when you make up your mind."

He went out without waiting for an answer, which was just as well since Pinero had no answer to make. The small, puzzled-looking genealogist in the blue serge suit sat and stared at the closed door while his mind went racing round and round like a squirrel in a cage. He wanted nothing so much now as to call the police, but he knew that the time was past for that. He was too deeply committed to make an outcry now. The law would want to know why he hadn't reported the body on East Carruthers Street. He couldn't very well tell them he was trying to spare the feelings of a dark-haired, blue-eyed girl.

He looked at the neat pile of genealogical tables on his desk—the precise lineage of the Fullbrights. What a mess they'd led him into!

He picked up a yellowed clipping from the *Beeman County Courier*, an item taken from the files of 1863. In the florid journalism of the day the story was told of Merita Fullbright's disappearance. The ten-year-old girl had wandered away from the family wagon during a stop on the road to Nebraska. There had been roving troops in the neighborhood, lawless and predatory. Dark things had been thought, but nothing could be proved, and the grieving family had gone on in about a week, away from the war, leaving the memory of a missing blue-eyed little girl.

Pinero held the clipping thoughtfully, seeming to see for a moment the long-gone scene on the road westward. The confusion of the search, the distracted parents, and the little one herself—perhaps wandering down some path to the river, perhaps lying white and still across some brutal soldier's saddle-bow. So real was it to him that when his door again creaked open he looked up to know a moment's confusion.

He said: "Merita!"

SHE ran across the room to him and threw herself into his arms. Tears had stained her cheeks, and were still flowing, accompanied by racking sobs that shook her entire body in gusty spasms of grief.

"Pinero, it's a hell of a mess," she sobbed.

Pinero's arms went around her awkwardly. His hands felt strange and inept, yet marveled at the firmness of her shoulders. He held her, quietly, for a long moment before he spoke.

Hoarsely, he said: "It'll be all right."

Nancy shivered in his arms and turned up a woe-begone countenance, puckered like the face of a crying child. "He's going to send me to jail for killing Kohler," she said. "When the police car came, I opened the back door, and now he says he'll tell the police to compare my fingerprints with the ones on the back door. He says he'll do it if I don't—"

"If you don't what?"

"If I don't go ahead and claim the money. Oh, Pinero, I tried to quit when I saw how bad it was getting. But he says he'll frame me for the murder if I try to pull out now. I don't know what to do!"

Pinero thought rapidly. "Did Shade touch anything while he was at Kohler's shop?"

"He had on gloves—it wouldn't've made any difference. And he says the stone was finished last night, so there's every reason for him to have killed—"

"The tombstone was finished?"

"It's out there now," she said. "They put it out there last night, Shade says, and they want us to go out tomorrow and make the identification."

A keen excitement was beginning to grow within Pershing now. Isolated incidents, meaning nothing individually, but adding up to something tremendous were beginning to make themselves important and plain.

He said: "But the sandblaster—"

"They took it away last night," said Nancy Gold, her face muffed close to Pinero's second vest button. "Pinero, I'm afraid of them. From the way Shade talked I think he means to kill you, too, as soon as you do what he wants about the tombstone. From what he said—"

"Don't worry," Pinero said briskly. "Shade isn't going to kill anybody. Now where do we find this tombstone I'm supposed to report?"

Her head came back sharply.

"You're going ahead with it, in spite of what he threatened me with? In spite of the danger to yourself?"

He searched his memory for a phrase she had used, back in those almost forgotten days before murder and danger had been brought into it.

"For that much money?" he said.

Her arms thrust him away.

She drove sullenly, weaving the little car through traffic as though defying the gods to add any more to her misfortunes. She didn't speak to Pinero, nor did she look in his direction. Pinero Pershing didn't feel like talking either. He sat in a corner of the seat, holding a clumsy gasoline lantern in his lap. Occasionally he rubbed mist from the car window to peer out into the darkness as they left the little town and climbed the winding grade toward Old Hill Cemetery.

It was a desolate drive. The way led through logged-off land, past fields thickly dotted with black ghosts of burned stumps, and high now with the coarse tan of brake fern. There was a fine mist, loading the air with impalpable moisture, filming the windshield. The houses were scattered. Only an occasional square of yellow light flashed by them as they traveled through the night.

After something more than a half hour of driving, Nancy Gold turned off the highway and sent the car climbing steeply under a rough, unpainted wooden arch that had *Old Hill Pioneer Cemetery* painted in fading letters across the top. The road curved then through weedy hummocks, with scattered grave markers palely against the lights. At the far side of the cemetery she stopped the car, leaving the lights on to lay a wet white patch ahead of them.

Pinero lighted his lantern, waiting until the mantle incandescenced to shed a hard bright circle of radiance. He got out of the car then and waited.

She took her time about following, still sullen and silent. She jabbed a thumb toward one corner, and set off through the knee-high grass without a word. Pinero followed, holding the lantern high to light her way.

Reluctantly, she said: "About here."

Pinero said: "Thank you." He began a methodical examination of the headstones in the vicinity, and soon came to one that stood gaunt and plain, with the tall grass around it trampled down. The stone was dark with age, the ground unbroken. He set his lantern close by and read the inscription on the cold surface of the stone.

"Merita Fullbright Conroy," he read aloud. "Born 1853, died 1875. In loving memory of one whose passing dimmed the shining sun. So fair she was and full of grace, the angels smiled to see her face. R. I. P."

Sharply, Nancy said: "It isn't funny!"

"I didn't say it was," Pinero said gently.

He stayed there a while on his knees. Once he took a knife from his pocket and scraped into the deep crevices of the lettering. He patted the earth around the stone. When he stood up finally, brushing his knees, his face wore an expression of solemn excitement.

He said: "We'd better look around."

One by one he examined the surrounding headstones. He bent down the tall grasses that had grown up around them, flashing his light on the dim carving of their surfaces. Once he took a notebook from his pocket and copied an inscription. Finally he was done. He turned back to Nancy Gold, to find her huddled, shivering, by Merita Conroy's tombstone.

"It's O.K.," he said. "We can go now."

His voice was muffled and angry. "Why did you have to do it?" she said. "I was ready to quit them, if you'd have the guts to back me up. But you wanted the money—you had to go along with them. I tell you, you're putting your neck in a noose, and mine, too! They'll—"

"Oh, shut up!" he told her sharply. "I wonder what your great grandmother would think of you, leaning on her tombstone and bawling like a baby."

SHE raised tear-bright eyes to stare at him, her grief and anger vanishing under the impact of quick realization. She gave one final hiccough and pushed the hair back from her forehead.

"What did you say? My great—"

"Did you think it was just an accident, Shade picking you out of a whole cityful of people to lay claim to that money?" Pinero asked acidly. "I've suspected all along you might have more than a fraudulent claim to the Andaluz money. Now I'm sure of it."

"You mean all that was true about Merita Fullbright being brought to—about her marrying my great-grandfather?"

"That stone hasn't been taken from the earth in a decade, probably not since the grave was dug," Pinero told her. "It's got soil stains on it that couldn't be counterfeited. It's got old moss growing in the cutting marks. It's no fake—it's the real thing!"

"Then—then . . ."

"Then you actually have a claim to the Andaluz money," he told her. "And that's probably why they killed Kohler—so he couldn't tell you. He's been in business here a long time—his father may have cut this very stone. If he happened to mention it to them, they'd kill him before he could tell you. Otherwise you wouldn't take just a share of the money. You'd take it all."

"They were going to split it five ways, they said," Nancy mused thoughtfully. "I was to get fifty thousand."

"Generous with your money, weren't they?"

Her eyes were shining now, but not with tears. "You mean I'll actually get a quarter of a million dollars? Say it again! Pinero, am I rich?"

He said sourly: "You're rich, and Shade's got you framed for murder. What're you

going to do with your new-found wealth, bribe a turnkey?"

"Oh, Lord," she said, and all her gaiety fell from her like Cinderella's trappings at midnight. She looked at him pitifully.

"But I didn't, Pinero!" she said. "I didn't kill the little guy. You know that! Can't you prove an alibi for me, or something? Surely they can't put me in jail for something I didn't do!"

"You'd be surprised what they can put you in jail for these days," he said. "As far as my testifying in your behalf, think about this. If the bank found out you and I had paid a visit to a monument maker, how far do you think my story would go about the authenticity of this stone, even if it is true? How close do you think you'd ever get to collecting your quarter of a million?"

"But you said it was legally mine!" she pointed out.

"It still has to be proved," he reminded her. "Let the tiniest smell of collusion between you and me enter the case, and they'd throw your claim out without even an investigation!"

Piteously, she said: "I wish I'd never heard of Joe Shade or the Andaluz fortune. I wish I had my old job back, and I wish I was dead!"

"Like Kohler," he said.

She started to cry again, but the sympathetic hand he reached toward her shoulder was withdrawn suddenly as a clear white light swept across the skyline to their left. It became the headlights of a car, traveling fast on the curving cemetery road.

"Quick!" he said. "Out of sight!"

He twisted the lantern shut, and as its light died they sprinted for a rolling mound and flung themselves behind it. They were none too soon, for the light beam swept over them as they settled down, and the car ground to a stop.

"Shade's car!" she whispered, and was silent then at the warning pressure of Pinero's hand on her elbow. They watched two men get out and stride leisurely across the tall grass toward the Conroy headstone.

"They're probably hiding around in the weeds," said Joe Shade's booming voice. He added something suggestive that brought a short laugh from his companion.

Surprisingly, it was the voice of Jason Fitch that answered from under the down-tilted hat-brim of the second man. Pinero felt a moment's quick dismay. The forces were joined against them, and it was a hard combination to beat.

"To hell with them!" Fitch said. "There's nothing they can do now. We've got control, no matter which way it goes. If they make a legal claim, we'll put the girl in prison, and you know who'll excute the estate. If they don't file, it comes to my office."

Pinero stirred uneasily. He wondered why the man's words seemed to imply more than they said. He thought of something, vaguely, and set it to fermenting.

"In which case you'd better remember to play it level," Shade answered Fitch warningly. "Pershing and the girl can tell you I don't like being crossed."

"Don't worry about that," Fitch said easily.

"I won't," said Shade grimly, "and I'll handle the other principal in the case. I see the

I started writing the novel when our ship was off Cuba and finished it just outside San Diego. So at least the pages are salty.

That's an excerpt from R. W. Daly's letter which accompanied the manuscript of the exciting new two-part story, "CLEARED FOR ACTION," beginning in our March issue—the tale of Farmery Gosselyn, R.N., who became a captain in those stirring days when John Bull and Boney were at each other's throats and every French ship from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean was fair game for any craft that flew the White Ensign.



A great new novelette by John Scott Douglas, "JONAH-LUCKY"; plus additional fine stories by Philip José Farmer, Jim Kjelgaard, Donald Barr Chidsey; and the final smashing installment of Alfred Powers' "CHAINS FOR COLUMBUS."

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tombstone has been examined. Pershing may want to go ahead."

"He won't go far," said Jason Fitch. "Remember it was I who discovered Kohler's body and called the police. We can make it uncomfortable if we have to."

Shade kicked thoughtfully at the headstone for a moment.

"Then we're all set," he said, but there was a curious quality of indecision in his voice. A moment later he said, a little more loudly: "If you're listening, Pershing, you know what you're up against. Better get in touch with Fitch the first thing tomorrow."

Pinero's fingers sent another warning to Nancy Gold, and after an indecisive moment of silence the two men went back to their car and drove away.

Pinero rose first and pulled the girl to her feet. The darkness hid his exultant grin, but there was triumph in the quick embrace he gave her.

"We win!" he said. "Nancy girl, we've got 'em now!"

MR. WALKER of the First State Bank ushered them into his office the following morning—a rumped, tired but excited Pinero and the slim girl with the dark hair and the surprisingly blue eyes. Walker looked curiously at Nancy Gold, but he waited for the others to begin the conversation.

Pinero laid the Fullbright papers on the desk.

"This is the Fullbright genealogy," he said. "It covers all possible descendants of the family who might be entitled to a share in the Andaluz money. I might add that I found there are claims of inheritance which may be legally brought against the estate."

Walker nodded, and thumbed idly through the thick sheaf of papers without taking his eyes from Pinero. Then he laid the papers down and folded his hands precisely.

"I presume you've included such evidence as we shall need to appear before the State Referee and explain why these claims are being granted?" he said.

Pinero said: "Of course, Mr. Walker. There is the matter of a burial record establishing the Merita Fullbright line. I convinced myself of its validity."

Walker caressed his neatly clipped gray mustache.

"This young woman is an heir?"

Pinero nodded. "She is," he said. "Moreover, Mr. Walker, I've taken the liberty of asking the State Referee, Mr. Fitch, to appear here this morning so that we can make a complete settlement of the case. There is one other party involved in an attempted fraud, a Joe Shade, who is being brought here in police custody."

Walker's eyes widened. "Really?"

"It shouldn't be long," Pinero said.

It was a bare ten minutes. Shade appeared with an escort of two armed detectives. His entrance was quiet enough, but his eyes on Nancy Gold were hot and angry. It was Jason Fitch, coming in alone a moment later, who was inclined to bluster.

"I'm surprised you had the courage to call this meeting," he told Pinero Pershing.

Pinero nodded. "No doubt you are," he said. "But I thought we'd better clear things up. The attempt to pilfer the Andaluz estate isn't important, because it actually proved to have a legal basis. The only criminal aspect of that was the deceit practised on Miss Gold."

"There's still a murder," Shade said bluntly.

"There is indeed," said Pinero Pershing. "The plot was too involved to admit of honesty. When Kohler brought up the fact of Miss Gold's legal status, he had to be killed, not so much to keep him from talking, as to provide a crime for which she could be accused. So Kohler was murdered, and Nancy Gold was to inherit the money before she was sent to prison."

"I must say this is not the type of report I was expecting," said Walker sharply. "The criminal aspects do not concern the bank. It's too bad there has been violence, but that does not concern the bank. *Requiescat in pace*, I always say."

"You always do, don't you?" Pinero said grimly. "Rest in peace. R. I. P. That's what you scrawled on the stone above Kohler's head after you'd seen it on the Conroy headstone, Walker. I couldn't imagine you being the one who had killed Kohler until I learned from listening to Fitch and Shade last night that each suspected the other. Until I learned that in the event of a legal inheritance by Miss Gold she would be put in jail and the estate would be administered by *you*!"

Walker burst out: "This man is covering up!"

But it was Shade who said savagely: "You *did* go back, didn't you, Walker? This was your plan, from the start! And you killed him! By God, I'll testify—"

Pinero waited until the detectives had taken away a confessed murderer, Vice-president Walker of the First State Bank, before he told Nancy: "I've got some bad news for you, straight from those other stones at Old Hill. Your father married again. The inheritance is apportioned equally among all his children by his second wife, and he was a very prolific gent. If you're lucky, you'll get a thousand dollars."

She blinked dark lashes at him. "Tell me," she said. "Can two live as cheap as one, if one's a genealogist?"

Pinero thought they could, definitely.

OBJECTIVE—MURDER!

By **WILLIAM R. COX**

Author of "Vacation With Slay," etc.



A Malachi Manatee Story

I grabbed Spesak and used him as a shield against the bottles.

Going against Tom Mulford's killer was desperate business. This was no backwoods Cracker amateur, but a smooth operator who knew how to use a knife like a big-time shiv artist, and who proved it—twice!

ILENE CARVER and I sat on the terrace of the Shoreland Hotel and looked at the Gulf of Mexico, which was busily changing hues under the coaxing of a midwinter sun. Ilene was wearing a brief bathing outfit and drinking a Martini, very dry, with a twist of lemon. Her red hair was caught up by a scarf and her greenish eyes were worried.

She said: "Malachi is almost never late, the rat."

"It's only four," I said. "He's messing around with a local cop who runs a small blackmail racket. . . ."

"I know what he's doing," she said impatiently. "Butting into things that are none of his business. Just because he has seven or eight or twelve million dollars doesn't mean he should try to cure the world of its ills. I'm getting sick of this, Tack Hinton. I'm getting sick of hanging around waiting for Malachi."

"You just said he was rarely late," I pointed out.

She gave me a dirty look. There is no use trying to be logical with a woman, even one as smart as Ilene. The truth was that she and Malachi led a cat-and-dog existence with very few tender passages. There was nothing to

keep them from marrying except their own independent temperaments.

Malachi's predelection for messing around with petty crooks in politics or public service had started when we first returned from the Pacific to lick our wounds, and had served to relieve tension and banish boredom. Malachi had the money and the brains and I was his guy. He still limped a bit and my lung lesions, though healed, were not sturdy. His money eased the path and besides I loved the big mugg.

We were at Shoreland because this cop, Andy Spesak, had given us a ticket on the highway when we were celebrating the return of gasoline, and then had offered to tear it up for twenty bucks. Malachi had preferred to accept the invitation to the court and pay his fine, then had blasted the cop. Spesak was a surly, black-thatched individual who deserved dismissal, but Malachi had run into a local situation and some former pals in the upper strata of Florida finance, and a storm was gathering. Ilene recognized the signs and was taut.

She said: "There come the weird foursome—Malachi's pals!"

"Not pals. Just acquaintances," I said.

THE woman came first, wrapped in a gaudy Filipino sarong. She was shaped like a bureau with the upper drawer open—a waist you could span with your hands, and legs which made Grable worshippers gape and stare. She had flamboyant blond hair, dyed. She was about thirty and as ripe as a black olive. Her name was Dora Acton.

Her husband ambled behind, following the pot which was his tummy. He was bald, except for a fuzz over each ear, and pink all over—his face, his smooth, hairless body, his eyes. He was all curves, a round ball of a man, no taller than his wife.

Dave Acton had never done a lick of work in his life, owned almost as many shekels as Malachi, had been 4F in the war—and no wonder, the liquor he drank. Not that the booze showed any effects on him. He was a two-fisted guzzler, but liquor only made him more amiable and friendly. He never said a cross word, nor did a mean thought ever seem to cross his mind. He wasn't pretty, but he was kindly and people liked him.

Rem Cartright was a step closer to Dora Acton, which was symbolical. Cartright was Acton's age, but taller, slimmer, square-jawed and wide-shouldered, with much wavy hair on his rectangular head. The contrast between the two men was fantastic, and when you believed the gossip, that Cartright had always been in love with Dora Acton, had lost her to Acton's millions when he was a struggling young grove owner but had never given

up, you had a queer combination indeed. The three were always together and Dora treated both men with amazing impartiality—at least in public.

The fourth member of the group was young. He was tall and reedy, with a powerful, overdeveloped right arm. He wore only brief trunks and his bronzed body had the trim liteness of the trained athlete. I always stared at him, envying him, remembering my palmy days when I'd been in shape to go against the Bears or the Redskins at the Polo Grounds. This kid was Tom Mulford, a ranking tennis amateur. Acton, oddly enough, played a damned good game of doubles and Mulford was taking a free ride between seasons, serving as Acton's partner on the courts. They had creamed Malachi and me a couple of times with great ease, and it had rankled Malachi, who can't stand to lose at anything.

Ilene said: "If I have to listen to that woman martialing her lovers once more I'll bust her on the nose as sure as you're a big-eyed dope, Tack Hinton."

They came down to the beach where a Negro had unfolded umbrellas of brilliant hue and the woman gave orders in dulcet accents, but with decision. "Put the cocktails there . . . The blankets are wrinkled . . . Straighten them . . . Adjust that umbrella . . . All right, now, sit down . . . You pour, Tom, you don't spill so much . . . I'm dying for a drink . . ."

Somehow or other Dave Acton disengaged himself from the minor melee of settling down on the hot sand. He came waddling up to us, looking disturbed. He said: "Hiya, folks? I'm worried about Malachi. He got that policeman discharged . . . Political pressure was put on me . . . Spesak is tough. He swore to get Malachi in court . . . Where is Malachi?" Acton talked in bunches, like bananas.

Ilene said: "He's probably blasting the cop."

Acton said: "There's funny business . . . Got a hunch. Danger of some kind. Man named Joe Monk, cousin of Spesak, a giant . . . Got the Crackers goin' . . . Talks like Huey Long . . . Ignorant, but virile. Get's 'em stirred up."

Ilene said: "You better hire guards for that feudal estate of yours. I hear you indulge in a bit of peonage yourself. With the colored folks, I mean." Ilene has little or no tact.

Acton batted his eyes. "Got to keep help . . . Dora gets very unhappy if they quit . . . They owe me for stuff . . . The sheriff is cooperative"

"Dave!" came a cool voice from under the umbrellas. "Bring Ilene and Tack down for a drink."

Ilene kicked me under the table with her wooden sabots and I said, wincing: "Got to meet Malachi. See you later."

We got up and went to our cabanas. Ilene said: "That damned woman. She makes me sick. Let's hurry and find Malachi."

I said: "Sure. You dress and get out the car." I went into the cabana and discovered I hadn't put my wallet in my pants, so I hurried upstairs in the hotel to get it.

The Shoreland is one of those sprawling, stuccoed, two-storied affairs for the idle rich. I opened the door to the suite I shared with Malachi and stood there, gaping.

Malachi was sprawled in a chair, his long legs thrust out before him. His blond head was back and his face was reddened and bruised. He held a towel against one eye and ice water ran down his arm. His hound's-tooth sports jacket was slung over a chair, soiled with swamp muck. His hair was tousled and he was quietly furious with rage.

I said: "Somebody finally chose you and won, huh?"

"Do I look like a winner?" he said. His voice was steady but I know him well enough to detect the underlying tenseness.

I said: "A guy named Joe?"

"So the word is already around?"

"No. But it couldn't be Spesak because you'd be ready for that palooka," I said. "This Joe Monk must have got you from behind, while you were looking at Spesak."

"Down at the edge of Frog Swamp," Malachi said, nodding. "I went down with Spesak, just we two. Monk must have followed."

"Blackjack?" I asked, peering at the bruises.

"Just his fists," said Malachi grimly. "He's rough. Mouthed a lot at me about the common man and my money getting Spesak fired. They have an organization. Agin everything—except themselves."

"You're going to have a mouse on that eye," I said from rich experience. I picked up the phone, called the desk and had a boy sent out to page Ilene. Malachi groaned.

I said: "She's got to see you sooner or later."

"I don't mind anyone else," he said. "But what she'll say can cause nothing but trouble—for both of us."

I picked up my coat and slid into it. I found the keys to Malachi's car and my wallet and pocketed them. I said: "Well, it'll be better if she doesn't have an audience . . ."

The door banged open and Ilene came in. She stopped, staring at Malachi. I tried to close my ears against the triumphant invective which I knew was coming.

Then I saw that Ilene was paler than I had ever expected to see her. She took one step

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forward and her voice was deep in her throat. She said: "Tack, go get the guy who did this. Get him and kill him, whoever he is."

I started for the door. Malachi just looked at Ilene with his one good eye, not moving. I know he was as startled and touched as I was. I went into the hall and closed the door very quietly.

I HURRIED because I was anxious to get away before Malachi could stop me. I am unable to see anyone hurt him without doing something about it, but I knew he would want to even up this score himself. As I headed for the car a thought struck me and I detoured to the beach.

Under the gay umbrella, Rem Cartright sat alone. The others disported themselves in the Gulf. The square-faced man looked thoughtfully at me and said: "Where is Malachi, Hinton?"

"In his room," I said. "Do you know a man named Monk?"

"The agitator? I know him only too well. Provoked a strike in the box factory," said Cartright. He had a heavy, precise voice. I'm strictly Bronx myself and I knew he chose his words carefully through lack of formal education. "He's a dangerous thug."

"Where could I most likely find him?"

Cartright said: "What could you possibly want with him?" Then his face hardened and I could see his mind leap. He said: "Ah! The Spesak case, eh? I warned Malachi. You'd better watch out. Monk always has a dozen tough Crackers at his beck and call."

"He sounds like a meatball," I said. "I love meatballs—without bread."

"You're tough, all right," Cartright said. "Dora keeps telling us you're a hard one. But Monk is something to worry about. He's like a gorilla. He's been attacked by many people—but never hurt."

"Where does he hang out?" I demanded.

"There's a joint called Manuel's Place," said Cartright reluctantly. "It has a back room. The Monk crowd meets there. You'd better take help, Hinton. How bad is Malachi hurt?"

"I didn't say he was hurt," I said. "See you later."

Dave Acton was coming out of the water, his trunks sagging below his tummy, a sorry sight. The brown-skinned tennis player and Dora were still in the water. I noted the look Cartright cast Gulfward, shivered and went my way. I got the long convertible out of the yard, found the road leading past the swamp where I remembered seeing a juke joint. Shoreland Beach was man-made, and a miasmal swamp lined the shell road to the east from town to the bridge which led to the key. The town of Shoreland was garishly new, built around the Acton estate and groves, and

the Cartright box factory. These two also owned all the real estate—and the town, I reflected. Spesak had been an employee of the two men who had pioneered in this isolated section of West Coast Florida, yet they had seemed sympathetic to Malachi and his crusade, against Spesak and the whole city administration.

The winter twilight fell swiftly. I parked before a pine board shack of some proportions and went under the glaring neon sign to the door. The swamp was all around, but Manuel had hacked out a clearing a hundred yards square from the surrounding tangle of lush foliage.

I went in and stood at the rough, unpolished bar. The jukebox blared a hillbilly tune. There were a dozen men about—Cracker types, lantern-jawed, seamy-faced, slant-eyed, canny. Manuel was a Latin from Tampa, burly, scar-faced, swarthy.

I had a drink of bad bourbon and said: "Where's Monk?"

Manuel batted his eyes. "I dunno. He ain't here."

I had another drink. The Crackers regarded me slantwise. I said: "I got a message for him."

The back room was cut off by a partition. The door opened and Spesak came swaggering into the bar. There was instant silence. Even the jukebox ceased its clamor.

Spesak stared at me through red-rimmed eyes, a gangling, spindly man, six feet tall, with large knobby hands and evidence of ringworm. He said hoarsely: "That there is Manatee's muscle. Y'all look out, now."

I said: "I want Monk. You're just a crumb. I want the meatball."

A Cracker growled: "He called Joe a meatball!"

"I'll make him a meatball, for spaghetti and sauce," I promised.

Someone moved behind me. It hadn't been smart of me to come here, but somehow, remembering Malachi's eye, I didn't feel like being smart. It was action I craved. I ducked and spun and a coke bottle sailed over my head. Someone yelled, "Git him!" and the riot was on.

I grabbed Spesak and used him as a shield against the bottles. But the Crackers had fruit knives, with long blades and springs in the handle. I threw Spesak at them but he crawled out of it, ran for the door and out into the gathering night.

I began using my hands, and the Crackers kept falling down. Finally they closed in on me and only by gouging and rabbit-punching could I get to the wall. Manuel had a black-jack and I was trying to get it away from him.

A big man came in with Spesak following

him. I only got a glimpse of him, but he had shoulders wider than mine and was almost as tall as Malachi. He was bad. I could see it in his eyes and the scarred map of his face. He plunged through the futile mob and was at me.

I ducked and came up, knowing this was my meatball. I hit him four times in the face. He bled, but he hammered as though he loved it. My neck was paralyzed by a near-hit. He came in, trying to get close, using his fists like mauls, ignorant and glorying in it, just swinging and taking it. He was all man and a yard wide.

I took it. I got to his gut, and it was like iron. I slugged him in the groin and I swear he never felt it. I lifted one to his jaw and he went backward.

Instead of boxing him, I followed close, trying to kayo him. I got one to his jaw, but he gathered me in with his left hand and just held me. Then he slugged me on the jaw with his right.

I can take it on the potato. I tinned, rubber-legged, but not out. I thought I still had a chance. I moved out of range, trying to box a little, now. Then someone shoved a leg between mine from behind and shoved me forward.

He was smart. He played my middle. Since that Jap bullet did things to my lung, I'm not so hot down there. A long fight is not for me and I know it. He got me and my blood turned to water. He shifted to the chin and not even Joe Louis could have taken three of those. I went out like a light. I heard them all yelling, sounding savagely happy, and then I was out.

IT WAS very dark. I turned over and shoved at the ground and it was oozy and wet. I slipped and my face went into the mud. I cursed as best I could through a swollen jaw. It was a nightmarish thing, but nothing seemed broken except maybe a couple of ribs. I rolled over and sat up. There was no moon and the swamp was all around me. I thought of rattlers and coral snakes, got hold of a vine and somehow pulled myself erect.

The next question was, how had I gotten out? There was no light. I had no sense of direction. I took a step and floundered. I clutched a mangrove root and stood ankle deep in the ooze trying to get myself together. A light appeared as though by magic and a calm voice called to me: "Tack? Can you come over here?"

I said: "Malachi! Where the hell are we?"

He said in the same flat voice: "Follow my flash."

I stumbled, making progress as my blood began to stir. My chest hurt and of course my face was a wreck, but my limbs seemed all right. I went past a thick vine and saw Ma-

lachi plainly in the reflection of his flashlight. He was standing straight and tall, staring downward.

I followed the ghostly glow of the torch. Someone was lying on his face, arms outstretched. He wore a light sports shirt. The back of it was slit and the edges of the tear were black with dark stain.

Malachi said: "Fifty yards. A quarter-mile player."

It was Tom Mulford, stabbed in the back, beneath the left shoulderblade, neatly and surely murdered.

"How far off the road are we?" I asked. "And how far from the juke joint?"

Malachi said: "Fifty yards. A quarter-mile from Manuel's."

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock. Manuel's was closed when I arrived. It was a job finding you. I went to town first. Cartright told me you were here."

I said: "Where was Acton?"

"With Cartright. They drove in on business, before dinner. Mulford was with Dora Acton at the hotel."

"How did he get here, then?" I asked.

"That's what we've got to find out," said Malachi. He turned the flash on me and grinned a little. "I see you met Monk."

"And I'll see that meatball again," I said. "Alone."

"Do you think the two of us could handle him?" Malachi asked seriously.

"Alone," I repeated. "When I'm not sore."

Malachi shook his head. "Maybe. But he's awful tough. Let's go back, Tack. Chief Owen will have to pick up this poor kid. Let's go to town and see if we can find Monk."

We trudged out of the swamp. We got into the car, which Malachi had picked up at the juke—we had separate keys—and drove toward Shoreland.

Manuel's was boarded up, deserted. I thought about the Crackers and their knives and the dead boy in the swamp. But it would not be as simple as that. There was that look Cartright had thrown at Mulford when Dora and he were swimming together in the Gulf. There were Acton's premonitions of disaster and violence. There was the labor situation and the forces of the rich pitted against Monk and his merry men.

I said: "Malachi, what about the Crackers? Are they underpaid by Cartright and Acton?"

Malachi said: "I don't know."

I said: "Spesak was a shakedown artist. Is Monk running a racket among the working people?"

"I don't know—yet," said Malachi.

"Chief Owen will never catch a murderer who has sense enough to take the weapon away and lose it in the swamp and leave his

victim where he might not be found for weeks," I said.

"The buzzards would have found him," Malachi said. "You don't know. Florida buzzards."

"I met a big one," I said.

WE DROVE into town. Chief Owen was a mild, innocent man who belonged to Acton and Cartright. He was completely upset by our report of the killing. He immediately called the sheriff of Shoreland County, another nonentity who happened to be in Tallahassee at a sheriffs' convention. Then he sent some hastily sworn-in officers out after Tom Mulford.

We went back to the hotel. Malachi thought I needed a doctor, but I was sure my ribs were O.K. We went up to the suite and Ilene opened the door, took one look at me, then gulped the remainder of a large Scotch and soda. Finally she said: "I'll take this Monk myself. Where's my gun?"

"He'd eat your pop-pistol," I told her. "Save him for us when we get him alone."

Malachi said: "And try to remember anything you can about what Dora Acton, her husband and Cartright did this evening."

"On account of someone killed the tennis player," I added.

Ilene poured three big ones. We drank and she screwed up her lovely face and tried to remember. She said slowly: "Funny, I was sort of watching them. Dora was pitching woo at Mulford . . . How was he killed?"

We told her and she went on: "Mulford wasn't taking it too well. It seemed to me he was scared. As if he had been playing a game and suddenly it became serious, you know?"

Malachi said: "Then what?"

"Acton and Cartright went off before dinner. Dora chased Mulford down on the beach, but came back alone and furious." She considered. "That was about seven-thirty. They had eaten together."

"Did she stay in sight?"

"No. She took her coupe and drove off. I don't know why I noticed. She gets my goat." Ilene said eagerly: "She could have followed Mulford and killed him!"

"And carried him into a swamp?" Malachi shook his head. "I want to know how Mulford got out of here without a car."

"Walked. He was a great walker," said Ilene. "Tell me everything now, will you?"

I told about the fight. Malachi told about stumbling over the body while looking for me. He deduced that Monk had beaten me up and had searched the swamp for an hour before finding Mulford.

I said: "Say! How could I have been out that long from a slight beating?"

"Have you noticed your shirt?" Malachi

said. "Whiskey stains on it. They poured something into you. A Michael Finn, no doubt, to keep you quiet until they could fold the joint."

I touched the stains with my fingers. My mouth felt funny and I remembered the trouble I had getting up when I had come to in the swamp. Things began to get screwy in my mind. Manuel's joint equipped with kayo drops and a brute like Monk, with brains enough to decamp when things were hot, leaving me to live or die by snakebite made a strange picture of a back country Cracker set-up to my mind.

There was a knock at the door and I opened it. Dave Acton and Cartright came in. Cartright said harshly: "What's this about Mulford? My God, this is awful!"

Acton mumbled unhappily: "Owen's goin' in circles . . . Don't make sense . . . Who could've killed him? . . . Dora's having hysterics . . ."

"How did he get mixed up with that gang at Manuel's?" Cartright asked. "Owen will never find a killer among that crowd. He's afraid of Joe Monk." He stared at me, said: "I see Monk got you, too. Can't anyone stop that man?"

"He's a brute," said Acton with owl-like solemnity. "A depraved brute. He killed Mulford."

Malachi finished his drink and poured more, limping about the room. When everyone's hand was filled, he said: "Monk had no motive to kill Mulford."

"Born killer," said Acton, his fat cheeks quivering. "Tom went down there after you and Hinton fought them. They figured he was in with you and attacked him."

Cartright said viciously: "If you could pin it on him, Malachi, you'd be doing a great public service. Monk has got to go!" His angular face was granite hard, his slanted, elliptical eyes shone with fury and hatred.

"Try it," Acton begged. "Get him. Do anything for you, Malachi. Can't pay you in money—you got enough. Do anything you say, though."

They stared at him, waiting, two frightened rich men.

Ilene drawled: "Would you arbitrate your labor disputes? If Malachi finds the killer, will you let us act as a board—Tack, Malachi and me?"

They scowled at her. Cartright said: "We want Monk out of the way. I know he must have killed Tom—or had him killed."

Ilene said: "Malachi doesn't frame people."

They swallowed that, then got up, put their glasses down half full.

Acton said: "Think it over, Malachi. Do anything for you. Not what Miss Carver asks. Silly. But anything else." He went out and Cartright followed.

Before the door closed a wail came from down the hall and a soothing nurse's voice cut into it, but the petulant weeping went on and on. That would be Dora Acton and I pitied her husband.

There was nothing to do but go to bed and lick our wounds.

WE WERE up early, for a change. My face was worse than Malachi's, Ilene said, as we ate breakfast together. "It certainly is a change to have you beaten up instead of the other fellow," she added.

I said: "The question is, who murdered that simple, unfortunate kid? And how did they get him into the swamp? If it was Monk, he wouldn't have left the body near the spot where they dumped me."

"Not knowing you were merely drugged," agreed Malachi.

Ilene said: "I vote for Dora. Those curved jobs will do anything when spurned."

Malachi said: "What made you put in that crack last night about arbitrating the labor trouble here, Ilene? Since when are you a bleeding heart for the underprivileged?"

"I'm not," she said calmly. "I just knew it would annoy those two characters. I'm not fond of Acton or Cartright. I'm not enamored of Shoreland. I don't even care who killed the tennis player. I would merely like for you two to get hunk with Joe Monk. That's our slogan, Get Hunk With Monk. To hell with all else!"

Malachi said: "It's a nice little set-up. Assault, murder. I'll look around. You hire a car and examine the labor situation since you're so interested, darling. Tack will stick with the threesome you abhor."

"I'm not crazy about them, either," I said. "And suppose you meet Monk in your travels today?"

Malachi stood up, all six feet-five of him. He said: "You think you can take him, everything even. What makes you think I can't do the same?"

I had nothing to say to that. Malachi had a bad gam, but we didn't talk about it and, anyway, he had more endurance than was left in me. So we watched him go, with that limp which gave him the common touch, a dash of humility in what would otherwise have been perfection.

Ilene said: "The fool. We could gang up on Monk and continue our vacation. But he has to mess into things. Cartright and Acton are exploiting the Crackers."

I said: "Check all the way through. But take your gun."

"If Monk tackles me," she promised, "it'll be the last assault he ever makes." She thought a moment, then asked brightly: "Is he good looking?"

"Like Gargantua."

"Oh," she said. "Well, maybe I'll go to work on him, at that."

"That I'd like to see," I told her. She went off, her hips on oiled bearings, having the same effect on every male who saw her.

I put some salve on my face and went down to let the sun heal my scars. There was a commotion a few yards away on the sand and I heard the voice of Dora Acton. It had not altered one bit. She was giving orders.

"Dave, you've simply got to see Malachi . . . Rem, those trunks are unbecoming . . . Now be careful with the drinks . . . The sand will blow on us if you don't change that umbrella . . . Where is that red-headed vixen? . . . I don't trust that woman . . . Oh, is that Hinton? Well, what are you waiting for? . . . Get him . . . I want him."

It was Acton who came over. He said apologetically: "Wife's upset. Wants to talk. Thought a lot of Mulford, y' know? C'mon over. Have a drink."

I went over. Dora looked at me boldly, her black sloe eyes going up and down appraisingly. She said in a come-hither voice: "Sit down, darling. By me."

I sat down, said: "I'm sorry about your friend. When did you see him last, Mrs. Acton?"

It was a stunt the way she shut out Cartright and Acton. She spoke to me and suddenly we were all alone on a sandy island. It was sex at its peak. "Call me Dora . . . You're very strong. How did that awful man beat you?"

"With his fists," I assured her. "Did you drive Mulford into town yesterday afternoon?"

"Why, no," she said. "He walked in. He loved walking. I went to the beauty parlor. Do you like my hair?"

She had it rolled up, some new way, I suppose. I said: "It's very nice . . . Then you didn't see Mulford in town?"

For a moment the curtain rolled back and I could see Acton and Cartright. There is a stunt—split vision, they call it—which is highly developed in football players. Without looking, you can take in what is going on in an area ten feet either side of you. By shifting on the sand, I could see Acton staring at his wife, his thick lips parted, while Cartright glared straight at me. They were frightened. I had known that last night and now I saw they had not recovered.

The woman said: "I saw him . . . at a distance . . . talking to a man."

I said: "You don't know the man?"

"No," she said slowly. "I don't know the man."

The silence was thicker than the Shoreland Hotel fish chowder. A lie had been spoken. The two men relaxed, and I knew Mulford had

been speaking with one or both of them, and that they both were afraid to have it known.

I let the rest of the afternoon slip by. We drank quite a lot of Acton's cocktails from the thermos and had sandwiches sent down. It was late when Malachi drove in. Ilene followed him a few moments later and Dora stiffened and lost interest in me, or anything else, watching Ilene swing into the hotel. I didn't blame her. Ilene was like a race horse, Dora like a milch cow.

I unfolded myself and said: "One more dip. The water's pretty cold, but it's good for my bruises."

Cartright said: "I'll go with you."

We went down to the water. As we swam through the gentle rollers Cartright edged over, threshing a bit, for he was not an expert swimmer, and floated on his back. He said: "Hinton, take a tip from me. Don't mix into our business here. I mean the factory."

"Who, me?" I laughed. "Forget it."

He said: "Miss Carver was doing it today."

I wondered how he knew, but I didn't dare ask. He had been at the hotel all day, and if he got a phone call, I hadn't known it. I said: "Miss Carver is a free agent. You might speak to her."

"I'd rather you did," he said drily. "Miss Carver is—sudden."

We parted and I swam in. His voice had been different, harder, more decisive than I had ever heard it before. He gave the impression of strength withheld, and I realized I had been viewing him as the hanger-on of the Actons, particularly Dora, instead of the tycoon of Shoreland. He was a determined man—and he could be a killer.

I DRESSED and went up to the suite. Ilene and Malachi were drinking Martinis which Ilene had made—four parts gin to one vermouth. I stuck to bourbon and listened to their talk. Malachi had traced the movements of Acton and Cartright in town and discovered that they'd been together all afternoon and evening. If they had seen Mulford he had not been able to obtain a witness to the meeting. Dora, he ascertained, had visited the beauty parlor—but briefly. There was much time, around dusk, unaccounted for, and no one had seen any of the trio eating dinner.

"So any of them could have killed Mulford," mused Ilene. "I learned he went to Manuel's. Walked there from town, they said." "Who said?" Malachi asked.

"Joe Monk," said Ilene, grinning at us. "I tackled him in a tavern on the edge of town. He thought I was a reporter from a Yankee paper. He gave me the hoopla on Cartright and Acton, how they owned this county and ran it like Hitlers. No liberty for nobody, he said in his elegant manner."

Malachi said: "Did he make a pass at you, darling?" His voice was light, but there were undertones of danger which Ilene recognized but did not choose to fear.

She said: "What do you think? He's a man, isn't he? A good enough man to take you and Tack on the same day."

"Sure he's a man," I said. "A hell of a tough meatball. And he also had the opportunity to kill Mulford."

"But no motive," said Malachi. He scowled, wrinkling his brow.

"Unless—but that's fantastic . . ."

For once Ilene didn't interrupt or ask any questions. Malachi was limping up and down the room. We drank and they finished another pitcher of those dynamic Martinis. Supper-time came, and Malachi ordered it sent up. Ilene played the radio. I sat, deep in thought.

It was nine o'clock and the radio was giving out with music from Oklahoma. From down the hall, at the far end, came a sudden, piercing scream.

Malachi was nearest the door and got into the hall first, but I passed him on the carpet. I hit the door of the rooms occupied by the Actons and it flew open. Dora Acton was standing in the exact center of the large, high-ceilinged room and emitting horribles noises at the top of her voice.

Dave Acton lay on the rug. He was deflated, like a balloon which has been ruptured. Someone had stabbed Dave Acton in his fleshy back. There was the same slit in his shirt, the same stains as those which had been on the shirt of Tom Mulford. Acton's mouth was open, his eyes staring pathetically at nothing. He had been dead more than a few moments because the blood was already drying.

Ilene swung in close behind Malachi, took a look, turned to the livid, hysterical Dora. She said, "This will hurt you more than it does me," and swung with her left. Her hand slapped hard against Dora's cheek, her right hand followed the left.

Dora stopped making noises and gasped, the color returning to the slapped parts. Outside, the manager was rushing up. Malachi bent close, his nose almost touching the wound in Acton's back. He murmured: "A quick, expert thrust, no slashing. Just like Mulford. The same spot, the same stroke. An expert operator, this character."

The manager came in and began moaning hysterically. Malachi went to the window, which was open, and looked out. Then he beckoned and I left the room with him and went out and around to the spot where the murderer had obviously jumped. It was a fairish drop and the imprints were deep, but they were also marred by hasty scratching. Malachi had brought a flashlight. The tracks led to the shell driveway.

A frightened Negro boy said a small car had left a half hour before, but he had not seen the occupant. Neither had anyone else.

Malachi said softly: "Well, this about tears it. Poor Dave—he was afraid of it."

"Cartright is afraid, too," I said. "This afternoon they were both afraid when they thought Dora might reveal something about a man who was seen talking to Mulford yesterday afternoon. I could tell they were scared. And Cartright is worried about Ilene investigating his labor situation."

Malachi said: "It adds up—almost too obviously. There's more in it than I can be sure of, but I think we can go ahead with what we have. The shape of the wound, the opportunity for killing, and the motive. No proof, actually, yet. But how often do we get court proof of a murder? That's for the big police departments with laboratories and sleuths galore and a little room downstairs where they can beat the tar out of people. I think we can move in."

I said: "I want Joe Monk."

Malachi didn't answer that. He was striding around the corner of the hotel, and Ilene was sauntering toward us, a coat over her arm. A car started, heading away from Shoreland. Ilene said: "That's Dora. I thought we ought to follow her."

"I'll lay four, two and even we can join her later without trailing her," said Malachi. He had something wrapped in his hand. We got into his car and rode to town, taking our time.

IT WAS about ten when we got to the edge of Frog Swamp. Malachi parked the car beneath some pines and we walked the rest of the way, Ilene between us. Going against a killer and a man like Joe Monk, may be duck soup for heroes, but to us it was a desperate business. Actually, this was none of our business, except as citizens, and how many citizens deal themselves into murder mysteries? It was Malachi who did that to us.

There were no lights in front of Manuel's juke joint, but in the rear a sickly gleam struck across the clearing to the swamp edge. We crept close and found there was a window. I took a peek, and nodded. They were all there. Malachi went to the back. Ilene remained at the window, her gun in hand. I went to the front and set up a clamor.

That was to cover Malachi. After a moment I bashed in a window, removed the glass, climbed over the sill. There was a great deal of confusion in the back room, so I knew Malachi was already in.

From outside, Ilene's voice called, strong and clear: "Settle down. I've got you all covered and I'll shoot the eyes out of the first guy who gets tough."

Then I crashed into the back room. Malachi

was standing just inside the door, his eyebrows like inverted V's, his mouth thin and harsh. I colsed the door and put my back against it.

Dora Acton was sitting on a chair, tense with fear and excitement. She didn't look like the woman who had vented her grief over her husband's death in loud piercing accents. She looked like one of those operatic babes who lust for revenge, or something.

Cartright was standing, crouched a little, and again I saw him as a hard, capable man. He was calm, glaring at Malachi, then at me, then at the window where Ilene held the gun on them.

Joe Monk was on a chair, huge even when sitting. His face was sneering, calculating. He let his pig eyes slide around calculatingly. Manuel stood behind him and there were a couple of others. One was Spesak, the ex-cop, and the other was a gaunt, hard-bitten Cracker.

Malachi said: "A little meeting of the clan. More plans—for murder, perhaps?"

Cartright said: "You'd better get out, Manatee."

"There are a couple of corpses," Malachi explained. "And a pair of beatings, dealt out by Monk."

"I've killed no one," said Cartright. "This is private business. You've no right here."

Malachi said: "No, you didn't wield the knife. You and Frankenstein!"

Cartright said: "I'm trying to find out who stabbed Dave and straighten out this mess with the men. Dora came here on her own. There's nothing to do with murder in this meeting."

Malachi shifted his gaze to Monk. He said: "A simple Cracker boy who uses knock-out drops. . . Who stabs upward beneath the left shoulder blade, professionally, like a big-time shiv artist. You're no hillbilly, Monk, in spite of your drawl."

Monk grinned. "O.K., I've been places. But I don't stab people inna back, see?"

"Cartright was anxious to prove you did," said Malachi.

Monk shrugged. The power in him was obvious to all. He was absolutely without fear, I saw.

Cartright said harshly: "I find he did not kill Mulford—or Dave. We merely wished to get together. . ."

Malachi said to Monk: "They dumped the corpse of the tennis player within fifty feet of the place you left Tack. Dave was getting onto it, feared for his own life. So he got it next."

Monk shrugged. "I din't even know the guys."

Ilene suddenly screamed. The gun disappeared. Ilene was shoved violently away

from the window. I was sorry it had to be that way, but I had been waiting for it, and I guess Malachi had been waiting for it, too. Manuel produced a knife, and so did the Cracker and Spesak, the ex-cop. I dove right across the room and landed in front of Monk. He got up like a lion.

There was a single shot outdoors, and for a moment I froze, but then Ilene's voice came through. "Try it on me, will you?" Then I knew she hadn't been overcome by the attack. Ilene was plenty tough.

Monk was trying to take me first. Malachi went past me and began doing things to people in the way the Marines had taught him. He had a pair of brass knuckles and a blackjack and he used them often and well. Men began falling like chicken heads in a kosher poultry market on a Friday afternoon.

Monk missed me eight times. I just went close and let him try. He hammered down with a rabbit punch and I slipped aside. Then I let him have the full treatment. The fingers in the eyes, the stiffened palm against his nose, the punch at the base of his ear. He gave back, trying to kick me. I grabbed his heel and lifted and he went over backwards. His head hit the baseboard and he didn't move for a moment.

I turned around and Spesak was behind Malachi, on his knees. He had the spring-bladed fruit knife in his hand, thumb along the blade. He was trying to stab upwards. Manuel was down, the Cracker was sprawled over a chair. Cartright was dragging at a gun in his pocket which had caught in the lining.

In a corner, Dora stood watching, her eyes narrowed, a wild excitement in complete command of her. She was actually enjoying herself!

I reached out and took hold of Spesak and removed the knife from his grasp. I broke his wrist doing so. He screamed, and Malachi lashed out with the blackjack. Cartright went down on his knees and stayed there, like a stunned bull.

THERE was another shot and Ilene said triumphantly: "That got the bum!" Then she came in, swaggering a little, the gun still smoking. "Blew a small hole in him. I'm afraid not fatally."

Malachi was wheeling. Monk came off the floor, still brave, still swinging. Malachi slipped the knuckle off his hand, threw the blackjack to me. He let Monk get all the way up and then started. He struck out his left and threw the right in behind it. That was good punching, with Malachi's six feet-five leveling in a perfect pivot behind the right hand. He got it on Monk's chin. It was like felling a tree.

There was a crash and Monk hit the floor,

flopped over and lay still. Ilene dramatically raised her arm and began to count: "One, two, three. . ." She could have made it a hundred.

Cartright was holding onto a chair, shaking his head.

Malachi turned, said to him: "You hired Monk to come down here and stir up trouble. You wanted turmoil so you could get rid of Dave Acton. You wanted Dave's groves and you wanted his wife. It was an old hatred, the kind that festers. It came to a head and you planned to have Dave killed and blame it on Monk."

Cartright didn't speak. Malachi went on: "You hired Spesak, a cop, as the assassin. You figured that was a cunning angle. Then I had Spesak fired and you couldn't do anything about that without tipping your hand. So you had Monk on your hands, a killer already in disgrace. Then Mulford became a problem, as your lady love fell for him. You lost your head, Cartright."

Spesak moaned. I said to him: "I'll twist that busted wrist for you if you don't talk." He moaned some more, pleading dumbly with Cartright for protection.

Malachi said: "I can place you on the road where Mulford was killed, Spesak. When Monk awakens and finds out the truth, he'll testify."

"He killed Dave Acton, too," said Ilene. "He must have."

"No!" mumbled Spesak. "I didn't. I never did."

Cartright said: "You're right, Manatee. I give up. Spesak killed them both. He wanted to kill you, too. . ."

Again there was silence in the room. Malachi turned and looked around at the shambles, taking his time. Dora Acton had not moved from her corner, the others lay about in broken attitudes. Monk stirred, turned over, sat up, rubbing his jaw. His eyes went to Malachi and a look of the utmost respect came into them.

Malachi said softly: "You'll confess, Cartright?"

"I'll go in and give myself up right now," said the square-faced man doggedly.

Malachi said: "You're all right, in your own way, I guess. . . Mrs. Acton, would you let him admit to the crimes?"

She said, a bit hoarsely: "He—he—says he had them killed."

"But he didn't," said Malachi gently. "He wanted to. He would have, if we weren't here, probably. He was a bit insane. Mulford was the worst. He was used to Dave, but Mulford was new, and young. He didn't realize that Mulford had spurned you and had walked to town prepared to take the bus and leave the whole deal. Dave knew it, because Dave was

the man who talked to Mulford in town and gave him the money to go away."

She said: "You're crazy—Rem admits he did it."

"Because Rem Cartright knows you stabbed Mulford and hired Spesak to dump him in the swamp. Spesak wasn't present when Tack was left there, and took the easiest road in. You killed Mulford because he had refused to play with you and had run away." Malachi's voice was like thunder. "You stabbed him with a stiletto which is entirely different from the fruit knife weapons of this country, a weapon I saw in your room tonight, after your husband was killed. The police here may be rural, but they have that much sense. Chief Owen has that stiletto right now, testing it for blood-stains in Tampa. Maybe he won't find Mulford's blood on it, but poor Dave's gore will be fresh enough to trace!"

Dora Acton opened her mouth, but no scream came forth. She sat there, panting, her eyes wild.

Cartright tried to go to her, but Malachi shoved him aside. He said: "Owen is on his way out here now. You can buy a police department for petty, local stuff, but didn't you know you couldn't get away with murder? When Dave accused you of stabbing Mulford, why did you also kill him? Cartright would have done that for you, sooner or later, and maybe without leaving any evidence."

She leaped at him, clawing. "You lousy son! You couldn't know these things. . ."

Chief Owen came in then, with three cops, and took her. Cartright stood, white and stony-faced, while they added him as a material witness. The Chief said heavily: "I listened. You got a case, Mr. Manatee, if Spesak and Monk will talk."

Monk was on his feet. One hand went to his jaw. He said thickly: "Any guy that can kayo me with one punch. . . I couldn't handle that trick stuff Hinton gave me, but I never thought a punk could nail me with a reg'lar wallop. . . I'll talk, Manatee. I didn't contract

for no murders. Cartright wanted to upset Acton's apple cart. That's all I knew. I ain't no killer."

"Of course, you're not," Ilene said briskly. "Take them away, Chief. And watch out, I think the fat babe is about to pass out on you!"

They took them away. We relaxed a bit and I found a bottle of pretty good whiskey behind Manuel's bar. We had a drink. Ilene said: "I was right all the time. The bosomy job did it."

"Uh-huh," said Malachi. "Both times in a passion. She was so scared when she killed her husband that she ran to Cartright. He made her wait a while, then drove out so that people would think it was an outside job. He thought he had her for himself, then, with Mulford and Dave both dead. He really loves her."

"He was willing to take the rap for her," I said nodding.

Ilene poured another drink, said: "I'd like to see either of you in a spot like that. I've got a big steel engraving of you taking my crimes on your shoulders! Huh! Those plump babes heave around and roll their eyes and men fall like ten-pins for them. It makes me sick!"

"You don't do so bad yourself," said Malachi maliciously. "You sure had Monk going for a while."

"The meatball," I said.

"Meatball, is he?" she cried. "It took the two of you, one after the other, to knock him out. He could lick either one of you in a fair fight."

Malachi said: "What is a fair fight? Who makes the rules? Let's argue."


We did. Manuel's was open very late that night. We drank up a lot of whiskey and settled nothing. But it relieved our nerves, and we had a lot of fun.

And Monk wasn't a meatball, I privately conceded. He was a very tough racketeer, but he was no meatball.

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On the Homicide

By **JULIUS LONG**

Author of "Murder Under Foot," etc.

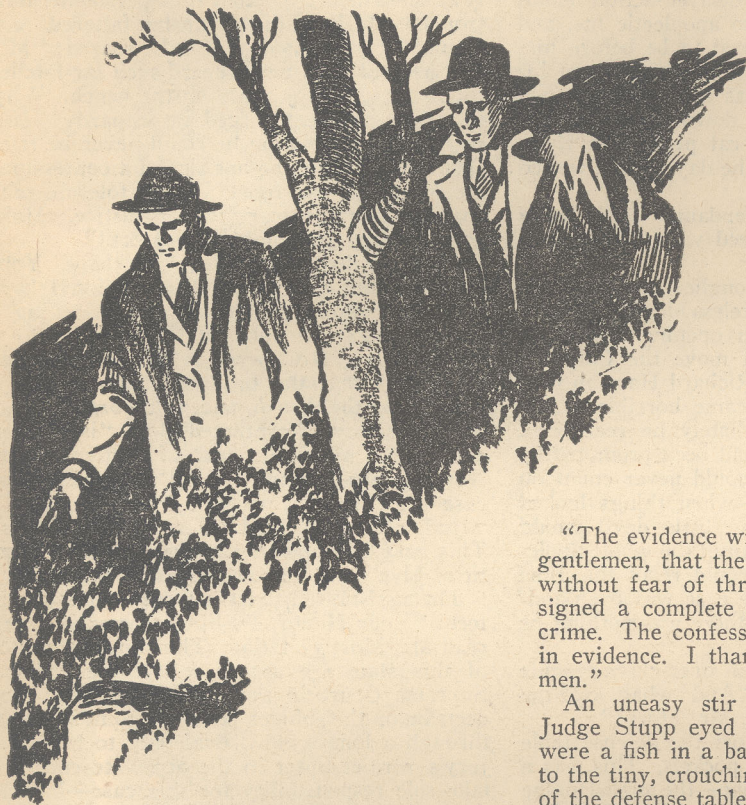


Take one judge and tease him until he's nice and hot under the collar. Add one larcenous client and wily C. D. Mort, and mix thoroughly. Spice with one gorgeous gal taking her shower in a hotel lobby fountain, and let them stew. Result—one corpse hard on the cold heels of another, with the law frantic just finding the bodies—to say nothing of catching the murderer.



of the Street

A Counsellor Mort Novelette



The two lawyers finally reached a clearing. Sheriff Farber and three deputies were going over the ground with a fine-tooth comb by flashlight.

CHAPTER ONE

Larceny and Old Lace

ASSISTANT District Attorney Clay McKinnon concluded his opening statement to the jury with obvious satisfaction—

“Ladies and gentlemen, the case against Richard Harmon may be briefly summed up. The evidence will show that while he was an employe of Auto Parts, Inc. he was entrusted with a key to a store room containing several hundred drums of a high-priced anti-freeze. The evidence will also show that Branch Manager Meecham caught the defendant red-handed as he was loading a drum of the fluid into his car. As Harmon later confessed, he had already stolen forty of the drums and sold them, to a party he would not identify, for eighty dollars per drum!”

McKinnon paused for effect and turned slowly to eye the accused man. Richard Harmon winced and hung his head.

“The evidence will further show, ladies and gentlemen, that the defendant voluntarily and without fear of threat or promise of reward, signed a complete and full confession of his crime. The confession will be duly presented in evidence. I thank you, ladies and gentlemen.”

An uneasy stir pervaded the courtroom. Judge Stupp eyed the accused man as if he were a fish in a barrel, then shifted his gaze to the tiny, crouching figure on the other side of the defense table. The judge obviously enjoyed a gloat. His expression plainly said: “This is once when even the great Clarence Darrow Mort is stuck with a sure loser!”

All the courtroom attendants and hangers-on perfectly comprehended Judge Stupp's gloat. The little defense lawyer had long been a thorn in the jurist's bulging side. Judge Stupp was noted as a bench bully, a judge who raved and ranted at the lawyers forced to practise before him. Apparently afflicted with a Messianic delusion, Judge Stupp abused the prerogatives of his office and treated all lawyers with open contempt. And any lawyer who talked back was liable to a fine for contempt of court.

Not so in Mort's case, however. The little lawyer was a master of subtle insult, and he could call the judge anything he wanted to, from a bald liar to a stupid ninny, without incurring a citation for contempt. He had a mastery of language which enabled him to make his meaning clear while cloaking his words with innocence, and on many occasions his manner was so ingenuously disarming that

not until the next day would the learned judge suddenly understand the meaning of some apparently casual remark.

The explosion of such delayed-action bombs would jolt the judge into apoplectic fits, and whatever lawyers happened to be before him at the time would suffer the usual fate of innocent bystanders. It was little wonder then that Judge Stupp looked down upon Clarence Darrow Mort as a fast cat peers at a rheumatic mouse. This was the day he had waited for.

"Counsel for the defendant," said Judge Stupp stiffly, "will proceed with his opening statement."

Mort rose wearily, coughed to clear his throat and said in a careless drawl: "Oh, I don't think I'll make an opening statement, Your Honor. Instead, I move the Court to dismiss the case against Richard Harmon."

Judge Stupp's face became horrible to behold. But almost immediately he recovered. The moment of horror had been prompted by his realization that you could never count on Clarence Darrow Mort—when things looked the blackest for him, the little devil would come up with a joker to upset the whole applecart. But Judge Stupp could relax this time—for once in his life the case was open-and-shut. Let Mort squirm—there was nothing he could gain.

Judge Stupp assumed an over-cloying smile as he politely asked: "And what are the grounds for your motion, Mr. Mort?"

Mort leaned back against the defense table and dug his hands in his pockets. This was a trick which infuriated Stupp—the august judge expected lawyers to stand erectly before him like flunkies.

Mort said in a tone of surprise: "Why, Your Honor, I supposed you'd noticed! The defendant, according to Mr. McKinnon's opening statement, is accused of embezzlement of property belonging to his employer. But Mr. McKinnon also stated that my client merely possessed a key to the room in which the property was stored.

"It was this key with which he was entrusted, not the care of the property inside the store room. It was Branch Manager Meecham who was entrusted with the property itself. He and he alone could be guilty of embezzling those drums of anti-freeze, for he alone stood in a position of special trust toward those drums.

"A mere naked possession, Your Honor, a bare charge, where access consists of a mere physical propinquity as an incident of the employment, does not create a special trust. Accordingly, my client was guilty of no other crime than larceny. As he has been indicted and placed on trial for embezzlement, I move that the case against him be dismissed!"

The proverbial pin could have been heard dropping throughout the room. Judge Stupp's face was as beet-red as if the criminal lawyer's statement amounted to a personal catastrophe—which it did. But he faltered only momentarily. A moment later he roared: "Motion overruled! I never heard such far-fetched sophistry in all my years on the bench. Why, this man has been placed in jeopardy! If I sustained your motion he could never be tried again even though he has signed a confession! He would go scot-free! I'll not tolerate such an outrageous miscarriage of justice. Make your opening statement, Mr. Mort!"

Mort smiled charitably. "Perhaps Your Honor would care to check a citation I have at hand." Mort turned about, picked up a small orange pamphlet and opened it to a marked page. No lawyer in the room needed to be told that the orange pamphlet was a bulletin of the *Northeastern Reporter*.

"The citation," continued Mort, "is *Warren vs. State*, Supreme Court of Indiana, 62nd *Northeastern*, Second Series, Page 624. The case is precisely in point."

Judge Stupp sneered. "I don't care if it is! This isn't Indiana—if you want to offer citations, give some from the courts of this state!"

The assistant district attorney rose to his feet. "Your Honor, I'd like a recess so I can read Mr. Mort's citation. The appellate courts of this state are apt to follow the Indiana Supreme Court in the absence of any other decision on the subject. I see no point in going through a long-winded trial only to have the jury's verdict upset in the appellate court. I take sole responsibility for this case—I drew the indictment myself. If I made a mistake in charging this man with embezzlement instead of larceny, I want to find out about it now, not after I've wasted the time of this court and the jury."

Judge Stupp scowled at the youthful assistant district attorney. Finally he snapped: "Ten minute recess."

WHEN he had left the bench, McKinnon came over to Mort's table and asked to see the orange bulletin. Mort grinned and passed it over. McKinnon read hastily, grimaced and threw the bulletin back onto the table.

"Cripes, C.D., you've got me!"

Mort chuckled. "No hard feelings, I hope, Clay?"

"Of course not. It's purely a technicality—even my boss approved the procedure. He thought the case was so open-and-shut he let me try it alone. But he should have realized that no case is a cinch when you're on the other side."

"Thanks, Clay. But what are we going to do with that dumb ox of a judge?"

McKinnon shrugged. "I'll move for a dis-

missal. Stupp's going to have to like it."

Mort shook his head in warning. "You'll make an enemy. Better let me fight it out with the judge."

"Nope. The stubborn mule would make us try the case over your objection, and the result would be a waste of several days of my time. We're swamped with work—that's why I didn't catch that Indiana case in *Northeastern*. The boss may be sore, but he'll agree I'm doing the wise thing."

"Well, it's your funeral."

Judge Stupp returned to the bench. Court was called to order, and the judge addressed Mort. "I've read that Indiana case in my chambers. I disagree with the court's reasoning. I'm sure the higher courts of this state will agree with me. So your motion for dismissal is still over—"

"Your Honor," said McKinnon, rising, "the State also moves for a dismissal."

Judge Stupp's eyes popped. He glared at McKinnon. "I can't understand your attitude, Mr. McKinnon! I thought you were prosecuting this case, not cooperating with the counsel for the defendant!"

McKinnon's face flushed. Mort could see that he was fighting to control his temper. He finally managed to say: "I'm sorry that Your Honor cannot approve of my conduct. However, the motion stands as made."

Stupp turned slightly purple. He steadfastly avoided Mort's gaze. Mort enjoyed the long moment and was glad that Stupp chose to drag it out. He could read the judicial mind. Stupp knew full well that he could not deny McKinnon's motion. It was all over.

"Motion granted!" Stupp snapped. "Case dismissed." The jurist paused. "Let me say for the record that in all my years on the bench this is the most disgraceful miscarriage of justice I have ever witnessed! It is all the more appalling that a member of the district attorney's staff should have aided and abetted the counsel for the defendant."

"Mr. Mort's activities are well known to this court. He has flaunted his contempt for justice, engaged in the most devious methods to open prison doors for confessed criminals. The case at hand is only another example. Richard Harmon is a confessed criminal, yet he is about to walk out of this room a free man, thanks to Clarence Darrow Mort, a disgrace to the legal profession!"

For once in his life Mort forgot to think first and speak afterwards. He leaped to his feet. "You're a liar! You're a disgrace to the profession, you psalm-singing idiot!"

"You're in contempt!" Stupp roared. "I fine you five hundred dollars! You will pay immediately or remain in custody!"

Too late, Mort got control of himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Clay Mc-

Kinnon was about to rise in protest. Mort stopped him with a gesture. Stupp glared from the bench.

"Well, Mr. Mort, are you prepared to pay your fine?"

"No, Your Honor. I happen at the moment to be—er, financially embarrassed. It looks as if I'll have to lay it out in jail."

"That will be eminently satisfactory to this court!" Stupp snapped. He discharged the jury and prisoner.

Richard Harmon had sat bewilderedly through all the proceedings, listening to the dialogue as uncomprehendingly as if it had been double-talk. Now he rose confusedly and addressed his lawyer.

"I don't get it, Mr. Mort. When does my trial start?"

"There's going to be no trial, son."

"Lordy! They convicted me in a hurry, didn't they?"

"They didn't convict you, Dick. You're a free man. You can walk out now. There's no one to stop you."

Harmon's eyes bulged confusedly. He was a slight, ineffectual-looking youth, weak-chinned and sallow-complexioned. He was, nevertheless, taller than his lawyer, and he looked down at him with piteous concern.

"You can't mean that, Mr. Mort. Don't kid me, please!"

"But I do mean it. Get along, Dick. My advice to you is to get outdoors and have some fun. Go hunting. You hunt, don't you?"

Harmon nodded mechanically. An after-thought struck him.

"But, Mr. Mort, I got to get a job right away and pay you what I owe you. It's wonderful what you've done for me. I don't know how you did it, but it's wonderful!"

"Forget it, Dick. What did I say my fee would be if I got you off—five hundred was it? Well, some time when you strike it rich you come to the poorhouse and pay me. The money will come in handy then."

"But, Mr. Mort, I got a little money in a savings account—a hundred and fifty bucks. I can give you that now if you come with me to the bank."

"Sorry, Dick. Can't make it just now. Didn't you hear His Honor? It's off to the cooler for me."

Harmon seemed on the verge of fainting. His voice sounded choked. "You mean *you're* going to jail and *I'm* going free? Why, Mr. Mort, that ain't fair! That's—"

"That's life, Dick. Don't bother about me, just run along and thank your lucky stars you beat a tough rap. And by the way, Dick, next time you pull a piece of larceny, don't let the cops talk you into signing anything. You're just making it tougher for yourself when you do."

Harmon stared. Mort turned away and spied a deputy sheriff. "Get the cuffs, Sam! I'm counting on you to see that I get a nice air-conditioned cell with southern exposure!"

The bailiff blushed and fidgeted awkwardly. "Gee, Mr. Mort, I ain't agonna have to cart you off to the jug, am I? You was just kiddin' the judge, wasn't you? Five bills wouldn't be nothin' but chicken-feed to a big-shot criminal lawyer like you!"

Mort held up his hands and turned them over. "Sam, so help me, I'm flat broke. I was just going to touch somebody for cab fare, but now I won't need it. I hope the chow at the county jail is better than what I've been getting at cheap restaurants in this town. If it hadn't been for all the hamburgers I've been eating, I might not have let that crummy judge get me riled."

Clay McKinnon stopped shoving books into his briefcase. "On the level, C.D., you haven't got the five hundred?"

"Nope."

"Well, I'll be damned! Say, here's fifty. I could let you have more, only just being married's kind of got me short. But I'll have the other four hundred and fifty for you in no time! There isn't a lawyer in town who won't donate the dough as soon as he hears about the way you got Stupp told. The dope—I'd have handed him one myself if you hadn't stopped me!"

Mort waved away the proffered sheaf of bills. "Thanks a million, Clay, but I don't think I'll have to lie long in jail. That partner of mine has still got the first dollar I paid him. Blackstone'll come running and pay off as soon as he hears about it."

The assistant district attorney said indignantly: "Wait till the rest of the bar hears about it! There'll be a petition circulated to request Stupp to revoke the fine! And before this is all over, the bar association will hand him a reprimand!"

Mort sighed wearily. "Don't exercise yourself about me, Clay. Anything that stupe can hand out rolls off me like water off a duck's back. What's five hundred fish? I lost ten times that much three days ago at Lucky Page's. Inside of a week I'll take in some swanky killer and bolster the bankroll. The hell with a lousy five bills!" Mort turned to the bailiff. "Come on Sam—I'm anxious to see my new quarters!"

MCKINNON stood by with a chagrined expression while Mort marched off with the embarrassed deputy. Richard Harmon came up to the assistant district attorney. "You mean he's got to go to jail just because he can't raise five hundred dollars?"

"That's right, Harmon. That's the kind of a lawyer you had—he works one hundred per

cent for the client regardless of what happens to himself!"

Harmon watched the little lawyer disappear with solemn admiration. Then he said under his breath: "Five hundred dollars! I'll get the dough for him, that's what I'll do!"

McKinnon turned sharply, for he had heard the almost inaudible remark. His brow furrowed as the frail youth walked out of the courtroom. Then he shrugged and zipped shut his briefcase. Perhaps Mort was right—Blackstone Jones would have him out of jail before he could pass a hat and raise the five hundred himself.

Mort had indeed been right. He had not even been booked in the turnkey's office when there was a stir. The turnkey, deputies and trustees assembled to watch the historic jailing of the great criminal lawyer all turned to behold another marvel, the gigantic Blackstone Jones.

Standing six-feet-seven, as perfectly proportioned as a middleweight boxer, Jones filled the doorway. He looked reproachfully at his senior partner.

"Come now," said Mort. "I can't have disgraced the firm that badly! Ask Clay McKinnon—that numbskull judge had a bawling out coming to him!"

Blackstone Jones' expression remained severe as he pulled out a billfold. "I'm not at all unhappy about your getting Stupp told. It's the fact that you're broke that makes me boil! Imagine—less than three weeks ago your cut in the Cranston case was twenty thousand dollars! And today you're broke!"

Mort rose indignantly to his full stature, a little over five feet.

"You're distorting the facts! The man from the income tax department lifted ten grand! Actually I've spent only a lousy five thousand in three whole weeks, not counting the other five the dice game at Lucky Page's cost me! And you act as though I'm a spendthrift!"

Blackstone Jones ignored the broad grins, drew five bills from the billfold. He proffered them to the deputy, who drew back.

"You'll have to pay the clerk. But I guess it's all right if you guys let Mr. Mort go."

The turnkey shrugged. "Sure. You didn't bring no commitment papers anyway. I guess this is the first case like this we've had—I'm glad I don't have to write it up. We'll just play like Mr. Mort was never here."

Mort sighed. "And I'm going to play like you owe me money, Blackie. Didn't I see another one of those beautiful pieces of printing in your billfold? How's about it?"

Blackstone Jones expressed his pained disapproval but handed over a hundred-dollar bill. "Try to get your dinner out of it," he said. "I'll meet you at Nick's after I've paid off the clerk."

Two hours later, Mort strolled grandly into Nick's, spied Blackstone Jones twisting a napkin at a table and crossed to him. His junior partner rose in dismay.

"Where've you been? I've waited an hour!"

"Over at Lucky Page's. The time passed before I realized it."

Blackstone Jones cupped his face in his hands in holy horror.

"So now you've dropped the hundred I gave you! When will you learn that you can't beat Lucky's dice game!"

Mort coughed modestly. He reached into his pocket and drew out a roll of bills that would have gagged a nag. Graciously he peeled off six centuries and tossed them upon the table in front of Jones.

"There you are, son. For your information and to give you proper respect for your elders, I'm going to let you in on something. I just got through taking Lucky Page's game for ten grand—twice what I lost last week."

Jones stared. "Incredible!"

"But true, Blackie." Mort pocketed his roll of bills, reached into his other pants pocket and produced a pair of dice. "Observe these cubes, Blackie. They can talk in any language, including the Scandinavian. It was the same pair or one identically like them that threw me for a loss last week. It took a little doing, but I found out where Lucky got them. The same guy was kind enough to sell me a few pairs to match. Only they spoke a different language. I palmed them into the game this afternoon, and you've seen the result."

Jones was still incredulous. "But I still can't buy it! Since when do Lucky's dealers let anyone keep the same dice and win?"

"Elementary, my dear Blackstone. I had six pairs when I walked into the Lucky Club. I kept inserting them each time the dealer would palm in the house dice."

"And you weren't murdered?"

"No. Lucky himself attended his funeral. If I had been a visiting fireman from Peoria, Illinois, I'd have been given the bum's rush. But even judges find out they can't push Clarence Darrow Mort around!"

Blackstone Jones solemnly sat down. "That reminds me. You'll never collect your fee from Richard Harmon. The kid's dead. Somebody shot him in a hunting accident this afternoon. *If* it was an accident."

CHAPTER TWO

Split Bullet

A WAITER put a menu on the table. Mort eyed it absently. He looked up finally and said: "So? Well, that's too bad. Seems that kid was born under an unlucky star. How'd it all happen?"

"I don't know much, myself. It happened within an hour and a half after Harmon's case was over. He went straight out to the Martindale estate and got there just as Ted Martindale and a couple of his friends were going out to the back woodlot to hunt for squirrels. Ted told Harmon to come along, he'd get him a rifle. So Harmon went along. The party separated. About a half hour later one of Ted's friends came upon Harmon sprawled flat on his face. He had been shot in the back of the head."

"The name of this friend?"

"I didn't catch it. A deputy was in here a while ago telling me about it, but he was in a hurry and didn't pass on any details."

"This Martindale estate," Mort mused, "is out on River Road, isn't it? That big place on top of the bank with the stone wall around it, facing the river?"

"Yes. It's the biggest layout around there. The Martindale family really has plenty of the stuff it takes."

"Of course. I remember—they live off the killing Grandpa Martindale made in rubber stock when Akron was just a crossroads town near Cleveland. Nobody in the family has done a lick of work since Grandpa. Naturally that gives them a first-ranking social position."

"Naturally. And what a family. Ted's only thirty but he's bald already, and there's a younger brother named Ralston who hides away in a summer house and pretends he's a novelist. Wears a little trick beard and doesn't cut his hair."

"I've seen him in the flesh," said Mort. "Heard him, too. Talks in a clipped, terse voice and afterwards looks around cagily as if he's said something very clever. Never sold a novel, so I hear."

"Nope. Everything he does is over the editors' heads. Then there's Mama Martindale. She's been drunk every night for thirty years. Had plastic surgery done on her nose three times when she's passed out on her face and broken it. Seems a miracle that family could manage to produce a daughter like Lisa."

"Ah, yes. I've seen the gal around. A looker."

"Brother, that's sacrilege! She's got a knockout build and a face that aggravates the situation. The best looking brunette I ever saw in my life. She makes all the blondes wish they had never seen a bottle of peroxide!"

"But she's just a little touched like the rest of the family from what I hear. Wasn't it only last New Year's Eve that she took a shower bath in the lobby fountain at the Maramour Hotel?"

"Yeah. I've got a picture of that hung on the wall of my room. You know Shiny

Sherill, the photog for the *Sentinel*? He was there with a camera. The paper couldn't use the pix, but Shiny passed 'em out to his pals. Mine is six-by-eight."

"Remind me to stop off at your hotel. This Ted Martindale—he runs true to form, doesn't he? I mean he laps up enough liquor to be his mother's son, and nobody ever accused him of having all of his buttons."

"Right. There are a lot missing. He's an all around punk. He's so used to pushing other people around that his normal tone sounds as if he's bawling somebody out."

Mort nodded. "He knocked me down once at the Lucky Club. He'd been playing a number, and he gave it up. I played it, and it won. He flattened me on general principles. The insult added to the injury was that Lucky's musclemen looked the other way and let him get away with it. The bruiser—he weighs about two hundred pounds!"

Blackstone Jones said: "I'll make a note of that, C.D., and when the opportunity presents itself I'll flatten the runt just to even the score. From what I've seen and heard, all of Ted's pals are just as rank as he is."

"No doubt. I wonder what a little, unheard-of guy like Dick Harmon could be doing in that crowd. How would he get to know Ted Martindale? Well enough, I mean, to pay a call at the River Road estate and be invited to join a hunting party."

Blackstone Jones nodded understandingly. "The idea isn't an original one. I thought of it first."

The waiter came back, and Mort ordered a hot sandwich and a double shot of bourbon. Blackstone had finished dinner, and, as usual, he abstained from liquor. Mort had grown so accustomed to this bizarre trait that he no longer rode his junior partner about it. "A dislike for liquor," he had said, "is really nothing to be ashamed of. It's no worse than being born without ears."

Mort downed his double, ordered another and said: "I feel a certain moral obligation about Dick Harmon. I did him one free favor, so it's only natural that I should do him a bigger one. Not that he'll appreciate it!"

"You mean tracking down his murderer?"

"If he was murdered. Of course there's a chance one of Ted's potted pals or even Ted himself accidentally took the back of Harmon's head for a squirrel."

Jones slowly shook his head. "It's stretching coincidence too far to assume that Harmon just happened to go to the Martindale estate and be killed today right after he was freed. There's much too much happenstance about that."

Mort eyed him appreciatively. "Both our great minds run in the same broad channel. I personally think—" He stopped short. A

young man had tottered into Nick's. He was red-faced, red-eyed. Plainly he was the worse for booze.

"What a shame!" said Blackie. He frowned his disapproval. At that moment the drunken figure spied Mort and swayed toward the table. He carried a folded newspaper in his coat pocket.

"Clay McKinnon!" said Mort, slightly amused. "Since when have you begun to hit the bottle? That's no way for a bright young man in the district attorney's office to act!"

McKinnon grinned foolishly. "Who's in the district attorney's office? Not me—I been fired!"

Immediately Mort lost his mild enjoyment of the situation. He spoke gavelly. "Sit down, Clay, and tell me all about it."

McKinnon sat down heavily in the booth beside Mort. He gave his shoulders an exaggerated shrug, looked around at the older lawyer and grinned as if he had something to grin about. "It was the Harmon case that did it. Haven't you seen the papers? Here—take a look."

HE PULLED the folded newspaper from his pocket. Mort accepted and opened it. He frowned as he read the front page two-column box of especially black type. The box contained an editorial with liberal quotations from an interview with Judge Stupp. The release of Richard Harmon on a technicality, the jurist opined, revealed the crying need for criminal law reform in the United States. The instant case was all the more disgraceful in that the state's attorney had not only failed to fight the technicality but had actually sanctioned it. It was for this that he was drawing his salary paid by the taxpayers of the state!

Mort threw down the paper in disgust. "So Harry Malone fired you as the result of newspaper pressure!"

McKinnon nodded. "He knows as well as I do that you'd have beaten us in the court of appeals. But the papers demanded somebody's scalp, so he peeled off mine."

Mort snorted. "The hell with newspaper editorials! Every editorial writer in the country is a self-styled criminologist who thinks empty prattle about legal technicalities will make the courts Utopia! They try to rouse the rabble every time a technicality is invoked to free an accused man whom they've already convicted in their lousy newspapers! They never squawk about the innocent men released from prisons every year long after some politically ambitious district attorney has railroaded them to jail on a technicality! They condemn the fairest criminal code in the world merely because in an occasional isolated case it permits an apparent miscarriage of justice. They belong in a Fascist country where crimi-

nals don't get tried, just arrested and shot!"

"Bravo!" said Blackie. "Better that a thousand guilty men should go free than that one innocent man should be punished!"

"Well, in this case," groaned McKinnon, "I'm the innocent man!"

Mort's features relented, and he said kindly: "Maybe you've had a good break after all. A job in the D.A.'s office can't last forever, and when you leave it you have no practice. Better forget political jobs and build up a practice for the future."

McKinnon was not impressed. "In the meantime, who's going to feed my wife and kids?"

Mort exchanged a depressed glance with his junior partner. "Well, something'll turn up. At least you're better off than Richard Harmon. He's dead."

It seemed to register slowly. McKinnon said: "You're not kidding? What happened?"

Mort told him the little that he knew. He concluded with: "What beats me is what Harmon was doing out at the Martindale estate. I can't figure it."

McKinnon said slowly: "Maybe this is the angle. As you left, Harmon said under his breath that he was going to get the dough, the five hundred dollars to pay your fine."

"I didn't hear him say anything like that."

"No, you wouldn't, you were too far away. But I heard him. And I'm willing to bet my other shirt that when Harmon scooted out to the Martindale place he had only one reason—to get five hundred dollars for you!"

Mort mused: "Now I wonder why anyone out at the Martindale estate would pass over half a grand to Dick Harmon!"

"If you can learn the answer to that one," suggested Blackstone Jones, "you may learn why Harmon was shot in the back of the head."

McKinnon seemed almost completely sober now. He said: "I think I follow you, Blackie. You think Harmon was blackmailing somebody out there and when he put the heat on for five hundred bucks the blackmailee decided to liquidate him. Right?"

"Right," said Mort. "We're all agreed. Now it would be interesting if our theory proved true and we were to nail the murderer."

McKinnon eyed Mort. "We?"

"Sure, 'we'. Maybe we can do you a good turn, Clay. If we do turn up the killer, you can have the credit. That will reinstate you in the public eye and give you a lot of nice newspaper space to work up a law practice with. How about it? Want to string along?"

"Do I? Say, you guys are swell! I'll never forget this!"

"Don't thank us until we've got our man. This may pay off only in headaches."

McKinnon soberly shook his head. "I don't think so. Where you're concerned, C.D., something always pops. If you can't crack this case, nobody can!"

"Thanks, but I'll need your help."

"Anything you say."

"First, drink half a gallon of black coffee. Then go back to the D.A.'s office and steal your file on Harmon."

McKinnon started. "Why—why, I couldn't do that, C.D. I'm no longer working there, and I've no right to take out the file."

"After the dirty deal Malone gave you, you still talk about your right to walk out with a file! It'll be easy—all you'll have to do is to walk in and claim you left some personal possessions there. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing! Get me that file. You were working on the case, and when it turns up missing, you can say you forgot to put it back. In the meantime, I'll have photostats made."

"I don't understand—why are you so eager to get that file?"

"Because I don't know a single thing about Harmon. I asked him no questions, so I got no answers. I didn't even ask him if he was guilty—I took his confession for granted. I knew my only chance to free him was on the technicality in the indictment. So it didn't make the slightest difference whether I had any dope on Harmon or not."

"I see. Well, we investigated Harmon pretty carefully. Maybe I could give you all the information you want."

"And maybe there's something vital in the file that you've forgotten. You get that file. And be quick, because even a dummy like Harry Malone will think of that angle sooner or later."

"O.K." McKinnon rose. He looked slightly woozy but this time his legs moved the way legs should. Mort watched him leave Nick's. The waiter finally brought his sandwich.

Blackstone Jones said: "And me? What am I to do, wait till you've eaten that sandwich and trail along?"

"Who said so? I want you to chase out to the Martindale estate and get me the low-down on everybody who was there this afternoon."

"You're kidding. They wouldn't even let me in, and if they did, they'd throw me right out again."

"Not if Lisa gets a look at you. She wouldn't throw out anything in pants, especially if the pants were your size. It's a wonder she hasn't tried to make you already."

"Oh, she has," Jones said modestly. "Naturally I'm not interested in females who take nude showers in hotel lobbies."

"Then get interested. Don't forget that Lisa has a million dollars in the bank and

another million in her shape. Maybe she is wacky like the rest of her family but she might turn out to be perfectly normal if you'd beat her brains out."

"You can't be serious," Blackstone Jones said doubtfully.

"I was never more serious in my life. Now, chase out there and get next to Lisa. I want you to set the stage so that when I show up, they'll roll out the welcome rug."

Jones got out of the booth. "I hope you enjoy the sandwich while I'm accomplishing all these miracles."

"I will, Blackie, I will."

HALF an hour later Mort was nursing a double bourbon as McKinnon walked in carrying a bulging briefcase. McKinnon was perspiring freely. He sat down and unzipped the case. It was mainly filled with books.

"I had to make it look good," McKinnon explained. "The boss himself was there. This Harmon deal has got him going."

"You mean the newspaper criticism?"

"No—that's old-hat by now. It seems Harmon was murdered beyond the shadow of a doubt. The county coroner found powder marks on the back of Harmon's neck. At first there was too much blood."

"Wait a minute—you mean powder marks, burns or smoke smudges?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Difference! And you're an assistant D.A.—were, I mean! Listen, Clay, there's all the difference in the world. Powder marks may show up if the gun was within a yard of its target. Smoke marks mean the muzzle was within a foot of the wound. Burns are made only when the muzzle was much closer. Now, with your memory thus refreshed, can you tell me what kind of marks were made?"

"Well—I'm not sure, but I think I heard Malone talking about powder particles only."

"That's probably right. The killer wouldn't have to get any closer. Now, about the bullet—did you pick up anything on that?"

"They haven't got it yet. Seems the coroner can't find it."

"That means it's been split. You can bet that other shirt of yours that the killer used a hollow-point or a bullet that had been split with a knife. It would be interesting to find out what kind of bullets each of the other hunters was using. Did you happen to pick up any names?"

"No. All the talk was about the missing bullet. Malone was having kittens because the coroner was taking so much time. He got him on the phone while I was there, and evidently the coroner didn't want to mutilate the corpse too much. 'I don't give a damn if you cut his head off!' Malone shouted. 'Get me that bullet!'"

Mort chuckled. "And while Malone was bawling the hell out of the coroner, you walked out with the Harmon file!"

"Yes, here it is." McKinnon passed over a cardboard folder marked *State vs. Harmon, Richard*. Mort accepted the folder eagerly and opened it.

"What are you looking for, C.D.?"

"I don't know. Give me time."

McKinnon waited silently for a quarter of an hour, watching Mort's eyes sift each item in the file. At the end of that time Mort replaced all the papers and closed the folder. McKinnon eyed him eagerly:

"Well?"

"A very thorough job. It's a damn good thing I got Harmon off on a technicality. I didn't know he'd been up twice before for embezzlement."

"I could have told you that."

"But you couldn't have told me that one of those times was when Harmon was working for Auto Parts, Inc., because you didn't think it important. Didn't it strike you as incredible that the same concern would hire him back after they'd once prosecuted him and sent him to the penitentiary?"

"No, it didn't. That other time was in California, and Harmon was using the name of Forrester. It seemed to me only natural that he would try to get another job with the same company. He knew the job because it was the same kind he had had before. I never gave it a thought. Of course I mentioned it to the local manager."

"Let's see, what was his name?"

"Meecham—the first name is in the file."

"I wonder if Meecham forwarded the information to the company's main office, wherever that is."

"It's in Detroit, but I don't know what Meecham did with the information. I told him to keep it under his hat. I wanted to spring it as a surprise on you. Brother! How you crossed me up!"

"This Meecham—did you get much of a line on him?"

"No. I didn't see any reason to. He's an ordinary-looking chap, about forty-five. I gathered that he'd been in town a year or so. His being manager of the local branch is an indication that he rates pretty well in the company. The company was started here, you know."

"No, I didn't know. How long ago was that?"

"Twenty years ago, more or less. At first old Jess Seeley just had an auto accessory store. But not for long. He branched out with other stores and finally bought a factory in Detroit that manufactured auto accessories. Now he gives even the big auto makers a run for the accessory and parts business."

"Well, that happened before my time, the opening of that first store, I mean. Where'd you get all that information?"

"From Meecham. He seemed pretty proud of being selected as manager here and correspondingly angry at Harmon for being able to get away with hauling out several thousand dollars' worth of anti-freeze in a company pick-up truck."

"I believe you said in your opening statement that Meecham caught Harmon himself."

"Yes. Meecham happened to come to the store house after hours. He caught Harmon red-handed, as Harmon admitted in his confession. And you'll remember that there was no rubber hose used to get that confession. It was made voluntarily."

"I remarked that at the time when I took the case. It convinced me that Harmon was none too bright."

"By the way, why did you ever take his case in the first place? I thought you had to have five grand before you would walk up the courthouse steps."

"Harmon's was on the house. I noticed that technical error in the indictment when I read it in the local law journal. I figured some bright young lad would be sure to spot it and get a lot of notoriety when he did. Maybe he would undermine my position as champion rabbit-puller-out-of-the-hatter. I couldn't take a chance on that, so I took the case."

"Well, it looks as if you got into something you didn't bargain for."

Mort nodded. "So did Harmon. Let's take a ride out to the Martindale estate and try to find out what kind of a bargain he made in the first place."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Party

THE Martindale estate, situated a few miles from the city limits, was well lighted as McKinnon turned his car into the drive. Mort observed that not only did all the house lights seem to be on, but also the drive lights and certain other flood lights strategically placed over the grounds, giving the place the festive appearance of a party in full swing.

It was indeed a party, Mort decided, a murder party. It became apparent that only invited guests were welcome, as a sheriff's deputy stepped into the drive and held up his hand.

"It's ten-to-one he doesn't know you've been fired," Mort said under his breath. "It would be a shame to disillusion him."

McKinnon slowed, forced a smile and waved a friendly greeting that indicated his right to enter the premises. The deputy squinted, rec-

ognized him and stepped aside. McKinnon drove on. He parked near a group of cars in a lot at one side of the sprawling stone mansion.

"So far so good," said Mort. "I don't think any of the sheriff's men will question you."

"But Malone will have at least one assistant out here," McKinnon pointed out. "Everybody in the office knows I've been fired."

"But nobody but Malone will have the guts to mention it," said Mort. "As for me, I hope Blackie's got everything set up by this time. If he hasn't, just tell anybody who asks questions that I came along for the ride."

They got out of the car and crossed to a porte-cochère. Another sheriff's deputy loitered there.

"Hello, Jeff," said McKinnon. "Where is everybody?"

"Out back looking for a bullet or something, I guess." The deputy eyed Mort. "Good grief, the murderer hired you already?"

"No, Jeff, but maybe he will. There's nothing like being at the scene of the crime to drum up business."

The deputy grinned cynically. "I don't know why the hell us guys should try to find out who done it—you'll get him loose any way."

"Yes, but you've got to make an arrest before I can make a fee. So, more power to you!"

Mort turned away and nodded toward the rear of the estate. McKinnon understood. The two men walked in that direction. Lights were spaced in such a manner that at no time were they in complete darkness until the woodlot at the extreme rear was reached. Mort surveyed the woodlot in the little light that filtered through from an invisible moon.

"Now, this is my idea of a hunter's paradise! Somebody in the Martindale family must be blessed with a little intelligence. Personally, I never hunt squirrels, but it's a cinch that nothing would attract them more than a grove of hickory nut and walnut trees like this."

"It also makes an ideal place for a murder," McKinnon commented. "Even in the daytime there'd be visibility for not more than seventy-five or a hundred yards."

"Right. I wonder where the scene of the crime is. We can get lost back here, you know."

"We should notice some lights. If the sheriff and his deputies are looking for something, they'll have plenty of lights."

A few minutes later a glow was visible. The two lawyers hastened on, doing their clothes no good in a section where the underbrush had been permitted to grow. Finally they reached a clearing. Sheriff Nate Farber and three deputies were apparently going over a section of ground with a fine-tooth comb. At

least they had rakes and large flashlights, as well as guns, and their search was systematic.

Also in attendance was a middle-aged man who frowned severely at McKinnon. Mort felt the former assistant district attorney wince beside him, and he understood why. The middle-aged man was Walter Jameson, chief assistant district attorney.

"Hello, Walt," said Mort. "Somebody lose a nickel?"

Jameson eyed Mort suspiciously. "What are you doing here—working for the killer already?"

"No, just kibitzing. Funny thing you fellows waited till dark to hunt for something back here."

"We didn't know it was murder till the coroner finally made up his mind, and it was dark by then."

"Mind telling me what you're looking for?"

"Yes, I do mind." Jameson eyed McKinnon. "If you haven't been reinstated I suggest that you and your friend leave the premises."

Even in the semi-darkness Mort could see the blood rise to McKinnon's face. McKinnon said nothing, and Jameson instantly saw his opportunity.

"You heard me—get going, both of you!"

Nate Farber had paused in his search. The sheriff eyed Mort thoughtfully. "Just a minute, Jameson, I guess I got some say as to what goes on around here. C.D., you wouldn't show up around the scene of a crime unless you had plenty of good reason. Maybe you'd like to tell us what your reason is."

"Certainly, Sheriff. The murdered man was a client of mine, as you know. I'm interested in finding out who murdered him and seeing that he gets his just deserts."

Nate Farber straightened and glared at Jameson. "See? He's out here to help. I guess maybe we can use his help. It's high time we had some legal advice that amounted to something. I'm getting tired of getting the goods on killers only to have you guys in the D.A.'s office mess up the case." He turned back to Mort. "We're looking for a cartridge case, C.D. I don't think we got a chance of finding it, but we're looking just the same."

"I see. You've taken it for granted that the bullet was too badly mutilated to prove anything, so you figure you're sunk without the cartridge case. Well, good luck, but I agree about your chances of finding it. No killer would be dumb enough to eject the case at the scene of the crime unless he was using an automatic twenty-two rifle. And there are damn few of those. At the moment the H. & R.—Reising is the only one I can think of."

"Well, it wasn't an automatic unless the job was done by some gun we don't know about. Harmon and the others were using single-shot rifles."

Mort grimaced. "I applaud your thoroughness, but looking for a needle in a haystack that had no needle in it would be no more hopeless than the job you've got."

Jameson had stood by sullenly. He now said: "Sheriff, you'll have to take full responsibility for shooting off your mouth the way you have. I'll make a report of this to Malone."

Farber sneered. "Be sure to put in what I said about the way he lets lawyers like C.D. here make a monkey of him. If he gets anybody convicted it's an accident."

Jameson looked like a full-grown beet, but he said nothing. Mort nudged McKinnon, and they walked away. When they were out of hearing range, McKinnon inquired: "Well, what do you think?"

"I think the guy who pulled this job saw a golden opportunity to get away with murder and took it. The sheriff will never find that cartridge case, and that means it can't be used to check test cases in the other guns. It's a million-to-one the bullet will prove nothing, so ballistics won't help a bit."

"You think we've actually run into a perfect crime?"

"Maybe, but let's not give up so soon. The matter of motive is what's puzzling me now. Going on the premise that Harmon was blackmailing somebody out here, we've got to find out who he was blackmailing. Even if we accomplish that, we'll get nowhere unless we can produce something besides the motive. As it stands, there's no evidence. We've got to make some."

McKinnon plodded on glumly. "It sounds like a tough order." He stopped suddenly. "Hey, what's that? Are we back at the clearing we started from?"

Mort followed his gaze. A light loomed through the trees.

"No, that's a house. Let's see."

THEY proceeded to the light. A small frame cottage stood in a clearing.

"This must be the summer house," said Mort, "where Ralston Martindale produces his unpublished novels. Let's drop in and have a look at the family genius."

He walked to the front door and knocked. There was a slight chill in the air, and the door was fully closed. Almost at once it opened. A thin young man with thick-lensed glasses peered out.

"Yes, what is it? More detectives?"

"We'd like to talk to you," Mort told him evasively. "This is Mr. McKinnon of the district attorney's office. Do you mind if we come in?"

Ralston Martindale sighed painfully as if carrying a cross. "I suppose there's nothing much I can do about it. Genius must bow

to the mundane matters of a tawdry world."

He stood by, and Mort suppressed a grin as he entered. McKinnon gave the boy a look of frank curiosity. His eyes bulged even more as he surveyed the interior. He knew nothing about such pastel colors, but he sensed that they would have ten-dollar names. All the furniture was in keeping with the color scheme.

"Quite a layout for the middle of a woods!"

Ralston Martindale eyed him sharply. "Did you come out here to discuss my studio?"

"Oh, so it's a studio? Got any nude models around?"

Mort kicked sidewise at McKinnon's shin, and wondered if he had really sobered up. He said quickly: "Were you here this afternoon when Richard Harmon was shot?"

"Quite naturally. I believe it is agreed that the shooting occurred between four-thirty and four-forty-five. I was here all afternoon until a little after five."

"You heard the shot, then?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. The underbrush and the trees muffle sounds. I heard some shots. But I guess everybody but the dead man took a shot at something. I might have heard one of the other shots."

"But you didn't see anything or anybody?"

"I saw my brother Ted and Jeet Seeley and—"

"Wait a minute!" snapped Mort. "This Seeley—who's he?"

"Why, he's the son of old Jess Seeley, of course. I thought everybody knew Jeet."

"You mean the Jess Seeley who founded Auto Parts, Inc.?"

"Is there any other?"

Mort shot a glance at McKinnon, who seemed intensely interested. He asked: "This other man you saw—who was he?"

"I don't know. I never saw him before in my life. He was a middle-aged man, looking particularly atrocious in a striped business suit. A single-breasted suit, I remember, though this man very definitely had a paunch."

"Atrocious, indeed!" said Mort, not daring to look at McKinnon again. "Was he carrying a rifle, too?"

"No. He seemed to be looking for somebody."

"You saw him again after that?"

"No. I didn't see anybody after that. Anybody but officers, I mean. I've been pestered so terribly that I haven't accomplished a thing all this live-long day!"

"Well, we won't bother you any longer."

When they were outside, McKinnon burst into laughter. Mort remained serious. "Know anybody that description might fit?"

"Well—it couldn't be, but—"

"But whom are you thinking of?"

"Meecham, the branch manager. He showed

up to be a witness today, and he was wearing a single-breasted striped suit. He fits the rest of the description, too. But of course it wouldn't be Meecham."

"Why not? Meecham works for Auto Parts, Inc. Jeet Seeley is the son of the owner and no doubt has a very important executive job in the company. Harmon worked for the company at the time of his part in the larceny of the anti-freeze. So it's no coincidence that he beat it out here. I tell you, Clay, there's some tie-up between Harmon's anti-freeze drums and somebody here at this estate."

"Well, I can't figure out what it would be."

"It could be that Meecham was in on that anti-freeze steal himself."

"But it was Meecham who caught Harmon red-handed!"

"Sure, but I seem to recall that it happened after office hours. Suppose Meecham had suddenly been notified that somebody important in the company, say Jeet Seeley, was to meet him at the branch. So Meecham gets scared and turns the cops loose on Harmon, knowing Jeet Seeley would catch him if he didn't turn him in."

"Why wouldn't Harmon tell the truth about Meecham? Why would he take the rap and let Meecham get away with it?"

"Because he wouldn't be believed if he did talk. And cons get to regard matters like that as private ones to take care of themselves. Later, when Harmon got off scot-free and needed five hundred bucks, he must have figured his information was worth that much to Jeet Seeley. He knew he was here, so he came out to see him. But Meecham followed him and shot him before he had a chance."

"You heard that crazy kid back there—the man he saw was carrying no gun."

"He said he saw no rifle. But Meecham could have been carrying a twenty-two revolver or automatic. Since ballistics can't prove anything, it can never be definitely determined that Harmon was shot with a rifle."

"You seriously believe that?"

"I don't believe anything. But it's one theory of the case, a working hypothesis. I think it'll do till a better one comes along."

"Then we'd better back-track to Nate Farber and put him onto Meecham."

"There's plenty of time. First I want to see how Blackie's progressed at the house. And I'd like a look at Jeet Seeley and Ted Martindale. Also the fourth member of the hunting party, whose identity I don't even know yet."

"That makes two of them—him and the murderer."

The deputy at the porte-cochère watched disinterestedly as Mort rang the bell there. A maid answered.

"I'm C. D. Mort. My partner, Mr. Jones, is expecting me."

The maid became alive. "Oh, him!" She whistled in appreciation. Mort grinned and motioned for McKinnon to follow. The maid led the pair into a living room approximately the size of the Union Terminal waiting room at Cincinnati, Ohio. Several people were lounging on two davenportes before a fireplace in which glowed a four-foot log.

STANDING at the fireplace was Blackstone Jones. He was speaking as the maid ushered in the pair, and he stopped at the sight of them. "Well, hello, C.D. I was just telling the folks how you put that cockeyed judge into a tantrum this afternoon! And look, everybody, here's Clay McKinnon, the D.A.'s assistant who was trying the case for the state."

Everybody looked. Blackstone Jones made the introductions with the manner of an old friend of the family. He must have appreciated the significance of Jeet Seeley's presence, but he said nothing. Mort got one more shock when he was introduced to the fourth member of the hunting party.

The fourth member was Oliver Montrose, wealthiest financier in Riverton. Lean, fifty-ish, he was nevertheless distinguished looking. Mort wondered if Lisa were the attraction. He shot her a glance, and she grinned back. Blackstone Jones observed this. He frowned. "I thought you didn't know Miss Martindale."

Lisa Martindale snickered. She was sitting with one leg hung over the arm of the davenport. It was a good leg, as anyone could see.

"We've met," said Mort in an offhand manner. His junior partner eyed him reproachfully. Almost every day he made the appalling discovery that Mort got around much more than he let on. Mort sat down beside Lisa.

"I wasn't sure whether I was persona grata. So I sent Blackie around to toss in my hat."

"Well, you couldn't have picked a better hat-tosser-inner. I owe you something for your thoughtfulness. I've been trying to make the big brute for months. Lordy, how I wish he'd grab me up and carry me off to a fate worse than death!"

"Lisa!" said Ted Martindale sharply. His face showed the usual amount of drinking. He turned to Oliver Montrose, who looked shocked. "She just talks like that."

Lisa said: "You go to hell, Ted!"

Mort enjoyed McKinnon's reaction. McKinnon had taken a place between Jeet Seeley and Ted Martindale on the opposite davenport. Jeet Seeley hardly seemed to notice his presence or that of anyone else. He had barely acknowledged introductions, and he sat dejectedly without any apparent interest in the conversation.

"Mr. McKinnon is out of the D.A.'s office," Mort said. "He wants to hear what each of

you knows about this afternoon's tragedy."

Lisa turned around and made a face.

"What the hell—we've already spilled our guts to the head flunkey from the D.A.'s office and the sheriff to boot! And now you want us to tell it all again. Why?"

"Don't be that way," Mort told her, giving her thigh an affectionate pat. Oliver Montrose looked outraged, and Ted Martindale said: "Take your leg off the arm of the couch, Lisa—I'm tired of looking at pink panties."

Lisa said: "Don't mind Ted—he's color-blind." She regarded Mort thoughtfully. "I think you're the one who wants to hear the story. Suppose I tell it, and if I'm wrong on any details, the others can stop me."

Mort nodded and she began. Harmon had appeared late that afternoon—in a cab, everybody assumed, for there was no strange car around. He had asked for Jeet Seeley. Jeet had told the maid to bring him in. Harmon had wanted to talk to him privately. Jeet demurred—everybody was ready to go out to the woodlot for a little sport, and he didn't want to delay the party. So he suggested that somebody give Harmon a rifle and let him come along. The rifle they gave Harmon was a new one, like the others.

So they had all gone out, the four of them, to the woodlot, and separated. Everybody but Harmon had taken a shot at something, and everybody had missed. That is, everybody but the person who had shot Harmon. Jeet Seeley had found the body. He had called for the others, and they had all gathered around feeling very bad about it. Then somebody had said they'd better call the sheriff.

"Not really much to make a fuss about," Lisa concluded. "Harmon was no good anyway. He was guilty, wasn't he?"

Mort nodded. He regarded Jeet Seeley. "It strikes me very odd, Mr. Seeley, that you should even let Harmon on the premises. After all, he had stolen from one of your own stores. He had—"

"Correction, please," said Jeet Seeley. "One of my *father's* stores. I'm merely an office boy in the organization, working for less money than one of the branch managers."

Mort shrugged. "So be it, but the fact remains that some day you'll inherit the whole shebang. You're an only child, aren't you?"

"I ought to know it—my father's reminded me enough. An only child is spoiled. An only child expects too much of everything. An only child is—"

"The sole heir," Mort completed for him. "So you had no reason to open your arms to Harmon, did you?"

Jeet Seeley eyed him steadily. "It so happens that Harmon and I were friends several years ago. Dad had put me out on the West

Coast in a branch office, and Harmon was working there under the name of Forrester. My mother was living then, and she used to send me a lot of money my father never knew about. I used to raise a lot of hell, and Harmon palled along. The pace was more than he could stand. He needed money so bad he stole from the company. I always felt responsible.

"I kept track of him, and when he got out of prison I suggested that he come to Riverton and ask for a job under his real name. So—"

"Wait a minute," Mort interrupted. "Did you tell the local manager about his record?"

"No. But I did tell my father. We had quite a row about it. He said I was too soft, that Harmon would turn out to be no good again. For once in my life I put my foot down. Harmon was hired. Then he got caught again."

Seeley looked wretched. Mort nodded understandingly. "And your father said: 'I told you so!'"

Seeley nodded, looking at the floor. Mort eyed McKinnon and his junior partner in turn. All three very plainly shared the same thought. Far from having reason to receive Harmon with open arms, Seeley had cause to kill him. Harmon had betrayed him, made a fool of him in the eyes of his own father.

Men have been murdered for less.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killer in the Woodlot

MMORT said casually: "Who was the other man in the woodlot, the man Ralston said he had never seen before?"

Everybody but McKinnon eyed Mort as if he were kidding. Mort finally added: "Don't tell me you didn't see another person in the woodlot, a man who would be a stranger to Ralston?"

Lisa eyed Mort down her delicately molded nose. "You wouldn't be pulling a fast one would you, Clarence?"

It was Mort's turn to wince. "Please, Lisa, please!"

Lisa burst into laughter. "Oh, I forgot! You don't like to be called by your first name. It reminds you that you were named after Clarence Darrow. I'd think you'd like wearing a big name like that."

"I don't have to wear anybody else's name," said Mort stiffly. "I can stand on my own hind legs. It was just an unfortunate mistake on my father's part. He was a great admirer of Darrow, and he thought he was doing me a favor by giving me his name. Actually, he put a curse on me.

"If it hadn't been for my name, I'd never have become a lawyer. And if I had never be-

come a lawyer, I'd have amounted to something by now. At least I'd be doing something I like. As it is, I actually envy your brother out there in his studio pounding out novels that nobody will ever read. At least he's stuck to his guns and is doing what he wants to do."

Ted Martindale spoke up. "Speaking of Ralston, am I to understand that he actually saw somebody else in the woods?"

"You are."

"Well, I was with Jameson when Ralston was questioned, and he didn't mention any such person."

"It could be that the fact momentarily slipped his mind. I gathered that your brother was concentrating pretty much on his work."

Ted sneered. "His work!" He got up and crossed to a portable bar. Without turning around he asked: "Anybody else have a drink? I think we should all be able to use one."

Nobody wanted a drink. Ted Martindale poured down half a tumbler of whiskey, omitted to follow it with a chaser and came back to the davenport, his face slightly red. He looked across at Mort and indulged in another sneer.

"I'd like to know what this is all about. I've sat here and put up with all this cross-examination of my sister and wondered what the hell it is to you. I don't know what it is to anybody. This Harmon punk was shot accidentally when one of us mistook him for a squirrel or something. It wasn't me—I wasn't shooting in that part of the woods. But if it had been, I wouldn't let it worry me a bit. It was an accident, and nobody will miss Harmon."

"Wrong on both counts," Mort said. "It wasn't an accident, and somebody will miss Harmon—*plenty!*"

Lisa turned quickly, while the others stared. Mort told about the powder marks. Ted Martindale eyed him doubtfully. "I don't trust you, Mort. I think you came out here just to kid us."

Mort shrugged. "Well, we're even. I think I'm being kidded. Didn't anybody tell you about those powder marks?"

Lisa shook her head. "No, C.D. We're all little innocents." She crossed her legs. "So it was murder. That means it was either one of us or that stranger Ralston told about—if there was such a person!"

Mort shrugged. Everybody turned as a maid came in. "It's the sheriff and that other man," she said. "They want to see everybody. Shall I bring them in?"

"Of course," said Lisa. "I'd like to see you try to keep them out."

A few moments later Jameson and Farber entered. Farber eyed McKinnon angrily.

"Why didn't you tell me you were no longer working in the D.A.'s office? Jameson says I should have caught his remark back there, but I didn't."

"I didn't tell you I was," McKinnon snapped. "You took that for granted."

Oliver Montrose had been sitting docilely. He now leaped to his feet. "What! Do you mean to say that we've been imposed on all this time?" He whirled on Mort. "Why, you told us this man was from the district attorney's office!"

Mort looked innocent. "Why, Mr. Montrose, how could you get that notion? I said McKinnon was 'out of the D.A.'s office.' Isn't that right, Lisa?"

Lisa burst into laughter. "You're worse than a liar, C.D.! You don't have to lie about anything—you can always convey the lie without actually saying it. I'm one little girl who ought to know! Brother, how you fooled little Lisa!"

Ted Martindale started to shut her up, but Oliver Montrose spoke first.

"Ted, I suggest that these intruders be asked to leave. I didn't come out here to be made a fool of!"

Martindale rose to his feet. "Get going, Mort. And you too, McKinnon!" He opened his mouth to order Jones out, then thought better of it. Mort started to get up, but Lisa held his arm.

"Pay no attention. This is as much my house as his. As a matter of fact it doesn't belong to either of us. It actually belongs to Oliver Montrose's bank."

The room silenced. Ted Martindale regarded his sister as if it would be a pleasure to cut out her heart. Lisa laughed in his face. "Why don't you tell them yourself, Ted? The Martindale millions are gone! The whole damn family's in hock to Oliver. And little sister's supposed to save the day by prancing down the aisle!"

Ted Martindale said: "Damn you, Lisa, now you've done it!"

Montrose was white. He looked helplessly to Lisa. "Lisa, I can't believe you would treat me like this!" He paused and appeared to be praying that the floor would open up and permit him to fall through. He turned to Ted. "I think I'd better go now, my boy. We can confer at greater length about the mortgage tomorrow."

"Not so fast," said Jameson. "Harry Malone is coming out here to take statements. He'll interview each of you separately, and a stenographer will take down everything. I'm sorry, Mr. Montrose—you'll have to wait." He turned to Mort. "But you, my friend, you and your partner and McKinnon, can get the hell out—and stay out of this case!"

Mort sighed. "O.K., Jameson. Just for that

I won't tell you which one of these people killed Harmon."

Jameson's mouth fell open. Sheriff Farber acted as if he meant to stop Mort as he walked by him, but he decided against it.

When the expelled trio were outside, McKinnon said: "You weren't serious back there, were you? You really don't know who killed Harmon, do you?"

Mort grinned. "Frankly, I've only a theory, as I told you. Suppose we all go into Riverton and try to find Meecham. You know him—you should have some idea of where he would be."

McKinnon shrugged. "I didn't know him too well. If he isn't in the city directory, I imagine we'll have to dig up some employee of the company and find out where he lives."

IT WAS ten o'clock before McKinnon succeeded in locating the residence of the branch manager. He lived at a south side apartment hotel, and when the trio stopped at the desk, the clerk said: "Mr. Meecham hasn't been home this evening."

"He usually comes in before this, doesn't he?"

"Yes. But sometimes he works late."

Mort thanked him, and the party left. As they rode back uptown, McKinnon said: "Maybe you're first hunch was right. Maybe Meecham's scrambled out of town."

"Maybe. But how could he know that anyone saw him in the woods? It's ten-to-one he didn't suspect that anyone like Ralston Martindale was around."

"You've lost your bet," Blackstone said half an hour later at Mort's favorite table at Nick's. Mort nodded. A bartender had just turned on a local news broadcast, and the first item was the newest development in the shooting at the Martindale estate. There had been another shooting.

Ralston Martindale had been shot dead in his summer house.

"So Meecham knew Ralston could identify him!" McKinnon mused. "That's the obvious interpretation."

Mort nodded. "It is also the illogical one. Try that apartment hotel on the phone, Blackie, and see if Meecham's shown up."

A couple of minutes later Jones returned to the table. He shook his head. Mort said: "We know he isn't working late at the office, so everything indicates that Meecham won't show up. And if he killed Ralston Martindale because he thought Ralston was the only man who could identify him as being on the premises, he'd have no reason to leave town or go into hiding."

Blackstone regarded his senior partner thoughtfully.

"Are you kicking around the idea that some-

body else besides Meecham was wandering around out there this afternoon?"

"No—it was Meecham, all right. But I don't think Meecham killed anybody, either Harmon or Martindale."

"Then you think your original theory of Harmon's murder was all wrong?"

"Not all wrong—just part of it. Come on, boys, let's go. We weren't welcome out at the Martindale estate, but we're going back anyway. I've a hunch the welcome mat may be out for us this time."

Mort had made no mistake on this point, he discovered, when the trio arrived at the Martindale estate. Harry Malone awaited them in the large living room. It was deserted save for the district attorney and Jameson.

"Well, C.D., I was just ready to have you picked up. I don't know why Jameson ever let you leave in the first place. He tells me you made a crack about knowing who killed Harmon."

"That's right, I did."

"Well, who did kill Harmon?"

"I don't choose to answer that one, Harry."

The district attorney reddened. "Well, you'd better. Even if you are a fellow member of the bar, I won't hesitate to have you booked for concealing evidence of a crime!"

"I'm concealing no evidence, Harry. You have all the facts that I have—you just don't have a theory that makes those facts point a finger at the murderer. You can't have me jailed for withholding a theory—even you should know that!"

Malone grew even redder. "C.D., are you working for someone in this case?"

"Do you expect me to violate a professional confidence?"

Malone roared: "I don't expect anything out of you except a raw deal!" He whirled on McKinnon. "It looks mighty suspicious, you palling around with Mort after what happened today!"

McKinnon had just enough liquor left in him to take a threatening step. Mort caught his arm. He grinned at Malone. "You should talk about a raw deal! You gave Clay the rawest deal I've seen in years! You know he only did what any honest and conscientious state's attorney should do. But you couldn't stand newspaper pressure, so you gave him the boot. Well, if you want any cooperation from me, you'll have to play fair with Clay."

Malone stared. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that we—Clay, Blackie and I—will hand you Harmon's killer on a silver platter if you'll reinstate Clay as assistant district attorney and absolve him publicly of any wrong-doing in the Harmon embezzlement case!"

Malone's mouth hung open. He screamed:

"I'll do no such thing! I won't make any kind of a deal with you! And I don't need your help. But I'll give you fair warning—if you're concealing evidence of anyone's guilt, I'll prosecute you for it!"

Mort turned to his companions. "Let's go see the sheriff, boys. Maybe somebody else around here will be willing to cooperate."

Malone froze, but made no attempt to stop them. In the hallway Mort spied a maid. He inquired as to the sheriff's whereabouts.

"He's at the summer house."

Mort turned to his junior partner. "Stick around, Blackie. Let me know if anything pops." He nodded to McKinnon, and the pair left the house. They made their way to the back of the estate and found the summer house without difficulty. It was fully lighted, and a deputy was guarding the front. He called to the sheriff at their approach.

FARBER appeared at the doorway. "Come in, C.D." He did not object as McKinnon followed. "Ain't this a hell of a mess, though? You know I got a theory—this stranger you told them about at the house, maybe he could've done it."

"You mean the man Ralston said he saw?"

"Yes. Ted Martindale told me about it. It's funny Ralston didn't remember the guy when we first talked to him."

"It may be funny, but it's not necessarily peculiar. Ralston, you should remember, was absorbed in his latest masterpiece. No writer is more wrapped up in his work than an unpublished one—every time he flops he thinks it was only because he wasn't trying hard enough. So Ralston should have been trying awfully hard by this time. Your interview must have been an annoying interruption in his great work. After he had time to digest the import of your questioning, memory of the stranger came to him. He even remembered something about the man's appearance and the clothes he was wearing."

"So Martindale said. But it's still going to be a tough job to place the guy."

"Not necessarily. I have a pretty good guess myself."

Farber was all ears. Mort smiled. "Sorry, Sheriff, I'm playing for high stakes. Besides, you wouldn't be able to find the guy."

Farber hardened. "Look here, C.D., I've always liked you. I've played ball more than once. But if you're holding a killer's identity out on me, I'll never forget it!"

Mort shook his head. "I'm not, Sheriff. Take my word for that." He looked out the window. "Something tells me the missing stranger won't be very far away. Have your boys beat down the underbrush. Maybe you'll be able to find him."

Farber's grim features relented. "O.K.,

Mort. You're a funny guy." He went to the door. "Round up a couple of guys, Mike, and search the woods all around here."

The deputy outside asked: "For what?"

"For a middle-aged guy in a striped suit. I want him—bad."

He turned back to Mort, who was surveying the room. His eyes rested on a pane of window glass containing a tiny hole with a star.

"Ralston shot through that window?"

"Yes. The coroner's performing the autopsy now. The guy was shot just like the other one—in the back of the neck. He must have been close to the window."

"You've looked for tracks?"

"What do you think? I'd like to know how you're going to make anything out of tracks when people've been tramping around here all afternoon."

Mort continued to survey the contents of the room without enthusiasm. He slumped into a chair. "Stop me if I'm wrong. After Malone got through taking statements everybody was permitted to run loose. You don't know where anybody in the house was after that?"

"No. Everybody's got a story, but nobody's really got an alibi. Do you really think it was one of them high mucky-mucks instead of this guy I've set the boys to look for?"

"Yes."

Farber shook his head. "Well, I can't see it that way myself. Jeet Seeley was the only one of the bunch who even knew Harmon."

Mort shrugged. "By the way, are they all here on the grounds yet—Jeet, Ted, Lisa and Montrose?"

"Sure. I'm not holding anybody. I just asked them all not to leave. Especially Oliver Montrose. If he had said he was going anyway, I wouldn't have stopped him. You can't cross a guy like that."

"How about the old lady, Mrs. Martindale?"

"I checked on her. She's been drunk for a week."

"Well, keep up your search for the missing link. We're going to try the house again. We may need your help if Malone tries to throw us out."

"You'll get it."

A taxicab pulled up to the porte-cochère as Mort and McKinnon approached. An elderly man carrying a briefcase got out and paid the driver. The cab left, and the man walked up to the door and rang the bell. He gave the advancing pair an uninterested look and impatiently rang the bell again.

The door maid answered.

"I'm Mr. Seeley. I'm expected."

"Oh, yes," said the maid. "Mr. Montrose is waiting for you in the library. I'll take you right in."

Mort and McKinnon followed. Blackie was

lounging in a chair. "Well?" Mort asked.

"Nothing doing, only somebody called right after you left and made an appointment with Montrose."

"That was Jess Seeley, and he just came in. He didn't ask to speak to his son?"

"No. So that's Jeet's old man! Not much resemblance. The kid must take after his mother."

Mort said: "He must. I wonder why Seeley would come all the way from Detroit to River-ton, just to meet our local financier."

"I'll tell you," said a voice from the stairway. Jeet Seeley was standing there with Ted and Lisa Martindale. "My father is in a conference with Montrose because he is selling him Auto Parts, Inc. for fifteen million dollars."

CHAPTER FIVE

Distrust Fund

MORT said: "You don't seem to like the idea."

Jeet Seeley descended the steps, his companions following. "No, I don't. I've spent years learning the business, working at menial jobs so I could learn everything from the ground up. I like the business. I'm sure I can run it. But Dad says I can't. He says he's selling it for my own good—he'll put the money in a trust fund for me, and there'll be plenty to keep me in luxury for as long as I live."

Mort lifted his brows. "And you're complaining? A lot of fellows your age would be tickled to death if someone put that much money in trust for them and told them they didn't have to work."

Jeet Seeley gave him an angry look, seemed about to explode when Lisa put her hand on his arm. It was a motherly touch—plainly she felt sorry for him. He shook her hand away. "I don't want your sympathy," he snapped. "I'm leaving this house now. I'm going away—far away."

"Not very far away, son," a voice drawled. Everybody turned. Harry Malone was standing in a doorway, and his assistant, Jameson, was behind him. He advanced to Jeet Seeley.

"I'm arresting you for the murder of Dick Harmon. I've heard enough to convince me that you killed him out of revenge. Montrose told me something in his statement you didn't think I knew. The reason your father is selling out to him is because of the Harmon embezzlement case. When you hired Harmon over your father's protest, he warned you that if Harmon turned out bad it would convince him that you weren't competent to handle the business. So Harmon turned out bad, and your father said that was enough—he'd accept

Montrose's offer. So you lost your head this afternoon and murdered Harmon."

Malone turned to Jameson. "Go find the sheriff." Jameson left. Malone cautioned Jeet Seeley. "Don't try to make a break for it, son. I'm warning you that anything you say will be held against you!"

Jeet Seeley had said nothing. When Lisa put her hand on his arm again he made no attempt to remove it. The boy seemed wracked by some inner terror. Mort didn't think it was terror of the electric chair. He guessed it was terror of what Jeet's father would say when he discovered his son had been arrested for murder.

Ted Martindale said: "I think I'd better tell your father, Jeet."

Jeet said tonelessly: "You may as well."

The elder Seeley appeared in less than a minute. He was accompanied by Ted Martindale and Oliver Montrose. He regarded Malone quizzically and Montrose said: "Mr. Seeley, this is District Attorney Malone."

Seeley stuck out his hand in the manner of all big business executives, and Malone shook it. He added: "Sorry we have to meet under such circumstances, Mr. Seeley. I've just arrested your son."

Seeley nodded shortly. "Yes, yes, I know. You're only doing your duty, Mr. Malone. I never thought I'd raise a son who would be charged with murder. All his life he's been a trial and a problem to me, but I never thought it would come to this. I—"

"Damn you!" said Jeet. He sprang across the room and knocked his father down. Everybody froze as the youth towered over his flattened father.

"I might have expected that you'd side with the district attorney or with anybody else who accused me of anything at all—even murder! You're just running true to form, that's all! When I was a kid it was the same way. If I got into a fight, I started the fight. If a window was broken in the neighborhood, I broke the window. If anything was missing around the house you even hinted that I had stolen it! And now, when I need you most, you let me down! Hell, I don't want you! I've saved a little money of my own and I'll hire a lawyer myself."

He turned to Mort. "Will you take my case?"

"Certainly, son."

"Fine! Then let's get out of here. I never want to see the old goat again!"

Malone shook his head sadly. "My, my! A boy who would strike his own father would certainly be capable of murder!"

Oliver Montrose and Ted Martindale seemed to agree as they lifted Jess Seeley to his feet. His lip was bleeding. He stared unbelievably at his son, apparently too dazed by

the blow to realize quite what had happened.

Mort also regarded Jeet a little incredulously. The boy seemed different somehow. He thought that Lisa, too, noticed a change. He asked Malone: "All right if I have a confidential talk with my client?"

Malone frowned. "Make it short. The sheriff'll be here any minute!"

Mort had Jeet Seeley lead him to the library. The papers from the elder Seeley's briefcase were already spread out for signing. Mort's practised eye saw at a glance that they had already been initialed by attorneys for both parties. It was a complicated layout.

"On the level," said Mort, "you must have been plenty burned up at Harmon."

Jeet shook his head as if the matter were trivial. "I was at first. I made a special trip to Riverton just to bawl the hell out of him for making a fool of me. But as soon as I explained what he'd done to me, he began to cry like a child. I knew he was the victim of some bad trait that he couldn't fight against. After that I wasn't mad at him at all. When he came out here today, I tried to treat him as if I'd forgotten that anything had happened."

"Did he tell you why he had come here?"

"No. He managed to say he wanted to see me privately. So I told him to look for a summer house and walk about a hundred and fifty yards north to a clearing and I'd meet him there."

"Holy cats! You didn't put that in your statement to Malone?"

"No—I'm not as dumb as my father would have you believe. I knew how it would sound. This is the first time I've told anyone. You're my lawyer, so I guess I'd better tell you everything."

"Absolutely—including whether you did meet Harmon at the clearing and whether you did kill him."

"I went to the clearing all right, but Harmon was already dead. I got away fast. I was afraid of how it would look. I kept wandering around, and finally Ted Martindale found the body."

"Do you know of any reason Meecham would try to contact you out here?"

"Meecham—say, do you think that could have been the guy Ralston saw?"

"I'm sure of it."

"No, I don't know why he would want to see me. I knew him, but not very well." He reflected. "Do you think Meecham could have shot Harmon and Ralston?"

"No. One more question—how long have you know Lisa Martindale?"

"Not long, about six months. I met her on a routine field trip. I fell in love with her. I told Father, and he hired detectives. They dug up enough stuff to fill a book."

"You still want to marry her, though, or

you wouldn't be here. Isn't that correct?"

"That's right. But if I do, Dad says he'll cut me out of his will altogether."

Mort smacked his hand in the palm of his fist. Jeet eyed him with mild interest.

"That mean anything to you?"

"It cinches it as far as I'm concerned!"

Jeet shrugged. "Well, I don't follow you."

MORT went to the door, opened it and called: "Come in here, everybody, and send in the sheriff when he comes."

"He's here now," Malone called back. The entire party, including the sheriff, filed into the library. "If you've got something on your mind," said Malone, "get it off. I want to take my prisoner in."

"You're not taking him anywhere. But when you do leave here, you'll have the murderer of Dick Harmon and Ralston Martindale with you. That's a promise."

Sheriff Farber said: "Meecham's murderer, too?"

"So your men found the body?"

The sheriff nodded. Malone stared angrily. "Sheriff, you've been holding out on me!"

"Nope. I just got here and didn't have a chance to tell you. One of my boys came across Meecham stuck back in some bushes. We identified him by the stuff in his pockets. He answers the description of the fellow Ralston Martindale saw, all right."

Mort leaned forward as if the fate of the world depended on the answer of his question. "How was Meecham killed? Was he shot?"

"No. His head was all bashed in!"

Mort leaned back against the table containing the papers from Jess Seeley's briefcase. He chuckled to himself and regarded Malone. "Harry, I'll give you one more chance to save yourself from being made a laughing-stock. I'll hand over your murderer for you and let you walk out of this room with him in custody if you'll give me your word to reinstate Clay McKinnon at a five hundred-dollar-a-year raise!"

Malone's eyes narrowed. Mort knew he was thinking that to yield to the proposition would reveal him as a weakling, but the district attorney was also reflecting that he was in such a complex mess that without Mort's help he might never get himself out of it. So he said: "You have my word."

"All right, Harry. It's a wonder you couldn't figure out this case yourself—it's really simple. It begins with the sad story of a dominating, successful father and an only child who is a little too easy-going, good-natured and kind. The father distrusts the son and undermines his self-confidence by humiliating him with his distrust.

"All his life the son is haunted by the fear that he will never be capable of taking over

the great corporation his father has built up. His father encourages this fear. He tells the son that it would be best for him if he sold out the business and put the proceeds in a trust fund for him.

"The father couldn't have realized that this would be the final blow, the knockout punch that would forever destroy every last vestige of self-respect that his son might have. From then on an assured income of many thousands of dollars would mean nothing to the son. He would hide away in bars, eventually drink himself into oblivion.

"His only hope lay in marrying the girl he loved. But the father stood in the way of that marriage, too. If the son married the girl, he'd be disinherited—not even a trust fund would be set up in the will.

"You can imagine the consequences of this blow to the son's prestige in his father's eyes. The son had befriended a weak, no-good embezzler, and he had asked his father to give his friend one more chance. The father gave the crook his chance, and the crook betrayed his benefactor. The son lost face, and the father definitely decided to sell the business and set up the trust fund.

"Calculate the consequences of Dick Harmon's crime. The loss of a few drums of anti-freeze was a minor one. The major consequence was the fact that a fifteen million-dollar-business passed into the hands of Oliver Montrose. Montrose wanted it bad, and Seeley wouldn't have sold it if he hadn't thought a sale necessary.

"Hasn't it occurred to you, Harry, that someone might have talked Harmon into stealing those drums solely to discredit Seeley's son and force a sale? Remember that Harmon, according to his son's code, kept mum about the identity of the man to whom he sold the drums. That man must have figured that sooner or later he'd get caught as he'd been caught twice before."

Oliver Montrose had suddenly become the object of all stares. He blushed furiously. "Sir, the inference of your remarks is preposterous!"

Mort laughed in his face. "From what I've heard about you, you'd steal the fillings out of your grandmother's teeth—if you had a grandmother and she had teeth!"

Montrose turned helplessly to the district attorney. "Mr. Malone, do I have to stand here and be—"

"Let Mr. Mort proceed," said a solemn voice. It belonged to Jess Seeley. He was using a handkerchief to check the bleeding of his lip and eyeing the criminal lawyer with intense interest.

"To continue with my theory," said Mort, "let's suppose that even dumb Dick Harmon, ruminating in his cell, began to wonder why a

wealthy, socially prominent citizen should stoop to participating in the petty larceny of a few drums of anti-freeze. His mind must have been stimulated when Jeet payed a visit to his cell and told him about the spot he'd been put in.

"So he put two and two together—he had been a pawn in a game to hurt his best friend and benefactor. He was ashamed of this and kept his silence. But when he was freed today and needed five hundred dollars, he decided that Jeet would pay him that much to know who had talked him into stealing the drums of anti-freeze and paid him eighty dollars for each drum.

"He knew from somewhere, the newspapers, probably, that Jeet was here at the Martindale estate. So out here he came and arranged to meet Jeet in a clearing. Don't look that way, Jeet—I'm telling this for your good, though it was told me confidentially. So Jeet goes to the clearing and finds Harmon lying there dead.

"Harmon was dead, because the man he was going to expose had got there first. But somebody else got there, too. Meecham, the branch manager, had a hunch that Harmon's first move after his release would be to seek out his confederate. So he followed him clear into the woods. He must have heard the shot that killed Harmon and stupidly walked into the clearing.

"The killer knew he was sunk unless he killed Meecham. So he did this by beating him to death with the gun stock. He then dragged Meecham into the underbrush where he could dispose of him at some future time.

He thought he had plenty of time because he was sure nobody had seen Meecham in the woods.

"But Ralston Martindale had. When I told the killer that this afternoon, he became panic-stricken. He decided he'd have to get the body out of the woods before it was found. So, as soon as he'd signed his statement for the D.A., he back-tracked. But this time someone else came upon him and saw him as he reached the body.

"Ralston Martindale was that unlucky person. The killer knocked him unconscious on the spot, carried him to the summer house, went back for another gun and killed him, shooting him through a window to make it appear that he was conscious when shot. All this took quite a lot of time. The killer would be missed if he stayed away from the house too long.

"So he had to leave the body in hiding, convinced now, no doubt, that the mysterious stranger would be blamed for both killings and searched for everywhere but in the underbrush. That's how it happened, Harry."

MALONE frowned darkly. "I don't pay off on theory, C.D. I can't walk out of here with Montrose on nothing more than the evidence you've just given me."

"I'm not asking you to, Harry. I want you to take Ted Martindale."

Martindale's mouth hung open in astonishment. His sister turned a glare on Mort. "You're crazy—you can't accuse Ted of anything like this! What would he have to gain from a deal like that?"

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"Plenty. I won't even mention the fact that he must have sold the anti-freeze at a neat profit which he could appreciate, being broke. He made a chump out of Harmon because he knew Harmon's discovery would discredit Jeet in his father's eyes. Of course Jeet had mentioned the situation in one of his visits here at the estate.

"By discrediting Jeet in his father's eyes, he made him look bad in your eyes, too, Lisa. You wouldn't want to marry a weak sister. Ted didn't want you to marry him because his father would cut him out of the will, and there'd be no money for him to chisel from you.

"But Montrose was old money-bags in person with a short, sweet life expectancy. The family would be in the bucks again. And I'm gambling Ted was banking on something pretty definite if the Seeley deal went through. How about that, Mr. Montrose?"

Apparently numbed, Montrose slowly nodded. "I signed a contract to hire Ted as general manager at fifty thousand a year as soon as the deal was closed and everything was settled."

Lisa whirled on Montrose. "Why, you old goat! You were deliberately bribing Ted to root for you!"

Montrose shrugged wretchedly, seeming to have aged years since he had come into the library. "I loved you dearly, Lisa. I'd have done almost anything!"

Harry Malone said: "You've still got nothing but a theory, C.D. How do you think I can convince a jury without some concrete evidence?"

"Oh, you'll have plenty of that. As I said, the killer felt that he had to get rid of the body before it was found. That means the discovery of the body would have proved him the killer."

"You're talking riddles," said Malone impatiently. "You haven't even seen the body! How could it prove Ted Martindale's the killer?"

Mort eyed the sheriff. "Nate, you've custody of all the rifles used this afternoon, haven't you?"

"Of course. Each one's got a ticket on it with the name of the person who used it or owned it."

"Well, you won't have to test bullets to prove the murderer's guilt. All you'll have to do is examine the stocks. One of them is going to show marks and traces of blood, maybe human hair or skin. You can't wipe all that stuff off, you know. Ted Martindale knew this—that's why he couldn't stand the discovery of a body that had been bludgeoned instead of shot. Check the guns and see if I'm right."

Farber shook his head. "I won't have to,

C.D. Those were all new guns. I remember one of them showed marks on the stock. It was this man's."

He pointed to Ted Martindale, and every eye followed his finger.

Lisa crossed the room to her brother and used her fingernails to make ribbons of his face. Farber pulled her off, and Jeet Seeley came forward to lead her from the library. Her brother whimpered with pain as Farber clicked a cuff on his wrist and took him out of the room.

Harry Malone sighed, stared resignedly at McKinnon. "Well, come on, Clay, we've got work to do."

McKinnon followed the district attorney out, pausing in the doorway to fold his hands and shake them over his head at Mort.

Blackstone Jones chuckled. "I just happened to think—you've finally got even with Ted for flattening you that time at the Lucky Club."

"I don't think so. He was so drunk at the time he wouldn't even remember I'm the guy he hit."

Olive Montrose came alive. "All right, Mr. Seeley, now that that's over, let's get down to business. The papers are all ready to sign and—"

"There'll be no signing!" Seeley snapped. "The deal's off. I'm giving my son a full partnership tomorrow—if he'll take it. 'Jess & Jeet'—how's that for a partnership?"

Montrose started to protest, but he saw the look in Seeley's eye and walked out dejectedly. Seeley faced Mort.

"Mr. Mort, I'm very grateful to you for the way you've absolved my son of any suspicion in connection with these murders. He hired you, but I want to pay you. I'll mail you a check for ten thousand dollars before I go to bed tonight. I hope you will find that satisfactory."

"Make it twenty," said Mort. "You can afford it."

Seeley gulped. "Very well, sir. I'll make it twenty."

"You'd better apologize to your son, too," added Blackstone Jones.

"I will. He knocked a lot of cobwebs out of my head when he hit me tonight. Brother—can that kid punch!"

Seeley left, and Mort was alone with his junior partner. "Well, Blackie, it looks like wedding bells for Lisa. Too bad. You'd have had a lot of fun beating her brains out twice a day."

Blackstone Jones shrugged. "I don't envy Jeet. Lisa's far from being my idea of a perfect woman."

Mort crossed the library and picked up a dictionary. "Here's the only place you'll ever find one."

DEATH IN THE GROOVE

By THORNE LEE

Author of "Stairway Going Down," etc.



I grabbed his shoulders, spun him, tossed him up in the air, and threw him a hard right.

I'm the guy who gave Eddy Delgado, the Lung, his muscles. Of course I didn't realize this would indirectly be the cause of Leland Stokes' death, and while Stokes was a strictly no-good character who deserved killing, the law says even newspaper columnists have a right to live.

AROUND Hollywood they don't go by names any more. They go by features. You've heard of The Voice, of course? The Body, and The Horn? Also, The Look? Well, I am known, generally, as The Arm.

In the phone book I am Bert Harrigan, body trainer, the guy who tries to manufacture muscle where the pretty boys have only artificial padding. I am most famous for my connection with the murder of a certain Hollywood nuisance and also for my picture on the cover of *Whim* magazine, the one where I have my arm stretched out at arm's length and that singer, Eddy Delgado, is chinning himself on it. You may recall the title: ARE CROONERS GROWING MUSCLES?

That picture was a follow-up to the knock-out punch that rocked a nation. Just for the record I wish to explain my own relations to said punch. I am the guy who invented it.

This Eddy Delgado first came to me to buy some muscles with which to poke a man by the name of Leland Stokes upon the nose. I will say this—that Stokes had a nose which deserved poking, being always in other people's business, which is how a movie columnist makes his living. Stokes had not only referred to Eddy in his column as *The Lung*, but he was also making regular literary passes at Vivian Ryan, who danced to Eddy's songs.

After a week's workout I decided that Eddy might someday get strong enough to break an egg with his bare fist, but he would never get near the nose of a rugged customer like Stokes. I sort of liked the kid, so I dug into the old brain tissue and came up with an idea.

The set-up was not hard to arrange. Eddy was singing with Dustin Mills' band at the Shadyside Club and he simply paid off the electrician to douse the spotlights at the proper time. I invited Leland Stokes to the club myself and we rated a ringside table right down within blasting range of the brass section.

It took only about three drinks to get Stokes in a heckling mood. By the time of Eddy's third song Stokes' bright remarks were being passed from table to table.

I didn't feel too kindly toward Stokes myself, because it was a pleasant thing to hear this Eddy Delgado sing. Eddy had about enough vocal power to fill a box at the Metropolitan, but the amplifying system took care of that. The loudspeakers carried his voice from the back alley to Sunset Boulevard.

Eddy was not yet drawing the ice-cream and bobby-sock mob but he was great guns with the double chin and the corset. He was medium tall, pale, and thin as a pull of taffy. You could distinguish him from the microphone by the brown, curly hair which had a tendency to crawl down his neck. At the end of his third song Eddy asked for a little fanfare and then he made a speech.

"LADIES and gentlemen, there is one so-called man among you who likes nothing better than a fight as long as he is barricaded behind his typewriter. They tell me he has two good punches in his repertoire, both of them below the belt. His most recent pleasure is to refer to me as *The Lung*. At this time I would like to offer him the opportunity to find that lung with either one of his fists. If he doesn't, I shall proceed to poke him square on the nose—"

Well, friend Stokes was already up, brushing back his handsome blond hair, the big

shoulders under his dinner jacket tight and set. He swaggered over to Eddy without a word and swung.

We were prepared for that. I knew the punch that Stokes would throw. I had seen him use it. Amateurs seldom change their style. I had taught Eddy how to snake out of the way of that first one and he did a good job of it. Then the lights went out.

I had the whole scene measured with my eyes. In two steps I was spinning Stokes by the shoulder. I let him have a solid right across the jaw. I couldn't hear him land because of the uproar, but I knew by the feel that he was down and out.

In fifteen seconds the lights came on again and I was back at my table sipping a highball. Stokes was flat on his back in the middle of the dance floor and Eddy was standing over him with his fists doubled. The crowd whooped.

I looked as surprised as I could, then I trotted out and raised Eddy's arm. "Ladies and gentlemen, the new champion. . ."

Well, that really broke things up. The manager came down and began pumping his elbows at Eddy but the crowd was cheering and applauding so loud that the boss had to shrug it off, with a sick little grin. Eddy and I carried Stokes backstage into a little cubbyhole and dumped him in a chair. Nobody seemed interested in reviving him. It was as if all Hollywood had thrown that punch at him.

Under normal conditions, such an unexpected scene would have kept everybody jabbering for the rest of the evening, but the act that followed was not a normal condition. It was Vivian Ryan.

This Vivian was something that should happen only in a dream, and if your husband failed to come home some night you could just about figure he was down on the Sunset Strip elbowing into the Shadyside at twenty smackers per elbow.

Vivian had platinum hair that did not grow—it floated around her head. She had slate-gray eyes, a smile with the right number of teeth, and a figure that would stop an army in its tracks. Take all that, put it in a wisp of lace, and set it to Dustin Mills' music and you had a combine that was out of this universe.

Dustin Mills himself did not know one end of a musical scale from another, but his shoulders filled out a tux properly and his dark South-of-the-Border face looked good to the customers. Also Mills knew a gold mine when he saw one, namely Vivian Ryan dancing soft shoe to the rhythm of Mark Cavanaugh's drums, Paul Miranda's piano, Joe Hufty's bass fiddle, Terry Biddle's slip horn, and Eddy Delgado's voice.

At the end of Vivian's number, I just sat there, all six-feet-five of me, slumped in my chair, dreaming about it. I did not wake up until the club was closing and I heard Eddy Delgado hissing at me across the table: "Harrigan! Harrigan, listen! You broke Leland Stokes' neck with that punch! They've got a doctor backstage and he says Stokes' neck is broken!"

I WILL never forget the beet face of Detective Lieutenant O'Malley when he saw what had happened to Leland Stokes and then saw Eddy Delgado. He looked around desperately at the members of the band as if he hoped that some mistake had been made about the source of that punch. It takes quite a man to wrestle the bull fiddle, or the trap drums, or the slip trombone all evening, but all Eddy Delgado needed for his work—in the words of the late Leland Stokes—was a lung. That was about all Eddy had. You would not buy Eddy for a slab of bacon.

O'Malley pinned Eddy up against the piano and fired questions at him. "It is your opinion that being called The Lung in public print is reason to break a man's neck?"

Eddy was grinning it off like the world's champ. "I did not intend to break his neck."

"Could there be anything else involved in your little feud with Stokes?" O'Malley snapped.

Eddy squinted his brown eyes. "Such as?" "Such as Stokes trying to groom this Vivian Ryan girl for the movies and you not wanting to be left behind?"

"Who told you that?" Eddy barked, looking around angrily at the band, particularly at the Latin profile of Dustin Mills.

O'Malley shrugged. "I read the papers. I even read Stokes' column. I recall he gave Miss Ryan that fancy monicker, The Heartbeat."

"Vivian is a heartbeat, all right," Eddy said. "She's the heartbeat of this band, but I don't think anyone around here would want to stand in the way of her career."

O'Malley looked at the girl. She was still in costume, sitting at my table. "Well, if I was The Lung I wouldn't want The Heartbeat to get very far away," O'Malley said.

The only laugh at that gag came from O'Malley himself. He scowled up at the band, waved a big hand at Mark Cavanaugh, the drummer. Mark was high man on the slope of the pit, surrounded by his family of traps.

"Hey you!" O'Malley said. "Did you notice anybody go backstage after Stokes was carried off?"

Cavanaugh was a good-looking, solid hunk of man, but his dark face constantly twitched with an overflow of energy. He shook his head, grinned. "I'm a busy man when Vivian

dances. The body is hers, but the rhythm is mine!"

O'Malley switched to the fat man on the fat fiddle, Joe Hufty, working down by the left exit. "How about you, big boy?"

Hufty twanged the bass and displayed a pair of hands. "I, too, work for a living!"

O'Malley swung to finger-happy Paul Miranda at the piano on the far right. "What did you see, boogie-boy?"

Paul's grin was oily. "You expect me to be seeing other things when our Vivian is dancing?"

O'Malley was not too happy about it all. He came over to my table. "You're the monster they call The Arm?" he asked.

I nodded. "Harrigan is the name."

"Harrigan, did you notice how dead Stokes was when you helped this kid carry him away?"

"A stiff is a stiff, dead or alive," I said. "At the time I thought he was alive."

"People should watch things," O'Malley grumbled. "Which way did you carry him?"

"Around the piano, through that curtain at the right."

O'Malley consulted my shoulders. "Harrigan, I wish you were a crooner."

"How come?"

"We could use a turkey like you on this job"—O'Malley wagged a finger at Eddy—"but I don't know what a jury is gonna do with this animated wishbone!"

EDDY himself was not frightened. He reveled in his ill-gotten glory. The next day he popped into my gym with: "Harrigan, they've got me in every headline in the country! 'Crooner Packs Death Wallop' and stuff like that."

"It won't sound so musical through the solid walls of San Quentin," I reminded.

"Oh, hell!" Eddy said. "There are plenty of lawyers who can get me out of this mess. They'll have the state apologizing to me even for bringing up the matter."

"Eddy, it strikes me, when you get right down to it, that you aren't in this mess at all. I'm the one who is."

Eddy looked alarmed. "Now, Harrigan, you keep your mouth shut. I want it to stand as it is. After all, you were punching as my proxy and I'll be an accessory before the fact anyway. . . All I want from you is why you hit the guy so hard!"

"Eddy, I didn't hit him so hard."

"Huh? What d'you mean by that?"

"I mean, I was holding back. If a neck broke under my fist, I would have felt it breaking."

"Maybe it was the way he hit the floor—"

"I plant 'em easy," I said. "I know about fractured skulls. Anyway, Stokes' neck was

twisted halfway around to the left. The way he was hit, it should have been twisted to the right—"

"But it must have been your punch, Bert! Nobody was backstage at all after that until they found him dead."

"It does look bad," I admitted, "but I still can't figure about that punch."

Eddy was off on his brag again. "You know, Bert, this has been a very great thing for the crooning business. Pretty soon it may be regarded as one of the manly professions."

"You're in no spot to be crowing, kid," I advised. "Murderers get a lot of publicity, but they don't last."

"I wouldn't call it murder," Eddy protested.

"You might if you got to thinking about it."

I wasn't the only one who had an idea like that. Vivian Ryan looked me up privately in my office with the floating miseries in her gray eyes. Vivian was not exactly one of my following, but I was one of hers. "Bert, I'm so worried about Eddy!" she said.

With Vivian it's every man for himself. "Eddy seems able to take care of himself," I said coldly.

"That's the trouble, Bert. I wish Eddy wouldn't act so much like—like a crusader. That Lieutenant O'Malley is very angry. He says even newspaper columnists have a right to live."

"There are arguments on both sides," I said.

"Bert, they're trying to make a murder case against Eddy!"

"Who told you?"

"Bill Fisher, the electrician, said they made him tell about the lights going out that night and he had to admit that Eddy had paid him to turn them out. That makes it look as though Eddy knew what he was doing. They say Eddy knocked Leland down and then broke his neck in the dark! And that isn't all, Bert. They're saying Leland Stokes was in love with me and Eddy was also in love with me, that Eddy was jealous—"

"Is that true?"

"I don't know," she whimpered. "Nobody ever said so."

I put a protective arm around her shoulders. "Honey, it strikes me the guys you associate with are all undernourished."

She found my chest very absorbent. "Oh, Bert, what'll we do about Eddy?" she wailed. "I just couldn't get along without Eddy!"

"There are lots of crooners as good as Eddy—"

"There's no voice for me like Eddy's! I just float away on it!"

"Huh!" I said. "Well, honey, I think it'll be very hard to convince a jury that Eddy

was a murderer. Take it from me, Eddy just doesn't have the muscles. It would take somebody with a mighty twist in his hands to break Stokes' neck!"

I found Vivian blinking down at my own big hand on her shoulder and I quickly got the thing out of sight. She looked up at my face and I could feel the hot blush creeping up my neck like an army of red ants.

ALTOGETHER my position was very delicate. I didn't know whether Eddy might talk if he got in too tight a spot and there were also a few other people who might remember how close I'd been to Stokes while the lights were out.

It was very hard on my character to know what to do. Especially because of the little guy with the shrill voice who rides around on my shoulder giving me advice in tight places. This voice, I find is always on my side. In the case of Eddy Delgado, the voice kept saying: "You will note, Harrigan, that Eddy would not be very big competition for Vivian Ryan if he was enrolled for the full course at San Quentin. It would be advisable, Harrigan, to let the law take care of Eddy—"

Sometimes I am inclined to argue with the voice. That's how I came to be at the Shady-side Club a few nights later, alone, watching Vivian's number from a table way back among the poor tippers.

My pulse was thumping that night as if Vivian were dancing in the palm of my hand. The sensational part of her tap routine was the fact that she didn't make the tap sounds herself. She wore soft shoes, and Mark Cavanaugh, the drummer, did the tapping with a wooden block arrangement set up before a microphone. Cavanaugh worked in the dark and Vivian held the spotlight. The audience did not catch on until Vivian made a sudden stop and the taps kept right on going. Then Vivian leaped and whirled, tapping with her toes all the while, and her feet seemed to thud against invisible drums.

As a finale an extra spotlight picked up the hands of Paul Miranda at the piano, jumped over to Terry Biddle's trombone, then drifted down to Eddy Delgado at the mike, Vivian adapting her style to each mood. Her long toe leaps and Eddy's mellow voice went together like soft winds and summer rain. The band was muted down to a whisper and the spotlight framed just the two of them, Eddy and Vivian. If they had ended the number right there, the audience would have fallen on its face, but the band jammed the thing into a storm, pitched it up to Joe Hufty at the big bass, and finally back to the hurricane beat of Mark Cavanaugh's drums.

At the end I was sweating as if I had just

(Continued on page 90)

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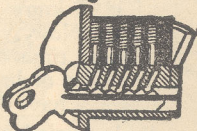
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Thorne Lee

(Continued from page 88)

gone ten rounds with Cavanaugh. I was excited. Very excited.

When the club closed I went down to the pit. A few wolves were circulating around Vivian, but she was brushing them off expertly. She said she had to stay on and smooth out her routine with the drummer.

Eddy Delgado and Dustin Mills came out from backstage, gloved and hatted for the street. I dragged Eddy into a corner. "Eddy, I got an angle on this thing. I want to get hold of the dope sheet on that last number, I mean the sheet that shows what instruments are playing at what time."

Eddy's brown eyes crinkled. "The orchestration?"

"Yeah. That's it. The whole works."

"Well, Mills would have—"

"Get it, Eddy, get it. This is murder we're talking about!"

My voice was harsh with excitement. Eddy felt it and ran after Dustin Mills. He caught the leader at the side door, got the proper sheets, and the two of us sat down to them in the front office.

"It stacks up like this, Eddy," I said. "I know I didn't break Stokes' neck with that punch. I just put the guy under the anesthetic for the big operation, the big twist. Somebody else got to Stokes while he was unconscious. Now, there was nobody backstage during Vivian's dance number, so I figure that maybe Stokes was slipped the old twist by someone in the band who had time to slip through the back curtain. The way the spotlights were focused, there were times when you couldn't see the band at all, and anyway when that girl is dancing you can be sure that nobody is looking anywhere else!"

Eddy's pale face was turning a greasy yellow. "God, Harrigan, do you think so?"

"Kid, I know so. I got a brain as well as an arm. Now, you find me what instruments had some time off. Find me somebody with a nice pair of hands. To break a man's neck you gotta have hands!"

Eddy buried his nose in the music, reading it as I would read a book. Finally he jumped up, yelled: "I've got it, Harrigan! I should have remembered. At least three minutes without a solitary note."

"Which one?" I demanded hoarsely.

Eddy threw off his hat and gloves, beat out a little rhythm patter on the desk with his hands. "Don't you get it, Harrigan? That guy would be sure to have strong hands, terrific hands. His stuff is all by hand!"

"I get it!" My slap on Eddy's back almost flattened him. "That's our man. Come on, kid!"

Death in the Groove

THE LIGHTS were out all over the club, except for a double spot on Vivian and Mark Cavanaugh rehearsing down there in the pit. Nobody else was around. The night watchman was very likely keeping his eye on the liquor supply in the bar.

Eddy and I stood in the foyer peering through swinging glass doors. Vivian was still in her scant costume, a streak of mist, and the drums were going like machine guns.

Cavanaugh was a show in himself. He had his coat off, sleeves rolled up. Bare arms snaked around him, streaked from drum to drum. Black curls danced across his eyes. His face strained and chanted, as if the rhythm began at the roots of his hair and worked down through his body. The sweat worked with it, streaking his face with writhing ribbons of silver.

"He beats it with his gums," I muttered. "I'd like to hear that chant, like to hear what he says."

"We might be able to, at that," Eddy whispered. "See that microphone hanging over his head? I think it can be lowered. Try to slip inside without being noticed, Harrigan."

Eddy disappeared in the direction of the electrician's booth. I dipped through the glass doors and found a chair in the outer border of darkness.

Cavanaugh and Vivian were too absorbed to notice any outside sounds. All the mikes were still on and the rhythm came flooding out of the loudspeakers, a twisting, tugging jungle beat, enough to rip a man right out of his chair. I saw the overhead microphone creep down toward Cavanaugh's bobbing head. Every so often Cavanaugh's face would twist upward, eyes blinking, mouth working, teeth gleaming, and fragments of his chant would hit the mike—"Comin' at ya, comin' at ya, comin' at ya. . ."

The drums would go up in a wild crescendo, then fade, and again the mike would catch the chatter of his lips.

"... Take it baby, take that beat! Take it baby, take that beat! ... Whirl it baby, tie it up! Shape it baby, tie it up! ... Dance it baby, dance it baby, dance it baby. . ."

I didn't hear Eddy come in but I felt his clawed hand biting my arm. "Listen, Harrigan!" he hissed into my ear.

"Swing it baby, tie it up! Swing it baby, tie it up! Comin' at ya, comin' at ya, comin' at ya. . ."

"Harrigan, do you get it?" Eddy whispered. I nodded. "I get it."

My words were lost in the final climax of the drum-dance. Cavanaugh seemed to rip apart at the drums, leaping, beating. Vivian

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MAGAZINE

205 E. 42nd St., New York City 17

Thorne Lee

piouetted twice, folded at the ankles, the knees, the hips, collapsing into a mound of flesh and quivering rhythm. Cavanaugh was on the tympani in a final thunderous uproar and then it faded, and faded, and Vivian's long body shot straight up into the air like a fountain, came down lightly, and bowed.

The drum beat died, but metal and glass picked up the vibrations, a thousand little insects of sound.

Vivian swung on her long toes. "That's all, Mark. I'll go get dressed."

Cavanaugh wriggled down from the stand, brushed the hair out of his eyes. His thick fingers crawled up and down his shirt front—they were still alive with spiders of unspent rhythm. Oily sweat flowed down his face. He blocked Vivian's path to the dressing rooms, searched her with his eyes. His fingers played around his white throat and finally forced out some words. His voice was down in the well. "Sure, Vivian. You go get dressed."

Vivian swished past him and through the back curtain. Cavanaugh got out a cigarette, clamped his teeth on it. The guy who never missed a beat with a drumstick had to use both hands to hold a match to that cigarette.

He paced up and down the floor, twisting his hips and shoulders with little cat motions. He came close enough so that I could see the muscles playing up and down his neck. Suddenly he slapped down the cigarette, ground it with his heel, and started toward the back of the pit, gliding on his toes.

Eddy Delgado got his long legs moving, ran down an aisle. "Cavanaugh!" Eddy's voice sounded as if his chest had been run over with a truck.

THAT voice was a knife in Cavanaugh's back. His body arched, spun on the toes. "Delgado! Where you been all the time, Eddy?" he rasped.

Eddy crouched down, shoved his chin out to protect his ribs. I started to get up, then slid back into my chair. The little voice was back, riding my shoulder. "Harrigan, how about you sitting this one out?"

Eddy was getting the words out somehow. "Cavanaugh, you're the guy who murdered Leland Stokes! You slipped out the back curtain while Vivian was dancing to my song. You snapped Stokes' neck with your hands while he was still asleep from that knock-out—"

Cavanaugh slid sidewise along the dance floor on one foot, skating on his toe. His body moved, but there was no visible motion in it except the working of his spread hands. "What did you say, Eddy?"

Death in the Groove

"You murdered Stokes, Mark, because he threatened to boost Vivian into the movies, to take her away from the band, away from you and your drums! Drummers like you are a dime a dozen in Hollywood. Vivian didn't have to have you, but you had to have her, Mark!"

Cavanaugh didn't answer in words. He wove the answer with the twisting lines of his face. He took off from that skating toe in a crazy ballet leap.

I had to stand up to see. They were rolling, skidding around, wrestling like two kids in a sandpile. I could see Cavanaugh's white hands inching up Eddy's back. If those hands ever got to the throat, I wouldn't give Eddy over thirty seconds—

The little voice spoke up. "You will note, Harrigan, that the competition for Vivian is rapidly being eliminated."

Eddy's arms were free but he wasn't finding much use for them except to shred Cavanaugh's shirt. All he could do was wheeze.

Cavanaugh was on top again, flattening the crooner. His fingers slipped past the hump of Eddy's shoulders. The thumbs looped up around the base of Eddy's neck.

"Harrigan, you will note. . ."

I trotted down, flattened my left hand against the back of Cavanaugh's neck, palmed his forehead with my right and snapped. His arms and legs jerked apart like sprung pincers.

I grabbed his shoulders, spun him, tossed him up in the air, and threw a hard right into his face. He went over the piano, smeared through the music racks, and piled into the drums. His head hit a snare drum with a pop, smashed through the hides, and he was collared there. He didn't move.

Vivian floated into the scene, trying to get a silk thing wrapped around her. "Oh, Eddy!" she wailed. "I heard you on the loudspeaker in the dressing—Oh, Eddy!"

She surveyed the wreckage of Mark Cavanaugh and then found her man. Eddy the Terrible was trying to push his face away from the floor but he couldn't make it.

Vivian got down and pawed at his head, cooed over him.

"Oh, Bert," she said, "wasn't Eddy wonderful?"

"Eddy was tremendous," I said and walked out to call the cops.

Which was all very well, I guess, considering that The Heartbeat rightly belongs with The Lung, and The Arm is only an arm. But if any smart-alec newspaperman gets hold of this and tries to dub me The Big Heart, there will be one neek in this town that they'll never get untwisted!

THE END

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

One afternoon about a year ago I opened my front door and was met by a man who deftly placed a very much abused brogan on the door sill and smilingly said that I was a very fortunate person. He was a soap salesman and was prepared to offer me "the bargain of a lifetime." He showed me a box of soap powder, a brand strictly new to me, and offered it for a price that was above and beyond my valuation of soap, regardless of form.

When I refused his offer he said that I was his first customer and that this sale was very important to him, that his boss was waiting for him just around the corner and if he didn't make a sale his job would go up the chimney like the good Saint Nick.

This I didn't swallow and since he was letting a lot of cold air into the house, along with a generous portion of hot, I raised my hand to bid him farewell. As I did so he quickly crossed my palm with two soap boxes, offering both for the price of one. This I declined. He then stated he was over-stocked and could let me have three for the price of one. My head rolled in the negative and he countered with four-for-one because he was leaving town to return to the factory and didn't want to tote a lot of boxes back with him.

My brain registered three bars and tapped out the words "R-E-A-L B-A-R-G-A-I-N." I quickly produced the correct amount of ducats and closed the deal.

I promptly retreated to the kitchen and discovered that the stuff wouldn't dissolve in water, hot, cold or indifferent. On experimenting I found that gasoline would do the trick, but I considered such a combination dangerous and also impractical.

J. A. R.
Louisville 4, Ky.

DOOR-to-door salesmen with "lucky numbers" may bring bad luck if you don't insist on your money's worth.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

One afternoon I answered the door bell and was greeted by a charming young lady. She smilingly held out to me several slips of paper. "Choose one," she invited.

I selected a slip and then she held out her hand saying: "Let me see."

I felt very fortunate when she said breathlessly: "You drew a lucky number, the first one this afternoon."

She went on to say: "I represent the Art Studios. Here are some samples of our work, which I'll be glad to show you if I may come in." I opened the door and she sat down in the living room, while I noticed her stylish appearance and beautiful rings. She showed me some handsome pictures of children, asking if I didn't have some children, and if I

Ready for the Rackets

wouldn't want their pictures tinted in this portrait style.

I told her I had two little girls. She glanced around the living room and saw a picture of our oldest girl. "That would make a lovely picture," she said, "if you have a copy of it to give me to take along. And since you drew the lucky number we would make you one absolutely without charge enlarged and in the natural colors. Of course if you wanted more pictures, we would charge you our regular rate of two dollars a picture."

I gave her a copy of the picture, thinking to surprise my husband with it. "That's the first time I ever won anything," I told the girl at parting.

A week later a middle-aged man appeared at our door. "I have the picture you won from the Art Studios," he said. I was sorry it was not the charming girl of the previous week.

When I looked at the picture I was disappointed, for instead of a portrait like the one she had showed me it was just a tinted enlargement. He gushed over it and talked in high sounding art terms and praised the beauty of the child. Then he opened a small case he carried and pointed to some samples of frames. He said: "These will just complete the picture and make it into a work of art."

When I asked the price of the various frames, I found they ranged from ten dollars to twenty dollars. I knew I could get the same thing in an art store for just a few dollars.

"They're too expensive," I answered at last timidly.

"Too expensive?" The man was aghast. When he saw persuasion would not work, he started to threaten: "So you accept a free work and then won't even buy a paltry frame. How do you think we live?" I was alone in the house and finally took the cheapest frame for ten dollars, giving him a check for the amount, but he insisted on cash, so I finally gave it.

He promised to bring the framed picture next day. That is the last I ever saw of the picture and the frame, also the ten dollars.

The next day my humiliation was complete for I found from my neighbors that everyone had had the same lucky number, only some of them had been lucky enough not to bite.

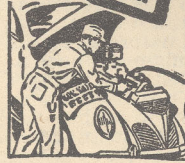
Wilma Scott
Germantown, Ohio

IT'S an old, old game, but there's always a new way to pass a bad check. Don't be too impressed by the big name at the bottom—it may be forged.

The Rackets Editor
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Dear Sir:

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Ready for the Rackets

She wanted a cold wave, the best I could give her. She went through the hands of various operators as it was late and she had no appointment. I was busy and did not notice her hat, purse and sweater lying on my desk. I suppose the sweater covered the purse. Had any operator seen it she would have handed it to her to keep. I keep a card prominently displayed in each booth reading: "The management will not be responsible for money or other valuables left on the desk. Keep your purse with you at all times."

While she was being shampooed, another woman came in and wanted instant service. I explained that there would be no time for her that day, but we could give her an appointment for the next morning.

This Leopard Lady, as one of the girls dubbed her from her coat and turban, asked permission to use the telephone, explaining that she must ascertain if her part-time maid could accommodate her at that time. Then she made the appointment and left.

When the first woman came to pay for her service, she opened her purse, fumbled around in it, sat down quickly as though weak. "I've been robbed!" she said. "I had a twenty-dollar bill and about three dollars in loose change. I still have the change but that twenty is gone. One of your operators must have pilfered my purse when she answered the phone."

I made it quite clear that I could trust my girls. I also showed her the notice. "You alone are to blame if your money is gone. Are you quite sure you had the money? That is an old dodge and has been tried before."

I am afraid I was not very tactful but I had been swindled once before. She assumed a pose of injured innocence, but when I threatened to call an officer she became very perturbed.

"My husband would have a fit if this came out in the papers. I'll write you a check if you'll cash it and take out your eighteen dollars. I need two to get home."

The bank was closed. I could not wait all night for it to open to assure myself that she had an account, so I accepted the check and gave her the two dollars change. I had forgotten that she had said she had about three in her change purse.

I had been stung once before with a phony check and should have been on my guard, but I did know her husband by reputation. She had her check book and social security card, so I accepted the check, gave her change, and we left it at that.

Something about the Leopard Lady teased my memory. I decided to check on her address without waiting for the bank to open. I went to the apartment building, but there was no one living in the apartment she had given as her home. Then I knew that she and the supposed wife of the politician were working together.

I sent the check in to the bank in the morning, and it came back with word of stopped payment. I waited for the Leopard Lady but of course she never came. Then I telephoned the politician. He said: "My wife is out of town, has been for weeks."

Ready for the Rackets

Who the woman was or how she had managed that check with the bank, I never will know but I did learn that two hands are swifter than many eyes.

M. E. R.
Hobart, Ind.

WE HAVE had many reports of this new racket. It won't work if you keep your eyes wide open, so profit by this forewarning.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

A new racket has just been broken in this part of the country and the originators have left for greener pastures. There are two of them, and they may turn up any place. Here is the racket they will pull:

The first one writes a local telephone number on a ten-dollar bill, memorizing the number. (It's usually the local drugstore or garage.) The second one then takes the ten-dollar bill and goes to one of the stores, buying with it some cheap item costing in the neighborhood of fifteen cents. He gives the storekeeper the ten-dollar bill, gets his change and leaves.

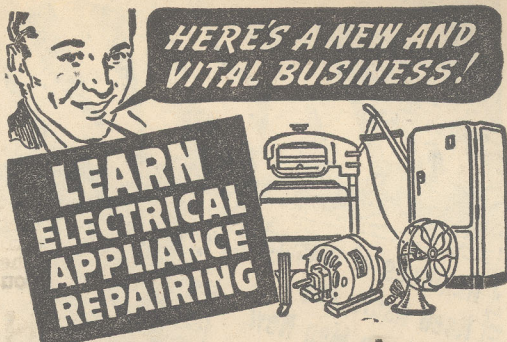
The first one then comes into the picture again, going into the same store and asking for change for a dollar so he can use the telephone. The storekeeper gives him the change and the blackguard then goes into the telephone booth only to come bursting out, asking for the rest of his change.

Naturally, the storekeeper is flabbergasted when he hears that this stranger gave him a ten-dollar bill. But the stranger can prove it, because he wrote a phone number on the bill—and he proceeds to recite the number. The storekeeper can't deny that there is a ten-dollar bill in his cash register with that very phone number on it, so he thinks he made a mistake and gives the stranger the other nine dollars change.

The two boys cover a town on a wholesale basis, so watch for them!

Neg Monett
Frankfort, Mich.

THE END



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When disorder of kidney function permits

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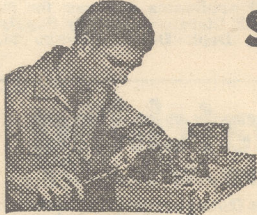
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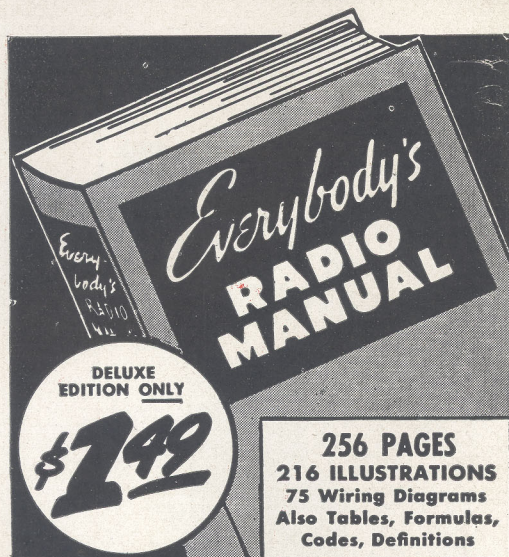
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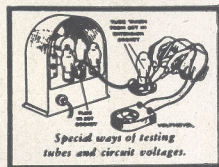
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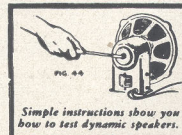
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