

ALL STORIES  
COMPLETE



APRIL

15¢ DIME  
**DETECTIVE**  
MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

RICHARD DERMODY  
JOHN KNOX  
AND OTHERS



**NO PLACE LIKE  
HOMICIDE**

*A MARIANO MERCADO  
NOVELETTE*

**D.L. CHAMPION**

*A COUNSELLOR MORT STORY  
by JULIUS LONG*



## Uncle Tom & Little Eva awritin'...

Hattie Beecher married a teacher rich in learning and little else... turned to her pen, wrote short sketches. Later, the death of one of her children made her realize the tragedy of a baby torn from a slave-mother. She revolted at a society which could consider a man a *thing*. When a friend wrote: "Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that would make the whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is!", she rose to her feet, clenched the letter, said, "I will write something... I will if I live".

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ALL STORIES COMPLETE 

# 15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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

Vol. 51 CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1946 No. 1

2—THRILLING COMPLETE SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTES—2

*You may think New York a nice place to visit, but there's*

No Place Like Homicide.....D. L. Champion 10  
Mariano Mercado felt that if a man had to die it was far better he did so from a bullet rather than from succumbing to the bacterial hordes. But death by violence means murder, and murderers have to be caught—this time in a gun-slinging free-for-all in a Sixth Avenue chili joint.

*Don't look in a haystack for the riddle of*

The Needle and the Hook.....Julius Long 26  
For Clarence Darrow Mort can give you all the lowdown on this latest puzzler. It all started as a routine concealed weapons charge but before the pint-sized legal light was through it had ripened into mayhem, treason—and murder!

AN EXCITING FULL-LENGTH MIDNIGHT MURDER MYSTERY

*A house is where you hang your hat, but*

Home Is Where the Hearse Is.....John Knox 64  
Wild Willy Hassell would have made the Dead End Kids look like so many Little Lord Fauntleroy. Only two people had ever loved him, his neurotic sister and Florence Barnes—who paid for befriending the little moron with her life.

A RIB-TICKLING SERIES-CHARACTER SHORT STORY

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The Doctor's Double.....Richard Dermody 47  
The time is just ripe for one of the Doc's little plans. We have less than a C-note on us and it gets mighty odd in the winter, even in California. But I never expect this caper to turn into a double-play . . . double fees, double detectives—and a neat doublecross.

2—SMASHING SHORT DETECTIVE STORIES—2

*Dig out your Halloween costume to wear when*

Murder Rides a Broomstick.....Roland Phillips 54  
"Stuff and nonsense," everyone said to the rumors that a witch had flown out of the Pembroke attic the night old Miss Lydia was killed. But they began to doubt their words when the second corpse was found—a skinny old hag and, lying near the body, a besom, the favorite mode of transportation for witches since time immemorial.

*Try not to be the beneficiary of a*

Lethal Legacy.....A. Boyd Correll 85  
If Steve had known that murder, big-time scandal and a powerful dope-ring were involved in his inheritance, his gift-horse could have been toothless for all he cared.

AND—

*We want to know if you're*

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 6  
In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

The May Thrill Docket.....6  
A preview of some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in next month's DIME DETECTIVE.  
Cover: "Piled around the skull were thirty-nine pieces of Olmec jade."  
From: *Home Is Where the Hearse Is*.

The May issue will be out April 3rd

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**"What's he got  
that I haven't got?"**

LOOK at the successful men you know. "What have they got" that you haven't?

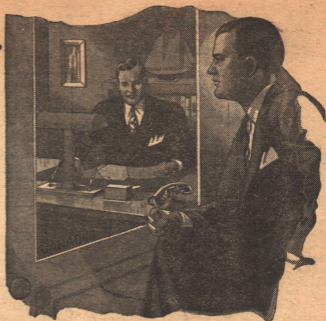
Very little, probably. In most ways these men are no brighter or naturally more capable than average. Many of them probably have no more formal education or better natural aptitudes than you.

But that little extra they have is important. They have the special knowledge and ability for which business is glad to pay well—they know the what, why and how of business. They have also the confidence and aggressiveness which come from knowing that they know and can apply their knowledge.

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**LA SALLE** EXTENSION UNIVERSITY  
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## THE MAY THRILL DOCKET



THE Pimlico meet was over and Joe Maddox and his wizened assistant, Oscar, were heading west to sunny Santa Anita. Just drifting along when, all of a sudden, there was Dab Dab McNab dead as a Christmas goose down the mountainside. Of course Maddox had to jump in and take charge. From then on all the bad luck that had dogged Dab Dab his whole life seemed to be transferred to the big bookie's broad shoulders. And in Santa Anita not only was sunshine and horseflesh to be found, but Cassidy, the big Masterton dick, as well. Oscar didn't help things either by claiming to have seen a ghost on New Year's Eve. Of course this hallucination was obviously the result of the little man's annual holiday bender, since anyone could tell that Dorothy McNab was no ghost—not with those curves! But before she finished accusing Joe Maddox of having caused her father's death, the bland Buddha of the bangtail circuit almost wished he were dealing with something less tangible and vitriolic.

Bluff had helped Maddox out of many tight spots before but the bunch he was up against now—men after big money who thought nothing of murder—couldn't be stopped so easily. A dose of their own medicine was what they needed and Maddox was just the boy to hand it out. A brand new thriller about a big-time *Gee-Gee Doublecross* in the series involving your favorite bookie-turned-sleuth by T. T. FLYNN.



Plus: the latest "High" Price novelette by DALE CLARK, bringing you up-to-date on the doings of the irrepressible shakedown shamus and Beulah, his luscious girl Friday; a new Hannibal Smith novelette, *The Bones of Barnaby Bliss*, by C. WILLIAM HARRISON; and stories by JULIUS LONG, ROBERT C. DENNIS and others.

This suspense-packed May issue on sale April 3rd.



## Ready for the Rackets

### A Department

*Racketeers and syndicators 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 chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 206 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17.*

**WATCH** your step when someone offers to let you in on the ground floor of a hot deal—you may walk into the dog-house.

The Rackets Editor  
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

A few days after it was announced that nylons were again being manufactured, a man checked into a local hotel. In addition to registering for himself, he made reservations for a group of drivers who were to arrive in a truck convoy a couple of days later.

"Have to move that way for protection," he explained, "with nylons as valuable as they are now."

That was all the build-up he needed. Before long he was besieged by hotel employees, the women wanting stockings for themselves, and the men wanting them for wives and girlfriends.

But the sharper played coy. "Yes, it might be arranged, but he really didn't care about doing such business. It smacked too much of black marketing." And thus he let them sell him on the idea, a time-tested method.

Naturally the pay-off came when all the suckers had practically forced their money into his hands. That was the signal for him to steal quietly away.

The truckers for whom reservations had been made never arrived. Nor, needless to say, did the nylons. A crook had merely been quick to take advantage of a situation made to order for a swindle.

H. A. Folker  
Columbus, Ohio.

**OH** FOR a power bestowed on me,  
To see myself as salesmen see me.

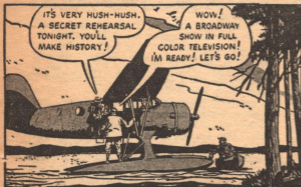
The Rackets Editor  
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

I was fooled by a racket existing in the middlewest in the sale of bogus nursery stock, either by real or pretended agents for nursery companies.

(Continued on page 8)

# Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...



(Continued from page 6)

A nice looking middle aged man came to my door, and his politeness gained him entrance into the house, which did not happen to many agents. Then he began his sales talk about nursery stock. He was taking orders and had a book of beautiful pictures of shrubs and trees. He guaranteed satisfaction, of course. I finally bought some shrubs to the tune of three dollars. He said that I was to pay on delivery and that made it seem to be a straight proposition.

In a few weeks, a wagon heavily laden with shrubs stopped at the front gate. A strange man, not the personable advance agent, but a rough type of fellow, brought me a bunch of dormant shrub-roots, which did not look very promising. He asked for the money I had pledged. Something in his way of talking made me suspicious but I paid him the money, then went outdoors and planted my roots.

The winter passed, and next spring I watched to see my new choice shrubbery develop. When it finally began to show the character leaves, I found that I had bought roots of the very buck-bush which I had been trying for years to clear out of my farm yard. It was the same story with my neighbors, most of whom were also victims of the well-mannered agent. Whatever they had ordered, the roots all developed into strong buck-bush plants. Apparently the nursery firm was just a bunch of racketeers who had dug up all the buck-bushes they could find to fill their shrub-orders.

We suckers had no legal recourse, since by the time we discovered the swindle, the so-called nursery folks had disappeared from our section, probably to begin operations in a distant part of the country where the news of their racket had not yet penetrated.

B. B.  
Hamilton, Mo.

**A**MATEUR mechanics, beware of those wonder-working gadgets that "pay for themselves." If you've ever had one, you know who pays—the poor buyer, every time.

The Rackets Editor  
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

"Install our 'Whirligig' attachment on your carburetor and increase your gasoline mileage! Results guaranteed or your money cheerfully refunded."

In words to this effect a midwestern manufacturer advertised a circular metal disc about three inches in diameter and having four shallow channels set at right angles to each other and leading to a large hole in the center. The advertisement, which appeared in one of the largest mechanical magazines, went on to describe how easily the little gadget could be installed by simply removing the carburetor, placing the disc over the intake manifold and then reinstalling the carburetor. The suction of the running engine was supposed to draw the air into the manifold through the channels from four different directions resulting in a terrific

whirl of air. This whirlwind action was supposed to provide better carburetion with a resulting increase in gasoline mileage. "Pays for itself in a very short time and well worth the \$2.50 you pay for it," the ad said in effect.

Having a car that was very gas thirsty I was much interested. Believing that it must have some merit if it was sold with a money-back guarantee and was advertised in that particular publication, I bought it—and then my trouble began.

First of all I installed the disc myself but in doing so I got the carburetor all out of adjustment and finally had to run the car over to the garage to get it set right. I didn't tell anyone about the gadget as I wanted to have some facts first.

Fortunately, however, I already had some fairly accurate figures on my gasoline consumption and I looked forward to the promised saving. Two hundred miles later the figures showed that my gas consumption was exactly what it was before and I began to wonder whether I hadn't been swindled.

Finally I drove over to the garage again and told the master mechanic what I had done. He looked at me indulgently and then said: "Why didn't you ask me about it before you bought it? I would have told you that it wasn't any good. The air rushing through your carburetor is just as turbulent as it could be and that so-called whirlwind effect couldn't possibly accomplish a thing. You better write them and get your money back!"

Disturbed, I had him remove the little disc and after cleaning it I shot it right back to the manufacturer with a letter telling him politely that I wished to avail myself of his money-back offer since the disc hadn't performed as advertised.

Days passed and then weeks. I wrote a second letter and then a third. I received no response whatever nor was my little disc returned to me. Without it I had no case to turn over to the postal authorities so I just kept the whole nasty business to myself.

That happened some years before the war and about a year or so later the advertising seemed to have been withdrawn. Now with the end of the war and material again reaching the hands of such unscrupulous manufacturers I have already seen that same little useless disc advertised in almost the same manner as it was when I got stung.

I have also observed a new article consisting of a small steel ball the size of a marble which is enclosed inside a spring-like cage. The purpose of this article is to break up the smooth flow of the air through the carburetor, thereby increasing the gas mileage through better carburetion. This useless contraption was a war casualty and I have not yet seen it reappear on the market but from the way it sold previously it will certainly be back.

Perhaps by printing this letter you will prevent some one else from being swindled as I was.

H. C. W.  
Greenview, Ill.





**INTRIGUE IN  
MEXICO CITY!**

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Based upon the Collier's Magazine serial by Robert Carson

Produced by **PHIL L. RYAN** · Directed by **EDWARD H. GRIFFITH**



*I swear that Mariano Mercado seemed pleased by the news of George Harkwell's death. If a man had to die it was better he did so from a bullet rather than from 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, on the last lap of a slay-trail which started on the grounds of the American Embassy in Mexico City and ended in a gun slinging free-for-all in a Sixth Avenue chili joint.*

**A Mariano  
Mercado  
Novelette**



We scrambled over the fence, landed jarringly on the other side. Crothers was nowhere in sight.



# NO PLACE LIKE HOMICIDE

By D. L. CHAMPION

*Author of "Imperfect Alibi," etc.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Embassy Enigma

I CLIMBED the stairs to Mariano Mercado's apartment in the Calle de Madellin, let myself in with my own latchkey. I found the little Mexican detective in his bedroom standing anxiously before a mirror, staring intently at his own coffee-colored features.

I said, "*Buenos días,*" and added: "What are you doing, admiring yourself?"

He did not turn around from his rapt contemplation of himself. He said: "Do you know that sunburn has been known to kill a man?"

"I've heard of a few isolated instances. But what do you care?"

He gestured with a thin and graceful hand to a copy of the newspaper *Universal* on the table. I glanced at it, saw that it was open to the English page. There was a two-column advertisement for a sunburn lotion.

I said: "I still don't get it."

"That advertisement," he said, turning around at last, "is addressed to the American tourists who are exposed to our brilliant sun only during the short period of their vacation. If they are in danger, what of me? I have faced this sun almost every day of my life."

I ran my fingers through my hair and

sighed wearily. Every morning of his life Mariano Mercado became apprehensive that he was about to catch a new disease. Every afternoon he took drastic means to combat it. And mine was the ear into which was invariably poured the case history.

"Mercado," I said, "you can't possibly get sunburned."

"Why not?" he said piteously. "I am not a strong man. My constitution—"

"I am better acquainted with your constitution than you are. You can't get sunburned for the simple reason that you have lived under the Mexican sun all your life. You're immune. You can't get sunburned any more than a Hottentot."

"Nevertheless," he said firmly. "I shall buy some of this lotion after we have eaten. We shall breakfast at Sanburn's."

Now, Sanburn's restaurant in Mexico City is as American as the Statue of Liberty. It caters to Americans and its cuisine is strictly United States.

"I thought you didn't like tourists," I said. "Nor American cooking. You'll find both at Sanburn's."

"True," said Mercado. "But our own restaurants of quality do not open until lunch time. The cheap places which are ready for custom now are dirty and unsanitary. I would rather expose myself to the execrable American food than to a horde of native bacteria."

"All right. Finish dressing."

He crossed the room and flung open his crammed closet. Then he proceeded to bedeck his thin wiry body. I gathered that as far as he was concerned, it was quite definitely Blue Monday. I do not mean that his hypochondriac spirits had become depressed to the point of melancholy, nor that a Sunday evening orgy had brought on a racking hangover. The point I make is purely sartorial. It was his blue day.

His suit was the color of a robin's egg and it had been cut by a reckless, slashing hand. The lapels reached almost to his waistline and the shoulders were padded like an old quilt. The trousers had edges like swords and were as tight as a drum skin.

His shirt was the hue of the turquoise sky over Mexico City, his tie a trifle darker with a few restrained yellow stripes laced through it. His shoes were of two tones, each of them

**WE** went downstairs into the street, walked through the sun to Sanburn's. As usual, it was crowded with tourists. In the babble of conversation, the only Spanish I heard was spoken by the waitresses.

As we sat down I caught sight of a familiar bulky figure seated across the room, in off-key and his socks were a screaming saffron to match the stripes of his tie.

the company of a girl of about twenty-six. I said: "Look. There's your friend, *el coronel* Gomez."

Mercado turned his black eyes in the direction I had indicated. Gomez was an official of the police whose regard for Mercado was equaled only by Mercado's regard for him. Gomez was as honest as a roulette wheel in Juarez, a fact which Mercado didn't like at all. And Mercado was far more quick-witted than Gomez, a quality which the policeman could not abide.

Mercado turned back to the table, said: "No Mexican woman would trust Gomez. That is why he is compelled to find romance with a gringo tourist."

The girl looked from home, all right. She was a brunette with a pale, wistful face and a pair of big brown eyes that seemed to hold sadness within them.

"Romance?" I said. "At this hour in the morning? I doubt it."

Momentarily, we forgot Gomez and the girl and ordered fresh raspberries, eggs and coffee. We were half-way through our food when a high-pitched feminine voice sounded above the murmur of conversation in the room.

"Well, if he is, I'm going to see him!"

Mercado, his nose buried in his coffee cup, did not look up. I did. I saw Gomez apparently protesting, while the girl had half risen and was pointing a slim forefinger directly at the back of Mariano Mercado's spine.

"I think you're about to receive company," I told him.

Mercado removed his nose from his cup and bowed as Gomez and the girl approached the table. I stood up and pulled out a couple of chairs. Gomez beamed on us, a feat which I, at once, considered suspicious.

"This," he said in his heavy English, "is Miss Jane Harkwell."

We acknowledged the introduction. The girl said: "*Señor*, the waitress just mentioned to me that you are the best private detective in all Mexico."

Mercado admitted this charge with a modest bow.

"Then," she said, "I need your services. Have you seen the morning papers?"

Mercado sighed. "Dire tidings, indeed."

"Ah," said Jane Harkwell, "then you've heard about my uncle?"

"Your uncle?" said Mercado. "No, *señorita*, I refer to the typhus outbreak in the state of Oaxaca. I can give you some appalling statistics regarding typhus. This disease has slain more men than any war. Than all wars, as a matter of fact. I—"

"Mercado," I said hurriedly, "this lady seems in some distress."

He glared at me. He possessed more sta-

tistics than the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and he handed them out freely, constantly and in stentorian tones.

"My uncle," said Jane Harkwell, "is dead."

Mercado evinced polite interest. "Of disease?"

She shook her head and as she answered her voice broke a little. "Of a bullet."

I swear Mercado seemed rather pleased by this news. If a man had to die it was far better he had done so by violence rather than from succumbing to the bacterial hordes.

He said: "Your uncle was murdered?"

"Of course, he was murdered," the girl said vehemently.

Gomez sighed heavily and entered the conversation for the first time.

"The señorita is naturally overwrought. Her uncle is a suicide. An unpleasant fact, but a fact nevertheless."

Mercado said coolly: "You have investigated?"

Gomez spread his palms upward. "It is out of my jurisdiction. However, it is obviously a suicide."

"That's idiotic," snapped the girl. "Why should my uncle kill himself?"

"I assume," said Mercado, "that the death did not take place in Mexico City?"

"Of course it did," said Jane Harkwell. "Right next door to the hotel where we are staying."

Mercado lifted his eyebrows and faced Gomez. "But, you, *señor*, said you had no jurisdiction. You have jurisdiction anywhere in Mexico City."

"Not everywhere," said Gomez softly. "This man killed himself on the property of the American Embassy. That is, under International Law, territory belonging to the United States of America."

Mercado ordered some more coffee. He said: "Perhaps you'd better tell me all about it."

Gomez cleared his throat. "It was this way, *amigo*. This *tourista* whose name is George Harkwell—"

Mercado held up a silencing brown hand. "It is the lady who is paying my fee," he said. "I will listen to her story."

GOMEZ lit a cigarette unhappily. I gathered that he was not at all pleased to have Mercado mixed up in the matter.

"My uncle," began the girl, "is a lawyer. From New York. A client of his, Mr. Arthur Constance, had to come to Mexico on business. He needed a lawyer to come along so he brought my uncle. My uncle offered me the chance to take the trip with them. I speak a little Spanish and was supposed to make myself useful.

"Last night my uncle left our hotel to go to

a drugstore. He was gone for quite a long time. At three o'clock this morning we phoned the police. They reported, after a while, that my uncle's body was lying before the Embassy. There was a bullet in his brain and a revolver in his hand."

"What hotel are you staying at?" asked Mercado.

"The Geneve. It is close to the Embassy."

"It was a suicide," said Gomez, twisting uncomfortably in his chair. "It is obvious. The gun is in his hand. According to the Embassy, his money and wallet were untouched. Doubtless, he was affected by some sentimentality which dictated that he die on American soil. Hence, he entered the Embassy property before he shot himself."

"A touching theory," said Mercado. "I can hardly imagine an American doing it. I cannot imagine a lawyer of any nationality at all doing it."

"He didn't do it," said Jane Harkwell vehemently.

"This Mr. Constance," said Mercado. "Did he believe your uncle had killed himself?"

"When he first heard the news he was most upset. He said my uncle had been murdered. But later he seemed to change his mind and to go over to the suicide theory."

"And you, you know of no reason why your uncle should have blown his brains out?"

"There wasn't any."

"Pues," said Gomez, "who knows the innermost secrets of the human heart? Perhaps it was romantic trouble. An uncle would hardly take his niece into his confidence about such things."

Heaven knows I am not as shrewd as Mariano Mercado. However, it seemed to my dull wits that Gomez was desperately fighting for the suicide theory. I wondered why. Gomez was unscrupulous, but I was certain he had not stooped to the professional killing of tourists.

Mercado said: "Miss Harkwell, what was it that your uncle went out to buy at the drugstore?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He didn't say."

"Did he speak Spanish?"

"None at all."

Gomez spread his palms again. His lips parted in his oiliest smile. "*Amigos*," he said, "why all this pointless questioning? The man is dead. We Mexicans murder for only two reasons, robbery or jealousy. Señor Harkwell was not robbed. He had not been in the city long enough to have established a liaison which would cause an angry husband to shoot him."

Mercado said to me: "Latham, go to the telephone. Call the Geneve Hotel. If Harkwell spoke no Spanish, he must have asked

the desk clerk where a drugstore was situated. Perhaps he even asked how to order what he wanted in our language. Find out."

I went off to the telephone booth. Personally, I had no theory as to the death of Harkwell. However, I did know that the Mexican police didn't like dead Americans, nor did the Embassy. Tourists' corpses invariably cluttered up international relations.

I made my phone call, chatted to the desk clerk for a full ten minutes and returned with the information Mercado desired.

"You were right," I told him. "Harkwell asked the clerk both questions."

"Buena. And what did he want at the drugstore?"

"Bicarbonate of soda."

Mercado grinned at Gomez. "Coronel," he said, "the man was murdered."

"That theory is idiotic," said Gomez. "Do you mean to tell me that any Mexican would have the nerve to murder a man on the grounds of the American Embassy?"

Mercado shook his head. "No. The man was not murdered there at all. Moreover, you cannot tell me that a man buys bicarbonate of soda, then kills himself. A bullet will cure his heartburn much more quickly than bicarbonate. The drug was unnecessary to a potential suicide."

"But the body. It was on the Embassy grounds. You can't get away from that, my friend. You can't—"

"Wait," said Mercado, and his black eyes twinkled. When he spoke again it was in Spanish. "Let me tell you a story. It is a gringo story. From Brooklyn. Listen."

I GAVE him my full attention. Mercado was not a frivolous character. If he digressed before a potential client to relate an anecdote from Brooklyn, quite obviously it had a point.

"There was a policeman," began Mercado, still speaking in his native tongue, "a Brooklyn policeman who, unlike yourself, *mi coronel*, was a stupid illiterate officer. There came a day when he found a dead horse lying in the street. To be precise, on Kosciusko Street.

"The officer rolled up his sleeves, bent over and proceeded to drag the horse along the pavement. A bystander approached and asked the policeman what he was doing.

"I've found a dead horse," replied the policeman, "and I have to make a report of the matter."

"So," said the bystander, "and where are you taking it?"

"I'm dragging it down to Hoyt Street."

"Why?"

"Because," said the policeman, "I just can't spell Kosciusko."

There was a long blank silence. I realized that Jane Harkwell's limited knowledge of Spanish precluded her following Mercado's story. As for myself, I understood the words, all right, but I was damned if I understood the point. I glanced at Gomez to see his reaction.

He was glaring at Mercado. His swarthy cheeks were hot and dark. He twirled his mustache in the manner of a man who is angry.

Mercado smiled faintly, said: "You do not like my anecdote, *coronel*?" He sighed and shook his head. "It is very funny in English."

Gomez uttered an obscene Spanish oath, pushed his chair back across the elaborately tiled floor and stood up. He repeated the oath, turned on his heel and strode from the restaurant.

Jane Harkwell asked: "What has happened?"

"I hate to admit this," said Mariano Mercado, "but I am forced to concede that laziness and a desire to avoid work and responsibility are pronounced traits of our nation."

I emptied my coffee cup. Nettled, I said: "Would you stop being so cryptic? Would you mind explaining your last philosophical observation? Also your Brooklyn story. Also tell me what all this has to do with the death of Miss Harkwell's uncle."

"He was murdered," said Mercado. "And not on the grounds of the American Embassy. Doubtless he was killed on the Calle Niza."

"Then how did the corpse get to the Embassy?"

"It was dragged there."

"By whom?"

"One of Gomez' men."

Jane Harkwell blinked. "You mean the police put him there?"

Mercado nodded. "It has happened before. It is remarkable, but of every ten Americans who die violently in Mexico City, six of them are discovered on the property of the United States Embassy."

I thought back to his story of Kosciusko Street and all of a sudden a light hit me.

"I see what you mean," I said. "The tourist trade is one of Mexico's principal industries. It must not be discouraged. Moreover, dead Americans are international situations. The government will not like it. The police will be compelled to dig up the criminal. In order to save all this trouble, the bodies of dead Americans are, on occasion, dragged onto Embassy property. It is then strictly an affair of the United States."

"Es verdad," said Mariano Mercado. "El coronel Gomez is not an energetic man."

"Nor an honest one." flared Jane Hark-

well. "He knows very well it was no suicide. But it's easier for him to call it that."

Mercado nodded his head in slow agreement. "Sí, I fear, *señorita*, that he is not honest either."

"Then," said Jane Harkwell, "consider yourself retained. I will pay you anything within reason, and you are to find the killer."

"For money," murmured Mercado, "I will try anything."

"Except," I put in, "undistilled water."

Mercado shuddered and looked at me reproachfully. He said: "Let us go to your hotel and call on Mr. Constance."

## CHAPTER TWO

## The Road to Utopia

I CALLED the waitress and paid the check. A few minutes later the three of us were in a taxicab bound for the luxurious Hotel Geneve.

We disembarked, strode through the tiled lobby and ascended to the third floor. Jane Harkwell knocked on a door and in response to a bass, "Come in," we entered.

Constance was a little man. He was almost bald, the few remaining gray wisps of hair

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plastered down on his shining pate. His mustache, however, was luxuriant. His spinal column was concave and it struck me that he was probably much younger than he looked. I guessed he was just the wrong side of fifty.

The girl introduced us. As she announced Mercado's profession, Constance shot her a sharp glance of annoyance. Then he waved us to chairs. He spoke in a rather high-pitched voice.

"Miss Harkwell," he said, "is naturally upset. For that we cannot blame her. But I assure you that this is no case for a detective. Harkwell killed himself. I am certain of that."

Mercado lifted his eyebrows. "According to Miss Harkwell, you didn't think so when first you heard of his death."

"The man who called me stated flatly that he had been killed. Of course, the news upset me and I hadn't time to think. Later when I heard the police theory, I recalled what I knew of Harkwell's private affairs and I was in accord with the official theory."

"Do you mean," said Mercado, "that you know why he killed himself?"

Constance nodded. "Well, yes," he said, glancing uncomfortably at the girl. "I hadn't wanted to tell you this, Jane. But since you're convinced that George was murdered, I am more or less forced to tell you the truth."

Jane Harkwell stared at him. There was skepticism and unfriendliness in her eyes.

"There was a woman back home who was plaguing him. I'm afraid she had letters and various other things which would have caused George a lot of trouble. He got a letter from her last night, a letter which made impossible demands. Had he refused there would have been a nasty scandal. He would have been disbarred and ruined."

Jane Harkwell said shortly: "I don't believe it."

Mercado was frowning and thoughtful. As far as I could see he wasn't getting anywhere. Even if Constance were lying there was nothing Mercado could do about it. And if there had been any clues lying about at the time when Gomez copper found the corpse, they certainly were cold by now.

A knock came at the door of the suite. Constance said: "Come in."

A man of medium height entered the room. For a moment, I was uncertain as to whether he was Mexican or American. His skin was brown but whether from sunburn or heritage it was difficult to say. When he spoke it was in English but with what seemed to me the faintest trace of a Spanish accent. Yet when he said, "Buenos dias," to Mercado, I thought I heard an American taint in his Spanish. But there was no doubt of the fact

that he spoke in the deepest bass since Chaliapin.

Constance said: "This is Señor Huerta." Señor Huerta beamed on us all. Constance said to Jane Harkwell: "Mr. Huerta is returning to the States with us."

Her thin eyebrows arched. "Why?" "This is the man we were looking for. Your uncle found him for me."

Jane Harkwell seemed puzzled but suspicious. She said to Huerta: "You knew Harry Crothers?"

Huerta shook his head and clucked like an old hen. "Indeed," he said. "My best friend. I was with him when he died."

"He's dead?" "En verdad. He has been dead for some three years."

Jane Harkwell stood up. She walked over to the window and looked out into the tree-lined street. She turned her head abruptly.

"Señor Mercado," she said, "may I see you at your office this afternoon?"

"Porqué no?" said Mercado. "Always provided it does not disturb my siesta hour."

"Four o'clock," said Mercado, leaving his chair and walking to the door.

I got up and followed him. At the door he bowed gravely to everyone and went out into the corridor. I still followed.

In the lobby Mercado made his way through a crowd of chattering tourists to the desk clerk. He slid a five-peso note across the marble counter.

"Last night," he said, "you will remember Señor Constance getting word that his friend was dead?"

The clerk nodded. "Yes. The Embassy sent a man over here after they had identified the body from some mail found in his pocket."

"And did the señor have any other visitors last night?"

"None, señor."

"But he had a telephone call?"

"He did, señor."

"And that would have been about an hour after the man from the Embassy was here?"

"That is correct, señor."

"Gracias," said Mercado. "And that was his only call all night?"

The clerk nodded and after thanking him we went out into the street to look for a taxi.

I LEANED back in the seat and thought it all over. I didn't talk about it until we were back in the Calle de Madellin apartment.

"Of course," I said, "I see what you were driving at with the desk clerk. You figured that if Constance said it was murder the first time something must have happened to make him change his mind. Something external.



Something like a visitor or a phone call."

Mercado nodded abstractedly. He was engaged in shaking out three vitamin pills into his palm. He meticulously placed them on the healthiest looking tongue I had seen in years and washed them down with a glass of water.

"Correct," said Mercado. "I believe that Señor Constance is lying—with all the assurance of a man who cannot be questioned."

"What are you going to do? I gathered from Constance's words that he will return home shortly. You haven't much time."

"I have no time at all," said Mercado equably.

"What do you mean by that?"

"We wash our hands of it."

"And lose the fee?"

"What else? I can't demand information of the Embassy. Gomez would give me none even if he had it. Constance, who is lying, can call the police if I bother him. What am I to do? Pick a killer out of thin air? Now, let us go to lunch."

"Isn't it early for lunch?"

"The sooner we eat it the sooner we may repair to our siesta and rest the tissues of our body."

Glumly, I went along with him. It wasn't every day we got a case with a cash fee, but I was forced to agree with him. After all, he was no crystal-gazer.

I went back to Mercado's place after my siesta. I found him busily engaged in routing whatever germs had settled upon him while he slept. He gargled vigorously with two beautifully colored mouthwashes, performed his ablutions with a disinfected soap which smelled far worse than most unsanitary odors, then swallowed two teaspoonsful of two different medicines as a general tonic.

No sooner had he finished than the door bell rang and I admitted Jane Harkwell. She nodded to me and strode purposefully to Mercado's desk.

"Señor Mercado," she said, "I want you to come to New York."

Mercado blinked. He had never been in New York. As a matter of fact he hadn't been in the United States since he was a child. His ideas about the country were somewhat confused. He pictured everything north of the Border as a germ-free, brightly scrubbed, shining land.

"I shall pay all your expenses," said Jane Harkwell, "and also five thousand pesos for your time."

"It is true," asked Mercado tremulously, like a child asking to be reassured regarding Santa Claus, "that in New York the water is so pure it may be drunk from the bathroom faucet?"

"It is true," said Jane Harkwell.

"I shall go," said Mercado. Then he added rather querulously: "Why?"

Jane Harkwell sighed and sat down on one of Mariano Mercado's thoroughly antiseptic chairs.

"Because you're the only person with enough sense to know that my uncle was murdered. And because I have a strong premonition that something's wrong and I have enough money to indulge myself."

"But what do you want me to do?"

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "I'm not even sure of that. But I'm positive something odd is going on. I want you to help me find out what it is. Perhaps the answer to my uncle's death is in New York. It's certainly not here."

Mercado's face was suddenly grave. He leaned forward over his desk, said: "Do you believe that Arthur Constance killed your uncle?"

She hesitated for a long moment, then said frankly: "I never liked Constance. I think he's lying now about my uncle having had some trouble with a woman. I believe he'd be capable of murder, provided there was enough money in it. But I don't see how he could have killed my uncle that night. I was with him all the time my uncle was out of the hotel, save for about ten minutes when I went to my own room to get a handkerchief."

Mercado nodded. "Constance said that this man Huerta was the fellow your uncle had found for him. What did he mean by that?"

"I'll tell you. It's one of the reasons I want you to come back home with me. My mother is dead. Her best friend was an elderly widow who became totally blind as the result of an accident a few years ago. Her name is Alicia Crothers and she is extremely wealthy. Arthur Constance is going to marry her."

"And you don't approve of the match?" said Mercado.

"I do not. But Mrs. Crothers is lonely and troubled. She won't listen to me. However, she was very much in love with her husband who disappeared some twenty years ago. She flatly refused to marry Constance until it was definitely proved that her husband was dead. My uncle got a tip that he had died here in Mexico. That's why we came—to check on it."

Mercado nodded. "So now it's checked—with this Huerta—and Constance will wed the wealthy widow. How wealthy is she?"

"Millions," said Jane Harkwell. "That's why I think something funny is going on."

Some time later, after Miss Harkwell had left, Mercado turned to me, his copper face beaming. "Latham," he said, "this is a great moment. We travel north to the United States, where there are no germs, no slums, no disease, a veritable sanitary Utopia. For

once my poor mind will be free from worry."

I let him dwell in his fool's Paradise. I didn't tell him about the horrible tenements on New York's lower East Side. I didn't tell him of the cockroach-ridden slum apartments. I didn't tell him of the appalling infant mortality rate of this, my native land.

We left two days later. Exercising great restraint, or possibly because he fondly believed he was traveling to a realm where there were no bacteria, Mercado brought along a mere half dozen medicine bottles and a scant three boxes of pills.

THE train pulled out of Buena Vista Station at twenty minutes past eight in the evening. Mercado and I occupied a Pullman section. Opposite us, Jane Harkwell had a lower. Arthur Constance and Huerta had a compartment in the car ahead of us.

Constance had spotted us boarding the train. He had cocked an inquiring eyebrow but asked no questions. Jane Harkwell read a magazine grimly for a while and was in her berth before the train had passed through Calera.

I wondered if she had told Constance that we had been retained or whether he merely thought it coincidental that we were on the same train. If that were his idea, I figured it would be dispelled when he saw us still with him at the Border.

We went through Monterrey at six o'clock the following evening and were due at Laredo, in Texas, at midnight. Now the last stop before the American Border is the little town of Camaron. The train pulled up at the ramshackle station at exactly a quarter to eleven.

Mercado was sitting by the window, staring into the moonlit night with his dark and brooding eyes. Suddenly he became erect in his chair. He nudged me and pointed.

Huerta had stepped on to the station platform from the train, and at that moment the train started up again. Huerta made no attempt to reboard the car. He walked swiftly through the station to the dirt road beyond it.

Mercado shrugged. "I thought Constance was taking him along to testify to the death of Crothers."

"So did I. Perhaps he merely got a written attestation from him instead."

"Then why bring him all the way north to Camaron?"

I didn't know the answer to that, nor did I consider it particularly important, Mercado apparently did. His brow was wrinkled and there was a thoughtful expression in his dark eyes when we went through the customs at the Border.

Customs and immigration inspection held us up for the usual three hours and it was quite late when we were able to turn in. I

was sleepy and irritable when Mercado and I entered the diner at San Antonio for breakfast.

We had barely attacked our eggs when two men entered and sat at the table opposite us. One of them was Constance, who gave us a nod that was barely civil, the other was Huerta in an equally unsocial mood.

I gaped at them. I turned back to Mercado and said: "But he got off at Camaron. How did he get back on the train?"

Mercado looked at me sleepily. "I am not surprised," he announced. "I thought about it a great deal last night. I rather expected that we had not seen the last of Señor Huerta."

I asked him a half a dozen more questions, but despite my curiosity he wasn't talking. Then Jane Harkwell came in and sat down with us and the conversation took other turns.

The remainder of the trip was uneventful. Mercado was oddly silent. He stared out of the train window and seemed lost in thought. I guessed he was meditating on the strange actions of Señor Huerta, and left him alone while I buried my nose in a book.

When we arrived at New York, Constance and Huerta bade us curt farewells and hurried out of the station. Jane Harkwell accompanied us to a phone booth from which we tried to round up a couple of rooms in a hotel.

I did the phoning while Mercado beamed around the station. The floor was well swept which delighted him. The crowds that passed were not afflicted with *pinta* or any other obvious disease. It struck me that for once in his life he had lost his awful fear of contagion.

After some difficulty, we managed to obtain a couple of rooms in a small hotel within three blocks of Mrs. Crothers' apartment. I slept soundly and awakened refreshed and energetic after nine hours' rest.

I showered and dressed, then went out into the hall and knocked at the door of Mercado's room. A shaky, unhappy voice said: "Come in."

I WENT in to find Mercado sitting huddled in a huge armchair. His ear was glued to the radio and there was a fearful expression on his face.

"Where is a *farmacia*?" he asked.

"This town is lousy with *farmacias*," I said. "What do you want now?"

He pointed a trembling finger at the radio. "Everything," he said. "*Dios*, I have nothing. I did not realize. I did not know."

"Did not know what?"

"The risks one runs. I have been listening to the radio. I have learned some terrible things."

"For instance?"

"About my health. There are so many

things I must take to guard against disease. I never dreamed—”

I laughed. I could easily see that Mercado, after getting a load of the radio commercials, was more worried about germs than ever before.

“I need laxatives,” he said. “Several of them. Each contains an ingredient peculiar to that specific laxative alone. I will need them all. And several toothpastes to keep my mouth free of bacteria. And many breakfast foods for iron, roughage and protein. *Dios*, Latham, I simply can't swallow everything I am supposed to take.”

He stared at me gloomily. “I never should have come. Ignorance is bliss. I just didn't know the danger. I thought that in the United States I would be free from these worries. I thought—”

“Forget it,” I said. “Our advertising agencies invented hypochondria. How about some breakfast?”

Moodily, he got out of the chair. I could see that he was shaken. The oily voice of some announcer who had predicted dire happenings to those who didn't use his product still echoed in Mercado's soul.

He put on his hat, wrapped himself up against the outside air and we went downstairs.

Directly opposite us was a chili joint. Mercado stared at it. A bright neon sign twinkled outside. Within, its counter was of gleaming white tile. The floor was spotless. The chairs were of glittering chrome and red leather.

Mercado smiled and some of his gloom vanished.

“Look,” he said, “here we can eat chili for breakfast. In a place that is clean, free of germs. Not like the places in Mexico City where one dares not tread. Come on.”

Personally, I didn't want chili for breakfast, but if it could make Mercado forget the constant unseen death which filtered through the air it was all right with me.

We went in and sat a counter. Mercado ate two bowls of chili and so impressed was he with American standards of sanitation that he neglected to perform his customary ritual of wiping off each dish and piece of cutlery with a silk handkerchief.

He ate with relish. Temporarily, he actually forgot his fear of germs. He drained his cup, turned to me and said: “Ah, poor Mexico. Here, in a cheap restaurant, we have the ultimate in cleanliness and sanitation. In my country, for those essentials one must patronize the most expensive places.”

There were several things I could have told him about sanitation in New York. For both our sakes, I kept my mouth shut.

We returned to the hotel to find Jane Harkwell waiting in the lobby. She greeted us in a worried voice.

“Perhaps I'm a fool,” she said. “Mr. Constance is most angry at me for bringing you up here. He says I'm a silly, hysterical woman. And I admit I sound that way when the only reason I can give him for bringing you up here is that I felt a premonition.”

Personally, I had thought the same thing since the very beginning. It didn't make sense to come to New York to find the killer of a man who had been slain in Mexico. However, with me a free ride was a free ride and I hadn't been home for three years.

But Mariano Mercado shook his head. “I do not consider you a silly woman,” he said gravely. “As a matter of fact I am beginning to have a premonition myself.”

Jane Harkwell seized on this eagerly. “You mean you think something is wrong?”

“Emphatically,” said Mercado. “Suppose you introduce us to your friend, Mrs. Crothers.”

I said: “Are you working on a murder committed in Mexico or on the protection of Mrs. Crothers?”

He turned to me, mild surprise on his face. He said: “You don't think they're unconnected, do you?”



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**A**LICIA CROTHERS was a little woman. She sat in a huge armchair, looking like a China doll. Her sightless eyes stared straight ahead in a dim room with drawn shades. She was dressed in a black bombazine affair which covered her entire body like a voluminous shroud.

She appeared to be well over fifty years of age. A maid, older than her mistress, led us into the vast rectangular living room. Jane Harkwell went forward to greet her. Then she introduced Mercado and myself as two old friends whom she had met in Mexico.

Alicia Crothers gave us her blue-veined hand. She said in a remarkably clear voice: "Jane, you must bring your friends to the wedding."

There was a moment's silence. Jane Harkwell said: "Then you really intend to marry him?"

The old woman nodded. "Why not? He seems to be a gentleman. And I'm lonely. I need someone to look after the estate. I have only delayed this long because I was never certain of Harry's fate. I never loved anyone but him. I must be sure he is dead before I marry again."

The girl said: "I take it you've spoken to Mr. Constance since he got back?"

"On the telephone. He has this Mr. Huerta with him. Mr. Huerta was with Harry when he died." She sighed heavily. "It is a relief to have some word after all these years even if it is only of his death."

Mercado said softly: "How many years, madam?"

"Twenty-eight. Harry just disappeared. Vanished. I never knew why. I locked up his room two weeks after he had gone. It has never been unlocked since. For years I wondered why he had left. I never found out. Now, even my curiosity is leaving me."

She sighed again. "Mr. Constance has been kind to me. As my husband, he will know how to distribute my estate so it brings more good to the world than it has to an unhappy old woman."

Jane Harkwell looked unhappy. She glanced over toward Mercado who shook his head, tacitly counselling the avoidance of what the young woman was about to say.

After about twenty minutes we took our leave. In the street, I said: "Well, now what? What is this all about, if anything?"

Mercado said: "Latham, I need a detective?"

"Hell, you *are* a detective!"

"That won't do. I have not authority and thus far no law of this state has been broken. I want a private detective. Where can we find one?"

I shrugged my shoulders. My acquaintance with private detectives prior to meeting

Mariano Mercado had been limited to fiction. "We can try the classified directory," I said.

"Good. Let's."

From the pages of that invaluable book we selected a gentleman named Joseph Mendoza. It was a haphazard selection dictated solely because of Mr. Mendoza's obvious Spanish ancestry.

We took a taxi down town to the forties where Mendoza's office was situated between Sixth and Seventh Avenues.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Unholy Matrimony

**M**ENDOZA was an elderly man, fat and possessed of a pair of darkly suspicious eyes. His office was shabby enough to cause Mercado to perch gingerly on the edge of the chair he sat in. I knew as soon as he got back to the hotel he would embark on a purification rite to get rid of whatever germs hung out in Mendoza's office.

This time I couldn't blame him too much. The furniture was broken and dirty. The desk was battered and obviously had been second-hand a decade before. The carpet was scuffed and worn. Even I could well believe that Mr. Mendoza's office was a breeding place for bacteria.

Before Mercado could state his business, Mendoza took a few minutes to tell us how good he was.

"Yes, sir," he said affably, "I was with the New York Police Department for twenty-five years. The finest bunch of coppers in the world. I have my pension and could quit entirely. But there's so much bloodhound in me I just have to keep at it. Now, sir, is it a divorce?"

I suspected that most of Mendoza's business came from divorces, and that if there wasn't any evidence Mr. Mendoza would be glad to manufacture some for you.

Mercado shook his head. "No, not a divorce but something just as simple. Staying with a Mr. Arthur Constance at 1168 East 119th Street is a man named Huerta. I want you to check on him for me."

Mendoza wrote down the name and address. "Check in what way?"

"See if he has any record. It should be simple enough for you to obtain a set of his fingerprints. I'd like them checked at Police Headquarters. I suppose you can manage that?"

"Indeed," said Mendoza. "The police will do anything for me. Is that all?"

"That's all at this time," said Mercado.

"What do you charge?"

"Twenty bucks a day and expenses."

Mercado shook his head. This was added proof that all Americans were millionaires. He considered himself lucky if he got half that much. Reluctantly, he handed over a twenty-dollar bill.

"Come back about this time tomorrow," said Mendoza, "and I'll let you know what I've got. And bring another twenty bucks in case I can't do it all today."

We went out into the street. I didn't have a very high opinion of Mendoza and I said so. Mercado shrugged. "It doesn't make much difference. It takes little intelligence to do what I have asked."

I glanced at him curiously. "What's on your mind? Do you think Huerta's a crook or something?"

"Obviously," said Mercado. "Now, let us go back to the immaculate place where they sell the chili and have some lunch."

I sighed and went along. Apparently, I was going to be forced to eat chili all during our stay. It was a dish I could happily do without and which I rarely ate in Mexico.

We did the town that night. I didn't particularly relish sitting in crowded night-clubs but I figured I was only letting myself in for a lot of trouble if I permitted Mercado to sit home and listen to the messages of impending doom on the radio.

We breakfasted once more in the chili joint and I was forced to listen to another encomium of Mercado's on the polished appearance of the joint. When we got back to the hotel we had a visitor. It was Constance.

He came into the room, rubbing his hands and exuding good will.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I suppose I owe you an apology."

"I didn't know why and I said so."

"It was really my job to override Miss Harkwell's whim. She's dragged you up here for no good purpose that I can see on a wild goose chase. It was foolish of me to permit it. I am here to make amends."

Mercado swallowed one of his after-breakfast pills. I didn't know exactly what it was supposed to cure. After the previous day's session at the radio he had promptly spent a fortune in the local drugstore, despite my loud protests.

"Yes," said Constance, "I suppose that silly girl has already defrayed your expenses up here and paid you some sort of a fee. Well, I am prepared to pay your way back and give you a check for five hundred dollars for your trouble. Naturally, you will keep whatever she has given you, also."

It sounded like a beautiful deal to me. We'd had a free trip and we'd get back to Mexico with enough cash in our pockets to loaf around for a while.

Moreover, as far as I could see we were

doing no good here. Whether Crothers' widow married Constance or not made no difference at all to me. And despite Mercado's sinister hinting I didn't see that any terrible crime was about to be perpetrated.

"I am sorry," said Mariano Mercado. "I work only for one client at a time. I am committed to Miss Harkwell."

"Committed to what?" said Constance loudly. His face flushed with color. "To what? Why are you here? Don't tell me you expect to find out anything about her uncle's death here in New York?"

Mercado nodded. "That is precisely what I do expect."

Constance stared at him, exasperated, for several seconds, then turned on his heel and left the room. I made a futile gesture and said: "Why did you turn him down? Why are you always tossing money away?"

He didn't answer. He put on his porkpie hat and said: "Let us go down and see if Mendoza has found out anything."

I sighed and went downstairs with him. We took a taxi downtown.

HALF an hour later we were inside Mr. Mendoza's shabby office. So was Mr. Mendoza. Mr. Mendoza was not so garrulous this morning—and there was an excellent reason for this metamorphosis.

Mendoza lay on the floor of his office, half his body underneath his ancient desk. There was an ugly gash in his throat. Blood soaked into the dusty, thirsty carpet. It needed no medical examiner to know that Mendoza was dead, nor, for that matter, how he had died.

Mercado stared down at the corpse. He said in a loud voice: "Dios, I have killed him." He clapped his palm against his forehead and said it again, still louder.

"Don't be an idiot," I snapped. "And let's get out of here. This isn't Mexico City. We don't know a copper in town and we haven't a single connection. Let someone else find the body and for heaven's sake stop telling the world at the top of your voice that you killed him."

Mercado blinked at me. For one of the few times in his life he decided without argument that I was entirely right. He backed across the room to the door, opened it and went out of the office. I was so close behind him that I trod on his small and highly polished shoes.

In the taxi, I said breathlessly: "Let's call Constance."

"Why?"

"This, I think, is an excellent time to tell him that we've reconsidered, that we'll accept his proposition. We can be on a plane tonight. There isn't anyone who can connect us with Mendoza's death."

"There's someone I can connect with it,"

said Mercado. "And I'm going to stay here until I do."

"Where are we going now?"

"To Mrs. Crothers."

"Why?"

"There's one question I want to ask her before I go to the police."

I knew better than to argue with him although I was still certain that our best course was to snap up a fast check from Constance and grab the first plane south.

Mrs. Crothers' maid admitted us. She invited us to seat ourselves in the foyer since her mistress was engaged at the moment. We sat down on a pair of upholstered chairs. Mercado looked uneasy. I attributed this to the fact that he was terrified of all cushioned chairs. Microscopic life bred in them.

From the living room we could hear the sound of voices. One definitely was that of Mrs. Crothers, one equally definitely was that of Constance. Then there was a third voice, that of a man, which I had never heard before.

The conversation resolved itself into a low inarticulate rumble as it came through the closed door. None of the words was intelligible.

Some twenty minutes later, the living room door opened. The maid appeared and ushered Constance and Huerta to the front door. I waited for someone else to appear but there was no one else in the room.

Constance bowed coldly, paused as if he were about to speak to us, then at a signal from Huerta kept going on out of the apartment. Huerta, a grim expression on his face, followed.

The maid announced us, then told us to go in. I followed Mercado into the room, still puzzled.

The third voice I had heard most certainly was not Huerta's. I'm no expert on the human voice, but Huerta's bass was so low-pitched, so distinctive that I would have recognized it anywhere.

"Madam," said Mercado, "since we know each other so slightly you will think I have come here with a strange request."

The old woman looked at him blankly. "What is it?"

"It is a request that you trust me. It is even more important to you than it is to me."

There was a long silence in the room. Mrs. Crothers sighed. "Jane said I was to trust you. And I trust Jane—implicitly. What is it?"

"That room," said Mercado, "that room of your husband's which has been locked all these years. Has no one ever been in it at all?"

"No one."

"Perhaps there is a safe in the room?"

"There is. A wall safe."

"And no one has opened that safe either? No one since your husband?"

She shook her head. "No one. I don't even know the combination myself. But why do you ask these things?"

Now Mercado hesitated. He said softly: "Perhaps I can give your husband back to you."

She started violently in her chair. "But he's dead," she said. "He's dead."

"I doubt it," said Mercado. He added in a voice which she could not hear: "Although it might be better so."

He stood up, said: "We shall return in a few hours with Miss Harkwell."

**WE WENT** out of the apartment and into a corner saloon where Mercado asked for *habanero*. To the bartender his request was as unintelligible as Choctaw. We both settled for Scotch and soda.

Mercado gulped his drink. He turned his brown face to me and it was grave and worried. His eyes were shadowed and he wore a deep frown.

This was an extremely odd circumstance. Excluding his phobia on bacterial life, Mercado was not a man given to brooding. I said: "What's the matter?"

He made a gesture of futility with his palms spread upward, then he said: "I am a duck out of water. In a foreign land. Latham, I must get a policeman. A trustworthy policeman, one who has been on the Force a long time."

I thought this over, said: "I can do the next best thing for you. I know a police reporter who's been on the Headquarters beat for twenty years. He'll know someone. And if you can promise him a story we should have him in the palms of our hands."

"*Bueno*," he said. "Call him."

I went into a phone booth and called Larry Gale. After exchanging the usual greetings people exchange when they haven't heard from one another for four or five years I came to the point.

"Sure," he said, "I got a guy—Phelan. He's a sergeant. We do each other favors. And he's been on the Force since Peter Stuyvesant was Mayor. I'll come along if you think there's a story."

I hung up and reported to Mercado. "Good," he said. "Call him back and find out where I can meet this Phelan. It must be right away. While I'm down seeing him you call the Harkwell girl. Then the two of you go back to the Crothers place and wait for me."

I went back to the phone booth and made the necessary arrangements. Then I returned to Mercado's side.

"At Police Headquarters. Centre Street,"

I told him. "They'll be waiting for you. Now what am I supposed to do in the Crothers place?"

"Wait for me. And see that nothing happens."

"Nothing happens? Nothing like what?"

"Murder," he said quietly, "or marriage."

He emptied his glass and dashed out into the street to hail a taxi. I sighed, phoned Jane Harkwell and asked her to meet me at the Crothers apartment.

I met the Harkwell girl in the hall of the apartment house, which was lucky. I doubt that I would have gained admittance alone. Constance and Huerta were already there. The old lady was dressed fit to kill. Her gnarled hands glittered with diamonds. She wore a silk dress, heaven only knows how old, and her head was wrapped in some lace gadget.

The men looked at us unpleasantly as we entered, but the old woman fluttered with happiness. She said to Jane: "I'm so glad you're here, dear. We've decided to wait no longer. A justice of the peace is on the way now."

Jane glanced at Constance. He returned her gaze coolly.

"There's no point in waiting. Alicia needs someone to straighten out her mixed financial

affairs immediately. Naturally, it will be a simpler matter if I am her husband."

I cleared my throat, said: "In case the justice of the peace arrives before Mercado, I trust, Mrs. Crothers, you will wait for my friend."

She smiled. "Of course, we want him to witness the ceremony."

"Why?" snapped Constance. "What's he got to do with it? I don't know why Jane brought him here anyway. Why should we wait?"

The argument was still going on when the doorbell rang. To my relief it was Mariano Mercado. With him was a bulky man with an Irish face, bushy eyebrows and the air of a copper. This, then, was Phelan.

Jane Harkwell said: "We are waiting for an official to arrive and marry these two people."

Mercado smiled faintly and sat down. "I think," he said, "it might be advisable to postpone the ceremony for a while, Mrs. Crothers."

Constance stood up. His face was purple. "Why do all you people insist on butting into affairs which don't concern you?" he cried.

"We want to get married. We're well over twenty-one and we know our minds. Adults may do as they please in this country."



starring FRANCIS LEDERER • GAIL PATRICK  
ANN RUTHERFORD • EDWARD ASHLEY

with LINDA STIRLING  
JOHN LITEL • LEONA ROBERTS  
MICHAEL HAWKS  
Directed by WILLIAM THIELE

A MASTERPIECE  
SIGNED IN  
**BLOOD!**

First he enshrined  
her beauty on canvas  
—then consigned it  
to death!

THE  
MADONNA'S  
SECRET

A  
REPUBLIC  
PICTURE

"Not always," said Mercado softly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well," said Mercado, "there are several things one is not permitted to do—among them being arson, assault, and cutting the throat of a private detective in his own office, for instance."

Constance gasped. Huerta cleared his throat and looked at Mercado through slitted eyelids. Mrs. Crothers said: "What on earth is the matter? Why, pray, should I postpone my wedding?"

"Because," said Mercado, "while it is true that your husband is legally dead, Mrs. Crothers, it is also true that he is actually alive."

**T**HERE was a moment of taut silence in the room. "Do you mean that Mr. Huerta has been lying to me?" the old woman asked.

"Only partially," said Mercado. "It is true, indeed, that he was your husband's best friend. It is most dubious that your husband died in his arms."

There was another silence. All of us looked at Mercado. Phelan leaned up against the wall, idly picking his teeth. Despite his casual air, his eyes never left Mercado's face.

Alicia Crothers leaned forward in her chair. "You mean my husband is alive?"

"That is what I mean," said Mariano Mercado. "But I do not think he will be alive long."

"You mean he's ill?"

"No," said Mercado, "I mean he is a killer. He was a killer twenty-eight years ago. That's why he ran away. He was a crook and a murderer. But the police didn't know him by the name of Crothers. To them he was Amos Widders. So he fled the country and you never heard of him again."

"You're a meddling liar," said Constance in a tone which convinced me that he thought Mercado anything but a liar. "Can you prove any of these things?"

"All of them," said Mercado.

Phelan sighed. He shifted the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other and said: "How about getting started, bud?"

Mercado glanced at him and showed almost all of his excellent teeth. "Well," he said, "so Widders disappeared. And it never became necessary to look for him until Mr. Constance met Mrs. Crothers and heard of her vast wealth. He promptly asked her to become his wife and was accepted conditionally."

"The condition being," I put in, "that she be assured of her missing husband's demise."

"Precisely," said Mercado.

I looked over at Constance, expecting to see him verging on apoplexy. He wasn't. His face was deathly pale and Phelan was watching him closely.

"Thus," said Mercado, "Constance here got in touch with a lawyer—a lawyer, I regret to say, who had something of a reputation for getting in touch with men evading the law. Mr. Harkwell went into action."

I heard a sibilant intake of breath at my side. I turned to see Huerta, grim-lipped, glaring at Mercado.

"Mr. Harkwell went with Constance to Mexico," said Mercado, "as soon as the lawyer, through his many connections, had arranged to meet Widders, or Crothers."

"And did he meet him?" asked Jane Harkwell.

Mercado nodded. "He met him and was killed."

"But why should Mr. Crothers kill my uncle?"

Mercado smiled faintly. "Self defense."

The girl gasped. "You mean my uncle tried to kill Mr. Crothers?"

"Exactly. That was the only reason he and Constance went to Mexico."

"But why?"

"Once Crothers was definitely dead there was no further obstacle to the marriage. It's as easy as that."

"I don't quite get it," said Phelan.

"Neither do I," said Constance. "It's idiotic. I am not going to remain here to be insulted."

Without removing the toothpick from his mouth, Phelan said: "Sit down, bud."

Constance sat down.

"Let's make it clearer," said Mercado.

"Constance and Harkwell were after Mrs. Crothers' millions. They wanted Crothers out of the way for obvious reasons. They traced him and went to Mexico to kill him. Harkwell left his hotel that night to meet him and do the job. However, Crothers was too good for him. He killed Harkwell before the lawyer could kill him.

"He left him in the Calle Niza, and our pal, Gomez, dragged him into the Embassy grounds and planted a gun in his hand to make it look like suicide."

A thought came to me. "And when Constance heard of it, of course, he yelled, 'Murder!' Then Crothers got in touch with him and they made a deal. Crothers would keep his mouth shut about being alive, would provide Huerta, here, to say he was dead and Constance could pay off when he got Mrs. Crothers' cash."

"You're largely right," said Mercado. "But you will recall I agreed a short time ago that Huerta was actually Crothers' best friend. Do you know how I happened to come to that conclusion?"

We looked at him expectantly.

"Because," said Mercado, "Huerta is Crothers, or Widders."



THERE was a sharp cry from Alicia Crothers. Huerta came to his feet. He fired a Spanish oath at Mercado, then added two more in English. His bass voice resounded through the room.

Alicia Crothers cried: "Harry! That's my husband. I'd know that voice anywhere!"

Jane Harkwell crossed the room and took the old lady's hand. Mercado continued.

"Both Crothers and Constance were afraid of a doublecross. Crothers couldn't get money from his wife without coming to the States. He was afraid to do that. Constance couldn't collect unless he could convince the old lady that Crothers was dead. So they came along together. If Constance crossed Crothers, he could stop the wedding. If Crothers tried to cross Constance, he could turn him in to the coppers. So he assumed the name 'Huerta' and they traveled together."

"Except," I said, "between Camaron and the Border."

"Ah," said Mercado, "that's what gave it away. Crothers left the train at Camaron. He reappeared in San Antonio. Why? Because he had no papers. He did not dare pass through the immigration office. He had a car ready, drove to the Border and simply waded across the Rio Grande at night."

I thought of something. "What about our private detective, Mendoza?"

"Crothers killed him. Mendoza was an old copper. Once he saw Huerta he knew he was Widders. He went down to Headquarters and checked Widders' crime. I learned that downtown. Obviously then he, too, sold out. He got hold of Widders and tried blackmail. Widders killed him."

The man known as Huerta said: "This is a stupid lie. I am neither Widders nor Crothers."

"That's an easy one," said Phelan. "We've got Widders' prints downtown. I don't care whether you're Crothers or not."

"We've got Crothers' prints, too," said Mercado. "In a safe, a safe that's never been opened in twenty-eight years, which has never been opened at all, save by Crothers, himself."

"I think that will do," said Phelan. "We'll take one for murder and the other for fraud, conspiracy and concealing criminal knowledge of murder. Come on, you two."

Alicia Crothers uttered a little gasp and fainted. Jane rushed toward the bedroom for smelling salts. Constance looked like a dead man.

As Phelan moved toward Huerta, the latter's hand moved with amazing rapidity to his hip. He pulled out a gun and slugged Phelan on the skull. Then he kicked out at Mercado's shin and was out of the room before I could move. The door slammed behind him before I was out of my chair.

Phelan recovered first, and brilliantly. He grabbed Constance, clicked a pair of handcuffs on him and clicked the other end of the cuffs onto the steam pipe. Then yelling to Mercado and me to follow, he took to his heels. The three of us charged out the door together.

We were lucky to find the elevator at our floor. As we went shooting down, inquiry revealed that Crothers must have used the stairs. In the hall the doorman hadn't seen him. That meant he must have used the back stairs.

We rushed out the service entrance of the building into the side street. We caught sight of Crothers speeding around the western corner. We charged after him, Mercado, coattails flying, in the lead, Phelan second and me about four lengths behind him in the rear.

At the corner, we saw Crothers duck into a doorway. We plunged along behind. We went through a dark corridor into a backyard. Crothers was on the top of a fence and fast disappearing.

Phelan's gun cracked once. We scrambled over the fence and I heard Mercado mutter: "Dios, my suit!" We landed jarringly on the other side and looked quickly around. Crothers was nowhere in sight.

There was a doorway before us, in front of which were a dozen garbage cans. A most unpleasant smell greeted our nostrils. Phelan plunged forward through the sickening stench. As we gained the doorway, we saw a kitchen, the filthiest kitchen I have ever seen in my life. And in the middle of it sprawled Crothers in a pool of grease. Doubtless, he had slipped and fallen as he was running through.

He sprang across the floor and barricaded himself behind a barrel of beer. We saw his gun barrel over the top of it. Beside me I heard Mercado hiccup. This time I didn't blame him.

The wooden floor on which we stood had a layer of grease an inch thick and in that grease was embedded the dirt of a decade. There were five uncovered garbage cans, filled to the hilt, on which were feasting a horde of the largest cockroaches I have ever seen.

A half naked, grimy looking man stood staring at us by a rusty, filthy stove. At a sink stood two more unwashed individuals dumping dishes into water that would have killed a typhus germ.

Phelan said: "Come out of there. There are three of us."

"Get out yourselves," said Crothers, "or you'll be three corpses."

"You asked for it," said Phelan and fired.

(Continued on page 97)

# THE NEEDLE



By

**JULIUS LONG**

*Author of "On the Homicide of the Street," etc.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Trial by Error

**P**OLICE Court Magistrate Jake McSwain said to his bailiff: "Call up the preliminary hearing on the concealed weapons case. I don't want to make the D.A. wait."

The bailiff looked through his docket and sang out: "Case Number 47639, *The State vs. Cecil Johnson.*"

Magistrate McSwain said: "Is the State ready?"

District Attorney Harry Malone instantly popped to his feet. "The State is ready, Your Honor."

"Is the defendant ready?"

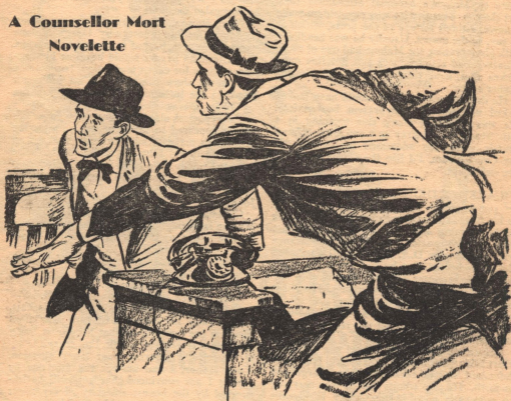
Clarence Darrow Mort looked up from his newspaper and drawled: "And willing and able, Jake. Let 'er go."

McSwain's face became as red as his eyes, which were fiery. It was apparent that His

# AND THE HOOK

*It was a rare day when Clarence Darrow Mort, famous criminal lawyer, condescended to represent a client on any charge less than homicide. But perhaps the shrewd little legal light saw in this case more than met the average eye, for what began as a mere run-of-the-mill concealed weapons charge soon ripened into mayhem, treason — and murder!*

## A Counsellor Mort Novelette



In the next split-second his employer seemed to be catapulted toward him.

Honor had been on a good one the night before. He snapped: "Bring in the prisoner."

The bailiff went to the door, yelled, and immediately Patrolman Dinwoodie, the arresting officer, ushered into the courtroom a shy little man of about fifty-five. The little man looked about, bewildered at first, then with some hope as he spied his attorney's face over the top of a newspaper. McSwain eyed him with interest, and many heads turned. Something about the little man's clothes distinguished him from everybody else in the room.

Even the reporters couldn't quite decide

what there was about those tweeds that set the little man apart. They were there en masse, eager and alert for this lowly police court hearing on a concealed weapons charge. It was a rare day when District Attorney Malone put in a personal appearance in a police court—an even rarer one when Clarence Darrow Mort, nationally famous criminal lawyer, condescended to represent a client on any charge less than murder.

Malone had half a dozen assistants fully capable of handling a preliminary hearing, the only purpose of which was to determine

whether the charge should be dismissed or the accused bound over to the grand jury. It was almost a foregone conclusion that the accused would be bound over, for it was provided by statute that only in the event of the failure of the state to show even a probability that a crime had been committed by the accused, should he be discharged. Accordingly, the presence of the district attorney himself seemed superfluous.

Reporters in the press box sensed there was more to Malone's personal attendance than met the eye. The district attorney seldom made a move without an eye to the press, which is to say, to the voters. Usually he was headlined with photographs, for Malone had one of those square-jawed countenances and fine-line mustaches that lend themselves to the photographer's art.

He dressed snappily and would have looked naked without his ever-present boutonniere. He was especially sharp this morning in a pin-striped oxford gray suit and wine-colored four-in-hand. He addressed McSwain. "If the Court please, I'd like the affidavit read to the defendant."

CLARENCE DARROW MORT sighed and put down his newspaper. He got wearily to his feet, as if having to work at ten o'clock in the morning amounted to penance for past sins. He contrasted sharply in appearance with the snappy D.A. His soiled, unpressed clothes indicated that he had spent the night in an ill-kept gutter. He had not shaved. His hair needed trimming, and combing. His client looked at him with misgivings, seemed to wonder if this could be the man credited with more legal talent than all the rest of the bar association put together.

Before the clerk could read the affidavit, Mort said: "Let's skip all that stuff, Jake. The defendant waives reading of the charge and so-forth. He also admits that he was carrying an automatic pistol when Officer Dinwoodie arrested him in the lobby of the Niel House. He even admits that the pistol was concealed in a shoulder-holster under his armpit.

"Of course he had no license to carry it. He is not even a citizen of this country but an Englishman here on a visitor's visa. However, he is entitled to the same defense at law as any citizen. I ask that the case against Cecil Johnson be dismissed for the reason that he had good and sufficient reason to carry a weapon concealed upon his person. He feared his life to be in danger and therefore was entitled to carry a gun to protect it. Even Malone knows this is an adequate defense to a charge of carrying concealed weapons in this state."

Malone sneered. "Yes, Your Honor, I happen to be familiar with the law. But Johnson

will have to prove his defense. It will take a lot more than a mere statement. I might say, Your Honor, that I feel very deeply about this case, as I do in all cases of concealed weapons.

"This country is on the verge of a crime wave due in a large part to the importation of thousands of foreign firearms by returning war veterans. These weapons will inevitably fall into the hands of crooks and be used in crimes of violence. Somebody must do something about it, and I intend to do it. From now on I will personally prosecute every case of concealed weapons!"

There it was. The boys in the press box no longer had to guess why Harry Malone had personally appeared to prosecute Johnson. The afternoon papers would headline his one-man crusade for crime prevention, two-column cuts would show him pointing an indignant finger at the little pistol taken from Johnson by Officer Dinwoodie.

The reporters also knew now why Johnson's tweeds appeared so subtly unique. They were of English make. And they knew that, as an English citizen, Johnson would no doubt be deported rather than tried for his indiscretion of carrying a concealed automatic pistol. Whatever happened, it didn't look good for Johnson.

Clarence Darrow Mort drawled: "If Mr. Malone is through making campaign speeches, I'd like to put my client on the stand to testify in his own defense."

Magistrate McSwain regarded Mort with suspicious interest and nodded.

"Swear in your witnesses."

"My client's only witness is himself."

McSwain's eyes widened. "What is this, C.D., a gag? Do you think I'll turn your client loose on his own say-so that his life is being threatened? Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Mercifully ignoring your latter question, Your Honor, I can answer the first one by saying I am convinced that you will be impressed by the honest sincerity of my client when he explains to you why he felt it necessary upon his arrival in America to buy a gun for his protection. My client is constitutionally entitled to testify on his own behalf even though he is not an American citizen. I insist on that right."

McSwain shrugged and ordered Cecil Johnson sworn in. The little man seated himself in the witness chair. Malone watched nervously. Plainly, he could not understand how this case could go wrong, but when Mort was in on one, you could never be sure what was going to happen.

MORT took a position a few feet from the witness stand. He did not look at the witness but out through the window behind the stand and appeared to be absorbed in the

architecture of the dingy old Hotel Mosby across the street. The courtroom was on the second floor of the Criminal Courts Building, which made it on a level with the fifth floor of the Hotel Mosby.

"You will state your name to the Court," said Mort.

"Cecil Johnson, sir." The little man spoke so timidly that he was almost inaudible. He played nervously with a gold ring on the second finger of his right hand. His lawyer's lack of interest in him seemed to worry him, and he kept turning around to see if Mort were still there.

Mort said: "Where do you live, Mr. Johnson?"

"Redditch, England."

"And what is your occupation?"

"I'm retired, sir."

"Turn around and speak to the judge," said Mort. "Now tell the judge why you bought an automatic pistol shortly after your arrival in America and carried it with you ever since."

Johnson fidgeted and seemed to be trying to push the gold ring farther down his finger. His soft, gentle face was very pale and lined with obvious worry as he said, falteringly: "Well, Your Lordship, the first day I arrived in New York I received a telephone call at my hotel. I was told that if I did not return to England at once I'd be—I think the way the man termed it was—rubbed out."

McSwain regarded the accused man with obvious interest. He had beamed beatifically when Johnson had addressed him as "Your Lordship." McSwain was especially appreciative of reverence, as he had practised law in a poolroom until his precinct leader had taken pity on his wife and children and made him a judge.

"Why," asked McSwain, "would anybody want to scare you back to England? You weren't running out on your wife, were you?"

"No, Your Lordship. I never married."

"Well, then?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Your Lord-

ship, why anyone would make such a threat. I left England only because my physician advised me to take a long rest and to travel. I had always wanted to see America."

McSwain nodded his approval. Malone looked worried. This Englishman had a way about him. But still, Malone plainly thought, McSwain couldn't turn Johnson loose on his own story.

Mort noted Malone's discomfiture and continued. "What did you do then, Mr. Johnson?"

"I left New York as I had planned and traveled to this state. Its climate had been especially recommended to me, and I intended to stop here in this beautiful city indefinitely."

McSwain beamed anew.

Mort asked: "And did you receive another threat by telephone?"

Johnson turned to McSwain. "Yes, Your Lordship. Yesterday I received another threat while dining at a restaurant. It is quite evident that I was followed from New York. Again I was warned that I should be 'rubbed out' if I did not return to England at once.

"Quite naturally I was frightened, particularly since I had heard so much about gangsters in America. I tried to convince myself that the first call had been made by some crude practical joker put up to his prank by some friend back home in Redditch. But this second call convinced me that the threat against my life was no joke."

"Why didn't you go to the police?" McSwain asked skeptically.

"Because, Your Lordship, I am a stranger in this country and without friends. I feared my story would be ridiculed. So I went about acquiring a pistol. I'd rather not tell where I got it, Your Lordship. The pawnbroker who sold it to me said he'd be in trouble if the police ever found out."

Mort asked: "The same pawnbroker sold you a holster?"

"Yes, sir. And some cartridges. He also showed me how to use the pistol. I explained



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to him that I had never used a gun before."

"And you wouldn't have resorted to buying one now if you hadn't thought your life in danger?"

"Oh, no, Your Lordship. I certainly shouldn't have!"

Mort walked around in front of the bench and said: "There you are, Jake. You can see that this poor, frightened man was guilty of no wrong-doing. The law was not meant to be used against honest men such as he. I move that the case be dismissed and the prisoner be discharged."

McSwain hesitated. Malone leaped to his feet.

"Surely, Your Lord—Your Honor, you can't seriously consider the prisoner's uncorroborated story! Why, anyone could justify the carrying of concealed weapons by thinking up a cock-and-bull story like that! It would make a travesty of the law!"

McSwain said: "I'm afraid he's right, C.D. I can't—"

**H**E JUMPED then, like everyone else in the room. Cecil Johnson actually leaped out of the witness chair and fell down several steps onto his face. He lay there sobbing and trembling. No one had heard the shot, but everybody had heard the whine of the bullet and shattering of glass in the window behind the witness stand.

The first persons in the room to recover their composure were the reporters. At first it looked as if Johnson might have been shot, but when they dragged the whimpering man to his feet they discovered that he was only badly frightened. Then the bullet hole was spotted in the opposite wall. It was apparent that the slug had narrowly missed Johnson.

The reporters fled in a body to their phones. "What's everybody standing around for?" snapped McSwain. "You, Dinwoodie, get the lead out and tell Headquarters there's just been an attempted murder!"

Officer Dinwoodie left the room. Mort inquired with exaggerated solicitude as to his client's well-being. Johnson's teeth chattered so much that he could scarcely talk. Mort turned in triumph to McSwain.

"Well, Your Honor, do you still deny my motion to free my client?"

McSwain shook his head solemnly. Malone started to protest, but McSwain cut him off.

"I'd have done the same thing! It's a crying shame that a visitor to our country can't travel without having to defend his life! He had a right to buy a gun and carry it. Bailiff, give Mr. Johnson back his gun and holster, too. Prisoner's discharged, case dismissed!"

"Oh, thank you, Your Lordship!" said Johnson. Mort saw to it that he got back his automatic pistol and holster, then shepherded

him out of the courtroom. Out in the street he hailed a cab and fairly shoved his frightened client inside. He gave the driver the address of his own office, and the cab rolled through the busy street.

"Relax," said Mort. "You've nothing to worry about."

Johnson's teeth still clattered.

"B-but I was shot at! Someone outside the building tried to kill me!" He stared in amazement at his own statement, then repeated: "It's true! Somebody *did* try to kill me! But where could the shot have come from?"

"From the Hotel Mosby, Room 516."

Johnson said: "Yes, but—" He blinked his eyes. "Did you say Room 516? How could you know that?"

"Because I rented the room and sent the man there who fired the shot. I don't think you've had the pleasure of meeting my junior partner, Blackstone Jones. Lately he's become very good with a pistol. So I gave him a chance to prove his proficiency today.

"We arranged that he was to count to one hundred after I crossed in front of the window. Then he was to shoot close enough to you to convince that imbecile, McSwain, that your life was indeed in danger. I must say that he shot close enough."

Johnson stared dazedly. Slowly, he got the idea. He shook his head.

"You Americans . . ."

"Are resourceful," Mort completed. "It was the only way I could get your case dismissed. You'd have been in immediate trouble with the immigration authorities if you'd been held. I take it that you are not, as a matter of fact, retired, but in this country on very urgent business requiring your immediate attention."

Johnson started to nod, then his face clouded with suspicion, and he froze. He took off his coat and began to put on the shoulder-holster.

"I suggest you forget about that thing," said Mort. "The next time some cop picks you up you won't be so lucky."

Johnson said: "I've got to take that chance. The next time somebody shoots at me, I may not be so lucky."

Mort scoffed. "You aren't going to tell me you actually did receive those phone calls?"

Johnson busied himself with tightening the shoulder-holster.

"I'm deeply appreciative of your cunning resourcefulness, Mr. Mort, but I really see no point in trying to convince you of something which you obviously disbelieve. It makes no difference to me what you believe."

Mort grinned. "O.K., pal, clam up—it suits me. But I must remind you that I've still got a couple of grand coming to me. Maybe you don't remember—that's two thousand dollars."

Johnson said knowingly: "I attend the cinema and I know perfectly well that in America a couple of grand is two thousand dollars! Just wait till I get my coat on, and I'll pay you. I must say that you earned the money. As you guessed, it's very important that I keep out of trouble at this point."

He put on his coat, tugged at the gold ring again and removed a wallet from his pocket. It was not over-stuffed, but he handed Mort two one thousand-dollar bills, so new that they had only one fold in them.

Mort accepted them. "Thanks. Always glad to promote amity among nations."

Johnson leaned forward to the driver. "Drop me at the Niel House, will you?"

He settled back in the seat. "You know, Mr. Mort, in England everybody thinks you are dead."

Mort started, then laughed. "I'm afraid you're confusing me with Clarence Darrow. He is dead. I was only named after him. My father thought Darrow the greatest man alive, so I was tagged with the name. Entering the legal profession as a criminal lawyer was, I suppose, the inevitable consequence. My junior partner, Blackstone Jones, suffered the same fate. I expect you Englishmen know about Blackstone, too."

Johnson nodded. "But we know even more about Darrow. I must say that you are worthy to bear his name. I'll be forever grateful to you. Having somebody fire a pistol at me at precisely the strategic time was a stroke of genius on your part."

Mort nodded. "I've always suspected I had something like that in me." He waited for Johnson to laugh, but the Englishman accepted the statement at its face value. A few blocks farther on, the cab stopped before the city's leading hotel, and Johnson got out. Mort extended his hand. Johnson was about to shake it, then stuck out his left hand. They shook hands awkwardly, and Johnson entered the hotel.

Mort rode happily to his office building, entered his private office by the back door, pressed the switch on his inter-office unit and said to Miss Blimm: "When Blackie shows up, send him in."

Miss Blimm replied: "He's just coming in now, Mr. Mort. I'll tell him."

A few seconds later the door opened, and Blackstone Jones, all six feet and seven inches of him, entered the room. There was a semi-glazed look in his eyes, and he was feeling the back of his head, Mort tossed a new thousand-dollar bill across his desk to his partner.

"Your cut, Blackie. Nice job. A little close, but a nice job."

Blackstone Jones dazedly regarded the money. He shook his head sadly, "I'm awfully sorry I let you down. C.D. I never

dreamed anyone was wise to me. Lord, how that guy slugged me!"

Mort slowly rose from his chair.

"Slugged you? What are you talking about?"

"Why, while I was watching the courtroom from the window in 516, somebody sneaked in behind me and got me with a blackjack! When I came to, my gun was gone and so was Johnson from the witness stand! So I came right back. What's that money for, anyway?"

Mort sat down heavily. "For you. So you didn't fire that shot after all! Then somebody really is trying to kill poor little Cecil Johnson!" He switched on the inter-office unit. "Miss Blimm, get me Cecil Johnson at the Niel House."

A few seconds later Miss Blimm answered: "Sorry, Mr. Mort. Mr. Johnson just checked out. He left no forwarding address."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Speak of the Devil

OLIVER MANTON, manager of the Niel House, had once been saved the embarrassment of a costly lawsuit, over a forcibly ejected couple who later turned out to be lawfully married, thanks to the services of Mort, who discovered that the couple earned a better-than-average living working the racket. Accordingly, Manton had no hesitancy in giving Mort any assistance he desired.

But he could give him no clue as to Cecil Johnson's next address.

Mort eyed Manton glumly across a corner table in the Niel House stag bar.

"Could Johnson have left any tell-tale clue behind in his room?"

"No. I even had the housekeeper check the contents of the wastebaskets before the maid went in. There was nothing. Johnson cleaned it out thoroughly. And the mail clerk says he received no mail at all while he was here."

Mort signaled a waiter for his check.

"Well, thanks for trying."

The waiter brought the check. Manton took it, signed it and handed it back. He eyed Mort thoughtfully.

"You seem very anxious to contact this man. Why don't you cable the police at that town in England he gave as his address? It was something like Radish, wasn't it?"

"Redditch. I never heard of it before. No, I don't want to start sending cables to the English constabulary. I have every reason to believe my erstwhile client is perfectly respectable, but discretion is in order."

Manton shrugged. "It seems very evident, respectable or not, that Johnson is in some kind of trouble. You haven't mentioned it, but the attempt on his life made the afternoon

papers. I don't blame him for getting out of town."

"Especially when his enemies were able to loose the local cops on him."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think Officer Dinwoodie has such an eagle-eye that he could have spotted that rod all my himself, do you?"

"I hadn't thought of that. This happens to be Dinwoodie's beat, and he's in and out all the time. I supposed he just happened to notice Johnson as he crossed the lobby."

"Not a chance. The pawnbroker who sold Johnson his rod and holster did him a favor. The holster was of thin, soft leather, the kind that doesn't add to the bulge of the gun. And the gun had no bulge to speak of. It was a thirty-two-caliber Colt, and flat as a pancake. Dinwoodie wouldn't have noticed Johnson in a million years if somebody hadn't put the finger on him."

Manton regarded the little lawyer, then turned to a waiter. "Get me Casey."

In less than a minute a nondescript individual dressed like a successful insurance salesman walked into the room and came to the corner table.

"Yes, Mr. Manton?"

Manton said: "C.D., this is Casey Thomas, my house dick." He turned severely to the detective. "Why did you tip Dinwoodie to Johnson's rod?"

Casey winced and flushed. Momentarily he seemed to hesitate between denial and making a clean breast of it.

Manton snapped: "Come on—I know Dinwoodie didn't spot that rod all by himself!"

Casey said miserably: "It's like this, Mr. Manton—a guy called me and told me we had a guest named Cecil Johnson from England and that he was packin' a rod. He told me if the guy got picked up there was a twenty in it for me."

"You know how it is—I didn't want to make trouble for a guest. But the guy had no business with a rod, so I propositioned Dinwoodie. He's not too bright—I told him it would be a feather in his cap if he layed for the guy and picked him up."

"So he picked him up. His precinct captain gave him a pat on the back, for you'd never spot that rod in a million years if you weren't looking for it. And the guy kicked in with his twenty by mail. I didn't think I was doing anything wrong. After all, the guy had no business packin' a rod."

Manton said coldly: "I should fire you. You should have come to me."

Casey said earnestly: "It'll never happen again, Mr. Manton!"

"I hope not."

Casey left, wiping perspiration from his brow. Manton shrugged.

"What can you do in a case like that?"

"That's your problem. Mine's getting more complicated. My ex-client's got to be told how right his suspicions are. It's very plain that the same man who phoned him threats phoned Casey. The idea was to pull his teeth if not to get him out of the country altogether. Somebody is going to get that guy—if I don't get to him first."

Manton sighed. "Well, it'll take a miracle to find him."

"**MAYBE** you've got the miracle," Mort told Blackstone Jones half an hour later. He had instructed his partner to go home and take care of the bump on the back of his head, but Jones had laughed at the idea and made a bee-line for the city library.

"Like you," he explained, "I'd never heard of this English town of Redditch. But when I got busy at the library I found that it's one of the most important towns in the world—if you're a fisherman or a seamstress. You see, the very best hooks and needles in the world are made in Redditch."

Mort regarded his junior partner with growing appreciation.

"Go on. Tell me more about Redditch."

"It's virtually all given over to the manufacture of hooks and needles. The only real competition comes from Norway, but the Norwegian hooks are inferior. As for needles, Redditch just about has the industry to itself. About four companies produce them. If you're from Redditch, your business is either hooks or needles or both."

"So," said Mort, "you think our friend Johnson's an old hook-and-needle man?"

"The odds all say so. Now, the question I asked myself the first time I heard about Johnson making a bee-line straight to Riverton from New York was why any sensible man would do that, especially if he were on a vacation."

"Scenically, Riverton is no different from any other city of three or four hundred thousand in the Mid-west. The surrounding country is beautifully hilly and agriculturally productive, but there's nothing to pull an Englishman here on a sight-seeing tour. So it seems logical that Johnson actually was making a business trip."

"It then occurred to me that Johnson might be in Riverton for the purpose of doing business with Jeff Baxley. You know Jeff, of course."

"Sure—he paid me a nice fee once. He'd educated his kids in England, traveling over there to see them instead of bringing them home summers. He gave them both—Bee and Jeff, Jr.—swell cars, but right after Bee got back she had a hell of a wreck. You see, she was used to driving on the left side of the



road, and that doesn't work so well over here. She killed a guy and was tried for manslaughter.

"Old Jeff hired me, and I beat the rap. That was just before you joined the firm. Too bad you didn't rate a cut on the fee—I jolted Jeff for thirty grand. But he had it to spend."

Blackstone Jones nodded.

"Of course, and you know why. Baxley's one of the largest manufacturers of fishing tackle in the country. I didn't waste much time chasing from the library to the nearest sporting goods store. I pretended to be interested in fishing tackle, and an old-timer at the store told me Baxley uses nothing but the very best hooks. They all come from Arkham, Ltd., a Redditch firm. Now, do I have to draw a diagram?"

"Perhaps not. It would seem that Johnson came all the way from England to close a deal with Baxley over fish-hooks."

"Precisely. My hunch is that he represents some rival firm and that Arkham, Ltd. are doing everything possible to keep him from closing the deal. They mean to stop at nothing, even murder."

Mort slowly shook his head. "I can't buy that one, Blackie. I'll concede that English businessmen are no more scrupulous than businessmen the world over, but I can't see

murder in a scuffle over a contract. There's something deeper—that I'll guarantee."

Blackstone Jones furrowed his youthful forehead.

"But what else could be back of it?"

Mort reached for his phone. "Maybe Jeff Baxley will tell us."

But he got no farther than Baxley's private secretary. Mr. Baxley, she stated, was out of the city. No, she couldn't give his forwarding address. Mort hung up. He stared thoughtfully out a window, then snapped his fingers.

"I've got it! Ever since I handled Bee's manslaughter case, Jeff's been wanting me to come to his lodge at Kyser Lake! He's bragged about how isolated it is and how wonderful the fishing is! He's practically begged me to visit him there for years! That's where he'll be now! And it's a good bet that that's exactly where we'll find our friend, Johnson!"

IT WAS seven o'clock in the evening when Blackstone Jones parked in front of the Plaza Hotel at Kyser Lake. He would have made the two hundred-mile drive from River-ton much faster, but for Mort's protest against any speed over sixty miles an hour. Mort didn't object, however, when Blackstone Jones grabbed up all the bags and carried them into the hotel.

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A bellhop started forward, took one look at Blackstone Jones and made no attempt to take the bags. Mort registered. A condescending clerk gave the pair a lake-front suite at thirty dollars a day. The suite turned out to be two over-sized closets made into bedrooms and a sitting room of similar proportions.

"The only way I'll be able to lie down," said Blackstone Jones, "is to let my feet hang out of the window."

Mort, only a few inches over five feet in height, was satisfied. But he consoled: "Cheer up. Once Jeff Baxley finds we're here, he'll invite us to his lodge. Naturally we just can't barge in on him."

Blackstone Jones ducked his head as he came out of his bedroom and said with no appreciable enthusiasm: "Naturally."

The pair went down to the hotel dining room and left it an hour later, still hungry but eight dollars poorer. Mort spent what was left of his change in a quarter slot machine in the lobby while his partner looked on with disgust.

"You know you can't beat those things."

"Sure, and people get married every day," Mort remarked caustically.

"Speaking of getting married, some very nice material just walked in. Brother! What a gal!"

Mort turned away from the slot machine. His eyes widened as he watched a brown-haired girl in a white suit hand an overnight bag to a bellhop. She walked to the desk and registered.

Mort sighed and observed to his partner: "It looks like the hotel for our entire stay. Baxley's lodge must be full-up or his daughter would never check in at this gyp-joint."

Blackstone Jones whistled softly. "So that's Bee Baxley! I thought she was in some dramatic school in New York."

"Evidently school's out."

Mort waited until the girl had climbed the stairs to the second and only upper floor. He sauntered over to the desk, dug a ten-dollar bill out of his pocket and was rewarded by something approaching attention from the clerk.

"A friend of mine—his name's Cecil Johnson—was to meet me here. I wonder if by any chance he could be registered."

The clerk said instantly: "We've no one by that name."

"Perhaps he used his show name—he's in show business, you know." Mort described the Englishman.

The clerk still shook his head. "I haven't seen anyone like that, and I've been on duty all day."

Mort left the bill on the desk and returned to Jones.

"Let's take a ride over to see Jeff Baxley."

They got instructions at the first filling station. The Baxley place was well known. However, the attendant warned that it was completely isolated, being situated on Wolf Island, an islet at the end of Minnewauken Island, a large resort center. To reach Wolf Island it was necessary to cross a narrow bridge barred by a gate at one end.

"Better phone Baxley," Mort said. He went into the filling station. Baxley wasn't there, but he got Jeff, Jr., the son.

Jeff, Jr. said surlily: "So sorry, Mr. Mort, but my father isn't expected at the lodge. I regret that I can't say where he is at the moment. But he definitely isn't due at the lodge."

Mort hung up and went back to the car.

"Well, Blackie, we'd be about as welcome as a pair of scorpions at Baxley's lodge. The old man isn't supposed to be due—at least that's what Junior says. It seems Junior's taken over. No doubt he's entertaining someone special. I never liked the brat. I hope he has a horrible time."

Blackstone Jones said glumly: "Looks as if we've come on a wild-goose chase. Maybe Johnson galloped off to make a deal with some other fishing tackle company."

"Not a chance. He got out of Riverton because he was afraid to stay. Baxley must have sent him up here—maybe he hasn't arrived yet. But Johnson's on the grounds somewhere, I'll gamble on it. And speaking of gambling, I wonder if they provide any action around here?"

"Oh, my! Here we go again!"

Blackstone Jones pleaded to no avail. Half an hour later the pair was ushered into a place called the Hornet's Nest. No introduction was required—the locality was that wide-open.

The Hornet's Nest consisted of a single rectangular room large enough to accommodate numerous games, a roulette wheel and bird-cage. However, every table was deserted except for a dice table in the far corner.

"Looks as though somebody is getting some action," said Mort.

He crossed the room, his partner following reluctantly. For once nobody turned to stare at the giant. All eyes were intent upon the man holding the dice at one end. Blackstone Jones identified him first.

"**JOHNSON!**" he said loudly, but still nobody looked up. Mort stood on his toes at the edge of the crowd.

Cecil Johnson was indeed the focal point of all eyes at the table. He threw the dice as Mort caught his first glimpse of him.

There was a general murmur of incredulity. Someone said with awe: "The tenth straight pass!"

Somebody else said: "Why doesn't the house change the dice?"

Mort observed the heckler. He was a slightly too handsome youth slightly too much the worse for liquor. As Mort watched, he risked his last two chips on a come-bet against Johnson. Very plainly Johnson would clean him out if he made an eleventh pass. The stick-man pulled in the dice and palmed in a new pair so crudely that Mort was embarrassed for him.

This time he was positive Johnson would crap out, and the youth would regain some of his losses. Johnson seemed unaware of any chicanery. He bet the house limit, a thousand dollars, and hurled the dice. He sevened.

The youth cursed. Women frowned. The stick-man said: "If you can't take it, bud, scam."

Plainly the dealer would have liked to indulge in some first-class profanity. He raked in the dice and eyed them sourly. Johnson raked in his chips and said: "That'll be all. Now, let's see—where do I cash these?"

"Right this way," said a man in a tuxedo, the only person in the house who was in full-dress. "I'll take care of you in the office."

Johnson followed meekly. Mort took for granted that the man in the tuxedo was the proprietor. The crowd around the table broke up. The disgruntled youth made his way to the small bar in one corner and ordered whiskey. Mort was right behind him when he ordered. Mort also ordered whiskey, learned that the place had no license and that all drinks were on the house. He smiled and said consolingly to the unlucky youth: Well, it's nice that somebody can be lucky."

The youth scowled. "That was stage money. I never saw the guy before. Arno rang him in here as a shill. He's supposed to be paying the guy off right now, but that's just a gag. Arno wouldn't let anyone make eleven straight passes at his tables, with the house limit bet every time. That's what fooled me—I thought it was a sure thing betting against the little guy. What a sucker I was!"

"Not cleaned out, I hope."

"But good!"

Mort flicked a twenty-dollar bill across the bar. The youth looked at it in amazement, then his eyes narrowed in suspicion as he said coldly: "Keep your dough, fellow. I'm not a charity case yet."

Mort smiled disarmingly. "It's not charity. I'm a stranger around here, and I'd like a few answers before I get my feet wet. So Arno uses rigged games?"

"Of course. His dice talk seven languages including the Scandinavian. The only way you can beat the crap game is by betting against a sucker—the way I thought I was doing."

"Well, it may console you to know that the big winner was no shill. It isn't stage money he's being paid off with right now."

"I don't believe you."

"Have it your own way. Mort extended his hand. "I'm C. D. Mort. This is my partner, Blackstone Jones."

The youth reluctantly accepted his hand, waved vaguely toward Jones.

"Jerry Reynolds. I've heard of you. You got Bee out of a bad jam once, didn't you?"

Mort's brows lifted as he nodded. Reynolds went on explanatorily: "I was to meet Bee here at the lake. Only I'm not meeting her now. I couldn't. I dropped two hundred bucks, the dough that was to get us married. So there'll be no Bee and no wedding bells."

Mort exchanged a glance with his junior partner. Very plainly Reynolds was talking because he believed the game lost and that nothing he said now would make any difference. He went on.

"Bee's old man is right. I'm no good. I lap up too much booze and throw my dough away on bum games. If I married Bee, I'd be living off her in a month. Maybe even sooner."

Mort tried to think up something appropriate, but at that moment a door opened, and Johnson reappeared with Arno. Arno had an arm around the little man's shoulder and was telling him loudly enough for everybody in the room to hear: "I certainly get a big kick out of seeing somebody walk out of here happy! It's the only advertisement for the place I can get. Just tell them where you got it—that's all Sam Arno asks."

The little man said he would tell them where he got it.

"Well, fancy meeting you here," said Mort, crossing over. Johnson froze, as if he were confronted by a ghost. He stared at Mort as if trying not to believe his eyes. Then he turned on his heel and fled from the room.

Mort stopped, momentarily astounded. Then he ran after Johnson. The Hornet's Nest was two miles from the nearest lake town, and nobody would think of walking the distance, especially if he were carrying eleven thousand dollars in winnings. But Mort looked over the grounds and saw no one.

Beside him, Blackstone Jones said: "He's hiding from you. Why?"

"I'll be damned if I know. I wonder where he could have gone?"

A car roared out of the parking lot, skidded on two wheels as it turned into the road. Mort could not see the driver, but he said: "Well, he really must be frightened of me. The odds are he stole that car to make a getaway. Anyone would think I was the devil himself."

Blackstone Jones said solemnly: "That thought has occurred to me before."

## CHAPTER THREE

## Air-Tight Frame

**B**ACK in the Hornet's Nest, Mort appreciably lowered the house losses for the night by dropping the thousand-dollar bill he had received from Johnson, also the thousand-dollar bill he had turned over to Blackstone Jones. This latter was not accomplished without a crisis in the relationship of the two partners. In the end, Mort won his point. He lost the next one, a nine.

The second thousand gone, he returned to the bar, his partner pleading: "Can't you see you've had enough, C. D.? You can't beat these games!"

"Johnson did." He regarded Jerry Reynolds, now pretty droopy at the bar. "Your luck still sour?"

"Sure. I dropped your twenty. You'll play hell ever getting it back."

"Forget it, Jerry. It looks like a bad night for both of us." He turned back to his partner and said: "Damn it, I don't mind dropping a couple of grand, but I'm really bothered about the way Johnson behaved. What could have been the matter with him?"

"A guilty conscience. Or maybe he's grown scared of everyone."

Mort's brow furrowed. "Maybe you've hit it. It could be that whoever's gunning for Johnson has a good and sufficient reason for doing so. Could be he's dished out a nice doublecross."

"To whom? Baxley?"

"Not likely. I still think Baxley's here at Kyser Lake, and Johnson would hardly show here if he were afraid of him."

"If that's the case, why don't we find Baxley and learn what it's all about?"

Mort grimaced. "Looks as if nobody wants us to find him. We aren't apt to win any popularity contests at Kyser Lake."

He turned as he saw the look on Jerry Reynolds' face. The youth looked as if he would have welcomed a hole in the floor through which to crawl. He shrank back as if trying to make himself invisible. Mort saw the girl in the doorway.

"Jerry! I thought I'd find you here!"

Bee Baxley walked up to the bar. Her attention was so intensively concentrated on Jerry Reynolds that she failed to notice Mort.

"Don't tell me—I know! You've let Sam Arno clean you out again!"

Reynolds sheepishly forced himself to meet her gaze. "That's the size of it. I'm sorry, Bee. This time it's the works."

Bee Baxley glared savagely. "I'm glad you said it! I would have if you hadn't beaten me to it! Dad was right! You're no good!"

She turned suddenly, recognized Mort, but

seemed incapable of a single word of greeting. She was crying when she ran out of the room.

Reynolds turned dully to the bartender. "Do I rate another one? Make it a double."

The bartender poured a double. Mort, who did not think highly of his fellow men, nevertheless pitied them. He nodded to his partner, and the pair walked to the door. Sam Arno met them there. He held out a hand.

"It's a pleasure having you here, Mr. Mort. And you, too, Mr. Jones. I just found out who you were. Sorry my boys nicked you a little. Better come back tomorrow night and let them nick you some more."

He laughed uproariously at his joke. Mort, who could tell a tin-horn in any league, smiled as cordially as possible and wiped the clamminess off his hand as he walked out. The pair rode back in silence to the Plaza.

As Mort picked up their key the clerk said: "That man you're looking for—I'm sure it's the same one—he just came in. He's in 233 right now."

"And who has 233?"

The clerk hesitated as if searching his soul. Mort laid a ten-spot on the desk, and the soul-searching ended. The clerk dug up a registration card and handed it over furtively.

Mort read: *J. E. Kenwood, Arkham, Ltd., Redditch, England.*

**M**ORT thanked the clerk and ascended the stairs. Blackstone Jones followed silently. He had read the card over Mort's shoulder.

The pair halted before Room 233. Mort rapped on the door. Someone said: "Who's there?"

"Cecil Johnson."

The door opened immediately. A balding man in shirtsleeves looked up and down at the pair and snapped: "I don't understand. Is this some joke? Neither of you is Cecil Johnson."

Thick cigar smoke issued through the doorway. Mort tried to peer into the room, but the man held the door only a quarter open.

Mort said: "I'm really looking for Jeff Baxley. I believed him to be here."

The man's eyes narrowed. A voice said: "Damned if that isn't old Corpus Delicti!" The door was abruptly opened farther as a fat man, also in shirtsleeves, appeared.

"Hello, Jeff," said Mort. "I've been trying to find you." He indicated Jones. "This is my partner, Blackstone Jones."

Baxley shook hands. "And this is Mr. Kenwood. It's his room, but I'm sure he'd like to have you in for a drink."

Mr. Kenwood said he wouldn't mind at all. He poured Scotch, eyeing Mort with intense suspicion. He said finally: "Why did you say you were Cecil Johnson?"

"You know Mr. Johnson, do you?"

"Of course. But you haven't answered my question."

"Well, I wanted you to open the door, and I thought you would for an old friend from Redditch."

Kenwood was not satisfied. "How do you know about Johnson—that he's from Redditch, I mean?"

"Because Mr. Johnson retained me to represent him professionally. He didn't say what it was all about. He just said I was to meet him at your room in this hotel. Isn't he here?"

Kenwood snapped: "You've eyes! Frankly, I don't believe you." He turned to Baxley. "This man is a friend of yours, and I don't wish to be boorish. But he's not telling the truth."

Baxley poured a mixed drink down his throat, set down the glass and said: "C. D., you know I'll always feel a great debt of gratitude to you. But for you, Bee's life would have been ruined by a reformatory sentence. But I'm damned if I can understand your suddenly popping up and handing us a line of hoey. What's it all about?"

Mort took his time before answering. He stared around the room, saw papers that appeared to be duplicate copies of a contract on a stand. He said: "That's my story, Jeff. Sorry you and your friend don't care to believe me. Under the circumstances, I guess I'd better be going."

Kenwood said: "I can't think of a single reason for your staying."

Baxley made no comment as the Englishman escorted Mort and Jones to the door.

Outside, Jones said: "Brother! What a bouncing! I think we must have barged in at the wrong time!"

"Well, I got a drink of good Scotch that Kenwood must have brought over with him. Too bad you don't drink."

"I wonder where Johnson could be. He didn't stay long."

"You don't think he was ever in that room, do you?"

"But the clerk said—"

"The clerk said Johnson was there, but all he knew was that Johnson had started to go there. He probably got as far as the door, heard voices and identified one of them as Baxley's. Then he went out the back way—there must be a back way."

"But why? If Johnson came all the way from England to see Baxley, and if he meant to see Kenwood here at the hotel, why would he be afraid to see them both together?"

"If I could answer that one, I could tell you why somebody is trying to kill Johnson. But I can't answer it, and I'm tired of racking my brain over it. We've done our best to help Johnson—he's rewarded us by running away as if we were demons from hell. So the hell with Johnson! I'm going to bed."

**B**LACKSTONE JONES had risen and gone out by the time Mort awakened the next morning. It was ten o'clock. Mort killed twenty minutes showering and shaving, then dressed and went downstairs. He bought a Chicago paper at the hotel newsstand and commented to the girl there: "Not much news this morning."

The girl said excitedly: "Plenty of news around Kyser Lake though! Ain't you heard about the murder?"

Mort folded the paper and eyed the girl receptively. She went on, glad to find somebody who hadn't heard the story.

"A fisherman found him—they'd thrown him in shallow water. Somebody beat him up awful badly first and then threw him in."

"Would you mind telling me who, when and where?"

"It was over at Frog Bay. It must've happened in the night sometime. The man's name was Cecil Johnson, and he was all the way from England! Imagine!"

"I can imagine," Mort replied tersely.

Mort walked out onto the hotel veranda.



NEXT TIME SAY

**BRIGHT STAR**

for a better  
**FLASHLIGHT**  
and better  
**BATTERIES**

FAMOUS SINCE 1909

There was no sign of Blackstone Jones. He walked down the street to the restaurant, ordered breakfast. From the conversation there, he learned that the body had been discovered by a Toledo dentist. It had first been removed to the state conservation office, thence to the Van Horn Funeral Home, the local mortuary. Mort learned that the funeral home was another block down the street. He hastily finished his breakfast and walked the block.

A lean man wearing a sheriff's badge sat at a desk in the mortuary office. A stenographer was taking notes as he questioned a man whom Mort vaguely remembered as a patron of the Hornet's Nest the night before. The man said his name was George Peabody, and he thought the deceased might possibly be the man who had won eleven thousand dollars at the Hornet's Nest the previous night.

"I know all about that!" snapped the sheriff. He's the guy, all right. There's no need for you to look at the body. Next."

Abashed, George Peabody retired in confusion. Mort understood the sheriff's annoyance. The fact that Johnson had won so much money at the Hornet's Nest would embarrass the sheriff who presumably served as a law enforcement officer. Of course, Mort realized, any place run that wide open in a state with strict anti-gambling laws would have to enjoy the favor of the sheriff's office.

"Who are you?" snapped the sheriff.

"C. D. Mort. I think the deceased was my client. If you've no objections I'd like to view the body."

The sheriff eyed Mort suspiciously. "What was your client's name?"

"Cecil Johnson, of Redditch, England."

The sheriff eyed Mort thoughtfully. "That's him. Say, you wouldn't be Clarence Darrow Mort?"

"My birth certificate says I am."

The sheriff stood up and put out his hand. "Well, I'm mighty pleased to meet you, Mr. Mort. I sure am! My name's Tom Shultz. Come on, we'll take a look at the corpse. You'll probably want to claim it."

Shultz led the way to a back room, where a deputy stood guard. Cecil Johnson was recognizable, though one side of his face was flattened.

"Somebody sure didn't like him," observed Shultz. "It wouldn't have required that amount of beating to kill him."

Mort nodded. Then his gaze froze on the dead man's right hand. The hand lay beside the body, the fingers curved slightly inward. Four of them, that is. The second finger of the hand was gone. Only a short stump of perhaps half an inch remained. It was this finger that had worn the gold ring.

The finger had not been recently amputated for the stump was perfectly healed.

The sheriff noted Mort's gaze.

"Funny thing about that finger. The coroner says it's been off'n his hand for three months anyway. Yet nearly everybody who remembers this guy didn't notice he had a finger missing. Only one guy, Sam Arno, noticed Johnson had lost a finger. He saw it was missing last night when he paid Johnson some money. Sharp eye, Arno's got. Other people didn't notice. Coupla guys even remembered seeing a ring on the finger. People sure are funny." Shultz laughed.

The ringing of a telephone was faintly audible. From the office a girl's voice called: "It's for you, Mr. Shultz."

Mort followed the sheriff back to the office. Shultz picked up the phone and listened. He said: "I'll be right over."

He hung up and turned to Mort. "Maybe you'd better come along. There's a guy over at the Plaza who's gonna need a good lawyer. Name's Jerry Reynolds. They found him drunk in a room this morning with his pockets full of dough. Eleven thousand dollars. The money sure wasn't on that guy back there when they fished him out of the lake this morning!"

**JERRY REYNOLDS** looked a little better now, after a rather painful session in the bathroom. He stared dismally at Mort, who eyed him from his position on the hotel bed. The bed had not been slept in, only slept on. The room was the one which had been rented to Bee Baxley the night before.

Reynolds explained listlessly: "I got good and drunk and came here to see Bee. She wasn't here. The bed looked good. I threw myself down and passed out. The next thing I know the maid's in here trying to wake me up. She says Bee's checked out and somebody else is coming in. I tell her to go to hell. Then the manager tries to wake me. After that the sheriff and you come in, and I get the bad news. Imagine—all that dough in my pockets, and I didn't know it!"

"You're sure of that?"

"Dead sure. I'm a souse, but not the kind who beats up people. I'm gentle as a lamb. Too gentle."

Mort got up off the bed, opened the door and looked down the hallway. Nobody was in sight. The sheriff had promised him a confidential talk with his new client, but Mort usually didn't trust sheriffs any farther than he could throw them. He closed the door and turned back to Jerry Reynolds.

"I believe you, son. This is a plant if ever I smelled one. But the thing that looks bad for you is that you lost all your dough betting against Johnson. You saw him walk out with eleven grand in winnings. You passed out in this room, you say, but you've nobody to prove

it. You came in here late at night, and the desk clerk was either asleep or in the rest room. Anyway he didn't see you, and nobody else did. So there's nothing to convince a jury that you didn't come in the back way after you'd caught up with Johnson and killed him."

Jerry Reynolds looked glum. "No, I guess not. Maybe you've got a hopeless case this time."

"There's no such thing as a hopeless case, only a hopeless client. Don't let this get you down. I've never lost a client to the hot seat yet, and I don't intend to begin with you."

"I don't know why you want my case. I haven't got a dime. That two hundred last night was the last of my army mustering-out pay. I can never pay you anything near the fee you usually get."

"That's my worry. Yours is how we're going to get you out of this air-tight frame." Mort crossed to the phone. He called the desk. "Has Mr. Jones come in yet?" He frowned at the answer and put down the phone. "I'd like to know where that big lummo is! At a time like this he runs out on me!"

Reynolds said: "For two cents I'd run out myself. My chances would be just as good as they'd be before a jury."

Mort turned sharply. "Nonsense! Why do you think that sheriff let me talk to you alone without an argument? He's around the corner down the hallway hoping you'll make a break for it. Outside, the local police have surrounded the hotel. Your corpse wouldn't make a very good witness."

Mort went to the doorway and called down the hall: "O.K., Sheriff, we're through."

Reynolds forced a grin and shrugged. "Well, I guess you took care of that in a hurry." The sheriff came in wearing a disappointed look.

Mort said: "Take your prisoner, Sheriff." To Reynolds he added: "Keep your chin up. I'll run over and see you at the county jail later."

The sheriff led Reynolds out. Mort checked once more at the desk. There was still no report on his partner. He went downstairs, walked out onto the hotel veranda as the sheriff and his prisoner drove away.

There was an idle cab, and Mort signaled to the driver. "The Hornet's Nest."

The driver said: "There wouldn't be anybody out there this time of day."

"This is a special day."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Accusing Finger

MORT dismissed the driver when he saw Blackstone Jones' car parked in the Hornet's Nest lot. He climbed the steps, entered the ante-room reserved for "front"

and found a man stretched out unconscious on the floor. Mort gave the man a passing glance, walked into the gambling room beyond. A groan at his right made him turn.

Another man, whom Mort recognized as the stick-man of the night before, lay writhing. His eyes were bloodshot and either tears or perspiration, or both, bathed his cheeks. He stared at Mort and moaned: "My back! He's broken it."

Mort made no comment. He walked toward Sam Arno's office. The door was closed but not locked. Mort opened it and paused in silent appreciation.

The suave gambler of the night before lay on his back on his own desk. Blackstone Jones stood over him in a pose of great affection. As Mort stared, however, his gigantic partner slapped Arno almost playfully. The force was nevertheless sufficient almost to knock Arno from the desk.

"I'm telling you," Arno pleaded, "I don't know anything else! I gave it to you straight!"

As his partner seemed about to slap Arno again, Mort said: "Take it easy. That guy outside says you broke his back."

"Oh, hello," said Blackstone Jones. "No, I didn't break his back. I just loosened it a bit. He won't even be crippled."

"You might tell me what it's all about."

"It's about a phony finger. Take a look at this."

Mort stared at the finger his partner held toward him. It was amazingly realistic. Mort recognized the gold ring. The ring covered the end, served to conceal where the false finger joined the stump.

Mort accepted the finger. It was made of thin, yet brittle, rubber compound. An expert job of flesh-coloring had been done. The finger was flexible at both points, and hollow.

"Arno had it," Blackstone Jones explained.

"I happened to be at the funeral home when he came along and identified the body. I noticed that he betrayed no surprise when he saw that a finger was missing, and that the stump was healed over. So I thought it likely that he had known and would have a damned good idea as to what had happened to it. My guess was right. I finally persuaded him to give it to me."

Sam Arno turned a tearful face upward to Mort.

"Please, Mr. Mort, make him let go of me! He's going to kill me! I've told him everything I know—so help me!"

Mort said: "What's he spilled, Blackie?"

"His story is that after Johnson left last night he had a little chat with his stick-man. The stick-man showed him a pair of queer dice that Johnson had palmed into the game. Of course, Arno considers the use of any

queer dice but his own highly unethical. So he and the stick-man and that other goon outside paid Johnson a little call. Johnson tried to use his automatic, but they took it away from him."

"As easy as that?" Mort asked. "How did he find him, and where?"

"I gather that Arno has ways and means of knowing things around Kyser Lake. He tracked Johnson to a cottage in Spring Grove—that's a cottage park just beyond the hotel. So he and the boys worked over Johnson for a while. This, Arno says, was at about two-thirty."

"So help me!" said Arno. "It wasn't more'n three when me and the boys left him."

"Dead in the lake?" Mort asked.

"He was alive! We'd only roughed him up a little—enough to make him think twice before he pulled another fast one on Sam Arno!"

"And you got your money back?"

"No, only the finger. It got knocked off while the boys were working the rat over. At first I couldn't believe it. Then I knew how he'd palmed those dice into the game without Ed knowing. It made Ed feel a lot better—it was the first time anybody'd ever taken him. The guy was slick. He used three sets of dice, not just one. I'd have been justified in murderin' the guy, but I didn't."

"The hell you didn't! You killed him, got your eleven thousand back and then got cold feet. You figured you'd better sacrifice the eleven grand and plant it on Jerry Reynolds."

Arno managed to lean up on his elbow.

"Reynolds? No foolin'? Is he the guy who had the dough all the time?"

"You should know."

Arno shook his head. "Honest, this Johnson was slick enough to figure I'd be on his trail. So he'd stashed his haul somewhere. All he had on him was a coupla hundred. I'll admit I tried to get out of him what he did with the eleven grand, but he's tighter'n a clam."

"You mean you fixed it so he would be. It won't sell, Arno—we're taking you in to the sheriff." Mort put the finger in his pocket.

Arno paled. "Look here, Mort, I'll make a deal with you. I know how my having that finger looks. Do you think I'd have kept it, though, if I knew Johnson was dead? I beat it right back here to get it and burn it as soon as I saw the body. Only this guy barged in here before I could do a thing. But I've no hard feelings. Suppose I pay you five grand and you take my case."

"I represent only one client in any murder case. I'm representing Reynolds now. Sorry, Arno, you're going to take a ride."

"No he ain't!" said a voice in the doorway. Mort turned. Ed, the stick-man, was bent over in pain, his eyes fiery, his face wet with

perspiration. But he seemed perfectly able to handle the snub-nosed automatic in his right hand. He glared at Blackstone Jones with unholy hatred.

"Now it's your turn! You ruined me—crippled me for life! Now I'm going to blast you to hell!"

His hatred of the giant who had mishandled him seemed so great that he had eyes for no one else. Mort thought he could reach him in time, but it wasn't necessary.

Blackstone Jones had picked up Sam Arno and now held him in front of him. Ed hesitated. In the next split-second his employer seemed to be catapulted toward him. The impact rolled Ed backward. His revolver went off, but the bullet went wild. Before he could use it again, Blackstone Jones had reached him and kicked it from his hand. He picked up each man with one hand, shook them both and snapped: "The next time anybody around here pulls a gun on me, I'm going to beat the hell out of him!"

A VOICE said: "What's going on around here? There's a guy out there knocked cold."

It was Sheriff Shultz. He frowned his displeasure, surveying Blackstone Jones. "Oh, you're the guy who was at the funeral parlor!" He gulped as he beheld Arno and Ed held powerless. "What are you doing, anyway?"

"Giving your friends a little third-degree. It occurred to me, Sheriff, that you might not do it."

Shultz growled: "Let go of them guys! You got no right to take the law into your own hands!"

"But he gets results," said Mort, holding out the rubber finger. "I think you can guess where this fits."

Shultz's eyes popped. "So them guys was right about the stiff wearin' a ring! What do you know about that?"

"I know that Sam Arno took the finger off Johnson at approximately two-thirty last night. And I know he and his goons roughed up Johnson till about three. He claims he left Johnson alive and that Johnson was carrying only a couple of hundred dollars at the time. But I think he's a much more likely prospect for the hot seat than Jerry Reynolds. How about you, Sheriff?"

Shultz hedged. "Reynolds had the money, remember?"

"And Arno had the finger. It can point only one way."

Shultz eyed Arno shyly. "Looks as if I'll have to hold you for questioning, Sam."

Arno's eyes blazed. "Oh, you will! After all the dough I've handed you! You rat!"

"Now, Sam," pleaded the sheriff, "I got to do my duty."



"Now you say it!" Arno resorted to argument. "Listen, Tom, do you think I'd knock off a guy over a lousy eleven grand? I'm the last guy in the world who wants a murder stink in this county! If this whole deal isn't cleared up soon, I'm through and so are you. How the hell are you going to run all your racehorses on your salary?"

"Ah," said Mort, "so the sheriff is a lover of good horseflesh! Listen, Shultz, living on your salary may be tough, but it'll be a lot tougher if you're living on prison fare. You turn this hooligan loose, and I'll swear you'll get a state investigation!"

Shultz eyed him thoughtfully and decided the little lawyer meant what he said. He turned resignedly to Arno.

"Take it easy, Sam. If you ain't guilty, you've got nothing to worry about. I'm only holding you for questioning."

Arno reddened in fury, then tossed his head toward Mort. "Why don't you hold him, too? There's a dozen guys who'll swear Johnson ran for his life when he spotted Mort last night! Ask him why Johnson ran out the minute he saw him?"

Shultz eyed Mort warily. "What's this he says?"

Mort sighed. "Wire Harry Malone, the D.A. back in Riverton. He'll tell you Johnson was my client, that I cleared him of a concealed weapons rap only yesterday."

"Then why'd he run away from you?" the sheriff demanded.

"I'll be damned if I know. I came all the way up here to warn him that somebody really meant to kill him."

Shultz fairly screamed: "What's all this? Now you're telling me somebody else was after him? Who?"

"I wish I could tell you. Maybe some other gambler he'd bilked with the phony finger trick. Habits like that don't make friends and influence people—except to murder!"

Shultz appeared on the verge of a nervous breakdown. "What am I going to do?" he moaned. "I never expected anything like this when I ran for office!"

Mort said: "Haven't you got a D.A. in this county? Why don't you call him in? If he's got any sense he'll tell you the Reynolds frame smells to high heaven. Nobody knocks off a guy and then spends the night in a strange bed with eleven grand in his pocket that belonged to his victim. It just isn't being done in the best murder circles. If you can't use your head, Shultz, use the D.A.'s."

Arno snapped: "He's right, Tom. You're beyond your depth. Better ring Buss Faulkner right now. Buss'll help us all out of a hole."

The sheriff walked to the phone, had a brief conversation and turned back.

"Buss's on his way." He turned to Black-

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# WINCHESTER

BATTERIES

Make light of the dark *bullet-fast*

stone Jones. "Let go of them guys—they're comin' with me."

Blackstone Jones relaxed his grip, and the stick-man almost fell on his face. He followed in pain as Sam Arno led the procession. Outside, they revived the third man and helped him along to the sheriff's car.

"I'll meet you at the local jail," Shultz told Mort. "That's where I put Reynolds. We'll see what the D.A. has to say."

**T**HE sheriff and his charges rode away, and Mort climbed into his partner's car. Blackstone Jones drove out of the lot.

"You treated those boys rough, Blackie. Better be careful. Sometime you may overdo it. You don't know your own strength."

"Maybe I was a little hostile. But I thought one of those punks might have been the guy who slugged me in the Hotel Mosby. My head's still sore. It makes me mad every time I think about it."

Mort eyed his partner askance. "The blow must have affected you more than I thought. How can you think for a split-second that Sam Arno or any of his mob tried to kill Johnson yesterday morning? It's a cinch Arno had never seen him before he walked into his place last night."

"Then you think whoever killed Johnson was the man who phoned him those threats?"

"Of course. This thing is bigger than a row over some wrong dice. I believe Arno. He never killed Johnson, and he never got his money back. Johnson expected trouble. But he didn't hide the eleven thousand, as Arno thought. He turned it over to someone he trusted. My guess it was the same person who loaned him the car he was using last night."

"How do you know somebody loaned him a car?"

"Because the sheriff made no mention of any report of a stolen car. I assumed Johnson had swiped one in his emergency because I didn't think he'd made any contacts yet at the lake. But it's a cinch he didn't have to swipe one. A one-horse sheriff like Shultz would be sure to talk up a car-theft coming along with a murder. So I want you to chase around and find out if anybody can identify the car Johnson was using. People will remember the guy now that he's been murdered."

"Why not assign me something easy—like finding a needle in a haystack?"

Mort snapped his fingers. "Needle!" He laughed aloud. "Hell, there's the answer—needles. Hooks and needles!"

Blackstone Jones eyed his senior partner in bewilderment.

"What are you talking about?"

"About something that phony finger should have pointed to all the time! Why did Johnson have his finger amputated a few months ago?

Because of an industrial or some other kind of accident? Hardly. When you lose the second finger of a hand in some factory machine, the odds are you'll lose at least part of another or at least have them mutilated.

"I've heard of gamblers having a finger amputated to help them bottom-deal, but not their second finger. And it's hard to imagine anybody parting with a finger merely to palm dice. Johnson must have thought of that stunt as an afterthought. His original purpose in having that finger removed was to use the phony one for the concealment of something immeasurably more important than a pair of dice!"

"But what?" Blackstone Jones demanded. "What would he be able to conceal in a hollow finger? Certainly not diamonds! He couldn't smuggle enough into the country that way to make it worth while."

"Of course not. Now let's use our heads for a change. Johnson came to America from Redditch. We're justified in assuming that he was in the hook and needle trade. Why? Because it's about the only trade there is in Redditch—it's the manufacturing center for high-class hooks and needles.

"It's also a fair guess that Johnson had an important job in the trade. Yet he definitely wasn't the executive type. My hunch is that he was a technician of some kind. Now, tell me, Blackie—you've read up on hooks and needles—why is it that one little town in England has a half-nelson on the trade? Why does a man like Jeff Baxley have to dicker with an English firm when America is the greatest industrial country on earth? What's the gag?"

"That's an easy one to answer," said Blackstone Jones, glad of the opportunity to show his erudition. "Only these few English firms know how to build the machines that make high-grade hooks and needles. They can't be produced at a profit without the use of these perfect machines which turn them out at low cost. Even the Japs before the war failed to compete with the English manufacturers. Despite their low wage scale, they couldn't go on the market with a high-grade hook at a competitive price.

"The Norwegian machines are the second-best, but they use a softer steel. As for American hooks and needles, they're inferior—at least the book I read says they are—and they couldn't be sold at all without a forty-five percent protective tariff.

"The secret of the English hook machines is handed down from generation to generation in each plant. They won't even hire a guy to sweep out until they've checked him as thoroughly as the FBI checks an atomic bomb chemist. And the guy has to work at minor tasks for three years before he even gets to see a few parts of the machines. Only two

trusted men in each plant get to see all of the parts and know how the entire hook or needle machine is put together."

MORT leaned back and sighed.

"Check and double-check. Now we know why Johnson had his finger amputated. It was probably done during a vacation so he could run out on his trusting employers and carry a complete set of microfilms to America. The films, of course, showed all the important working parts of the super-secret hook and needle machines.

"Johnson planned to sell the films to Jeff Baxley. Baxley would gladly chance the risk of a lawsuit since nobody could prove where he got the plans. Secret processes and machines, of course, are never patented. When the secret gets out, the owner has only a common law right that he has to prove in court.

"Jeff Baxley is no angel when it comes to business ethics. He'd run that risk, as I said. My guess is he was about to close a deal with Johnson when Johnson got scared out of town. So Baxley arranged to meet him here at Kyser Lake."

Blackstone Jones slowed as they neared the Plaza Hotel.

"But where did Johnson keep the microfilms when he was using the finger to palm dice?"

"With the same party he trusted with his eleven grand. He was scared stiff. Those threats had made him afraid to keep the films in that hollow finger. It was bound to come off if he were roughed up, just as it did come off last night. I remember now that he was always playing with it and even gave me a left-handed handshake yesterday morning."

"But who would he trust with the precious films—and the money? He would be wide-open for a doublecross."

Mort nodded. "That's exactly what he got. He could be expected to talk his head off in the event he was doublecrossed, and the guy who did it couldn't risk his talking at all. Those microfilms were valueless so long as Johnson remained to testify in court. He could prove where they came from and establish the common law rights of his English employers."

"Arkham, Ltd., do you think?"

"I don't know. At least he knew Kenwood, but then both men were from Redditch. I'm going to follow your original suggestion and cable the Redditch constabulary. In the meantime, look for somebody who remembers Johnson driving a car last night."

Mort entered the hotel and sent a brief cable to the Redditch police. As he turned away from the desk, a young man entered with Sheriff Shultz. Shultz brought him over to Mort and introduced him as Buss Faulkner, the county attorney.

Mort shook hands, and Faulkner said: "I'll appreciate any help you can give me, Mr. Mort. I can't believe Jerry Reynolds killed Johnson—or anybody else. I've known him all my life. Right now I want to check up on a rumor that Johnson came to this hotel last night."

Mort said: "The clerk here will verify that. He asked for an Englishman named Kenwood and was sent to Room 233."

Faulkner turned questioningly to the clerk, who said: "My God, so that's who he was!"

Faulkner said: "I think maybe we'd better have a talk with Kenwood. Is he in?"

"No. He went out a while ago. He drove away in his car, a Buick sedan."

"But you don't know where he went?"

"No, sir."

Mort said: "I think I can guess. Jeff Baxley was in Kenwood's room last night. You'll probably find Kenwood at Baxley's lodge."

"Sounds logical. Let's go."

They walked out on the veranda just as Blackstone Jones pulled up and parked. He got out, and Mort introduced him to Faulkner. Mort eyed his partner quizzically, and his partner nodded.

"You may as well come with us. We're taking a ride over to Baxley's lodge."

The sheriff drove his own car, Faulkner riding in front. Mort climbed in back beside his partner and asked in a low tone, while the car was in second gear: "Well?"

"A Buick sedan. I was lucky—the first filling station. The guy there works a twelve-to-twelve shift and remembered Johnson."

"What's that?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"My partner was just telling me," said Mort, "that we may be on our way to meet a murderer."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Bee-line to Murder

THE gate to the Wolf Island bridge was open. The sheriff's car rattled over it and followed the drive to the Baxley lodge. It was a magnificent affair for Kyser Lake, a long, rambling frame structure apparently designed to give every room a waterfront view. There was a parking lot containing several cars, one of which was a Buick sedan.

The sheriff parked beside it and the four men got out, walked toward a terrace where Jeff Baxley sat with Kenwood and a youth whom Mort remembered vaguely as Jeff, Jr. Baxley rose, frowning at the sight of his visitors. Kenwood regarded them impassively while Junior looked irked.

Mort made introductions. Sheriff Shultz explained: "We came to question Mr. Kenwood about this man Johnson who got himself

killed. Seems you're from the same town in England, Mr. Kenwood."

Kenwood nodded stiffly. "We're both from Redditch."

"And you didn't even come to the funeral parlor when you found out he'd been killed?"

"No. I knew Johnson, but we were not close friends. He was an engineer with my company at Redditch, but he was fired some months ago. He was employed in a position of great trust, and his gambling habits forced his dismissal."

Mort said: "If you were only casual acquaintances, why was he driving your car last night? You don't deny that he was, do you?"

"Of course not. I could hardly refuse. It's a rented car, and covered by insurance."

"And what was his purpose in going to your room last night?"

Kenwood's brows lifted. Shultz and Faulkner had been listening open-mouthed.

"If you must know," said Kenwood irritably, "he was returning the key to the car. The first time he heard me talking to Baxley and didn't want to bother me. But he came back later with the key."

Mort studied the Englishman. "Since your line is hooks and needles, perhaps you'll confirm what my young partner has read about the industry. The manufacture of such articles is very secret, isn't it?"

"Very."

"And Johnson was entrusted with the secret of the machines, wasn't he?"

Kenwood started. "He was."

"I should think your company would hesitate before firing a man who could sell out its precious secrets."

Kenwood laughed a little condescendingly. "For your information, sir, it would be impossible for Johnson or anyone else to sell the secret of the hook and the needle. The machines are so complex that they could not be duplicated from memory. Only detailed plans would do, and every employe is thoroughly searched every day."

"Wouldn't photographs do as well?"

Kenwood's eyes narrowed. "Certainly, but they would be as difficult as plans to smuggle out of the factory."

"Not microfilms concealed in a hollow rubber finger. Are you aware that Johnson had had a finger amputated and that he wore a dummy?"

Kenwood leaped to his feet. "So that's why he gave me a left-handed handshake! The traitor! I didn't think it possible! How would he make the films?"

"Isn't Arkham, Ltd. equipped with a micro-film outfit?"

Kenwood started. "Why, of course! At the beginning of the war, films were made in

case the machines had to be destroyed. Johnson must have made a duplicate set which he hid until he could smuggle them out! It never occurred to me that he could be guilty of such perfidy!"

"Are you sure? Are you sure you didn't threaten Johnson after his arrival in America in an attempt to frighten him out of the country? Are you sure you didn't sneak into the room at the Hotel Mosby, knock out Blackie here and try to kill Johnson while he was testifying in defense of a charge you'd framed him for?"

"I certainly did not! I had no idea Johnson was in America until he turned up here at Kyser Lake. We bumped into each other in the lobby yesterday."

"Didn't you wonder why he was here, Mr. Kenwood?"

"I thought about it and decided that Johnson had decided to try anew in America."

"And it didn't occur to you that he had come to Kyser Lake to sell Jeff Baxley the secret of the hook and the needle?"

Kenwood started, then turned slowly to face Baxley. Baxley laughed easily.

"I don't know what you're getting around to, C.D., but you're all wet. I signed a contract with Kenwood's company last night. I'm tied up to buy Arkham's hooks exclusively for the next five years."

Mort said: "To buy them, yes." He turned to Kenwood. "Did your contract have anything in it about his right to manufacture hooks?"

Kenwood shook his head in puzzlement. "Why, no, sir. We never include such a clause in our contracts, since there is little likelihood that Mr. Baxley or anybody else will ever successfully compete with us."

"But if Baxley were to manufacture hooks, his contract with you would be an idle gesture, wouldn't it?"

Kenwood shrugged. "I suppose it might be so called."

Mort turned to Sheriff Shultz and the youthful D.A. "There you are. I give you another nominee for the hot seat."

Baxley said: "You're still all wet, C.D. I never even knew Johnson, much less made a deal with him."

"I wonder who else he could have come all this distance to see—first to Riverton and then to Kyser Lake."

Baxley said indifferently: "I wonder, too."

**T**HERE was a screech of brakes in the parking lot. Everybody watched as Bee Baxley leaped out of her car and ran up to the terrace.

"Dad!" she said breathlessly. "Jerry's been arrested—for murder! You've got to do something about it!"

Jeff Baxley coldly eyed his daughter. "I can't think of a single reason why I should. I've told you often enough what I think of Reynolds. By the way, you're supposed to be in dramatic school."

"Well, I'm not. I came here last night and—"

Baxley held up a hand. "Don't bother, I know all about it. I happened to overhear Junior giving your hotel room number to Reynolds over the phone." Baxley eyed his son. "It appears that I have no control over either of you. It's what comes of your mother leaving you both independently wealthy."

Bee's eyes flashed. "Well, since I am wealthy, I'm going to hire a good lawyer to defend Jerry." She seemed to notice Mort for the first time. "You'll take his case, won't you? I'll pay you your own price!"

"I'm really working for Jerry, but I'll take your proposition."

Bee looked relieved. "Well, that's wonderful."

"Isn't it though?" her father said sarcastically. "C.D.'s breaking his back now trying to hang Johnson's murder on me. Of course you'd gladly see your own father go to the chair if it could save Reynolds for you!"

Bee looked shocked, then eyed Mort coldly. He shrugged. "It so happens that your father could have had a good motive. Besides, as he's just admitted, he knew the number of your room. He could have planted the money on Jerry."

Bee's brows drew together. "What money? I only heard a flash on the radio as I was headed back to New York. I turned around at once—didn't stop to learn any details."

Mort explained: "Jerry had eleven thousand dollars on him, presumably the money Johnson won at the Hornet's Nest dice table. That's the worst thing against him."

"It's more than enough," observed Sheriff Shultz.

Mort said: "Remember, Sheriff, Baxley and his son knew Bee had that room. Either of

them could have run across Reynolds there and planted the money."

Jeff Baxley, Jr. slowly got to his feet. "What the hell! How do you figure me in this thing?"

"As your father said, you're independently wealthy. You know the fishing tackle business. You could set up your own concern and lead the field if you could make hooks as good as those from Redditch. That might suit you fine. You don't get along any too well with your father, it appears."

Junior thought this over. Bee Baxley snapped: "Now you're trying to pin it on Junior! Can't you think of any way to save Jerry without sending a member of my family to the electric chair?"

"Perhaps." Mort turned to the sheriff. "How about getting Sam Arno for me? And bring along Jerry, too. We might as well have them all here."

Shultz was willing. He left the terrace and drove away.

Mort addressed the young county attorney. "Here's another angle for you to kick around, Faulkner. Kenwood here pretends to be astonished that any man would be low enough to sell out good old Arkham, Ltd. But consider this—Johnson was a technician, not a businessman, while Kenwood travels all over the world for the company and is a smooth article if ever I saw one. Suppose the two men pooled their forces, Kenwood to handle the business end, while Johnson stood by with the goods."

"Then let's imagine a little further—Kenwood decides there's no point in splitting the loot. He'll knock off Johnson, get the films and plant the eleven grand on Reynolds. It's chicken-feed compared to what he'll make out of the films, and framing Reynolds obscures the facts."

The county attorney asked: "But how would he know where to find Reynolds?"

"A fair question. Reynolds could have been drunk enough to make a commotion in the



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hallway, thereby attracting Kenwood's attention. He would think of planting the money on a drunk, follow Reynolds into the room and do so."

Faulkner shrugged. "It leaves a lot to coincidence."

Kenwood snapped: "Of course it does! Let me ask some questions—I may not have the whole picture straight. I'd like to know who this man Arno is."

"He runs a local gambling joint. The sheriff is holding him because he admits he and his boys went to see Johnson at his cottage late last night. They roughed up Johnson, but Arno claims he found no trace of the eleven thousand. Nor did he find any films."

Kenwood grew thoughtful. "Well, if that's the case, how could Johnson's murderer have found the money on his person?"

"He didn't. My guess is that Johnson had turned the money and microfilms over to somebody he trusted."

Jeff Baxley said: "Then what the hell are you accusing me for? Or Kenwood? Johnson wouldn't trust either one of us according to your theories."

"Not theories—hypotheses. I was merely enumerating the possibilities. My only definite theory about the murder of Cecil Johnson is that he was killed by someone whom he mistakenly trusted."

**T**HE three Baxleys and Kenwood sat around nervously. No one had a further word to say. The sheriff finally drove up again. He had picked up a local policeman, and the two officers escorted their prisoners to the terrace.

Sam Arno glared at Mort. "I suppose this is your idea."

"I merely wanted to question you a little further about your informal interview with Johnson last night. You're sure you found no money except the two hundred dollars you mentioned?"

"That's all."

"And nothing else of any importance—such as microfilms?"

"No. How many times are you going to ask such questions?"

"Till I get an illuminating answer." Mort sighed, watched in grim envy as Bee Baxley tightly held Jerry Reynolds' hand.

Mort asked Reynolds: "You don't remember seeing this man"—he indicated Kenwood—"last night before you reached Bee's room, or immediately afterwards?"

Reynolds studied Kenwood and shook his head. "I don't think I ever saw him before in my life."

Arno grumbled: "I still don't see why someone doesn't ask a few questions of this smart shyster." He glared at Mort. "When Johnson

saw him last night it was as if he'd seen a ghost! He beat it out fast!"

Faulkner eyed Mort with new interest. "Why would Johnson be afraid of you when you'd defended him in court only that morning?"

"Sorry, son, but I can't answer that one. I came all the way to Kyser Lake to warn Johnson that someone had really shot at him."

"But he knew that!"

"No, son, he didn't. Blackie here was supposed to shoot through the courtroom window just to convince the judge that Johnson's life was in danger. But somebody sneaked up on Blackie, knocked him out, then really tried to kill Johnson."

"But why? If somebody was after his films, they couldn't have shot him down in the courtroom and then taken them from him."

"Oh, I think it could have been done. Whoever shot at Johnson had guessed the secret of the phony finger. Getting the contents of the finger might not be so difficult after he was dead. In the milling crowd that would immediately surround his body, it might be easy to slip off the finger and put it back empty of the films."

"Well," said Arno, "I don't get much of what you guys are talking about, but it wasn't films in that finger last night. It was queer dice."

Mort nodded. "I'm guessing that Johnson was frightened into giving up the films. That was probably the purpose of the original threats, to make him think they were no longer safe in his possession, not nearly so safe as they would be with his trusted pal. The pal afterwards took care of the eleven grand—and Johnson!"

The county attorney exchanged a glance with the sheriff and said: "A nice theory, but have you any idea as to who that trusted pal might be?"

"It couldn't be someone Johnson had met recently in America. It would have to be someone who had gained his confidence in England. That could be Kenwood. It could also be Baxley, who had traveled there to see his kids in school. And it could be Jeff, Jr. I'm inclined to favor anybody named Baxley, since Johnson made a bee-line to Riverton, then to this lake."

**B**LACKSTONE JONES jumped to his feet, his six feet, seven inches unfolding in explosive force. He yelled: "That's it! That's it—*bee-line!* Johnson made a line to Bee! She was educated in England as well as Jeff, Jr.! She could have met Johnson and sold him on the idea of making those films! A man

(Continued on page 96)

# THE DOCTOR'S DOUBLE

By RICHARD DERMODY

Author of "The Doctor's Trove," etc.

A Doc  
Pierce  
Story



I tape Ronkel's mouth and throw a few turns around his arms and legs.

*I am always a sucker for the Doc's little plans and the time is just about ripe for a new one. We have less than a hundred iron men on us and it gets mighty cold in the winter, even in California. But I never expect this caper to turn into a double-play... double fees, double detectives—and a neat doublecross.*

THE DOC grips me by the arm and speaks in my ear. "The twist and twirl is a clauder," he says. "She is about to boost one of those Simple Simons."

I take a gander at this tall dame standing a few yards away in front of the jewelry counter. She is built for plenty of speed and is wrapped in a mink coat. Her left mitt is in the nocket of this coat and her right is point-

ing daintily at a trayful of diamond rings the clerk is displaying to her.

I watch this right hand carefully. In fact I almost miss seeing this third mitt come sneaking out the front of the mink coat. This third mitt is a perfectly good left duke so I know the one she has tucked in her pocket is a phony. In fact I figure the whole left arm must be strictly the Crow McGee.

This third hand is not in sight long but when it goes back into the coat I observe that four diamond rings go along with it. The Doc chuckles. "A high-class clauder," he says. "A genuine old-fashioned booster with a dummy arm. I have not observed such a spectacle in years." He stops chuckling. "There is a tall weed in the grass, pony boy."

I turn my head slowly. Sure enough, a square-built party is standing a yard or two behind us. He is paying close attention to this dame in the mink coat. The dame shakes her head at the clerk and moves toward the door. The square-built party eases after her. We follow the square-built party as we always enjoy watching a pinch.

When we get out on the sidewalk, the dame is walking briskly up the street. The square-built party is maybe twenty feet behind her and taking his time. The Doc glances at me and I can see he is as puzzled as I am.

"This is most unusual," he says. "I expected to see that copper apprehend the lady as soon as they hit the sidewalk." He buttons his swayback coat and sets his black skimmer square on his head. "Let us follow them."

We tag the gumshoe and the dame for maybe four blocks. Then the dame turns down toward the beach. The gumshoe steps into a doorway. I notice he gives us the dog-eye as we go by. The dame trots up to the front door of this big hotel, the Royal Pacific. She disappears through the door. The Doc and I stare at each other.

"Well," I tell him, "maybe we are in the wrong racket. This Royal Pacific is the best flop in California. They belt you thirty or forty bumblebees per day just to sit in the lobby. I had no idea there was this much profit in shoplifting."

The Doc scowls. "There isn't," he says. He thinks for a minute and snaps his fingers. "I will be back in a few minutes. Meet me at the next corner."

**I**N MAYBE five minutes the Doc comes up the street. He has a wide smile on his big red face. "We have hit pay-dirt, pony boy. That little lady is none other than the storm and strife of Mr. J. Wyndham Totter, the owner of the Royal Pacific Hotel." He rubs his hands together. "Mr. J. Wyndham Totter is a millionaire at the very least. I have a little plan in mind for the gentleman."

Well, none of this makes sense to me but I am always a sucker for the Doc's little plans. In fact the time has come for a little plan. We have been in California just one month and we have less than one hundred iron men in our pants pockets. Also we are in the stakes at this fleabag we live in for another fifty. It gets cold in the winter, even in California.

The Doc rubs his hands some more. "I just cased the layout. It is perfect. Now the first thing you must do is buy an overcoat."

For a minute I think the Doc is losing his grip. "Wipe the fog off your cheaters," I tell him. "I am wearing my benny now."

The Doc grins. "So I notice. It is a becoming garment. But not suitable for attendance at the cocktail dance at the Royal Pacific Hotel this afternoon."

This one stops me cold. The last place I would be caught dead in is a cocktail dance. The Doc's grin widens and he goes on: "You must follow my instructions carefully. I smell a good score. You must handle the first part of this operation under your own power. I will be on hand to take over when the time comes."

It takes him fifteen minutes to talk me into this caper but finally I agree to go along. The Doc heads back for our fleabag to get his luggage and I head for the lower end of town. I search three hockshops before I finally find a benny that fills the bill.

This coat costs me one iron man and even at that price it is no bargain. It is a sick green on the outside and it looks like a couple of murders took place inside. I fold it up and carry it under my own benny when I walk into the lobby of the Royal Pacific Hotel.

The layout is just as the Doc describes it. The cloak-room is just outside the main dining room where this cocktail dance is taking place. Next to the cloak-room is a stairway and between the cloak-room and the stairway is a little hallway. A door from this little hallway opens into the back end of the cloak-room. A couple of bushy potted plants almost cover the entrance to this little hallway.

I wait until a few people stop at the cloak-room. Then I fold up this one-buck overcoat and toss it into the little hallway between the cloak-room and the stairs. Then I step up to the counter and hand my coat to this blonde. She gives me a check. I move along and stand just inside the dining room watching the tussle. Finally I see a group coming out of the dance so I move in behind them and walk past the cloak-room. While they are collecting their coats I dodge into the little hallway. The door into the cloak-room is half open. I reach inside and grab my own benny off the hanger. Then I replace it with this job I bought in the hockshop. I drape my own benny over my arm and walk out with the



check the blonde gave me still in my pocket.

That evening I put on my soup and fish and walk into the dining room of the Royal Pacific. I have left my benny at our hotel. I am beginning to get nervous as I suddenly realize that we are extremely short of money. The Doc has had to bounce half a yard to square our bill at the fleabag so he can move to the Royal Pacific.

He is sitting in front of maybe ten dollars' worth of food when I enter the Royal Pacific dining room. He has dusted off his swayback coat and is wearing a fresh white vest and his best pair of striped pants. I do not feel like putting on the feed-bag but I order up several expensive dishes. I push the food around until I see the Doc is through stoking his haybilly. Then I get up and give him the office that the play is on.

I pay my bill and walk out to the cloak-room. I hand the blonde my check. She lays this hock-shop overcoat on the counter. I take one look at it and jump back about three feet.

"What is that repulsive object?" I ask the blonde.

She is a young job and for a moment I feel sorry for her. She looks at the coat and her eyes open wide. "Why . . . it's yours."

I let out a squawk that brings a dozen people out of their chairs in the lobby. "My coat?" I holler. "Why," I tell her, "I wouldn't be found dead in that thing!" I pound on the counter. "I demand to see the manager. I have been robbed."

A solid party with a thin black mustache and a wide brown face steps up. "I am Mr. J. Wyndham Totter," he says. "What seems to be the trouble?"

The Doc is right at J. Wyndham's elbow. "Pardon me, sir," he says. "My name is Dr. Pierce. I am a guest in the hotel and have witnessed this whole occurrence. I suggest that we step into your private office, Mr. Totter."

J. Wyndham stares at the Doc and then at me. I pick up the hockshop benny and nod.

"Perhaps that would be better," I tell him.

J. Wyndham parks behind this big desk in his office and blows out his cheeks. "Now," he says, "what is this all about?"

I tell him that I check my coat when I go into the dining room. When I come out, the blonde in the cloak-room hands me this mess. I throw the coat on the desk. J. Wyndham pokes at it with a paper-knife. "Where did this come from?"

I shrug my shoulders. The Doc cuts in. "I was just behind this young man when he checked his coat. I noticed that it was an expensive camel's-hair, worth several hundred dollars."

I pick up the cue. "That's right," I tell J. Wyndham. "That coat set me back three hundred and fifty dollars."

J. Wyndham nods. "Of course I will reimburse you if we fail to recover your overcoat." He pushes a button on the desk. "I will ask our house detective to step in."

I AM sitting back in the chair, all relaxed and thinking about this easy three-fifty we will pocket in a few minutes. The door opens and a square-built party comes in—the very same party we noticed following Mrs. J. Wyndham Totter out of the jewelry store. I am suddenly nervous as I remember that this gumshoe saw the Doc and me walking down the street together. I don't dare look at the Doc.

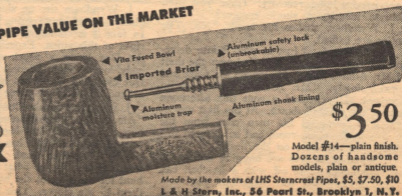
The gumshoe stands there while J. Wyndham tells him about how I lose my benny and how the Doc vouches for the fact that my benny is worth three hundred and fifty dollars. The gumshoe's name turns out to be Munger, Herman Munger. He listens carefully to J. Wyndham Totter and then takes out a big notebook and writes in it.

"I will have a complete report for you in ten minutes, sir," he tells J. Wyndham. He takes a good look at the Doc and me. Then he gives us a little bow and goes out. So far as I can tell he doesn't give us a tumble

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so I figure he is as dumb as he looks, which is almost impossible.

J. Wyndham breaks out a box of cigars and a jug of brandy while we are waiting. The Doc seems perfectly at ease so I loosen up a little myself. After a few minutes Herman Munger returns and halts in front of the desk. "I can find no trace of the overcoat," he says. "It is a mystery."

J. Wyndham lets out a big sigh. "I feared as much," he says. "You may go, Munger. But keep an eye open." Munger goes out and J. Wyndham reaches in a drawer and pulls out a checkbook. He scribbles for a minute and tosses the check to me. "I have made it out for four hundred," he tells me. "The extra fifty is for the inconvenience."

I reach for the check but the Doc beats me to it. He grabs it out of my hand and smiles at J. Wyndham. "You are an easy mark, Mr. Totter," he says. "You are what denizens of the underworld call a soft touch." He folds the check and slowly starts tearing it to pieces. When it is reduced to shreds he drops it in an ashtray and touches a match to it.

J. Wyndham sits there with his mouth open. I am getting a little confused myself. It is the first time I have ever seen the Doc set money on fire. The Doc chuckles.

"It may interest you to know that Mr. Allan and I are partners," he says. "We rigged this little operation as an object lesson." He reaches in his pocket and shows J. Wyndham a gold badge the size of a slice of ham. The Doc has one of the finest collections of phony buzzers in the country.

J. Wyndham lets out a gurgle and stares at the badge. "Are you an officer of the law?"

The Doc nods. "Mr. Allan and I have been associated with federal enforcement for many years."

Well, I have to snicker when he pulls this one. The closest we have ever been to a federal enforcement agency is when some U. S. Marshal puts us in the lead. The Doc goes on: "You have had a number of jewel thefts here in the hotel recently. Have you been able to identify a single suspect?"

J. Wyndham shakes his head. "No. The police are baffled."

The Doc nods. "Just as your house detective, Herman Munger, is baffled over the theft of Mr. Allan's coat." He lowers his voice and speaks slowly. "Mr. Allan did not lose an overcoat. He checked a coat this afternoon during the cocktail dance. At the first opportunity he removed his own coat from the hanger in the cloak-room and substituted this object you see here on the desk."

J. Wyndham's eyes are bugging out so far you can knock them off with a baseball bat. "This whole thing was staged by you?"

"That's right." The Doc leans forward.

"It was the best method of convincing you that you are at the mercy of any clever criminal." He drops his voice to a whisper. "Your wife is in great danger, Mr. Totter."

J. Wyndham turns pale. "Amelia? What danger?"

The Doc leans back in his chair. His eyes narrow and I know he is getting close to the payoff pitch. "This gang of jewel thieves plans to kidnap your wife, Mr. Totter." J. Wyndham lets out another gurgle and the Doc holds up his hand. "Just a moment. You think your wife is safe because you have Herman Munger follow her around. Let me tell you that Munger will be of little value when it comes to a show-down with this gang."

J. Wyndham takes out a big handkerchief and mops his face. "This is terrible," he says. "What can I do?" He reaches for the phone. "I must call the police."

The Doc shakes his head. "The police cannot help you. Take my word for that. I know this gang." He thinks for a minute. "It will give me great pleasure to lay this gang by the heels. I have a few old scores to settle with them."

J. Wyndham brightens up. "Then you will protect my wife?"

The Doc nods. "Yes," he says quietly. "Our fee will be five thousand dollars in advance."

J. Wyndham comes up out of his chair like there is a tack in it. "Five thousand? Do you think I'm crazy?"

The Doc speaks slowly and distinctly. "No, Mr. Totter," he says. "I do not think you are suffering from kleptomania."

I have never seen a party deflate so quickly in my life. J. Wyndham shrinks about four sizes in four seconds. He slumps down in the chair. "Then . . . you know?"

The Doc nods. "I know that your wife is a thief, that she is suffering from this horrible malady." He smiles at J. Wyndham. "You forget that I am a physician, Mr. Totter. As a matter of fact I happen to be an expert psychiatrist. I believe that I can put your wife on the road to recovery in a short time."

J. Wyndham sits up slowly. His eyes are glassy. It has been coming pretty fast for him. In fact it is coming a little too fast for me right at this point. Especially the part about the Doc being a psych-what's-this. Everybody knows that the only medical pitch the Doc ever had was when he peddled snake-oil around the carnivals some years back.

J. Wyndham speaks slowly. "Yes," he says, "Amelia is a kleptomaniac. Dr. Ronkel, our house physician, has been treating her for several months. He has recommended that she be allowed to steal. Munger goes along and makes a list of what she takes. Then I hunt for the articles she has stolen and return them to the stores. This afternoon she stole

two diamond rings from a jewelry store." He reaches for his checkbook. "I accept your proposition. I have no alternative."

I meet the Doc in the lobby of the Royal Pacific at ten o'clock the next morning. He tells me he has slipped a bellhop ten dollars to sneak his luggage out the back door and down to the station. I have my keister at the station already and we are all set to blow town as soon as we cash this check for five grand which J. Wyndham Totter has written the night before. As we walk out I notice the house detective, Herman Munger, parked behind a newspaper in the lobby.

**T**HE teller at the bank takes a close gander at the check. Finally he picks up a phone and speaks in a low voice. He puts the phone down and smiles at the Doc. "Can't be too careful," he says. He starts to shuffle the lettuce on the counter.

My fingers are itching. Suddenly I feel a piece of paper in my hand. The Doc grins at me and speaks to the teller. "My friend here has a small check from Mr. Totter. Perhaps you would be kind enough to cash it for him. I can vouch for him."

I unfold the paper in my hand and I am not surprised when I discover it is the very same check the Doc tore up and burned in J. Wyndham Totter's ashtray the night before. The Doc has more pockets in his sway-back coat than you can find on a pool table. He always has a supply of blank checks and other handy items in these pockets. It is no trick at all for the Doc to switch anything he has in his mitt for an article in one of these pockets.

The teller deals me four fat yard-notes. I am stuffing them in my leather and trying to keep a straight face when I happen to glance at the next window. Herman Munger, the house detective of the Royal Pacific, is standing there giving us the dog-eye.

The Doc spots Munger, too. He grabs me by the arm and we head out the door and down

the street. It is one of the few times I have ever seen the Doc get nervous.

"We have walked into a trap, pony boy," he tells me. "We must return to the hotel. I must stop that bellhop I bribed to remove my luggage."

A taxi comes along and we grab it. I pay off the jockey while the Doc heads through the front door at a high trot. I am right on his heels and am greatly relieved when I notice he has a bellhop by the arm. I glance around the lobby and then I nearly keel over.

Herman Munger is sitting in a chair reading a newspaper.

The Doc heads for the elevator and gives me the office to come along. When we get in his room he opens his keister and takes out a long, green document with red and gold seals all over it. He starts to write on this document.

I sit down on the bed and try to stop feeling nervous. The Doc folds the document and stuffs it in his pocket. He grins at me.

"I am pleased with the situation," he tells me. "This should turn out to be one of our better operations."

"Well," I tell him, "so far none of this makes any sense. I never saw such a nuisance as this Herman Munger. Every time I turn around he is giving me the double-o."

The Doc chuckles. "Herman has been helpful. In fact Herman has revealed exactly what is going on in this place." He closes his keister and starts for the door. "We will now pay a call on the house physician, Dr. Ronkel." He stops and thinks for a minute. "We may be forced to use stern measures with Dr. Ronkel. Please be at hand when the necessity arises."

This Dr. Ronkel is a skinny party with a little pointed set of whiskers on the end of his chin. He gets up when we come in and holds out his mitt.

"I am pleased to meet you, Dr. Pierce," he says. He looks at me, and the Doc puts me away as his secretary. I start to take a chair



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but the Doc gives me the office to stay upright. He walks around the desk and stands close to Dr. Ronkel.

"I will be brief, sir," he says. "We are federal officers."

He flashes this big gold buzzer. I move around on the other side. Ronkel turns a light green. "What is wrong?" he asks.

The Doc smiles. "Nothing, we hope. We would just like to take a look at your private account book for the past twelve months." He hands him the green document. "Here is my authority."

Dr. Ronkel smiles. "I assure you my income tax is in order." He turns to a little safe set in the wall and twirls the knob. The safe opens. I notice a bunch of little boxes on the floor of this safe. Ronkel pulls out a big book and turns to lay it on the desk. The Doc nods to me and as Ronkel's chin goes by I put a hard right smack on his button. He drops like a log.

The Doc looks down at him and tosses a roll of adhesive tape on the desk. "Wrap him up, pony boy," he says. "We will need to produce him later." He takes the little packages out of the safe and stows them in his pockets. Then he starts tapping the back and side walls of the safe. Pretty soon he grunts and pulls one of the side walls loose. A bunch of pink envelopes tied up with pink ribbon flops out on the floor.

I tape Ronkel's mouth and throw a few turns around his arms and legs. When I turn around the Doc is stuffing the letters in his pocket. He has a wide grin on his red face. "Let us break the good news to the Totter family," he says.

Well, I can stand a little news about what is going on myself but I know better than to ask questions. I roll Ronkel up in the rug and tuck him under the desk out of sight. Then I follow the Doc out the door and into J. Wyndham Totter's office.

**J** WYNDHAM jumps up and shakes hands with us. He looks up at the Doc. "Have you made any progress?"

The Doc smiles. "The case is broken," he says. "We will have the culprits under lock and key within the hour." He holds up his hand. "Please ask Mrs. Totter to come down here. When she arrives I wish to speak with her alone for a few minutes."

J. Wyndham looks puzzled but he picks up the phone. After a short wait Amelia Totter walks into the room and stands looking at her husband. J. Wyndham puts us away as the law and tells her she is to give us her complete confidence. Then he backs out the door into the next room.

Now that I get a close look at her I can see that this Amelia Totter has even more

speed than I give her credit for. She is legged up like a Derby winner and has a pair of big brown eyes and wavy brown hair. She drops into a chair and looks at the Doc like she is afraid he is going to bite her.

"What do you want?" she asks in a low voice.

The Doc grins. He reaches in his pocket and lays the bundle of pink envelopes in her lap. She grabs the first one off the top and tears it open. The breath goes out of her and she lifts her head and gives the Doc the full treatment with the brown lamps.

"You must come straight from heaven, Dr. Pierce," she says.

The Doc chuckles. "No," he says, "we came straight from Dr. Ronkel's office. Dr. Ronkel is reposing under his desk, waiting for the police." He walks over and puts his hand on her shoulder. "I must tell your husband the whole story, all except one minor detail. Do you think you can explain the real reason for your pretending to be afflicted with kleptomania?"

Amelia is pale but her voice is steady. "Must he know?"

The Doc nods. He thinks for a minute. "So far as we are concerned those letters do not exist," he says. "Dr. Ronkel will not dare to mention them, and if he does he cannot prove anything."

Amelia is watching the Doc closely. "But what will you tell my husband?"

The Doc grins. "I'll think of something. Leave it to me."

Amelia reaches up and grips the Doc's hand. "You are an angel, Dr. Pierce," she says. "I will trust you. You have such a kind and honest face."

Well, I have to snicker when I hear this. The Doc has made a good living for years on his kind and honest face, but this is the first time I ever heard anyone call him an angel. I step to the door and call J. Wyndham back into the gathering.

The Doc doesn't give J. Wyndham a chance to ask questions. "I have made a few guesses, Mr. Totter," he says. "I want you to correct me if I am in error. For example, your wife developed this malady, this urge to steal, shortly after Dr. Ronkel came here as house physician?"

J. Wyndham glances at Amelia and nods. "That is true, but I fail to see the connection."

"You will." The Doc narrows his eyes. "Did Dr. Ronkel ask you to employ Herman Munger as house detective?"

J. Wyndham nods again. "Yes. Dr. Ronkel said that Munger was experienced in cases of kleptomania and would take good care of my wife."

"Just as I thought." The Doc leans forward and speaks slowly. "Your wife was never a

victim of kleptomania. She was the victim of a clever gang of blackmailers." He turns to Amelia. "Have I your permission to tell your husband what has been going on?"

The dame nods. "Yes. Please tell him everything."

The Doc frowns and says: "Dr Ronkel is the leader of a gang of criminals. He is brutal and unscrupulous. He told your wife that you were marked for death at the hands of a professional killer—that the only way she could save you was by pretending to be a kleptomaniac. He also forced her to assist his two henchmen in robbing the hotel guests."

J. Wyndham sits up and his eyes hop out on his cheeks. "Is this true, Amelia?"

The dame nods and gives a shiver. "Dr. Ronkel is wicked, evil." She glances at the Doc. "You are wrong in one respect, Dr. Pierce. I did not assist in the thefts from the Ronkel made me steal from the stores. He sent Munger along with me."

J. Wyndham looks at the Doc and frowns. "Was Munger in on this, too?"

The Doc nods. "Munger and another man whom you have seen many times, but did not recognize." He reaches into his swayback coat and lays the packages he took from the safe in Ronkel's office on the desk. "You will find the jewels stolen from the hotel guests in these packages. In addition, you will find other jewels. *The jewels stolen by Mrs. Totter that were not returned to the stores.*"

J. Wyndham and Amelia stare at each other. The dame speaks first. "Did they give you the jewels I stole?" she asks J. Wyndham.

"Yes. I returned them to the stores myself." The Doc shakes his head. "You were allowed to find only part of the loot," he says. "That is what put me on the track. You told us last night that Mrs. Totter had stolen two diamond rings. Mr. Allan and I watched her take four rings. Dr. Ronkel was holding out part of the proceeds."

J. Wyndham thinks for a minute and then nods. "I see," he says. "It was a clever plot. But who is the third man in this gang?"

The Doc chuckles. "That was another little point that had me puzzled. Herman Munger cleared it up for me himself. When Mr. Allan and I left for the bank, Herman Munger was sitting in the lobby. When we arrived at the bank he was standing a few feet away while I cashed your check. We took a cab and returned to the hotel by the shortest route. When we walked into the lobby, Mr. Munger was sitting in a chair."

**I** WATCH it sink in on J. Wyndham and Amelia. In fact I have only just tumbled to it myself. J. Wyndham opens his mouth. "Then . . ."

The Doc nods. "Exactly. Herman Munger has a twin brother. That was what made it so easy to rob your guests. One Munger sat in the lobby and checked guests in and out. His carbon copy prowled the rooms and lifted the loot. If any of the other employees or guests saw him they would think nothing of it. No one suspects the house detective. Especially when he has a twin brother giving him a perfect alibi."

J. Wyndham snorts and grabs the phone. The Doc shakes his head. "Do not call the police yet," he says. "You must give Mr. Allan and myself time to get out of town. If these crooks get a good look at us our usefulness in the war against crime would end."

He gets to his feet. "You will find Dr. Ronkel under the desk in his office. One of the Munger twins is in the lobby. You will probably find the other one sleeping in his room." He nods at the packages on the table. "You have enough evidence there to send them away for a long time."

I am on my feet. I bow to J. Wyndham and Amelia. The Doc also bows and we start for the door. J. Wyndham steps back to the desk. "Not so fast, Doctor," he says. He pulls out his checkbook and gets busy with his pen. "I insist that you accept an additional five thousand dollars. You have made me the happiest man in the world."

The Doc steps right up. "I will accept with pleasure," he says. J. Wyndham is writing again in the checkbook. He smiles at me. "You must allow me to buy you a camel's-hair overcoat, Mr. Allan," he says. He flips the check to me and I see it is for four yards. I manage to keep my face straight.

We are out of the hotel and in the bank in ten minutes flat. We make the same window and this teller gives us a puzzled look when we hand him two more checks just like the pair he has cashed for us that morning.

The train is pulling out of the station when we flop into a seat. The Doc leans back and lets out a big sigh. "I must confess that I am glad that operation is over," he says. "It turned out well, but there were some sticky spots."

I can feel all this lettuce resting in my wallet. It is a nice feeling. "We made a good score, anyhow," I tell him. "And also doubled as a pair of guardian angels for J. Wyndham and Amelia."

The Doc chuckles. "Yes," he says. "It was all done in doubles. Double fees, a neat doublecross, and double detectives."

"Well," I tell him, "there was a time there when I figured maybe they would double us up in a room with bars on the windows."

I look out the window and scowl at the scenery. "There is one thing I wish I had checked on," I say. "Which one of those Mungers was Herman?"

# Murder

By  
**ROLAND  
PHILLIPS**

Jonas closed in on the man, smacked the gun from his fingers and clipped him, hard.



*Abe Whittle, the town tippler, swore he saw a witch on a broomstick swoop out of the Pembroke's attic the night old Miss Lydia was killed. "Stuff and nonsense," everyone 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 rope and, lying near the body, a besom, the Flying Fortress of witchendom since time immemorial.*

# Rides a Broomstick

IT WAS funny, the way things happened, that I should have been studying my history lesson, which dealt with the Puritans and their witch hangings, the very night Lydia Pembroke was murdered. Mr. Beecher and Mr. Finny were in the living room with me at the time, smoking and chatting in front of the fire. Jonas Beecher was the sheriff, and a smart one—tall and thin and a little stooped-shouldered, with more hair in his bushy eyebrows and mustache than on his head. He usually depended more on his wits than on a gun in preserving law and order. And that's why in the end he cracked the mystery, a double-barreled one it proved to be, which had superstitious folk talking in whispers behind locked doors. A locked door played a big part in the affair, too, although not for the same reason. I helped some, and in a way so did Dr. Kerrick, but it was Jonas who really got in the final lick.

My father, a mining engineer, had lived with the Beechers since Mother died, and when he went to South America I stayed right on so as not to miss my schooling. Their house was about the largest in Crestmont and the Beechers sometimes took in boarders since there wasn't a hotel in the village. Tourists stopped off, especially summers, just to look around. They said the place had "charm" and raved about the old houses and the things in them.

Mr. Finny was a regular visitor from New York, a birdlike little man with twinkling blue eyes and a hearty laugh, and a great one for telling stories. He used to take me around the county with him in his little truck, picking up odds and ends of stuff. Called himself a junk dealer, although the sign on his truck read, *Andrew Finny, Antiques*. His shop was in New York. I couldn't imagine how he ever made a living off the fool things he bought, but Jonas claimed the business was a gold mine.

Mrs. Beecher was clearing off the supper table and Mr. Finny was in the middle of a story, when Ted Druet, the garage man, came storming into the house.

"Jonas!" he yelled. "You better get over to the Pembroke place right off. Some woman flagged me on the road below there a few minutes ago, cryin' an' carryin' on that Miss Lydia had been killed an' for me to fetch the police."

"Who was the woman?" the sheriff asked, bounding out of his chair.

"Don't ever remember seein' her before. Old an' crazy lookin', bareheaded an' wearin' a

wrapper. She like to scared me to death poppin' up in front of the car like she did."

"It must have been Lydia's sister, Deborah," Mrs. Beecher said.

"Like as not it was," Ted Druet agreed.

"Sort of a local wraith, isn't she?" Mr. Finny put in.

"Always has been," Jones declared, pulling on his coat. "Never has been introduced around or seen much. . . You want to come along with me?"

It was not until Ted Druet had gone on to his shop and Jonas was hurrying down the road with Mr. Finny—the sheriff's car being laid up for repairs—that he turned and saw me following. "You go back, Cedric," he ordered. "No place for a young 'un where there's been violence and bloodshed."

But I merely fell behind a few steps and kept right on, sniffing a little because I had always liked Miss Lydia even if most folks did call her a "snooty, dried up old maid." She might have been old and prim and dressed queerly, but she was sweet and gentle just the same. I ran errands for her and had even gone into the house, which was more than most people had done in years, although I saw her sister only once—close to, that is. Even then the shades were drawn in the room, and what with all the commotion I hadn't paid much attention to the woman except to notice her arm.

The Pembrookes had founded the town away back in Colonial days and a lot of them were buried here. One of the men had fought in the Revolutionary War and afterwards built the house Miss Lydia lived in, a two-story, shingled place on the side of Dobb's Hill. She and her sister were the last of the family, and now that Miss Lydia was gone I wondered what the sister would do.

THE men turned off into a weedy lane that wound between big elms. I lagged behind a bit. The house showed up ghostlike in the moonlight. The front door was standing open, and when Jonas and Mr. Finny tramped across the veranda a tall woman holding a lamp met them.

"I'm Mr. Beecher, the sheriff," Jonas said. "Are you Deborah Pembroke?"

The woman nodded. "She—Miss Lydia's up in the attic. I've been waiting . . ." her voice wavered and broke and her hand shook so that Jonas took the lamp from her.

"Show us how to get there," he said.

Holding to the rail, the woman led the way to the second floor and down the hall to a nar-

row door that opened onto a flight of steep, uncarpeted stairs. I tiptoed after them, my heart thudding. When the woman hesitated, Jonas spoke sharply.

"Go ahead! There's nothing to be afraid of."

A candle burned on a table in the attic, but the rest of the cluttered space was dark. A large window at the far end was open. That wasn't the first thing I saw, though. It was Miss Lydia lying on a mound of rugs, her head turned a little to one side, and so quiet and natural she seemed to be curled up asleep.

Jonas gave his lamp to Mr. Finny and dropped down beside the woman, brushing back some of the hair that had fallen across her face. Then he looked around and straight at me in the doorway. I expected he would be mad to find I'd disobeyed him, but he wasn't.

"Cedric," he called out, "you go bring Dr. Kerrick. Quick now."

I ran all the way, which wasn't far, found the doctor at home, told him what had happened and we both hustled back. Dr. Kerrick, who acted as medical officer for the sheriff, was younger than most folks in the village, a little more than twice my age—I'm going on fourteen—but right up to date.

He nodded to the men when we reached the attic, and without speaking, except to ask Jonas to hold the lamp close, examined Miss Lydia. "She was struck just back of the ear, a hard blow," he announced finally, getting to his feet. "Been dead for several hours at least."

"I could see that right off," the sheriff said.

The doctor looked around and for the first time seemed to notice the woman hunched against the wall. "Who's this?" he asked.

"It's Deborah Pembroke, Lydia's sister," Jonas told him. "She found the body and had Ted Druet come for me." He dragged a rickety chair from the jumble of furniture behind him. "Sit here, Miss Deborah. Take your time now and tell us all you know. Everything."

The woman sat down, blinking in the light, and drew her robe tightly about her thin shoulders. "I've never—been up here before," she began faintly. "Never once. Lydia always kept the attic door locked. I didn't mind. Tonight—it was right after supper—she took a candle and came upstairs, saying she thought she heard a noise. I told her it was just the squirrels. They get in here, come cold weather."

She paused and wiped at her eyes. "After I'd finished the dishes, I took a lamp and went up to the bedroom. It's right across from the attic stairs. The door was partly open, and while I was undressing I thought I heard a mumbling as if—as if Lydia was talking to

somebody, only I knew it couldn't be, for there were just the two of us in the house."

"So you concluded she must have been talking to herself?"

The woman nodded. "I waited and waited, but Lydia didn't come down, didn't answer when I called and—and after a time I came up here. I thought at first that she'd fallen, but when I saw the blood—and her head. . ."

"You ran out and stopped Mr. Druet, told him?"

"I don't know who it was."

"Could anyone get into the house and upstairs without you hearing?"

"Must have, somehow, although we keep the doors and windows locked."

"This attic window's open," Mr. Finny said, moving toward it and peering out. "That big tree limb seems close enough for a man to slide along and get in here—get out the same way," he added.

The sheriff walked over to investigate. "Could be," he admitted, "if a fellow was sly, and could open the window from the outside." He turned and glanced around the attic. "I'll have to come up here in daylight to search the place. With all this clutter of stuff it'll be a job finding the murder weapon if it was tossed away. No sign of one so far."

"The proverbial blunt instrument," Dr. Kerrick said. "Let's hope it'll bear the needed fingerprints." He smiled. "A house as old as this ought to have a first-class ghost, Jonas. Has that occurred to you? What if the spook got riled at Miss Lydia and—"

"Fiddlesticks!" the sheriff snorted.

"Just the same, plenty of folks in this region would accept the theory," the doctor said. "The stories and superstitions I've listened to amaze me."

"Say, look down there!" Mr. Finny, who had remained at the window, suddenly exclaimed. "Isn't that somebody on the ground beside the tree?"

The sheriff stepped to the window, leaned out, swore, and bolted from the attic, clumping down the stairs so fast it was all Mr. Finny and I could do to keep up with him. We dashed out the front door and into the side yard.

"It's Abe Whittle," Jonas muttered, bending over the sprawled man who was breathing heavily, his eyes closed. "Does porter work at Grant's bar?"

"He's been injured," Mr. Finny declared.

The moon was so bright I could see that for myself, what with the blood on his face and shirt. Jonas prodded him, finally boosted him to his feet. "You, Abe! Wake up!" he ordered. "What you doing here? How'd you get hurt?"

Whittle swayed, staring at us dazed-like for a minute. Then he clapped a hand to his nose,



"I—I smacked into a tree," he stammered thickly.

"Fell out of one, more likely," Jonas charged. "And you're higher'n a kite. What you doing in Miss Pembroke's yard this time of night?"

The man looked around as if to get his bearings, peered at each of us, then up at the house, shuddered and clutched the sheriff's arm. "You know—know what I seen?" he gulped, pointing a shaky finger toward the attic. "Up there where the light's showin'? Swooped right out the window it did an' made for me. I turned to run an'—an' bumped into the tree. Must have knocked me cold."

"What swooped out?" Jonas demanded, scowling.

"A—a witch ridin' a broomstick! I seen her plain as day."

Jonas swore and cuffed him. "That's enough! Talk sense now, Abe."

"But I tell you I seen her," the man wavered. "I—I was headin' for home. . ."

"You don't live in this direction," Jonas snapped angrily. "You're babbling nonsense. I'm locking you up till you're sobered and tell the truth. And you'll have a lot of explaining to do before you get out again. Come along."

**M**R. FINNY and I went on home a bit later, after the sheriff had taken Abe Whittle to jail and Dr. Kerrick took charge of poor Miss Lydia. We had Deborah come with us instead of staying alone in the house for the night. When we got back, Mrs. Beecher met us to hear the news and saw that Deborah was made comfortable.

"It must have been dreadful, finding her sister like she did," Mrs. Beecher declared, coming back after putting the woman to bed. "The poor creature's in a daze and shaking like a leaf. She's younger than I expected, and nice, too. To think of the horrible things folks made up about her! Why, I heard she was disfigured and ashamed to show herself, and some said she was half-witted and Lydia had to keep her tethered most of the time."

"I've listened to the same things for the past few years," Mr. Finny said. "It's been cruel, the talk that's gone around."

"Do you think Abe Whittle shinnied up that tree and took a tumble coming down?" I asked.

"Hard to know what to think. Maybe he was drunk, maybe just pretending." Mr. Finny began laughing. "But he certainly had a story to tell. A broomstick-riding witch! That's a rare one."

"Well," Mrs. Beecher remarked, "there're no end of those who still hold with such things. Just as some of their forebears did right in this very state."

"They hanged plenty of witches once," I

spoke up, remembering my history book. "A few of them really admitted they could put spells on people and were friendly with the devil. Those suspected of being witches were whipped with castor-bean bushes, which were said to make them confess, or tossed into ponds and if they floated they were guilty."

Mr. Finny shook his head. "That's true enough, Cedric. I suppose the story will create a lot of talk once it gets out. And as you say, Mrs. Beecher, there'll be folks who'll swallow tonight's story hook, line and sinker."

The sheriff came in presently to tell us Abe Whittle had sobered up quick enough when he learned of the murder, but that he still stuck to his yarn about being so scared he'd run into a tree which accounted for his bloody nose."

"He sure collided with something," Mr. Finny agreed.

"I'm holding him," Jonas said. "He's the only suspect so far, but I don't think he's guilty. It just doesn't make sense. No reason I can figure out. No motive I can see at all for the murder."

"Guess you'll have to hang it on the ghost Dr. Kerrick mentioned, or the witch that swooped out the window," Mr. Finny commented, grinning.

"I'd just as soon think Deborah killed her sister," Jonas replied.

The two men were still talking when I went off to bed. It was a long time before I fell asleep, thinking over what I'd seen and heard that night. The next day was Saturday, with no school, and I was up early. Mr. Finny had already gone to attend an auction somewhere off in the county.

Miss Deborah ate breakfast with us, looking pale and shaky, but only breaking down when the sheriff tried to question her. She hadn't any idea who might have clubbed her sister to death. Lydia had no enemies. She'd seen no suspicious characters lurking around the premises lately. She didn't know Abe Whittle and was sure her sister hadn't either. When Jonas asked if there'd ever been any trouble between Lydia and herself, Deborah said they always got on pleasantly and enjoyed being by themselves. I knew the sheriff was leading up to the reason she had kept so close to the house all these years, never being seen outside the yard or appearing when anyone did call, but the woman started crying so hard that he shrugged and walked away from the table.

Mrs. Beecher wanted to go back to the house with her, to help straighten things up for the funeral, but Deborah said she'd rather be alone today, and set off by herself. Later on that morning I decided to get hold of my chum who had a new rifle, and perhaps join him in knocking over a few squirrels. Instead of following the main road, I took a short-

cut across the fields back of the Pembroke place. Just as I was skirting the pond I heard a flock of crows making a great racket in a nearby thicket, and when I came up to them, thinking they were deviling an owl, I saw what had excited them.

For a minute I stood stock-still, swallowing hard, my heart pumping. The crows circled off, but kept up their chatter. I didn't go very close to the object on the ground, and after peering at it from all sides, I turned and ran to get hold of the sheriff. He wasn't at the jail or town hall, and I'd about concluded he must have gone to look over the Pembroke place again when I saw him drive out of Ted Druet's garage with Dr. Kerrick beside him. I called and waved and he stopped. By the time I reached the car I was so winded I could hardly talk.

"There's a woman—over near the pond," I gasped. "I think—she's dead."

"Good Lord!" the doctor exclaimed. "Another one?"

Jonas snatched me up into the rear seat. "Show us where," he ordered.

WE SWUNG off on the dirt road and I pointed to the thicket where the crows were perched again, making more noise than ever. Jonas and the doctor jumped from the car, climbed the rail fence and strode across the field. When I reached them the doctor was squatted beside the woman. He had turned her over, but I couldn't see her face so well because of the stringy, gray hair that hid most of it. She was old and wrinkled and skinny, and had on a long dark robe.

"No trace of blood," Dr. Kerrick was saying, "but there's a bruise on the side of her head. I'll make a thorough examination later. Been dead a long time." He brushed back the woman's straggly hair. "Anyone you know, Jonas?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Nobody around these parts."

"Huh, that's odd. We may find some identification when we go through her clothes. Not exactly a glamor girl, would you say?"

Staring down at the woman's face, noticing her sharp nose, pointed chin and wild hair, I thought she looked like the pictures of witches I'd seen on Halloween cards, but I kept quiet.

"Looks like you've another headache coming on, Sheriff," the doctor said. "Let's hope these mysteries don't run in threes. Of course we can't be sure—" he broke off to pick up what seemed to be a straight, smooth stick that lay partly concealed under the woman's robe, and when he pulled it all the way out, I saw that a bundle of twigs were fastened to one end.

"Looks like a makeshift brush of some sort," he muttered.

The sheriff stepped over and took the thing from him. "Why, it's a besom," he declared. "Sure is. Haven't seen one in years."

"A what?"

"Besom. Guess you're too young to remember. Before fancy brooms were invented, early-day folks used to wrap a bunch of willow or birch twigs around the end of a branch to sweep with," Jonas explained. "My grandfather had a couple in his home. And this is a danged old one," he added, inspecting the cord with which the twigs were bound. "They haven't made twine like this for the last hundred years. It's dyed wool, almost as stout as wire."

"Just an old-time broom, eh?" the doctor said, his eyes beginning to twinkle. "And how do you suppose it got here? Was the woman carrying the broomstick—or riding it?"

"Don't go spouting nonsense," Jonas growled.

Dr. Kerrick chuckled. "The old girl was riding a broomstick and had to make a crash landing! Maybe the twigs conked out on her! Maybe Abe Whittle's story isn't so crazy after all."

"Rubbish!" Jonas snorted, his face getting red.

"Well then, how are we to account for the relic being found here? The woman must have brought it with her. Why? Why would she be lugging a broom—a besom, as you've labeled it—across the field?"

The sheriff didn't answer, didn't seem to be listening at all. Instead, he was peering intently at the end of the worn besom handle. "Look here!" he said. "Would you say these were stains?"

Sobering a little, Dr. Kerrick inspected the brown marks. "Offhand I'd pronounce them bloodstains, and not so old either. We'll soon determine that." He paused and glanced up. "You haven't found what Miss Lydia was struck down with yet, have you?"

Jonas admitted he hadn't. "Probably will, though, when I give that cluttered attic a good search this morning. That is, if the miscreant tossed away whatever weapon he used in the place."

"If you don't find what you're looking for, and these stains prove to be blood, this broomstick might well be accepted as the murder weapon."

"Maybe so, only—"

"Only we'd be left wondering how in thunder it came to be found way off here, apparently in the possession of this so far unidentified old woman," the doctor went on as the sheriff hesitated. "Wouldn't it be logical to think then that she committed the crime?"

Jonas bristled. "Drat it, Kerrick," he grumbled, "you want me to believe she got

into the attic somehow, clubbed Miss Lydia to death with the broomstick and sailed out the window astride it?"

"Well, we'll have to admit the slayer got in and got out again," the doctor contended. "The getting in might not be so puzzling, but remember Deborah Pembroke was in the room at the foot of the attic stairs and saw no one coming down. The stairs and the window are the only exits."

"There's that tree outside the window."

"Yes, that might be the answer, but you'll agree that Abe Whittle never could have scaled it, let alone crawl out on the limb—not in the condition you found him in."

"I'm not thinking he did that any more than I'm believing a witch sailed out the window and took after him," the sheriff retorted. "His nose is a mess and there's blood on the tree trunk, so he must have collided with it. Maybe he was scared of something, or just was drunk and ran into it in a drunken stupor. No sense in our holding a guessing contest now. Let's get the corpse away first."

It was not until the men were carrying the woman off to put her in the car that I noticed she had on only one slipper. When the edge of her robe snagged on the fence and I loosened it, I got a glimpse of her thin, bare arms. I started to say something right then, but held my tongue because the idea that hit me was so outlandish and I knew the sheriff wasn't in any mood to listen.

Several people saw the body being taken into Dr. Kerrick's laboratory back of his office, and I suspected it wouldn't be long before the news spread. Miss Lydia's murder the previous night had been enough to shock the village, and now the finding of an unknown dead woman this morning was sure to set everyone buzzing.

"Best not to give out anything till after you've made your examination," Jonas told the doctor as we left the office. "Later on we can let some of the older folks have a look at the remains if we haven't been able to identify them. I'll be back from the Pembroke place in half an hour or so."

When we were outside and in the car again I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Jonas," I blurted, "I think the dead woman is Deborah."

He kept right on driving for almost a block, his mind apparently fixed on something else. Then he stiffened and looked around. "How's that? Deborah Pembroke? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Because of the scars on her arm," I explained. "I saw them the time she fainted once while I was in the house and helped lift her onto the sofa. I'd forgotten all about it until a while ago when I saw the scars on the dead woman's arm."

"Remembered that, did you? But you don't remember what she looked like?"

"It was sort of dark in the room and I didn't pay much attention. Besides, Miss Lydia was all fluttery and—"

"The trouble is, Cedric," Jonas broke in, "we'll never be able to prove Deborah had a scarred arm as you claim. You're about the only one in town who ever saw her close up, but even so we can't accuse this other woman of impersonating Deborah."

I saw that all right enough, but it didn't discourage me. "We can keep our eyes open from now on, and if she's a phony maybe she'll give herself away."

Jonas nodded. "Yes, we can do that," he agreed, and fell silent a while.

"She'll think herself safe, believing no one's ever had a good look at Deborah," I went on. "We might trap her somehow."

"Don't you go off half-cocked now," Jonas warned as we turned into the lane. "It's ticklish business and we've got to go careful."

"While you're up in the attic I'll snoop around downstairs," I said.

**T**HE woman met us at the door wearing an apron and dust cap. When the sheriff had gone upstairs I stayed below, asking if I could be of help and being told I wasn't needed. Miss Deborah—I had to keep on calling her that—didn't seem to mind my wandering around the house or appear to be watching where I went or what I did. She kept on with her dusting, opening and shutting cupboard doors, changing things about on the shelves and fussing with the curtains. I couldn't see a speck of dust anywhere though, and there seemed to be no sense in her puttering.

This was the first time I'd ever been in the front part of the house, and the minute I walked into the sitting room I spotted a besom, as Jonas called it, standing alongside the big fireplace. It was exactly like the one Dr. Kerrick had found earlier, even to the faded red cord used to bind the twigs to the handle. Another besom stood beside the parlor fireplace, but there was none in the dining room. I wondered if there had been and if it had been taken away.

After a while I went back to the kitchen where the woman was washing dishes. She had her sleeves rolled up and I saw her arms weren't thin or scarred. My heart began to thump hard then, but it was nothing compared to the thrill I got later when I spied a slipper on the floor at the foot of the dining room, sofa. I hadn't noticed it before when I'd been in the room. I snatched it up and tucked it under my sweater just as the sheriff came downstairs.

He didn't say anything to me, but called to

the woman, warning her not to let anyone in the house. She promised to keep the doors locked and not show herself, and followed us out upon the veranda.

"Her arms aren't scarred," I whispered excitedly to Jonas as soon as we reached the car. "There's a besom missing from one of the fireplaces and the others in the house are exactly like the one we found this morning. And I picked up a slipper just before you showed up," I rushed on. "I'm almost certain it's a mate to the other one."

"What other one?" he asked, driving off.

"The slipper the dead woman was wearing. Didn't you notice she only had one on?"

"Why, no, I hadn't, Cedric. Just one, you say? We'll check on that."

Dr. Kerrick came in from the laboratory as we entered his office. "Well, Jonas," he announced right off. "Those stains on the broomstick are blood, and not too old either. But there wasn't a blessed thing on the woman that might serve to identify her." He nodded toward a chair. "That's her outfit."

The sheriff stepped over, pawed through the mussed garments and picked out a slipper. I handed him the one I'd found and he put the two side by side. It was plain to see they were mates, both scuffed gray felt with a knitted blue edging around the tops through which a faded blue ribbon was threaded.

"Where'd you come across that?" the doctor asked, turning to me.

Jonas repeated all I'd told him and what I'd found. Dr. Kerrick whistled.

"So our corpse might be Deborah Pembroke, eh?"

"Begins to look that way. Murdered, was she?"

"I can't be sure. That bruise back of her ear cracked her skull, all right, but whether it was the result of an accident or not—"

"The ground's soft out in the field," the sheriff interrupted. "Even if she'd tripped and fell it wouldn't have caused much damage. I'd say she was dead when she was brought to the spot where we found her. Stands to reason she wouldn't have gone traipsing in the open wearing a thin wrapper and just one slipper. And since we find the missing slipper in the Pembroke house we've got to assume it was dropped off there."

"Then we've also got to assume this other woman lugged her out of the house," the doctor added.

"Naturally. If she intended to palm herself off as Deborah she'd have to make away with the original."

"How are you accounting for the besom?"

"Why, it could have been planted there to make us think the dead woman murdered Miss Lydia. Cedric tells me it's exactly like those in the house now, so it undoubtedly came from

there. And I couldn't find a thing in the attic that looked as if it might have been used as a weapon—nothing with stains on it, I mean."

The doctor whistled again. "That seems to point squarely to this imposter—if she is one—as the criminal."

"Certainly does," Jonas said. "I can't come right out and charge her with the crime, though, not until I have more evidence."

"A double-barreled killing! The last of the Pembroke clan exterminated! Whew! That's something to think about. Too bad we didn't handle the broomstick more carefully. It might have revealed a few damaging fingerprints."

Jonas admitted that they had been at fault there. "Can't be helped now," he grumbled. "What I've got to figure out is who the woman is, where she came from, and most of all, what the devil she's up to. What's the motive behind this affair? Once I hit on that we've licked the mystery. It couldn't have been robbery because Lydia hadn't anything and I don't believe the sister had either. They've been living on borrowed money for the last couple of years."

"The woman had to be aware of the situation existing here—that Deborah was practically a recluse and as such couldn't very well be identified—or she wouldn't have dared stage this performance," the doctor pointed out. "She may be an old friend of the family or even a relative with a grudge to settle."

"But why would she stay on here?" Jonas countered. "She could have killed and then disappeared as mysteriously as she came. We probably wouldn't have discovered the crime for days. Instead of that the woman evidently carted off one of her victims to be found later and remains on the scene to do her play acting."

"You've got a problem on your hands, Jonas," the doctor conceded.

"Anyone had a look at the body yet?"

"Yes. I called in Matt Vernon and old Henry Dobbs after I'd finished my examination. They're about the oldest inhabitants and should be acquainted with almost everyone in this area. Both stated they'd never laid eyes on the woman before. I didn't mention the broomstick, though, or where we'd found the body."

"We won't spring that yet," Jonas said, staring moodily out the window.

The doctor nodded. "Better not. Folks around town would jump at conclusions and believe stronger than ever in the drivil Abe Whittle pulled on us. Funny, when you stop to think of it, how that wild yarn fits into the affair," he went on. "Our corpse certainly looks the part of a proverbial story-book witch, and the broomstick we find beside her, obviously the murder weapon, was what he

claims she was astride. Not an ordinary one, mind you, but an ancient besom, the very sort a witch is always pictured as riding. Almost seems as if he might have been in cahoots—

"By golly!" Jonas exclaimed, snapping his fingers and turning from the window. "I think I've got the answer. A wonder I didn't tumble an hour ago. Why that—" He broke off as the door opened and a patient came into the office. "See you later," he said to the doctor, and motioned for me to follow him outside.

SOME men were standing beside the car when the sheriff reached it, so I didn't have a chance to question him. He told me to run on home, which I did, still wondering what he had suddenly "tumbled" on. I couldn't see where the doctor's remarks about the witch suggested anything, or that Abe Whittle was mixed up in the murders.

Mrs. Beecher and Mr. Finny, who had just driven up, were in the yard when I got to the house, and old Henry Dobbs was just shuffling off. He had told them about viewing the body, and Mrs. Beecher repeated the news to me. I didn't let on I knew a thing, and the sheriff hadn't much to say when he came home to dinner, although his wife pestered him with questions.

"Henry Dobbs said the woman was an old crone and ugly as a witch," she stated. "Was she dead when you found her, Jonas?"

"Doctor said she was."

"Dead from natural causes?" Mr. Finny asked.

"Don't think so."

"For the land's sake!" Mrs. Beecher exclaimed. "That's terrible. And nobody able to identify her?"

"Good reason for it," the sheriff replied. "If the woman could have been readily identified she probably wouldn't have met her death. That's my theory and I hope to prove it. And what's more," he added, "by proving it we'll get to the bottom of Miss Lydia's murder. Now let's have dinner and not so much conversation."

After Jonas had left, Mr. Finny let me look at some bird prints he'd bought that morning, and we talked over them until late in the afternoon when Mrs. Beecher suggested I go and bring Miss Deborah back for supper.

I set off down the road, not hurrying any, and by the time I reached the Pembroke place it was growing dusk. No lights showed in the windows, and when I knocked on the door nobody answered it. After calling and waiting a bit, I walked through the yard, wondering if the woman had become alarmed and disappeared.

I was debating what to do and staring up at the attic window, when a huge, flapping

something swooped out and down and seemed to be headed straight for me. I yelled and dived into a lilac bush, about as scared as I ever expect to be. But a minute later, peering from my cover, I jumped up with a laugh, for the thing that had frightened me was wheeling down to perch on a nearby limb—the biggest horned owl I'd ever seen. I knew then what must have happened to give Abe Whittle a bloody nose and call forth the story he had told Jonas. I could make out the hole under the eaves just above the attic window where the bird probably had a nest.

Remembering my errand, however, I sobered down, realizing that if the woman had disappeared the sheriff ought to know right away, and after shying a stick at the owl and watching it flap off, I struck out for home across the back field. When I reached the house, Mrs. Beecher said Deborah had come back alone a few minutes after I'd left, so I went into the sitting room and told Jonas and Mr. Finny about the big owl I'd seen. The men laughed.

"A good thing you were sober, Cedric," Mr. Finny chuckled, "or you'd probably be corroborating Abe's yarn."

"I don't blame him for being frightened," I said. "That old owl was surely a whopper. I'll bet it had a ten-foot wingspread."

There was an extra place at the supper table, but Mrs. Beecher explained that Deborah hadn't felt like eating just now and was lying down. "She seems more upset than last night. I suppose the poor creature's just beginning to realize the dreadful thing that's happened and that now she's all alone in the world."

The sheriff's lips twitched a little. "She'll be taken care of," he said, and I guess I was the only one who caught what he meant.

"Do you think Miss Lydia had anything of value besides the house?" his wife asked. "I heard the place was mortgaged."

"It is," Jonas told her.

"What's in the house won't bring much," Mr. Finny spoke up. "I looked it over about the first trip I made here. You went with me, remember? Introduced me to Miss Lydia. I did buy a few things, but the rest is what the trade calls shooting gallery stuff."

"I remember she didn't take us into the attic," the sheriff said.

When we finished eating and went to sit by the fire, Mrs. Beecher fixed up a tray which she took in to Miss Deborah. The men were hardly settled and had their pipes going before Mrs. Beecher came running back to us.

"Deborah's gone!" she cried. "Her window's open and—and she's gone."

We all jumped up and ran down the hall to the back room. Jonas walked to the window, which was only a couple of feet above the ground, and looked out.

"You must hurry and find her," Mrs. Beecher pleaded tearfully. "The poor soul is likely out of her mind, straying off into the cold night."

The sheriff didn't seem nearly as disturbed as the rest of us. "A wonder she'd take the trouble to climb through the window when she might have walked out by the door much more easily," he grunted.

"She'll never stray far on foot," Mr. Finny declared. "Wait till I get my hat and I'll help you make a search."

When he went into his room I whispered to Jonas: "She got scared and ran off."

"She was scared all right," Jonas agreed, and grinned smugly.

Mr. Finny joined us and we went outside. It was dark in the yard and Jonas kept his flashlight just sweeping the ground. The bush below the woman's window was squashed but the grass around it didn't show any footprints, if that was what he expected to find. Mr. Finny started for the side gate which was standing open, but when he saw that the sheriff wasn't following him, he turned and came back.

"Going to use your car?" he asked.

"No need of that," Jonas replied, switching on the lights in the garage. "Just as you said, the woman won't stray far on foot. She knows she wouldn't have a chance to escape once we sent out an alarm. It strikes me she hoped to leave here the way she came—under cover."

Mr. Finny blinked at him. "Under cover?" he repeated. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"About your truck," Jonas said quietly.

"Good Lord!" Mr. Finny exclaimed. "You don't think she'd try to hide there, do you? Why, she couldn't. It's locked."

"Of course. I expected it would be now," the sheriff replied, and held out his hand. "Let's have the key."

Mr. Finny shrank back, his face white. "Don't be absurd!" he gulped. "That woman couldn't—"

"You heard me?" Jonas growled, starting toward him. "I want that key."

**S**TILL backing off, Mr. Finny began fumbling through his pockets while I looked on open-mouthed, too amazed to stir. His hand came out presently, but instead of a key it clutched a revolver. I yelled and ducked. Jonas, moving faster than I had ever seen him before, closed in on Mr. Finny, smacked the gun from his fingers and at the same time clipped him hard on the jaw. Mr. Finny tumbled against the garage wall and slid to the floor.

Jonas picked up the revolver and glowered down at the whimpering man. "Seems like you've convicted yourself proper, Finney," he

charged. "That's what I've been waiting for you to do. You smuggled this woman into town in your truck to impersonate Deborah Pembroke. You murdered Miss Lydia and her sister, packed Deborah out into the field and left the bloodstained besom you'd used beside the body, thinking no one could identify the woman and trusting we'd conclude she was the killer."

Mr. Finny stirred and groaned, finally sat up holding his injured jaw, but offering no word of defense.

"I never tied you in on the affair until after I'd had a good look in the Pembroke attic this morning," the sheriff went on. "Then the motive back of the whole performance hit me. The stuff up there, dating back to Colonial times, and which you must have seen in the past, would be worth a small fortune to a man in your business, Finny."

"And since Miss Lydia firmly refused to sell her cherished family possessions, you had to plot a way to get hold of them. Your accomplice was to pose as Deborah, who'd fall heir to the Pembroke assets at Lydia's death, and then of course she'd dispose of the valuables to you."

He reached down then and frisked Mr. Finny's clothes, although the man squirmed and fought to prevent it, and came up with the keys.

"What you never counted on," Jonas resumed, "was that one person in town often visited the Pembroke house and had seen Deborah. So once we'd identified your victim—and I purposely dropped a few hints at dinner today—you saw where your plans were wrecked and your accomplice threatened with exposure."

"You didn't dare let her be arrested. You were too afraid she'd talk. And to save yourself from being involved you got the woman out of her room this evening before supper, hid her in the truck again, intending to drive her back to New York in the morning and let us run in circles trying to locate her. You thought we'd decide she had murdered Lydia, that we'd never find her, and you'd both be safe."

Stepping to the rear of the truck, Jonas found the proper key, unlocked the door and yanked it open. "Come out!" he barked.

There were no sounds within the truck, no movement at all, and for a minute I held my breath, thinking Jonas surely must have been wrong in his suspicions. Then the woman crawled slowly from under a pile of stuff, blinking in the light, her hair straggling over her white face, her clothes mussed.

"You don't have to threaten me," she wavered huskily, her eyes upon the gun Jonas still held. "I'll tell you everything you want to know."

"Lady," the sheriff said, "you can just bet on that. . . And stay right where you are!" he ordered curtly, as the woman started to climb out of the car. "You're taking a little ride to the police station and I've arranged it so you're going to have proper company on the trip."

With that, Jonas turned, picked Mr. Finny up bodily in spite of his struggles and cursing, dumped him into the back of the truck, slammed the door and locked it. Then he walked around and got up into the front seat. He slammed the door and started the engine.

"Makes a good patrol wagon, Cedric," he boomed at me as he steered out of the garage. "You go in and keep Mrs. Beecher company till I get back. Don't know if you should wait up or not—I may be pretty late."

Jonas hadn't any more than driven off when Dr. Kerrick showed up. I told him and Mrs. Beecher all that had happened and they were as dumfounded as I'd been.

Mrs. Beecher went to bed later, but we two waited up for the sheriff until nearly midnight when he finally came home, beaming like anything.

"That woman turns out to be a Mrs. Johnson, Finny's housekeeper, and I guess they were sweet on each other so she agreed to do his bidding," he told us.

"She practically talked herself blue in the face, hoping to skin out of this mess, but she never can. Wasn't a bit of use in Finny babbling, trying to deny things.

"Shucks, I had him convicted when he pulled a gun on me—knew for sure then that he'd locked the woman in his truck. Their rooms here were side by side and they could

talk together all they wished with nobody suspecting it.

Seems he struck down Deborah as soon as he got into the house, then ran upstairs to do in Lydia who was in the attic at the time, which accounts for her being found there. Used the same besom for both killings, the woman confessed.

"She's trying to make out now she hadn't expected murder to be committed when she came here, but of course that's a laugh. She must have known just about what was coming off beforehand. Played her part pretty good for a time, didn't she, what with all of Finny's coaching?"

"And Abe Whittle doesn't figure in the affair at all, according to your theory," the doctor said.

"Of course not. How could you think that? His being found in the yard and that story he told were just what you might call happenstances."

"I thought the way you behaved in the office when I spoke of him indicated you suspected he had a part in it."

Jonas laughed. "It wasn't Abe or his witch. It was you mentioning the one word 'cahoots' that seemed to hook things together," he explained.

"Struck me all at once, remembering that old stuff I'd seen in the Pembroke attic this morning, how it would be a gold mine for Finny, and that the woman might have been used to get hold of it for him. Right then and there the motive for the killings popped into my head.

I'll give you credit for the tip, Kerrick, but the honors will have to go to Cedric."

## THE NIGHT I DIED

When I awoke to find my face bruised, my clothes bloody and my belt around a dead man's neck, I was to wish I had really died that ghastly night, instead of living to fill the murderer's hangnoose that was already tagged with my name!

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**HOME  
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By **JOHN KNOX**







*Wild Willy Hassell, according to all reports, would have made the Dead End Kids look like so many Little Lord Fauntleroy's. Only two people loved him, his neurotic sister and Florence Barnes, both of whom paid dearly for befriending the little moron — the latter with her life.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Crime Test

THERE was a sixteen-year-old boy in the suburbs of Ridgemont who made good as a celebrity. He was called Wild Willy Hassell. One day he vanished and his father received a ransom demand for two thousand dollars. Few people thought Willy worth even this modest sum, but Old Man Hassell scraped up the cash, and his fat son-in-law, Sam Greydays, went out to deliver it.

There was considerable laughter mingled with head shakings when Greydays returned, red and sputtering, to tell how Willy himself had collected the money at the point of a gun, kicked him in the seat of his pants, and blithely boasted that he was headed for the South Seas, probably to set himself up as a pirate.

Opinion was that he would succeed.

The footnote to the story was not so amusing. Willy Hassell's old father died a few months later—some said from grief, some said from stomach trouble.

At any rate, the "Hassell Hoax" was now

Vane flung himself wildly back into the road as a black mass of rock hurtled down the cliffside and landed with a crash almost on the very spot where he had been crouching.

two years old and hardly the sort of thing to interest a man of Babson W. Vane's reputation. Known as "Bad-Weather Vane," or "the Anticipator" because of his uncanny and sometimes annoying habit of predicting murders in advance, this young research criminologist rarely bothered with anything but the knottiest problems.

However, he happened to be working on a monograph to be called *Five Types of Juvenile Delinquent* and Willy Hassell seemed to be all five. So he drove out to Ridgemont one morning to interview Mrs. Greydays, the sister of the meteoric prodigy. And he stayed all day.

Jill Winter, his small, dark and glamorous secretary, was considerably surprised. She wondered if the absentminded Vane had got lost in the Indian caves which honeycombed the Ridgemont hills. It was a quarter to five, and Jill was just adding a final dab of rouge to lips that needed scarcely any at all, when the office door burst open and B.W. himself barged in.

With a nod and a mumble that might have passed for a greeting to a lip reader, the criminologist plowed toward his desk, plopped down behind it, and began to fish from his pockets a mass of scribbled paper scraps. He stared at each as if it were one of the lost odes of Sappho, took a deep breath and looked up brightly.

"Ah, Miss Winter, would it be too much of an imposition to ask you to take a little dictation?" he inquired.

"Well, Jumping Jupiter!" said Jill, glancing at her watch. Then she saw his puzzled look and laughed. For, as usual, there was in Vane's lean blondness, his vague and scholarly eyes, an air of appealing helplessness which—deceptive though Jill knew it was—she could never quite resist.

"The big lug," she said to herself. "He's probably forgotten to eat his lunch and doesn't know within two hours what time it is." So she sat down to her desk, and with pencil poised, inquired: "What's so hot about the Hassell Hoax anyhow?"

"Eh?" Vane looked up, blinking absently. "Oh, the Hassell case . . . But I'm working on the Florence Barnes murder now."

"THE what?" Jill jumped. Even a year after that sensational unsolved crime, the words still had a power to startle. "You may be a weather-vane, but you need a calendar attachment. I thought the police wrote that case off a year ago when Randall Barnes was acquitted."

"So they did," said Vane unperturbed. "But it happened out in Ridgemont, too, remember? And this sister of the Hassell prodigy was the principal witness against Barnes. Talking to her today got me interested in that case again. So I visited the vacant Barnes house and stumbled—literally—on a clue that may clear up the puzzle."

Jill let out a whistle. "Just offhand like that you'll solve the biggest mystery since the Lindbergh kidnaping?"

"Oh, bigger," Vane said complacently. He shifted his scribbled scraps like cards in a solitaire game. "The Lindbergh—crime was obviously the work of a mercenary brute. But the Barnes case gets at the black vitals of human behavior in a very terrifying way."

"How come?"

"Well, Randall Barnes, you might say, was Mr. Nobody—that is, Mr. Everybody, Mr. Average. Age forty-five, a fire insurance salesman, a bowling fan, a collector of arrowheads. He'd been married fifteen years and nobody ever heard him quarrel with his wife. Yet the state charged that suddenly, for no plausible reason, he savagely beat his wife to death with a poker. If a man like that could commit a crime like that for no reason at all, then all our theories about human nature are a lot of hogwash."

"But who else could have killed her?" Jill asked. "Very few people think Barnes is innocent."

"Very few people think—period," Vane amended. "Barnes was freed by the state but convicted by public opinion. The case was

horribly bungled. Nobody, I think, saw the crime from the proper angle. They saw it like a room seen through a keyhole. Naturally they saw no motive. They saw only a partial crime."

Jill frowned. "A *partial* crime?"

"So I think. Murders, like births, are sometimes natural twins, even triplets, even Siamese twins. But one Siamese twin, observed as an individual, would drive an anatomist mad. He simply wouldn't make sense. Neither did the Barnes case for the same reason."

"And if it was a partial crime," Jill said slowly, "that means there'll have to be more murder to complete it? Playing the 'Anticipator' again, huh? Well, who'll be the next victim, Barnes himself?"

Vane shrugged. "Barnes was almost murdered—in the gas chamber. He's a ruined and broken man anyhow, hiding out on a little farm from the enmity of the public. When I telephoned him he seemed eager to clear his name and fell in readily with a little plan I have."

"What's that?"

"I've invited Barnes himself, the Greydays woman, and that Professor Rickton, Barnes' next-door neighbor who was the co-discoverer of the body, all to come here tonight and face a lie-detector."

"But you don't have a lie-detector."

"Yes I have." Vane grinned and tapped his forehead. "Up here. I refer to a word-association test."

"Please explain."

Vane leaned back in his swivel chair and built a Gothic arch with his fingers. "First," he said, "let's outline the bare facts of the Barnes case:

"Randall Barnes, who lived on the outskirts of Ridgemont, left his house one evening a year ago to walk to the Ridgemont Bowling Alley to play in a match. When he got there, twenty minutes later, he was told by the proprietor that a man giving the name of Frank Baker had telephoned that he wanted some insurance in a hurry and had left an address where Barnes could find him.

"So Barnes left and traveled away across town to find his unknown customer. But he found no such address. It was a phony. Barnes was gone three hours. When he got home his house was dark and locked and his wife did not respond to his calls. So, in a panic, he roused Professor Rickton next door and the two of them forced an entrance. They found Mrs. Barnes on the living room floor with her brains beaten out and a bloody poker beside her.

"Now it was clearly established that Barnes was gone for the three hours, and that the woman had been dead too long for him to have

killed her after his return. But the call that had lured Barnes away had been made from a public booth beside the vacant filling station about halfway between Barnes' house and the bowling alley at eight-ten—just about the time Barnes must have passed. So naturally the state claimed that Barnes had already killed his wife when he left home and that he made the phony call himself to establish his alibi.

"The defense, on the other hand, explained the call by saying that the killer had watched Barnes leave home, had followed him, made the call, and then returned to murder his wife.

"But the state's theory was supported by the testimony of this Mrs. Greydays, the sister of our Willy Hassell who had vanished the previous year. Her house was just across the street from the telephone booth and she said that at the time of the call she had seen a man 'who resembled Barnes, except that he wore a beard' come out of the booth. It was very damaging testimony for Barnes, since it was assumed he had tried to disguise himself by putting on a false beard. The state would certainly have convicted him if they had been able to produce a motive.

"But they couldn't. Barnes and his wife had never been known to quarrel. The most diligent search failed to reveal any hint of a clandestine love affair on the part of either of them. And Barnes gained nothing financially from his wife's death. Her insurance barely covered funeral expenses, and she had no private estate."

"But the defense couldn't give a plausible reason for anyone else having killed her," Jill said.

"True enough. She seemed to have no enemies, was not criminally assaulted, and the only thing missing from the house was twenty dollars from a cash box in the kitchen—a very weak motive for a rather elaborate crime. I always believed the Greydays woman lied, and I never thought the poker killed Mrs. Barnes. There was a roundish stab wound in her body, difficult for a poker to have made, a fact which was slurred over by the police. The poker was just a red-herring, bloodied up to make it look like a homemade crime."

"You're rather positive," Jill commented. "What did kill her, then?"

"This," said Vane.

WHILE Jill's eyes bulged, he drew from the sagging pocket of his tweed coat a longish object wrapped in paper. Shucked of its wrapping, there rolled to the desk a horn-handled sharpening steel such as every carving set contains. It was heavy, had a beveled point, and was covered with splotches of ugly reddish rust.

"Good heavens!" Jill looked at the instru-

ment in horror. "Where on earth did you get that?"

"Under a rosebush in the front yard of the Barnes house," Vane answered. "It had been thrust straight down into what must have been soft earth. The amount of surface area disturbed was therefore so small that a small rock would have served to hide it from the police search. But scratching chickens had uncovered the end and, as I said, I stumbled on it.

"You haven't shown it to the police?"

"Not yet. It's my ace in the hole for the game tonight. In the test I give Barnes tonight I'll plant definite hints as to the weapon's hiding place—a secret only the killer would be likely to know. If he's guilty I think I'll know it. I shall, however, plant similar hints in Professor Rickton's test, since he was next door at the time of the killing and may have seen more than he's told. As for Mrs. Greydays, I'll try to trap her in the matter of the bearded telephone-caller she claimed she saw. And since her fat husband insisted on coming along, I'll try to discover his private opinion of his wife's dubious story. Now let's get busy on the word lists themselves."

He placed the sharpening steel in the drawer of his desk, sorted his scribbled notes in four piles, and said: "I've already jotted down some key-words, *critical* words, as they're called. We'll mix them in with a lot of words having no significance—*indifferent* words. A list will be read to each subject who will be asked to respond with the first word that comes to mind. This response will be jotted down and the subject's hesitation timed with a stop watch."

"Then you'll mutter a magic rune and get the answer?"

Vane frowned. "Magic was the first form of science," he said. "Hand me a dictionary and quit laughing."

As they worked the room grew dim. They snapped on the lights and continued their task until four white envelopes, each marked with a set of initials, lay on Vane's desk.

"Four little death-traps," Jill mused cheerfully. "Who's going to feed the words to the victims?"

Vane snapped his fingers.

"Walton, of course! I forgot to tell you to call him. Do so now and have him hurry down here. Walton is perfect for the job. He has such a negative and colorless personality, he won't disturb the subjects any more than a hat rack."

"Poor Walton," said Jill, but she made the call.

While she talked to Walton, Vane listened with an air of pleasure. Wilbur J. Walton, portly, pompous and prematurely saddened, was the manager of the Vane Clipping Service, which B. W. had inherited from his father.

Though the prosperous business enabled Vane to pursue his criminological researches without pecuniary worries, he detested its details so greatly that he even maintained the business offices on a different floor. Walton handled it all. Vane, as a youth, had been forced to work under Walton. And Walton had been a fussy boss and a tale-bearer. Now Walton was passing through the nose for his lack of foresight.

"Walton and his wife had a date to go out and eat steaks," Jill said reproachfully as she racked the telephone.

"Let him eat cake," said Vane.

"Speaking of eating," said Jill pointedly, with a glance at the night-shadowed windows, "I'd like to give you a word-association test. What do the words 'hungry secretary' suggest to you?"

"That I'm stuck for two dinners," Vane replied laughing. "Ah, well, I'll pay off. On the eve of a triumph of pure reason over police routine, I feel I can afford—" He had risen and now began to slap his hip pocket as if a hornet had stung him. "However"—he grinned sheepishly—"I seem to have forgotten my wallet . . . You're in funds? Good, let's get in the saddle then. Where's my hat?"

"On your head," Jill said wearily.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Olmec Skull

THE personality of B. W. Vane did not hold many mysteries for Jill Winter. But one thing which never ceased to amaze her was that though he seemed to muddle through his daily affairs like a not very bright child, once the gears of his mind had meshed on a murder case, his mental machinery could move with a disconcerting display of precision and power.

Another person who knew this, who was troubled, aggravated, and often infuriated by it, was Inspector Hamilton Carr, of the Homicide Detail. Carr, a man whose mental processes were as neat, orderly, immaculate, as his double breasted gray suits, his small waxed mustache, his clipped speech, was never too proud to throw his tough problems in Vane's lap. But from then on he was often left in the dark, due, he claimed, to a perverse streak of mystification in Vane's makeup. Returning to the office after dining, Jill and B. W. found the inspector already there, puffing one of Vane's palest Havanas and giving off the symptoms of a boiler about to blow up.

"Look here, Bad-Weather," Carr began without preliminary sparring, "what's this rot about your opening up the Barnes case? Don't give me that innocent look. Price McConnell of the *News* met you fogging it in from Ridgmont like a hen getting ready to lay

three eggs, and he says you remarked casually that you were all set to break the Barnes case in time for the morning edition. Of course I only represent the police," he finished acidly, "but even so we are mildly interested and you might have given me a hint—"

"Now, now," Vane soothed. "McConnell misquoted me. I merely said I'd settle the question of Barnes' guilt."

"He said you called us a pack of fools," Carr added.

"No, no, I merely said you handled the case like a bunch of drunken Indians trying to work out a problem in calculus. The fact is, you made four basic errors. In the first place you did not guess that the Florence Barnes' murder may have seemed motiveless because it was a part of a larger pattern. In the second place, you assumed *de facto*, that the person who made the call during Barnes away *must necessarily* have been the killer—"

"Well, who else would have lured him away?"

"I don't know. But you never looked into any other possibility. Your third error was that you did not learn why Mrs. Barnes went to the dentist on the day of her death."

"But she didn't get to see the dentist. He was busy, so she went off without seeing him."

"Yet the autopsy showed nothing wrong with Mrs. Barnes' teeth," Vane pointed out, "and no one had heard her complain of tooth trouble."

"Are you suggesting that the dentist was her lover?"

"No, no. That's the commonplace sort of angle you're good at. If she'd had a lover, you'd have found him. I merely say it was an extremely mysterious thing which was never explained at all. And finally, you were mistaken in assuming that the poker killed her—"

"Oh, rats, you're splitting hairs!"

"It takes a precision instrument to split a hair," Vane said. He opened the drawer of his desk and brought out the rusted sharpening steel. "Besides, I found this."

Carr came to respectful attention. Here was something substantial. It commanded his immediate interest. He even whistled when Vane told where he had found it. But when Vane went on to describe the word tests he intended to give, Carr's enthusiasm dwindled to a fishy skepticism.

"Oh, well, have your fun. I'll take my chances on trying to trace that weapon, though it won't be an easy task. But I will stick around and watch your seance tonight," he added generously.

"Thanks, I don't want you," Vane replied. "It would scare the daylight out of my subjects, having the police around. But you can go down and get Walton to hide you in the Clipping Service file room until they've as-

sembled. Then I'll let you know and you can eavesdrop at the door. And tell Walton I'm ready for him up here. Tell him I brought him a juicy hamburger. Now scam, before these people come!"

Carr went off grumbling. A few moments later, Wilbur J. Walton appeared. The manager's puffy face drooped and the cowlike eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses were stony with reproach.

"A customer just came in," he said severely, "and before I could even find out what he wanted, this detective comes pounding at the door. Having the police beat on our doors will ruin business. I barely had time to tell the customer to wait while I jumped out into the hall and hurried this policeman to the back door. Then I had to run up here like a flunkey to answer your summons—"

"Never mind, Walton," Vane soothed. "Only a seedy poet with a book to trade for press clippings would come at this hour."

"Poets have to have money to get published, don't they?" Walton snapped. "What menial job have you got for me here?"

Vane explained about the word tests. Walton sang the blues about T-bone steaks. A knock at the door cut short his lament.

**J**ILL answered it and showed two and a half people into the room. The third person got only halfway in because the huge bulk of Sam Greydays blocked him.

Greydays was as big as Goering, and in fact had the latter's sappy smile. He wore a plaid suit so loud that even his booming voice did not quite drown it. His wife was a startling contrast. She was small and self-effacing, with a mass of black hair in which her small face floated like a petal on dark water. Her eyes were large and dark, too, but they had the shrinking look of a wild thing that has strayed into city streets.

"Ho, ho, here we are," Greydays announced, a trifle too heartily. "Minnie didn't burn case to come, since any mention of the Barnes cast gives her the jitters." He smiled at his wife as one encourages a timid child. "But I told her you were mainly interested in her brother Willy, and if you could find that littleascal and do anything to reform him, well. . . . But, oh, here's Professor Rickton, too. He drove up just as we did, but I had him blocked out, I reckon."

He stepped clumsily aside and in the doorway appeared a slight, sallow man with a short silky beard. He was dressed in baggy black alpaca and looked like a medieval scribe with liver trouble.

"Yes, I came—reluctantly," he said, measuring and moistening each syllable with the tip of a pink tongue. "I do not want to injure Randall Barnes. Yet the slight new evidence

I have may tend to do so, I am afraid."

Greydays and his wife looked at each other as if this news surprised them and Minnie Greydays hastened to say: "Oh, I hope you don't think I have any new evidence about the Barnes murder, Mr. Vane. I told all I knew at the trial. I only hoped that by coming I might get you to help me find Willy. I worry about Willy so much. I can't help feeling that Willy will turn up sometime—" She broke off as if she had said something wrong and looked down at her toes.

"Not an unnatural feeling," Vane said, eyeing her puzzledly. "Well, this test is nothing alarming. I merely hope by word-association to bring out certain things you may have forgotten."

He introduced the group to Jill and Walton and asked them to be seated. His manner was brisk but casual. Very much, Jill thought, like a conjurer going through his routine. She eyed the shrinking figure of Minnie Greydays and hoped that Vane would fail to trap her.

The criminologist had picked up the envelopes which contained the word lists and handed them to Walton. "Just take Mrs. Greydays into the inner office and read this list to her, Walton, old fellow," he said sweetly. "You know the rest of the procedure."

Walton responded with the sullen bow of a lackey recently kicked and led the timid woman from the room. Vane broke out a box of fifty-cent cigars and held a match for each of the men.

Allowing them to mellow a moment under the fragrant fumes, he then said: "Randall Barnes should be here any moment. If either of you gentlemen can think of anything helpful, you might prefer to say it before he arrives."

He waited. Rickton pursed his lips and looked hesitantly at Greydays. Greydays shifted his bulk importantly and spoke around his cigar. "Well, I didn't have much to do with that business, you know, but I'll never forget the way Joe Sykes at the bowling alley described the voice of that guy who made the phone call luring Barnes away. I was supposed to play on the same team with Barnes that night but I was late going over my books and got there after Barnes had come and gone. But Joe Sykes—he's the owner—he said to me, 'Sam,' he said, 'that guy who called Barnes talked like his mouth was full of mush.' Those are his very words—'full of mush.' I thought that was pretty original and was probably important. But they never even put me on the stand at the trial." He seemed offended.

"A lamentable oversight," Vane agreed, nodding sympathetically. "And did your wife tell you that night about seeing a man come out of the telephone booth who resembled Barnes except that he was wearing a beard?"

"Well, no," Greydays said. "Minnie never

mentioned it until next day—after the call had been traced to that booth.”

“Next day! Odd she didn’t mention it as soon as the murder news got out.”

“There’s a lot of things Minnie don’t tell me,” Greydays complained darkly. “Minnie’s been awful unsettled since Willy did what he did.”

VANE turned with relief to Rickton. “And there was some evidence you forgot to mention at the trial, Professor?”

“Oh, I didn’t forget,” Rickton replied. “But I wasn’t sure it was relevant, and it might have injured Barnes. It had nothing to do with the actual murder—I was sound asleep when all that happened. The little matter I refer to concerned the defense’s claim that no one ever heard Barnes and his wife quarrel.”

“Ah!” Vane reared forward like a hunting dog that gets the scent. “But you did hear them quarrel, Professor?”

“Only once,” said Rickton, “and it was so utterly trivial that if it had not happened on the day of her death—”

“And what was the quarrel about, Professor?”

“About a skull.”

“A skull!”

For the first time since entering the office, Rickton smiled. “Don’t be alarmed, the skull had no sinister connotations,” he said. “Barnes, as you know, was a great collector of Indian artifacts and bones. The hills out there abound in such relics, and I have the same hobby. But Barnes took his amateur archeology much more seriously than I do. I realize I am only a novice, but Barnes was apt to spin wild theories about his finds and could not bear to be contradicted or laughed at. It was about the only subject on which he was touchy. Anyhow, he had recently dug up a peculiar skull, along with some pottery shards, and he claimed that it was a genuine Olmec skull.”

“What’s an Olmec skull?”

“The Olmecs,” Reckton explained, “were an ancient race whose remains are found mostly in the jungle lowlands of Mexico. The word means ‘Rubber-People’. They were the first race known to work rubber and were wonderful carvers of jade a thousand years before the Chinese. They were a small moon-faced people with skull structure of a rather primitive shape. They had a burial custom of severing the head of the deceased and burying it separately in an earthen jar. The skull Barnes found was in a broken Indian jar. He was terribly excited and believed that his find would revolutionize archeological theories. I considered his claims ridiculous, but refrained from laughing at him.”

“But his wife *did* laugh at him?”

“No, no, Mrs. Barnes was much too tactful for that. But they did have an argument on the day of her death which I happened to overhear while I was working in my garden next door. Barnes was declaiming about the importance of his discovery when his wife stopped him. ‘Don’t be a fool, Randall,’ she said. ‘That’s no more an Olmec skull than mine is—’ She seemed about to say more, but Barnes retorted angrily: ‘So you think I’m a fool?’ Mrs. Barnes at once began to back-track and apologize. But Barnes continued to sulk, and the matter was dropped.”

“And that’s all?”

“That’s all,” Rickton said, and swallowed self-consciously.

Sam Greydays let out a roar of laughter. “Well I’ll be damned! If that ain’t like a professor! Thinking a man would kill his wife over an argument like that.”

Rickton turned white and glowered at him. “Of course you’re much too clever, Greydays,” he flared. “The way you let that half-witted little brother-in-law of yours make a fool of you proves that!”

Greydays went on chuckling. “Oh, I’ll admit Willy made a sap of me when he collected his own ransom. But Willy was a caution—slick as a greased pig.”

“Slick?” Rickton asked with disgust. “Don’t tell me anything about Willy Hassell. I tried for two years to din common arithmetic into his thick head. A lazy little degenerate with the brain of an ape!”

“Ho, ho,” Greydays laughed again. “You can’t hurt my feelings talking about Willy. But don’t let my wife hear you. She always has been nuts about that little monkey. He’s the apple of her eye—”

He broke off because the door to the inner office was opening. Minnie Greydays came out. Behind her Walton stood scowling.

“Next,” he said like a barber forced to work during a big-league game.

Vane nodded to Sam Greydays. “If you don’t mind—”

“Sure.” Greydays got up. “Didn’t hurt you, huh, Minnie?”

Minnie giggled. “It seemed a little silly really.” She looked about the room nervously. “Mr. Barnes hasn’t come?” she asked. She turned to her husband. “I believe I’ll go down and wait in the car, Sam. Mr. Barnes may be bitter about my testimony. I’d rather not meet him.”

“Go ahead,” Greydays replied, shrugging. He went past Walton into the inner office. Jill Winter showed Minnie Greydays out. When the door had closed, Professor Rickton leaned confidentially toward Vane.

“I’m glad the subject of Willy Hassell came up,” he said in a guarded tone. “I couldn’t say it before them, but Willy Hassell is a little

monster, a moronic throw-back to cave days, a congenital liar and thief. He once stole a valuable article from me, a string of Olmec jade beads."

"Really? A product of those same Olmecs to whom Barnes believed his skull belonged?"

"Yes. Only I found my beads in Mexico."

"And Olmec jade is rather valuable, isn't it?"

"Rather," Rickton said. "Of course I can't swear Willy stole them. But he worked for me on excavations, was around my house a great deal, and must have learned the combination to my wall safe. And since he was utterly without moral inhibitions—"

He went on rather bitterly about Willy's perfidies until the door opened again and Greydays came out. "Didn't take me long," he boomed. "Well, if that's all you want, Mr. Vane, I'll go down and join Minnie. She seems afraid that Barnes will bite her."

HE LEFT and Professor Rickton went in to take his test. Vane looked at the clock and frowned. "I can't understand why Barnes hasn't come—" He stopped suddenly, snapping his fingers. "Damn! I forgot all about Carr down there in the filing room!"

"As I expected you to," said a voice from the doorway. Inspector Carr stepped in. "I came up here just as the Greydays woman was coming out. She looked scared. Did you beat her? And the big fellow almost caught me at the keyhole just now. Well?"

"Rickton is taking his test," Vane said. He told of his interview with the three people, part of which Carr had heard.

Rickton came out presently, looking rather bewildered. "Frankly, Mr. Vane, that word list seemed rather pointless. However, you know your business. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Not tonight," Vane said and thanked him. When he had gone, the criminologist looked at the clock again. "What the devil can be keeping Barnes?"

"If you weren't too smart to consult the police," Carr said smugly, "you might find out. Barnes has arrived."

"What do you mean?" Vane snapped.

"He's down in the waiting room of your clipping bureau. He evidently saw the Vane Clipping Service listing on the directory and didn't notice that your office was on the floor above it."

"And Walton took him for a customer!"

"Probably. Anyhow I spied on Barnes through a keyhole. The man's nervous, keeps clutching his coat pocket and going to the door to look out every few minutes."

"And yet you went off and left him?"

"Oh, it's probably the police he's afraid of," Carr said casually.

Just then Walton emerged from the inner office carrying the four envelopes. "Since Barnes isn't coming," he whined, "I wish you'd let me go, B. W."

"Barnes is here!" Vane stormed. "He's the man you thought was a customer. Go down and bring him up here at once."

Walton went out sulkily and Vane paced the floor, still fuming. He jerked up short as the telephone jingled. Jill answered it.

The excited voice of Walton shrilled for all to hear. "B. W., come down here! The man's dead!"

They raced in wordless consternation along the corridor and down the stairs. The door lettered *Vane Clipping Service* was open. An arm and a pale clenched hand protruded from it, lying on the dun-colored carpet of the hall. The rest of the body was lying just inside the door.

The man who was supposed to have beaten his wife to death looked strangely harmless now, his thin body huddled limp as a rag doll under the threadbare suit. A mask of blood hid the deeply etched lines of his face. His skull had been crushed by repeated blows.

Vane bent and noted that the body was still warm, the blood only partially coagulated. Carefully, he opened the clenched fingers and with the point of a pencil lifted a small object from the dead palm. It was a little polished disc with a perforation in its center.

"What is it?" Carr asked hoarsely.

"I don't know," Vane said, "but my guess is that it's an Olmec jade bead."

Stepping gingerly over the body, Carr made for the telephone and called Headquarters. He turned away, patting his moist forehead and sank down on the divan. "The papers will crucify me for this, B. W.! Randall Barnes murdered right under my nose! And I'll bet one of those people you had up there did it."

"It's possible," Vane agreed. "And if so, the same person probably killed Florence Barnes last year. But brace up. I laid traps for all of them in these word lists. Maybe the answer is right here in my hands."

He brought out the four envelopes, extracted the folded sheets and began to examine them. The first was Minnie Greydays' list, with her timed responses attached. A slow smile replaced Vane's thoughtful scowl. "Yes, that woman lied, I'm fairly certain now . . ."

He glanced quickly at the other sheets. Bewilderment gave way to anger, and his glance flashed up to impale Walton like a bug on a needle. "You abysmal idiot! No wonder Rickton thought his word list pointless! You got them mixed up and gave the men the wrong tests! You gave Rickton's test to Greydays and Greydays' to Rickton!" He crushed the papers in his fist and hurled them to the floor.

Walton stood quivering, either with fright or sullen revenge. "I—I was nervous," he stammered. "I hadn't had my dinner . . . I was hungry and I—"

"Get out!" Vane roared. "Get out and eat. Eat heartily, eat brain food! . . . No, that would be a waste of time. Eat hay!"

Walton scurried away and Vane slumped down beside Carr, making the picture of dejection a double exposure. Only Jill Winter retained her calm. Quietly, she began picking up the wadded paper Vane had thrown to the floor. "Keep your shirt on," she admonished. "You've still got a victim—that shrinking little Greydays woman."

Vane came to life. "Why, so I have," he agreed.

"You caught her in a lie," Jill went on, "so maybe you and the police can third-degree a confession from her."

Vane looked up. "You're a complete cynic, Miss Winter."

"I got that way working around you," Jill replied as she swished from the room.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Little Black Lies

THERE was presently the usual bustle of men in blue, men in plainclothes, men with pencils, with cameras, with dusting powder, and men simply with cigars. Inspector Carr endured the ordeal of his colleagues' pitying glances until the significant facts were on record. Then he and Vane retreated to the latter's office where Carr gratefully accepted a double shot of bourbon and found stamina to speak.

"It adds up to one of your guests all right," he said, "but that doesn't get us very far. They left separately, in a deserted building, with the elevator service off, at intervals too closely spaced for us to determine medically which one went down at the time Barnes died. Any one of them *may* have seen Barnes looking from the door, which was visible from the stair landing all had to pass. On the other hand, there's no way of proving that any of them *did* see him, either before or after his death. That hand thrust out from the door could have gone unnoticed from the stair landing."

"But he was killed in much the same manner as his wife," Vane said, "and probably with the same sort of instrument. The fact that he had offered to produce new evidence about his wife's killer practically ties it in with that crime. And the Olmec bead he was clutching may or may not be that evidence. At any rate, I'm sure of one thing—Minnie Greydays lied at his trial."

He had her word list and its timed responses spread out upon his desk and Carr now moved over to look at it. Vane said: "Most of the words in these tests, as you know, are *indifferent* words, of no significance. Scattered among them are the *critical* words—the traps. Here are four words with responses I consider enlightening."

They both pored over the sheet on Vane's desk on which appeared three neat columns, concentrating their attention on four heavily underscored words.

Word called:	Response:	Time for Response:
<i>Telephone</i>	Operator	3 sec.
<i>Perjury</i>	Sacrifice	3 sec.
<i>Beard</i>	Sideshow	1 sec.
<i>Eight-ten</i>	Florence Barnes	1 sec.

Carr studied the list and shook his head. "Well, she hedged on the words that suggested her testimony. But why is anybody's guess."

"Oh, it's a guessing game," Vane admitted. "The payoff isn't in this." He tapped the sheet. "The payoff depends on how the subject reacts to the guesses I make from this. Suppose you see if your men have brought those people in yet, and if so, have the Greydays woman sent up here first."

Carr got busy on the telephone. When he hung up, he said: "They're all here. All deny having seen Barnes at any time tonight. None will admit even noticing that the door down there was open. The woman is on her way up."

Minnie Greydays was a pathetic figure as the big patrolman herded her into the room. Her face in the shadow of her inky hair was wafer-white, and she stood with her body slightly huddled, like the fabled maiden on the rock, waiting for the dragon to appear. Jill Winter led her gently to a chair and gave Vane a glance as frigid as her name.

Vane made no effort to put the woman at her ease now. When he spoke it was in a metallic monotone, as emotionless as the clicking of an adding machine.

"Mrs. Greydays," he said, "you have done a grave injury to a man who is now lying dead."

The woman's dry lips parted and she drew a sibilant breath. "I didn't kill him, I didn't, I didn't!" she sobbed.

"You almost killed him last year," Vane interrupted, "when you told a jury that at eight-ten on the night of his wife's murder you saw a man who resembled him—except that he was wearing a beard—come out of the telephone booth across from your home. I suggest, Mrs. Greydays, that you were lying."

The woman gave him a frightened glance, caught her breath and looked down at her fingers. They were tangled and twisted in her lap like naile roots clawing for a lifehold.



Vane resumed: "When the word *telephone* was read to you, why did you wait three full seconds and then answer *operator*?"

"Well," the woman said weakly, "telephone suggests *operator*."

"Not to you, Mrs. Greysdays," Vane said, shaking his head, "with the Barnes murder fresh in your mind. The fact that you took three seconds to dispel the associations that rushed to your mind and choose a commonplace answer, was a dead give-away. You aren't a good liar, despite your success last year. Some powerful compulsion must have kept you steady then. Which brings us to a word still more touchy—the word *perjury*. Can you explain why, after another three seconds' hesitation, you responded to that with *sacrifice*?"

He waited. But the woman only stared with a dumb fixity at her tangled fingers.

"Then I'll try to explain," he offered. "You knew you were on trial as to your testimony. The word *perjury* could only have brought to your frightened mind the thoughts of guilt and penalties. But you fought off those associations, at the same time trying to justify what you had done. And all the while your hesitancy was becoming more noticeable, so that when you blurted out *sacrifice*, it was a give-away after all. It was your secret justification for what you had done. You made a sacrifice to shield someone, didn't you?"

THE woman lifted her suffering face with an effort. "No, no . . . And I never said the person in the phone booth was Barnes. I only said it *might* have been. It was almost dark, I couldn't see clearly."

"I suggest," said Vane, "that you did see clearly—too clearly—and that was the reason you deliberately lied to muddy the water with your confusing story. Let's pass on now to the critical word, *beard*. You said you saw a man in a beard—you implied it might have been false—who resembled Barnes. Yet when the word was read to you tonight, you hesitated only a second and answered *sideshow*. Why did you choose that particular and surprising response?"

"I—I don't know . . . It just slipped out . . ."

"I think you're telling the truth now. It was a subconscious slip. And it seemed so far from the associations you were trying to avoid that you felt safe about it. But I believe there is a definite association in your mind between *beard* and *sideshow*. What is it?"

"I tell you I don't know," the woman whimpered. "I admit that *beard* did suggest my testimony, that I was trying to avoid that, but I don't know why that word came out."

Vane slowly lit a cigarette. "Then let's dig," he invited. "What does one see in *sideshow*s, Mrs. Greysdays?"

The woman held her breath, staring at him in wide-eyed alarm. "Well," she began haltingly, "one sees glass-eaters and living skeletons, wild men from Borneo and two-headed calves—" She stopped.

Vane waited. Then: "But why are you leaving out bearded ladies?" he asked.

Minnie Greysdays stiffened with a cry, her hands clutched the arms of her chair. "They're just fakes," she babbled helplessly.

"So was your story, Mrs. Greysdays, which partially accounts for the subconscious association. For my part, I never could swallow that false beard business. It was gilding the lily. You saw someone all right—but not wearing a beard. Not even a man. I think you saw a woman. It's congenital with a certain type of liar to over-elaborate. To hide the fact that you saw a woman it is not enough to say it was a man. You must add that property-room beard. And the beard served a second purpose, suggested another person besides Barnes. It suggested Professor Rickton. You did not actually want to convict Barnes. You only wanted to confuse. And you wanted to confuse because you were shielding someone."

The woman sank back in her chair sobbing. "Yes, yes, I lied. But Barnes wasn't convicted. If he had been, I'd have confessed to save him."

"But whom were you trying to shield, Mrs. Greysdays?"

The woman collected herself, faced him in stubborn silence.

"Your husband?"

"No, no . . . oh, no."

Her look of surprise, almost of relief was so genuine that Vane immediately shifted his attack. "Then who was the woman who made the call?"

Minnie Greysdays' jaw was set tight.

"Very well. Let's glance at your response to the words *eight-ten*. That was the time of the fatal call. To that you answered quickly—*Florence Barnes*. That seemed safe enough. Most people would naturally have associated the murdered woman with the time of that call. But you were the one person who should have thought of someone else in that connection. You should have thought of Randall Barnes, the man you said you saw at that time. You didn't. You thought of Florence. And I am going to suggest that you did so for the simple reason that it was Florence Barnes herself who made that call which lured her husband away."

The effect of that statement, bursting like an atomic bomb on the painful silence, left Minnie Greysdays less shaken than the others. Carr almost jumped from his chair and Jill let out a gasp. But the tension drained from Minnie Greysdays' body. Her small pale face registered resignation and relief.

"Yes," she breathed, "yes, it was Florence Barnes. I didn't know who she called or why. I happened to see her from my yard, and then she saw me. She was embarrassed. She came over and laughed nervously and asked me not to tell anyone I had seen her there."

"That's all she said?"

"No, she stood and talked a few minutes, trying to pass it off casually, trying to get my mind on other things."

"What other things?"

"Oh, Willy—" her voice choked off and naked terror shone in her eyes again. "I mean," she hurried on, "people could always get me started by talking about Willy. Most people said harsh things but she said nice things, said Willy wasn't as bad as he was painted and that she wouldn't be surprised if we heard from Willy soon—" Again she stopped with a sudden constricting of throat muscles and looked at the floor.

Carr, who had been hanging on her words like a fish on the end of a tight line, slid forward to the edge of his chair.

"Mrs. Greydays, do you realize that if you had told us that you saw Mrs. Barnes after her husband left home he would never have been brought to trial, and would probably not be lying dead now? Do you expect us to believe that you put that man's life in jeopardy just because Mrs. Barnes asked you not to mention a phone call which, for all you knew, may have been a perfectly innocent matter?"

Minnie Greydays' face was quivering now. "I've told you all I know," she cried hysterically. "I won't say any more even if you beat me with a rubber hose!"

"Oh, honey, they won't do that!" Jill Winter swooped toward her like a hen toward a hawk-threatened chick. She put an arm around her and faced Carr defiantly. "Leave her alone. Can't you see she's at the end of her rope?"

"She ought to be at the end of a rope," Carr growled.

But Vane's voice snapped curtly: "That's all, Mrs. Greydays." He gestured to the waiting cop. "Take her out, Officer."

**T**HE cop, too startled to hesitate, helped the fainting woman from the room. When the door had closed, Carr turned on Vane with a snarl. "Who do you think you are anyhow? Dismissing my witness just when she's ready to crack and admit who she's shielding!"

"Oh, she told us," Vane said.

"Don't be subtle! You mean the sea-lion husband?"

Vane lighted a cigarette, said wearily: "No, no. Tell the man, Jill. Draw him a picture."

"The picture I draw," said Jill, "is that of a tormented woman being badgered by bullies. A woman." she added poetically. "who looks

like a suffering madonna in some old Italian painting—"

"Suffering cats!" Carr exploded. "The woman's no madonna. She's a fanatic—the most baffling and unpredictable type of killer in circulation. She almost swore a man's life away last year, and tonight she may actually have murdered him. And if she didn't lie to shield her husband, then she's lying to shield herself."

"Oh, you haven't exhausted the list," Vane said gently. "She has a brother, remember? A certain degenerate little savage, called Wild Willy Hassell. He pulled a fastie on his family and did a fade-out about a year before Florence Barnes was killed. Didn't you see the woman nearly go into a fit after she'd let it slip that Florence Barnes told her she might hear from Willy soon?"

Carr's anger cooled and his gray eyes shot a glance of grudging admiration at Vane. "B. W.," he said softly, almost reverently, "maybe you've got something . . . Gosh!"

He went into a huddle with himself and emerged, picking his way with care.

"In other words, suppose Willy Hassell spent the two thousand he gypped from his old man. Suppose, a year later, he came back to his old haunts to get more. Willy's the very type who might have murdered that woman for a measly twenty dollars—and left us all groping wildly for some motive fit for an adult killer."

Jill Winter, who had brother trouble herself, looked keenly at Vane. "B. W., you don't think that poor little half-wit killed that woman?"

"Miss Winter, you think with your heart," Vane said. "Besides, I don't know that Willy is a half-wit. He made two thousand dollars pretty easily, didn't he? And I'm not saying he killed Florence Barnes—or that he didn't. But it's pretty obvious to me that Minnie Greydays thought Willy might have come back, and was certain that people would say he was the killer. Also, Mrs. Barnes may have said more about Willy's expected return than Minnie has admitted—enough to make her almost lie a man's life away for fear of admitting she even saw Florence Barnes at all. Which suggests that Mrs. Barnes may have told Minnie the phone call concerned Willy."

"Sure," Carr agreed. "And another thing. There's that Olmec jade bead in Barnes' dead hand tonight. Didn't Professor Rickton say that Willy stole a string of such beads from him?"

"He did," Vane replied. "But there's still so much we don't know. Why did Mrs. Barnes go to the dentist on the day of her death? And was Willy Hassell well acquainted with the murdered woman? Maybe Sam Greydays can help us on that."

The whale-shaped Greydays came in like a March wind. His fat jaws glowed and quivered and the wind from his laboring diaphragm rattled the papers on Vane's desk.

"Hey," he blustered, "you bullies can't treat my wife like that. I won't stand for it!"

"Sit down then," Vane said curtly. "Your wife has just confessed to perjury. She did it to shield someone from suspicion in the killing of Florence Barnes. And since there are only a few people she would have lied for—"

"Hey"—the bluster was somewhat weaker now—"hey, you don't mean you think that I—"

Vane said carelessly: "You may have for all I know. You're a butcher, I understand. Maybe you're in the habit of beating steers over the head—"

Greydays hit the chair with a jolt. The typhoon dwindled to an asthmatic wheeze. "Hey, you're nuts! I never even knew Barnes was here tonight. As for Florence—Good grief! Why should I—"

"Why should anybody? Tell me this—was Florence Barnes well acquainted with your remarkable young brother-in-law?"

Greydays' shrewd pause proved that his head was not as fat as his body. "Willy, huh? Why, everybody knew Willy, of course. He was a character out there in Ridgemont. Most people wrote him off as a little savage, which of course he was. But the fact is, Mrs. Barnes seemed to like him. And Willy liked her. He'd run errands for her and she'd give him pocket money and doctor his cuts and bruises."

"In other words," Vane said, "she mothered this black sheep. And if, for instance, Willy had come back to Ridgemont a year after he left, with his patrimony—if we may call it that—squandered, might Willy have appealed to Mrs. Barnes for help, going to her even before he went to your wife?"

"Well," Greydays considered, "Willy knows Minnie would have taken him in no matter what he'd done. But he knows I wouldn't. So, yeah, he might've gone to Mrs. Barnes. Only"—he paused—"if I get what you're driving at, well, it don't seem likely that Willy would have killed her—or does it?"

"He may have asked for help or money and she may have refused him. You've said he was a little savage."

"Everybody said so," Greydays admitted. "Only it's sort of a nasty idea. But if Minnie lied she must've done it on account of Willy. There's nobody else she'd do it for. I hope you'll go easy on Minnie. She's sorta delicate, and she's got an insane affection for that little brute."

Vane stared at the ceiling. "Yes, perhaps affection is a form of insanity," he said drily.

They let Greydays go, wagging his head worriedly. The room filled with a cold and speculative silence behind him.

CARR broke the spell. He said: "I think you've hit the jackpot, Bad-Weather. I hear the distant rattle of the pay-off. How sad life is." He sighed, not entirely facetiously. "For twenty dollars a half-wit kills a woman who's befriended him. A neurotic sister almost lies a man into a gas chamber to save the half-wit. Finally the accused man finds a jade bead, one of a string the half-wit had stolen, and connects it with the murder. Maybe the half-wit dropped it when he killed the woman. Anyhow the man comes forward with this evidence only to be met by the neurotic sister, who learns what he's up to and murders him."

"Omitting," Vane murmured, "the possibility that Willy himself may have followed Barnes here tonight and killed him."

"Sure, that's possible, providing he was warned by his sister that Barnes had some evidence. But that would mean she's got Willy hidden out somewhere now—maybe in those hills."

"Well, they say Willy was always at home there," Vane mused. "Willy, the cave-creature, the hillman, distrusted by the dwellers in the valley."

"You guys make me sick," Jill Winter suddenly interrupted. "Trying to pin two beastly murders on a weak-minded boy and the poor scared girl who reared him from the cradle."

"Oh, did she?" Vane turned to her. "You appear well-informed on the Hassell family, Miss Winter."

"Maybe you'd be, too, if you stayed at home and read the clippings in your bureau. I went down there today and boned up on the sob stories that came out after Willy faked his kidnaping. Willy's mother died when he was born and Minnie reared him—took a viper to her bosom'—is the quaint phrase the sob-sister used. They made Willy seem like a cross between Jack-the-Ripper and a sea-serpent. All the stuff was re-hashed again some months later when Old Man Hassell died, grieving over his son, they said." She sniffed. "If anybody died of grief, it should have been Minnie. She's one of the bureau's customers, by the way, though she didn't mention it tonight."

"Really? Does she collect clippings about brutal crimes committed by adolescent sea-serpents?"

"No. She wants items about boys picked up suffering from amnesia. That and advertisements, ones that she's inserted in papers all over the country. They're all the same. They read: WILLY COME HOME. ALL IS FORGIVEN—MINNIE."

There was a moment's silence. Then Vane

asked: "And are these ads still appearing?"

Jill nodded. Vane looked at Carr, who said: "What of it? Maybe she doesn't know where he is. Maybe she didn't *know* last year when Florence Barnes was murdered. But she suspected. And she was ready to murder a man with a lie then, to shield Willy. So why couldn't she have murdered him tonight—with a sharpening steel?"

"I haven't said she didn't."

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think I'd like to talk to Professor Rickton about Olmec jade."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### More Skull-dugger

THE slight, bearded professor was nervous. But he had himself in hand. The expression on his shallow face, the bearing of his erect, thin-shouldered frame, suggested something brittle but extremely resistant. "What a wretched business," he remarked, sighed and sat down.

"Oh, yes," Vane agreed. "Did you know that Minnie Greydays has admitted she perjured herself about Randall Barnes last year, and that the person she saw in the phone booth was really Florence?"

"No!" Rickton almost dropped the cigar he had been nursing. "Is it possible?" He frowned, then tongued his lips with the lizard-quick eagerness of a man with a theory spoiling to be aired. "But, Mr. Vane, hasn't it occurred to you, as a psychologist, that Minnie Greydays is a neurotic who is perhaps incapable of telling the truth? To be blunt, there is a streak of weak-mindedness in that whole Hassell tribe. The mother, who died at Willy's birth, was a nervous invalid. Minnie reared the little brute who, as we know, is a dangerous cretin. And even old Hassell, the father, was to say the least, eccentric."

"In what respect?"

"Well, he was quite a wealthy man, but unbelievably stingy. He whined a great deal about raising two thousand dollars of ransom money which Willy got, yet it cannot have taxed him greatly. Even his attitude toward Willy was a contradiction. In spite of the fact that the boy was patently a mental defective, old Hassell always made a pretense that Willy was perfectly normal, always spoke of how Willy would some day take over his thriving grocery business and seemed quite devoted to him. Yet, on the other hand, the old man begrudged him the expense of treatments which might have greatly benefited Willy."

"What sort of treatments?" Vane asked quickly.

"Well," Rickton said, "you know that nervous troubles, even epilepsy, are some-

times traced to bad teeth which create a pressure on the brain."

"And Willy had tooth trouble?"

"Oh, yes, he had a crooked jaw tooth he often complained of—"

He stopped, startled, as Carr's hand clapped suddenly against the desk top and the inspector turned on Vane. "Bad-Weather," he demanded, "did you know that was coming?"

"What?" Vane asked innocently.

"Don't sit there like the cat that swallowed the canary. You know what I mean. The dentist! That dentist you've been harping on, the one Mrs. Barnes visited on the day of her death. Of course there was nothing wrong with her teeth. It wasn't her own teeth she wanted to get treated!"

He faced Rickton again with the air of a man who has caught his third ace. "Look here, Professor. Suppose that last year Willy Hassell drifted back to Ridgemont—broke. He was, we'll say, afraid to go to his sister because of Sam Greydays' hostility. But Mrs. Barnes had befriended him in the past. Now if he had appealed to her do you think she would have tried to help him?"

Rickton hesitated, exploring the dawn of an inner light. "Why, I hardly know . . . Randall Barnes would certainly not have approved."

"Of course he wouldn't have!" Carr fairly glowed. "That's the point! That's why Florence Barnes had to lure her husband away from home with that telephone call. And if Willy had played on her sympathy by saying, for instance, that his bad tooth was tormenting him, it would explain why Mrs. Barnes tried to see the dentist—to get him to treat Willy secretly. But she failed in that. And fearing that her husband would turn Willy over to the police, she got rid of him so she could try to treat the tooth herself. She was too clever to make that phone call from her own house, because there's no dial system out there and an operator might have overheard. Then, when Minnie saw her, she tried to silence her by saying she'd have some news of Willy soon—"

"And then," Rickton said slowly, "she took Willy in and the little beast murdered her for the paltry contents of that cash box! Horrible! But plausible. Perfectly in keeping with his character." He turned to include Vane in his glance, as he finished. "An amazing piece of deduction. Yes, I subscribe completely to your theory."

"Oh, it's not mine," Vane said, shifting his long legs. "I haven't any theory—yet. I want more facts."

"Then I will give you a fact that has just occurred to me," Rickton volunteered. "Willy Hassell lurked about in those hills after he

pulled his kidnap hoax and had supposedly escaped. Undoubtedly he had some cave hide-out and stayed there, laughing at the police who were searching trains and highways for him. I know that a couple of nights after he had collected the money, I was strolling near my home and saw the glow of a campfire in the hills. I'm sure it was Willy's, and though I did not report it—"

"You should have," Carr reproved, but in a forgiving tone. "We'll overlook that now, however. The pieces of our puzzle are falling into place. Now I have another item—" He turned to Vane's desk and picked up a small labeled envelope. From this he spilled into his hand a small polished disc which he thrust suddenly under Rickton's nose.

"Ever see that before, Professor?"

**R**ICKTON bounced forward as if a charge of electricity had jolted him. He whipped out his pince-nez, clipped them to the bony saddle of his nose, and stared. "Why, sir, that looks like one of the Olmec jade beads which Willy Hassell stole from me. Where did you get it?"

"Out of Barnes' dead hand," Carr said with triumph.

"Really? But how could Barnes have got my beads?" Rickton paused thoughtfully. "Ah, I have it! Barnes had promised to bring some new evidence here tonight, hadn't he? Well, the beads must have been that evidence. My guess is that Willy brought my beads to Florence Barnes last year and tried to sell them to her. When she refused to buy them, he killed her and stole the twenty dollars. But in his excitement he must have left the beads. The police overlooked them because the Barnes house was full of Indian artifacts. But when Barnes found them later, it set him to thinking. He connected the beads with Willy and—"

Rickton stopped like a man whose enthusiasm has carried him too far. Vane's voice edged in suddenly like a probing blade.

"Did Barnes know that Willy had stolen the beads from you?"

Rickton paled. "Why—why as to that I cannot be sure. . ."

"There are so many things you can't be sure about," Vane complained mildly. "Had you told Barnes that Willy stole them?"

"Well, no—" Rickton was becoming confused.

Vane drove his point home like a hypodermic needle. "In that case, Barnes would have been more likely to connect the beads with you!"

Rickton rose from his chair in horrified protest. "No, no, he wouldn't have! He didn't know I had the beads either. . ."

Vane smiled, relaxed, like a matador who

realizes before the bull does that the sword has found its target. "Didn't he now?" he asked. "Barnes was a friend of yours, a fellow-archeologist interested in the Olmecs. Yet you didn't tell him of this important find?" His tone became crisp. "How much were those beads worth, Professor?"

Rickton wilted. He seemed to be licking acid from his lips now. In the voice of a man confiding a shameful secret, he said: "Olmec jade beads have sold for as much as four hundred dollars apiece. My string contained forty. That would have amounted to sixteen thousand dollars."

"Sixteen thousand dollars!" Carr came alive. "Why that's a respectable murder motive itself!"

Rickton's face was wrenched by an inner struggle. "Gentlemen," he gasped, "since you must badger it out of me, I'll tell you why I concealed my possession of the beads. I was not sure they were mine."

"You got them from some shady source?" Carr probed.

"No, no, I found them in Mexico, as I said, but it was while on an expedition financed by the academy where I teach. Technically the academy would have a claim on them. But, sirs"—he lifted his eyes appealingly—"I have been teaching all my life for a pittance. I could not bear to give up those beads. Can you blame me?"

"Not so much for that," Vane said. "But you were rather indecently eager to make a point against the monstrous Willy. He may be guilty, of course. But we don't know that he left the beads at the Barnes house. Barnes may have got them in any number of ways."

"For example?"

"Well," Vane said, "I've never understood why Barnes was so fanatically sure the skull he found was an Olmec's merely on the basis of its shape and the fact that it was found in an Indian jar. But if he had found some genuine Olmec beads with it, or near it, his conviction would be explained. He may have concealed his possession of the beads for the same reason you did—because they were so valuable."

"You mean that after stealing my beads Willy may have buried them again?" Rickton asked. "And Barnes later dug them up?"

"It's possible. What happened to the famous skull, by the way?"

"I don't know," Rickton said. "Barnes said he threw his whole collection away after the trial. He said it recalled his previous life too painfully. I think he threw the stuff in an old dump pile out there in the hills."

"I'd like to find it." Vane turned to Carr. "Why don't we go and look for it? Professor Rickton and Greydays can act as guides."

"You mean tonight?" Carr asked.

"Why not? If Willy Hassell really is hiding out there it would give you a good chance to surprise the beast while he sleeps."

Carr agreed dubiously. Rickton said: "Then perhaps you'll permit me to go home and put on my hiking boots?"

"Oh, your shoes won't be hurt," Vane assured him. "You can wait for us down below. We'll be ready in a jiffy."

After Rickton had gone out, Carr asked: "Why not let the old codger get his boots—his umbrella, too, if he wants it?"

"I'd rather he wouldn't putter about at home too much," Vane said. "I can't help wondering why he always spoke of *beads*—in the plural. We only found one bead in Barnes' hand. How did he know that Barnes had all the beads? We didn't."

"Do we know it now?"

"Rickton, at least, never seemed to doubt it," Vane said. "I'm afraid friend Rickton is a slippery eel. But then," he added, "Sam Greysdays is not the blunt simpleton he pretends to be, either. And Minnie certainly can't be called forthright. While we're on that subject, Carr, I think we've got all we can get out of that woman by pressure. My suggestion is that you let her go home. But put a guard on the house and let Miss Winter go and stay with her."

"I'll take that job," Jill said readily. "But I won't be a stoolpigeon and pump her for you, if that's what you expect."

"You probably won't have to," Vane replied, a twinkle in his eye. "Your well-known sympathy will melt her so that she'll probably force a confession on you. Then you'll have to tell or be an accessory to her crime."

"Being an accessory to crimes is old stuff to me," Jill retorted airily.

Instead of smiling at that, Vane frowned.

**T**HE hills beyond Ridgemont were old, low, crumbling ridges, veined with gullies, pitted with caves, spottily wooded with cedars and thorny brush.

The party, composed of Vane, Inspector Carr, a thick-set detective named Swope, and guided by Rickton and Greysdays, drove down Ridgemont Avenue past Rickton's home with the dark and ominous Barnes house beside it, and followed a weed-grown road that branched off toward a gravel quarry. Presently they left the car and went on afoot, following two half obliterated wheel ruts which led up to an old dump ground and the Indian caves above it.

The atmosphere was distinctly eerie and grew more so as they climbed. A surf of dirty clouds kept scudding past the moon, alternately darkening the sky and revealing again in wan flashes a landscape that must have changed little since cliff-dwelling In-

dians had roamed about it. Vane could readily imagine the wild-natured Willy Hassell finding in this eldritch region a home for his restless spirit.

"Willy was a creature born out of his time—like the last of the dinosaurs," Professor Rickton muttered learnedly as they filed along in the darkness. "I never visit these hills without feeling that Willy is slinking along like a shadow at my heels."

"Probably because he did that very thing," Sam Greysdays boomed. "Willy could move like a panther. He stalked me the night I came out here with the kidnap money. I should've guessed that real kidnapers would have asked for more money than a measly two thousand, but I didn't. You could've flattened me with a feather when Willy stepped out from behind some junk at that old dump pile and shoved the gun in my belly."

"That place is near here?" Vane asked.

"Yeah, up ahead a bit. And just above it are the Indian caves where Willy used to hide out."

They climbed on in silence until dark bluffs began to tower on their right and the road began to crumble away. Detective Swope, carrying the electric lantern, now sprayed its white beam on a deep gully where the gutted skeletons of old cars presided over a graveyard of rusted and decaying rubble. More of the stuff lay on the other side of the road, too, at the base of the cliff, and it was here that Vane spied what appeared to be the ashes of an old campfire surrounded by battered pots and pans and a rusted tub.

"Could this have been the campfire you saw?" he asked Rickton.

The professor sighted back across the dark valley and nodded. "I think so. It wouldn't have been visible from town, but I could have seen it from where I was walking. I thought at once of that little apeman crouching here in its glow."

"But the apeman appears to have cooked his food," Vane said. He had stooped to examine a greasy residue in the old tub. "This is an old fire. If he's hiding out here now, he's doing his cooking somewhere else."

"Maybe in the caves up there," Rickton pointed and Swope swung the lantern's beam against the bluffs. A ledge leaned out and the black splotches of two caves mouths showed above it.

"Suppose," Vane suggested, "that you leave the lantern down here with its beam trained on the caves and all of you go up and hunt for Willy while I stay down here and see if I can find any trace of Randall Barnes' discarded collection."

All agreed readily except Rickton who seemed inclined to linger. The angles of his bony face shone sharp and waxy as he stared

upward with obvious reluctance. "It's absurd," he said uncomfortably, "but that boy always gave me the creeps. He never seemed quite human."

"So I'm beginning to think," Vane agreed. He watched Rickton as the professor squared his meager shoulders resolutely and marched off a few yards behind the others. He continued to stare as the ghostly procession mounted against the bleak cliff walls. Then he stopped, propped the lantern on a rock so that its light shone upward, and began to poke in the ashes of the old fire. The ground beneath was neither rocky nor baked, and the stick with which he was probing went down easily.

Suddenly he paused, with a queer sensation of eyes watching him. He made a backward movement to look up, but his heel hit the lantern, knocking it aside. Instantly the cliffs above him were plunged into blackness. There came a chorus of sharp warning cries and the ominous rattle of loose gravel:

VANE flung himself wildly back into the road as stones pelted around him and a black mass of rocks followed, hurtling down the cliffside to land with a crash almost on the spot where he had been crouching. A part of the boulder broke off and rattled down into the dump pile, but its main bulk remained, with the ashes of the old fire buried under it. The electric lantern was gone.

"Are you hurt, B.W.?" Carr's voice called down. A flashlight lanced the dusty air.

Vane answered that he was not, and climbed up to where the rest of them stood waiting.

"That was a close call for you," Carr said, mopping his brow. "The big boulder had evidently fallen and lodged, just barely balanced, on the ledge. We were all scattered out about it, but after you kicked the lantern over I couldn't see what jarred it loose again."

Professor Rickton was peering at the cave entrances. "A creature as small and quick as Willy Hassell," he said, "could have been hiding behind it, could have shoved it and darted into one of those caves without being seen. But the caves join inside, so if we split up we can catch him if he's in there."

They did so, Carr going with Rickton and Swope while Greydays accompanied Vane. The latter had only matches to guide them through the shadowy cavern, but the flashlight's glare from the other chamber soon became visible through a connecting tunnel. At about its middle the others stopped while Professor Rickton pointed to a slab of rock which leaned against the tunnel wall.

"Evidently the entrance to a coyote's den," the professor was saying, "but a boy of Willy's size could easily crawl into it."

"We can shove that rock away if we all get onto it," Detective Swope said, and presented a burly shoulder.

The others joined him and the rock was soon thrown aside. There was a wider passage behind it. They went in a little breathlessly, single file, Carr in the lead with the light. They entered a small cave, about twelve feet in diameter, which had obviously been the cavern hideout of a boy.

There was a pile of brush like a primitive bed in one corner, and against one wall a slab of rock formed a sort of table. On it lay a slingshot with its thongs half rotted, a homemade boomerang, a crude bow and arrow, a broken pocket knife, some fish hooks, an old top—all the usual nondescript treasure that clutters a boy's pockets.

And dust. Dust and cobwebs covered everything.

Vane stooped and fumbled in a warped cigar box full of junk and brought out a small tarnished gilt picture frame. It contained a faded photograph. As he stared at it, the others came near to look.

The picture showed a little girl of about twelve holding in her lap a child of one or two who was as ugly as a small goblin. But the girl's sad-eyed face wore a look of pathetic pride, and the child's abnormally wide mouth was grinning.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Sam Greydays said. "Minnie has looked everywhere for that little picture. It's her and Willy when they were kids. That little hound would steal anything."

"It was a compulsion with him," Professor Rickton said, "just as it is with a pack-rat. And look at his picture, Vane, the moronic shape of his head, the degenerate face. Now you begin to realize the sort of abnormal monster we are dealing with."

Vane gently wrapped the small gilt frame in a handkerchief and thrust it into his pocket. He turned slightly and eyed the bearded savant with an absent stare. "Yes," he said, "there is a monster involved in this business."

He remained lost in thought while Carr and Swope searched the cave. They found no traces of any recent occupant. The party then went out and started back toward the car. Vane and the inspector lingered behind near the dump pile. Carr asked: "Aren't you going to hunt for that collection of relics Barnes threw away?"

Vane shook his head. "I doubt if he threw them away. But there's something under that old campfire. Suppose you quietly send some men out here to move the boulder and dig beneath it."

Carr's face in the moonlight was puzzled. "So you think the rock was pushed down to cover something up? What?"

"Me, for one thing," Vane replied. He moved on. A moment later he added: "After we drop Rickton off at his house in Ridgemont. I want you to put a man there to watch him at once. Also, I want you to check up on old Hassell's death a few months after Willy's disappearance. Have his doctor interviewed and get a list of his symptoms. We may want an exhumation order."

"Good God! What on earth are you driving at?"

Vane didn't answer. They caught up with the others, got back into the car and returned to Ridgemont. They let Professor Rickton out at his house. But Sam Greydays said he wanted to be dropped off at his grocery market. He hadn't had a chance to go over the day's accounts. They let him out at the big modern market, with its gold-lettered sign and glass-brick front, and then drove to the Greydays house.

It was an unassuming bungalow, buried in shrubbery. A single light shone from the living room. As they went up the walk, a man stepped out of the shadows and muttered with a yawn that everything was quiet. Mrs. Greydays had gone to bed and Miss Winter was in the living room.

They entered quietly without knocking. Jill Winter sat on the divan. There were some papers on a low table in front of her and she had a pencil in her hand. She looked up with annoyance. A finger flew to her lips and she pointed to a door across the hall. "Shhh! Don't wake her. I had to give her a pill to get her to go to sleep."

"But I wanted her to talk," Vane complained. "Instead, you put her to sleep and then sit here working a couple of cross-word puzzles!"

"No, I'm working on those word tests you threw away." She moved so that her shadow shifted and he saw them.

"But they were given to the wrong persons, my girl."

"Any dope," Jill replied, "can learn things from a test given the right person. It takes brains to learn things from a test given the wrong one."

"No doubt of that. What have you learned?"

"Rickton and Greydays are both liars."

"Oh, I knew that. What have you got on them specially?"

"Well, look." Jill fluttered the papers as Vane sat down beside her. "Here's the test you intended for Sam Greydays. You wanted to find out what Sam thought of his wife's testimony. So in one place you put the words *wife* and *identify* right together. But Rickton took the test by mistake. To the word *wife*, he answered *Florence*."

"Natural enough," Vane said. "Rickton

has no wife. The Barnes case was on his mind, being the subject of the test. So he thought of Barnes' murdered wife."

"Sure. But to the word *identify*, he responded *dentist*. His two responses were *Florence* and *dentist*. He said he didn't know why Florence Barnes visited the dentist, but I'll bet he did all along."

Vane frowned thoughtfully. "Could be. But not necessarily. He agreed with the theory that she went to the dentist to get him to treat Willy's tooth. But at the time of the test, he may merely have thought of her mysterious visit—after the word had brought her name to mind. Well, what have you got on Greydays?"

"He also knew something about the dentist business." She shuffled the papers. "He took the test intended for Rickton. In it you put some of the same words you put in the test for Barnes. You thought Rickton might have seen the killer bury the weapon under the rosebush. So you put *bury* and *rosebush* right together. Greydays taking Rickton's test, responded to *bury* with *dead*, which isn't unusual. But on *rosebush* he hesitated two seconds and then said *toothache*! Now if you assume that in mentioning the word *dead* he, too, thought of Florence Barnes, and right after that said *toothache*, then he, too, must know more than he admitted about her visit to the dentist. Anyhow I'd get hold of that dentist if I were you."

Vane's long fingers stroked his chin. He turned to Carr. "I think we should, Inspector." He got up. "And I want to talk to Mrs. Greydays again. Damned convenient for her husband with Old Man Hassell and Willy out of the way. Sam Greydays must net a lot of coin from that grocery business he fell heir to." He walked toward the door across the hall. Jill rose to stop him but he beat her there. He opened the door and snapped on the light.

THE bed was empty. The covers had been thrown back. Curtains fluttered in an open window. Vane stepped in and stood looking at the bed. He stooped down near its head and picked up a small white object. "This, I'm afraid, is the sleeping pill you thought she took."

Carr, who reached the doorway, exploded. "You let her escape—deliberately!" he raged at Jill.

Jill was defiant. "I didn't—but I'm glad!" Carr yelled for the detective on guard and gave him a tongue-lashing while they searched the grounds, and found nothing.

"The woman can't get far," Vane soothed. "Go ahead and send for that dentist. Have them bring him to Rickton's house. We'd better go there at once."



Carr paused only long enough to telephone Headquarters and broadcast an alarm for Minnie Greydays. Then he sent a man to get the dentist Florence Barnes had tried to consult, while, he, Vane and Jill piled into the police car and drove to Rickton's house.

It was a small rock cottage under the shadow of the tall dark murder house. They drove up quietly with lights off and Detective Swope met them at the gate.

"Old Rickton's up to something," he confided in a tense whisper. "Just after I got here, he put the lights out as if he were going to bed. But then, with a little flashlight, he sneaked into his study. He was starting toward his wall safe when something made him suspicious. He may have heard me outside. He snapped off his light and it's been dark in there ever since. I can't see where he's gone—"

"Help! . . . Help!"

The cry cut short Swope's words and sent them racing toward the dark house. There was a crash of breaking glass and the cries ceased.

The front door was locked. Vane broke a window and they climbed in. Snapping on lights, they made their way toward the study.

It was an untidy room, lined with bookcases and crowded with shelves and cabinets of curios and artifacts and bones. Rickton, in a pair of loud-patterned pajamas that jarred incongruously with his scholarly beard, lay in the center of the floor. There was a smear of blood across one cheek. A half of a brick lay beside him. The pane of a window between two bookshelves had been smashed.

Vane bent over the unconscious man. But as he took hold of one of Rickton's hands, the professor suddenly sat upright. His dazed eyes flew instantly to a section of wall where the tarnished disc of a wall safe was visible. Then he turned toward his rescuers.

"What happened? Who did it?" Vane asked.

"Who do you think?" Rickton demanded almost angrily, rubbing his injured face. "Willy Hassell, of course!"

"You see?" Carr shot at Vane. He turned to Swope. "Pick up that boy's trail. After him, man!" He pushed Vane aside and helped Rickton up. "Now . . . let's hear about it."

Rickton slumped into a chair. "I had just gone to bed," he panted, "when I heard a sound. It seemed to come from in here. I got up and crept to the doorway. I saw a head and a pair of shoulders silhouetted in the side window there—"

Vane said: "Detective Swope was watching you."

"Was he?" Rickton started. "But this was not Swope. Swope must have been at another window. This was a small figure, with

narrow shoulders and a cap pulled low over a pallid face. Do you think I don't know Willy Hassell when I see him—that old cap of his with the squirrel-tail sewed to the top?"

He glared at Vane a moment, then went on. "Anyhow, I flung the light on him and he ducked back. I knew I couldn't catch him, so I looked about the room to see if he had been inside. He hadn't, so I put out my light and waited for him to reappear. By the time he did I had a stone hatchet in my hand. I yelled at him, and when he didn't run, I hurled it. I missed, but he hurled in the brick and knocked me out."

"Well, we'll get him," Carr promised, "and Minnie is probably with him. The she-wolf running with the cub—"

Vane's voice intruded gently. "By the way, Professor, was there something in your safe you were afraid Willy might steal?"

Rickton's eyes jerked toward the criminologist, his face dead white. "Eh? My safe? Oh, no, no, just my insurance papers in there, things of that sort. . ."

"I rather thought you were worried about your safe," Vane said, laying a hand on the knob. "It's unlocked! You must have opened it in the dark to investigate. . . ." He began to draw it toward him.

Rickton sprang from his chair like a monkey. "Stop!" he screamed. "You have no right, no warrant—"

His words choked off. He froze, clinging to Vane's arm like a drowning bug to a stick.

The safe door had swung open. From the round hole behind it there grinned a yellowed skull. And piled around the skull, so that the discolored teeth seemed to be trying to chew them, were a number of round stone discs, polished and perforated.

"Thirty-nine pieces of Olmec jade," Vane said softly.

Rickton fainted.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### No Ghoul Like an Old Ghoul

THEY had brought in the dentist, a wiry-haired young man with forearms like a blacksmith, and Sam Greydays, who had returned home to find his wife gone and was now loudly blaming the police for driving her crazy.

The dentist was angry at being dragged from his bed at such an hour and kept repeating like a parrot: "I never treated Florence Barnes' teeth at any time. I don't know why she came to my office on the day of her death. I thought all that was settled at Randall Barnes' trial."

Rickton, fully recovered from his faint, said nothing at all, but sat slumped in his chair, watching Carr count the jade beads, with eyes that were sick and sunken.

Carr finished and said: "Thirty-nine. The bead Barnes had in his dead hand tonight makes forty. You murdered Barnes tonight, Rickton, and got your beads back. But you didn't have time to count them and didn't know that he was clutching the one that will convict you."

Rickton swallowed. His voice came with an effort from between tight-clamped teeth. "I did take the beads, and I was in a hurry and left one—yes. But I didn't kill Barnes. He was dead when I found him there. I noticed one of the beads which had slipped out of his pocket and I then found the others. They were my beads, worth sixteen thousand dollars. Only I couldn't prove they were mine. Barnes was already dead and I didn't want to be mixed up in it, so I just took them and got away as quickly as I could."

"And where did you get the Olmec skull?" Vane asked.

Rickton said resignedly: "Oh, I lied about that, too. I had it all along. Barnes didn't throw his collection away—he gave it all to me. But after he was dead, I couldn't prove that either, and I was afraid to get involved by admitting I had the stuff."

"You've done a lot of lying, by your own admission," Carr said. "You can see how a jury is going to regard that."

"Jury?" Rickton quavered. "No, no, you won't bring me to trial for those murders. By that time you'll have caught Willy Hassell and his mad sister."

"You will stick to that story about Willy attacking you?"

"Story? It's the truth! I saw him!"

Carr turned away with a shrug, looked at Vane. "The beads are the clue to it all, Bad-Weather. Willy Hassell stole Rickton's beads and buried them again. Barnes dug them up in the neighborhood of this old skull, and thought he'd found Olmec remains. But he concealed the beads. Then, at some time or other, Rickton saw them. He may have thought that Barnes had bought them from Willy Hassell, but he couldn't prove they were his own. So he decided that the only way to get them back was to steal them. He cooked up some scheme to get Florence Barnes to lure her husband away from home, and while she had gone to do that, Rickton sneaked in and began to search the Barnes house for the beads. But he couldn't find them and Florence came back and caught him ransacking the place. She may have guessed what he was up to and accused him, and so he killed her."

"Then he tried to frame Barnes, bloodvint

up the poker and all that. But Barnes wasn't convicted, and later Barnes must have got to thinking about the hidden beads. He knew Rickton would know their value and he began to suspect Rickton. So he was bringing the beads to you tonight. But he went to the wrong office and was seen by Rickton as the latter was leaving. Rickton guessed, or learned, what was up, killed Barnes to silence him and took the beads."

He paused, waiting for Vane's reaction. Vane was holding the skull in his hand, staring at it like a modern Hamlet. He ran a long finger into the gap in the line of jaw teeth and said: "You're ignoring the skull. The skull is more important than the beads."

"What? You mean a bigger prize? You mean it's really the skull of a primitive Olmec?"

"No, no," Vane said gently. "I mean it's the skull of a primitive-minded boy called Wild Willy Hassell."

There was a strangled silence for an instant and then Carr gasped: "Good God! This is horrible! You mean Rickton murdered the boy, had already done it to get his beads back? That after Willy faked his kidnaping, Rickton saw a chance to get his beads and the ransom money, too?" He glared at Rickton. "So that's what you did after you saw Willy's campfire out there in the hills?"

Vane said: "No, that fire had another purpose. I think it was used to boil the flesh off the skull."

"And then he re-buried the beads along with the skull?"

"I think that was done," Vane said. "It was the cleverest move in a bold killer's game. It's notorious that the body is hard to dispose of. But this murderer saw a unique advantage in the fact that this is a region of Indian graves. And another advantage in the fact that Willy Hassell had a queerly shaped head, with a low slanting forehead and small brain-case—"

"Like a primitive Olmec!" Carr interjected.

"Of course. So our killer boiled the flesh from the head—probably in that old tub we found out there—and buried the skull in an Indian crockery jar, the beads along with it. The boiling bleached the skull and the chemicals in the earth did the rest of the job of making the skull look old. Then the headless torso—which would be hard to identify—was buried in another place, probably beneath the ashes of the fire, since that's an old trick."

"Right!" Carr said. "My men haven't got that boulder out yet, but they will. And it was because you were digging in the ashes there tonight that Rickton shoved the boulder down. He was able to do it unseen in the brief darkness after you had kicked the light over."

Vane said: "Let's drop back to what happened just before Florence Barnes was murdered. Barnes had dug up the skull and the beads and thought he'd made a discovery of vast archeological importance. But he didn't tell about the beads because the owner of the land might have had a claim on them. So his belief that the skull was an Olmec's seemed even more ridiculous than it actually was.

CARR'S head was nodding now like a pump handle. "Of course, of course. And now Florence Barnes enters the picture. Florence who had nursed Willy's cuts and bruises—"

"And toothaches," Vane said. "Yes." He turned to the dentist. "Did you ever treat Willy Hassell's teeth?"

The dentist frowned. "Yes, there was a crooked tooth that had a hole in it. I once put in a small filling—"

"That hole was what the killer overlooked," Vane said. "We know that the filling must have been lost, otherwise Barnes would have noticed it and his claim would have been absurd. But the shape of the tooth itself, the shape of the skull, and the hole on the tooth, made Florence Barnes suspicious. She had probably put oil of cloves on that tooth of Willy's more than once.

"So she tried to see the dentist, probably pulling out the loose tooth to take with her. But she wasn't able to see him. She made an effort to speak of the matter to her husband, but he got angry at the first hint that his theory was wrong. So she decided to consult someone else, bringing this person in to see the tooth and the skull, too. But she had to get her husband out of the way to keep him from throwing a fit, so she lured him off with that phony call."

"And then Minnie Greydays saw her make it."

"Yes. So Florence tried to pass it off. She asked Minnie not to tell, and bought her silence with the mysterious promise of 'getting news about Willy soon.' Maybe she wanted to prepare Minnie for the shock, too. But Minnie misunderstood and thought Florence meant that Willy, in the flesh, had returned, or soon would. She may even have hinted that her phone call concerned Willy. So Minnie was naturally terrified when she learned of Florence Barnes' murder. She knew Willy would be accused, and to shield him, she invented that absurd story of a bearded man who supposedly resembled Randall Barnes."

"Listen!" Rickton's voice suddenly broke in. "Minnie is crazy—a maniac! And I tell you Willy Hassell is still alive! But if Minnie had followed Florence that night, had seen her with the tooth, maybe telling someone that it was Willy's, then Minnie would

have gone even more berserk and might have killed Florence herself—"

"It's him, not Minnie," Sam Greydays burst out. "I tell you that little monster—"

Vane held up his hand to stop him. "Let's settle this monster business," he said. "The Willy Hassell I've been hearing about certainly is a monster, I'll grant you. One of Webster's definitions of a monster is—a *fabulous animal*. And one meaning of *fabulous* is—*fictionitious*. Tonight I've heard Willy Hassell called a savage, a moron, a cretin, a cannibal, a wolf-cub, and a cross between a sea-serpent and Jack-the-Ripper, to mention a few examples. That, I submit, fills Webster's bill. That Willy is a fabulous animal who never existed at all.

"What did exist, I suspect, was a rather simple-minded lad, with no taste or aptitude for bookish things, but competent enough in the outdoors. A mischievous lad, not always truthful, capable of stealing on occasion, who had a taste for the hills and wanted to be let alone. I suspect, in fact, that Willy's worst crime was in possessing a credulous old father who was set on putting this misfit boy in charge of a thriving grocery business some day, a thing which must have been the last thing Willy himself wanted—"

"Willy! There he is!"

The scream, from Rickton, sliced across Vane's speech and swung all eyes toward the window where the professor was pointing. Beyond its jagged frame of broken glass, something crouched in the vine-shadowed darkness like a hunted thing, like a rat at bay.

A dark suit that blended with the shadows covered the huddled body and a low-pulled cap with a squirrel's tail in its top shaded the pallid blotch of a face, a small face with bared teeth and yellow light gleams crawling in dark eyes.

And then the creature was leaping—not away from the light, but toward it. The long blade of a carving knife flashed. Jill Winter screamed. And amidst the general panic, Sam Greydays was the quickest to move, his big bulk lunging toward the window as he cried: "Willy, Willy, you little fool, stop!"

He cleared the window sill and leaped toward the attacker. There was a tangle, mad, cat-like screams choked off, and B.W. Vane sprang through the window just as a small body fell limply from Greydays' clutches and the big man turned, his eyes bulging in a swollen face, his jaw sagging.

"My God!" his voice quavered. "It ain't Willy! It's Minnie! I didn't recognize her until—"

"Like hell you didn't!" Vane's voice cracked like a whip. There was a stone pestle in his hand now and it smashed against Greydays' face. The big man staggered with a

curse and Vane hit him again. He beat him to his knees and knocked him flat on the ground with a final blow.

Only then did Carr reach the criminologist and grab his arm, yelling: "Hey, you fool, don't kill him! He kept that crazy girl from cutting somebody's throat!"

"His own throat," Vane said. He seemed surprisingly cool. "Minnie caught on, even if you didn't, Carr. My last words told Minnie the truth. If I hadn't beaten Sam Greydays down, just as he beat Florence Barnes and his other victims, he'd have had that gun out of his pocket in another moment, and I wouldn't be here to talk at all."

HE TURNED to where Jill Winter was bending over the body of Minnie Greydays, sobbing: "Get a doctor, you idiots! Don't you understand that she just put on some of Willy's old clothes because they were easier to sneak around in? She followed you because you were hunting Willy, and must have overheard something that made her suspect Rickton. She tried to get into his study and flung the brick at him in a panic when she was discovered. Afterwards she sneaked back and heard the rest of it . . . But she's alive, thank God, and if you'll only get a doctor—"

Minnie had opened her eyes. Greydays hadn't. Carr rose from beside his big bulk. "You're lucky you didn't kill that man," he told Vane. "You'd better talk fast, as it is. Are you claiming that Sam Greydays committed all these murders? Why?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Vane asked. "I said enough for Minnie to catch on. When I mentioned the grocery business which her father had intended to leave to Willy, and which Greydays now has, Minnie understood. Can't you imagine how Sam Greydays felt at the prospect of Willy someday owning the grocery business which he was already managing and had probably helped to build up?"

"And so the whole thing started with Greydays' plot to get rid of Willy Hassell?"

"Of course. Maybe he ribbed Willy into writing that kidnap note. Or maybe he killed Willy first and wrote it himself, asking for only two thousand dollars because that would be about what a kid would ask for. Since it was Sam himself who went out to deliver the ransom, it was a cinch to cook up that story about Willy taking the money away from him. With Willy dead, no wonder he encouraged people to laugh at the way Willy had made a fool of him. Also, Sam had probably heard enough archeological arguments around Ridgemont to get the idea of burying that skull in the Olmec way. But he didn't know enough to realize the value of the beads he buried with it."

"You spoke of exhuming Old Man Hassell's body," Carr said.

"It should be done." Vane looked at Minnie. "Your doctor didn't think your father died of grief over Willy, did he?"

"He said gastro-enteritis," the woman replied in a hushed tone.

"A frequent diagnosis in arsenic poisoning," Vane amplified. "Did the doctor seem thoroughly satisfied about that?"

"No," Minnie said, "I don't think he was. He questioned me a lot—about rat poisons that Sam might have at the store, for one thing. But I wouldn't believe such a thing of Sam, and I guess I lied a little to shield Sam. It was too horrible to think that he—"

"Lying to shield people is a habit you're going to have to stop, Minnie," Vane told her. "But I think you've had your punishment. Tonight at your cottage when I explained about Willy's tooth and then mentioned the grocery business which Sam got control of because Willy and your father were both out of the way, that made it different, didn't it? You hadn't taken that sleeping pill and you heard every word I said?"

"That made it different," Minnie sobbed quietly. "I understood things then. I knew what he had done, and I knew that Willy would never come home, and I was ready to kill him then." She huddled, trembling, in Jill Winter's arms.

"I think," Carr said, "that we've got enough on Greydays, especially if we find poison in old Hassell's body and also dig up Willy Hassell's bones. But"—he looked dubiously at the grinning skull on the table in the room—"I wish we had that tooth that would identify it positively as Willy's skull."

"I think we may find it," Vane said. "After all, it was to get hold of that tooth that Sam Greydays killed Florence Barnes."

"But how did Greydays know Florence had it? How did he know she suspected anything?"

Vane smiled. "Because she told him, of course. She failed to see the dentist, and her husband got mad when she dared question his theory about the skull. So Greydays was the one she would naturally have consulted, since Minnie would have gone into hysterics if the thing had even been suggested to her. Greydays, if you remember, told us he was late for the bowling match that night, detained by his business. That business was keeping a date with Florence Barnes and murdering her."

Carr clucked his tongue. "The woman summoned her own killer."

"Exactly. She also lured her husband away and set the scene for her own death. Greydays came prepared, carrying the sharp-

(Continued on page 94)

# LETHAL LEGACY

By A. BOYD CORRELL

Author of "Death Invites an Audience," etc.



"The racket's too dirty," I said,  
and shot him in the belly.

*When a private eye unexpectedly inherits a big night club, naturally he investigates. But if Steve had known that murder, big-time scandal and a powerful dope-ring were involved in the legacy, his gift-horse could have been toothless for all he cared.*

I HAD arrived late at the office. Anita, my little girl Friday, had the afternoon off. I glanced at the small stack of memos she had left carefully typed for me and found only one which needed my personal attention. It said: Joe Barton called while you were out. Wants you to phone him right away.

So I phoned Joe Barton. And after I'd talked with him, I hung up and shook my head several times to make sure I was awake. The next thing to do would have been to get a

drink out of my filing cabinet. There were several reasons why I didn't do this—the main one being that I didn't keep liquor in my filing cabinet. I kept files in it. Another reason was that I'd had a couple of quick ones in the Seven Seas on Hollywood Boulevard just an hour before. So I merely cocked my feet on the desk and worried.

Barton was a lawyer, a pretty big shot lawyer, and our conversation had been strictly off the record. I knew him fairly well, had played golf with him, and we'd met in court. I'm a private investigator who doesn't get his name in the papers if he can help it, but Glamor City keeps me pretty busy. You'd be surprised how many jobs there are for an honest shamus in Hollywood.

Barton had started off by hedging. He wanted to know how well I knew Jason Strong. I said I'd met the guy a few times—who hadn't? I also applauded the pictures I'd seen as a teen-aged squirt when he was making love to actresses of the silent days who are now grandmothers. I also said I knew Strong had been "at liberty" for a long time—his last option not having been lifted because about that time his face had to be. I also knew he had lately married Mona Gale.

Mona, at present, was big-time box office. Her fan mail came in trucks instead of being stuck under the door. Her press agents said she was twenty-three, which made her not more than thirty, and she had really crossed up the gossip-columnists by marrying Strong. All the wise guys had had her practically hitched to a slick Latin dancer-actor named Rojas. But Strong had stepped in and used his Great Lover technique, and apparently he could still pitch it.

Some of the boys said cruelly that Strong had got himself a meal ticket so he wouldn't end up in a furnished room on East Fifth with a gasp in his mouth. Me—I wouldn't know.

I told Barton that I had an elbow-scraping-and-hoisting acquaintance with Jason, and then I let the conversation lag. He picked it up. He was worried.

Well, not quite worried. Afraid, that was it. His firm had a reputation, and he wasn't taking any chances. "Jason was up to see me today. He wanted to make a new will," he said.

"Yeah? I didn't know he had any dough."

"He's got an annuity—not much. That wasn't it, though. Seems that about two months ago he bought the Can-Can."

I shrugged, but Barton couldn't see me. He went on: "It's a night-spot. Hell, you know it. On the Sunset Strip."

I said: "Sure, I know the joint. Well?"

Barton said: "Keep this under your hat. He's left it to you—in the event of his death."

I gagged briefly. I hardly knew the guy.

I'd had a few drinks with him, maybe I'd bought him one once. Was he so hard up for friends that he'd leave the Can-Can to anybody who bought him a drink?

Finally I said: "Thanks for the tip-off, Joe. I'll let you know."

His voice sounded anxious. "Well—do that, Steve. There's nothing—" He hesitated. "I figured I'd better check with you."

"Thanks again," I said and hung up.

That was all there was to it. Next thing Zanuck would be giving me a yacht. It was very nice of Jason, only I knew there'd be strings. And I don't like strings. They can catch about your neck, somehow.

I picked up my appointment book and flipped through it. Anita had made an entry I hadn't noticed: *Jason Strong, 3:30*. So Jason Strong had an appointment with me for today . . . in an hour.

It was midsummer and sweltering hot, and I didn't blame Anita too much for forgetting to add it to her memos. She'd be at the beach now, getting blisters and absorbing cokes. I sighed and wished I had enough money to retire. When Strong died, maybe I would have—the Can-Can was a valuable property. It had ridden along for years, just staying out of the red, as a stop-and-drink joint on the Strip, and then suddenly some columnist had written it up. It had boomed into popularity, and though the popularity was fading a bit, it was still worth dough.

I YAWNED and admired the cabinet. As far as I knew, it was the only filing cabinet in any Hollywood eye's office that had files in it. The boys had threatened to sue me for unorthodox practice, but I still persisted in keeping my liquor in what I felt was the right place—a tiny mahogany bar in one corner of the office.

Anita had worked for a publicity outfit before coming with me, and she had a passion for newspaper clippings. She had taken over the cabinet and had a file on almost everyone of any importance in the movie colony. I pulled out a drawer to look for information on Jason's wife.

Mona Gale. Twenty-five. Born Little Rock, Arkansas. Came to Hollywood and worked in a Drive-In in San Fernando. A director noticed her legs. From a bit part she rocketed to stardom via a song that miraculously got on the hit parade which she had crooned in the picture. Van Kesselring was the producer who discovered her and he was a bad egg. I mean bad. He'd been on the fringes of a lot of divorce suits, but had wriggled out by the skin of his head, which wasn't figurative talk.

O.K. Van Kesselring. Mona Gale. There was also Rojas, a native-born South American

—it said there—who'd been starring in Panamint's production-line musicals. He sang and danced and had a suave line. After Jason took Mona from him, he'd snatched desperately at the vanishing publicity and tried to walk into the Pacific. Since he'd arranged to have cameramen and columnists on hand, it was even more of a fizzle than he'd planned.

I looked up the Can-Can, but ran into a block. No information. I had to use the phone, and even there my sources weren't too helpful. A guy named Seth Cain had been manager for years, and Jason had kept him on when he bought the place. Cain seemed to have no antecedents at all, which made me wonder. Apparently he'd been found under a cabbage leaf six years before, when he'd taken over the place. I vaguely remembered meeting him, a flat-faced, impassive, stocky man with a cigarette perpetually pasted to his lip.

It was a good, solid cast, and now Jason had written in a part for me. I didn't like it a little bit. I was sitting on hot pants, wondering why he had decided to make me his beneficiary. The word "frame" kept shuttling around in my head—probably because I've lived in Hollywood so long.

I've got a reputation as an honest eye. I wondered about Jason's appointment, and what the hell he would have to say. I was very surprised when he didn't propose anything that wasn't on the up-and-up.

He came in before I had time to get tired of waiting. He was limping—a big, still-virile man with the harsh handsomeness that was so popular in the Twenties. Jaw and nose and eyebrows. But the nose was pinched, and there were wrinkles between the eyebrows, and the jaw didn't mean anything, no matter how much it stuck out. Jason Strong was scared stiff. I saw that in the minute it took him to open the door and walk into my office and sit down.

He said, "Hello, Steve," and his voice had a queer hesitancy. Suddenly, watching him, I felt an unexpected reaction. This was all wrong, seeing Jason Strong scared. He couldn't be scared. When I was a kid, I'd watched him, brave and daring, shooting down a dozen rustlers, Oriental dope fiends, or gangsters. He'd meant something to the kids of that forgotten decade. It's gone now, but you'll remember. It was the day when Doug Fairbanks' grin brought confusion to the crooks, and Bill Hart's poker-face was a mask above his avenging guns. Hero-worship, and juvenile, I know. Only it was all wrong somehow, seeing Jason Strong afraid.

I didn't like it, and my back felt funny. I said: "Hi, Jay. Glad to see you. Use a drink?"

He said: "My God, yes! I've been living on the stuff. I only hope you've got soda—that's all that's keeping me from ulcers."

I went over to the bar, but there wasn't much in it. I hadn't looked at the contents for weeks, and I was surprised to find that there was only a bottle of bourbon left. But Strong seemed delighted at that. I poured us drinks, came back to the desk and sat down.

He took the whiskey at a gulp, shuddered, and held out his glass for another. A second drink straightened him up a bit. The actor's look came over his face, and I knew then that whatever he was going to tell me, it wouldn't be on the level.

So I said: "What is it? Overwork? Nerves?"

"One thing and another. Steve, do you realize it's been years since we've had a drink together?" He stared around the office. "I like music when I'm drinking. What do you say we—"

"I'll put in a radio tomorrow," I said. "A floorshow I can't manage, on my commissions."

Jason's quick smile didn't reach his eyes. He said: "Doing anything tonight? Let's hit a few joints."

I swirled the golden liquid in my glass and watched the pretty bubbles. "Come off it," I said. "You made an appointment to see me. If you just want somebody to drink with, your wife's got prettier legs than I have, chum. What's bothering you? Women, scandal, or contract trouble?"

His eyes opened. "My God, you're suspicious. Do you work all the time? Doesn't anybody ever invite you out for a drink?"

I said: "Sure, but I've got a home phone. You made an appointment during business hours. Don't kid me, Jay—spill your trouble. Is it Mona?"

He snapped: "I didn't marry her for her money! If you pull any cracks—"

I clucked my tongue. "My, my, the man's touchy! Look, pal, so far as I know you and Mona are a couple of lovebirds."

**B**UT he had changed the subject successfully. Before I could bring it back, he asked for another drink. I waited till he finished, wiped his lips, and settled back. Then I got out of my chair.

I said: "I'm going home for the day, unless you've got something to talk about."

Strong hesitated. "O.K.," he said finally. "I'll go along with you."

I said, "I've got a date," and reached for my hat.

Strong took my arm. He said: "Break it, Steve. I'll pay. Look, I'll stop playing around. I want to hire your services."

I said, "That's better," and sat down again. I was annoyed, partly because I was worried about his leaving me the Can-Can and partly because I don't like to be sucked into anything.

He said carefully: "I want you to visit some places with me."

"What places?"

"It doesn't matter much. I want you to hang around with me for a few days."

"Bodyguard?"

"No," he said quickly. "Just—hang around with me. I'll pay you enough. But I don't want you to ask any questions."

I said flatly: "Jay, why not tell me what you're mixed up in? Believe me, it's smarter that way."

He waited, looking at me. After a while I shrugged and drank my whiskey. As though that had released some tension, he grinned and took an envelope from his pocket and tossed it on my desk. "Retainer," he said.

I thumbed through enough currency to make up five hundred dollars. I said: "If I take this job, Jay, you've got to answer a few questions . . . Jay!"

He was leaning forward in his chair. I couldn't see his face.

I jumped around the desk and grabbed his shoulder. He turned up a face that no camera had ever seen. He was trying desperately to speak.

But he was already past answering questions. He died while I looked at him.

All I could think of was that twenty years ago I'd sat in a movie theater chewing gum and watching Jason Strong play his great roles on the screen, and now he was dead in my office.

Habit took over. It might have been heart failure, of course. But when I examined the whiskey bottle, I found a whitish sediment on the bottom. I went into the bathroom and uncapped the liquid-soap container. Even mixed with warm water it tasted rotten, but I felt safer when my stomach was empty.

There was a G.P. down the hall and I surprised the patients waiting in his anteroom. He came back with me, made a few quick tests, and said I'd been smart in drinking soap. Just the same, he gave me something that tasted even worse. After that, he examined the body while I phoned L.A. Homicide.

A couple of hours later a basket had been taken out, with Jason Strong in it, and Captain Morrissey sat on the edge of my desk and looked at me from under thick, black, caterpillar-like eyebrows.

He said: "Who knew Strong had an appointment with you?"

"Anybody could have known. I don't know whom he talked to."

Morrissey said: "Yeah. Well, you ought to get a better lock on your door."

I told him I kept my valuables in a safe deposit box and there was nothing in the office to tempt a thief.

Morrissey said, "Um," and studied the ap-

pointment book. "Find out when your secretary made that date with Strong. Somebody came in here after that and poisoned the whiskey. By the way, do you give drinks to all your clients?"

I said I didn't. I hadn't used that bar for weeks. I added that Jason obviously had been hitting the bottle lately, and would have asked for a drink even if I hadn't offered one.

Morrissey wiggled his eyebrows. "You're not much help," he said. "What did he pay you that five hundred fish for?"

"To go out and drink with him, so far as I can figure. I told you what happened."

The police captain sighed and stood up. He said: "Of course you could have poisoned him—only you haven't any motive . . ." He paused and studied me, then added: "Or have you?"

I said: "No. And I wouldn't have poisoned myself, either."

"It didn't kill you, did it?" he snapped. "Anyway, hang around town. See what you can dig up. We'll get busy."

I said, "Yeah," and by that time I wanted a drink. The only thing I hadn't told Morrissey was that Strong had left me the Can-Can. I knew he'd find that out sooner or later. Morrissey was a square cop, and he'd give me every chance to explain. I doubted if I'd land in the gas chamber, but just the same I knew I would feel safer if I could find out who'd killed Jason Strong before Morrissey learned that I was a beneficiary.

After the cops had left I decided to take a run down to the Strip and see what my inheritance looked like. I'd been in the Can-Can a couple of times, but only as far as the bar. This time I was going to do a Cook's tour. I left a note for Anita, telling her where I was, got in my car and headed for Sunset Boulevard.

The facade of the place was Colonial, like an old Southern mansion, but inside it was strictly Hollywood. Low lights, booths with high partitions between them, and private dining rooms in the rear. The second floor was apparently not for the public. A neat but uncompromising sign hung on a rope across the stairs, proclaiming: *Absolutely No Admittance.*

I took a booth facing the steps and ordered a quart bottle of beer. It was around five o'clock and the place was practically empty, with only two waiters and one bartender on duty. After I was served, the two waiters and the barman huddled together over a racing form and seemed to forget my existence. I drank slowly and watched the stairs.

It was fifteen minutes later that Mona Gale came in. She was almost running. She headed for the steps, ducked under the rope in one lithe movement and scurried up and out of



sight. It was done so quickly and silently that none of the three employees noticed her. I waited a few moments, then followed, leaving a bill on the table to keep the waiter from thinking I had skipped.

Upstairs there was a long corridor, flanked on each side by doors. I walked by each, listening until I heard movement behind the third and last one on the left. I knocked.

There was absolute silence for a moment, then a noise as though someone had hastily slammed shut a drawer. From inside the room a startled, feminine voice said: "Come—come in!"

I PUSHED open the door and walked into what was obviously a private office. Fairly good pictures hung on the wall and the carpet was expensive. A big desk ruled the center of the office, and, standing behind it, one hand resting on its polished top, was Mona Gale. She was trembling, and her other hand she held behind her. A nervous twitching jerked at her pretty mouth, and her eyes, violet and far apart, stared at me apprehensively. She said, a bit breathlessly: "What is it? What do you want?"

I told her who I was, and threw out a few feelers to see if she'd heard about Jay. I didn't want the job of breaking the news to her and probably having a hysterical dame on my neck. I said, "Jay was up to see me today—said he had a job for me," and waited.

Her shaking became more violent and I could see the hand on the desk clenching. Suddenly she slapped the back of it against her mouth and turned and practically ran toward a door behind her. She said, "Water—I—I want a drink of water!" and disappeared through the door. I noticed that even in her hurry she had remembered to keep whatever she held behind her back out of my sight.

I sat down on the edge of the desk and swung a leg and considered my chances of looking into the drawers I had heard slam. I had about made up my mind to try it when the door to the corridor opened and Seth Cain came in. Apparently he didn't expect to find me there. His usually impassive face became animated, and the unlit cigarette hooked into his mouth almost fell to the floor. He recovered himself quickly, backed against the door, and stood there.

I said: "Hello, Cain. I came in to see Miss Gale." I nodded toward the door at the back. "She's in the johnny."

As if to prove my statement, Mona opened the door and came through. I looked at her sharply. She wasn't the same woman who had had such a bad case of jitters a few minutes before. Her face was relaxed, there was a smile on her lips, and her eyes were almost over-bright. Both her hands hung by her side

and they were not clenched. She was as calm as a dead rabbit.

"Hello, Seth," she said. "This is a friend of Jay's." She introduced me before I could say we had met. "Jay had a job for him—" She turned her lovely gaze on me and smiled. "What was it you said he wanted done?"

Cain didn't give me a chance to answer. He was staring directly at me, but he addressed his words to Mona. He said: "Jay's dead—they just phoned."

I turned in time to catch her, but she almost folded too quickly. By the time Cain had said "phoned" I saw her slump. I picked her up and carried her to a couch along the wall and let her head rest a bit lower than her feet. Then I headed for the back room for water. Through the door I could see Cain bending over her.

I said, "I'll let it run a moment to get cold," turned the faucet on full to cover any noise and jerked open the medicine cabinet which hung above the washbowl. On the top shelf was what I was looking for—a hypodermic needle, shoved hastily into a corner and half-hidden by a package of gauze. I shut the cabinet and brought a glass of water out and forced some between Mona's lips. She mumbled something and Cain said: "Take it easy."

He was still looking at me. He said: "Jay died in your office from poisoned liquor."

I said: "Yeah. And if it hadn't been for liquid soap I would have, too."

Mona sat up. She said: "You mean Jay was—poisoned?"

I nodded and she got shakily to her feet. She stood swaying a moment, then went toward the door. She said, "Seth, get me a taxi," and walked out into the corridor.

Cain glanced hurriedly around the room, then back to me. He said, "You wait here," and followed her. He closed the door and I heard a key turn. I listened to their footsteps disappearing down the hall.

I went over to the big desk and sat down. Some interesting things were coming to light. First, Mona Gale was a dope addict, there was no mistaking that. The shot she had taken had either gotten her over a tremendous shock or, quite possibly, it was just a "needed" shot which had been delayed.

Second, the hypo was kept here in Jay's office. Or was this Jay's office? I opened a drawer and the first thing I saw was a stack of correspondence addressed to Seth Cain. That answered it—this was Cain's little sanctum.

Third—pure guess on my part—was that Jay, married to Mona, knew of her addiction.

Fourth, Jay didn't use the stuff. That was easy. A dope addict doesn't go for whiskey and get any relief from it, and Jay had really

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**A. Boyd Correll**

gone for that shot of bourbon in my office. I put my feet on the desk and bounced my fingertips together. Who wanted both Jay and myself dead? Obviously the poison had been for both of us, otherwise it would not have been a slow acting one. A quick poison would have acted on one of us and warned the other not to take a drink.

I kept trying to add things up and they wouldn't come out right. If Jay was trying to cure his wife of the dope habit he couldn't do it by buying the Can-Can—

My feet hit the floor with a bang. *Maybe that was exactly what he was trying to do!*

I grabbed the phone on the desk and dialed Barton. I said: "Listen, Joe. Who bought the Can-Can—I mean who actually paid for it? Do you know?"

Barton said: "Yes, of course I know. I handle Mona's business for her. Jason put down the first payment and Mona guaranteed the balance with the bank. Why?"

I said: "Did you know Mona took dope?" I heard him suck in his breath. He said: "Look, Steve. That could ruin her in pictures. Where did you get the idea?"

I said: "At the Can-Can. I'm down here now. There's something funny going on, and I think it's dope. Cain took the precaution of locking me in—" There was a rattle at the door and I slammed down the receiver.

**WHEN** Cain came in I was standing looking out of the window. I said: "What's the idea of kidnaping me?"

"Sorry," said Cain. "Just force of habit, locking my office door." He walked to his desk and gave it a quick survey. He said: "What was it Strong wanted you to do?"

I couldn't answer that one. Cain's question had more or less laid it on the line.

I said to Cain, who was watching me: "How long has Mona been on the stuff?"

"What stuff?"

So he wanted to play. I said: "A girl doesn't get the habit just after she marries. She's got too many other things to do. Besides, Jay could have stopped her. He didn't find out she was on the stuff till after they were married, I suppose."

Cain said very softly: "I'm curious to know just what's on your mind."

"Murder," I said. "Strong was killed because he was trying to smash the racket. His mistake was trying to do it secretly, to protect Mona from publicity. He wasn't willing to go to the police."

"So he didn't go to the police?"

I said: "No. He came to me instead, though he didn't trust even me completely. He wanted

## Lethal Legacy

me to go around Hollywood with him, as a sort of insurance. The way I see it—"

Cain sat down at his desk and started to open a drawer. I took my hand out of my pocket and showed him a blunt-nosed .38.

"The way I see it," I said again, "is that you were trying to kill Strong before he could smash your racket. And he figured you'd lay off if he started getting chummy with a private eye."

"How much do you want?" Cain asked.

I laughed a little. What I wanted was my life. I knew it wouldn't be long before Morrissey found out Jay had left the Can-Can to me. I could foresee his movements after that. He'd look me up at my office, and there'd be the note I'd left for Anita. Sometime soon I figured Captain Morrissey would be dropping in right here at the Can-Can, asking me for an explanation. I wanted to have a good one ready when he arrived.

"You damn fool," I said. "Jay left the Can-Can to me."

Cain's eyes and mouth popped open.

I said: "I wonder how surprised you are?"

The gambler's mask came down over his face. He said: "O.K., I'm surprised. But that doesn't mean we've got to cut both our throats. You say you own the Can-Can. Maybe you're lying."

"Maybe I am," I said. "Wait and see."

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "Listen. I've always run this place my way. The owner got enough profits to keep him satisfied—till he sold out to Strong, and skipped. Now let's talk turkey. First, I didn't kill Strong. I've got alibis for two weeks back, so it doesn't even bother me. What I am bothered about is the Can-Can. I'll tell you now—it's worth dough. Plenty of dough. You want to sell?"

I grinned at him.

He said: "You've got the reputation of an honest eye. O.K. Stay out of this business. I know how to run the Can-Can and you don't. The owner gets a check every month—whoever the owner is. You can let me manage the place, and just sit back and collect the profits."

"The profits on the dope, too?"

Cain lifted his hand suddenly in a warning gesture. I didn't turn till I heard the door rattle. Then I backed up, swinging my body so the .38 would cover the right territory.

Joe Barton came in. He stared first at Cain and then at me through his rimless glasses. He was a pompous man with a heavy build and jowls on his cheeks like a bishop's. He said: "My God, Steve! What's going on?"

I said: "Nothing yet. What are you doing here?"

"When you phoned, you said Cain had locked you in. Then the connection broke.



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## A. Boyd Correll

Naturally I wanted to know what was going on."

I said: "Coming here alone took guts. For all you knew, Cain might have killed me and you'd be walking into the tiger's mouth. Maybe you knew Cain wouldn't kill you. Is that it?"

Barton said: "Now, Steve—"

I swung on Cain. "Get this, Seth," I said. "And don't try anything. Not yet. Just listen to a few things that I've heard about from various sources I have to have in my business.

"Joe Barton isn't afraid of being killed. A lot of crooks have a motive for keeping him alive. I've heard about his safe-deposit box, and what's in it. If he were killed, the police would look through that box, and a hell of a lot of people would go to jail, including Seth Cain, I'll bet."

I turned to the lawyer. "You're the only guy who could safely take over this dope racket, Barton, because Cain wouldn't dare have you killed."

Barton blinked at me through his rimless glasses and said: "When you're through—"

**I SAID:** "When I'm through, you'll be in the gas chamber where you belong. Hell! I was crazy not to see the answer before. I thought Cain killed Strong, but I was wrong. You're the guy who called at my office this morning. I jumped to the conclusion it was a phone call, but it wasn't. After Jay made his new will, leaving the Can-Can to me, you saw a swell chance to clean up. You were at my office, and you poisoned the bourbon."

Barton said: "Of all the cooked-up stories! I'm an attorney, not a killer. I've got a good practice—"

"Small potatoes, compared to the money the dope racket pulls in," I said. "You saw a chance to buy in without any risk at all. The price was murder. With Jay and me dead, the Can-Can would revert to Mona, and you handle all her business. She's got sense enough to know she's not a business manager. You'd have taken over, had Seth Cain working for you, and pocketed the big dough. And Cain wouldn't have dared kill you. Not with all the evidence against him in your safe-deposit box."

Cain choked: "Barton. You thought . . ."

Barton said casually: "Take it easy, Seth. The only danger to us now is from this two-bit private op. Strong left him the Can-Can because he thought an honest detective would carry on his work and clean up the racket. But with Steve out of the way we can work out a deal. A safe one."

"Of course I might shoot somebody," I offered.

Barton said: "Use your head, Steve. I've

## Lethal Legacy

got a gun aimed at you under my coat. We could kill each other. Wouldn't it be smart to make some sort of a deal?"

I knew now that Morrissey wouldn't arrive in time. I sat there with sweat cooling my face and looked at the fat lawyer.

"The racket's too dirty," I said, and shot him in the belly.

He folded like a jack-knife in the chair. His slug went wild into the floor, ruining Cain's expensive rug. I swung toward the desk, but something hot and heavy hit me in the side and I had only a glimpse of Seth Cain's smoking gun before I went down. My .38 had fallen somewhere out of sight for the moment. I saw Cain glance out the window and then at me, his face twisting.

And then I spotted my gun. I was half paralyzed and my side was a burning hell, but I managed to close my fingers around the butt. Cain ran toward me, kicked the gun out of my hand, and went past. He opened the door and slammed it behind him. Once more I searched for the gun and found it where it had skittered across the floor. I crawled past Joe Barton, who had slid from his chair and lay, tied in a knot, crying, his hands hugging his belly.

I kept on crawling and got the .38 and started toward the door. As I opened the door and dragged myself into the corridor I heard gunfire from below.

And then, after quite a while, Captain Morrissey came and looked down at me and grinned. I felt my coat and shirt being stripped off. Someone was probing around my ribs.

I said: "I'll live, Morrissey. Look in Cain's office. See if you can save Joe Barton."

Morrissey jerked his hand and a cop hurried away. "Start talking," he said.

"Where's . . . Cain?"

"Dead," he said. "He came down the stairs as we drove up. He started shooting at us and we got him."

I said: "Well, patch up Barton. He killed Jay Strong. Patch him up so he'll talk."

Morrissey said: "Do you own the Cannon?"

"So you found out," I said. "I figured you would. Yeah, Jay left it to me. But I'm giving it to Mona. She'll need it, when the news hits the papers. It can't be kept hushed up now. Maybe if she gets somebody to run this joint clean, she'll have enough to support her in a sanitarium. That's where she belongs."

"So do you," he said, "until that side is healed."

Morrissey was right, but I got out again after my ribs had mended. Mona never did.

THE END

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## John Knox

(Continued from page 84)

ening steel. He didn't want to use a gun because of the noise, and he probably avoided using a knife for the very reason that he is a butcher. The sharpening steel was a natural for a quick and quiet job. Afterwards he bloodied the poker to frame Barnes and stole the twenty dollars to make it look like a feeble attempt on Barnes' part to suggest robbery.

"All right, but what about that tooth? Greysdays probably carried it off and threw it away where we'll never find it."

Vane said: "I think not. Consider his state of mind. He had just murdered a woman in order to get a thing which might pin another murder on him. Would he be likely to carry that thing around any longer than necessary? I don't think so. Moreover the tooth was easy to dispose of. He didn't have to dispose of the skull—didn't want to, because its loss would be noticed. But Florence must have already pulled the tooth out and it wouldn't be missed. So I think he hid the tooth with the weapon—under the rosebush—poking a hole, putting the tooth in, then forcing it down with the weapon itself.

CARR said: "We can soon find out." He sent a man next door to the Barnes house to dig in the place Vane had described. "But," he asked Vane, "if you had that all figured out, why didn't you tell us sooner?"

Vane smiled at Jill. "I didn't figure it out until my smart little secretary shoved the clue right under my nose."

"Those mixed-up word tests!" Jill gasped. "Did I really?"

"You did really." Vane turned back to Carr. "Remember Jill pointing out that Greysdays, taking Rickton's test, responded to the two words *bury* and *rosebush*, with the words *dead* and *toothache*? Greysdays got past the word *bury* all right, giving a natural answer. But the word *rosebush*, coming right afterwards, jolted him. He thought of the hidden weapon, of course, and fought to avoid that. But he tripped on something else which was also hidden there—the tooth."

"But he said *toothache*."  
"What he probably said," Vane explained, "was *tooth*. But he thought fast, and before Walton noticed his pause, he added *ache*. He felt safe then because he could say that *bury* suggested the murdered woman, her visit to the dentist made him think of *toothache*, and he hadn't noticed the word *rosebush* at all."

An ambulance arrived, and Greysdays, recovered from his knockout, but sullenly silent, was carried away.

"We'll X-ray his skull at the hospital," Carr said, "so that he won't claim later we

## Home Is Where the Hearse Is

beat a confession out of him—if we get one.”

“You probably will get one, or its equivalent,” Vane replied.

This proved true. The man Carr had sent to dig came in presently with the crooked tooth. The dentist said he had X-ray pictures of Willy's tooth in his files. They were later matched and compared identically with the buried tooth.

Willy's bones were also dug up and Old Man Hassell's body was found to contain poison. But none of this evidence was needed. Greydays feigned a coma after he got to the hospital, caught his nurse off guard, and threw himself from a seven-story window. His face and head were battered in a manner that recalled his victims, and he was just as dead.

Jill went home with Minnie Greydays and left her only when a doctor had given her a hypo and a nurse had taken over. She and Vane rode cityward in the brightening dawn.

“Well, for once,” Jill told her employer, “you'll have to apologize to Walton. If he hadn't mixed up the tests, Greydays wouldn't have tripped on that word.”

“Oh, I think it was Greydays who mixed up those tests himself,” Vane replied. “He would naturally have been wary of taking any test designed for him.”

“You won't even give poor Walton credit for his mistakes,” Jill said sourly. They rode for a time in silence and then she spoke again. “You hit Greydays three times. Did you have to?”

“Maybe not, but I was thinking—”

“I know what you were thinking—of the way that beast had beaten his victims. Well, it proves you have some human feelings after all, and aren't just a big ugly mass of brain cells wriggling around puzzling out who killed who and why.”

“Heavens!” Vane said, shocked. “Do I really suggest such an abomination?”

“Not really.” Jill tittered and found courage to snuggle a little closer to his arm. “But poor Minnie.” She sighed. “I wonder if it might not have been better for her never to know at all?”

“And go on living with a mass-killer who'd have murdered her the first time she crossed him about that property—which was really hers? Oh, no. As for the shock, it's better Minnie got it over with all at once. She'd have gone on yearning and hoping and hunting for Willy the rest of her life. Now she knows, and the world knows, that her poor Willy was not the absurd monster he had been painted. That monster is gone. And sad as his return was, Willy has come home.”

THE END

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**Julius Long**

(Continued from page 46)

goes haywire when a girl gives him ideas, especially a girl like Bee!

"So Johnson listened and came to America. Bee was in New York at dramatic school. They teach lots of tricks at those places. They tell you about voice filters, they teach you how to disguise your voice so that a soprano will sound like a bass. It was an easy trick for Bee to scare the daylights out of Johnson with a few phone calls.

"Instead of turning over the films, he bought a gun. This played right into Bee's hands. She turned him in to the cops, thinking she'd get him deported. Then he'd have to leave the films so she could make a deal. She never intended to make a deal with anybody—except Jerry Reynolds.

"He was just out of the army, and she wanted to set him up in a big way with the precious secret of the hook and the needle. She probably didn't tell him what she had in mind for him. But last night she saw him in an entirely different light, the same light her father sees him in. She saw him as a worthless, weak-sister incapable of carrying out her plans.

"So she went ahead on her own. She easily surprised Johnson, beat him to death. Earlier she'd got hold of the precious films, by the simple device of convincing him that Mort's being here at the lake meant he was wise to his game and dealing himself in. The fact that the bullet had come so close was ample corroboration. Johnson fell for it. That's why he shied out of the Hornet's Nest when he saw Mort there.

"The fact that Johnson was planted in shallow water indicates a woman did the job. Otherwise he'd have been dropped where he couldn't have been found. When Bee returned to her room she found Reynolds there and decided to make him the goat.

"Coming back here and playing the role of a contrite sweetheart ready to sacrifice all for her true love was to complete Bee's dramatic performance. But there's one more scene—in the death house. Bee will get top billing."

Reynolds gasped: "Is this true, Bee?"

"Of course not! He can't prove a thing!"

Mort turned wearily to the sheriff. "The films—she's probably got them. She had no idea anybody would suspect her, so they're probably in her car."

She had the films—and Blackstone Jones' gun. As the latter observed: "Women can fool all of the men some of the time, and some of the men all the time, but they can't fool Blackstone Jones more than nine-tenths of the time!"

**THE END**



## No Place Like Homicide

(Continued from page 25)

His bullet ricocheted off the barrel. Two shots came from Crother's gun. Mercado took a deep breath. He picked up a pot which hung nearby and hurled it at Crothers. And as Crothers ducked, he sprang. He vaulted the barrel easily and landed like a frog on Crothers' shoulder.

His hands seized the wrist of Crothers' gun hand. In another instant, Phelan and I were there, too. Crothers was soon disarmed and held firmly in the copper's grasp.

Phelan shot an admiring glance at Mercado. "Nice work," he said. "Very nice."

Mercado looked around the kitchen slowly. "Dios," he said. "Let us get out of here! What sort of place is this?"

"This?" said Phelan. "Oh, it's the kitchen of some little chili joint that fronts on the avenue."

Mercado stared at him.

"*Qué?*" he shrieked. "*Qué dice?*"

I repeated what Phelan had said.

The greatest private detective in Mexico stared at me with bulging eyes. He muttered, "Dios," twice, then fainted dead away.

IT WAS on the southbound train that I asked him: "Just when did you decide that Huerta was Crothers?"

He shrugged his shoulders and looked most melancholy. "I entertained the idea all along. However, you will recall that we overheard Constance and Crothers talking to the old lady one day and Crothers wasn't using his bass voice, which was most distinctive. He had raised it a full tone."

"So his wife wouldn't recognize him?"

"Precisely."

He lapsed into sad silence again. I said: "What's wrong? Didn't you enjoy the trip?"

He shook his head, said miserably: "I can't sleep. Nightmares. That kitchen. I shall not live two weeks."

THE END

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**Biggest Smoker's Value Ever!**

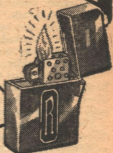
**Windproof LIGHTER and POP-UP Plastic CIGARETTE CASE**

Top slides open and pops up your favorite cigarette

**BOTH FOR \$2.98**  
TAX FREE POST PAID

**A Matched Set You'll Be Proud To Give or Get**

*Both Personalized*



With a Rich Silver on Black Monogrammed INITIAL of your own choice

**For Your Smoking Pleasure**

**A THRILL BY THEMSELVES . . . A TRIUMPH TOGETHER**

Take the lighter, for instance! It's a genuine "Feather Lite," cased in gleaming heat resistant black plastic. Famed for the instant, positive action it's the favorite "flame" of smokers the nation over. Just a twirl of your thumb lights it—and its wind guard keeps it lit. And if you want the joy of added smoking pleasure, your answer is the matching POP-UP cigarette case, which is actually a cigarette holder too, ready to serve you on split-second notice! Every cigarette that pops up out of a POP-UP is invitingly fresh, firm and enjoyably fragrant! They're a peach of a pair, both yours to own for only \$2.98—and if you don't think you've bought a double value after seeing your thrilling twosome—we'll refund your money cheerfully . . . quick as a flash . . . And that's a promise!

**MAIL THIS COUPON FOR SMOKER SET**

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. RP32 PRINT INITIAL  IN THIS BOX  
618 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

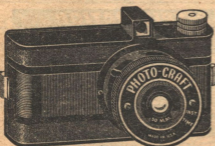
Please rush Feather Lite Windproof Lighter and Matching POP-UP Cigarette case personalized with initial printed in box above.

**CHECK ONE**

I am enclosing \$2.98. Send my Personalized Smoker Set POP-UP  
 Send my Personalized Smoker Set C.O.D. I will pay postman \$2.98 plus postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone Print Clearly \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Zone \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

**COMPLETE 5-PIECE CANDID CAMERA OUTFIT**



*Includes all This!*

- ★ GENUINE PHOTOCRAFT CANDID Type CAMERA
- ★ CARRYING CASE with Your Name in 23-Kt. GOLD
- ★ 3 ROLLS of No. 127 FILM

**ALL YOURS FOR ONLY \$3.98**  
POST PAID

**LOOK AT THESE FEATURES**

- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground and Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on Any Standard No. 127 Film
- ★ Will Take Pictures in Full Color
- ★ Has "Bulbeye" Level View Finder
- ★ Easy, Simple, Foolproof Operation

THREE ROLLS OF FILM INCLUDED



*Personalized* WITH YOUR NAME IN 23-Kt. Gold

**PICTURES YOU TAKE TODAY WITH THIS BIG 3-IN-1 OUTFIT WILL BE THE TREASURES OF TOMORROW**

. . . For while time stands still for no one, the memories of happy times can be preserved by Photocraft. Your Photocraft candid camera outfit comes to you ready to go to work—with a handy shoulder strap carrying case Personalized with the name of your choice in 23-Kt. GOLD, and enough film for 48 exposures — for only \$3.98 postpaid! Your Photocraft will also take full color pictures when loaded with Colorchrome film. So whether for a gift or for yourself, order your Complete 5-piece Photocraft Outfit now! Our guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction.

**RUSH THIS COUPON NOW**

Sold On A "EXAMINE AT OUR KICK" GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Yes, if you don't feel that Photocraft is everything you expected, you may return it in 10 days for a complete refund.

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. P0210  
618 South Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush my Photocraft Candid Camera Outfit at \$3.98 with Personalized Carrying Case and 3 rolls of No. 127 Film. My money will be refunded if returned in 10 days. Name Wanted is Gold.

**CHECK ONE**

- I'm enclosing \$3.98 in full payment. Please send my Photocraft Outfit Postpaid.
- Send my Photocraft C.O.D. I am enclosing \$3.00 deposit because I want my Carrying Case Personalized in GOLD. I'll pay postman balance of \$2.98 plus postage.
- Send my Photocraft C.O.D. without items on Carrying Case. I will pay postman \$3.98 plus postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone Print Clearly \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Zone \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

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Jelt Denim Overalls  
Union-Alls • Matched  
Shirts and Pants  
Whipcords • Dunga-  
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Industrial Uniforms

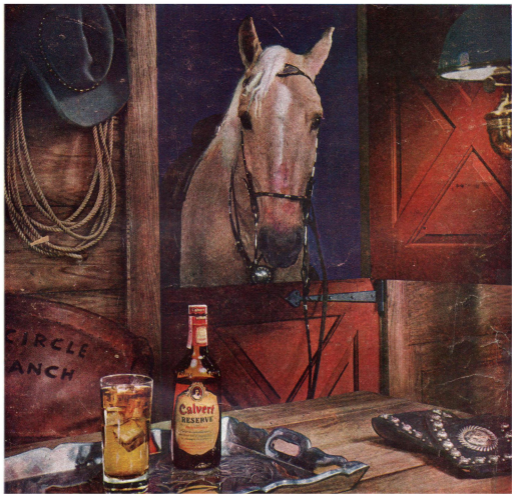


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**M**AYBE he doesn't know a stirrup from a saddle . . . but judging from that glorious Calvert highball, he sure knows his whiskey!

Make no mistake, Calvert is very definitely *the real thing* in whiskey. Fact is, we've blended more fine whiskey in our

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. . . . . *It's the real thing!*

*Clear Heads Choose* **Calvert**



Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.

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