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ROWE, YOUR NEXT STOP IS FELONY COURT...THEN THE GRAND JURY
...YOU CAN'T PROVE YOU EVER GAVE ME A CENT
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MISS DEMARE MAY DICTATE HER STATEMENT NOW..AND CATCH THE NEXT TRAIN
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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 52 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1946 No. 3

2—FULL-LENGTH MURDER MYSTERY NOVELETTES—2

Hackett's here again and the homicide's wholesale—

It's the latest style in wooden overcoats, just—

3—THRILLING SHORT DETECTIVE STORIES—3

Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock—

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AND—

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The November issue will be out October 4th

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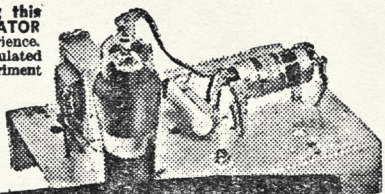

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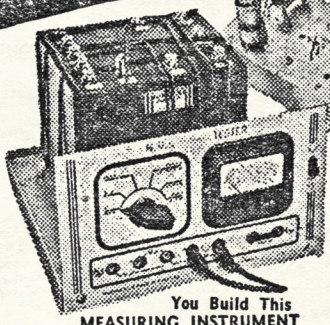

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THE NOVEMBER THRILL DOCKET

BOB HARRIMAN was fresh out of the Seabees and didn't even know he'd inherited a farm, until he was almost trampled to death in the rush of prospective buyers. After a good look at the place, he was more confused than ever—what was so precious about those swampy acres with their battered buildings—and the deadly pool of quicksand? And who had dug those seventeen grave-like holes in the pasture? Bob had a healthy curiosity to find the answer to the puzzle . . . but he soon learned that in this particular case health and curiosity didn't go together.

HERMAN PETERSEN—a welcome newcomer to our roster of crime-fictioneers—contributes a real spine-tingler in his long novelette, *Devil's Acre.*

ROBERT MARTIN comes up with the fast-shooting fable of a sylvan slayer who was a live-wire with a rifle and a dead-shot with any weapon. Turn a big-city dick loose in the wooded hills of Ohio, pepper him with hot lead from all directions and what have you got? A private eye seeing red! Jim Bennett was the target for tonight all right—but here was one clay pigeon who could shoot back—and when he got the range, the slickest hick in the hills didn't have a chance, because Jim knew that *Killers Can't Be Careless.*

Also: JOHN WHITING is back with *Murder in the Cards,* a new Mike Donlan novelette; WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT tells of an exciting bigtown chase that cracks a *Tin Pan Alibi*—and other first-rate yarns of death and detection, in the big November issue of DIME DETECTIVE, on sale October 4th!

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in telling us your own personal experiences with 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, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17.

IF YOU'RE careful, you can save. But be even more careful when you spend.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

Two friends of mine noticed an advertisement in their local paper offering a well-paid job servicing vending machines. Interested, they made arrangements to meet the advertiser. A middle-aged man answered their knock on the door of his apartment. They were quickly put at ease by his likeable manner and his neat, well-dressed appearance. When he began to talk about his son in the Air Corps any suspicion they may have had was dispelled.

With a glib tongue, the phony convinced his callers that they would do well to invest a little money in postage stamp machines which were at this very moment being manufactured in California. These machines would be placed on the outside of downtown buildings, making them easy to service. He gave no idea where the machines were to be placed, but assured my friends that if they were one of the first to invest they would be given choice spots. Convinced by the smooth promoter that here was a chance that they could not afford to overlook, they parted with $1000 of their hard-earned savings. In return they were given a contract stating that they were the sole owners of twenty-five stamp machines to be delivered later.

A few days later they noticed a warning sponsored by the Better Business Bureau, "Investigate Before You Invest." Alarmed, they called the Bureau. A check on the local files of the BBB brought to light an unfavorable report on the promoter. Later it was discovered that the contract specified no delivery date for the machines. A further check revealed that the machines in question were not even in production. Police were called, but the swindler had already left town to add more victims to his list.

William Gilmore.
Columbus, Ohio

(Continued on page 97)

THERE is a definite I.C.S. type. The records of 100,000 current students . . . more than 5 million students since 1891 . . . supply the outlines. Here's how the typical enrollee shapes up at the time of beginning his studies:

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THIRTEEN SHROUDS

A Thackeray Hackett Novelette

By

FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Author of "File Them Under Murder," etc.

Headliner Files, Inc. specialized in the perambulations of the prominent, but sometimes they followed the foibles of not-so-near celebrities . . . like the hasn't-been prizefighter and the non-struggling young playwright, who came to such unhappy ends. Thackeray Hackett, that whirling dervish of a dick, swung his dandified but oh-so-deadly little cane and finally stopped the murderer cold—very cold, indeed.

Pyke illustrated by holding the .45 automatic at arm's length.

CHAPTER ONE

Bared Bones

I HAD just had lunch with Ingrid Bergman and now I was returning to work feeling very pleasant about everything.

My luncheon with Miss Bergman couldn't truly be called a tête-à-tête. I hadn't been really alone with her. By actual count there had been

sixty-three others at the table, mostly news or publicity people, the occasion being not wholly irrelevant to the unveiling of the newest Bergman picture at the Radio City Music Hall next Friday.

As pictorially arranged by her producer, Miss Bergman had sat in lovely prominence in the guest of honor's place, exactly twenty-eight chairs north of me. This distance had seemed astronomical at the time, and still did, but I had really enjoyed my lunch with Ingrid Bergman anyhow, just as I had enjoyed my lunch with Lana Turner at MGM's expense last week and my lunch with Ginger Rogers at Paramount's the week before.

I paused to gaze with a smile at the sign on our office door, feeling that there were few other jobs which could offer such moments of glamorous conviviality to atone for its hours of migraine.

This sign is an odd one. If you have wandered among the watering places in Middle Gotham you may have noticed it on the front of a trim little building sitting not far from the Stork Club. It reads at the top, *HEADLINER FILES, Incorporated.* There follows a line of elucidation: *Suppliers of Information About Celebrities.* It is rounded out with: *Clarabelle Brown, Directress. New York—Hollywood.*

Entering, I passed through the reception room and along a private corridor to the front office of Clarabelle Brown, the originator and sole owner of Headliner Files, Incorporated. She wasn't at her desk. It was now past three o'clock and I'd gotten back from lunch ahead of her. That wasn't surprising. It happened five times every week. (Clarabelle does not come in at all on Saturdays and Sundays.)

Turning now to my own door, I paused again, this time to chuckle at another example of the sign-painter's art. It read, *C. Walter Preston, Business Manager.* Those words, business manager, struck me as being very amusing. Headliner Files functioned amid confusion, disorder and lunatic inefficiency which it was my job to organize into sound business procedures. I had been working on this problem for many months now and, if anything, the confusion, disorder and inefficiency had grow even crazier. Sometimes I blubbered into my Budweiser about it. Today I thought the whole notion was rather whimsical.

My telephone was ringing, a thing it rarely stops doing.

Eunice, our telephone operator, said: "Mr. Preston, I'm being pestered to death by somebody named Mr. Albert Dalley who's been trying to get you personally for the past two hours."

"Al Dalley of the Allied Press?" I said. "Put him right on." Then the connections clicked and I greeted him: "Hiya, Al, ol' pal, hiya, pal, ol' Al."

He sighed with envy, but he was too busy to waste time ragging me about long lunches with too many cocktails. "Listen, Pres, we've got another flash on Voster."

He meant Otto Voster, of course, the famed theatrical producer and director whose name you were seeing headlined in the papers not long ago. Otto Voster was one of the three famous people who figured in that sensational plane crash down in the Great Smoky Mountains—the most adventurous airplane accident since Margaret Hastings and her male companions dropped into their Shangri-La in Dutch New Guinea.

When it happened Voster was flying with Catha Chester and her husband, Julian Roberts, the stage stars. It was Roberts' private plane and he was piloting it. They were cruising over the mountains down there in eastern Tennessee when the plane suddenly conked out. They had to chute down into wilderness, into an uncharted region as primitive today as it was before Columbus. What followed then was a bang-up front page story—how these three became separated and how Catha Chester and her husband finally managed to find their way back to what we call civilization, with Voster's fate remaining uncertain. A search for Voster was still going on.

"The story is date-lined Knoxville," Al Dalley said. "They've found a skeleton. They think it's Voster's but they're not sure."

"Just bones?" I said. "No clothes or anything else?"

"Voster's been missing for weeks now." Dalley reminded me, "and those mountains are full of wild animals."

"If it's a human skeleton found in the region where Voster disappeared, then it's logically Voster's skeleton, isn't it?"

"That's very rugged country, Pres, but guys hunt and fish through it and sometimes one of 'em gets lost and never comes out. In any case we've got to have an identification. Our report says there are marks of a surgical operation on the skull, maybe a brain operation, say ten or fifteen years ago. Does that fit Voster?"

"If so, we don't know of it here," I answered. "At the time of the accident I checked through all the dope we have on Voster. Descriptions of him were broadcast to everybody living in that region, remember? There was no mention of any marks on his skull because, naturally, everybody at that time was still hoping he would turn up alive. You'd better check directly with Catha Chester and Julian Roberts. They were closer to Voster than anyone else. Want us to give you their home phone number?"

Dalley said in harassed tones: "I got that number from your secretary hours ago, but

nobody answers. This flash was put on the air around noon, but they couldn't have heard it because there's been absolutely nothing from 'em. Look, Pres, I've given up trying to reach Catha Chester and her husband. What are we paying you for, anyway? Get busy and find 'em for us."

"O.K., Al," I promised. "I'll ring you the minute we've got it."

ALLIED is one of our most valued subscribers and its money entitles it to just such legitimate information as this. Also, this was the sort of assignment that proves the worth of Headliner Files' service. In a way, too, it was an errand of mercy, for the identification of that skeleton down there in remotest Tennessee might settle once and for all the uneasy question of what had happened to Uncle Otto, as all Broadway affectionately called him.

There was one hitch. Since Allied, an organization not without resources, had failed to reach Catha Chester, I couldn't see offhand how Headliner Files might do better.

I went into our main offices hoping to find a lead in our dossier on Miss Chester. Headliner Files was having a typically busy afternoon. Telephones were trilling. There was a constant rumbling as of distant thunder—the characteristic noise of heavily loaded file-drawers rolling in and out. Four girls were poring over some of our 60,000 folders in search of information requested by subscribers who were holding the line, waiting impatiently for it. The data they desired might be anything under the sun having to do with any famous person on earth, and the probability was that we had it on tap.

For example, if you happen to be a maker of pretty-smelling soap who wishes a testimonial from Lana Turner, we can warn you that you might earn yourself a pretty frown by calling her Laaa-na, to rhyme with manna, but that you may be rewarded with a smile and the desired testimonal if you make it Lawna. Again, if you have been unable to find Humphrey Bogart in any of his usual haunts in Hollywood or Manhattan, we would suggest your trying the Ohio farm of his good friend Louis Bromfield, the novelist. Also, we might tell you, if you cared to know, that America's sweetheart, Mary Pickford, is now fifty-two, that Kate Smith collects Dresden china, that Barney Baruch in his youth was a crackerjack amateur boxer and that during the stiffest tensions of World War II Winston Churchill relaxed by playing with toy tanks on the floor at Number 10 Downing Street.

Our motto is: "We know the answers." Ninety-nine percent of the time we really do know them. As for the other one percent, we'll find out for you, provided only that it doesn't violate our policy and that learning it is humanly possible. A subscription to our service costs only $15 a month and we will gladly mail you an application blank upon request.

Back in my private office with Catha Chester's folder, I sifted through the information we had collected about her. There were pounds of it, including a three-part profile from *The New Yorker,* scores of interviews in other magazines, hundreds of news clips and packs of notes of our own. We had lists of her closest associates, so I began calling them.

None of them, including her agent and her lawyer, could tell me where Catha Chester might be at the moment.

Henri Barbour, Otto Voster's assistant and manager of the Voster Theatre, where every new Chester-Roberts play was presented, said that Catha and her husband had been there this morning, rehearsing a radio show, but had left at noon for parts unknown. Barbour had worked with Voster for only the past four years and couldn't recall any mention of an earlier brain operation, but Catha possessed the manuscript of an unpublished biography of Voster, he said, so she would know.

All I had to do was find her.

Then taking one of those gambits which Headliner Files specializes in, but which few people think of, I phoned Catha's favorite hairdresser, Miss Dunlap, in those super beauty salons at the Waldorf-Astoria, but Miss Dunlap hadn't seen a hair of her.

I also phoned Marzio's, a little dump of a restaurant on Third Avenue, where Catha Chester often goes because she thinks Marzio makes the best goulash this side of Hungaria, but Catha hadn't had any goulash lately.

Next I tackled the Julian Roberts folder. We had separate folders on this famous twosome although most of the material overlapped in both directions. Catha and Julian were inseparable in the affections of the theatre-going public. As a husband-and-wife team they were a younger edition of Lunt and Fontanne, and highly successful too. After I had searched all through our data on Roberts, however, the result was still negative.

There was nothing mysterious or ominous in this. In New York you can pass into the realms of the unknown in a very simple manner—you just step out a door. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts might have decided to spend the afternoon riding the Staten Island ferry, or feeding peanuts to the pigeons in Central Park. The fact remained, however, that I still had to see Catha Chester about a skeleton.

I sat and thought.

PRESENTLY I gave up thinking and called: "Hackett!"

Thackeray Hackett appeared in my door-

way looking genial. When Hackett looks genial his disposition is not to be trusted. His real nature is one consisting of eccentric animosities, exasperations and quiet furies. He might best be described as Fred Allen's snarl incarnate. He is aware of this and is trying —so far without success—to get over it. That's why he sometimes forces himself to look genial. Even when he is looking his most genial, however, there is a wry twist in his smile and truculent glitters lie deep in his baby blue eyes.

Less than a year ago Thackeray Hackett was operating a walnut-paneled and chromium-trimmed private detective agency on Park Avenue. Due to circumstances as complex as they were disastrous his license was revoked. Along with his license, of course, he lost his reputation, his office, his clients, his career and a load of coin.

Hackett was a born detective who could no longer function as a detective legally. When he was down to practically his last buck, Clarabelle, with her big warm heart, had made the mistake of hiring him for Headliner Files. We were paying him peanuts as a researcher —this being the best honest job he had been able to find. It was a reporting job, or, in another sense, one of investigation. In case we should ever need to know whether Frank Sinatra snores in his sleep we had Hackett to find it out for us.

Hackett had been working for Headliner Files for some weeks now, so I'd gotten to know him rather well. Knowing Hackett well is a special relationship to which an ordinary word like friendship does not apply. It is hard to think of something analogous to Hackett, but a pet porcupine comes to mind. That is, you might grow to feel very fond of a pet porcupine, and understand its every need, and admire it as a prime specimen of its kind, but you can never get to be really cuddly with it. Hackett's like that.

"Thack," I said, "Knoxville reports the discovery of a skeleton in the Smoky Mountains region. It may or may not be Otto Voster's. If Otto Voster never had his skull opened surgically the skeleton is not his and the search for him must go on. Apparently the only persons on earth who can settle the point quickly are Catha Chester and Julian Roberts. As to where the hell they may be at the moment, however, the Allied Press and I are baffled."

I gave him a brief resume of my futile attempts to locate the famous pair. He gazed at me with his eyebrows slightly lifted, took a newspaper off my desk—it was yesterday's *PM*—glanced into it, then looked into the Manhattan telephone directory and next used my phone to ask Eunice: "Get me Plaza 7-3232."

This was impossible. Nobody could look into yesterday's *PM* and immediately see where Catha Chester was right this minute. Hackett was evidently playing a long hunch. I caught up the *PM,* shifted across the hall to Clarabelle's telephone and said quickly, "Cut me in on my phone, Eunice."

I heard Hackett saying: "May I speak with Dell Kerry?"

The nicest voice I have ever heard answered: "This is Dell Kerry." I found myself hoping that Dell Kerry was this side of sixty and single. The girl to whom that voice belonged was one I wanted to meet at the earliest date possible.

"Headliner Files calling, Thackeray Hackett speaking. We have an important message for Catha Chester."

"Why, Catha and Jule left here not more than three minutes ago." Dell Kerry's voice was so wonderful to listen to, it was hard for me to keep my mind on what she was saying. "I'm expecting them back later in the day, though."

While listening I referred to yesterday's *PM.* There was a cut of Catha Chester, two columns wide—a fine job of photography, bringing out the great, dark depths of her eyes in her frail, small, little-girl face. Beneath it were a few lines of type: *First of a series of portraits of Catha Chester, who is sitting daily for her good friend Dell Kerry, photographer with newly opened studios on Fifth Avenue.*

I made a note to read the papers more carefully in future.

Hackett was saying over the line: "This is urgent, Miss Kerry. Can you tell me where Miss Chester is right now?"

"Yes, I can." Each little word captivated me. I wondered what quality it was in Dell Kerry's voice that made me want to roll over and purr. Her voice wasn't exactly melodious, or even soft, it was individual, it had character. That voice clothed in flesh must be something to whistle at. Its effect on me was sheer magic. If ever Dell Kerry should say to me in that exciting voice of hers, "Come to baby, do," I would straightway go to baby the very first time she said it. I sat there listening fascinated as she went on: "Catha mentioned when she left that she and Jule intended to drop in at Gus Pyke's apartment. That's at Two Hundred Something East Seventieth Street."

"Thank you very much, Miss Kerry," Hackett said.

"Not at all," Miss Kerry said.

"Miss Kerry," I wanted to say, "I love you," but I managed to save it.

Next Hackett asked Eunice for Gus Pyke's number. That name seemed vaguely familiar to me, although I was sure we didn't have him filed.

A man's voice, slightly thick-tongued, answered Hackett's opening question. "Yeah, this is Gus Pyke, this is good ol' Gus."

"Headliner Files calling," Hackett said. "We're trying to reach Catha Chester and Julian Roberts. Are they there?"

"I'm 'specting 'em," Pyke said. "They oughta be showing up here almost any minute now."

I RETURNED from Clarabelle's desk to suggest: "Let's get this point settled, Thack. Better see them personally. Be there when they arrive."

Hackett reached for his hat.

"The lovely lunch I had with Ingrid Bergman today has put me out of the mood for office work," I added. "Besides, I've taken a personal interest in that far-away skeleton. I'll go with you."

My real reason for wanting to accompany Hackett was important. If the skeleton was actually Voster's the news would come as a shock to Catha and her husband, for they had been Otto Voster's dearest friends. Although they had probably resigned themselves to never seeing him again—his failure to emerge from those thick mountain forests must mean he was dead—of course they couldn't be entirely sure so far. The news we had for them might decide this anxious question once and for all. I wanted to give it to them gently, in a way befitting Headliner Files' policy of amity. Hackett was still so new at the job, and he sometimes reacted to celebrities with such a peculiar lack of consideration for their sensitivities, that I felt I'd better take over this trip.

"Let's go," I said.

Hackett took his cane from the corner behind the hat-tree where he always leaves it leaning while inside the ffice. It's a straight walking stick of hickory, almost as thin as a pencil, sleekly tapered and as flexible as tempered steel. Hackett never steps outside without it. Although he doesn't appear to be the type, he keeps his cane in hand with a certain air of aristocratic negligence wherever he goes. This nonchalant manner of his is as deceitful as the cane itself, which is not the dandyish affectation it seems to be. Actually it is a weapon, one of really terrifying potentialities. Having witnessed a demonstration, I can testify that Hackett's little hickory stick deserves the same respect as should be accorded a short-tempered cobra.

He swung his cane jauntily as we left the office. He thoughtfully tapped the floor of a cab with it while we rode up to East Seventieth Street. He tucked it under his arm as we entered a small building of white stone where apartments rent for approximately the number of dollar bills it would take to paper the walls. Our destination was not on one of these inferior levels, however. It was the penthouse.

We buzzed and the door was opened by a florid-faced man of thirty-odd with wavy, sand-colored hair and a bristly mustache to match and intense eyes of an unusual reddish-brown color. He frowned at us with the annoyance of an impatient man who had been unnecessarily interrupted in the midst of an important task.

"We're Preston and Hackett, from Headliner Files," I said. "Are you Gus Pyke?"

He said: "No. I'm a friend of his. My name's Richie—John Smarte Richie, the playwright."

I said, "Oh, yes, how are you?" although I had never heard of a playwright named John Smarte Richie. "We'd like to see Catha Chester and Julian Roberts."

John Smarte Richie, the playwright, shook his head. "They're not here."

"We understand they're on their way," I insisted. "May we wait?"

John Smarte Richie shrugged. "Why not? Come in."

He turned away with a vague gesture toward the living room as a whole. Promptly and entirely he forgot us then. He fell into a deep easy chair, pulled a pad of foolscap across his knees, put on a dark preoccupied frown and began muzzling a gold pencil. John Smarte Richie was evidently working on a play then and there and didn't want to be bothered any more.

We practically tiptoed into the living room. It was the sort of living room which you would not be astonished to find in a penthouse on East Seventieth Street—expensively and formally stylized. A costly job of redecorating emphasized a masculine note. The paint and the furniture seemed new, yet everything seemed untidy and scuffed up, as if the occupant didn't really know how to live in these brackets. This penthouse on East Seventieth Street actually had a hint of Tobacco Road squalor in it. In spite of this and his inelegant name Gus Pyke seemed to be a bachelor with dough.

While examining the spotty decor I discovered Hackett standing stock still, his cane held hard in one fist, his whole body tight, his face looking bleached as he peered at a connecting doorway.

In this doorway stood a tall, lean, partly bald but otherwise not unhandsome guy who was shouldering an elephant gun, aiming it straight at Hackett's head.

I stood paralyzed also, too startled even to close my eyes to the sight.

Behind us, deep in cushions, John Smarte Richie, the playwright, continued working on his play.

THEN the guy in the doorway lowered the elephant gun and broke into roars of mirth. He really howled. He guffawed and he doubled up with the cramp of his loud laughter and he slapped his thighs and gleeful tears came into his eyes. Hackett and I just stood there, unamused, watching him poker-faced until he quieted down to a shoulder-shaking giggle.

"God, you should've seen the look on your face," he gasped to Hackett. "I wish I had a picture of the way your face looked when you turned around and saw me drawing a bead on you. God, it was as good as Bob Hope remembering he hasn't got any pants on."

"It must have been really very, very comical," Hackett said with a deadly evenness of tone.

Still laughing, the guy turned back into the bedroom with the big gun. Hackett moved after him and I went with Hackett, resentful and rubber-kneed. Fixed on one wall of the bedroom was a large glass-doored cabinet containing a display of firearms of various kinds. The bald guy put the elephant gun inside it, still chortling.

"Honest, you had nothing to be so scared about, pal. None of these guns is loaded, see? None of 'em *could* be loaded, on account of I've never even bought any ammunition to fit 'em, see? There're all these guns here but not a single cartridge in the place, just to be safe, see?"

He removed a .38 revolver from the cabinet, pointed its muzzle at his temple and pulled the trigger.

"See?" he said. "None of 'em's loaded."

As further proof he removed a pearl-handled .25 automatic from the case, pressed it over his heart and pulled the trigger.

"See? Empty, all of 'em."

John Smart Richie looked up from his playwriting long enough to complain in irritated tones: "Cut that out, Gus. When it comes to guns your so-called sense of humor is just too damn' childish. Some day you're going to do that once too often."

"Shaddap, shaddap, whatta you know about guns, anyway, Rich?" the bald guy retorted. "I'm just showing these boys none of my guns is ever loaded, see?"

He pressed the .38 revolver to his left temple and the .25 automatic to his right temple and pulled both triggers.

"See?"

Neither Hackett nor I commented on this idiotic demonstration. The guy wasn't sober and even in his soberest moments he obviously wasn't too bright. If this was Gus Pyke I couldn't quite figure him settling in this classy layout, either, although I could begin to understand its abused condition.

"Shouldn't've scared you boys like that, though," he said, turning alcoholically contrite. "I 'pologize. Good ol' Gus is sorry, boys." He pumped Hackett's hand, then mine, and went on without having heard our names. "Gladda know you, friends, and that's fromma heart. This is my gun collection, see? 'S my hobby, collecting famous guns. Not for shooting at all, just for keeping. Every one of these guns has got a history, see? That big one I pointed at you, pal, Teddy Roosevelt used it hunting elephants in Africa. That pair of six-shooters there used to belong to William S. Hart, see? But here, boys, here, take a good look at this one. This is a prize. Here's my baby, my favorite of all. Remember the celebrated Elwell murder case, back in 1920? Famous murder case, never solved, remember? Well, I can't tell you how I got holda this gun, but, brothers, it's the very gun that was used to kill Elwell."

He held it forth for us to marvel over—a massive .45 Army automatic.

Hackett said: "It's a phony."

Pyke frowned at him. "Elwell was murdered with a .45 Army automatic and this is the gun."

"Elwell was murdered with a .45 Army automatic," Hackett said, "but this gun is not the one. The guy who sold you this gun misrepresented it. You bought a dog."

"This is the very gun that killed Elwell, no kidding," Pyke said. "Happened right here in this same block on East Seventieth. Date was June eleven, 1920. Joseph Bowne Elwell, sportsman, wrote books about how to play bridge. To this day nobody knows who shot him or why, but this is the very same gun he was knocked off with."

"The weapon of murder in the Elwell case was never found," Hackett said.

Trying to ignore him, Pyke talked to me. "Elwell sitting in a downstairs room, see? About eight A.M. Sitting there reading his morning mail when somebody came in, somebody wanting to kill him, and with this very same gun—"

"The weapon of murder in the Elwell case was never found," Hackett said again.

Pyke glared at him. "Shaddap, shaddap, you dumb dope, and listen to a guy who knows what he's talking about. The murderer went up to Elwell with this gun, with this very same gun, see? Only it was loaded then and it hasn't got any bullets in it now, see? He held this gun two, three feet from Elwell's head, see?"

Pyke illustrated by holding the .45 automatic at arm's length, pointing it at his own forehead.

"Then he pulled the trigger just once, see?"

Pyke pulled the trigger just once.

The result was a blast that whammed through the entire penthouse.

Next the rooms seemed crammed with silence until, behind us, in the living room, John Smarte Richie said quietly: "Well, whattaya know."

In the bedroom Hackett and I stood gazing at Gus Pyke, at the gun in his lifted hand, at the black hole centered low in his forehead, at the first bright red blood trickling down the bridge of his nose, at the expression on his face, an expression of complete but painless disbelief.

Then Pyke's arm swung down, a signal of finality. The gun fell out of his hand and he drawled, "Aw-w, gee," in a tone of mild remorse.

He dropped down to his knees, but no farther. There he stayed, on his knees as if in prayer, uncannily keeping his balance.

"He was right about that last part," Hackett said in the silence. "That's just where Elwell got it, smack between the eyes."

CHAPTER TWO

Homicide Repeats Itself

IT IS officially recorded in the police annals of New York City for 1920 that Joseph Bowne Elwell continued to live for several hours after a bullet from a .45 Army automatic (a weapon which never came to light) had passed completely through his head from front to back. Gus Pyke's demise was similarly delayed. He couldn't last long, of course, but he wasn't dead so far.

With Pyke still kneeling there on the bedroom floor in that zombielike state of equilibrium, his wide-open eyes full of disbelief, Hackett turned quickly to the connecting door, closed it and bolted it.

Then putting his cane aside for a moment, Hackett slipped his hands under Pyke's armpits. I stumbled over to help. We lifted Pyke to the bed. This man with the hole in his forehead and a bullet in his brain actually retained some slight power of motion and a sort of consciousness. That black spot between his eyebrows didn't even oleed any more. He lay there with his eyes still open, still looking a little puzzled, as if trying to figure how he could have made such a dumb mistake.

Behind us the door-knob rattled, then a fist pounded and John Smarte Richie called through: "What the hell happened? What've you got this door locked for? Let me in there!"

Hackett said over his shoulder: "Phone for an ambulance."

After a moment of hesitation footfalls moved quickly away from the door. Richie was evidently heading for the telephone.

"I don't like that locked door either," I said. "I'm getting out of here."

Hackett moved back to the door with more agility than I could manage in my numbness. He stood against it, preventing me from reaching the bolt. He held his cane and watched the man on the bed.

"What's the idea, Thack?"

"He's still ticking. I want it nice and quiet for him."

"I would rather be in some other nice, quiet place," I said. "Thack, we can't be of any help to him. We never saw him before. We don't know anything about him. He means nothing to us. He's had a bad break, but that's his headache, not ours—and what a hell of a headache it must be! If we're smart we'll get out of here."

"Dying men sometimes say and do enlightening things," Thack observed.

"Whatever this one may say or do, it's no affair of ours. This accident happened to happen when we were with him, that's all. Let's blow."

Hackett gave me an acrid glance. "Accident?"

"Certainly. Clarabelle isn't paying us to get mixed up in foolish accidents, Thack."

"We're mixed up in this one regardless," Hackett pointed out. "We witnessed it."

I was dizzy. "All we came here for was to ask one little question. We came on business. Our business is information about famous people. This guy Gus Pyke is not famous now, never was famous and won't be famous even after he cools off."

"Such is fame," Hackett said impatiently. "There was a time when this guy's death would have made big headlines from coast to coast."

Footfalls returned to the door behind us. Richie knocked again.

"Let me in," he said. "Come on, let me in there!"

Hackett went on being the self-appointed guardian of this dying man's privacy. He seemed not to hear Richie's continued thumping on the door. Gus Pyke, however, did hear it. It aroused a response in him.

Gus Pyke said, perfectly clearly: "Thirteen shrouds."

I looked at Hackett. Hackett lifted his eyebrows but otherwise didn't move. Now the knocking stopped. Richie stood there on the opposite side of the latched door, listening.

"Ambulance is coming," he said. "Let me in, will you?"

Not moving, we watched Gus Pyke. The ambulance really wouldn't matter very much. The best doctor in the world couldn't do more than wag his head over Gus. He was certain to die. It was merely a matter of a few minutes, or, like Elwell, several hours at most.

Gus was swallowing slowly, trying to get a few more words out. Finally they came,

blurted syllables which might be complete words in themselves or only a fragment of what he had meant to say.

"Two pair—"

I wondered if he knew he was saying something. He seemed to possess consciousness of a kind, but actually it was a dream state, a sort of rigid delirium. The words he had uttered might bear no relation at all to the thoughts squirming in his pierced brain, and even those thoughts might be meaningless. It seemed so—it had sounded as if Gus had made a reference to the game of poker. Hackett thought this was as good an assumption as any.

Hackett said: "Three of a kind beats two pair."

Gus laughed raggedly. The dying man actually laughed in good humor. He said: "Yeah, three of a kind, that's right." Then he laughed again in a quiet, pleasant way, as a man might laugh when sinking under anesthesia.

Richie knocked, a loud, angry sound. "What's going on in there? Let me in. Open this door!"

He banged his fists so hard on the door that the noise frightened the dying man. Out of the torture in Gus Pyke's brain came more short syllables, in a wavering breath. They sounded like this: "Shoots too shoots too shoots too shoots toosh."

Then he relaxed luxuriously all over. There was a gentle easing of muscular tension throughout his lean body. His head rolled just a little and he seemed to sigh like a contented baby and to sink softly down into a condition of perfect comfort.

IT SEEMED very quiet. I couldn't imagine what we were waiting for now, but Hackett showed no inclination to leave. Neither did he move to touch the automatic lying on the floor, the gun that had not killed Elwell but really had killed Gus Pyke. Hackett stayed there, backed against the closed door, looking thoughtful, until there were new noises behind us and a new voice said with authority: "Ambulance."

Then Hackett opened the bolt. Richie pushed his way in first. Two white-coated interns came in after him carrying a rolled-up litter. One of them gave Gus a light once-over and shook his head, looking griped.

"We can't move him until the medical examiner's seen him." To the other intern he said: "Call 'em, Mike."

As Mike headed for the phone in the living room Richie turned to Hackett, his reddish eyes intense in his florid face. "What kind of a trick was that, keeping me out of here? You're strangers, but this guy was a good friend of mine. What did he say?"

The intern ordered us: "You two guys stick around. The homicide squad will take over."

Richie threw an irritated gesture at them. "I never saw these guys before in my life, but as far as this is concerned I know they're all right. They had nothing to do with this. Gus was always a damn' fool about handling guns. He was always clowning, making like he was blowing his brains out. I kept telling him some day one of those empty guns would turn out to be not so damn' empty as he thought, and today, just now, by God, it finally happened. He was a crazy, clowning fool with guns. Nobody's to blame for this but Gus himself, the dumb sock. These two guys are absolutely in the clear."

Richie could defend us without loving us, for next he turned on Hackett with his peculiar eyes seeming to get red hot.

"But you had no right to keep me out of here. I want to know what went on. I heard Gus saying something before he died. I'm going to find out what it was. Come on, give out, let's have it. What did he say?"

Lighting a cigarette, the intern remarked in a tired, scornful way: "Are you kidding? Nobody in that condition could have uttered so much as a single syllable."

Richie looked confused.

"Think so?" Hackett said softly. "A guy with a hole in his head can't talk?"

"Not *that* kind of hole." The intern took a quick, hard, suspicious look at Hackett. "Well, he didn't say anything, did he?"

Hackett shrugged and turned away. I quietly followed him into the living room. On the baby grand there was a large, glamorized, lucite-framed portrait of Gus signed *Dell Kerry*.

In the bedroom Richie began arguing with the interns as to whether or not Pyke could have spoken. They didn't see us easing toward the entrance. Hackett had it open and we were halfway out when the telephone rang. The instrument was right there near the door. Hackett gave me the willies by turning back to answer it.

A young woman's voice said: "Hello, is that you, Gus?"

"Gus can't come to the phone right now," Hackett told her.

"Then will you give him a message, please? Just tell him that Catha and Jule won't come this afternoon after all, but we'll see him a little later, probably after the broadcast. Thank you so much."

"Where— Miss Chester, where—"

"Good-by," Catha Chester was saying while hanging up.

Down there in the mountains of eastern Tennessee there was a skeleton which would have to go nameless a little longer.

Richie was still wrangling with the interns

in the bedroom when Hackett and I left. Our departure might be illegal but I felt it couldn't make our situation much more uncomfortable. The interns hadn't taken our names. Richie might or might not remember who we were. We might be lucky enough to squeeze out of this thing altogether. Anyway we left, avoiding the elevator in favor of the stairs.

Back at Headliner Files after an anxiously wordless trip, I led the way directly into Clarabelle's office. It was still deserted. The afternoon was practically all used up now and Clarabelle hadn't yet come back from lunch. Bending to her intercom box, I tipped the cam connecting it with the desk of Polly Digby, our secretary-general. "Polly, where the hell is our Clarabelle?"

"I don't know, Mr. Preston, except she phoned in to say she won't be back today."

The news was not unprecedented but this was a bad day for a playback on it.

I took Hackett into my office and said: "Now let's make sure we see eye to eye on this, Thack. It may or may not be serious, depending on developments. There's a lot of time, money and care invested in Headliner Files. It's a sound, growing business. At the same time it's a unique thing, as tender as an apple-blossom, which can be destroyed by such subtle poisons as bad will and lack of confidence. It would break Clarabelle's heart to see it hurt or wrecked by the wrong kind of publicity. Luckily our noses are clean, so our safest play is to stay clammed up until such time as the cops may come sniffing around, in which event we couldn't do better than to stick to the truth. You understand that, Thack?"

"What could be simpler?" Hackett said in an odd tone.

"We still haven't picked up any information about Otto Voster's skull for our valued client the Allied Press," I reminded him. "If you have any more hunches as to where Catha Chester may be at the moment, see what you can get out of them."

Hackett went to a telephone in the main office. A few minutes later, he had a report. "Dell Kerry says Catha Chester and Julian Roberts will be back at her studio within half an hour. They seem to have spent the whole afternoon wandering hither and yon."

"There's a note about that in our dossier on Miss Chester. She likes to drift aimlessly around town whenever she's rehearsing a new play or going on the air. It helps her to relax her mind and get her into the mood of a part. Julian Roberts seems to like it too. They'll be on the air tonight at eight, their first radio appearance since the accident. In fact, tonight's show will be the story of their experience down there in the Great Smokies. I don't want to miss it."

AS I LEFT the office with Hackett, Headliner Files was calling it a day. The rumble of file drawers had grown quiet and there was only an occasional jingle from a telephone. All the girls were putting on fresh lips and hurrying off to meet their dates, except Polly. It was her turn for the graveyard watch. Someone must be on hand at all hours of the night, as well as all day Sunday, to answer such urgent questions as our subscribers may choose to ask, such as: What breed is that odd dog of Lily Pons? (Answer: a Lhasa Apso.)

Dell Kerry's studio on Fifth Avenue was only a few blocks away, so we walked. I was excited at the prospect of meeting my favorite photographer but fearful that the rest of her couldn't live up to her vocal cords. The way Hackett swung his cane seemed eager too, in a sinister sort of way.

"Stop mulling over that dead man, Thack," I said. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed, but maybe we're shut of him, and if so it's good riddance."

"Don't be such a snob about him, Pres," Hackett answered. "Does a corpse have to bleed blue before you'll associate with it? You think this one is just an ordinary, undistinguished run-of-the-mill dead man. Actually he would have rated a thick folder with us if our service had existed in his day. Don't you remember Gus Pyke at all?"

"His name does seem vaguely familiar," I said.

"Such is fame." Hackett repeated the comment bitterly. "Think back twelve or fifteen years. There was an outbreak of typhoid up in Alaska, a serious epidemic. It was really knocking people over, whole families at once, doctors, nurses, everybody. Their supply of vaccine ran out, so a shipment was sent off by plane from the States. This was in the dead of winter, with blizzards tearing loose all over Canada, the worst winter storms on record. The plane carrying the serum headed into all that mess of weather and just disappeared, never to be seen again."

"Sure, I remember that," I said, "but then a second plane with another load of vaccine did get through."

Hackett nodded. "The pilot of that second plane, the one which did get through, was Gus Pyke."

"By God, I remember now, he really was. Why, that one flight made the guy a real hero. After that the papers and the newsreels were full of him. He was lionized everywhere. He made himself a mint of money signing testimonials for fountain pens and cigarettes. The big air-lines scrambled to hire him for big coin. So that was Gus Pyke!

"He looked different then," I went on. "He had a fine build and all his hair. I remember

that dapper, waxed, needle-pointed mustache of his, and his classy pilot's uniform, the one he designed himself. Errol Flynn in technicolor never looked more adventurous. Well, well. So the great Gus Pyke is dead now. Gus Pyke, the hero, the flying Apollo, who isn't handsome or a hero any more. Funny how we forget. I hadn't heard him mentioned since he settled down to piloting those big transcontinental passenger planes."

Hackett lifted a queer smile at me. "He didn't last long at that. His fame went to his head, then he wasn't so famous as he once was, which made him take up drinking in a big way, so finally they took away his transport license."

"Last I heard," Hackett said quietly, "Pyke was taking any odd job he could find, grubbing for coffee and cakes, down and out."

"If having a penthouse on East Seventieth Street is being down and out," I remarked, "I would like to work up to that level of poverty."

Beside a bronze doorway on Fifth Avenue there was a display case containing a striking portrait of Catha Chester—the same one we had already seen in *PM*. I was disturbed to find Hackett narrowing his eyes at this praiseworthy photograph of an eminent dramatic artist. Her personal and professional distinction impressed him unfavorably. He actually sneered at her.

"None of that, Thack!" I said, and tugged him away. We went up the stairs and he frowned darkly all the way. Pausing at a door that bore in new gold the simple lines, *Dell Kerry, Photographic Portraitist,* I thought it best to caution Hackett.

"You're about to encounter several very famous people face to face, Thack. Please try your best to be civil to them."

It is a fact that Clarabelle could not have hired a man worse suited temperamentally to his job than Hackett. Hackett in his own peculiar ways is almost as allergic to celebrities as he naturally is to arsenic.

This animosity of his is deep-rooted and, I must admit, not without reason. It was a celebrity who had caused Hackett to meet his professional destruction.

You may remember the murder of the Merriam girl in Connecticut last year. The case was petering out, the local authorities having learned nothing as to who had strangled the pretty little nineteen-year-old victim, when Hackett went to work on it. He discovered the murderer's identity. The murderer was one of radio's biggest singing stars, a warbling Adonis ranking just below Sinatra and Crosby, the swoon-bait on a multi-million-dollar show with a soaring Hooper, a property backed by powers too great for Hackett to buck. Being a man of integrity Hackett had bucked them regardless, and now the male canary was still twittering over the wavelengths, having neatly escaped the consequences of a dirty murder, and Hackett was professionally dead.

"I understand your feelings toward celebrities, Thack, and I sincerely sympathize with you," I said, "but not all of them are maniacal little egos who trample others ruthlessly in their climb to the dizzy heights of fame."

"No? Look sharp behind you anyway, brother, and wear a knife-proof back-protector," Hackett said.

"Don't be silly. Some celebrities are the nicest people on earth, with deep warmth in them, and richness of personality, as I'm sure you'll find Catha Chester and her husband to be."

I opened the door and we walked unexpectedly in on a nice little party.

THE party was occurring in a large boxlike room which somehow combined a waiting room with a studio. The avenue side was something out of *House Beautiful* while the opposite space was taken up by a great wheeled camera, spotlights, reflectors, backdrops and pictorial properties such as Doric columns, Grecian urns and Victorian mirrors. About two dozen nice, clean, prosperous-looking people were talking over cocktails. Among them I recognized several famous faces from the stage and the screen, two noted film directors and a critic of fearful influence. In one corner a very socially conscious and widely celebrated radio writer was talking with Catha Chester and Julian Roberts.

A young woman wearing a smart mannish suit came to us with a straight, easy stride and the smile of an old friend. "Hello," she said.

Instantly I felt like a freshly uncapped bottle of supercharged sizzle-water. I stood there grinning at her in foolish ecstasy, all abubble inside. Visually she had the same qualities that had vocally made me her slave. This young woman had been around, and she was nice, and she was aware of the score, and she had learned how to handle herself, and in a flash I had come to know her like a pal.

"Hello," she said again as I stood there enraptured, and she laughed a little, amused by the way she had overwhelmed me, and liking it.

"Well, *hello!*" she said, and I finally managed to answer, "Hello," without adding, "darling."

I must have introduced Hackett and identified myself because she said next: "Oh, yes, you're from Headliner Files. There's nothing in it, but have a cocktail anyway."

I saw a tray-laden maid float by and then there was a Martini in my hand.

"No, thanks," Hackett said. So, along with all his other odd quirks, he was a non-drinker too? "Nothing in it?"

"That news story," Dell Kerry explained. ter's bones. Just a few minutes after Catha about it. Sorry, but those aren't Otto Vos-ter's bones. Just a few minutes after Catha cleared that up there was a radio flash saying the skeleton belonged to a Louisville banker who got lost on a hunting trip last year."

"Some days I don't get a damn' thing done," I said. I kept grinning at her idiotically. "Some days I don't care."

Julian Roberts came to us curiously. He had a certain flipness of bearing, a professional slickness of manner. He was shorter and smaller than he appeared behind the footlights. His face was broad and a healthy brown, his presence was forceful and charming. He was ten or twelve years older than Catha.

"The Headliner Files men? You told them?" he asked of Dell softly. He looked at us with his sad brown eyes and said: "No, no, I only wish— But no, we know nothing more now than we knew before, there is nothing more we can say except—Hard as it is—The days as they pass—We can't help feeling, more and more, Catha and I, that there will never be any more news of Otto, never. And

yet we will always go on hoping that some day—"

Roberts broke off with a flutter of concern and glided after Hackett. Hackett, his cane still in hand, was advancing straight upon Catha Chester. Catha turned from the radio writer to whom she had been talking. She looked up at Hackett with sweetest trustfulness, giving this stranger her most expectant attention.

Roberts was all kindly solicitude for his wife. I had followed apprehensively and Dell Kerry had come with her easy, sure stride. No one else noticed this quiet huddle forming. Somehow it was ominous, thanks entirely to Hackett.

Also, I was fascinated in a jittery way by the conjunction of this discredited ex-shamus with one of the brightest stars in our contemporary theatre. There she was with her great dark eyes lifted trustfully in her fey little face to the hostile stare of this embittered, down-at-heel ex-shamus.

"What was Gus Pyke to you?" Hackett asked her flatly.

"I don't know Gus at all well. He's more a friend of Jule's than mine," Catha Chester said. Then her wistful smile became a little puzzled. " 'Was?' "

Roberts' sharp gesture didn't stop Hackett's saying: "Gus is dead."

All Roberts' nerves were poised on tip-toe. He was alarmed, exasperated by Hackett, enormously concerned for Catha. "No, no, please. Catha, darling, it's a mistake, you mustn't think about it."

"Gus is dead?" Catha said quietly. "Gus is *dead?*"

She stood there staring at Hackett with her great dark eyes wide open. Her small, frail face turned white and she shuddered. Roberts patted her head as if she were a little child and crooned reassurances to her while I tried to pull Hackett away. Hackett wasn't budging.

"Now she is so upset!" Roberts said it in a hiss of despair. "In only a little while we must go on the air for a full hour show. I tried so hard to keep this from her. Catha, get hold of yourself, darling, please, Catha—"

"That's getting pretty upset over the death of a casual acquaintance, all right." Hackett eyed Roberts. "While we're at it, what was Gus Pyke to *you?*"

Roberts was fuming, aching to sock him. "Catha told you, Gus was a friend, that is what he was. If a friend of ours is dead must we answer to you?"

"Not necessarily to me," Hackett said, "but somebody should answer for it sooner or later."

Catha gazed pale and fearful at Hackett and the others in the room were noticing that something was wrong. Roberts began moving quietly closer to this little man with the cane.

I had a grip on Hackett's arm and I pulled hard. I hustled him out the door.

THE AIR of Fifth Avenue, pungent with its usual load of exhaust gas, felt cool and good on my face. "I should have let Roberts knock your ears down," I said hotly. "Here's a sensitive actress about to hit the air coast-to-coast with millions waiting to hear her. So you hand her a case of the willies. Besides that, you throw Roberts into a fury. If they fluff their lines or blow up entirely they can bless you for it. Maybe they'll even have to cancel the show. There could be plenty of hell to pay over this, Thack. What're you trying to do, wreck the whole works, including Headliner Files?"

Unconcerned, Hackett nuzzled his cane in thought.

"What's the difference what Gus may have been to Catha or Roberts or anyone else? They were casual friends of his, just as they're casual friends of hundreds of other people. So all right, so what more could it possibly add up to?"

"The very question that interests me," Hackett said.

"Thack, we can't run this business without the cooperation of our celebrities who are the subject and the source of the information we sell for dough. We've got to coddle 'em, not needle 'em. We can't go around causing the nervous collapse of great actresses like Catha Chester and making everybody hate us, including a nationwide broadcasting system, when—"

JULIAN ROBERTS hurried from the bronze doorway holding Catha's arm snugly. They turned away at a fast walk. Should I go after them with an apology or let bad enough alone? While I was wondering, Dell Kerry came to us, seeming as unworried by the incident as Hackett.

The voice of my dreams said: "She'll be all right. Catha's a gutty girl, more so than most people think. Where could we go that's nice and quiet and private?"

"There's a lovely cocktail party going on upstairs," I reminded her.

"That's a barn of a place where I've been working damn' hard all day, and I'd like a change of scene, please. The others will just stay on without missing me. I want to hear Catha's show tonight, but the broadcasting studio isn't the place for that—no illusion—so I'd like to go to a nice, quiet, comfortable place where there's pleasant company and a good radio."

"My home," Hackett said like a shot. "Taxi!"

I eyed him with rancor. I could think of many places where I would like to spend an hour or two with Dell Kerry, but Hackett's place, wherever it might be, was not one of them. What would it be like? Broke as he was, he probably had a cold-water flat, four flights up, somewhere around the Bowery. But it was too late now. There was the taxi, and Hackett was ushering Dell into it, and the next moment I was necessarily rolling along.

Dell looked at Hackett curiously, amused by his evident earnestness. "Would you like to know what Gus Pyke meant to me, too?"

Hackett said, "I was coming to that."

"I hardly knew him."

"What about that guy John Smarte Richie, the playwright?"

"Just friends again."

It was pleasant to have Dell sitting there beside me—so pleasant that I didn't wonder why she had left her famous guests at a party of her own which must have been important to her in a business sense.

Our cab headed not into the slums but into Sutton Place. It did not stop, anywhere in that large surrounding neighborhood which has come to be known as Sutton Place, understand, it stopped *in* Sutton Place, in the very heart of it, at a spot which few New Yorkers have ever seen.

Hackett led us through an old wrought-iron gate and across a terrace of mossy, age-old bricks. The Queensboro Bridge was a high, dark arc against the misty sky. The East River flowed directly below us, broad and moon-silvered. Trees, real trees, shaded a few old benches, and there was a row of little windows hinting happy privacies within. Manhattan was an ocean's width away. This was a venerable, peaceful nook tucked away somewhere on the Left Bank or perhaps in quaintest Vienna. And this was Hackett taking us home with him.

He unlocked a little crooked door and we went down a step into a room and he snapped a switch. We stood there and looked. It was so plain, so simple and so perfect. There were pine panels, smooth with the fine wax of time, and hand-hewn beams smoked by the years. Had we been antique dealers we would have thought we had suddenly died and gone to an authenticated heaven. He had a wall full of books and record albums. He had an original Cezanne, a Van Gogh and a Utrillo. It felt so lovingly lived-in. It made my own apartment seem as cozy as a skating rink. Clarabelle's place on Gramercy Square seemed by comparison about as chic as a mouthful of gold teeth.

Hackett had evidently bought this home at the height of his success as a Park Avenue detective, and evidently he intended to keep it come doomsday. He might be threadbare, he might go hungry, he might be forced to work for Headliner Files for enough tin to meet the taxes, but when he went home he went to heaven every night.

"Thack," I said, turning to express my admiration—but I paused because he was standing there just inside his door, tight all over again, holding his cane alertly, gazing at nothing, listening.

There were footfalls on the old bricks. A bell tinkled faintly somewhere nearby. A door opened and a man's voice asked in a thick, slurring way: "Is dis where a guy name of T'ackeray Hackett lives?"

A woman answered nicely: "No, that's right next door."

The thick voice said, "T'anks, lady," and the footfalls came on. Then there was a fumbling series of thumps on Hackett's knocker.

Hackett opened the door and we looked at a squat, neckless man whose suit, much too small for him, bound across his barrel chest and his hamlike thighs. He had listless eyes with a crust of scar tissue above them and a flat, wheezing nose. His lips were thick, as if permanently swollen, and he puckered them into the shape of a doughnut as his heavy tongue pushed his words through the hole.

"Dis where T'ackeray Hackett lives?"

"That's right," Hackett said softly.

"*You* T'ackeray Hackett?"

"That's right."

"Say, dat's fine!" he said, seeming really pleased. "Gee, I been lookin' all over fer yuh."

He reached to his hip pocket, tugged up a huge blue revolver and pushed it in Hackett's direction.

"Now I'm gonna kill yuh," he announced.

CHAPTER THREE

A Stick in Time

HE STOOD there with his tongue squirming in that doughnut-hole of a mouth, squinting as he aimed the revolver, this slug-nutty giant who wished to do the best job he could of murdering Hackett on the spot—Hackett, who was unarmed except for his slender walking-stick.

Before he could pull the trigger something occurred which our homicidal visitor could hardly have expected.

Hackett quickly brought his cane to a horizontal position six inches above his head. He whirled it—spun it so rapidly that it became a blur. This in itself was enough to give the gunman pause. In wonderment he heard the spinning cane giving out a brief, deep, singing hum. Then, with a gentle lunge, Hackett brought his cane downward with a lightning-swift flick.

A gash opened across the big man's wrist, releasing a freshet of blood. The gun became too heavy for the damaged wrist to support. It drooped. Its owner lurched back against the doorframe, looking down at it, stupefied.

"Hello, Kewpie," Hackett said.

The big subhuman brute lifted his head, dull surprise mingling with numb shock in his eyes.

"You're Kewpie Moggs," Hackett said softly. "Your right name's Orville, but everybody calls you Kewpie."

Kewpie's eyes began to glimmer with hatred for Hackett.

"I used to see you around, Kewpie," Hackett went on softly. "Sometimes at the training gyms over on Eighth, now and then when a pal brought you into the New York Athletic Club. I sparred with you there once, myself."

In a smouldering fury Kewpie Moggs tried to lift the gun. His hand still drooped. There was blood on it now, his wrist was bleeding freely, and his hand wasn't functioning properly any more. He began shifting the gun to his left hand.

"Don't do it, Kewpie," Hackett said. "Drop it."

"Naw, naw!" Kewpie was enraged by the hurt Hackett had done him. "Naw, I ain't gonna drop it! I'm gonna kill yuh!"

While Dell and I stood there, able to think of nothing better to do than to stare in frozen consternation, Kewpie poked the gun toward Hackett in his left hand and pulled the trigger.

The report slammed against all the fine old peaceful walls. The bullet sped over Hackett's right shoulder and thumped into a row of books on a shelf. Hackett sighed and lifted his stick above his head and its dirgelike note signalled an attack that did startling things to Orville "Kewpie" Moggs.

His hat whipped off his head. A fragment of his necktie fluttered in the air. A cut appeared across the knuckles of his left hand and poured out red. Another slash began bleeding on his right cheek. Blows smacked against his jaws with more power than a boxer's mitt had ever delivered, against his temples with stunning force, against the sides of his knees with paralyzing pain. Hackett's stick swished, whacked, flicked, stabbed and sang while he moved his feet in a gentle shuffle, like Bojangles warming up. Within ten seconds by the clock Moggs had suffered punishment more terrible than he might have absorbed in ten rounds in the ring.

Out of this giant's mouth came a bull's bawl of fear. Moggs staggered backward, still hanging onto the gun, now with both hands, and in both of them there was too little strength to pull the trigger. He howled again in mortal terror and flung himself into a wild lumbering run across the terrace.

Hackett sprang after him, cane still gripped. Somewhere out there in the darkness he caught up with Moggs. We heard the bass hum of his cane, the snakelike swishing, the flicks so sharp that we winced at each slapping impact. The gunman screamed, a sound of animal desperation. There were running footfalls again, then quiet.

Dell Kerry looked down at the blood spattered on Hackett's doorstep and said: "My God, what happened?"

Drawing a shaky breath, I said: "You have just seen a demonstration of something called single-sticking. In the Eighteenth Century it was a favorite sport among those who felt that duelling with sabers was too pantie-waist. If there are any ears or fingers lying about, just kick them into a corner and the maid will sweep them up when she comes in."

There were no more sounds of terror in the night—the little spot of paradise under the Queensboro Bridge had gone back to being idyllic. I looked for Hackett's kitchen and found a neat, modern one containing a choice assortment of liquors. I carried a Scotch and soda to Dell. She drank half of it quickly and then asked: "It seemed to be a form of mayhem. You called it single-sticking?"

"The first time I saw Hackett in action I couldn't believe it either," I said. "Thack was a private dick until he lost his license. He lost his pistol permit at the same time, of course, and can never get another. He'd be foolish to pack a gat illegally, so he carries a cane instead. Just a thin little hickory stick, which is not to be sneered at, sister, as you have seen. He tells me that in wet weather he might use a parasol the same way, but that's something I have yet to see."

Dell shuddered. I was listening for sounds that might signal Hackett's return.

"A cane is legal everywhere and beautifully deceptive too," I went on. "As you saw in Kewpie's case, nobody expects a dandyish little item of personal adornment to leap up and scalp you, or worse. Single-stickers don't fool. Their tactics are to avoid being hit while hitting where it will do the most damage, and never mind any of those niceties that concerned the Marquis of Queensberry."

Dell's glass was empty. She took mine, which was also emptier than I'd thought, and said: "Let me fix 'em this time." After looking across the terrace and seeing no sign of Hackett, I followed her into the kitchen. This might have been a deliciously cozy moment all alone with her, except for our thought of bloodshed.

"As you noticed, Hackett didn't waggle that cane wildly, like something out of 'Life with Father.' There's a technique. The 'on guard' position is the one where he held the cane horizontally above his head. That spinning

business is called the *moulinet,* and I imagine it may be likened to a rattlesnake's rattling. The idea is simply to strike and get back fast for the next one. You bring the stick down in a cutting swipe, or jab it, or flick it—a flick being powerful enough to split a one-inch pine plank or a skull—"

"But why did the man come here to kill him?"

"Hackett has that effect on some people, that's all."

THERE were brisk footfalls on the terrace. Hackett came in with a smile.

"When last seen, our murderous friend was proceeding westward in need of medical attention," he informed us. "There was no particular point in staying with him."

"You pulled your punches on him," I remarked. "You could have poked out both his eyes or severed his jugular, but instead you just slashed him up a bit. Why were you so gentle with him?"

"He means more alive than dead."

"Where did he come from and why did he want to murder you?"

Hackett gave me a sharp, impatient glance, as if this were something I should know without having to be told. He didn't offer Dell any sort of explanation either. He was thoughtfully tapping the head of his cane against his teeth when the telephone rang.

Polly Digby was on the wire, calling from our office in search of me. "Mr. Preston," Polly informed me, "Miss Brown's been trying everywhere to find you. She's all excited about something. She mentioned the police, Mr. Preston. She said she wants you here at the office right away, with Mr. Hackett."

"Thank you, Polly," I answered grimly. "I'll be there right away, with Mr. Hackett."

Hackett seemed neither surprised nor disturbed by this summons. He asked Dell Kerry politely please to stay here and make herself at home. He assured her we would be back in time for Catha Chester's broadcast. He promised her that no more murderers would prowl the premises. I couldn't understand how he could feel so damn sure of this, but he did succeed in relieving Dell's doubts. She sank into a soft chair, kicked off her shoes, curled her toes into the rug and gave me a smile that promised she'd be here when we got back.

As we rolled toward Headliner Files in a cab I remarked wryly to Hackett: "Your old acquaintances often grow to feel like killing you, no doubt?"

He looked forlorn. "Orville Moggs is one of fame's step-children. He never got anywhere as a fighter but as a sparring partner he has held together forever. At one time or another every pug known to Jacobs Beach has sparred with Kewpie and knocked him silly. The slug-drunk condition is not permanent, but don't let it fool you. Kewpie can't think, but that makes him all the more dangerous. Because he can't think he's not easy to stop. He'll go right on slugging long after a congenital moron has shown enough sense to quit. In a man of intelligence that quality might be called inspiring tenacity or unconquerable courage. In Kewpie I don't know what to call it, but it can be just as deadly."

A light was shining behind the lowered venetian blinds of the front office of Headliner Files. I used my key and led Hackett directly to Clarabelle's desk.

Clarabelle showed no signs of anxiety at the moment. She was laughing gaily into her telephone. There is hardly a moment of the day or night when Clarabelle hasn't a handful of telephone. To her Mr. Bell's invention is a source of endless delight, without which life would not be worth living and our civilization would crumble into inarticulate dust.

Since Clarabelle knows millions of people intimately, one of my major headaches is Headliner Files' monthly telephone bill—there being hardly any spot on the globe with which Clarabelle will not set up telephonic traffic when the urge hits her. After a glance at my

face, however, she said quickly: "Good-by, Eleanor." It was not at all improbable that she had been chatting protractedly with her friend Mrs. Roosevelt, wherever on earth Mrs. Roosevelt might be at the moment.

"Walter, doll," she said at once in her warm, sympathetic way, "tell Clarabelle what's wrong."

"First, Clarabelle," I said patiently, "you tell us how-come this urgent conference."

"Lieutenant Blackley is coming, doll," Clarabelle answered uneasily, patting all the golden ringlets which cluster on her head.

"Blackley?" I glanced in alarm at Hackett. Hackett remained quite calm at the news. "Detective Blackley's coming here? What for?"

"All I know, doll, is that I phoned my apartment to see if there were any messages, and Lieutenant Blackley had left word that I should call his office as soon as possible. I did, and he suggested we all come here to talk it over. He said it would be pleasanter here for us than down at headquarters."

"Didn't he mention what he had in mind?"

"He'll tell us that when he gets here, dolls."

Clarabelle, although childless, or perhaps because of it, feels a deep maternal affection for practically everyone. She is a native of Texas and the descendant of a long line of frontier sheriffs, which may also explain part of her personality. She loves laughter, talk, parties, long lunches, people individually and in the mass, and husbands. Not other women's husbands, her own. She has had four of them so far and her fifth is expected momentarily. She just loves to marry guys, that's all, and in this connection I have often wondered how it is that she picks a type which is none too durable. It's not to be surmised from this, however, that Clarabelle is always frivolous. On the contrary, she has her wits about her and she's right there at battle stations when needed, as this moment showed.

I related rapidly to Clarabelle what had occurred, not omitting Hackett's questionable part in it. Violence and death seemed misplaced subjects in the frilly office of this charming, plump, pretty woman of fifty. While listening she plucked diamond rings from her left hand and redistributed them among the fingers of her right—a reliable symptom of her agitation. Still, she didn't let it upset her too much.

"My chief concern, naturally, Clarabelle," I wound up, "is to keep us clean in the papers, because, naturally, our celebrities will quit cooperating with us if we get into bad odor. Whatever's cooking with Blackley, we've got to avoid trouble with the police too."

"But doll, we've done nothing wrong, so why should the police bother us at all?" Clarabelle said. She turned with an appeal to Hackett. "Thack, dear, you're much smarter than we are about such matters. Tell Clarabelle what all this means."

Hackett smiled. Among the three of us he was the only one who felt like smiling. "I don't know what it will add up to finally," he answered with a shrug, "but even as it stands I'd rather you didn't know what Gus Pyke said when he was dying."

A two-toned gong bonged, announcing a presence at our street door. We heard Polly hastening to answer it. She opened the entrance and there were murmurs in the reception room. Next Clarabelle's intercom buzzed and Polly's voice twanged out of it.

"Police Detective Blackley to see Miss Brown." Polly added: "To see Mr. Preston too." She added again: "And also Mr. Hackett."

"Show him right in!" Clarabelle answered quickly.

Hackett sat there with his cane between his knees and a challenging glitter in his eyes. I felt my temperature dropping several degrees below normal. Clarabelle bounced in her chair and rapidly patted all the golden ringlets on her head and said excitedly: "Let's not get excited, now, dolls, let's just have faith in human nature."

DETECTIVE Lieutenant Blackley of the homicide squad then made his entrance. It was impressive. Blackley's entrances are always impressive, thanks largely to his girth.

His appearance is striking in other details too. He is the fashionable gaslight era brought up to date. He wears a derby instead of a cast-iron bowler, and his black-gray hair, parted in the middle, hasn't quite the patent-leather polish they gave it in the old days, and his black mustache is rather smaller than the "handle bars" of the period, but on the whole there could not have been a gentleman officer of the 1890's who was bigger, cleaner, prouder or more courteous than the Lieutenant Blackley of today.

It is well to add that there is no police officer of today, no matter how tough or wised up, who can excel Blackley in doing his job expertly, in a thoroughly modern manner.

We first came to know Blackley some months ago, following a gun duel which arose between him and two homicidal heisters. Blackley was its sole survivor, and unhurt. This had been his day of fame, entitling him to a public pat on the back from the commissioner and a listing with Headliner Files.

He had supplied us with all the personal information we had asked him for, but his overly suspicious nature wouldn't let him quite believe we were just what we professed to be—a treasury of trivia concerning the celebrated, an archive of notes about the

notable, a private news service specializing in the perambulations of the prominent—in short, a repository of stardust. He thought we must be some new kind of shakedown racket. He was mistaken in this, of course, but he had adopted a policy of watchful waiting and he had dropped in rather often for a look around.

As he beamed upon Clarabelle this evening I suspected there might be one other reason for his frequent visits. A smile glowed on his scrubbed face and he bent low over her hand, kissing it in spirit if not actually. Clarabelle blushed—I could hardly believe my eyes, but she did—and seizing the opportunity, turned both barrels of her charm on him. They loved it mutually. I thought it was wonderful, particularly in view of the Gus Pyke incident, which would not alleviate Blackley's doubts of us if ever he should connect us with it in his suspicious mind. I hustled to place a chair for him in my most fraternal manner and he settled into it with slow elephantine grace, nestling his paunch comfortably in his lap. So far it was a lovely visit.

Blackley's gaze turned to Hackett, who hadn't stirred or uttered a word of greeting. Hackett just sat there with his cane between his knees, staring implacably at Blackley, and a cold wave crept over the lieutenant's moonface.

He began: "I do consider it most unfortunate—"

He did not say, "It's a helluva shame, pals," or "What a dam bum break, for crysake." He is proud of his clean, correct, polite speech. Sometimes it's stilted, but on the other hand it never shrinks from his point.

"I do consider it most unfortunate that a service as useful in its special way as this one should invite discredit upon itself by employing a disgraced ex-shamus."

"Shamus" is one of the few slang words in Blackley's vocabulary. His manner of speaking it makes clear his feeling that it is the foulest word in the language.

"But Lieutenant," Clarabelle said quickly, "Thack is a dear, good boy with the best intentions in the world, and through no fault of his own he was given a very raw deal. I believe in him with all my heart and I do so want to give him a new chance to make good."

Blackley kept his glacial eyes on the set face of Clarabelle's dear, good boy, who was staring back at him in a spirit of sheerest malevolence.

"Private detectives," Blackley said, "are far too often concerned with concealing the truth rather than revealing it. They are available for hire for purposes which would turn an honest crook's stomach. I do regret seeing a man of this stripe working here. But—" A wave of his well-groomed hand dismissed the distasteful subject of Hackett. "I have come in reference to the violent death of a man named August Pyke."

Clarabelle quickly patted all her golden ringlets. A dreamy kind of smile appeared on Hackett's face. I sat down, telling myself that our best play was to come clean.

"Please count on our complete cooperation, Lieutenant!"

Blackley turned a dim eye upon me. "You could have cooperated the better by remaining on the scene, Mr. Preston. However, I trust your involvement in Mr. Pyke's death was purely circumstantial. Mr. Richie has convinced me of that even before I have heard your story. Will you tell me now, please—"

This was a break with a silver lining. I told him rapidly. He nodded his round head on his fat neck, finding everything satisfactory, until I came to Hackett's dubious actions, which he had already heard about, of course, from Richie. A glint in Hackett's eye warned me I had better not reveal Pyke's dying words. I didn't, feeling that Blackley's face was already frosty enough.

"Dear Thack just wanted to be helpful, Lieutenant," Clarabelle said, smiling prettily.

"Such helpfulness may some day deposit Hackett in prison," Blackley remarked. "My only question, then, concerns Mr. Richie. Was his behavior at all questionable?"

"Not in the slightest," I answered. "He was surprised when it happened, of course, but at the same time it wasn't entirely unexpected because it was something he had repeatedly warned Pyke against."

Blackley wagged his head. "At any rate Mr. Pyke's demonstration of Elwell's manner of death was a convincing one."

Hackett spoke with an edge on his voice. "On the subject of celebrated murder cases, and also in reference to the low nature of private detectives as compared with the impeccable police, there was a case back in 1902—the famous Rosenthal murder. The killer was a man named Charles Becker. Do you recall, Detective Lieutenant Blackley, that Becker was a detective lieutenant?"

"Never mind that stuff, Hackett!" I said.

"Thack dear—" Clarabelle protested.

"Believe me, Hackett's malicious and irrelevant remarks leave me unmoved." Blackley rose ponderously from his chair. "I am always thankful for the cooperation of busy people. This episode will probably not earn much space in the papers and your names need not be given more than incidental mention. Officially the matter is ended, with Mr. Pyke's death classified as accidental."

HE WAS finished with us, he was about to go, he was actually satisfied to leave it at that. I hadn't dared hope it would work out so simply and so painlessly.

"Accidental?"

The voice spoke in sharp scorn. It was Hackett's voice. He curled his lips at Blackley.

"Accidental, he says!" Hackett sneered.

Blackley had been about to move toward the door, but now he stood massively still. He repeated coldly: "Accidental, indeed."

I said quickly: "Thack, this is official, it's out of our hands, it's ended, the lieutenant says it was accidental, so that's the way it happened and we're glad to hear it, we're well out of it, Thack."

Ignoring me and peering at Blackley, Hackett said: "Did the cartridge get into that gun accidentally?"

"How else?" Blackley said.

"Intentionally, with malice aforethought, of course," Hackett answered. "Pyke was murdered."

A moment ago Blackley had been officially bowing us out of an accidental death. Hackett was now pulling us into a murder. Clarabelle gestured entreatingly at him. I moved in on him with a scowl. He ignored us both.

"Somebody who wanted Pyke dead loaded his favorite gun when he wasn't looking," Hackett said. "You didn't find any extra cartridges in the place, did you?"

"Indeed," Blackley said. "A box of them in a drawer of the gun cabinet."

Hackett hadn't expected that, but he asserted at once: "You'll never trace them. You'll find no prints on them. They were left in the drawer to help fake the picture of carelessness on Pyke's part. Actually he didn't know they were there. He said: 'There are all these guns here but not a bullet in the place, just to be safe.' He said: 'I've never bought any ammunition to fit these guns.'"

"How great a reliance may be placed in the statements of a drunken man?" Blackley asked simply.

"He wasn't that drunk," Hackett insisted. "He shouldn't have clowned with his guns like that, but he wouldn't have done it if he hadn't been satisfied it was safe. It really was safe until somebody took advantage of his foolhardiness. With good reason Gus Pyke was the most surprised guy on earth when that bullet smacked him between the eyes."

Blackley shrugged, not caring to argue the point. Clarabelle said beseechingly: "Really, Thack, doll, you shouldn't concern yourself."

I said, forcing a laugh: "What're you trying to do, make more work for the cops?"

Hackett went on ignoring us. "It's the damnedest murder I've ever seen. The victim obligingly fired the fatal bullet himself. The murderer was no doubt miles away at the time, maybe having a plate of hot-cakes in Childs. He may not know even yet that he got his man."

Blackley chuckled deep down in his globular interior—a peculiarly ominous sound, like the promise of an earthquake. "Even though it appears Hackett has certain objections, the New York City Police Department will continue officially to regard Gus Pyke's death as accidentally caused." He bowed. "I know I can always rely upon our friendship. Good evening, Miss Brown, Mr. Preston, and thank you."

He turned the mass of himself while putting on his derby and steamed courteously away.

I gazed biliously at Hackett.

"Now, Walter, doll," Clarabelle said quickly, "don't lose your temper. Thack just sees things his own way, that's all. His intentions are the very best, Walter, and I'm sure he doesn't want to get us into any trouble. Do you, Thack, dear?"

He gave me an acrid smile. "Don't kid yourself, Pres. Blackley knows it's a murder that was planned to look accidental. He also knows that his smartest play is to seem to accept it as such."

"Be that as it may, Thack. Was Blackley also putting on an act when he said he thinks we're in the clear?"

"Did he call us together here tonight just to tell us Pyke's death won't be investigated as a murder?" Hackett countered, looking nettled. "It was a jiu-jitsu trick done mentally. He let us get organized to resist a push on his part, then he didn't push. He wanted to see us drop our guards and fall on our faces. We didn't quite oblige him, but we did let him know we're holding out, we've guilty knowledge."

"But doll," Clarabelle asked in a thin voice, "what could he possibly suspect us of?"

The smile Hackett put on then made my blood run cold.

"An experienced suspecter like Blackley can suspect anybody of anything without half trying. To him Headliner Files looks too much like a tricky new setup for blackmail. Now think of Gus Pyke, who was down and out a short time ago. His newly acquired penthouse means blackmail, definitely. Gus Pyke the blackmailer died in the presence of Preston the suspected and Hackett the foul. So is Blackley bowing politely out? Don't kid yourself. Just bear in mind that Blackley is as dumb as the entire population of a fox farm."

"Regardless of all that," I said, "Pyke's death is officially nobody's crime. It was an accident. That finishes it. That's all there is, there isn't any more. We're all O.K. You can't improve our position by riding Blackley and insisting it's a murder, can you?"

"No," Hackett said.

"Well, then. That's better. We know now what to do about Gus Pyke, about this whole affair, in fact. Forget it entirely. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Hackett said. "For a little while, anyway. Until the next accidental murder comes along."

"Until what?"

Hackett shrugged. "Why was Pyke's death made to seem an accident? The killer wants to cover himself from the law, naturally, but he may have an even better reason. Maybe he has somebody picked out as his second victim, maybe even somebody else as his third, and he's got to fool 'em into feeling safe from murder while he works his way around to them. 'Three of a kind,' remember? Gus Pyke when he was dying laughed and said: 'Three of a kind, yeah.' I can be wrong. On the other hand there may be two more accidental murders coming up."

"Thack, I think you're off your trolley. I keep telling you, it's no concern of ours anyway. Please, can't we forget it—starting right now?"

"Sure, sure," Hackett said again, wryly. "We'll just forget it—until Kewpie Moggs reminds us of it by dropping around again. By then it may be too late for you to appreciate fully an angle which you've apparently overlooked. I wasn't alone in that room when Gus Pyke died, Pres. I wasn't alone there when he spoke his dying words. You were there too, sport."

CHAPTER FOUR

On the Ledge

HACKETT having neatly unnerved me, I felt skittish of every shadow along our return trip to Sutton Place. We went into his dream of a living room to find Dell Kerry cuddled in the easy chair, listening to WQXR on Hackett's superb radio. She hushed it to a melodious whisper, smiling a cheerful welcome.

"Perfect timing, gentlemen," she said. "Catha's show comes on in just a few minutes."

Hackett gestured me kitchenward. I whipped up two drinks, using his nectar from Scotland. We sat with Dell between us on the sofa facing the radio.

"This afternoon I noticed the fine portrait you did of Gus, Dell," Hackett said. "Is John Smarte Richie, the playwright, also in your gallery?"

"I used them to practise on," Dell answered. "At that time I was aiming a lens at anybody who would sit still long enough. Look, you don't think Rich had anything to do with what happened to Gus, do you? Gus Pyke was Richie's closest friend, and vice versa."

"Everybody is everybody else's pal here," Hackett observed. "Nobody is anybody else's enemy. How lovely. How unlikely. The fact is, Gus was murdered, and someone among this little friendly group, someone who's playing for keeps, is probably getting set right now to murder again."

Dell said: "How you talk!" Color faded from her face and her hand clenching her highball trembled a little. Then she laughed a short cynical laugh, seeming to return to herself, and said: "Shhh, let's listen."

She turned the radio dial and we settled back. A dramatic fanfare was followed by the dignified announcement: "Cloud-Fleece Blankets presents the Theatre-in-the-Clouds." The applause of the large studio audience mingled with the show's opening theme.

Then a personable male voice said: "This is Alan West, director of your Theater-in-the-Clouds. Ladies and gentlemen, tonight is really an occasion, for after an absence of some months we welcome Catha Chester and Julian Roberts back to our Theatre-in-the Clouds. Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Catha Chester—"

"Good evening, everybody," Catha said, sounding like the girl next door but someone very special too—as indeed she was. There was loud, prolonged applause, a stamping of feet and whistling, and all this acclaim subsided reluctantly.

"—and Mr. Julian Roberts."

"Hello, everyone," Roberts said, and his reception was almost as vociferous as that given his wife.

Alan West continued: "It is only after some hesitation that Catha Chester and Julian Roberts have consented to tell us tonight of their recent adventure in the Great Smoky Mountains of eastern Tennessee. Miss Chester, why were you at first reluctant to let us hear your own account of your exciting experience?"

In her low, quietly modulated voice, seeming perfectly self-possessed, Catha answered: "It's still so close to us, so fearfully close. But the really big reason is that it has not ended."

Julian Roberts took it up. "Yes. You see, Catha and I left a part of ourselves down there in that wilderness—a part which we fear will never come back to us. Of course I'm speaking of the dearest of our friends, Otto Voster, whose achievements in the theatre may have ended forever when he was forced to drop out of the sky and down into those unmapped mountains."

"But we want the story to be told tonight, fully and for the last time," Catha went on, "so that everyone may know that Otto was a brave and good man as well as a great one. Inaccurate accounts have been printed, but tonight we shall tell it as it really happened, and then we hope it will be forgotten—except that never, never as long as we live will our memories of Otto Voster grow dim—and we shall never stop hoping that some day, somehow, Otto may at last come back to us."

Catha's voice went ragged on those last words, with a raggedness not written into the script. Her emotion was genuine and deep. The announcer hurried in on a less troubled note, to extol the merits of Cloud-Fleece Blankets. I rolled my head to gaze fondly at Dell, who rolled her head to gaze at me with a cozy smile, and I asked her: "Before you became a photographer what were you doing, besides being luscious?"

"I was a photographer of a different kind," she said. "I mean I freelanced, news stuff for *Life,* and *Look* and the pic services. It was all right, but you could kill yourself at it for beer and pretzels. I've always yearned to do portrait work. Catha's introducing me around and thanks to her I'm getting a shot at the kind of subjects I like to work on—the kind of people you have in Headliner Files, people with character. But as for me, I'm still a nobody myself—so far."

I said, feeling a twinge: "It couldn't have been easy, getting yourself set up in a Fifth Avenue studio."

"I'm a smart girl," Dell said. And a damned desirable one, too, I thought. "Listen."

"Let's have the bad news, Dell," I murmured. "Who's your heart interest?"

"I haven't any, Pres. There isn't any man in my life. Don't look so amazed and do stop drooling. Really. I'm too interested in my work, I suppose. Shhh!"

I slid my hand over hers, feeling like a kid on Christmas morning—one who hadn't yet opened his packages—as the director of the radio show, Alan West, came back to the mike. "And now—

IT WAS the night when Catha Chester and Julian Roberts last appeared in our Theatre-in-the-Clouds. When we signed off that night, Catha, you felt very tired—you'd been working very hard and needed a short rest—so you and Otto Voster piled into Jule's plane early next morning and you all flew down to your childhood home near Chattanooga."

Catha said: "We spent four lovely days there. Going home reminded me of the days when I was a starry-eyed teen-ager dreaming of a career on the stage without the vaguest idea of how to get started. It always reminded me, too, how fortunate I was when the great Otto Voster took me under his wing and made himself my teacher, my foster-father and my guardian angel all rolled into one."

This turned the dialogue into an account of how Otto Voster had discovered Catha, which

in turn led smoothly into a short sketch telling us how Voster had next worked his magic on an obscure young actor named Julian Roberts and transformed him into a star. We were told how the Chester-Roberts team immediately clicked in their very first comedy, then we heard of their idyllic romance, their marriage and their continued successes on the stage.

Otto Voster's background was sketched in swiftly when Jule said: "Otto enjoyed talking about his own start, too—how he had been an East Side urchin, then how he got small jobs with the Keith-Orpheum circuit, then branched out on his own as a Broadway booking agent, and finally how he scraped together enough pennies to produce his first play—a fine production which people still talk about after all these years."

Jule digressed here with a very pertinent comment. "You know, my friends have often asked me: Aren't you jealous of Otto—aren't you jealous of this man's importance to your wife? I always laughed at them. Me, jealous of a man who was like a father to both of us? Impossible!"

"That's true, Jule," Catha said earnestly. "There was never the slightest hint of jealousy between you and Otto. Otto wasn't like that either. Really, there was never anyone else like Otto—his soft heart and his sweet soul—his generosity—his genuine reverence for the theatre—his unequalled sense of showmanship. We owe so very much to Otto Voster—"

Jule: "Which he gave us freely, Catha. But our pleasant visit in the south finally had to end. So we piled back into my plane, you and Otto and I, and we buzzed back in the direction of New York to tackle the job of selecting a new play for this season."

The sound man came in here with the drone of an airplane motor.

Catha: "Otto loved flying. The sky was such a lovely clear blue, we were floating so smoothly and the mountains below were so beautiful. Still, I'd be glad when those mountains were behind us. When I was a little girl I'd heard lots of scary stories about how wild the Great Smokies are, and I'd never forgotten them."

Jule: "Otto couldn't believe they were so wild as all that."

Catha: "But I told him, 'Otto, they're a perfectly blank space on the map. There just *isn't* any map of that region. Right down there is the highest and the ruggedest and the wildest part of the whole Appalachian range.' I said: 'Why Otto, there are places down there that no human being has ever seen, actually! And that mysterious blue haze floating around the peaks— Nobody knows just why it is, but it's there even in the clearest weather, that smoky blue vapor hovering over the peaks like crowds of ghosts.' "

The sound of the motor faltered.

"I heard that," Catha said, "and I asked quickly: 'Jule, what's wrong?' "

The sound effects were suited to Jule's lines as he said: "The motor sounded even more ragged—and then it stopped. There wasn't any sound at all now except the soft whir of the wind. And I had to tell Catha and Otto: 'That motor is gone for good.' "

Catha: "I took hold of Otto's hand, tightly, and I asked: 'Jule, what's going to happen to us?' "

"We'll go on gliding like this for a few minutes," Jule said. "If only I could see a field somewhere—any sort of field, reasonably flat. I'm trying to find one, but—there isn't any. Trees, trees everywhere, and mountains, nothing but mountains—"

Catha: "I'd never been so frightened; and Otto was terribly pale, and I said: 'Then what can we do, Jule?' And Jule said—"

"Jump! We've got two parachutes."

Catha: "Only two parachutes. And there were three of us. But Jule said—"

"It's all right, but we've got to hurry. You're sitting on one of the parachutes, Otto—it's the cushion of the seat. Here. Now get into the harness—"

Catha: "Otto was bewildered. He seemed to think one of us must be left behind in the plane. Jule explained to him—quickly, because there was so little time—"

"No one will be left. We'll be all right, all three of us. Don't argue now! Listen! You go down in one of the chutes, Otto. I'll take Catha down in the other. I will hold her—Yes, yes, it's true, we'll be safe that way, I swear it! Hurry, Otto—"

Catha: "Jule put Otto's arms through the loops and fastened the buckles. He kept talking to Otto—"

Jule: "Listen, Otto. Take this, this wire handle. Don't let go of it. Stand up and jump out and let yourself fall a little, then pull that handle. You understand? Now! Stand up! Don't wait any longer, Otto!"

Catha: "Otto was still terribly frightened, but he obeyed Jule. He—he jumped out of the plane. I couldn't bear to watch. But I heard Jule speaking—"

Jule: "He's all right, Catha. He's pulled the rip-cord now, he's all right. Catha, listen, the plane's losing too much speed, we'll stall soon."

Catha: "But Otto?"

Jule: "He's floating there now, drifting on the wind. We've got to get out, Catha. Put your arms around my neck. Tightly, Catha. Hug me the hardest you can."

Catha: "I thought—there couldn't be any nicer way of doing it. And Jule said—"

Jule: "I've got you, Catha, I've got you. Hang on now. Hang on because this is—where we—*get off!*"

THE music went up in a dramatic crescendo, signalling the first act curtain. Alan West came on next to say: "At that moment these three, Catha Chester and Julian Roberts and Otto Voster, vanished from our world. Their story of tragic adventure and devotion amid hardships had just begun."

The announcer then stepped up to the mike to promise that in a few moments the curtain would rise on the second part of tonight's story, but first, of course, he had a few remarks to make concerning Cloud-Fleece Blankets.

We had listened intently, Hackett with a peculiar searching light in his eyes. I discovered that I had somehow begun to get a buzz on. Dell had made several trips to the font of Scotch. Now she went out to get me another refill during the commercial—and the drinks she mixed were by no means sissies.

Hackett said softly: "Shoots too."

I peered at him. "Whazzat?"

"Shoots too shoots too. It's something like Gertrude Stein's a rose is a rose is a rose. You can begin it anywhere. Try a different start. Then it becomes 'too shoots too shoots too shoots.' Or two chutes. Two parachutes."

"For goodness' sake," I said.

"Two pair," Hackett murmured next. "It started to be the same thing. Two *para*-chutes."

"Whattaya know about that," I said. "Gus certainly had that subject on the brain, or on what was left of his brain. How's about those thirteen shrouds, huh?"

Hackett looked at me with glints in his baby-blue eyes. "A shroud is not exclusively a winding sheet. A shroud is also a line, a rope. There are shrouds on ships. The ropes of a parachute are shroud-lines, or just shrouds."

Staring at him, I said: "So what about thirteen of 'em?"

"Thirteen shroud-lines were the normal number on a certain kind of pre-war parachute," Hackett answered. "That is, it was really twelve shroud-lines plus a landing-line, making thirteen in all."

"O.K.," I said. "O.K. So Gus died babbling about the correct number of lines on a parachute. So what?"

Hackett gave me another glittering look and said to me, his superior in Headliner Files: "Shut up and listen."

Despite his insubordination I felt glowingly pleasant as Dell came back to sit beside me. Thanks to Hackett's strange searching mind I knew it was important for me to be more sober than I was so I could do a little thinking along brilliant lines. I felt there were secrets all around me and I had to try to figure what they were. As it was, I gratefully accepted another potent drink from Dell and I sat there smirking foolishly as I listened to the radio.

"And now," the announcer announced happily, "we continue with our Theatre-in-the-Clouds presentation starring Catha Chester and Julian Roberts."

Alan West, the director, took it up. "Catha had truthfully called it the highest, the ruggedest and the wildest part of the Appalachian Range. So there was no one to notice a small airplane, an empty plane without pilot or passengers, diving toward destruction on the timbered mountainsides. No one saw the two parachutes floating deeper, deeper into the mysterious ghostly blue haze that clings around the peaks. Then—"

Catha and Jule next told of their landing. Catha's first breathless question was: "Otto—where is Otto?"

Jule said: "I saw the wind carrying him down that way, toward a valley. It was taking him away, farther and farther."

Catha: "Call to him!" They called to him many times without hearing an answer, and then Catha said urgently: "We've got to find him, Jule."

Jule: "Yes, we must find him, but— What sort of place is this? It looks like a big shelf of rock. It gives me a strange feeling, as if we were the first humans who ever set foot here. Never mind, Catha—come on, we've got to find Otto—"

The scene blended into the next one, which found Catha and Jule breathless, worn out and bewildered. Catha: "There were no trails, no paths, nothing to show us the way out. Then Jule explained—"

"This was a big shelf of solid stone sticking out of the side of the mountain, very high up. Above us was a sheer wall of rock which we couldn't possibly climb. All around us, on all other sides, was empty space. There was only one way to get off this ledge, only one, that was to crawl down somehow—down. I had to tell Catha the truth. I said: 'This shelf juts out so far—in most places it's a sheer drop, sometimes for hundreds of feet—and in other places it's so steep we couldn't possibly hang on with our bare hands.' "

Catha: "Then—what can we do, Jule?"

Jule: "I've thought of a way. The parachute."

Catha: "The parachute?"

Jule: "The silk ropes on it. I can cut them off. I have no knife, but I can bite them through, or chop them with a sharp stone. Then I can tie all the short ropes together to make one long rope—long enough to reach down."

Catha: "So that was what we did—"

I wanted to stay awake in order to hear how Catha and Jule would make out—although, of course, I'd read all about it in the papers at the time. The improvised rope had proved to be long enough. Jule had let himself down it first, Catha following without mishap. Once on more negotiable ground they had searched for Otto Voster in vain and groped for a way out of those rugged mountains.

Catha: "He was an old man, a gentle, tender man, who could never last long under the rigors of that wilderness. We were so afraid for him—we tried so hard to find him—we called his name hundreds of times, never hearing an answer—never finding the slightest sign of him—"

The rest of the script was simply the story of how Catha and Jule had finally found rescue two days later. By this time their plane had been reported missing. A Forest Service lookout had sighted a plume of smoke evidently rising from the burning wreckage, and this had helped to narrow the hunt. A searching party had found them staggering along a thin trail, ragged, starving, on the point of complete exhaustion.

That was really all there was to tell, but of course it had be dramatically touched up, so Alan West came on to tell us: "Then followed weeks of rest for both of them. Yes, two of the three came back to tell us tonight of their unforgettable experience in the primeval mountains—and one is still missing. Early today there was another report leading us to hope for a moment that Otto Voster had been found, but it was a false hope and the search for him must go on. Miss Chester—"

Catha said: "It's true that we may never see Otto again, but his great achievements in the theater will never be lost—and never as long as Jule and I live will he be—never will he be—"

Her voice broke out of control and she was unable to speak the final words. Jule filled in for her, smoothly: "—never will he be gone from our hearts."

Then there was a climactic crescendo followed by the inevitable: "Ladies and gentlemen, next week at this same time Cloud-Fleece Blankets will again present our Theatre-in-the-Clouds, starring—"

The radio was snapped off. The quiet of Hackett's home was blissful. If he was still around I didn't notice him any more. I was so marvellously comfortable there on the sofa. It was so cozy with Dell close beside me, and we talked in confidential whispers, and I remember a peculiar impression creeping into my fuzzy mind, an unpleasant, sneaky suspicion of which I was only dimly conscious. I sensed that Dell had fed me those too many drinks deliberately, and now she was asking me questions, too many questions, insistent little whispered questions.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Date With Death

"LUNCH with you today?" Dell said over the phone in her exciting voice. "Why, Pres, I'd love it."

"I'm a happy man," I said. "I'll be over early."

Headliner Files was functioning unusually well this morning. Clarabelle was so busy chattering into her telephone that she hadn't buzzed me for ten or fifteen whole minutes. Here and there other telephones tinkled musically. Our file girls were rooting into folders, answering our subscribers' questions and avoiding collisions, with the deft footwork of a practised team. Everything seemed rosy—probably because Hackett had not been in my hair for hours.

He appeared now in my doorway, looking thoughtful and dubiously amiable.

"Let me thank you again for putting me up over night, Thack," I said. "Also, let me apologize again for passing out like that. I've been wanting to ask you, what were Dell and I talking about, along toward the end?"

Hackett's smile grew slowly. "She seemed interested in the manner of Gus Pyke's passing, but you didn't give away any state secrets, if that's what's worrying you." He gazed at me curiously. "Had you noticed a certain similarity between Gus's penthouse and Dell's Fifth Avenue studio?"

I frowned at him. "I like Dell very much, Thack. Some dame may have been keeping Gus, but there's no sugar-papa in Dell's life. She told me that and I believe her and I don't want to hear any sly cracks about her." He irked me. Everything had seemed so lovely until now. I pointedly changed the subject. "Where've you been all morning? I ask because I feel it's a fine place for you to be oftener."

"I was making a few pertinent inquiries at the training gyms over on Eighth Avenue."

"Inquiries pertinent to what?"

"To our continued viability, and also to Orville Kewpie Moggs. Did you know that Kewpie was nailed for a murder a year or so ago?"

"Nailed for a murder? Then howcome he's walking around loose now?"

"That question has an important answer," Hackett said. "The victim, an ex-strip-teaser, was a friend of Kewpie's. He didn't kill her. The real killer framed him. A numbhead like Kewpie is a natural for a frame, of course. He had been practically written off as a total

loss when a newspaper reporter took pity on him and dug into the case. This reporter came up with a genuine alibi for Kewpie, one Kewpie actually hadn't remembered he had. The real killer has never been found, and never will be, but that's beside the point. Kewpie was cleared and consequently he's grateful as all hell in his dumb-brute way to this certain reporter who saved him from getting his big heinie heated in the sizzle-seat. In fact, Kewpie has made himself forever this guy's willing slave."

"You keep saying 'this certain reporter'. What's this certain reporter's name?"

"He never comes around over there on Eighth Avenue, so nobody seems to remember that detail."

"Those short memories haven't stopped you, have they?" I asked in surprise. "Kewpie's case must have been mentioned in the papers. Look it up in the *Times'* news index."

Hackett shrugged. "Why bother?"

He went out, leaving me blinking. Why bother, he said. Why bother finding out the name of the reporter who could be the guy who had requested Kewpie to murder us!

Evidently Hackett already knew the reporter's name, without having asked, and felt it was so obvious that I should know too. I checked back over the past twenty-four hours or so, wondering if I had run across a newspaper reporter at some point without noticing him at the time. I couldn't remember any. Maybe Hackett meant Richie. But Richie wasn't a reporter. Richie was John Smarte Richie the playwright.

I mulled this over while I went into the wash-room and slicked up. Adjusting the angle of my homburg just so, I hoped Dell would think I looked very man-about-town. I stepped out and as I sauntered along the street I considered which intimate restaurant I should take her to and I thought how wonderful it would feel to be alone with her for the very first time. As I reached the big bronze doorway on Fifth Avenue I heard footfalls following me, looked around and saw Hackett.

I gave him an unfriendly frown and said: "Don't think you're horning in on my lunch with Dell, bud."

He eyed me, swinging his cane thoughtfully.

"Go on, blow!" I said.

He stayed there, not speaking. I felt foolish. What could I do? Hot under the collar, I climbed the marble stairs to the second floor and turned to the door of Dell's studio. There I paused again, turning resolutely to face Hackett, who had dogged my every step. Cane or no cane, this was my limit.

"Scram right now, Thack, or by God—"

"Kewpie Moggs is tailing you," Hackett informed me.

"So you came along to protect me," I said with sour skepticism. "I'm touched." I turned to the one window in this little corridor and looked down into Fifth Avenue, which was busier than an ant-hill. If Kewpie Moggs was anywhere in that flowing crowd he eluded me. Turning back, I said even more sourly: "Don't give me that stuff. Kewpie is somewhere lying on his bed of pain, unable even to lift his aching head, thanks to you. And now—goodbye, Thack."

I turned the knob of Dell's door. It was locked. Puzzled, I pressed the bell-button and waited. Nobody came. Hackett stayed there, of course. I pressed the button again and still there wasn't any answer.

"What's this?" I muttered. "Am I stood up?"

Hackett looked around, tapping his cane impatiently. There was another door, unlettered, at the rear of the hallway. He tried it and found it also fastened. He lifted his head thoughtfully, sniffed twice, then returned to the entrance bearing Dell's golden name, where I was pressing the button again.

HACKETT brushed me aside and did something which I had never seen done before. He placed his right side snugly against the door, pressed his right shoulder backward against one side of the frame, and lifted his right foot against the opposite side. Then with his right hand on the knob he pushed in three directions at once—sideward on the door-frame and inward on the door itself. The frame visibly bulged. There was a click as the latch was freed of its socket. Hackett relaxed, quietly opened and door and stepped in.

The big studio was deserted.

"Dell!" I called. Apparently she wasn't here.

Hackett sniffed again, then strode to a far corner of the huge room. Back there, almost concealed behind an assortment of plaster columns and vases, was a door. Hackett thrust it open and I followed him into a corridor.

The corridor was a weird, black tunnel. Both walls, the ceiling and the floor were all painted dead black. At the far end of it was a single window entirely blacked out. This passageway would have been as black as midnight in a coal mine except for three golden yellow bulbs burning dimly along its length overhead. Obviously it connected with Dell's darkrooms.

"Dell?" Hackett called.

The only sound was a peculiar soft, dull mumbling, as if the air itself were mumbling. I couldn't identify the sound or place it.

Hackett, moving quickly, turned to a door on the left of the corridor and pushed through. This was a small room where more props were stored—odd-shaped chairs, ornate picture-

frames, statuary on pedestals. Another door in this room was standing ajar. Hackett opened it wider and we found ourselves gazing into the public hallway which we had just left. We were looking out through the door in the rear of the public hallway which Hackett had found bolted only a moment ago.

I sensed a presence that had fled only seconds ahead of us. I could almost feel it running down the stairs and out into the anonymity of the crowds on the sidewalk.

On the tile floor of the hallway something lay burning with a dull, smoky, orange flame.

Hackett stepped toward it, swished his cane and with its tip picked up the burning thing. He flicked it through the air so swiftly that the flames were whipped out. It struck the wall, a blackish thing of irregular shape, and fell back to the floor.

Leaving it behind, Hackett went to the window overlooking Fifth Avenue. He peered out briefly and turned back with a dark frown, shaking his head, as I picked up the thing we had found burning on the floor. It was a photographic negative.

"Hold onto that," Hackett said, going past.

I stuffed it into a pocket as we went back into the black corridor. That peculiar, dull muttering sound became audible again. Seeking its source, Hackett opened a black door on the opposite side of the hallway. It gave into a darkroom, a small one, long and narrow. The inside of the darkroom itself was painted white, and an ordinary unshaded bulb shone overhead. There were shelves bearing bottles of chemicals, trays and tanks in a bluestone sink. And a tangle of metal on the floor.

The tangle consisted of a twisted, misshapen thing that had formerly been a tall metal stool. It had been used to pound the bejeepers out of a small steel strong-box. The strong-box lay there with its lid knocked off, empty.

"Dell!" I called.

That odd muttering sound was growing louder, becoming a rumble that vibrated in the walls.

Hackett went farther down the black corridor to a second door. Opening it, he cried out hoarsely and jumped back. Flames poured out of it.

Hackett pressed himself against the opposite wall, peering through the open, flaming door with a set expression of revulsion. I ran to his side. The blaze poured out, flowing upward, spreading over the ceiling above us. The room beyond the doorway was a larger darkroom and it was full of fire. All of it was flames, swirling, streaming, churning, blasting their heat out at us.

On the flaming floor near the doorway lay a gallon jug with its label somehow still legible: *Wood Alcohol.* There were fat pipes overhead, the shafts of a ventilating system that had enabled this fire to become a holocaust within the confines of this room.

In the center of the floor, lying there, looking up at us with widened, bulging eyes, was Dell.

I knew it was Dell although she had no hair now. All her hair was gone. It had become an oddly twisted black cap of ash on her head. Her eyebrows were black, scorched lines. Her face was strangely swollen, cooking. I saw juices pouring down her cheeks like tears. All her clothes were burning, and her shoes. She seemed to stir a little as the flames tightened her muscles, to stir as if in an effort to get up.

I heard myself yelling. I was conscious of trying to tear myself loose from something that prevented me from getting in there to Dell, and then Hackett was standing squarely in front of me and saying fiercely: "You can't do that, Pres." He slapped my face, a flat stinging slap, and said: "You can't get her out, Pres, you can't, you crazy fool, you'd die trying." Then he slapped my face again, hard, and said: "Beat it out of here right now or I'll knock you flat and drag you out."

Then I was down in the street, on the opposite side of Fifth, shivering and staring up at the smoke. Hackett had pulled me from the building, of course, and he must have turned in the alarm too. Traffic was stopped and policemen came crowding and poking their sticks into the immovable mob and the fire engines came screaming and the smoke kept rising in clouds, black and evil-smelling.

Hackett tried to pull me away, but I wouldn't go. He stood close beside me, watching me with comradely concern, thinking I might cave in at any moment, and he looked sad, very sad. I told myself I would never hear Dell's exciting voice again and I watched the firemen playing hissing streams of water into the terrible flames that embraced her lovely body.

CHAPTER FIVE

Strange Tea

I WENT back to my office late in the afternoon. Hours ago I had finally walked away from the horror on Fifth Avenue. Next I had found that Hackett was no longer with me. Although the guy put my teeth on edge sometimes, he knew how to be kind in the right way at the right time. I'd gone from bar to bar trying to find one without a radio, because it seemed all the radios in New York were blatting the latest news about the Fifth Avenue fire. I swallowed many drinks of authentically hard liquor but I was sober as a deacon and in fair possession of what passes

for my faculties when I went in to my desk and found Hackett there.

He was saying into my telephone: "I'd like to, very much, thank you. . . . Five o'clock, yes. Goodbye." Then disconnecting, he explained to me: "Catha Chester has invited me to tea."

"Tea!" I said. "I've been drinking bottled-in-bond tea all afternoon." I sank into the uncomfortable chair provided for my office visitors. "Isn't that fine, having tea with Catha Chester?"

Hackett leaned toward me, his manner intent. "I hope you still have that negative."

I'd been drifting around for hours with that fragment of negative in my pocket, forgotten. I pulled it out, stared at it, made nothing of it, then passed it to Hackett. He held it to the light, frowning, studying details. Most of it had been burned away but the part that remained was unharmed.

"She shouldn't have smoked in there in that darkroom," I said miserably. "She probably lighted a cigarette while she was splashing around with that alcohol. People shouldn't do such foolish things, especially nice intelligent people like Dell."

Hackett lowered the fragment of negative and gazed at me in compassion. "That was no accident, Pres."

"Don't talk so goddam smart!" I said, almost snarling at him. "Don't tell me this is another of those tricky accidental murders you like to blabber about!"

"What else?" Hackett said gently.

"I know it was," I admitted, wilting. "Certainly it was."

Hackett's face was forlorn. He felt sorry for me. I couldn't decide whether to hate his guts or admire him. He had called the play. He'd been watching for another of those grisly accidental murders to happen, and here it was. I wished it hadn't been Dell, that was all.

"I have here a small crow which I have brought along for eating purposes," I said. "I'm sorry I got nasty about the way you tagged over there, Thack. If you hadn't pulled me out of there I'd be a cinder now, like—Well, I'd be a cinder."

He nodded.

"If only we'd gotten there a little sooner, maybe—" It was no good, thinking things like that. "What did you do to that door, anyway?"

"The emergency squads working out of headquarters—the crowbar squads or inhalator squads, they're often called—use something called a crinoline, or Quinlan. It's a lever arrangement for springing the lock of a door by spreading the frame slightly, just as you saw me do. Sometimes muscle-power isn't enough, though. We were lucky. Or were we?"

"No, we weren't lucky," I said. "It wasn't lucky for Dell that we came too late to help her."

"It wasn't a question of time," Hackett said. "Not at all. If not today, Dell would have been murdered some other day."

I wasn't ready to go into the question of why Dell had been murdered. I preferred to think she had never done anything to get murdered for. "I don't think I was lucky seeing her like that, either," I said. "I'll never stop seeing her like that."

Hackett nodded again slowly. "She was already dead before the fire was set, Pres. Strangled, most probably." He went on, not sparing me: "Then she was left there in the darkroom with the alcohol splashed all around in readiness. Next the guy who'd killed her broke open the little strong-box. He got the negative out of it. Just about then we came in."

"He was there, all right, when we came in," I said numbly.

"Hearing us coming in, he touched off the fire in the darkroom where he'd left Dell's body. Then he headed out, moving fast, so we wouldn't corner him in that black hallway."

"Was it that close?"

Hackett said earnestly: "If he stopped at all on his way out it was just long enough to put a match to that negative. Getting rid of that negative was hellish important to him. I think it was even more important to him than making a getaway."

"And he carried that burning negative with him on his way out?" I asked.

"To make as sure as he could that it was destroyed, yes. The film didn't burn fast. Some film-bases don't. He ran with that burning film until he couldn't hold onto it any longer. He had to drop it, still burning, in the hall, but he headed right on down the stairs, evidently feeling pretty sure the negative was as good as destroyed."

"It would have burned up entirely if you hadn't used your cane on it." The piece of film in Hackett's hand was an oblong section with one uneven, blackened edge. "What the hell is it a picture of?"

Hackett handed the negative back to me. I frowned over the reversed image. It showed something mound-shaped, like a heap of sand or perhaps a boulder. Two pairs of legs were standing beside it—men's legs, both pairs in ordinary trousers. Just in front of the four feet there was a hollow in the ground. One of the men was stooping forward and lifting something out of this cavity. He was holding it gingerly by its upper end. It seemed to be a stick, or a piece of a branch of a tree, about eighteen inches long, with a glove hanging from the lower end of it.

"It doesn't mean a thing to me," I said, re-

turning the negative to Hackett. "Nothing means anything."

He slid the fragment of film into an envelope and tucked the envelope into his inside coat pocket. "You need diversion, Pres." His suggestion was wry: "Come on and have tea with Catha Chester and me."

I lifted my head. "Come to think of it, why the hell is Catha Chester inviting you to tea?"

He smiled cryptically, as if to say my guess was as good as his, which of course it wasn't. I got the feeling that he wanted to keep me close to him. He wanted me along because he was really concerned for me. It was a heart-warming thought. For a while, back there, I'd been trying to think of ways and means of getting rid of Hackett. Now I felt I wouldn't know what to do without him.

WE WENT out and signaled a taxi. As it traveled northward, then westward, Hackett seemed alert, tense. It delivered us into a cross-street off Central Park. We went into an apartment house done in English provincial style, of all things. An antique elevator hardly larger than a dumb-waiter, piloted by a walking male mummy, sneaked us up to the sixth floor in twice the time it would have taken us to climb the stairs. We stepped directly into the vestibule of the Roberts apartment. A telephone bell was ringing somewhere beyond. We heard Jule answer it.

He uttered a polite groan and said: "She was a friend, a friend, and we are deeply shocked. Only yesterday afternoon we were at her studio, a nice little cocktail party. Nothing to add to what we have already told all the newspapers. No, no, please, no more statements."

He hung up and immediately resumed an argument which the phone call had evidently interrupted.

"Contracts, money!" he exclaimed. "What do I care about them? More money means nothing to me. I already make enough. If I make more, I only pay it out again in taxes. All I want to do is act, to do my job the very best I can. With Otto gone that will be hard enough to do without wasting so much worry on money."

A man's voice said: "Catha is much better at business than you are, Jule, and she doesn't feel as you do about it. Otto had her under his personal contract, which will be canceled when his death is legally established. Then she will no longer share her earnings with her producer. She'll begin making twice as much money as before! And the movies. Otto would never let her make a picture, but now she may choose any Hollywood producer she wishes and make fortunes, fortunes!"

"Please, please, this is not important," Jule insisted. "The most urgent question is the play, the new play. But please—"

He appeared in a doorway, a striking figure in his gray flannel slacks and soft gray suede oxfords and silky white shirt with flowing sleeves and snug Russian collar. He came to us with a kindly smile, and we shook his strong brown hand and I wondered all the more why we were here. Only yesterday Jule had been about to slug Hackett and today Catha had singled him out for an invitation which many a celebrity-seeker would have paid an eye to get.

"So nice of you to come," Jule said earnestly. "I hope you will talk to Catha, help her to get her mind off herself. She is so changed. Losing Otto, who meant so much to her in so many ways, she's so uncertain of herself now, she goes to pieces over any little thing."

He escorted us into a huge baronial room. Catha was there with two men—John Smarte Richie the playwright and a middle-aged Latin whom I recognized as Henri Barbour, Otto Voster's assistant director and the manager of the Voster Theatre. Richie was scowling at him, and Barbour sat there in a morose silence as Catha came to us. In one hand she had a tall glass which appeared to

have a little water in it. Her large dark eyes shone in her small, little-girl face with a brightness that was almost feverish, and her smile was friendly in a nice dreamy way.

"I'm so glad you came." She said this simply to both of us, giving us her tiny hand, and then she turned to Hackett with a special smile, and she gazed at him as if seeing for the first time a character of fascinating potentialities—which indeed he might well be.

"Congratulations on your splendid performance last night, Miss Chester," I said.

She gave me the briefest glance as she answered: "You're kind, but it was no credit to me, because it wasn't acting. I didn't need to imagine how all that might feel. I knew. And I hated that show last night—hated making capital of an experience so personal—"

Jule put in: "That once we had to do it, so everyone could know what happened, but it's all done. Now they are hounding us to make a picture of it, begging for Catha and me to stay in it. We won't do that, of course, but our plays—Catha wants us to make pictures of our best ones."

"It will be strange, working with a new director," Catha said softly. "It will never be the same as working with Otto."

"Catha misses him so much," Jule added quickly. "She's like a child about him—she won't eat enough, she can't sleep, she's so uncertain of herself, so lost. Catha, please, not too much, Catha."

Catha had turned to the buffet and was refilling her highball glass. She refilled it to the brim from a magnum of champagne.

She returned with another special smile for Hackett. "I wanted to try to explain about yesterday. Really, you didn't say anything wrong. It's just that I—I'm not sure of my reactions any more. Not only losing Otto, but those horrible days of trying to find our way out of those mountains. Sometimes, for no reason at all, a flood of fear comes over me, a feeling of panic that I can't shake off." She forced a wan smile. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

She was actually apologizing to Hackett for the way he had roughed up her skittish nerves!

Jule said with a gesture both kindly and impatient: "Let's all sit down and be good friends and have good drinks and enjoy ourselves talking about pleasant things."

He was eagerly hospitable, but the silence of the two men at the table had asserted itself. Henri Barbour said without a trace of accent but with considerable acerbity: "It is still my considered opinion, Catha, that this play of Richie's stinks."

Richie's face flushed and his rust-red eyes became challenging. He patted a manuscript that lay on the table. "What the hell do you know about it? You have no critical judgment of your own. All you can do is try to guess what Otto Voster could have thought. You'll never be another Voster, brother. Whether you see it or not, this play is big stuff, it's terrific."

Barbour rose indignantly and announced: "Catha, this writer of abominations has insulted me for the last time." He caught up his hat, brushed aside Catha's and Jule's protestations and strode toward the vestibule. "Goodbye!"

"Leave Henri to us, Rich," Catha said wearily. "Please, let us handle this and it will be all right."

"But not any more of this arguing today!" Jule said.

"Sure, you handle it," Rich said, smiling smugly. "I'll drop around tomorrow to see how you've made out with him." Evidently the hatless type, he picked up his script tenderly and wandered toward the door. "Meanwhile I'll work on the second act curtain. I'm going home right now and beat my brains out over it." He went on, in the direction Barbour had gone.

Jule was alertly solicitous of Catha. She had had too much champagne and now she seemed shaky. He led her to a huge soft chair and as she sank into it he said: "Please, Catha, let me get you something to eat."

She shook her head with childlike stubbornness. He straightened, tossing his hands hopelessly over her. The telephone began ringing again. Jule hurried toward it. The room was quiet until Catha murmured, gazing at Hackett: "It was so lonely there in the mountains, so terribly lonely because Otto wasn't with us. I couldn't help feeling even then that we'd never see him again. You will never know such loneliness as that."

Hackett went to her and sat on the arm of the big chair, gazing down at her. "But Otto Voster had already taught you everything there is to learn about the stage. You and Jule are finished artists in your own right."

"Who knows?" Catha said. "This is a great emergency we're facing now, and who knows how we'll stand up to it? If we have been merely puppets of Otto's, we'll soon discover it now!"

She said this bitterly as Jule returned. "I'm so sorry, you must excuse me for a little while," Jule said quietly. "At the Ambassador Hotel—that man from M-G-M with the contract. I'd better talk to him now, put him off for a while. I won't be long, I promise."

He caught up a gray flannel jacket and flung it across his shoulders as he moved toward the vestibule, and I heard him say vehemently to himself: "God, how I hate the movies!"

WHEN he was gone Catha laughed derisively and said: "Let him hate them all he pleases, he'll be well paid for it."

I stared at her, coldly revising my estimation of Catha Chester as an artist. Could it be true that Jule's professional standards were actually higher than hers? Catha was generally esteemed more highly than Jule—but was she thinking chiefly of the box-office receipts, while he gave his greatest concern to the quality of their work?

It suddenly occurred to me that Catha must have chafed under Otto Voster's strict management.

Catha was pleading to Hackett: "How can we know what we are? Can we ever be completely sure of ourselves—sure of anything at all? Isn't there any security anywhere? How can we ever know what we will make of tomorrow?"

It was very strange, beginning with the invitation itself—an invitation to a tea where we hadn't yet been offered anything to drink at all—and as I stood here now, in this peculiar murky room with the borders of colored glass in the windows, I sensed more strangenesses all around.

I tried to discover why I felt this way, and suddenly I knew at least one strange thing about this place.

Catha had called Otto Voster her creator, her foster-father, her guardian angel, the dearest of all her friends, and there was no reason to doubt that he had been all these to her—but there was no photograph of Otto Voster in her home.

I had no business at all snooping around here, but I had to make sure of this. Neither Catha nor Hackett gave me a glance as I quietly climbed the stairs to the balcony. I looked into the master bedroom, then into Catha's room, then into another. When I came back down the balcony stairs I was virtually certain that nowhere in this apartment was there a photographic likeness of Otto Voster.

Catha and Hackett were murmuring together and Jule was gone. I wanted to get out of here. I found my hat and went into the vestibule and finally, with a feeling of relief, I strode out the street entrance and returned to what I hoped was normalcy.

I walked down Central Park West and found myself hurrying. Without intending to do so I was walking faster, steadily faster. I was fleeing from something, from a danger sensed rather than known.

Somewhat surprised at myself, I looked back curiously; and then I was no longer surprised at myself at all, and my haste was completely intentional.

Kewpie Moggs was back there in the twilight mist, dogging me.

CHAPTER SIX

Death Comes in Threes

THERE was no mistaking those bull shoulders or that flat, moronically inscrutable face with the doughnut mouth. Kewpie bore the marks of Hackett's cane: a square of gauze taped on his right cheek, his right wrist bandaged, another bandage wound around the knuckles of his left hand. He was plodding along with sullen, unswervable determination half a block behind me.

Not being a brave man, I walked on rapidly, or possibly ran, while trying to find an unoccupied taxi. There were none. Neither was there a cop in sight. That hulking jungle anthropoid kept stalking me relentlessly along the busy metropolitan streets until, suddenly, my luck took a turn for the better. A cab was discharging its passengers into Essex House. Instantly it had a new passenger—me. I stumbled into it, gasping inarticulate instructions to the driver.

The taxi whisked me away, leaving Kewpie in the rear distance, but this was no real satisfaction. I felt I hadn't really shaken him. When I reached the door of Headliner Files, the office being a closer haven than my apartment, I was still winded, and I stabbed my key into the lock, slid in and made sure the latch was set behind me.

Headliner Files had closed for the day, of course. The whole place was quiet. In the main office Polly was dozing at the switchboard, her stocking feet hoisted on another chair, holding down the graveyard watch again. It was entirely permissible for her to catch a few winks when the board was inactive. I liked having her here tonight—I would have liked having anyone here. Not disturbing her, I plugged my desk phone into an outside line. She slumbered on.

I went into my private office, dialed Spring 7-3100 and asked for Lieutenant Blackley.

"Good evening, Mr. Preston," he said politely. "It's pleasant to hear from you, particularly since I was contemplating another visit to your offices."

"You were?" I said. "What for? I mean, drop in any time."

"Merely another routine matter in connection with this afternoon's fire in Miss Dell Kerry's studio. I find a certain interest in a description of the man who turned in the alarm. It mentions a cane."

I tried to laugh lightly as I said: "Hackett's not the only man in New York who carries a cane, of course, Lieutenant. How are you classifying Miss Kerry's death, by the way?"

"An accident," Blackley said blandly, "a most unfortunate accident indeed. Although, of course," he added on an ominously casual

note, "fatal accidents in that certain circle of people are becoming so frequent that our findings may be subject to revision."

"Of course, of course," I said.

I had a wild feeling of being caught in the middle. Out there in the dark streets a prehistoric monster of a criminal was prowling for me. Here on the telephone a detective was courteously reminding me of the law's long reach.

I told Blackley about the big man who was following me everywhere I went. For the sake of simplifying the situation I professed not to know who he was or why he was doing it, except that I suggested it wasn't my autograph he wanted, and I carefully avoided any mention of Hackett. Would Blackley please assign a man to watch over me? He assured me that indeed he would be most happy to do so at once. Thanking him and hanging up, I felt a little better and told myself there was no reason why Hackett should learn of this arrangement. He would only be difficult about it.

Only a few minutes later, or so it seemed, our two-toned gong cut loose with its double bong. Out in the main office Polly wakened with a soft squeaking scream. I signalled reassurance to her on my way to the street entrance. Not opening it at once, I called out: "Who's there?"

A cheerful voice answered: "The name's Parker, Mr. Preston. A big round man named Blackley sent me here."

I opened the door and Parker stepped in, his manner businesslike and hopeful. He was thirty-five or so but seemed to retain a certain collegiate callowness. This impression may have been due to his crew haircut. I could have wished for a tougher-looking type, but Parker was friendly and plainly he held considerable confidence in himself.

"You must've come up from Centre Street by jet propulsion," I said in amazement.

"Oh, no. I just happened to be over at the Seventeenth Precinct Station when the good lieutenant phoned up, so I just strolled over," Parker explained easily. "Now that you see what I look like, you won't begin worrying about me following you around, too. Nobody's waiting for you out there now—I took a little look up and down the block to make sure. Well, see you later, Mr. Preston," Parker said, grinning, and he stepped out again.

It seemed I had scarcely returned to my desk when my telephone rang and a chipper voice informed me: "He's not here now."

"What? Who's calling?"

"This is Parker, from the corner drugstore. I mean that big battered-up guy. He's watching your office."

"He is?"

"I just want you to know, Mr. Preston, if it should come down to a choice between him and you, I'll take him," Parker added, and before I could ask what that meant he had hung up.

Now I heard noises at our street entrance. This time our gong didn't bong-bong. There was a faint shuffling of shoes on the stone stoop and other furtive sounds. Then someone was inside. Somebody had magically passed through that locked door. I sat there with frost collecting on my bones as I listened to the unearthly footfalls moving across the reception room toward our main office. Scared silly, I managed to push myself up from my chair, then push my head out my door. What I saw was Hackett, of course. I hadn't known Clarabelle had given him a key.

I WENT out to the main office and looked at Hackett. "I thought you and Catha were hunkered down for a really beautiful evening together."

He gave me an irked glance. "Haven't you found out yet I'm a man of honor? Anyway, I've other plans."

"How did you leave her?"

"Alone, opening another magnum." He gazed at our banks of file cabinets with an odd smile. "We deal in all sorts of information about all sorts of famous people, but we haven't one word concerning John Smarte Richie, the eminent playwright."

"I've had no chance to check on him. We'll start a folder on Richie right away."

"It would be the thinnest folder in the place," Hackett said. "I did a little digging into the archives of *Variety* this afternoon. Four years ago a play called *That's All, Brother,* by John Smarte Richie, expired during a try-out week in Philadelphia. It's the only play by John Smarte Richie ever to reach actual production."

"You must have missed some. Probably he's written a stack of boff hits under other names. Catha and Jule wouldn't be wasting their valuable time on a no-good would-be dramatist."

Hackett faced me. "Now don't get sore again, Pres. This is fundamental, we've got to face it. Gus Pyke's penthouse and Dell Kerry's studio and Richie's playwriting are all of a pattern. Each is an expression of a desire, an ambition fulfilled. There's one thing that made them possible, one necessity common to all three—dough."

I said uneasily: "You mentioned blackmail pretty early in the game. It seems plain enough now. Gus—down and out one day, up in a penthouse the next. Dell's studio—no small investment, with years to go before it would begin paying off."

"She told you she'd freelanced for beer

and pretzels before that—and that she was a smart girl."

I winced, but went on. "Richie. What's he using to pay his bills with while he writes a play that's still a long way from the footlights? All right, blackmail. But where's the connection between the three of them?"

"There's one somewhere." Hackett reminded me: "When he was dying Gus Pyke said: 'Three of a kind,' and laughed."

"But who were they blackmailing? Were all of them bleeding the same victim? And on what basis?"

"People in the news game learn things about other people, as we well know, being in the racket ourselves. Dell was in it. So was Richie."

"Richie?"

"As a reporter," Hackett said, "until he quit the grind to devote himself exclusively to the drama. They verified that for me over at *Variety* today. In fact, Richie is the reporter who canceled Kewpie Moggs' reservation on the hot seat."

I stared at Hackett. "Then he *is* the guy who wants us dead. Why?"

"Gus's dying babbling could carry too much meaning for us. Richie doesn't want us figuring the angle and wrecking his future, which depends on his blackmail setup. It's that big."

I kept staring at Hackett. "He's the guy, then! Why, it's clear as day now what happened to Gus and Dell. First there were three blackmailers and now there's only one. Now Richie can collect every dollar the traffic will bear, with nobody else cutting in." I felt feverish. "What are we waiting for? Let's corner that guy with it."

Hackett said wryly, "Quit pushing me into these things, Pres," which, coming on top of everything else, left me speechless.

We left Polly still dozing by the switchboard. As we stepped out Hackett gazed up and down the dark street. He was looking for Kewpie Moggs, of course. I saw no sign of Kewpie. Neither did I see any sign of Detective Parker.

Hackett held his cane alertly as we hustled along, looking for an empty cab. We caught one pulling away from the Stork Club. Hackett remembered Richie's address from the phone book. I anticipated another opulent setting, like Gus's penthouse or Dell's studio, but the taxi dropped us at a brownstone front on East Thirty-Seventh.

"Material luxury is less important to Richie than fame in the theatre," Hackett remarked.

In the vestibule we found the name of John Smarte Richie listed as the sole occupant of the second floor. Hackett returned to the stoop for a look upward. Light glowed out of the second floor windows. We were about

to touch the bell-button when a voice spoke behind me.

"Mr. Preston, you going in *there?*"

It was Parker, looking uneasily puzzled. Hackett frowned at him, then frowned at me a demand for an explanation.

"I told you, Mr. Preston," Parker said, "if it came to a choice, I'd take *him.* After a while he made a phone call, and I guess he was called off then, on account of next he came here. Naturally I stuck with him. You're not going in there where he is, are you?"

I heard myself saying: "Thanks, but I think we'll be all right."

Parker answered dubiously, glancing at Hackett: "I'd better hang around anyway."

Hackett's eyes were a palpable force playing into my flushed face, like ice-cold water from a hose. He didn't speak. He just stood there burning, really deeply hurt. I had crossed him up behind his back, I had betrayed an undeserved lack of reliance in him, my selfish fear had undermined my trust in my friend.

"Forgive me," I said. "I'm an odious coward. After all, this is a triviality upon which my very life depends."

Hackett turned his back on me and tried the knob. The door opened. I followed him quietly up the stairs. On the landing we paused. Someone was sobbing. We heard deep, choking sounds of sorrow.

Hackett took a firmer grip on his slender little cane and with silent gliding steps advanced to a door. Behind this door, I reminded myself was Richie, the murderer of Dell Kerry and of Gus Pyke.

The sobs went on, great gulping sobs. Hackett pressed on the door of Richie's apartment and it swung slowly inward. The chesty, blubbering sobbing came to us more loudly now. We eased into the room. Hackett sidestepped, placing himself against the wall. I just stopped there in the doorway. We stood gazing at Kewpie Moggs.

MOGGS went on uttering those subhuman sobs, those horrible abysmal blubbering sobs. Tears were smeared over his flat face. He was down on both his knees, tugging with futile, imploring persistence at the limp arm of a man who was lying full length on the floor, a man who would never get up again. The head of the man on the floor was a ghastly, almost unrecognizable mass of lacerated tissue and splintered bone.

Hackett and I moved closer slowly, looking down at the thing that had been the head of John Smarte Richie. I remembered his saying he was going home to beat his brains out over his typewriter. That was almost the way it had been actually, except that someone had used his portable typewriter to beat his brains out for him. It lay beside him, misshapen, blood-smeared, the weapon that had been swung and smashed again and again into his face.

Kewpie Moggs sobbed like a blubbering sorrow-ridden kid, unaware of our presence. He kept tugging at Richie's arms, begging his master to get up and live again. It was impossible to wonder whether it was Moggs who had killed Richie. His grief was genuine. In his stupid, unquestioning way he had loved this man.

Hackett said gently: "It's no use, Kewpie."

Kewpie wagged his head, his big flat face all smeared with tears, and he said: "Naw, naw, I guess it ain't no use." Then he sobbed again.

"Did you find him like that, Kewpie?" Hackett asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I come in and t'ere he was, just like dis."

"That's tough, Kewpie," Hackett said.

Here was Hackett sympathizing with the ape who had tried to kill us, commiserating with him over the death of the man who had ordered us murdered.

Hackett looked around the room. The commonplace furnishings included a typewriter desk and a file cabinet. Hackett tried the cabinet and found it locked. Curiously he returned to the corpse and gently probed into its pockets. Kewpie had his teary eyes clamped shut—he didn't see this move of Hackett's. Having found a ring of keys on Richie's body Hackett opened all the file drawers. From the rear of the bottom drawer he lifted something spherical. It looked like a large ball of twine.

I heard myself saying: "Nobody can call this one an accident."

"No need to make it look like one," Hackett said, putting the ball on Richie's desk. "There's nobody left to fool. Richie was the last of the three."

Kewpie Moggs lifted his screwed-up face and saw us. Now he realized who we were. He hoisted himself to his feet with clumsy but desperate haste, reaching to his hip pocket.

"Don't do it again, Kewpie," Hackett said gently. "Rich is dead now. He doesn't care any more."

"He tol' me I gotta kill yuh," Kewpie insisted. "I gotta keep my promise to Rich."

Hackett, facing him, had his cane lifted. "Let's forget it, Kewpie. Let's call it quits."

"Naw, naw!"

Kewpie tugged the revolver out of his tight pocket as Hackett's cane hummed its deep song of warning, swished out, slapped hard against the side of his hard skull. The impact sent Kewpie staggering toward the hallway door. Hackett whacked him twice more, not cutting him, but simply knocking him into the

hallway. Kewpie tottered like a drunk, sobbing, crazy in his anxiety to pay a debt of murder to a dead man.

"That's all, Kewpie," Hackett said, an edge on his voice. "Get out of here now."

"Naw, naw, naw!"

As Kewpie swung the gun Hackett whipped his right arm. With the weapon deflected momentarily, Hackett moved in to execute that stroke which was, to my mind, the single-sticker's most devastating tactic.

Hackett held his cane vertical, tip upward, gripping it in both his hands. With clean swiftness he drove the tip upward to the soft V under Kewpie's chin. It penetrated smoothly and when the tip reached the roof of Kewpie's mouth the bones crackled. Hackett, still bearing upward, raised this monster off the floor and sent the mass of Kewpie Moggs flying over his shoulder like a gaffed tuna.

Kewpie plunged over the railing, dropped to the stairs below, rolled heavily and came to a stop sprawled in the foyer just inside the street entrance.

"He didn't even let go of the gun!" I blurted.

Laboriously Kewpie Moggs pulled himself up. He was balancing himself on his spread feet when Detective Parker eased in. Parker had heard the ruckus. He saw the gun gripped in Kewpie's fist and instantly his police positive was aimed at the middle of Kewpie.

"O.K., drop it," Parker said conversationally, "or I'll have to plug you."

No man can ever know what blurred, distorted images were flickering on the screen of Kewpie Moggs' consciousness. For years his brain had thickened under a rind of scar-tissue left by pounding gloves. He was stricken with sorrow, he had absorbed brutal punishment. Perhaps he thought it was Hackett facing him, or me, or both of us, or perhaps he didn't care who it was, didn't care about anything any more. He answered Parker's command with a snarl: "Naw, naw!"

Parker fired. The dirty front of Moggs's shirt bounced a little where the bullet bored in. The red blood began flowing out. Moggs stood there, not noticing the wound. Parker was so disconcerted that he permitted Moggs to fire next—a single blast that caught Parker full force, knocked him to the floor, set him down against the wall.

Parker sat there with blood leaking out of his own chest now, squinting as he aimed upward carefully, intensely engrossed in the problem of shooting Moggs down. He fired twice. Moggs sobbed again, more in grief than in pain, and rubbed the back of his free hand across his tear-smeared cheeks. Parker watched him, too shocked and too dumfounded to fire again, as he opened the street door and walked out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Too Many Shrouds

MY KEY was too unsteady in my hand, so Hackett guided it into the lock of Headliner Files' door. We want to my desk. I dialed the number of Clarabelle's apartment, hardly venturing to hope I'd find her there. She answered with a gay, lilting: "Hel*lo*-oo?"

"Better come to the office, Clarabelle," I said. "Don't ask questions now. Just get down here."

I disconnected quickly and sat there frowning at the phone. Within thirty seconds, sure enough, it began to ring. I picked it up again.

"Please, Clarabelle, don't waste time fooling around with telephones now," I said, giving her no chance to speak. "Get down here fast. You might do a little praying on the way, but don't stop for it."

I hung up again, looking hard at Hackett. He seemed untroubled but thoughtful.

"How did we get here?" I asked him. "How often can we beat it away from a scene of murder before Blackley begins to get irritated about it? We've done it three times now. This time, to top it off, we left one of Blackley's own men bleeding all over the place."

"I phoned Bellevue from Richie's apartment, remember?" Hackett said. "We waited on the corner until the ambulance picked up Parker, didn't we? Who was it invited him to get shot up?"

I felt lousy about Parker. "I went there thinking we could nail a couple of killings on Richie. That theory's smashed to pieces worse than Richie's head."

"I said Richie was the last of the three, but don't make the mistake of thinking he's the last, period," Hackett remarked, eying me. "There's still us."

"I know," I groaned. "Kewpie. There's no way of stopping him. He'll just keep rolling along, like an old man river of blood, until finally he slaughters us."

Hackett said quietly: "I wasn't thinking of Kewpie."

I didn't ask him who else then. I preferred not to know. I just wanted to wake up on another nice bright morning in Manhattan and find myself looking forward eagerly to another full day of futile attempts to organize Headliner Files. Except that I wasn't going to wake up. Hackett was the director of my dreams, the maker of my nightmares, the master of the day of judgment, and the end was not yet, the end was never.

Hackett pulled open a file drawer, pried up a thick folder and sat himself down at a desk with it.

"That's Catha's folder," I said. "I know it well."

I must have been a little hysterical.

Hackett leafed through some of the stuff on Catha's folder and presently paused over a newspaper clipping—a half-page feature headed *STARS ON NATURE'S UNSEEN STAGE.* It included a large photograph, an air shot of that mountain ledge, down there there in the Great Smokies, on which Catha and Jule had landed. There were several pictures taken on the ledge itself, and several others taken at another spot on the mountainside, far removed from the ledge, where the wreckage of Jule's plane had been found.

The plane had crashed on a rocky slope. One of the pictures showed a mound-shaped boulder in the background. Two men in ordinary business suits stood nearby. Despite a poor job of engraving and smudged ink they looked familiar. There was no hollow in the ground this time, and this picture had been taken from a slightly greater distance, but there could be no doubt that it depicted the same men and the same spot as Dell Kerry's negative.

Now Hackett pointed to a box of type reading: *A helicopter specially chartered by this newspaper was used to bring you this exclusive first-hand description. Story by Jack S. Richie, photos by Dell Kerry.*

The first sentence of Jack S. Richie's story read: "With Gus Pyke, famous pilot, at the controls, the helicopter bearing photographer Dell Kerry and your reporter—"

I felt older than God but much less wise, and Hackett sat there looking sad.

"It was right here in our files all the time," I said. "Richie and Gus and Dell, all three together."

"Together for the first time, but not the last."

"So after Catha and Jule had been rescued the three of them flew off to get a feature story about it. And at that time Richie was just a reporter and Dell was just a freelance photog and Gus was grubbing for any odd piloting job he might pick up, like that one."

Thinking I might learn something by reading it, I took up the feature article written by Jack S. Richie.

"Nothing there," Hackett said, shaking his head.

"Nothing? But after they flew back Gus began living high in a penthouse, and Dell's dream of a portrait studio came true, and Richie quit his reporting grind to write plays."

"Three of a kind," Hackett reminded me, "having a certain kind of dangerous luck."

"So what did they find there? A gold mine? Eldorado? Golconda?"

"Almost."

THE gong bonged. I hurried to the street door and let Clarabelle in. She was adorned with eighty bucks worth of Lilly Daché and five thousand bucks worth of mink. She looked as if she intended wholeheartedly to keep them and everything else belonging to her, including Headliner Files. Even including me, I hoped.

She asked breathlessly: "What's wrong, doll? Have Strong and Blackwell sued us?"

In a brownstone house next door to El Morocco there is an establishment called Celebrity Service, Incorporated. It's run by two smart boys named Ted Strong and Earl Blackwell. Since we are their only competitors in this screwball business of keeping tabs on notables I have felt there should be an attitude of mutual sympathy between us. Clarabelle, however, pretends that they don't really exist. She is so touchy on the subject of Celebrity Service that it is never wise even to mention it to her. A far worse mistake is to ask her: "Who dreamed up this service in the first place, anyhow, Clarabelle—you, or Strong and Blackwell?" People who wonder about this out loud in her presence find themselves forever exiled to Clarabelle's personal Siberia.

"Nobody has sued us," I said. "Strong and Blackwell are two sweet guys who know there are celebrities enough for all of us. Besides, their smartest move is to just let us alone. At the rate we're going we'll put ourselves out of business faster than anyone else could possibly manage."

She hurried into her office. Remaining in her mink and Daché she pushed her telephone to the farthest corner of her desk, a gesture meaning her decks were cleared for action. She wasn't quite as calm as her confident smile indicated, however, for she began plucking diamond rings from her left hand and rearranging them on her right.

"Tell Clarabelle all about it, Walter, honey," she urged.

Hackett appeared in the doorway carrying that big ball which he had brought from Richie's apartment. He had actually removed evidence from the scene of a homicide, which was a serious criminal offense, but I hadn't felt equal to arguing the point. He now unwound an end from the ball and said: "Hold this."

I held it curiously. Hackett gestured to me to stay where I was. While Clarabelle watched in perplexity he backed away, unrolling that loosely wound ball as he moved. Presently a knot appeared in the cord. Then, suddenly, I realized what it was.

"This is the rope Jule made—the long one he made by tying the short ones of the parachute together!"

"Richie brought it back from the ledge." Hackett went on unrolling the ball and count-

ing the pieces. "The chute had thirteen shrouds. One of these was a landing line reaching from the harness directly up to the top. Each of the other twelve went from a D-ring of the harness up and over the canopy, then down to another D-ring on the opposite side of the harness. Now. Lacking a tool to detach the full length of each of these, Jule hacked or chewed them off the harness, then at the edge of the canopy. O. K., then. How many pieces of line did that make in all?"

"Each suspension shroud made two pieces, then. There were twelve suspension shrouds in all, plus one single landing line. Total, twenty-five pieces, professor."

Hackett continued counting as he unrolled the ball. "Twenty-four . . . twenty-five." A ball remained in his hands, a smaller one now, but still a ball. "Twenty-six . . . twenty-seven . . ."

I stared at him and our entrance gong bong-bonged again. Alarmed, Clarabelle began fussing with her hat. In dismay I looked to Hackett for guidance. He dropped the entire ball of silken line into the wastebasket as if he had lost interest in it permanently and bent over Clarabelle, speaking softly.

"Slip out when Blackley isn't looking and flag a cab. Keep it waiting for us."

Clarabelle agreed with an agitated nod. Next Hackett cued me with a glance. I went quickly to our entrance, loosened the latch and opened the door all the way so as to admit the full width of Detective Lieutenant Blackley.

Blackley came inside, a polished anachronism of a man, looking heavily sober. He halted in the corridor when Hackett appeared from Clarabelle's office. His face was something molded from clean, pinkish ice. When he stepped into my office Hackett was close behind him. Hackett closed the door. Meanwhile Clarabelle had kept out of sight, quiet as a mouse.

"I had hoped to see Miss Brown also," Blackley said gravely. "This matter is of importance to her in a business sense."

"Clarabelle will be here any minute now." I heard faint sounds indicating that Clarabelle was then sneaking out to find a taxi for Hackett's obscure purposes, as he had urged. "Thanks for sending a man around to watch me."

Blackley placed himself tentatively in my visitors' chair, testing its capacity gradually, and then finding he could trust it he settled his paunch comfortably into his lap. His big black mustache quivered a little.

"You are not attempting to imply, are you, Mr. Preston, that you are unaware of Parker's—"

"He's implying nothing of the sort," Hackett said shortly. "We saw Parker get it."

I sat there silenced with consternation at Hackett's bluntness. Blackley turned his glacial eyes on him.

"And you abandoned him, as you have now abandoned three corpses, one after the other, each of these acts being legally and morally

offensive. I'm happy to have the surgeon's assurance that Parker will recover, but perhaps his situation would be still happier, Mr. Preston, if only you had warned him of the real danger, and if you had not deliberately deceived me as well."

"That's not how Parker got hurt," Hackett said flatly. "He just happened to run up against a tough baby who doesn't particularly mind bullets in his carcass."

Blackley answered in icy tones: "Miss Brown should be here. Even in case her firm survives these difficulties, which is questionable, she will at least face the necessity of restaffing its most important positions."

"Why?" Hackett said.

"Your acts of investigation are illegal," Blackley said. "You have both involved yourselves illegally in three murders."

"Three?" Hackett said, his lips curling. "You mean Richie and Dell Kerry plus Gus Pyke? They're murders now, are they—no accidents among 'em?"

"A change in classification—"

"Better not change 'em," Hackett interjected. "Let 'em stay accidents."

Both Blackley and I stared at him—Blackley because this disgraced ex-shamus was presuming to tell an honorable officer how to handle his case, I because this didn't sound like Hackett at all. For the high-principled Hackett it was a surprisingly unprincipled suggestion.

"I'm telling you," he said, his face growing hard. "That's the way it will be if you have any real decency in you. Winding it up any other way will put you beneath the contempt of even an ex-shamus."

THE lieutenant quivered with shock and indignation. Hackett signaled me with a glittering glance and abruptly left the office. I followed him quickly. Blackley attempted to steam after us, but first he must rise from his chair, an operation not without its difficulties.

Hackett and I found Clarabelle at an uneasy station just inside the street entrance. The taxi she had commandeered was waiting at the curb. We hustled her into it first and it ground toward the corner and a red light.

After looking back a moment I reported to Hackett: "This move is slightly ambitious. Blackley has an official car. He's in it now and coming right behind us."

Hackett tapped his cane impatiently. The traffic light changed and our cab whirred off again. The big black official car containing Lieutenant Blackley rolled along directly in our rear.

Clarabelle said: "Thack, dear, I think I could be more helpful if I were back there with him."

"The time's coming very soon now when you'll need to drench him in your charm," Hackett said. "Your errand of mercy, Clarabelle, is to get the big slob to make this case a closed book."

Without the faintest idea of what he was talking about, but sensing the importance of the stakes, Clarabelle said staunchly: "Just leave him to Clarabelle, doll."

Our cab turned westward with Blackley's official car still tailing us with ease. When we stopped in front of the apartment house where Jules and Catha lived, Blackley's car was just turning off Central Park West.

We hurried into the building. The elevator was there at the foyer level with the white-headed, creaky-jointed attendant seated inside it, reading a tabloid paper. Hackett didn't hurry him. He closed the panel without haste and we began slowly to ascend. We couldn't have been more than six feet upward when, looking through the iron grillwork, we saw Blackley looming into the foyer.

"Next trip, Lieutenant," Hackett said wryly.

There was something ominous in Blackley's calm. He gave no sign of frustration or anger. He simply lowered himself carefully to a bench, there to wait. He seemed in every way a man who could afford to wait, being completely certain of his arrangements.

Finally we stopped at the sixth floor and entered the Roberts' vestibule. No one appeared. We heard the faint music of a radio. Hackett ushered us into the big, murky baronial living room. Two doors, one on each side, connected it with the vestibule. Hackett bolted both of them.

While Clarabelle and I hung back like guilty intruders Hackett went on briskly, glancing all around. The only light was a dim table lamp. It revealed Catha Chester lying asleep on the sofa, cuddling a pillow as a child might cuddle a favorite doll. Was she really asleep, or was this a bit of acting? I was suspicious of everything and certain of nothing.

Hackett passed Catha by and went into the kitchen. There he looked out a rear door which gave onto a fire-stairs, then he bolted it. So much for a possible attack by Blackley from the rear. He came back to Catha. Clarabelle was bending over her and murmuring: "Poor child. Let's put her to bed, poor baby."

Hackett took her up in his arms. He lifted her easily, holding her gently and looking into her placid face with a commiseration which I could not fully understand. They were a strange sight, this celebrity-hating ex-detective with the famous, tiny, sleeping actress in his arms.

He kept his cane in one fist as he held her and we followed quietly as he climbed the balcony stairs. He lowered Catha to her bed and Clarabelle threw a blanket over her. She

seemed not disturbed at all. She went right on sleeping off her champagne—if she really was asleep.

"I think I'll stay with her, dolls," Clarabelle whispered. "I just have a feeling somehow."

We left her there with Catha. Going back along the balcony we heard a tapping below, a slow, dignified tapping in the vestibule. The elevator had hoisted Blackley and there he was, rapping on one of the doors.

The radio was still playing. Perhaps Catha had turned it on before falling asleep. A news period had begun. We heard a familiar name.

"—was seen to seat himself awkwardly on the curbstone, and there he died," the radio said. "Death was due to loss of blood from three fresh bullet-wounds. Kewpie, as Orville Moggs was called, was at one time or another the sparring partner of almost every major boxer in—"

Jule was standing on the balcony, blocking our way to the head of the stairs. He still wore his gray slacks, gray suede shoes and silky Russian shirt. He looked very tired. He had an automatic in his hand, pointing it at us.

"It's not really the gun that killed Elwell," he said, "but it's very much like that one. It will do. Will you step in here, please?"

Jule's gesture with the gun indicated the door of the master bedroom. His eyes were weary but there was fire in them. Hackett held his cane casually as he went through the door. I followed Hackett and Jule came after us, closing the door.

"You know better than to try this, Jule," Hackett said, his voice edged. "You can't go on forever killing and killing. You were clever about Gus and Dell, but not quite so clever with Rich, and this is not clever at all. You're losing your touch, Jule. They'll get you for killing Pres and me. There's a detective knocking on your door right now."

JULE listened and heard Blackley's continued tapping. He stood there pointing the gun at us. He didn't really want to kill us. He was sick of killing. He would do it only because he had to, because it was the only thing he could do about us.

"They'll find out why," Hackett warned him. "They'll dig, Jule, and they'll find out why, and then all your killing will have gone for nothing. They'll find it out in just the same way I've done it."

"Do you really know?" Jule said.

"I know you didn't mind paying money to Rich and Dell and Gus. You make more money than you need, so you shelled it out to them. But that was only a temporary arrangement, as you saw it. Rich's forcing you and Catha to use his bad play was a much more serious matter to a conscientious artist like Julian Roberts. And Gus was a drinker, and not too bright, he might brag too much sometime. Dell's knowledge was part of the knowledge they all shared, something you had to destroy as a whole. So you destroyed it part by part until you thought it was all gone—destroyed all the three of them who knew."

"No one else knew then," Jule said. "No one else in all the world."

"That would have been the end, but it isn't the end because now I know, too," Hackett said. "And if the killing goes any further others will learn of it, and then still others, until everyone knows it."

Jule shook his head. The brown wrinkles of his face deepened and puckered a little, and a glimmer of tears appeared in his hot eyes. "I'll go on trying anyhow. I've got to do it. If I fail at this everything will be gone, everything." Then he lifted his head and said acridly: "I don't believe you really know."

Hackett's voice was getting sharper. "The rope, Jule—it tells the whole story. The rope you made by tying the parachute shrouds together. There are too many of them—twice too many."

I watched that gun in Jule's hand.

"The number of pieces in that rope means it was made from *two* chutes. You and Catha had two chutes there on the ledge—and Otto Voster wasn't there with you. This means in turn that Otto had to come down without a chute. There's no possible question of this, Jule. It is proved, made inevitable, by the fact of the rope that saved you, and by the fact that Otto was not saved. And this is the truth you've been so desperately trying to hide."

Intent on watching Jule and Hackett, I was only dimly aware that Blackley was no longer tapping at the door below.

"Last night's radio script, like the news stories you gave out at the time, was a cover-up—a gigantic coast-to-coast lie. You used your famous voice, and Catha's too, on a nation-wide network, to establish sympathy for yourself, to make suspicion as unlikely as possible. The most important part of it was the scene telling how the three of you bailed out of your falling plane. That was fiction, Jule. It couldn't have happened that way. The silken rope proves it was actually rather different."

Jule and the automatic were gazing at Hackett fixedly.

"The three of you together in that plane—three professional egoists," he went on. "The motor quit and there came the beginnings of panic. It was Catha who jumped first, wasn't it? The woman, the most important member of your famous threesome—you strapped one of the chutes on her and got her overboard first."

"Of course," Jule said quietly. "Both Otto and I thought first of Catha. Egoists or not, we both loved her."

"But then, Jule," Hackett said intensely. "Then! Two men were left in that disabled plane with only one chute between them. Then there was real panic in both of you. You might have taken an instant to reason that you both might come down together in that one parachute, exactly as you falsely pictured yourself taking Catha down in the radio script, but neither of you stopped to think. You were both obsessed with desperation, both frantic to save yourselves.

"And in that moment of panic, Jule, your real attitude toward Otto erupted into action. The jealousy which you've tried to deny since, the resentment of his importance to the woman you loved, your inevitable feeling that your joint career no longer needed him and might even be impeded by him. A moment of ugly selfishness, your struggle with Otto over that one remaining parachute. Of course Otto hadn't a chance against you. You were younger, stronger." Hackett's face grew hard. "What did you tell Catha? When she saw you floating safely down after her in the other chute, how did you answer Catha's questions?"

Jule answered in an odd, numb tone. "I said to her, 'Otto was terrified, Catha, so terrified he was frozen in the seat. I couldn't make him hear, couldn't pull him loose. We had only a few seconds left, the plane was falling so fast. To go trying to pry Otto out of there—we'd both get killed. I had no choice, Catha, I had to leave him, had to jump alone.' "

"Not a very good lie," Hackett remarked bitterly. "No matter how difficult Otto might have been you could have cured him of that in half a second by clipping him on the button. Once you'd knocked him cold he'd have been easy enough to handle. Then you could have brought him down with you. But you were all unthinking emotion there in that plunging plane. You didn't care about Otto, you cared only about saving yourself. So you came down safely in the chute, leaving Otto to come down in the plane." Hackett asked, his lips twisted: "Did Catha really believe you?"

"I don't know," Jule said. "She is an excellent actress. If she had doubts of me she hid them beautifully. When my panic was gone I saw how horrible it must look, not only to Catha, but to the rest of the world once they learned of it. I said: 'Catha, my God, what will people think of me? That I saved myself at the cost of Otto's life—Otto, an old, gentle man, the one to whom we owe everything? I can't let anyone think that of me, Catha. It will ruin me, ruin both of us. We've got to find some way of preventing it—' "

Jule spoke softly now, as if glad of the opportunity to relieve a painful inner pressure already held too long.

"We got down from the ledge and looked for my plane. It had to be somewhere on the mountainside, not too far away. We found it. Then—then Catha went a little way off, where she couldn't see, and waited there while I did the rest."

HACKETT said: "You made a hole in the ground, scraping and digging, deep enough to put Otto's body in. There was gasoline left in the tank, wasn't there? You drained it and poured it over Otto's body. Odd." Hackett was speaking almost to himself. "The plane crashed one day and it wasn't until the next day that the Forest Service lookout sighted the smoke, but nobody else had wondered about that discrepancy." He went on. "Next, with Otto's remains well covered with earth and rocks—never to be found, you hoped—you went on with Catha and finally the rescue party found you on the trail."

"That would have been the end, except—"

"Except for Richie, with Dell and Gus, and their newspaper assignment. Their helicopter let them down on the ledge where you thought no one would ever again set foot. Richie was foxy about the silken rope he found there. Had you hidden the two canopies somewhere on the ledge too—or had you burned them—or had the wind blown them away? No matter—the rope itself told the tale. Too many pieces in it—Richie knew that meant two chutes, not just one as you claimed.

"Two chutes on the ledge, but no sign of Voster there. How had Voster come down, then, and where was he? Naturally Richie and party headed for the wreckage of the plane for a good look. They hunted around, knowing what the answer must be, and found the buried, burned body of Otto Voster. And though you began by paying money for their silence you knew at the beginning that you'd never be safe from them until you had silenced them forever."

Jule said softly: "Catha has been so wonderful. She has known all along, I think, yet she has never spoken a single word of reproach, she has been completely loyal. She understands how a single moment of panic might be enough to ruin a whole lifetime." Then Jule straightened and his hand grew tighter on the automatic. "But not only for my own sake—for hers too—No one else must ever learn of this."

Hackett's voice rasped. "Don't be a damned fool, Jule. You think I'm going to stand here and let you murder us?"

"I think so," Jule said.

The door opened behind him and Lieutenant

Blackley came in. Clarabelle had heard Jule's voice, had sensed our danger and had slipped down to let the lieutenant in. No doubt he had been listening at the bedroom door. Jule sprang aside so that he could cover us all with his weapon.

The unexpectedness and the size of Blackley startled Jule doubly. In turn the big gun in Jule's hand startled Blackley. It didn't frighten the lieutenant, however. Quite calmly he slipped a plump hand inside his coat where a shoulder-holster might nestle invisibly among all his other bulges.

Jule's gun twitched and Hackett moved in, his cane a blur. Instantly it was slashing out. Three swift strokes cut at Jule's hand. Hackett stood still, cane poised again, watching.

In dumfoundment Jule saw his hand turning red, drooping, losing all its strength. He watched the gun fall from his numb fingers, and as it thumped to the floor he simply turned his back on us and moved to the French windows.

Blackley was lifting his official gun. Hackett slapped it once, smartly, and Blackley went rigid.

Jule crossed the little balcony outside the French windows, vaulted its rail with smooth ease and vanished.

I stood there looking blankly at the night sky while Lieutenant Blackley stepped out on the balcony and looked down. After a moment I forced myself to go to his side. I saw the soft gray and silky white of Jule lying still on the cement of the little court seven stories below.

Blackley turned back. Clarabelle had come in. We all watched Hackett.

"Catha is still sleeping," Clarabelle said. "She doesn't know about any of this. When she learns Jule is dead she'll think she's the only person left in the world who knows what really happened in that plane. She doesn't dream we four know it too."

"We don't," Hackett said gently. "We don't know anything about it. We haven't the faintest idea what really happened in the plane."

Lieutenant Blackley stood there massively as Hackett said to him, "Catha did no wrong, aside from covering the man she loved. She'd never survive the truth of this. What's to be gained by blabbing it out and ruining the career of a great actress? You see, Gus Pyke's murder was an accident all the time. So was Dell Kerry's. And Rich's murder will never be solved. And Jule is another accident."

Blackley stood there with an expression of stupefaction on his moon-face and I wondered if he recalled his own scornful tones when saying to Hackett: "Far too often a private detective is concerned with concealing the truth rather than revealing it."

We looked from Blackley to Clarabelle and we left him to her.

We walked, Hackett and I. He carried his cane jauntily and looked wistful, yet there was something sardonic in him, something faintly sinister. He warmed my heart and made my blood run cold. I felt I knew him better than anyone else on earth knew him, and I felt I would never know him really.

Remembering how Hackett had sneered at Catha's portrait before meeting her for the first time, I said: "I'd still like to hear your reason for doing it this way, Thack."

"Sometimes a celebrity isn't exactly to blame for being one," Hackett said thoughtfully.

I believed somehow that this would be a better world if there were more Hacketts in it, but I wasn't at all certain of that either.

We walked through the New York night and found ourselves near Times Square and we paused to look up at the bright marquee of the Voster Theatre. The gleaming lights shone out with an announcement:

Later This Season

CATHA CHESTER and

JULIAN ROBERTS

In a New Play

The sign would have to be changed, of course.

It would have been the season's most brilliant opening. It would have caused Catha Chester's star and Julian Roberts' to shine with new splendor. But it wouldn't have had Otto Voster's blessings.

Tom Morgan's worst vice was an occasional buttermilk binge, but even clean living couldn't help him with this brain-tickler. Twenty G's worth of hot ice seemed to have melted away overnight. He found it though—in custody of a murderer whose heart made those rocks look as soft as new butter.

I slammed the fist forward, turning it over to get the maximum strength into the punch.

Hickory Dickory Death

By TED STRATTON

Author of "Time to Kill," etc.

IT was 9:10 A. M. on the dot. The shiny sedan braked by the side door of the Somerdon County Courthouse. I slid out of the car and told Bill Frane, one of my assistants: "Put the car away and go home. You've earned one day's pay."

"Sure, Chief," Frane said. His drawn face split in a grin and he lost no time taking the sedan away.

I stood a moment in the crisp air. Out of the side door strode a big man who looked as if he'd just breakfasted on a canary. He wore a gray suit, maroon tie, and a Panama hat white as vanilla ice cream. "Pretty soft for you," the man sneered. "You get paid for riding around in a county sedan?"

I stared up at the husky guy and only said: "I get paid, sir, but not very much."

"The taxpayers foot the bill for your all-night binge?" he added nastily, and walked off before I could coin a comment.

I stared at his retreating back and made

hard fists out of my hands. "Sure, you work all night for free," I muttered, "and some taxpayer cracks wise."

I entered the courthouse and walked along to a door where black letters on the frosted glass said: *Sheriff of Somerdon County, Daniel A. Tapping.* For a moment, I sagged against the wall, then straightened my tired shoulders and pushed inside.

Nan Carmichael, the sheriff's secretary, sat in the outer office. Her hair was as black as a coal vein on a dark night. Her voice tinkled like Mission bells at sunset, although I'd never heard any Mission bells. She was just a bit shorter than my five and a half feet. "Clean it up, Tom?" she asked.

"Yeah, Irish, and I've been punched and kicked and cursed. Just now a fat taxpayer coming out the side door insulted me. Please, a dime's worth of nice words, Irish."

"You're swell, Mr. Chief Detective Morgan," she said softly, and I felt better. "A Panama, gray suit and maroon tie?"

"The same."

"Norman Crandall. He came in early to see Dan about a husband who didn't come home last night."

I barged into the inner office and a roly-poly man whisked both feet off the cluttered desk top. "I'm just an employee," I assured him.

He was bald as a peeled egg. That was heredity. His red face came from too much bourbon, but that was his own doing. "Nice work," Dan said, "knocking over that wire-room, my boy. Norm Crandall and I went downstairs when the truckload of gear came in and I booked the three mugs. How'd the big one get that black eye?"

"Called me a son and hit me once, so—"

"Trouble, eh?"

"Mild. The tip was right. Two ex-wiremen were splicing wires on a single phone line to make five more connections in the wire-room. Plenty of horse-playing in that joint during the day, but we got small fry. Now can I go home and cork up for a week?"

"Well, there's a husband who didn't come home last night and—"

"Oh, he'll come home to dinner and fetch orchids and a plausible yarn for the little woman, Dan." I yawned. "See you tomorrow."

"Norm Crandall brought in the story. Tom, he's got influence with the freeholders and with this an election year, maybe you'd better—"

The same old story. Once I'd been a private eye, until my uncle with the long whiskers had whisked me overseas for thirty months of mud and hell in Italy. Afterward, Dan had hired me to head his staff because, "You're a war hero," he said. First off, I'd figured Dan was a cheap chiseler. My mistake. He was a nice, inefficient guy who worried about squawking voters like Norm Crandall.

"I'm only a bachelor who didn't come home last night," I said, "so let's have it." Remembering Crandall's insults outside, I added: "Maybe I should meet a man with political influence."

He gave me the story. Errant husband: Henry Reynolds, salesman for a jewelry store at Newark. I got interested because Reynolds had taken a valuable diamond out to MacKay Twimbley's last night and hadn't come home yet. Mrs. Reynolds—across the floor in the same apartment house as Crandall—had asked him for help, so he'd run to Dan at 7 A. M. and demanded action. Dan was saying: "When you interview Mr. Twimbley, you—"

"Wear silk gloves and a top hat," I interrupted. "You got an address for Reynolds and his description?"

Dan read from scrawled notes on a scratch pad. "Forty-four, five-foot-seven, one-sixty, black hair, blue eyes, and—uh, a mole left side of nose. Gray hat, dark blue suit, white shirt, blue tie, 120 Gramercy Court, second floor.

"Not much to go by," I said. "What color underwear?"

Dan beamed. "You're a card, my boy. You need help?"

"Not to talk to a woman or Twimbley." I blew a kiss to Nan on the way out and said: "Remind me to punch a fat taxpayer after I locate the missing Mr. Reynolds. Then I'm going on a binge."

"Buttermilk binge?" she asked, referring to my weakness.

"Three quarts of it, please. You can get me at the morgue."

She read minds and said: "Oh, Tom the lady-killer, eh?"

I didn't feel overly bright, so I said, "I bore 'em to death as you ought to know," and shoved off.

THE brick face of 120 Gramercy scowled at the neighbors. A fountain inside a clipped lawn worked languidly like a clerk with a hangover. I didn't have to press the bell to get in because a girl with an armful of books came along and used her key.

The self-service elevator was off on an aerial mission so I climbed the stairs with the help of the railing. One punch on the bell at 2-C delivered a trim, thirtyish brunette who asked casually: "Yes?"

"Morgan from the sheriff's office," I said, and my politeness got me into a room filled with modernistic furniture. The broad orange- and blue striped drapes and furniture tapestry were startling, but not enough to keep us from sitting near one another.

She wore a tailored, white linen dress and

a couple of diamond rings. Around one slim wrist was a heavy, hammered-silver bracelet with four small rubies where five should have been. She stretched the skirt over nylon knees, lowered her eyes and said: "I don't know where to begin."

Those were very nice legs, but I was too tired to gawk. "Why not begin at the beginning, Mrs. Reynolds?"

Her eyelids fluttered open. Full lips trembled and she stammered: "M-my h-husband didn't come h-home last n-night!"

I said gently: "Isn't that the end?"

She blushed a little and tried again. "My husband had an appointment last night to display a diamond to the MacKay Twimbleys."

"How valuable a diamond?"

"It retailed for over twenty thousand dollars, Mr. Morgan. My husband was a personal salesman, you see."

"You saw the diamond?"

"Yes, an unset stone and very valuable. It was to be a present for his daughter and my husband went out to discuss an appropriate setting." White teeth nibbled a generous lower lip. "Do you think he—he—"

I didn't know what to think, but that was my secret. "Oh, no," I said. "Was he a very methodical man?"

"Why, he worked on a timetable schedule, if you get what I mean! He always phoned when he'd be late and last night he didn't. I became frantic this morning and went across the hall to the Crandalls for help."

"Did you phone the Twimbleys to see if he had made the call?"

"I didn't want to bother them, Mr. Morgan."

"For whom does he work?"

"Caruthers. They're in Newark and very expensive."

"You phoned there?"

"Yes, but he hadn't come in."

"Did they think that was unusual?"

"My husband had no regular store hours. He wasn't a clerk. "

"Besides Caruthers and you, anyone else know he carried the stone?"

She had that answer too. "Just the Crandalls. We play bridge together and my husband showed them the stone last night. Do you think—"

I hunched forward. "Who knows your husband was in the jewelry game? "

"Why, just a few friends."

That really opened the matter up wide. Tell one friend your business and it's all over town in two hours. A twenty-grand diamond is enough ice to make even a friend think about who could own it. "Who went over to the Twimbleys with your husband?" I continued.

She looked up quickly. "With him? He always worked alone."

"Did he ever stay out all night before?"

"Only if I were with him, Mr. Morgan. Our friends say we were most devoted."

"I'm not trying to scare you," I said, "but I want to get at the facts. Did he ever mention that he had been followed by strangers?"

"No-o."

"Anyone ever try to hold him up?"

"Goodness, no!"

There wasn't anything more. He'd be home to dinner. He could have clinched the sale and gone on a bender. Or holed up in a Newark hotel for the night. Or stayed overnight at Twimbley's and the butler hadn't called him in time for a late breakfast. So I stood up and said: "We like these things to simmer a while before we start a wide search, Mrs. Reynolds. If he doesn't come home for dinner, would you phone the sheriff's office, please?"

Her chin jerked up. A hard line developed along the left side of her jaw. "Mr. Crandall said that you'd do something quickly about it, that the sheriff was his friend and would really move swiftly and—"

"The sheriff is a very efficient man," I cut in smoothly, and moved to the door. "You'll phone, eh?"

The elevator was still aloft so I crawled down the stairs and only needed the railing once. The fountain out front still had its hangover. Halfway along the block stood the county's sedan and Bill Frane gestured me that way.

"If it's more trouble," I said, "we'll let Dan take it."

"Him handle a suicide case?" Frane asked. "If a guy has to do a dutch, Chief, why don't he do it when we're not tired? A slit throat at the Ardmore Tourist Cabins."

I got into the back and stepped over a black bag. The sedan rushed off and I groused at a big-shouldered, bare-headed man on the bucket seat: "Why sit there, Doc?"

Doc Neesland, the coroner, drawled: "Once I did a stretch in solitary, Tom."

That was over par for Doc. "Know a Norman Crandall?" I asked.

Doc had been born in Somerdon County and knew everybody including the parasites who ate at his table. "Why?"

"He pestered Dan this morning about a husband who didn't roost at home last night. What's he do for a living?"

"The husband or Crandall?"

"Crandall."

"He's a promoter."

"For God's sake, what does he promote!"

Doc grinned. "Things that look good to him."

Doc's a good egg, but he likes to dangle people on strings. "When I cross Crandall's trail again," I snapped, "I'll shake out of him any information I'm after."

"You're five-foot-six and weigh one-sixty in the rain," Doc chided. "Crandall's an ex-amateur heavyweight, but you can dream, Tom. Yeah, he promotes stuff on the shady side of the street."

That didn't help much so we stared at some of our best Somerdon County farm property. Rolling meadowlands, ripening corn, woods and brooks that invite a man to quench his thirst. Or so the real estate operators bragged in their printed blurbs.

THE sedan swerved off the highway and onto a court that adjoined a brick office with a sign that blared: *ARDMORE CABINS, THE ULTIMATE FOR TOURISTS, MAX FORTMANN, PROP.* The "ultimate" sounded rather final for our friend the throat-slasher.

Before we could alight, a bald man with two bobbling chins rushed the car and leaned hairy forearms on the open window sill. I got a whiff of the two-buck gin he'd been using as a gargle.

"Jeez," he babbled, "I phone in right away when the maid finds the guy, see? I don't like guys that slit their throats, see?"

"Where's he hiding, Max?" Doc drawled.

"Cabin 24."

I made a rapid decision. Doc could handle a suicide, but I wanted to get an inside look at what made the tourist cabin business successful. You hear rumors around the courthouse. "Take it," I ordered, and slid from the sedan and went into the office with Max at my heels.

I asked: "What's the name of the corpse, Max?"

"It's in the book, see?"

"Don't you know his name?"

"Well, but—" Max shrugged and trotted out a flat book. His hands trembled like aspen leaves on a hot day.

I turned to the last page and scanned the entries. A Mr. & Mrs. Smith from Philadelphia; a Mr. & Mrs. A. Jones, 120 East Street, Grantwood; a Mr. & Mrs. Blanket from Bellair; a Mr. & Mrs. Brown from Evanston, and so on. All nice, respectable names. They always are in a tourist camp register.

I didn't have to ask Max the name of the corpse because Cabin 24 was written after the name of Jones. I yawned, and began casually: "Were you at the desk when the Joneses came in last night, Max?"

"Yeah. Chief, these jerks that wanna work you these days! You gotta lock the till, see?"

"Did he sign the book?"

"With my pen, Chief."

"Did you know them?"

"No."

"Did she come inside with him?"

"Naw, she scrunched down in the front seat, but I still got a good look at her face."

"The 11:02 P.M. means that's the time he registered?"

"Sure."

I leafed back through a few pages searching for some leverage to pry into the rat trap he called a brain. There were several very interesting items. "You set a record on that night?" I asked, pointing my finger at a particular date.

Max tried to see the book, but my shoulder was in the way. "Saturday," I said. "Two weeks back. You registered four couples for the same cabin on that night."

He stood there like a statue modeled from a kid's clay set. Sweat streamed off his fat face and soaked his white shirt. "I don't get what you mean," he said finally.

"We'll keep it a secret, then. When I see the prosecutor, I'm going to find out if there are any laws about that kind of stuff."

"If they don't stop here," he bleated, "they oney go someplace else, see? I don't *ask* 'em to stay."

"You don't turn 'em away, either." I picked up the phone book, riffled the pages. Then I whirled on him. "No Mr. and Mrs. A. Jones lives at 120 East Street, Grantwood."

"Chief, if it's a spot of cash—"

The look on my face cut off the sentence in midair. "If I can," I said, "I'll close you faster than a tomcat jumping out a window to keep a date. Get up off your knees and think. Did you know the man?"

"No," he blubbered.

"The woman?"

"No!"

He was too emphatic. "You know her," I said. "Has she been in here before?"

"Well, once-twice, maybe."

"With this man Jones?"

"Never with him, Chief."

"Is she around here now?"

"No, she runs out sometime during the night or morning."

"What's her name?"

"I—I—" A little sense filled his eyes. "Doris," he said, and he acted as if he'd just given me a clear title to the Philadelphia mint.

"What about his car?"

"It's back by the cabin, see?"

"A man, and a woman named Doris, and their name isn't Jones, rented 24 last night at 11:02. His car is here, she's gone, and his throat is slit. You'd better start praying, Max."

I walked out into the hot September sunshine and along between a double row of neat, adjoined cabins as alike as strung beads from the five-and-dime. A narrow weed-grown field separated 24 from the traffic hammering along Highway 7. A sedan stood nearby without a worry in the world.

But it was a nice cabin. Green-figured wallpaper, with three good pictures. A dark green rug, a double bed covered with a smooth, green-tufted candlewick spread. One easy chair, a desk, a french phone, and the county's camera on the single straight chair. Frane dusted powder at the bureau. I said: "Why look for fingerprints, Bill?"

"He thinks we're a pair of dopes," Doc Neesland said. He got up off his knees from beside a man who sprawled on the rug near the lavatory door. "Sometimes you wonder where a man gets all his blood."

"What's the story?"

"Dead on arrival. Probably been dead since around midnight, Tom."

I looked closely at the corpse. A medium-sized man, say five-foot-seven, flat on his back. A lean face, black hair and a mole on the left side of his nose. "Hey!" I blurted.

"It's Henry Reynolds from Somerdon," Neesland said.

IN HIS right hand, he clutched a knife, the kind on which you press a button and eight inches of wicked steel jump out. Blood had been washed from his wounded neck to disclose a deep jab into the jugular and an ear-to-ear slit.

"How do you figure it?" Frane asked.

"He stood facing the front door," I decided. "The killer, probably someone he knew, got in close and let him have it."

"Go on," Neesland urged.

"The killer wanted it to look like suicide, but that doesn't jell. A man can't stab his jugular and then slit his throat or slit his throat and then stab his jugular. Some dumb amateur killer handed us a job in a package, that's all."

"The knife is like professionals use," Frane objected.

"But amateur killers can buy 'em by the dozen," I said, and began collecting Reynolds' personal effects. Wrist watch, fountain pen, solitaire ring, an order book on Caruthers, a few dollars in bills, a betting slip that bookies hand out as a receipt, and a .22 caliber revolver in a compact rig under the left armpit.

"Why the gun?" Frane asked.

Neesland said: "Reynolds sold expensive jewelry."

That's how news travels. Probably half of Somerdon County knew that Reynolds carried around stuff worth a lot of money. I checked his coat lining, the padded shoulders, necktie, cuffs, felt under his shirt, and even pried off the rubber heels on his shoes.

"Looking for something?" Neesland asked curiously.

"He was carrying around a twenty-thousand dollar chunk of ice," I said. "This is the man Crandall reported to Dan this morning."

"Think the ice melted?" Neesland asked, but nobody laughed.

We wasted our time searching the cabin for the diamond. "Fetch the maid," I ordered Frane, "then check outside."

Frane returned in a couple of minutes with a young woman in soiled slacks and a tight T-shirt. She had sleep-hungry eyes and red-knuckled work hands. I asked her: "You see what goes on around here, eh?"

"I see a lot of things," she said. "A couple came in yesterday and—"

"Did you make the bed when you came in here this morning?"

One hand flew to her lips. "With th-that on the rug, mister?"

"Do you know him?"

"Just some drunk. I don't think he even knew himself last night when he come in. The woman—name of Doris-something from Somerdon—she don't hang around long. I come out to 23 later and saw her starting to cross the field to the highway."

"What about strangers or prowlers?"

"Mister, anybody could wander around in here and I wouldn't see 'em! I told Max he should oughta put up a fence, but he don't want to spend any dough and—"

I shooed her out, told Neesland to handle the corpse, and joined Frane outside. "Find anything, Bill?"

"Nothing."

At the sedan, we got our first break—a bundle of slips jammed behind the front seat cushion. Slips that said: "ACQ, 2nd, Gold. Wed., 100." One labeled "PIM, 4th, Nt. Wind, 500?, C-4", and a scrawled "OK, C", in the lower right hand corner.

Illegal betting calls for a complicated setup involving spots where the bettors place their money. These places usually had a code number like "C-4". Bets were phoned in to the wire-room where clerks made out these slips. Big bets like the five-hundred-dollar one on North Wind in the fourth at Pimlico needed an O.K. from a higherup.

There were fourteen slips in the pile. We'd seen other slips like this when we'd knocked over the wire-room last night. Frane asked: "Chief, you think Reynolds had a piece of that wire-room?"

"Probably that would explain why he had the slips in the sedan," I said, "but they could have been stashed there by someone else." I stuffed the slips into my coat pocket, said: "Pick me up at the office with the sedan."

Max Fortmann had a visitor, a thread-like man in a double-breasted coat that was supposed to give him width through the chest. "Hiyah, Jake," I said. "Did Max get nervous?"

Jake Terpak grinned. "Finished in the cabin, Tom?"

"He's my lawyer, see?" Max said proudly. "He says I don't have to answer no questions, see?"

"Shut up," Jake said easily. "Suicide, Tom?"

"Why not?" I picked up the register off the desk and started to leave.

"Hey," Max bleated, "you can't steal my book!"

"Jake," I said, "the man in 24 was murdered. O.K.?"

Jake nodded thoughtfully. "Sure, take the book, Tom. Now about the registrations—if a transient signs the book with a phony name, there's no law that makes my client responsible. He's not a party to any fraud and the responsibility for the signature rests with the—"

"See the prosecutor, Jake. That's a bigger fee."

Max sounded off: "I got no more worries, see? My lawyer—"

I grinned at Jake Terpak. "You tell Max," I said, "that every guy who ever went to jail had a lawyer."

"Right," Jake said, and nodded.

Outside, I piled into the sedan. "Courthouse and fast, Bill." We went out of there like a driver taking a turn at the Speedway.

I SAID to Nan Carmichael at the office: "Any news, Irish?"

Her eyes were troubled, but her voice still tinkled. "Mrs. Reynolds phoned twice, Tom."

"Did her husband come home yet?"

"No-o."

"He will—in a box, Nan."

Nan stared. "The suicide at the cabins was —Henry Reynolds?"

"In person and very much dead. Only it's murder, but you're not to tell anybody that. Frane is trying to locate a local tavern girl named Doris-something. Do two things for me. Carry the news out to Mrs. Reynolds and stay with her until I can get there. Phone Norman Crandall and tell him there are important developments that need his attention here. And it's not murder officially."

A little red stained Nan's face. "Crandall called while you were out, Tom."

"Like that, eh?"

"He was insulting about our—our slowness on the case. When and if you get a crack at him, think of me, please?"

"Can do, maybe. Is Dan in?"

"He's got a speaking date at the Rotary."

Inside my office, I located a number in the phone book and got the Twimbley's butler on the wire. No, in cultured tones, Mr. Twimbley was out. No, his daughter was out, too. "But you're home," I said, "and butlers always know more than the master. Three things, and this is the sheriff's office calling, bud: Was Henry Reynolds out there last night? If he was, what time did he leave and did he still have the twenty-grand diamond?"

Arrival 9:01 P.M. Departure, 9:38. Half an hour to decide on a setting for the stone and the stone went out with Reynolds.

I had some time on my hands and did a little phoning. Then I sat down and wondered where Reynolds had been between the time he left the Twimbley's and the time he showed up at the cabins with Doris-somebody. If Frane could strike the trail of the woman—

Frane did. He towed her in around two o'clock and winked. "Everybody knows Doris," he said. "Meet Miss Dunbar, Mr. Morgan."

"Mr. Bright Brain," she sneered, and flopped down on a red leather easy chair that Dan reserves for distinguished visitors.

"Careful of that chair," Frane warned. "It cost the taxpayers two hundred fish."

You see her type a lot draped on bar stools. Dark hair, sleek part down the middle. Too much lipstick. Shadows under the eyes that could be makeup, but probably came from late hours and Scotch. Tanned, bare legs, red high-heeled shoes, low green-colored dress. A careless way of crossing rather good legs and a husky voice that said: "I've got a two-fifteen date so make it fast, Morgan."

So I had to be agreeable and ask: "Know Henry Reynolds?"

"I know a lot of men, Morgan."

"I can understand that. Did you know Henry Reynolds?"

She smiled, a cute trick with the eyes and half-parted lips that were supposed to up the male blood pressure. "And if I do, Morgan?"

"He's dead."

The smile froze on her lips. I waited a moment, continued: "Last night in Cabin 24 somebody cut his throat. Want the details?"

Worry ran around her face. "I'm not interested in strangers."

"Did you see him murdered, Miss Dunbar?"

"I wasn't with him!"

"Do you know anybody who would want to murder him?"

"No!"

"Do you know him?"

"I told you that—"

"Never mind what you told me. What time did you and Reynolds get to Cabin 24 last night?"

"I can prove I wasn't at the Ardmore last night," she said triumphantly. "I had another date."

I asked gently. "Who mentioned the Ardmore, Miss Dunbar?"

"She reads minds," Frane said. "Two people saw her out there, but she had another date and can prove it. Chief, won't that sound pretty good to a jury, eh?"

She came apart at the seams. Sure, she had gone out with Reynolds to the Ardmore. But she wasn't that kind of a girl. So she'd only spent ten minutes there and then thumbed her way back to town.

"He was alive when you left?" I asked.

"Of course!"

"You met him earlier, where?"

"The Rounders' Grill in town. He came in around ten o'clock and I—I knew him and we had some drinks and then he made a couple of phone calls and—"

"To whom?" I interrupted.

"One was to some man he had some kind of a partnership with and I think the other was to his wife."

"But you're not certain?"

"No, it was just the way he talked afterward, if you get what I mean."

I thought that over, asked: "He made the phone calls. How long after that before you left the Grill?"

"Oh, fifteen or twenty minutes." She slid forward in the chair. "Mr. Morgan, you've got to believe me! You've just got to—"

"If you've told the truth," I interrupted, "you've no worry. It's just that—"

Nan buzzed the inter-office phone and said: "Mr. Crandall to see Mr. Morgan. Ready?"

"In about a minute, Miss Carmichael." I cradled the phone. "Bill, slide her out the back. And you, Miss Dunbar—don't do any talking and don't get any ideas about running off, understand?"

SHE nodded meekly, gushed thanks, and Bill pushed her out the back door into the corridor. Norman Crandall walked in as if he owned the county. I gave him the eye. Doc Neesland had said that Crandall had once been an amateur heavyweight. Broad shoulders, long arms, big hands, but a telltale bulge over the belt.

"Make it snappy, Morgan," Crandall said. "It's about time you parasites earn your money around here. There's an election coming up and maybe you won't be around after November."

"Weren't you here rather early this morning, Mr. Crandall?" I asked.

"I was worried about Henry Reynolds."

"What was his business?"

"Oh, something to do with jewelry."

"Diamonds?"

His eyes held a little caution. "Yes, I believe it was."

"Or backing a wire-room?" I continued.

"Well, now, Henny never mentioned that." A wave of the big right hand. "Of course, I don't know everything that Henny had his hand in."

"Did he carry any valuables around last night, Mr. Crandall?"

"Well, now, he might have. Say he did, Morgan—that would be a motive for his disappearance, eh?"

"You saw the diamond, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

"A twenty thousand dollar diamond and you have to scratch your mind to remember whether or not you saw it?" I stood up. "I figure you're a friendly sort of character, Crandall. Eager to run errands for women whose husbands stay out all night." I glanced at the scratch pad on the desk, asked: "Does this mean anything to you—12-10-I?"

"Can't say as it does."

"It's on the license plate of your Buick sedan, Crandall."

The eyes were very, very cautious now. "Well?"

It was time to bluff. "We've checked with the attendant at the Gramercy Court Garage. He said your car was out last night, that it went out at ten-forty-five. Where did you go?"

"Oh, I drove around a bit. Can't say just where."

"Ardmore Tourist Cabins, maybe? Cabin 24, eh?"

A long, long pause, then: "What are you getting at, Morgan?"

"A Buick sedan with license number 12-10-I was parked near the cabins last night. Henry Reynolds was out there. He carried on his person a diamond worth twenty thousand dollars. Somebody slit his throat out there and the diamond disappeared. Well, what about it?"

Ever see a big guy wilt? Two hundred pounds of beef turn into gelatine? "N-not murdered?" he managed to stammer.

"Murdered. You received a phone call from Reynolds last night and took your car out immediately afterward. You knew he still had the diamond. What business are you in?"

"I'm a promoter," he muttered.

"What are you promoting right now?"

Frane got it then. "Chief, the initial on one of the slips in Reynolds' car was 'C'. This guy is pretty close with Reynolds and Reynolds had a piece of that wire-room. This is the guy—"

"This is the guy," I said, "who promoted murder and robbery last night. About the wire-room, Crandall. The phone company kept records of all mysterious phone calls to and from a certain wire-room they'd uncovered. They were interested because somebody was splicing wires onto their regular lines and creating five connections from a single line. Their wire chief has your number, Crandall. They've got transcripts of you talking to the clerks in the wire-room. They've got—"

He stood up, cocked both fists and snarled: "It's a damned frame! Get me a lawyer in a

hurry, Morgan! Sure, I had a piece of change in the wire-room and so did Henny Reynolds, but you try and prove it!"

"The murder," I said.

"That's a frame! I wasn't near the Ardmore Cabins last night! I—"

I'm not particularly facetious, but it seemed like a good time to say: "It's a frame that's got your ugly face right in the middle of it, Crandall."

Then he remembered that his fists were clenched. Maybe he remembered that he was an ex-boxer and that I weighed one-sixty with my winter overcoat on. But when he moved in fast and stabbed with a left and followed with a roundhouse right, he didn't remember to cover up. I took the roundhouse punch high on my left shoulder. My right fist was back, knuckles up. I slammed the fist forward, turning it over to get the maximum strength into the punch. Boom, right into the soft stomach.

"Ooph," Crandall said, and sat down suddenly.

"Do you want to get up?" I asked politely, and Frane snickered.

No answer.

"Would you like a return match next week, Mr. Crandall?" I remembered something. "Want to make any more cracks about who's sponging off the county for a living, you wire-room chiseler?"

No answer. Frane said: "When did you get wise to him, chief?"

"On the way back from the cabins, Bill. Look, Mrs. Reynolds ran to him early this morning. Why didn't he phone the sheriff? Why did he run right out to the courthouse at seven A.M. to see Dan? How did he know Dan was here at that time? He had something else on his mind besides Henry Reynolds' failure to come home last night. Meanwhile, the wire-room had been knocked off. It was a good chance to come out here and play palsy-walsy with his friend Dan to find out if we had any leads into him. Two hours he hung around here with Dan, listened to Dan book the three mugs, saw the equipment we'd seized and by that time he knew we didn't know about him. And another thing—"

Frane stood there tossing something bright into the air and catching it. I grabbed it, studied it carefully. "Where'd you find that?" I wanted to know.

"This morning outside Cabin 24. Some kid lost her—"

I shook my head sadly and said: "You big dope. . ."

ONE-TWENTY GRAMERCY COURT still scowled in the late afternoon sunshine. Someone had turned up the fountain and I got a wave of cool air as I passed. I reached the double front doors and a woman in a print dress walked out and said brightly: "Hot for September, isn't it, young man?"

"Very hot for some people," I said cryptically, and caught the opened door with one foot and went upstairs. A knock on 2-C fetched Nan Carmichael. "I thought of you when I hit him," I said.

Her eyes brightened. "Really, Tom!"

"Yeah, and he sat down fast." Softly: "How'd she take the news?"

"You'd know if you'd come out with me. After this, you run your own errands of mercy."

"How do I look?"

"Well, as if you'd been on a buttermilk jag. Where's your comb?"

I handed it to her. She got some of the tangles out of my locks, straightened my tie, patted the wrinkles smooth in my coat and prinked the display handkerchief. "If I could only do something quick with a two-day beard—"

"You can't, Irish. Where is she?"

"Lying down in the bedroom."

"Wait in the kitchen and keep quiet. I'll make like you've gone out." She disappeared and I called loudly: "See you later, Miss Carmichael," and slammed the outer door.

I'd just stepped onto the rug in the room with the overly bright drapes when Mrs. Reynolds opened a door and stepped from the bedroom. "Oh," she said. "Where's that charming Miss Carmichael?"

"She was pretty tired, Mrs. Reynolds, so I sent her home."

She sat down on the divan and leaned far back. She still wore the white linen dress and carried a pocketbook large enough to rub shoulders with a trunk. She looked younger, but it could have been the soft light that sifted between the slats on the partly opened Venetian blinds at the windows.

"I'm very sorry about the way things turned out," I said, and let my voice trail off.

"I'm—I'm shocked," she said softly. "To think that he—that he cut his own throat and—and—"

"I can imagine it was a shock, Mrs. Reynolds."

White teeth began to nibble on the lower lip. "We'd been so happy together, Mr. Morgan. Did he leave a note or something—anything to explain why he—he—"

"No notes, but a few slips of paper in the sedan."

She sat up straight. "Slips of paper?"

"Yeah, from the wire-room."

"Wire-room? Oh, you mean telegrams, Mr. Morgan!"

"Did Mr. Reynolds leave you well off?"

"Well, I hadn't thought of that yet. There's his business and—things. The furniture here and the two cars."

"Insurance?"

"Some kind of a policy, I believe."

I'd made some phone calls at the office while Frane had been out looking for Doris-somebody who turned out to be Dunbar. "The jewelry firm carried a company policy on Mr. Reynolds for thirty thousand dollars. You're the one who will receive that."

"Oh. I'd no idea it was *that* large. But Henry always did think of me and—"

There wasn't much sense dawdling now. I pulled something from my trousers' pocket and laid it on the coffee table by the divan. "Want this?" I asked.

She stared at the small ruby. "Why would I want it?"

"I noticed this morning that there were only four rubies in the hammered-silver bracelet where five should have been. It matches the others, Mrs. Reynolds."

She rounded her eyes like a baby watches something bright that it doesn't quite understand. "You're sure it's mine? Where did you find it, Mr. Morgan?"

"On the driveway outside Cabin 24. Evidently it had loosened in—in the struggle and dropped out when you left."

She wasn't going to give in that easily. "I don't understand," she said, continuing the baby-stuff, but the hard line was developing along the left side of her jaw. "Cabin 24—the one where my husband—"

"The one where your husband died. Remember this morning when I asked you if anyone went out to Twimbley's with him last night?"

"Yes, I remember that. But he went out there alone."

"You don't know much about the jewelry business, Mrs. Reynolds," I said. "Unsold diamonds are heavily insured. The insurance company wants to know that the insured property is being handled carefully and wisely. Last night they had an operative trail Mr. Reynolds out to Twimbley's just in case anybody got any ideas of, say robbery."

Suddenly I got a bright idea. She had been so damned sure of herself all along. Running over to Crandall's apartment bright and early with a story about her husband not coming home, sicking him on us just in case we might get ideas about who had the diamond *after* we found Reynolds! And the way she carried that pocketbook around with her—

I LEANED down and snatched the pocketbook, flicked off the clasp and dumped the contents on the coffee table. No diamond rolled out, but there was a chamois bag tucked into one pocket. Something hard was inside the bag and a diamond rolled out when I loosened the cord.

"Imagine finding a diamond in your pocketbook!" I said. "It was easy for you to drive over to the Rounders Grill after your husband called. You had your own car. You trailed them to the Ardmore Cabins, parked off the highway, and hung around until the other woman left. Reynolds didn't expect you to walk in through that door! But he wasn't afraid of you—you were his wife! You could come right up close to him and he wouldn't budge. If it hadn't been for that insurance company operative, we wouldn't have known about your little game or—"

I had walked up and down in front of the coffee table slamming the words at her. That's how much of a dope I was! She must have bought those deadly spring-bladed knives by the gross. Where she got it so quickly, I don't know, but she had one. She kicked over the coffee table and pressed the button on the handle so that eight inches of wicked death jutted out from her fist. She came at me like a cat, and I backed across the room.

"No," I told her, and flung up one arm in time to ward off the first murderous thrust. The veneer had come off her face. I didn't want to get rough with her, but I didn't want to get slashed, either.

"Women!" she kept snarling. "Always it was some woman with him and—" She didn't look thirty now. Nearer fifty. But that wasn't helping me, and I didn't carry a gun.

She plunged forward and I slammed her wrist aside. I grabbed both arms, but she kicked my shins and I let go and backed further away. I was against the wall near the door, now. I couldn't retreat any further. She plunged forward silently, holding the knife low down for an upward jab at my stomach. I'd have to get rough with her—

Something swished through the air and came down on the top of her head. Her mouth opened like a fish in drydock. Her eyes glazed. When her knees sagged, she bent suddenly at the middle and fell face forward on the rug. First, I took the knife out of her hand and then I looked at Nan Carmichael.

"Thanks, Irish," I said.

"Did—did I kill her?" Nan asked wildly, swinging the frying pan in her right hand. "She was trying to kill you, Tom!"

"She didn't have a chance with you swinging that frying pan," I said. "Dammit, Nan, I knew all along that this thing was opening up too smoothly. I got in a rut and the rut ran right straight to Norm Crandall. But it was such a deep rut that I couldn't see out. She sent Crandall over to throw me off. Anything to keep me from seeing her in the background! Sure, Reynolds and Crandall were both mixed up in the wire-room, but killing Reynolds and snitching the diamond were her ideas."

"She killed her own husband?"

"Yeah, maybe it was jealousy of the other women like she said or maybe she just saw a chance to pick up all of Reynolds' little marbles for her own."

I picked up the phone, dialed the office. Dan Tapping answered. "Chief," I said, "send some of the boys over to 120 Gramercy Court. It's all cleaned up . . . Yeah, I told Frane to give you the lowdown on Norman Crandall, but he didn't kill Reynolds. No, the wife did it . . .

"It sure never pays to fool around behind a woman's back, Chief. I think she knows all about the wire-room stuff and can help us out with that . . . Oh, the case is air-tight against Crandall, but she can clear up a few loose ends . . . Her? Why worry about what's going to happen to her? Theft, murder, but you know what a smart lawyer like Jake Terpak can dream up for a jury's consideration. If we nail Crandall, you'll be sitting pretty with the voters for many years to come.

"Me? Oh, Nan's here and she's going to take me out to dinner and a dance . . . No, you drink your own bourbon. I'm sticking to buttermilk."

I cradled the phone. "So begins another day," I said brightly.

Mrs. Reynolds stirred on the rug and moaned once. "I hope she doesn't have another one of those knives, Tom," Nan said, and grabbed my arm. "Oh, I'm so glad that that insurance operative followed her husband last night!"

"Look, Irish, you'd better stick to typing. I'll be the detective. There wasn't any insurance operative following her husband around last night."

"But you said—"

"Sure, I said there was. You saw her crack wide open, didn't you? When you've got a crime on your mind, Irish, you're wide open for a fast play. You get panicky. You get ready to run."

"When did you first begin to suspect that it was she?"

I thought that over. "I guess it was about the time we found that the corpse at the Ardmore was her husband. I was tired and I got awake about that time and began to check back.

"You see, Nan, when I came out here this morning, she talked peculiarly. Her husband was in the jewelry sales game. He was a very important salesman. They were a devoted couple. All the while she talked as if he were already dead, not just missing. That meant that she knew he was dead and had killed him or she knew who had killed him. But I didn't get it at the time. Only after I woke up and checked back."

Nan's eyes were a couple of bright stars. "I hope," she said, "that you don't ever get on my trail, Tom Morgan!"

That was an idea. I looked at her as if I had never seen her before. Her smile was the sweetest thing this side of the dancing girls on Bali Island. I've never seen any dancing girls from Bali, but the distance they are from Somerdon County was just about right.

"Irish," I said, "I am on your trail and believe me, you're never going to get away from me."

A LIKELY STORY

By

ED SCHMID

Willis Carter knew that it takes a slick slayer to pull off a perfect crime. That's why he planned each part of his murder masterpiece—no visible motive, no witnesses, no evidence. He couldn't possibly be caught—or could he?

THE decision to kill his partner had been made calmly, without excitement or confusion. It had not been a sudden inspiration, but rather, had come as the simple and logical answer. Borden was sure to discover the shortage in the books and there was no possibility of making it good, now.

He took the heavy pistol from his pocket and removed the clip. The bore was bright, the chamber empty. He drew back the slide and let it spring forward. His finger tightened on the trigger and he nodded in satisfaction at the metallic snap of the firing pin. As matter-of-factly as if he were filling a fountain pen, he inserted the clip, drew back the slide again and watched it carry a cartridge into the chamber.

As he walked into John Borden's office, the little bald man looked up. The bright light gleamed on his perspiring head. He looked into the darkness that fringed the room and asked: "That you, Carter? What're you doing down here tonight?"

"Oh, I had something I wanted to take care of," Carter replied easily. He moved around the desk. "What're you working on?"

"I'm getting our books ready. Glad you dropped in, maybe you can help me find my mistake." He hunched his chair up closer to the desk and leafed back through some of the big, ruled pages. Leaning forward, intent on the columns of figures, he didn't notice the .45 automatic as it was raised to his temple.

He died instantly.

Carter pressed the limp fingers of the dead man's hands against the gun several times—around the barrel and on the grip. Then, carefully, he placed the right hand in position, forefinger well around the trigger, and stepped back to make a critical inspection.

He glanced at his wrist watch and reached for the telephone on the desk. Then he dialed rapidly. When he heard a gruff voice answer, "City Police," Willis Carter pitched his voice low, and spoke slowly and distinctly.

"This is John Borden at Borden-Carter and Company on Fifth Street. I want to report a theft."

"Yeah? What'd they get and when'd it happen?"

"I've taken about forty thousand dollars from my partner, over a period of time, by altering the records and our books. It's impossible to make the shortage good now, and I—"

"You say that *you* stole forty thousand dollars?"

"Yes. I'm telling you this so that I can go with a clear conscience."

"Where you goin'? You better stick—"

"I'm going to shoot myself."

"Hey! Don't do that! I'll get a car right out there! You wait—"

"Your car will be too late. I have my service pistol. I'll die instantly, without unpleasantness or pain. Goodbye."

The sounds of metallic sputtering in the receiver ceased as Carter replaced the instrument on its cradle. He opened the telephone book to the yellow pages and ran his finger down to the list of hospitals. When the second hand of his watch reached the top of the dial, he made a second call.

His words were rapid, now, and excited, as he almost shouted into the mouthpiece: "Get an ambulance over to Borden-Carter Company on Fifth! Hurry! Mr. Borden shot himself. . . Yes, that's right. Fifth and Oak. You'll see the lights in the office building. . . I think he's dead. The side of his head—it's awful. . . All right, I'll call them right away. Hurry!"

He broke the connection and dialed again. Waiting for the answer, he turned the telephone book over, still open to the classified section, and checked to see that the police number was listed on the cover.

"Police! Quick, there's been an accident! The Borden-Carter Company. This is Willis Carter. Mr. Borden just shot himself and"—he paused excitedly—"I called an ambulance and they told me to call you. . . You know where it is? Yes, Fifth and Oak. . . I think

he's dead. . . No, I haven't. I haven't done anything. What *can* I do? . . . Oh . . . Of course! I'll stay right here."

Three minutes later he heard the police siren's wail—heard it end in a diminishing moan as the car braked to a stop in the driveway by the small office building. He met them outside, nervous and excited to be sure, but that was only to be expected in a man unaccustomed to seeing death. More cars arrived shortly.

"Just sit down out here and take it easy," the officer in charge said as he hurried on into the office.

He stuck his head out a few minutes later to tell the ambulance driver to go on back to the hospital. His eyes turned to Carter as he was about to close the door again.

"You feel O.K.?" he asked.

"I think so. Uh—officer, is he—"

"Yes. He's dead. Died instantly. A forty-five leaves—" He hesitated. "Sure you're O.K.?"

Carter nodded, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He lit a cigarette. He smoked three before a uniformed policeman finally opened the door and beckoned to him.

The officer was sitting on the edge of the desk, busy with a pencil and a pad of paper. Behind the desk a blanket covered a bulky object. The toe of a man's shoe protruded. On the desk, Carter saw the phone book, still open and upside down. He saw a row of coins, billfold, knife and keys and realized that the officer was listing the articles old Borden had carried. The pistol lay there, too, gleaming dully in the bright light of the desk lamp. He'd told Borden long ago that a weapon like that was dangerous to own, but the old man had kept it anyway.

The officer dropped his pad into his coat pocket and handed the pencil to one of the other policemen. He kicked a chair around so that it faced Carter.

"My name's Howard, Mr. Carter. You were Borden's partner?"

The other nodded. "We've been partners for fifteen years. I was his superintendent before that."

"Was he having any family trouble or anything like that?"

"No. Mrs. Borden's been dead for years. They had no children. I don't know of any relatives at all. He's been nervous and jumpy lately, though. I thought he'd been working too hard."

"Nothing wrong with the company?"

"Oh, no. Taxes keep our profits down, but our business has been good. It wasn't that, I'm sure."

"Mr. Carter, we got a call at the station just a minute or so before you called us. I took it. A man identified himself as Borden, then said he was going to kill himself. He'd been embezzling from you, he said. Had taken over forty thousand dollars. Did you know of anything irregular in the books?"

"Why no, I can't believe—" Carter paused uncertainly. "We were having an audit next week, so I'll find out, but—"

"You work nights often?"

"No, I just came down here to pick up some things I'd left."

He proceeded to tell his story. He'd seen Borden's light. . . Came in to say hello. . . Heard a shot. . . Discovered the body. . . Yes, the pistol was his partner's. . . He'd called for a doctor, then police. . . Touched nothing except the telephone. . . Oh yes, and the telephone book. . . It was a terrible shock, naturally.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. It was over! He'd followed his plan to the letter. Old Borden, the ambulance men and the police too, had even followed the plan. It was as though they had been puppets, acting their parts as he pulled the strings.

"Is it possible that anyone could have been inside, fired a shot and left before you came in?" Howard asked quietly.

"Of course not! I'd have seen anyone leaving. I heard the shot just as I—" He paused, frowning. "Mr. Howard, you don't mean—"

The officer nodded. "Yes. It's murder, all right."

"Good Lord!" Carter jumped to his feet. "What—how—"

"There's a lot of little things that aren't just right. One of 'em is this: the gun wasn't tight in his hand. A suicide either drops the gun or he grabs it tight and hangs on. You have to pull his fingers loose."

"But if he telephoned you and said—"

"He didn't." Howard paused, then leaned forward in his chair. His face was deadly serious when he said, flatly: "*You* called the station, Carter, and gave his name!"

The other laughed weakly. "You're joking, surely."

"I don't joke about murder. I was at the desk at the time. When I answered the phone, I heard a watch ticking. That means that the caller wore a wrist watch on the hand that held the phone. Borden doesn't even have a watch. You do!"

When Carter leaped for the pistol, the officer smiled, stuck his hand into his pocket and pulled out a half-dozen cartridges. "It's not loaded, Carter," he said quietly.

It was several minutes after Carter's confession of embezzlement and murder had been signed, before one of the policemen remarked: "I didn't know you could hear a wrist watch ticking over a telephone."

"I didn't," Howard grinned. "but Carter thought I did!"

FEATHER YOUR COFFIN

A Jeffery Wren Novelette

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "Medium Dead," etc.

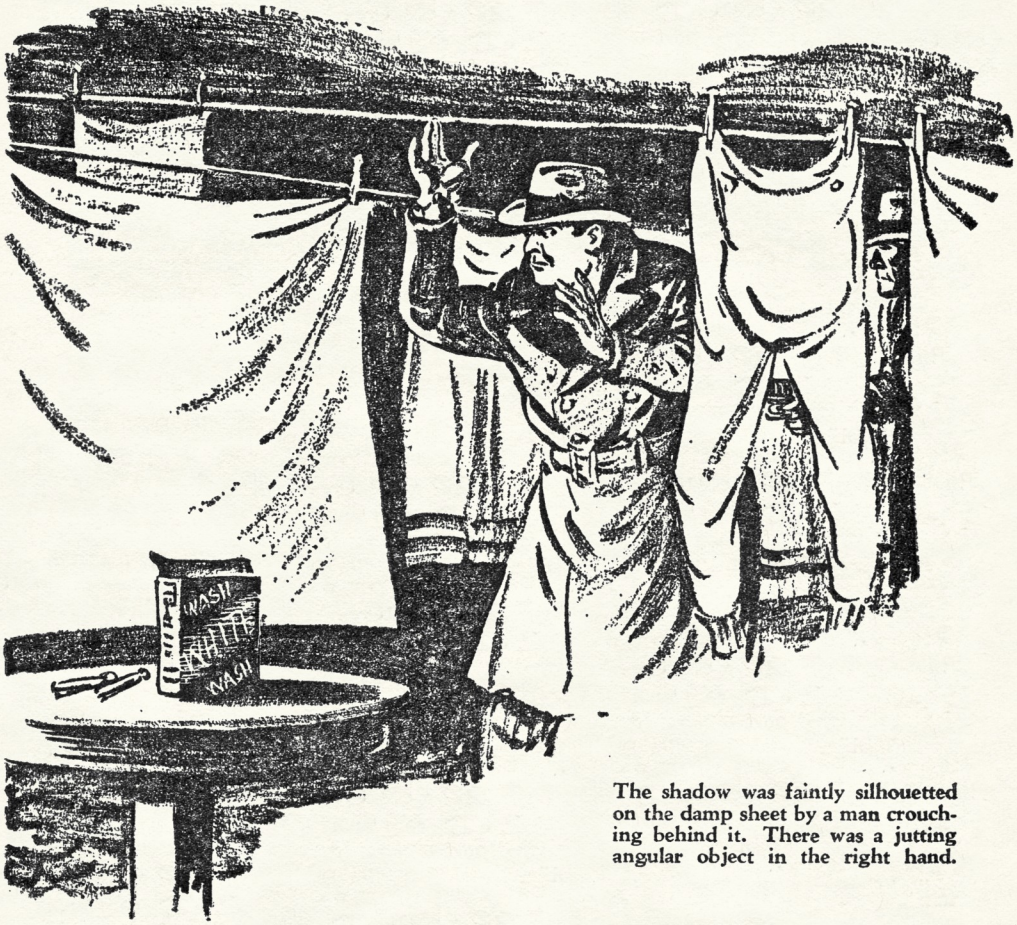
CHAPTER ONE

Something to Scream About

EARLY on a fragrant April Saturday afternoon, Jeffery Wren came by appointment into the ten-hundred block on North New Jersey Street, his slow bouncing gait reminiscent of an elegant hearse negotiating a multiple railroad crossing. The address he was looking for proved to be a tall, mid-Victorian residence with blistered green paint, scroll-sawed gingerbread, and ragged ecru lace curtains that hung listlessly behind leaded glass windows. It stood opposite a garage and was closely flanked on either side by warehouses. A girl stood on the front porch anxiously plucking her fingers and looking for someone, presumably Jeffery Wren.

Mr. Wren was fairly visible to the naked eye. His tailor had done everything possible with a fine swatch of navy blue pin-stripe, but Mr. Wren nevertheless remained approximately square and stubbornly immense. As he turned up the approach walk before the old house his smile stirred the surface of un-

Most slayers are as blunt as their favorite instrument, but in the case of the cock-eyed laundryman, the killer used a magician's bag of tricks as a very effective means to an end—someone else's. He failed to fool one member of his audience though—Jeffery Wren put his dextrous digits to work on the puzzle and reduced the hocus-pocus to plain old-fashioned homicide.



The shadow was faintly silhouetted on the damp sheet by a man crouching behind it. There was a jutting angular object in the right hand.

fathomable dark eyes. The young lady on the porch regarded him with limpid blue ones while her penciled brows gathered into a disinterested frown.

"Miss Peters?" Wren inquired. "Miss Elfie Peters?" He doffed his pearl gray homburg, sleekly ostentatious about it. When the girl on the porch nodded coolly, Wren's right hand dipped into his coat pocket. "My card," he said. "Or cards, rather." He brought out a full deck of playing cards which, with the slightest of motions, he fanned into a beautiful rosette.

"Oh, you're Mr. Wren, the magician!" the girl exclaimed in a funny little voice. "I thought maybe you sold life insurance."

"No," he said, chuckling. "Hardly." With his penchant for finding bodies he gravely doubted that he could achieve any great success in life insurance. He dumped his cards into his pocket, climbed the three steps of the porch, and regarded Miss Elfie Peters at close range. Among ladies in distress Elfie Peters might have been voted the one most likely to obtain masculine assistance and certain other attentions for which, presumably, she had not

bargained. She was small and cuddlesome with blond ringlets surrounding a delicate wistful face. The crisp white uniform she wore became her and led Wren to the conjecture that she worked in a dentist's office somewhere.

He said: "You've a locked room, you said. Somebody's inside. Won't come out. Won't answer either. An altogether distressing situation. Most upsetting. Quite!"

"You said it!" Elfie rolled her eyes tragically. "Imagine poor little me coming home from a hard morning at the laboratory and finding my door locked and the keyhole plugged up on the *inside!* I haven't got a key. So far as I know there never *was* a key. I asked F. Harry to help me, but he didn't have even the teeniest suggestion what I ought to do, so I called you. I've heard you're awfully good at creepy stuff."

Wren inclined his sleek dark head, admitting that he was awfully good at creepy stuff. Together with Zoe Osbourn of the Indianapolis police he had sent any number of phony spirit mediums and the like out of town with their ectoplasmic tails between their legs.

"Who's F. Harry?" he asked. "I've not had the pleasure."

"You will!" she returned with significance. "He's F. Harry Wilk, my landlord. I just rent a room here. The Wilks—F. Harry and Edith—rent the house from Randolph Patterson, my boss at the Patterson Laboratories. No, that's not it." Elfie fingered the dimple that centered her peaked chin. "It's really Louis Larue, the old man with the beard, who owns the house. He's Mr. Patterson's uncle. See?"

"Vaguely," Wren murmured. The names Patterson and Larue were both familiar to him in connection with the newspaper account of a tragic incident which had occurred the summer before at the same address, but Wren saw no point in burdening Elfie's overwrought mind with the details at present.

"I didn't want to move in with the Wilks," Miss Peters rattled on, "but what could I do? You see, I formerly shared an apartment with my girl friend until last week when she got married. Then I didn't want to be third wheel on a bicycle, would you?"

Wren's smile twitched. "Wouldn't think of it. Wouldn't want to be any part of a bicycle. Especially a matrimonial tandem."

"So when I couldn't find any place to live," Elfie continued, rearranging a curl which had looked all right in the first place, "Edith Wilk said why didn't I move into their guest room? Edith is the receptionist at the Patterson Laboratory . . . But I oughtn't to keep you out here on the porch."

"No," he said. "Too much sunlight. Not at all conducive to creepy stuff." As he followed Elfie Peters into the house he noticed the girl's stockings. They were as sheer a pair of hose as had ever attracted a sly glance, and what with the current shortage your Elfie Peterses weren't wearing hosiery like that to work.

ONLY a small portion of the spring sunlight penetrated the old house and that little was broken into its component colors by the beveled glass panes that ornamented the windows. To the right of the hall and through an opening headed with fretwork was a parlor furnished in green plush and red mahogany. A man was curled up on a love-seat reading a magazine—a magazine which he hastily concealed as Wren appeared with Elfie Peters.

Elfie pointed into the parlor, her palm upward like a mannequin's in a department store window. "That's F. Harry Wilk, Mr. Wren," she said with a trace of scorn. "He's a philosopher."

F. Harry stood up. He was a downy little man who appeared to have spent the last twenty years of his life in adolescence. He was trying to grow a mustache but even his own insignificant nose sniffed contemptuously at the experiment. Jeffery Wren entertained the whimsical notion that the mustache would get devoured along with F. Harry's shredded wheat some fine morning.

"How're you?" Wren asked pleasantly. "How's philosophizing?"

"Exhausting," F. Harry replied without looking the least exhausted. His rather round blue eyes skated to Elfie Peters and his frown was intended to be severe. "You take a great deal upon yourself, child, just because the lock on your door has jammed, to call in this—this—" He was not entirely sure what sort of a tag to hang on Jeffery Wren.

"Well," said Elfie, "you can just consider yourself lucky I didn't call the police! Come on, Mr. Wren. We disturbed F. Harry while he was doing some very important research in a comic magazine." And with a that-will-fix-you nod toward Mr. Wilk, Elfie Peters conducted Wren into the shadowy depth of the hall. She warned: "Don't fall over the stepladder."

The stepladder stood in front of an oak-paneled door beyond the stairway, and Elfie explained that she had fallen over it when she had come home from work that noon. She raised a small white-knuckled fist and knocked at the door. There was no answer.

"You see?"

Wren nodded. "Quite." Not constructed for easy stooping, he nevertheless bent over the lock and peered into the keyhole. A piece of paper or something of the sort was plastered over the keyhole on the inside of the door. Wren reached into his pocket and took out a small pair of tweezers which he inserted in the lock, puncturing the paper. He tore off a scrap of it and drew it out with the tweezers.

"Well!" he said. "My! Illuminating, isn't it?"

To Elfie Peters, it was not illuminating. Wren's tweezers held the scrap of paper for her inspection and she frowned at it. "Why, that looks like my wallpaper!"

"Quite! Precisely. If not yours, somebody else's wallpaper." He traded tweezers for his penknife, inserted the thin blade in the crack at the bottom of the door. There was a ripping sound as he drew the knife across the full width of the door. "More wallpaper," he explained. "An amazing overabundance of wallpaper."

He straightened, put the knife away, took out a ring of keys from which he selected the ordinary skeleton passkey which can be purchased in any hardware store. He put the key in the lock, twisted. He grasped the knob, turned it over, and as he gradually pushed the door there was a distinct tearing sound. He glanced over a massive shoulder and cocked an eyebrow at a puzzled Elfie.

"Too much wallpaper," he said. And the door came open.

They stepped into a bedroom—a very ordinary bedroom except for the wallpaper. The wallpaper had a bright gray background printed with green leaves and great bunches of lush strawberries. On the wall it was not too bad, but when you stopped to consider that somebody had neatly covered the door panel with it so that it overlapped a portion of the frame and was creased well down into cracks around the door to form an air-tight seal, it was, in Elfie Peters' own words, simply awful.

"Why," she gasped as she stared at the door, "it's as though Dagwood in the funnies had papered this room and sealed himself in! Only—only—" She pivoted completely around, her eyes scouting for spooks in the corners. "Only there's no Dag—I mean, *nobody!*"

"No body," Wren mused. His frown was slight, annoyed. "Ought to be a body."

Elfie skipped to the closet, jerked open its door. It was too small a closet to deserve the minute examination Elfie gave it, looking for a body. Wren's gaze wandered from the door to a gas heater in one corner of the room. Then he stepped to the nearest of two windows. Storm sashes were still in place, and they were hooked on the inside. Between the windows was a dressing table, and in the middle of it, among some cosmetic jars, was a key which Wren knew perfectly well would operate the lock of the door.

"Incredible," he murmured.

Elfie was back at the wallpaper-covered door. She ran a lacquered thumbnail up and down the crease on the hinge side where the paper had pulled away from the frame instead of tearing. Except for the islands of rouge on her cheeks, Elfie's face was pale. "It—it *had* to be done from the *inside—*" She broke off, twisted around to stare at Wren, her mouth open.

"Don't," he said gently. "Screaming is indicated. But don't."

She didn't scream. She was listening to what were evidently familiar footsteps in the hall outside. "Edith!" she called. "Come in here a minute, Edith."

The door was opened by a thin imposing woman with dead black hair and hollow waxen cheeks. She wore a straight black coat and carried a paper bag of groceries in one arm. Her heavy-lidded eyes moved from Elfie Peters to Jeffery Wren. When she spoke it was with an obvious effort as though she struggled against a perpetual lethargy.

"I don't approve of your entertaining gentlemen in your room, Elfie."

Elfie said: "Oh, hell. Get off your high horse and come look at this door."

Mrs. Wilk came and looked at the door, but she did not get off her high horse. She said: "You shouldn't have done that, Elfie. I'm sure Mr. Larue wouldn't approve, and you know how you've got to kowtow to landlords these days."

The vexatious thinning of Elfie's lips predicted a violent outburst. Wren smoothly intervened. "Elfie didn't do it, Mrs. Wilk. The room was locked when she came home. Locked and sealed. Did you do it? Did F. Harry?" For he had sighted the wispy shadow of Mr. Wilk in the corridor outside the room.

Mrs. Wilk stared at the papering job and shook her head. She seemed neither surprised nor bewildered. "I've been at work all morning. And Harry didn't. Harry spends his Saturday mornings in a pool hall."

"Quite," Wren said. "No doubt. F. Harry's a philosopher. Concerns himself with life behind the eight ball. But then"—Wren elevated his eyebrows and his gesture indicated the door—"who did?"

EDITH WILK faced him, her mouth drawn down at the corners. "It must be the work of a poltergeist," she said, just as though she had discovered ants at a picnic.

Elfie Peters threw up her hands. "I don't know what a poltergeist is, but I'm not going to share my room with one! I'm packing up and getting out of here right now!" She turned to the closet, doubtless bent on carrying out her threat, and encountered Jeffery Wren. "Well?" she demanded. "What's the matter with you? I don't see anything funny about this!"

Wren chuckled like apples rolling out of a barrel. "Oh, my! That's delightful. A paper-hanging poltergeist. That should put an end to all this speculation about Hitler. The man's dead. Obviously."

Elfie sat down on the edge of the bed. A tight frown spoiled her babyish forehead. "What's this about Hitler?"

Wren's smile was tolerant of the Elfie Peterses who require a blueprint with their humor. "A poltergeist is a ghost. A particular kind of ghost, not that there's any crying need for classification of the non-existent. A poltergeist plays jokes. Might conceivably hang strawberry wallpaper. Anything for a gruesome chuckle."

Elfie mulled this over with what help she could get from fingering her dimple. "He—*it* must have got a bang out of me falling over that stepladder." Which reminded her of something that left her wide-eyed. "Say! If it *wasn't* a poltergeist, *how* could anybody get *out* of this room, much less take the stepladder along?"

Wren nodded. "You've a neat problem there. Solid through solid." He frowned. "This isn't the first time a door has been sealed with wallpaper."

"No?" Elfie said, her brows arched. "Did you hear that, Edith? Don't tell me it's going to become a fad!"

"Hardly," Wren said. "Not with me. Too confining . . . however, on the fourteenth of August last year, a man papered over this same door. In this same room. Naturally."

There was, Wren remembers, something rather close to stunned silence. Somewhere high up in the eaves of the old house he could hear the faint cooing of pigeons. Then F. Harry Wilk wormed his way into the room and stood beside his angular wife.

"Say, that must have been when the Pattersons lived here. They and Mr. Larue had just come here from California, and Mr. Larue bought this house for them—"

"Shut up, Harry!" Edith gouged her husband with a sharp elbow. "You mean it happened right—right here, Mr. Wren?"

"Precisely," Wren replied. "The Pattersons had lived here about three weeks at the time. Mr. Patterson had re-papered this room himself, using ready-pasted wallpaper. This was the guest room. And the guest was one Percy Arbuthnott. Or call him Mr. X. For according to the newspapers, no one knew much about Percy. He was an old man, somebody that Larue, Mr. Patterson's uncle, had met in a trailer camp on the way east.

"That afternoon," Wren went on, enjoying the attention of his audience, "Arbuthnott was alone in the house. No, there was a cleaning woman, but she left at four. When Mr. Patterson came in after five, he found the guest room door locked. The keyhole was sealed. Patterson called the police. Arbuthnott had sealed the door with remnants of wallpaper. And he had turned on the gas heater over there."

"You—you mean," Elfie stammered, "he was dead?"

"Oh, yes. He was quite dead. And still is, your poltergeist notwithstanding."

The effect on Elfie Peters was both profound and amazing. Her indrawn breath came as a sharp hurt sound, a scream in reverse. She snapped to her feet, the back of her hand crushing her nice mouth. Then, without a word, she darted between Edith and F. Harry Wilk, gained the door, and dashed to the front part of the house. The Wilks stared after her until the front door slammed. Then they turned to Wren who was exhibiting a certain amount of smug satisfaction over the whole thing.

"What's eating that little twerp?" F. Harry wanted to know, forgetting that he was a philosopher.

Wren said lightly: "A normal reaction. Entirely so."

"It is, huh?" Edith's narrow eyes were trying to see on all sides of Mr. Wren at once.

Mr. Wren nodded. He reached for a cigarette he found in mid-air, touched the tip of it with a flameless lighter. "Elfie found a body. In her room, of all places. A murdered body. The late Percy Arbuthnott, to be precise."

"What do you mean?" Edith Wilk's voice had hardened. She was suddenly vibrant and alive. Her husband evidently associated this metamorphosis with some violent business with a rolling pin, for he cowered in her shadow. "Percy Arbuthnott killed himself."

"My dear Mrs. Wilk!" Wren reproved her gently. "You've forgotten the poltergeist. The phantom paperhanger who gets in and out of sealed rooms. Not"—with a sly smile—"for his own amazement."

"You mean," came faintly from F. Harry, "that if he could do it, so could somebody else?"

Wren chuckled, unreasonably happy about the whole thing. "Ah! There speaks the wise philosopher. You've a head on your shoulders, F. Harry." He stepped buoyantly from the room with the Wilks following. Half way to the front door he paused, stooped, and picked up something from the worn carpet—something that closely resembled a dollar watch. He glanced at it, then held it out to Harry Wilk.

Mr. Wilk made a futile attempt to gnaw his mustache. "It's not mine," he said.

"No?" Wren expressed mild surprise. "Yours, Mrs. Wilk?"

It wasn't Edith's, but she had a crowlike interest in anything shiny, judging by the way she snatched it from his hand. She gave it a good going-over with her muddy eyes. "It's only got one hand," she said, disappointed. "What would anybody do with it?"

"What indeed! But then you're not a Boy

Scout. It's a pedometer, Mrs. Wilk. It tells how far you walk. Also how far you walk back." Wren divided a benign smile impartially between the Wilks and went out the front door.

A man was coming up the walk from a nearly new black sedan parked at the curb. He was tall, with a neatly trimmed full white beard and white sideburns showing beneath his conservative black hat. He wore his age as an unbecoming garment which he had to put up with, for his step was sprightly and there was a certain brittle twinkle in his dark eyes.

On the sidewalk, Wren looked back. The bearded man had climbed to the porch and now he entered the house just as though it were his.

It was. His name was Louis Larue.

CHAPTER TWO

Death of an Old Ghost

IT WAS two o'clock that afternoon when Wren learned of an unprecedented demand for jointed snakes. He crossed the threshold of his novelty store on West Ohio Street and was not immediately noticed by the man and woman who were haggling with Horace, the lean bloodless-looking clerk behind the joke counter. The bone of contention seemed to be any number of toy wood snakes which Horace had heaped on top of the counter. The snakes were green, composed of small joints attached to a strip of rubber for a spine, and with scarcely any encouragement they could be made to coil and writhe in what was advertised as "a most lifelike manner."

Horace, to whom the customer was always wrong, allowed his pallid gaze to shift back and forth between the battling sexes. "I'm not gonna take sides," he said judiciously, around a limp and soggy cigar nobody had ever seen lighted. "You two wanna fight, go ahead. On'y don't bust the counters onna count I wouldun wanna stink bombs an' sneeze powder to polute the a'mosphere."

The man—he was middle-aged, short, and ugly—wheeled from his opponent to the referee. "Fight?" he said, then, "Fight?" an octave higher in pitch. "Why, she hasn't an argument. You've got my money, haven't you? You sold me every snake in the store, didn't you?"

Horace thought that over and nodded. "The gen'leman gotta point there, lady."

The woman appealed to Horace, and yet she had not the natural resources with which to appeal to Horace. Or, Wren mentally amended, if she had them she hadn't the remotest idea what to do with them. She wore her hair in a hard brown bun at the back of her head. The bows of horn-rimmed spectacles drew severe black lines across her temples to hidden ears. She used no discernible makeup. About thirty years old, she stood medium height in medium heels. The skirt of her medium brown wool suit was somewhat longer than fashion dictates though not long enough to provoke stares. In fact, nothing about her invited a second glance, though Wren faintly suspected that any man situated where second glances were inevitable—say, a crowded bus or a desert isle—would find behind this contrived mediocrity a rather remarkable woman.

"It's not fair," she protested in a clear soprano. "The butcher wouldn't do it . . ."

"The butcher don't sell join'ed snakes," said Horace.

". . . and the OPA certainly wouldn't approve."

Horace threw up faintly blue hands in a futile gesture. "I anna OPA are neutral. It's between you anna gen'leman."

The gentleman, who was no such thing, turned to the woman and was pretty specific as he voiced a generality. "What this country needs is more women who are ladies."

The woman recoiled. "Why—why I've never been so insultd in all my life!" She was thus back against the ropes when the man unleashed his kayo punch.

"You're a hardened old nylon campaigner!" he shouted.

Horace, who was not without sympathy for the underdog, said: "Sorry, lady."

Her laugh was strained. "Oh, that's all right." She picked up one of the snakes from the jealously guarded pile and waggled it in front of the man's great red nose. "Ugly, isn't it?" she said so that it was impossible to tell whether she referred to the wooden reptile or the unpleasant lumpy face behind it. She dropped the snake onto the counter, turned, and all but ran into Jeffery Wren.

"Well!" Wren said amiably. "Anything else? Anything in lieu of a jointed snake?" What she needed, he told his own astute self, was a mirror to show her that horn-rimmed glasses were half hiding long and lovely amber eyes that tilted intriguingly.

"No, thank you." She had completely recovered her composure. She walked to the door, hesitated an instant. Her backward glance was—furtive? Anxious? Wren couldn't be sure. And then she was gone into the paling sunlight along the street.

"You wan't 'em wrapped," Horace asked the acknowledged winner of forty-eight jointed snakes, "or you wanna play with 'em here?"

The short man buttoned his ill-fitting threadbare black coat. "Smart, ain't you?" he sneered.

Wren stepped over to the counter. "You've a pretty kettle of snakes there," he remarked pleasantly. "Quite!"

"Right." The man was not inclined to discuss his odd purchase. His small anthracite eyes looked bored. When the snakes had been made into as neat a package as possible, he tucked it under his arm and left.

"Well, for chrisakes!" This from Horace. "You meet more in'eresting people, don'tcha, boss? Whatchu s'pose he's gonna do with that buncha snakes?"

"Oh?" Wren, on his way to the stairs at the rear of the store, paused. "That's a question, Horace. Moot and well put. Here's another to mull over at odd moments. What would the lady have done with them? Providing she could have got them."

HE WENT on up the steps, through the door that bears the legend WREN'S MAGIC, and into the little reception room beyond, the walls of which were decorated with publicity photographs, all of Jeffery Wren as he had appeared with his magic act on Keith's circuit.

There were no customers waiting for him in the chrome and red leather chairs. He stepped over to the little table, was browsing leisurely through his mail, when the door at the top of the steps opened and a tall gangling man came in to approach Mr. Wren at a loose-jointed gait reminiscent of the milkman's horse. There was something horsy about his face, too, for it was predominantly nose, extremely narrow, and virtually without chin. Though he was scarcely into middle life, the stoop of his shoulders contributed tired lines to his tan topcoat.

"Yes?" Wren raised an inquiring eyebrow. The stranger had dropped a raw-boned hand into the baggy right pocket of his coat in a manner which was somewhat disquieting.

"Why did my wife come here to see you, Mr. Wren?" The man's voice was husky. Something about his attitude suggested that he had no intention of asking the same question twice. As Wren appeared puzzled, he added: "Mrs. Randolph Patterson. I saw her leave your shop not five minutes ago."

"Oh? Brown suit? Horn-rimmed glasses?" Wren, using questions marks for fish hooks, caught a nod from the horsy man. "Sorry," he said smoothly. "My misfortune altogether. Mrs. Patterson's business wasn't with me." He tipped his head to one side and regarded Patterson curiously. "You've a reason for gum-shoeing around after Mrs. Patterson like this?"

"A very definite reason," Patterson admitted with a slight tremor in his voice. His right hand came free of the coat pocket carrying a short-barreled but thoroughly businesslike revolver. "I am convinced that my wife intends to kill herself."

Wren had been confronted by men with guns before this, but never in exactly this manner. Patterson held the revolver by the barrel as though it were a dead fish he intended to toss to a trained seal. You could, Wren decided, practically smell the fish, and he wasn't having any.

"I wish you'd take it," Patterson said earnestly. "I don't know where my wife got it, but I certainly don't want it around the house. I have no use for firearms."

Wren made a face. "Nor I. They're too noisy. To say nothing of the mess that's got to be cleaned up afterward. Slow poison's the thing. Or"—with significance which seemed to escape Patterson—"ordinary cooking gas."

There was no telling how long the impasse would have lasted if two sly brethren of the Society of American Magicians hadn't appeared at the head of the stairs. Patterson hastily concealed the weapon. Wren waved a cordial greeting to his customers, told them he'd be with them in a minute. Then he opened the double glass doors of his magic shop, conducted Patterson past illuminated counters displaying conjuring apparatus, and into the thoughtful brown room that is his office.

Patterson sat down and removed his hat revealing yet another equine attribute—a mane of straight black hair inclined to straggle across his narrow brow. His eyes were cool, gray, intelligent. Wren, ensconced behind his desk, regarded the man warily.

"I took the revolver away from my wife because she was going to shoot herself," Patterson began abruptly.

Wren folded big hands on the desk. His pleasantly interested attitude suggested a deacon who would eventually get around to soliciting church funds. "Ah? You're reasonably certain? Some people with guns shoot other people."

Patterson was certain. "She was alone when I found her. She was on the roof of the apartment building and dangerously close to the edge. There was a struggle, and after the ghastly scene was over she admitted her intention without giving any specific reason."

"Odd," Wren murmured. "Extremely so." His dark eyes stared, his finger tips beat a soft tattoo on the desk top. "Why shoot herself when she could conveniently jump off the roof? Conversely, why go up on the roof to shoot herself. There's a superfluity of means. Or don't you think so?"

Patterson nodded agreement. "I also believe she has considered poison. You see, I conduct impartial laboratory tests for certain manufacturers and have occasion to use chemicals, many of which are lethal. One day when my wife dropped in at the laboratory she offered to run an errand for me. I am certain that one of the packages she brought back

from the wholesalers had been tampered with —one containing cyanide."

Mrs. Patterson, Wren concluded, was a woman whose taste in the matter of self-destruction was as varying as the wind. However, she'd hardly accomplish suicide Cleopatra fashion—not with a wooden snake.

He asked: "Your wife isn't burdened with domestic chores? You've a cleaning woman, haven't you?"

"No-o." Patterson replied slowly. "Mrs. Scudder used to come in two days a week when we lived on New Jersey Street. But there is very little work to be done in the apartment. My uncle takes care of his own room. Mrs. Patterson sends the laundry out." He shook his head, his eyes worried. "It's not over-work and it's not ill-health, though Mrs. Patterson is somewhat troubled by a sinus condition." He lapsed into silence, fingering the brim of his disreputable felt hat.

"Look." Wren was curt. "Why bother me? Go to the police. There's a law against suicide. Hardly enforcible after the deed is done."

"I would rather employ you, Mr. Wren." Patterson leaned forward to reach for the wallet in his hip pocket. "You are a detective, aren't you?"

Wren shook his head. "No. Not precisely. A magician rather." He reached across the desk, drew a thick water tumbler towards him with his left hand while his right ripped off a rough quarter-section from the page of a newspaper. "I've found a body or two," he went on. "Inadvertently. Found one this afternoon." He cocked an eyebrow. "A most inconveniently located body. Especially for you and Mr. Larue."

There was an all but imperceptible narrowing of Patterson's cool eyes. "Just what are you talking about?"

Wren raised empty hands in a short graceful gesture. "About Percy Arbuthnott. His incredible if not inexplicable murder."

Patterson came out of his shell like a shucked oyster, and his face was naked and gray and afraid. He stood up, uttered a short laugh that was almost a whinny.

"You're crazy! Arbuthnott killed himself, and you'd have a hell of a time proving otherwise!"

"You think so?" Wren's voice was quiet, assured. He covered the water tumbler with a square of newspaper, drew it toward him as he pressed the paper firmly down around the glass. Then he pushed the package he had made to the center of the desk with one hand while the other came down sharply to crush the newspaper flat to the desk top. The tumbler, apparently passing through the desk, thudded to the carpet and rolled within inches of Patterson's feet. Patterson stared at the top of the desk which was as solid and impregnable as Mr. Wren himself.

"You see?" Wren's smile was sly. "Solid through solid. What's a wall between friends? Or between a killer and his victim?"

Patterson turned and stalked out of the office. Wren was feeling very well pleased with himself until several seconds later when he discovered that Patterson had left the short-barreled revolver on the seat of the chair.

Things, Wren concluded, were getting a bit out of hand. He reached for the phone and called Policewoman Zoe Osbourn. . .

WREN'S Saturday nights belonged to the patrons of his magic shop. On this particular evening it was ten-thirty before the last enthusiastic trickster left with a thirty-dollar birdcage-vanish clutched in his eager hands.

Ten minutes later Wren turned up the collar of his topcoat and stepped out the door of his novelty store into a gentle but persistent spring shower. He walked east to the corner, then south to cross where Meridian Street joins Monument Circle like a handle on milady's mirror. In front of the hoary walls of Christ Church he stopped, stood for a drenching minute, and watched the swiftly changing pattern of headlight beams against the rain.

A black coupe swung out of traffic on the Circle. Its horn beeped, but louder still and more penetrating was the raucous voice of Zoe Osbourn.

"You're late, Jeffery!" She opened the door of the coupe and scowled fiercely at him, the expression on her large-featured face exactly like that of an aging and irritable Pekinese. "I've been cruising around this damned merry-go-round for so long I'm getting dizzy."

Wren touched his hat vaguely. His smile twitched. "Sorry no end, Mrs. O," he apologized as he got into the car.

She grunted. She was not in the best of spirits. While she was bulldozing her way out into north-bound traffic he took a dubious look at her costume. Her boxy topper coat was mustard, a condiment which failed to add piquancy to Zoe's beef. The hat atop her hennaed curls suggested an altercation with a waiter who, as a last resort, had hurled an omelet which had landed over her leeward eye, its parsley garnish intact.

She said: "You and your damned poltergeist! I've certainly been places and seen people since you telephoned!"

"A creditable occupation," Wren commented, adding with a touch of malice: "You find it broadening. Unquestionably."

"Ha! Now that we've all had a hearty laugh, maybe you can restrain your sense of humor long enough to hear what I've got for my trouble besides fallen arches!"

Wren was agreeable. Besides, listening to Zoe Osbourn was something only the dead and the deaf could avoid. She asked if he could guess what Detective Sergeant Thomas Hogan had said of Wren's deductions concerning the sealed room. When, who knew the Homicide sergeant well, thought it only reasonable to assume that Hogan had said: "Aw-aw!"

"He said," Zoe quoted, "that he didn't give a damn for the opinion of Jeffery Wren. He personally covered the Arbuthnott business last August, and nobody could have sealed that room up with wallpaper except Percy Arbuthnott himself. And on the subject of motive, if Arbuthnott was a millionaire incognito he even disguised his bankroll so it added up to sixty-five cents! Nobody showed any signs of becoming rich all of a sudden after Arbuthnott's death either. In fact, Louis Larue, Patterson's uncle, had to borrow money to pay for Arbuthnott's funeral and cremation. Larue, Hogan says, has an annuity or pension—something of the sort. Randolph Patterson's credit was shaky then, and it's shaky now."

"All chicken-every-Sunday people," Wren mused. "Might even say every other Sunday." He stared thoughtfully out beyond the wagging windshield wiper at the glare of lights on wet asphalt. "Elfie Peters' poltergeist," he said. "Hogan wasn't impressed?"

"He thinks it's a gag," Zoe replied.

"Gag?" Wren was incredulous. "Oh, come now! Where's the point? Who's laughing? Not Elfie certainly. Not Patterson."

"But the Wilks could be having convulsions," Zoe said dryly. "Edith Wilk used to give spirit readings at two bucks a throw. As far as anybody knows, she's on the level now, working as Patterson's receptionist. But once a spook crook always a spook crook, and tne whole thing could be some sort of a publicity stunt to promote a new racket. In fact, Hogan intimated you weren't above playing poltergeist yourself just to get a rise out of him."

"My dear lady!" He was appalled. "What a thought! And I've not even the foggiest notion how it was done." He sat in silence a moment, then: "What about the estimable Mrs. Scudder, the Patterson cleaning woman? Ex-cleaning woman, properly."

"Ex, and you can say that again, Jeffery. Mrs. Scudder is dead." Joe Osbourn cranked down the window to signal for a left turn. "She was hit by a car the same afternoon that Arbuthnott died, and she kicked off in the City Hospital three days later."

"My!" Wren brightened. "Well!"

"There's nothing to 'my!' and 'well!' about," Zoe said. "The whole thing got a good airing in court when Lemmy Scudder, her husband, tried suing everybody involved. Mrs. Scudder had boarded a trolley when she discovered she didn't have her purse. The motorman stopped the car after it had gone about three feet, and Mrs. Scudder backed off into the path of an automobile driven by a doctor who was batting along on an emergency call."

"Convenient though," Wren remarked. "Nothing less."

"Maybe so, Jeff. But what gets me is how all these people are strung together like beads. Mrs. Scudder was Edith Wilk's mother."

"Oh?"

"And Mrs. Scudder cleaned for the Pattersons when the Pattersons lived in the house now occupied by the Wilks. Edith Wilk works for Randolph Patterson, pays rent to Louis Larue who is Patterson's uncle, while Lemmy Scudder—he's Edith Wilk's step-father—takes in the Pattersons' laundry."

Wren nodded. "Birds of a feather, flocking. Also feathering their nests. They've a common bond. A common crime. Or call it an uncommon crime." He lurched against the policewoman as the car turned abruptly into Pierson Street, a narrow alley that extended north and south.

Zoe said: "We'll have a talk with Lemmy Scudder, and then if we don't pick up anything, I'm through."

"You'll be through," Wren said stubbornly, "but not the killer. Somebody is on to him. He can't evade the law of self-preservation, whatever else."

Halfway along the block, Zoe Osbourn applied the brakes and cut the ignition. Headlights of the police car shone full upon a pushcart with two high steel wheels that was parked against a board fence.

"That's Lemmy's cart," Zoe announced. "You've seen him a lot of times in the Mile Square—a bandy-legged runt with crossed eyes. He picks up and delivers washings with that thing."

Mr. Lemmy Scudder was a man with young ideas, Wren concluded—two sodden squirrel tails drooped from the pushcart handle. Beyond the board fence and the sheeting rain he could barely make out Scudder's house. It was squat and shabby. It fronted Pierson Street and was probably a source of irritation to many an eye that looked out of rear windows in the apartment buildings and business houses that were its neighbors.

Zoe switched off the car lights. The dark was sudden and stifling. Wren opened the door, extended an explorative foot to discover a puddle which, for all he knew, reached from one end of Pierson Street to the other. He stepped down into an inch of water, and did what he could to assist Zoe Osbourn, who came splashing in after him.

"Man the pumps, boys, we're sinking!" Zoe's loud voice disturbed echoes in the nar-

row canyon. She got a drowning man's grip on Wren's arm, and he led her through the pelting rain to Lemmy's gate. "Why the hell do we have to detect in weather like this?" she wanted to know.

"Quite. Most inconsiderate of somebody . . . but then think of the May flowers."

"You think of them," she growled. "You don't happen to be wearing open-toed shoes."

THEY had gained a slippery board walk that approached Scudder's house. Wren took just two steps before he ran into a clothesline that struck the bridge of his nose, whipped upwards, and knocked off his hat. He uttered a quiet damn.

"Just think of the May flowers, Jeffery," Zoe reminded him sweetly as he recovered his homburg from the mud that edged the walk.

There was light inside the Scudder house and some of it seeped out along the curled and raveled edges of the dark green shades. Zoe Osbourn asserted her authority with a knock that shivered the door glass in its frame. They waited, getting the full effect of the rain from the sky and the brimming eavestrough. There was no response from Mr. Scudder. Zoe tried the knob.

"Here," Wren said. "What's this?" He stepped in front of Mrs. Osbourn, ostensibly to snatch a visiting card or something of the sort which was wedged in the door. He couldn't read the card of course, but it furnished an excuse to get next to the lock.

"All right, Jeffery!" Zoe had divined his purpose. "The law will now shut its eyes while you break and enter!"

He chuckled, his deft magician's fingers already busy with a lockpick. The lock yielded, the door swung back. Wren turned, his smile smug, his brows elevated. "After you, Mrs. O. The parsley on your hat isn't looking too well."

"Huh!" Zoe put up a hand, concerned about her hat. She stepped over the sill and then pivoted slowly and completely around, rouged lips parted, eyes goggling. "Well, fry me a banana! Will you look at this!"

He was looking. Table linen, sheets, pillow cases, and washable garments hung on parallel clotheslines stretched from one end of the front room to the other. There was not a stick of furniture, no covering on the rough board floor. Foresight on the part of Lemmy Scudder had left an aisle open down the center of the room to the rear of the house.

"Anybody home?" The hanging laundry deadened even Zoe Osbourn's voice.

"No," Wren answered softly for the absent Lemmy. "Obviously not." He sidled past the policewoman, brushed against a clammy sheet. Ahead was a kitchen, to the left a bedroom. Wren ducked under a pillow slip, stepped into the bedroom with Zoe at his heels. An enameled iron bedstead with a tarnished brass trim occupied the center of the room. Against one wall was a washstand with a paving brick substituting for a missing leg. On the rough and slivered top of the washstand was a box of cheap note paper, several sheets scattered about.

Wren's buoyant step brought creaks from the flooring as he approached the washstand. "Look, Mrs. O," he said. "Our Lemmy has a poison pen. Or rather, pencil."

Zoe's prominent, gullible-looking blue eyes were fixed on the note paper and her scowl boded no good for the cockeyed laundryman when and if she got her hands on him. On three of the sheets of paper were false starts of nasty little messages, all smoothly printed in red pencil. One read: "Your husband is cheating on—" Another began: "I don't like to tattle but you should know about your husband—" And the third: "Your husband is decieving you with—"

Zoe grunted. "The little beast is a lousy speller."

"Quite. His 'i' before 'e'. You've discovered the least of Lemmy's sins. The very least." Wren got down on one knee beside a gallon can which had once contained Royal Ann cherries and now served admirably as a waste basket. He dug into the can and eventually came up with a bill-of-sale that carried the heading of an Indianapolis wallpaper retailer. He straightened, dark eyes bright with triumph.

"Well! One roll of E-Z Do wallpaper. Strawberry pattern. Sold to Lemmy Scudder. Our poltergeist! Elfie's rather." He nodded his head sagely. "He'll do a better job of haunting now. Unencumbered by a body." He glanced at Zoe Osbourn, found her standing with arms akimbo. The withering glare of her blue eyes affected him not at all.

"What are you babbling about now, Jeffery? What body and where is it?"

"What body?" He was astonished. "All this silence and you've no premonitions? Tsk! You're slipping. Unquestionably!" He thrust the bill of sale into her hand, turned, bounded out of the bedroom and into Lemmy's kitchen. There were galvanized washtubs nested on a low bench, a carton of soap chips, somebody's dirty linen waiting to be washed. Two orange crates supported a gas laundry plate that must have served as a cookstove, too. Washed supper dishes were neatly stacked on the wood drainboard of the sink. A range boiler with a side-arm coil for heating water was installed in one corner of the room, though there was a basement of some sort, as indicated by the closed trap door in the floor.

"Jeff," Zoe Osbourn said with a fire-alarm look in her eye, "I hear water running."

"What?" His frown was slight, his manner preoccupied. "Oh. Water. It's raining, remember?"

"In the house," she insisted. She marched to a door in the rear wall, paused there to scowl down at a flat brown cake of mud on the floor. "Somebody's heel print here. Don't mess it up." She put a hand on the knob, twisted it, pushed the door back. Wren looked over her shoulder into what might once have been a back porch—its floor was about eight inches below that of the kitchen—but which had been converted into a bathroom with the advent of plumbing.

Lemmy Scudder lay on his back in the old-fashioned claw-footed tub, his submersion assured by a trio of his own flatirons which rested on his gaunt middle. The hot water tap was about half open and the water level within a fraction of an inch of the overflow pipe. The splash of the continuous stream resulted in rings on the surface, distorting the wizen face of the man beneath, lending the body a quivering imitation of life.

It struck Wren as odd that with all the household accidents that occur around bathtubs the killer had made no attempt to conceal the fact that Lemmy had been murdered.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood and Dust

"HELL'S fire!" Zoe Osbourn slapped herself across the brow. "What's he doing in there?"

She afterwards admitted that this was not one of her more brilliant questions. The circumstances were not conducive to brilliance. Lemmy was obviously not taking a bath. For one thing, there were the irons, and for another, the laundryman was fully dressed except for his shoes.

A brown overcoat lay across one of the versatile orange crates with which Lemmy had furnished his home. On top of the coat was a gray felt hat streaked with the soot of a dozen winters and freshly stained with wet brown mud.

Wren stepped around Zoe and into the bathroom. He dropped to his knees to examine the rough work shoes which stood beside the crate. The heels, he noticed, were badly worn and could not have possibly left the clear impression in mud which Zoe had discovered outside the bathroom door.

"Jeffery, stop that meddling!" Zoe warned him.

He didn't hear. His right hand was down inside Lemmy's right shoe trying to find out where the tongue of it had gone. It hadn't been torn off as he had first suspected from the gaping vacancy behind the laces. The tongue of Lemmy's right shoe was stuffed well down into the toe.

"Illuminating!" he breathed. "Nothing less!"

Zoe stepped down into the bathroom and clapped a hand on Wren's massive shoulder. "Get up and get out of here, Jeff, and stop that meddling!"

"Yes. Of course. Who's meddling?" He dabbled his finger tips in the bath water and found it icy. "Lemmy's water heater isn't working. Or wasn't lighted." He reached into his pocket and took out a penknife, intending to mark the present position of the hot water faucet handle. Zoe caught his hand. Her eyes were narrow, her jaw set, and her upraised purse had all the ugly aspects of a blunt instrument.

"So help me, I'll hang one on you, Jeffery!"

"Oh?" He cocked an eyebrow and regarded her coldly. "The time of murder is unimportant? Well, that's novel. An interesting departure. Simply ignore the fourth dimension. It eliminates much tedious checking of alibis. Police procedure is reduced to arresting Lemmy's nearest relative, if any—"

"Stop that patter!" Zoe bellowed. "Honestly, the way you run off at the mouth is enough to drive anybody bats! You mean it would be possible to calculate the approximate time the killer turned on the water by repeating the process of filling the tub. Is that it?"

"Quite. Precisely. Hogan might be interested."

Zoe scowled at the tiny watch on her fleshy wrist. "It's eleven-sixteen now. Go ahead. But that's all, understand?"

Wren scratched a vertical mark on the dull brass of the faucet handle, turned the water off after first gloving his fingers with his handkerchief—all accomplished while Zoe was watching him with a suspicion he could virtually feel on the back of his neck.

"Well," he said, satisfied. "Now." He straightened from the tub to encounter Zoe's admonishing forefinger.

"Don't you touch anything else, Jeff. I've got to go find a phone somewhere. If I had a pair of handcuffs I'd lock you up, if—" she sighed gustily, remembering that he had a way with locks. "Well, just don't meddle."

His smile twitched. "Honor bright. I'll levitate myself. Remain suspended in mid-air."

They left the bathroom, Zoe well in the lead. Wren had just closed the door of the bedroom when Zoe's noisy footsteps came to an abrupt stop. At the same time she gave out with an explosive grunt of the sort usually associated with a hard swift blow to the tummy but which from Zoe Osbourn might indicate some minor accident like dropping a handkerchief.

"What's your trouble?" Wren called, and

as he got no answer he bounded out of the kitchen and into the maze of drying laundry in the front room.

The policewoman stood at the opposite end of the aisle that centered the hanging clothes, feet somewhat apart the better to support one hundred and seventy pounds of fairly rigid animosity. She had taken her revolver out of her purse, and it was inconceivable that she would have brought up the heavy artillery to blast a mouse. Wren took six quiet steps toward her and stopped. Zoe was staring at a damp sheet that hung on her left, and had it been wrapped about a grade-A ghost it couldn't have been the object of more pop-eyed, open-mouthed apprehension . . . And then Wren saw the shadow.

With all due apology to other shadows, particularly of the slinking species, this was the most ominous he had ever encountered. It was faintly silhouetted on the damp sheet by a man who crouched behind the sheet, and the jutting angular object that terminated the upraised right hand was a pistol. Shadows being what they are, it could have been a water pistol, but then Wren didn't think so. But more disturbing than the shadow of a man and his gun was the notion that Lemmy's laundry, like a field of tall corn, could have concealed a whole platoon of men with guns.

"Lady," somebody said, "you drop that rod or else I let the boyfriend have one in the spine."

The somebody was male, and possibly he had crawled out from behind a tablecloth or some long winter underwear. Where he had been was by no means as important as where he was at the present—directly behind Wren and in an excellent position to fulfill his threat provided he had a gun. He had a gun. Presently all the wrong people had guns, for Zoe Osbourn dropped hers as soon as she realized the balance of power was not in her favor.

"Really, Zoe," Wren said smiling. "Such devotion! Thanks no end."

She said: "Don't mention it." Her lips thinned.

"Come out, Rollo," the somebody directed. "We got 'em. We'll herd 'em back to the kitchen."

Rollo came out from behind the sheet—a tall dissolute youth in bottle-green rayon pants which the rain had plastered to thin, slightly bowed legs. He spat on the floor and was equally matter-of-fact about sticking his gun in Zoe's ribs.

"Tickles, huh, blimpy?" he said.

Zoe gave her shoulders an indignant twist, but she didn't offer anything in the way of resistance. The somebody got a grip on the back of Wren's topcoat collar, turned him around, and marched him back into the kitchen.

"Face me with your hands up. Rollo, you watch the female."

"By all means, Rollo," Wren said. "The female is more deadly." He raised his hands shoulder high and turned to face the somebody.

UNDER the circumstances it might be said that the somebody was a pleasant disappointment. He was a short blond man with a plump body stuffed into a light tan trench coat. His round pink face was not distinguishable from other round pink faces except that he had a sack wart on his left eyelid. Only the gun in his hand prevented him from being as ineffectual as the runt pig in a litter of Chester Whites.

"It's only fair to warn you that you are in the hands of the law," he announced pompously.

Wren chuckled. "You heard that, Zoe? This is the law."

"Ha!" she snorted. "He never got closer to the law than the Police Gazette!"

The man was offended. "I'm a detective." He proved it by turning over the lapel of his coat to reveal an inordinately large badge with words PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR on the shield.

Wren glanced over at Zoe Osbourn who was standing on his left, facing Rollo. The flare of her nostrils suggested the weak spot in a boiler that has exceeded its rated pressure. At the same time she exhibited a hearty respect for Rollo and his gun. There was, Wren decided, something thoroughly nasty about Rollo. He looked as though he had been born with an automatic in his hand and had been suckled with a gin bottle. Rollo definitely had to be reckoned with.

"I'm going to search you and you're going to stand still while I do it," asserted the man in the trench coat.

Wren's smile was like that of a parent who employs reason before the inevitable spanking. "Oh, come now. Why bother to search? I've not got it."

"Got what?" the man appeared puzzled.

"The little black book," Wren said in a sinister whisper. "With *names* in it. Or maybe it's a plan to blow up the State House."

Rollo thought it necessary to spit again. His worldly eyes touched the dumpy figure in the trench coat scornfully. He put his left hand down into the tight slot of his pants pocket and moved away from Zoe Osbourn but toward Wren. "You stay where you are, blimpy. Get over there, Pop, and watch blimpy. Before you search a big tub of stuff like this it ain't a bad idea to do *this*."

The "this" was forced through Rollo's clenched teeth, and before the "s" had hissed its last, "this" was identified in Wren's mind

with a number of catastrophic things ranging from the eruption of Vesuvius to the premature explosion of an atomic bomb. The only consolation Wren has ever been able to derive from the incident is that Rollo struck without warning, not with his bare fist, and that Rollo had thought it a necessary precaution.

Wren was blissfully unaware of striking the floor.

His first conscious thought afterwards had to do with the darkness. It was a grade-A darkness, guaranteed fade proof and impenetrable, undistinguished from oblivion except that, on coming into it, he was aware of a dull pain that extended from his lower jaw all the way up to the crown of his head. There were other pains in other portions of his anatomy, but his face was his chief concern. Did he still have a face? He got a hand up off a floor of cold damp brick and gingerly touched his face. Even then he was not altogether sure.

"Jeffy! Oh, God, Jeffy!" Zoe Osbourn's voice sounded fervently thankful. Her hands scampered over him in the darkness, grasped his shoulders, and tried shaking him.

"Please," he protested faintly. "Must you?"

"Jeffy, we've got to get out of here." She tried to help him sit up. "Come on, love, and laugh at locksmiths. We can't spend all night down here."

He didn't know why not. "Your virtue is safe. Oblivion will return any minute now."

"Don't you blot out on me, Jeffrey!" She slapped him soundly on the side of the face. He uttered a sharp pained "Oh!" And then she was pawing him and apologizing. "Jeffy, I'm sorry. I forgot about your jaw. But come on, get up. You're still a hero. That dirty gutter-snipe used brass knucks on you . . . Come on, Jeffy, and get little Zoe out of here."

It occurred to him finally to ask where was "here?"

"Lemmy Scudder's vegetable cellar, under the kitchen," Zoe told him. "I've yelled my lungs out for help, but this place is like a vault. It's full of sprouting potatoes and thousand-legged bugs. Here, I'll light a match."

She fumbled with her huge purse, got out matches, and struck one. Wren winced at the sudden glare that illuminated a round, bricked-in hole that narrowed at the top where the steeply-inclined skeleton stair joined the rim of a trap door.

"They just shoved you down those stairs, the so-and-sos!"

It would not, he thought, have taken much of a shove. He looked at the brick walls and the crawling things upon them. He had discovered nothing remotely resembling a window by the time the match went out.

"They got what they wanted?" he asked.

"They got that wallpaper slip you hooked out of Lemmy's waste basket. And of course the rats looted your wallet and my purse. After they dumped us down here, I know they went into the bathroom and then left in a hell of a hurry."

Wren sat silently in the darkness, breathing the fetid air. Something crawled onto the back of his hand and he bruised his knuckles against the brick shaking the something off. Then he got up. He staggered forward until his groping hand found the stair horses. He went up a step at a time until the top of his throbbing head contacted the trap door above. He backed a step, reached up to explore the wood under-surface of the trap door with his fingers.

"You want me to strike a light?" Zoe volunteered from the foot of the steps.

"No," he said. "Thanks."

Zoe chuckled. "Always the magician, aren't you, Jeffy? You've got to do all your little tricks under cover, just like Houdini. Well, go right ahead and astound me. This time I'll applaud like hell."

Wren tapped on the trap door with his knuckles. Then he turned deliberately and sat down on the steps. He searched his pockets, discovered the covetous Rollo had left him cigarettes. He put one to stiffened lips, touched the tip with it with his flameless lighter.

"Jeffery, what are you doing up there?"

"Smoking. Obviously." He drew deep and the glow from the cigarette revealed his impassive face. The illumination, however, couldn't have reached the stoical gesture he drew with his big hands. "You've a better suggestion? Honeymoon bridge is out. We've no light." He took a deck of cards from his pocket and riffled them. "Think of a card. The deuce of spades. Right?"

"Jeff Wren!" Zoe Osbourn climbed up the steps until she could get hold of Wren's legs. "Jeff, are you all right in the head?"

"Quite. Never more lucid."

"Well"—her swallow was audible—"well, let's get out of here. Remember Lemmy. I've got to phone Headquarters."

"Try mental telepathy," he suggested. "We're not going anywhere. Find yourself a soft brick. Preferably one uninhabited by centipedes."

"Hell's fire!" she breathed. "You mean we can't—"

"Exactly. The door is oak. Three solid inches of oak. The hinges are to the left, the hasp to the right. Both are on the top side. The screws of neither penetrate all the way. There's something of solid steel locked through the hasp staple."

"You mean," she shouted, "you can't make with the magic?"

"Oh, come now!"

"Don't you 'oh come now' me!" she raved.

"What kind of a shoddy fraud are you, you can't get out of a vegetable cellar?"

"It's not a vegetable cellar," he said unperturbed. "It's a dry-well. An ex-dry well."

"You mean the sort—" she gulped.

"Quite. Formerly for sewage. Lemmy's house really squats on the back of a lot facing Illinois Street."

"What's that got to do with us getting out of here?"

"With us *not* getting out," he corrected. "Dry-wells are notoriously snug little holes. They pass seepage—nothing else. I've always been a poor seeper . . . or do you find that too punny?"

Zoe's sigh was rather like a groan. She sank down on the steps. "What do you expect us to do—stay here until we rot?"

"No. Hardly. Somebody will get wind of Lemmy. He'll rot first. A pleasant thought."

SHE didn't say anything for a while. Then: "I'd bet my bottom dollar Houdini could get out of here."

"Highly debatable," he said stiffly. There was no point in her adding insult to his multiple injuries.

"Yessir"—with grim satisfaction—"Houdini could."

Wren maintained an offended silence. He took a final drag on his cigarette, flipped the butt away. The cigarette struck the floor where it glowed an instant before the damp got it. Zoe was fumbling with her purse again—Wren could smell the perfume of her cosmetics above the less pleasant odors within the vault.

"Jeff—"

He didn't answer.

"Want half a candy bar, Jeff?"

"No. Thanks."

She removed a paper wrapping. There was an odor of chocolate. "Uhm," she said munching. "Not bad. If anybody had told me this afternoon I'd spend Saturday night eating a Bi-Zingo candy bar in an old dry-well, I'd have said he was a damned liar."

She finished her candy and, by the sound of things, licked her fingers. She dug into her purse again, got out matches, and struck one to look at her watch.

"Only one-thirty!" she gasped. "I feel as though I'd been here a week." She lighted a cigarette while the match lasted. "I always like a smoke after a midnight snack." She might have been talking to herself for all she could get out of Wren. She smoked perhaps an inch of the cigarette and then flipped it away.

"All right!" she said definitely. "I don't suppose anybody ever threw Houdini into a dry-well, and if they had he couldn't have got out! I'm sorry I brought that up, Jeff, sorry from the very bottom of my heart, truly!"

"You're sorry," he said, chuckling, "from the bottom of a dry-well. Apologies don't come any deeper."

Zoe's sigh indicated some measure of relief. After a moment, she said: "You think somebody killed Lemmy because he was sending out those poison pen notes? Maybe he tried blackmail, and when the first touch didn't work, he decided to strengthen his threat with the notes. How's that sound, Jeff?"

"Harmonious. But the lesser of two motives. Consider Lemmy in the role of poltergeist. After all, he was Mrs. Wilk's stepfather. He could have got into the house this morning. Suppose he solved the riddle of the sealed room, knew that Arbuthnott had been murdered. Try that on your ocarina."

The silence was Zoe thinking ponderously. "Damned if I want to admit a cockeyed little runt who took in washings could figure out something I can't."

"Lemmy had inside information," Wren explained. "Remember the late Mrs. Scudder, the Pattersons' cleaning woman? The day Arbuthnott died, she left the Patterson-Larue house without her purse. Suppose she *didn't* leave at four o'clock. Or suppose she came back."

"She'd have called the police if she caught the killer in the act."

"Not if she considered the possibilities of blackmail. Or perhaps the act itself was obscure, not readily interpreted as murder. Perhaps she only saw something that frightened her. Something extremely odd. Later the correct interpretation came. Perhaps while she lingered in the hospital, between life and death. Observations of the subconscious are often more revealing than those of the conscious mind. Whatever that information was, she got it across to Lemmy before she died. We'll never know. Not now."

"But," Zoe objected, "if Lemmy wanted to experiment with sealing a room up with wallpaper, why go to the Wilk house? Why not do it right here?"

"My dear lady! Because the Wilk house contained certain equipment Lemmy didn't have here. When we know what that was, we'll know how it was done—"

Wren broke off, listening. There was a slight stir of sound in the house above—the opening of a door, then footsteps. Somebody called: "Lemmy, are you sick?" and the footsteps came closer.

Zoe Osbourn stood up, and the stair-tread creaked under her. "Down here in the cellar! Help!"

Wren said: "Hush."

"Hush?" Zoe's echo was like the take-off of a giant rocket. "If you think, Jeff Wren, that I'm going to sit down here and make like

a termite, you're crazy. Help! In the cellar."

The footsteps were now directly overhead. Somebody rattled the hasp. A man's voice that trembled with excitement said: "I'll have to call the police."

"You've *got* the police!" Zoe shouted. "Policewoman Osbourn."

"Maybe so, maybe not." The man above giggled nervously. "Because this here hasp up here is locked with a pair of manacles, that's what!"

Wren started to chuckle. "Our self-styled private investigator. Nice he found a place for his handcuffs."

As the footsteps receded, Zoe sat down again on the steps. "Hell's fire!" she groaned. "I'd rather stay in this stink hole and set up housekeeping with you, Jeffery, than be rescued by Homicide!"

Which was understandable. Sergeant Hogan would die laughing.

THOMAS HOGAN, the stocky redhead from Homicide, wouldn't have missed the opening of Lemmy Scudder's cellar if there had been ten bodies in the bathtub. He attended the unveiling personally and encouraged three newspaper photographers to record the event. Wren's only hope was that Zoe Osbourn's lethal glare would prove too much for the cameras.

"This one a little too deep for you, Mr. Wren?" Hogan asked, his Irish smile edged with derision.

Wren had no immediate answer as, monumental in his dignity, he followed the policewoman into a burst of flashgun fire. He sought out an orange crate in a corner of Lemmy's kitchen and there accomplished virtual self-effacement during the initial stages of the investigation.

While waiting for the arrival of the coroner's physician, Hogan was busy. He listened patiently to Zoe Osbourn and then to Mr. Hokely, the janitor from the apartment across the street. It was Hokely who had brought aid, assistance, and no end of embarrassment to Zoe and Wren, though motivated only by concern for Lemmy's health.

"Lemmy's been havin' such a lot of nosebleeds lately," explained Mr. Hokely, adding with an air of final authority which would have not discredited the best diagostician in the country, "That's high blood pressure. And when I seen how Lemmy went, drown-ded that-away, I says to myself it's a blessing he was took like that instead of a stroke and lingerin' on, paralyzed maybe like my old lady was for two years before she was took."

The law, Hogan explained to Hokely, was compelled to take the attitude that Lemmy would have preferred to linger. And then the sergeant turned his attention to material clues, such as the muddy heel impression on the kitchen floor and the red-lettered beginnings of the nasty little note found on the washstand.

It was while the coroner's man was making his examination that the invaluable Mr. Hokely came into the limelight again. He had seen Lemmy and his pushcart loaded with laundry come into Pierson Street when he, Hokely, was putting out a barrel of clinkers from the apartment basement. That was at 10:45 P.M.

Which meant that somewhere between 10:45 and 11:15 the killer had bopped Lemmy on the head—the medico had already attested to the bopping—and had put him in the tub.

"That's cutting it pretty fine," Hogan remarked to no one in particular. He chewed a match stick, stared reflectively at Jeffery Wren, and perhaps wondered why Mr. Wren and Mrs. Osbourn couldn't have arrived a few minutes earlier and caught the killer.

When Hogan went into the bathroom, Wren followed as far as the door to ask how things were going.

"Things," said Hogan with notable caution, "are going fine. There's cursory evidence of drowning all right. We can refill the tub, check how long it takes, and cut the time element to a hair. And say"—he smiled generously—"I'm mighty grateful to you for marking the position of the faucet handle before you turned it off."

"Don't mention it." Wren was staring down at the floor at the pitiful heap of personal belongings which had been removed from Lemmy's pocket—a plug of tobacco, a cob pipe, matches, a clasp purse, and a handkerchief which had once been white but which now was all but covered with dark stains of clotted blood. All the articles were of course water-soaked.

Wren pointed to the handkerchief. "Whose blood?"

"Lemmy's," replied Hogan. "Doc said he had a nosebleed recently. Lemmy, I mean—not Doc. . . You can go any time now, Mr. Wren. Not," he added hastily, "that we're trying to rush you, but you can't be feeling any too well."

Mr. Wren was feeling downright ill, and a large portion of that illness was due to certain pictures of himself which were destined to appear in the newspapers. Which possibly explains why, instead of taking an obvious hint, he remained for a while, a large and particularly irritating cinder in the eye of Thomas Hogan.

"This is how it stacks up," Hogan said finally. "The killer was somebody's husband—"

"My!" Wren cut in, smiling. "You're doing leagues. You've eliminated two-thirds of the population already."

Hogan spat out a sliver of match wood. "Somebody's husband who was doing some cheating—"

"Remarkable!" Wren murmured. "Another stride. You're down to two-sixths."

Hogan's cough was deprecating. "And the killer was in the house laying for Lemmy. We know that from the mud track we found right about where you're standing. The killer *must* have arrived before the heavy rain set in or the mud wouldn't have been as dry as it is."

"Oh?" mildly. "You think so? No reasonable doubt? But then you're not the doubting sort of Thomas."

Hogan flushed. "Now look here, Mr. Wren, I don't want to have any trouble with you. You yourself heard Hokely say that he saw Lemmy come in alone."

"Quite. Precisely. Hokely says Lemmy was alone. Meaning, of course, that Hokely saw no one with Lemmy. There's a difference. Minute but significant."

"Sure." Hogan was now thoroughly nettled. "Sure there's a difference, if you want to quibble. So Lemmy was escorted home by the Invisible Man!"

Wren nodded, pleased. "A most astute observation. Goes well with Lemmy's shoes. Lemmy's shoes couldn't have been worn by mortal man. Not tonight anyway."

Hogan laughed. "You expect me to swallow that?"

It appeared that Mr. Wren was considering Hogan carefully. "No-o," he decided slowly. "Afraid not. You won't swallow it. You'd much rather eat crow." He turned ponderously and his slow bouncing stride carried him out of the kitchen and out of Lemmy Scudder's house.

CHAPTER FOUR

Out, Damned Spot

JEFFERY WREN was awakened at 10:00 A.M. Sunday morning by an outrageous hammering on the door of his apartment-hotel suite. He got out of bed feeling stiff and not the least chipper, found slippers and his black satin dressing gown. By the time he had reached the living room his would-be visitor was actually kicking the bottom of the door panel. Wren asked what was wanted.

"Telegram for Mr. Wren."

The voice was just as familiar as the technique. Wren, thoroughly disgusted, said: "Oh, come now. You've no originality. No imagination. Possibly no brain." And then he unexpectedly opened the door. His huge left hand shot out, caught a coat lapel, and literally jerked the self-styled private investigator of the night before out from under the latter's hat. Wren kicked the door shut, kept the dumpy mealbag figure at arm's length for inspection. Mr. Private Investigator had wisely rid himself of his trench coat which had been featured in Zoe Osbourn's description of him. He must have experienced a bad night, for his blue serge suit looked slept in. His round pink face was somewhat less pink and, incredibly, it even appeared less round. He made a fumbling attempt to get something out of his right pocket, but Wren, who was not to be bitten by the same dog twice, caught the man's wrist and explored the pocket himself.

"If"—he was coldly polite—"you've no objection."

The blond man shook his head. "Not at all, not at all, Mr. Wren. I intended you were to have it anyway." And Wren withdrew not a gun, but what can only be described as a bunch of money, since it was neither wadded nor folded. Wren thought a cocked eyebrow was indicated, but his head was killing him.

"There's better than five hundred dollars there," said the man. "My capital and my first fee. If I had any good will you could have that, too." His smile was a bit wistful. "I don't think I'd better open a detective agency in Indianapolis."

"No. You've too much competition, what with the Oberron Agency and Hannibal Smith. Not to mention myself." Wren dropped the money onto the seat of a convenient chair and took a revolver out of the man's hip pocket. "Now." He flourished the gun. "You mentioned your first fee. Who paid you and for what?"

"My brother Harry. He thought we might as well keep the money in the family." The man sniffled; he had caught cold in the rain of the night before. "Harry wanted me to find out who hung the strawberry wallpaper over the door in—"

Wren held up a hand. "Don't tell me. You're F. Harry Wilk's brother?"

The man nodded. "William Wilk, but my friends call me 'Wonderful.'" He nodded lamely: "God knows why."

"Tut!" Wren chided. "Don't debase yourself. You know why the Wilks are so interested in who hung the wallpaper?"

Wonderful wasn't sure. "I ought to have figured it out but I guess I'm just not using my brains."

"No. You're not. No fault of yours, however. There's a shortage of everything these days."

"But they're out to make some money out of Patterson. Edith has got something on him she picked up in his mail, the way I get it."

"Oh?" Wren's eyebrows soared. "Edith is picking Patterson's mail. Probably both in-

coming and outgoing. Explains her presence in his office." He nodded savagely. "Mail-picking's no trick for her. She used to give spirit 'readings'. Probably knows every sealed message dodge from the alcohol sponge to the paraffin flap." Wren stepped over to the table, took a cigarette out of a box. When he had it going, he smoked in silence a moment, dark eyes moody. Finally he nodded. "Explains the Wilks' reticence about the pedometer. Their pretended ignorance, rather. Well!" He smiled, pleased with himself.

"Where's Rollo?" he asked suddenly, turning to Wonderful.

The man shuddered. "The cops got Rollo, and I don't hardly expect I'll get through the day without seeing the sun go down behind bars. But wait—" He held up an imploring hand as Wren made a move toward the phone.

"Why?" Wren asked. "You're resigned to fate. Why prolong the inevitable?"

Wonderful nodded at the money Wren had dropped into the chair. "That's honest dough. I'm hiring you to find out who killed Lemmy Scudder. If you don t find out they could easy pin it on me and Rollo, see?"

Wren saw, and in spite of his morning-after, he chuckled. He took a bouncing stride over to the chair and raked up Wonderful Wilk's modest fortune. He waved magnanimously toward the door. "Trot along. You'll go to jail. But not for murder."

The dumpy little man scuttled to the door, turned, and gave Wren a worshipful smile. "Gee, you're wonderful!"

"You're confused," Wren said with a wave of his hand. "You're Wonderful. I'm Wren."

AS SOON as the man left, Wren returned to the bedroom to dress. While tranferring certain articles from the pockets of the suit he had worn the night before, he came across the business card he had taken from Lemmy Scudder's door. He looked at it now for the first time:

THE E & S ELECTRIC SHOP
"Send for Mr. Swifty"
Washing Machines—Appliances
Vacuum Cleaners—Refrigerators

Across the face of it somebody, possibly "Mr. Swifty," had written: "We've got some dandies in now."

Wren stared a moment, snicking the edge of the card with his thumbnail. When the idea came to him it was sufficiently striking to elicit an audible "My!" He went back to the living room where, after consulting the phone directory, he called the Randolph Patterson residence. It was Mrs. Patterson's clear soprano that answered, and she did not seem the least surprised when Wren identified himself.

"In fact," said she, "I was about to call you. Something terrible happened to the little man who does our laundry, and the police have been here asking questions. I think I would find it reassuring if I could talk to some layman. But a layman who knows the ropes, as it were."

"Quite," Wren said. "I've an acquaintance with ropes." He concluded on a faintly sinister note: "Particularly the rope with the noose at the end."

Before eleven o'clock, which was somewhat earlier than he was expected, Wren descended majestically from a North Meridian bus. The Patterson address was across from University Park—an old three-story red brick building complete with ivy and with a fanlight over the door. Pigeon droppings streaked the stone coping and window ledges. Aware of the pigeons, Wren ducked hurriedly through the door, then climbed the three flights of steps to knock at the proper apartment. Mrs. Patterson's voice, lacking cordiality, told him to come in.

Wren opened the door. Before him was a small square living room. The furnishings were cheap and quite hideous. Besides an abundance of overstuffed chairs, there was a wicker "fernery" in the south window containing somebody's cactus collection. On a low end table that doubled as a radio and magazine rack, were two cartons of cigarettes, a quart bottle of peroxide, and the cash register sales slip from a near-by durgstore. A small waterfall-top desk occupied the center of a bay-window that overlooked the street. Mrs. Patterson sat at the desk, staring across at the sunlit park and gnawing the end of a yellow lead pencil.

She had on the same brown wool skirt she had worn the afternoon before. Her blouse was plain, almost masculine. Her knees were crossed, which only heightened the mystery surrounding her unfashionably long skirts. Mrs. Patterson's legs, in Wren's opinion, were eminently satisfactory.

Wren coughed. Startled, Mrs. Patterson turned. Light aslant her horn-rimmed glasses left her eyes empty as the windows of a vacant house. She stood up.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she apologized evenly. "I thought it was Mr. Patterson. You are Mr. Wren, aren't you? I saw you yesterday in your shop downtown." Her laugh was vibrant as an E-string tuned too high. "I really intended speaking to you then, but I couldn't quite decide."

"Oh?" He expressed mild surprise. "Then it wasn't jointed snakes? Not entirely?"

"Really, Mr. Wren!" The suggestion struck her as absurd. "I am afraid I was only trying to nerve myself up to asking for your advice and help. And at the last minute I decided that as a hired detective you would probably

be frightfully expensive. And after all it was a very small thing—small in every sense of the word. Something came in Saturday's mail—"

Wren checked her with a wave of his hand and at the same time assumed an expression of profound wisdom. "A note," he ventured. "An anonymous letter." Detecting the slightest sign of acknowledgement, he hurried on, sure of himself. "A note printed in red pencil. Very nasty in its implication. Quite! Suggested Mr. Patterson's infidelity."

Mrs. Patterson moistened her full lower lip with the tip of her tongue. "That—that's remarkable! How did you know?"

Wren shrugged. "We magicians! We never tell."

Mrs Patterson took off her glasses, and Wren was once more aware of her curiously beautiful amber eyes. She asked him to sit down, indicating the end of a studio couch near the desk. She sat in the chair she had occupied before. In spite of her hair-do which seemed to suggest that she might put on a Salvation Army bonnet the next minute, there was something worldy about her. Something, Wren thought, that made her a highly desirable woman. Then suddenly she was offering a bit of information which incidently explained her mousy get-up. She was, she said, a writer.

"That is, I have ambitions." She tapped a bulky pencil-written manuscript on the desk with her rimmed glasses.

Wren nodded. "The Hoosier vice. I've spattered ink around myself. A book called *The Dead Don't Talk*. An exposé of fraud spiritism. A notoriously poor seller."

Mrs. Patterson had discovered a kindred soul and, in her enthusiasm, she put a hand impulsively on his rather large knee. "Then you've experienced first-page agony, when you try to capture the entire mood of your story Well, I had it, and now it's gone."

"The mood?" he asked. "The agony? Or simply the first page?"

She laughed. "The first page, after all my struggles. It was right on top of this 'script yesterday, but now it's gone. I couldn't have misplaced it—I am an extremely methodical person—and I find myself utterly unable to reproduce it."

She turned, picked up her pencil, a blank sheet of paper, and hastily scribbled: *When you recieve this, darling, I will have left you and the world*— She broke off, exasperated, and drew a line through what she had just written.

"It began rather like that—with a letter—but it's simply no use. I cannot capture the original wording. You see, my heroine is deeply in love with her husband and he's unfaithful. She feels she can't live without him—"

A DOOR at the opposite end of the living room opened and a man's voice called: "Did that boy bring my—" Mr. Louis Larue, Patterson's uncle, stood across the threshold, aware now of the presence of Jeffery Wren. Mr. Larue's suspenders dangled in unlovely festoons of blue elastic from the top of his black trousers, and he was presently reaching under his beard to struggle with the button of his collar.

"Pardon me, I didn't know you had a guest, Marabelle, my dear."

She said: "That's all right, Uncle Louis." She gave the name its French pronounciation rather than the Hoosier which is not distinguishable from "Lewis". "The boy brought your cigarettes. They're over there on the radio with my peroxide . . . Mr. Wren, this is Mr. Patterson's uncle, Mr. Larue."

Uncle Louis, dangling suspenders and all, detoured from his path which was leading to the radio. His handshake was hearty if hurried, his black eyes a trifle too steady. "You have quite a reputation as a detective, Mr. Wren." And when Wren acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow, Larue said: "The wretched little cross-eyed man who takes out our laundry was killed last night, and the police were here this morning before I was dressed. They seemed to be retracing every step that Scudder took."

"Oh?" Wren maintained polite interest. "Checking alibis, no doubt."

"And I hadn't any," Larue said, and laughed. "Nor any motive either. I happened to be out when the worthy Mr. Scudder dropped in for the laundry." He turned to Mrs. Patterson. "What time did you say that was, Marabelle?"

"It was late," she said, "to be picking up laundry. About ten-fifteen. I know I was just ready to retire to my room. And Randolph, poor boy, was already in his and he'd been snoring for an hour. He had such a hard day at the laboratory—" She left that up in the air and frowned suddenly at Mr. Larue's suspenders. "Uncle Louis, you're still not dressed."

"True, true. But don't nag, my girl." Larue's eyes twinkled affectionately "I was out until after midnight last night." He went to the radio, picked up his cigarettes, and left the room.

It appeared that the members of the Patterson household were unusually keen on the subject of time, particularly those hours of the night before. Oddly enough, this stop-watch interest failed to produce an alibi for any of them. The two Pattersons had separate rooms, it seemed, and while Patterson might have been snoring his head off prior to the time of his wife's retirement, where he was during that critical time between 10:45 and 11:15 was

anybody's guess. It was, Wren thought, a unique situation.

He glanced over at the peroxide bottle on the radio and smiled at Mrs. Patterson. "So you're going blond. Nothing else explains such quantity of peroxide."

She dropped her eyes and for a moment concerned herself with chipping bits of rubber from the eraser on her pencil with a thumbnail innocent of lacquer. "I thought I ought to do something about my hair."

Wren refrained from adding "amen" to that. He said: "Conclusions might be drawn. Simply for our own amazement . . . The 'other woman' must be blond. The one referred to in the poison-pen note. More than that, she's Elfie Peters, Mr. Patterson's secretary." It wasn't necessarily true, but he liked the sound of it.

"Miss Peters is awfully attractive," Mrs. Patterson admitted with some reluctance.

"Quite. Though immature. . . Look. You've been married how long?"

"Nearly a year." Marabelle Patterson's amber eyes fled from Wren's face to the door of the apartment. There were footsteps in the corridor. The knob turned savagely, and Randolph Patterson flung into the room. He stopped just inside the door, gray eyes on Wren, his open mouth displaying large square teeth, and looking rather like a Walt Disney conception of a foolish horse. Mrs. Patterson and Wren stood up. Wren, at least, smiled.

"I've met Mr. Wren," Patterson cut through his wife's attempted introduction. He didn't seem at all pleased to see Mr. Wren a second time. His gangling gait carried him across to the desk. There he stood fumbling in the pocket of his topcoat to bring out a small bottle with a rubber bulb stopper. He put the bottle down on the desk with some force, and the sharp sound it made punctured a strained silence. He stepped back.

"My nose drops!" Marabelle Patterson exclaimed, the ring in her voice altogether false. "Mr. Wren, Randolph compounds the very best remedy for sinus trouble I've ever found. It's one of the sulfa and—and what else, Randolph?" She was trying desperately to draw Patterson into an amicable conversation—about nose drops. About anything, it seemed, that would take Patterson's mind off something. The something was Jeffery Wren, a large and genial gentleman who had somehow got between Patterson and the desk. Patterson's eyes were cool again, his expression anything but foolish.

"What do you want, Mr. Wren?" he demanded, his voice husky.

"Want?" Wren was astonished. His right hand strayed behind him for an instant apparently to withdraw his handkerchief. "Want? My dear sir! Nothing. Must I want something?" He moved away from the desk, swiftly for so large a man, and to the south window with its fern stand planted with cactus.

Mrs. Patterson appealed eagerly to her husband. "It's about the missing first page of my manuscript, dear. Mr. Wren is such a marvelous mentalist I thought he could locate it for me."

Mr. Wren was staring down at the cactus, an expression of childlike simplicity on his big face. "My! What a collection of pricklies, Patterson. But aren't you watering them too much?"

"They belong to my uncle," Patterson snapped. "Go on and get your hocus-pocus over and then leave, if you please."

"Randolph!" Marabelle Patterson half raised her hand as though to recover her husband's inhospitable words. Wren, however, wasn't the least offended.

"Hocus-pocus?" he asked, and then nodded. "Oh. About the missing page. I've no notion of where it is. Not the foggiest." His smile was cryptic. "But I've an idea where it will turn up eventually. A very good idea." He nodded pleasantly to the Pattersons and withdrew from the apartment. He was certain that Marabelle had seen him filch the bottle of nose drops from the desk, and he was just as certain that she would conceal the theft from her husband if—a veritable king-size "if"—Patterson noticed the bottle was gone.

HALF an hour later Wren's bouncing stride carried him up the approach walk in front of the tall old house that the Wilks rented from Louis Larue. His knock brought F. Harry Wilk to the door, and F. Harry's wisp of a mustache was stained with something that looked suspiciously like breakfast egg. He wore a crimson dressing gown over pink striped pajamas.

"How're you?" Wren asked pleasantly. "How's philosophizing? Profitable, no doubt."

"You'll grin out the wrong side of your face after I've published my book on how to live without money," said F. Harry.

He didn't intend to let Wren in, but then he was a good deal too small to keep Wren out. In the dingy hall beyond the door was a pleasant perfume reminiscent of Elfie Peters, and at the sound of Wren's voice, the girl stuck her blond head out of the room beyond the stairs. She was not pleased.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Elfie ducked back and slammed the door.

"My! What's her trouble?"

"She just came back for her stuff," F. Harry explained. "She *says* she spent the night at the YWCA."

"Tut!" Wren frowned at the little man. "There's libel in your inflection. Slander,

rather." He glanced into the parlor, saw no one. "Where's the good provider? The better half?"

F. Harry blinked sleep-puffed eyes in the direction of the stairway. "Up there. She just got back from the morgue. Somebody knocked off her step-father last night, and she was down there picking up his personal stuff. Now she's having running fits wondering where she'll get the money to bury him with."

Wren started for the foot of the steps, but F. Harry caught hold of his arm. "You can't do that, Mr. Wren," F. Harry pleaded. "A man's house is his castle."

"Even a woman's house. Quite!" Wren turned suddenly to F. Harry. "How much rent do you pay? Speaking of castles."

The question seemed to catch F. Harry mentally off balance. "Why—why," he stammered, "forty a month, I guess."

Wren raised his eyebrows. "Reasonable. Generous of Larue, isn't it?" He shrugged off Harry's grip and climbed the steps.

At the end of the upstairs hall a door stood open on a little storeroom tucked in under a gable. Through the opening Wren could see the lank figure of Edith Wilk. She was methodically going through the pockets of somebody's trousers, and so intent was she that she was not aware of Wren until he had crossed the threshold. She turned, caught her breath, peered at him through the secretive slits of her heavy-lidded eyes.

"How the hell did you get in?"

Wren's smile was bland. "Through the walls. Including the wallpaper. Poltergeists have no patent on it." He looked about at cast-off and broken furniture, at a barrel of rags, a pile of old magazines and accumulated rubble. It was hot and stuffy in the storeroom, and up under the eaves the cooing of pigeons was a somnolent sound. The late Lemmy Scudder's personal effects had been heaped without ceremony in front of the rag barrel, and Wren spotted the dead man's blood-stained handkerchief which Edith Wilk had evidently just removed from a trouser pocket.

He said: "Delightful nook you have here. A snug harbor. What's the rent?"

"Seventy-five dollars a month," she snapped. "Not that it's any of your business, Mr. Nosy!"

"No. Not that it is." He stooped in front of her and made a major discovery of the bloody handkerchief. "Well! You've been mopping up. Where's the body?"

"In the morgue," she said. Her voice was flat. "Somebody killed my step-father. I had to go down there to get his things. He didn't have a stitch of clothes fit to bury him in."

"Ah." Wren wagged his finger, gave her a sly look. "Here's something you'll be interested in. How to turn out a well-dressed corpse." His left hand went out to the pile of magazines, ripped off the cover of one. He straightened, found Mrs. Wilk watching him with natural suspicion as he rolled the piece of paper into a tube. When that was done he deliberately tucked the bloody handkerchief into the right end of the cylinder. Then he reached into a pocket, took out a rubber band which he snapped around the paper. He immediately offered the cylinder and its contents to the woman.

She didn't take it. She stood with one hand where her right hip would have been if she had had hips. Her mouth curved scornfully. "Say, are you crazy?"

Wren shrugged. He put the tube to his lips and blew mightily. A clean white handkerchief exploded from the end of the tube and fluttered to the floor. He immediately unrolled the paper and was as surprised as anybody at its innocence.

"Beats washing," he said happily. "Try it on Lemmy's socks. Who knows, you might get nylons." Chuckling, he stepped back into the hall where he paused a moment. "About that rent, Mrs. Wilk—"

"What about it?" Amazement was traded for something vaguely apprehensive on Mrs. Wilk's thin face.

Wren said: "Some discrepancy. F. Harry claims you pay Larue forty a month."

Her lips thinned. "Harry's a moron!"

"Oh, no argument there," Wren agreed. "No mental giant, certainly. But"—his eyes grew grave—"the point is you're not paying rent at all. No. The current flows in the opposite direction."

Edith Wilk hurled a few choice epithets at him, and then, being a practical woman, she picked up the heavy glass font of an oil lamp and threw that. Wren ducked only the lamp.

OUT in the bright sunlight of high noon, Wren saw Elfie Peters half a block ahead of him and walking south. She was lugging a heavy suitcase in one hand and an overnight bag in the other. He called to her. Elfie looked back, gave her head a disdainful toss, and quickened her pace. Wren lengthened his stride and came upon her in the middle of the intersection.

"Allow me," Wren offered, touching his hat.

"Allow my eye!" Elfie snapped at him. She jerked the suitcase away before he could take hold of it and almost upset her small self in the process. "You—you stop *annoying* me. Is that clear?"

It was clear, but Wren still kept abreast of her. He said: "You recovered your pedometer? The one that dropped in the Wilks' hall?"

She flashed him a look. "I don't know what you're talking about, and furthermore—"

There was something in the earnest stare of his dark eyes that checked her. He said gently: "That won't work. The Wilks tried it. Their ignorance on the subject of pedometers was appalling. But not very convincing. You wear yours on your garter."

Elfie's jaw dropped. She drew it up with a snap. "Well, I never heard of such cheek, such—such—"

"Unmitigated gall," he suggested.

"Such unmitigated gall—" Elfie stamped her foot. "Stop it! Stop putting words in my mouth and picking my mind and telling me what I wear and where I wear it—"

"Not to mention why you wear it," he cut in without raising his voice. "Look, my dear. You've no secrets from me. Not for long. Your misdirection isn't good. Not good at all. Had you admitted you were wearing a pedometer to record the durability of a pair of nylon hose, you might have thrown me off the track. That would have had a ring of logic, since your employer, Patterson, devotes his time to impartial tests for various manufacturers. But no. You claim ignorance of pedometers. There's an obvious conclusion to be drawn from such deceit. Your stockings aren't nylon. They're something new. Something better or cheaper. A synthetic from Randolph Patterson's test tubes."

He had been watching her profile carefully. The lines of anxiety at the corner of her eye didn't match the denial on her mobile lips. He went on quietly yet with a certain doggedness.

"The Wilks know. They've known for quite a while. Mrs. Wilks used to earn her living by the dubious art of reading sealed messages. Imagine what her talent could accomplish with the incoming and outgoing mail of the Patterson Laboratories."

Elfie Peters stopped in her tracks and dropped her luggage. She faced Wren. Her rouge stood out like islands on her pale cheeks. She asked in a funny tight voice: "You mean the Wilks know about Synthaline?"

He nodded. "Quite. And about Patterson's suddenly acquired wealth. There are others who know. Nothing else explains this delving into past crimes. To say nothing of current murder, and murder yet to come. Coincidence won't stretch that far, there had to be central motivation. A single puppeteer jerking all the strings on all the scrambling little puppets."

Elfie was sniveling. Wren put out a kindly hand and tilted her chin with his forefinger. "You're in love with Patterson"

"Why—why shouldn't I be!" she said defiantly. "He's just throwing himself away on that perfect frump of a woman he married!"

Wren shook his head. "Forget Patterson. He's not worth it."

Elfie stamped her foot. "I *hate* you. It's all your fault! You're a nosy, scheming man, and I *hate* you!" She snatched up her bags and hurried on up the street.

Wren sighed heavily, turned, and trudged for the nearest bus line. But he was nothing if not resilient, and by the time he had reached the white bungalow of Policewoman Zoe Osbourn the old buoyancy had returned to his stride.

Mrs. Osbourn's front door stood ajar, probably because of the excess heat from a furnace fire she had started in the cooler hours of the morning. Wren came onto the porch he heard her raucous voice exclaim: "Well, break my arches and call me a flatfoot! There's a man we could use around headquarters!"

"You're not," Wren said, "referring to me? No possibility of that. Not the remotest."

A newspaper rattled. A chair creaked its relief as Zoe Osbourn got up to fully open the door. She was unquestionably surprised and pleased. "Well, don't act coy, Jeffery. Come right in."

There was something about the domestic picture into which he stepped that aroused Wren's bachelor wariness—the pin-neat living room, the chintz at the windows, the tantalizing odor of beef roasting in a ring of onions, all constituted elements of a man-trap. Zoe herself, in a lavender house dress and minus some of her war-paint, was a good deal less formidable than on week days, and Wren sought strength from the stern photo-portrait of the late Mr. Osbourn in his police sergeant's uniform that occupied the center of the white-enameled mantel.

"I was just wondering what I was going to do with that big roast," she said, taking his hat. "It'll be nice to talk over a chunk of beef instead of a corpse for a change."

He shook his head. "Couldn't possibly. Thanks no end."

"Horse liniment!" It was an inelegant expression that put Wren immediately at ease. Chintz or no chintz, this was the same old Zoe.

He said: "Who's this paragon who's needed at headquarters?"

She picked up the want-ad section of the Sunday paper and showed him an item in the second column that read:

> HAVE YOU a pigeon problem? We have the answer. Pigeons humanely eliminated from homes, public buildings, churches. Call BRoadway 5571.

"Jeffery, you ought to see the front of headquarters from those damned dive-bombers!"

He nodded. "Quite. Think I've met your pigeon eliminator, too. Just yesterday. However—"

"However, you're going to sit down," she insisted. "I'll fix you a drink that will perk your appetite and harden your liver."

"No," he said. "That can wait. The beef can wait. The killer doesn't know it's Sunday." He took from his pocket the bottle of nose drops which Randolph Patterson had prepared for his wife. "This wants analyzing. Right away. You got some technician who'll manage it? Privately, of course. We've got to have the bottle and contents back before nightfall." And he told her briefly where he had got it and about the missing page from Marabelle Patterson's manuscript.

WHEN he had concluded, Zoe Osbourn went back into the dining room where her phone was located. She called a number, talked with somebody, and returned a moment to nod at Wren.

"A friend of mine at the Medical Center says he'll pick up the bottle in half an hour. Now how about that drink?"

"Ah! An admirable suggestion. A drink is indicated. Not to mention the beef dinner. However, I've brought along a bit of washing—" And with the same equanimity with which he would have produced from a silk hat, he drew the blood-stained handkerchief from his pocket.

Zoe Osbourn slapped herself across the forehead and goggled. "Hell's fire? What's that?"

"Lemmy's handkerchief. Obviously. My dear lady! Don't glare so. It's a mere crumb from Thomas Hogan's table. Evidence cast aside. Shall we see if it comes out in the wash?"

She snorted. "I only get about half of what you're babbling about, but you're not going to wash that gruesome souvenir in *my* kitchen!"

Wren flashed a look of complete understanding at the portrait of the late Mr. Osbourn. "On the back porch. In a mop bucket. Anywhere. Doesn't it strike you as odd that with all the soaking this handkerchief got, the clots are still distinct?"

She sighed gustily. "I don't know what you've got up your sleeve, but I suppose if you say we have to wash a bloody handkerchief before Sunday dinner, why we'll just have to do it. Ha! I've done crazier things, like spending Saturday night in a dry-well!"

He looked pained. "Don't mention it. Please." And he followed her back into the kitchen where she supplied a bucket of water and some soap. Wren carried the bucket onto the back porch and there repeatedly sudsed and rinsed the dead man's handkerchief under the frankly suspicious eyes of Zoe Osbourn.

"Out, damned spot," he said dramatically, as he held up the dripping handkerchief as badly stained as ever. "I've had no better luck than Lady Macbeth. You perceive? You grasp the full significance? Or must I delve into my handy handbook titled *Wren's Helpful Household Hints For Helpless Housewives?"*

Zoe's foot tapped on the threshold. "I guess you'd better delve, master-wit. Go ahead, slay me. The only thing I know about bloodstains is that if you put the cloth in hot water the stains set and no amount of ordinary washing will get them out."

"But my dear lady!" He was appalled. "That's it. Precisely. The significant thing is that Lemmy was drowned in *hot* water. Therefore he was *not* drowned in his own tub. A singular fact that Hogan has missed and which should prove no end upsetting. Or don't you think so?"

Zoe folded her hands contentedly across her ample middle and the expression on her large featured face was nothing less than beatific. "Why, you son of a witch! Will that ever fix Tom Hogan's wagon for him!"

He straightened away from the bucket after wringing out the handkerchief. His smile was slight, complacent. He spread the handkerchief over the edge of a metal wastebasket to dry. "Exhibit 'A'," he said. "Exhibit 'B' is less concrete. Might even call it ethereal since it exists only in the murderer's subconscious."

Zoe grunted. "You'd better not pull Exhibit 'B' on a jury then. They'll lock you in a bughouse."

He shook his head. "It's not that bad. Not quite . . . Look. You've a nodding acquaintance with pigeons. A ducking acquaintance, rather. But how's your pigeon English?"

She scowled at him. "Here we go again. If it's not bats in his belfry, it's pigeons. 'How's your pigeon English,' he says! What do you mean—no checkee no washee?"

"No. Hardly. Our laundryman is cockeyed—not slant-eyed. . . What do pigeons say?"

Zoe mulled that over for a moment. "I guess they say 'coo'."

"They don't," he argued. "You speak of cooing pigeons. But pigeons most emphatically don't say 'coo'."

"Well," she said, "they sure as hell don't holler 'fore' either! What do you think a pigeon says?"

He stared out at Zoe Osbourn's tiny back yard, as green and neat as a one-cent stamp. "It seems reasonable to assume that in the killer's mind a pigeon says: 'Looey Larue-Looey Larue'. It's inconceivable that any pigeon ever attempted 'Percy Arbuthnott'."

Zoe gaped at him. "If you mean what I

think you mean— Well, fry me a banana!"

"Yes. Fry me one too. Or are bananas compatible with roast beef?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Too Many Crooks

AFTER dinner Zoe got out her car and with Jeffery Wren at her side drove downtown to the Patterson apartment. They parked around the corner from the apartment entrance, got out, and started walking toward Lemmy Scudder's little house in Pierson Street. They took their time, trying to imagine that they were supplying the motive power for one push-cart, heavily laden.

"Not too heavily laden, of course," Wren said. "What did Lemmy weigh? Well under a hundred. Perhaps eight-five pounds dead weight."

"Come again, Jeff," Zoe said, scowling. "Don't forget that Lemmy did the pushing. The janitor from the flat across from Lemmy's witnessed Lemmy's arrival."

Wren shook his head. "No. The janitor was aware of the approach of Lemmy's push-cart. The natural assumption would be that Lemmy was pushing it. Lemmy wasn't. Lemmy was in the cart, disguised as laundry. The killer was disguised as Lemmy. That is, the killer wore Lemmy's hat, coat, and shoes. Not much of a disguise is needed on a rainy night. People are too busy dodging puddles to look closely at the faces of passers-by."

"Huhm." As she pegged along beside him Zoe's sidelong glance looked Wren's face over carefully. "Just what hat did you pull that rabbit out of, Mister Trickster?"

He chuckled. "That's apt. Extremely so. Out of Lemmy's hat. There was fresh mud on Lemmy's hat and a dent across the crown. The hat was knocked from the killer's head by the clothes line in Lemmy's back yard. Remember what happened to my hat? The line is strung low. Yet it must have been at its maximum height, because it was raining, and rain shrinks clothes line. Lemmy was a short laundryman. But it's inconceivable that he would string his line so low as to knock off his hat. Even if he did, he would habitually duck. Therefore, if Lemmy's hat was knocked off by the clothes line last night, Lemmy wasn't under it. Somebody else was . . . Care to fry another banana?"

She said she'd fry a bunch.

When they had reached the board fence in front of the laundryman's house in Pierson Street, Zoe looked at her watch. "Thirty-three minutes, Jeff, to the hair."

"We needn't split hairs," he said. "If the janitor witnessed the arrival of Lemmy's push-cart at a quarter of eleven, we've only to count half an hour or so. Where was Lemmy at about a quarter after ten? Leaving the Patterson apartment. Leaving it via the dumb-waiter, no doubt, disguised as a bundle of laundry. And incidentally, the tenants of apartments are notorious for their habitual use of hot water where cold would do as well. As for example, when drowning a troublesome laundryman in the bath tub!"

She said: "That means the actual killing took place before ten-fifteen . . . But why do it that way? Why didn't the killer simply knock Lemmy out, load him on the cart, take him home, and drown him in Lemmy's own tub?"

Wren shrugged. "Who knows, Lemmy might have come to during the trip, what with the joggling of the cart and the cold rain. Might have been very awkward for somebody. Also, there's the possibility the killer became enraged. Lemmy didn't merely drop in to collect laundry. Hush-money was his first objective. Lemmy had learned the secret of the sealed room. He knew the first death was murder. He was also aware of the upward swing in the fortunes of the Patterson household due to Patterson's newly discovered synthetic. Lemmy might have learned that from his step-daughter, Edith Wilk. But he failed to exchange confidence for confidence. He didn't tell Edith how the sealed-room trick was worked. Lemmy was interested in feathering his own nest."

Zoe gave her head a puzzled half-shake. "It's that damned sealed room that stops me every time. How could *anybody* get out of that room after sealing around the edge of the door with wallpaper?"

"Oh, come now," Wren said gently. "Nobody could. Our experience in the dry-well was nothing if not instructive on that point. The room was sealed from the outside. Don't let the mere fact that a key to the lock was found inside the room distract you. That's mere misdirection. Skeleton pass-keys are cheap."

Zoe slapped herself across the forehead. "'Sealed from the outside,' he says! Hell's fire, Jeff, stop that kind of babbling. Nobody could pull a trick like that!"

He looked at her with thinly veiled amusement. "You think not? But then you've a nice clean mind. To a psychopathic killer such as we're up against, anything is possible." And he took her arm to conduct her back along the way they had come.

When they reached the car, Wren suggested that Zoe drive him on downtown. He wanted to be alone, to think, and the quiet of his office appealed to him. The killer's peculiar mental aberration had conceived one perfect crime. There was another in the mill. And up to now he hadn't the foggiest notion what to do about it.

Zoe let him out in front of the dark and deserted novelty store on West Ohio Street. She would, she promised, phone him the moment she got any word from the toxicologist about the nose drops.

He went into the store alone, locked the door behind him, climbed the steps at the rear, went back through the magic shop and into his office. He hardly had time to seat himself behind the desk when the phone rang. He picked it up and said hello.

"Thank God!" It was the clear soprano voice of Marabelle Patterson. "Mr. Wren, I've been trying all over town to reach you."

"Sorry," he murmured. "Extremely so. You're in trouble of some sort?"

"No, no. That is, I don't *know*. Why did you steal my nose drops?"

"Oh, that. Has Mr. Patterson found out about that?"

"No," she said. "But why did you do it?"

"Oh, come now," he said gently. "You've a vague idea, surely. Doesn't it dove-tail with other factors?"

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the line—anxious, worried silence, Wren knew. Then she said: "I've been guessing. I'm nearly *mad* with guessing. First there was that nasty insinuating note in red pencil. It worried me, made me angry, but nothing else. Now I'm afraid. I'm desperately afraid. It's that missing first page from my manuscript. There—there wasn't any title on the story yet. And the way it was worded it—it could be a—a *suicide's* last letter, unsigned, but in my own handwriting. That's why I wanted to talk to you, to get your help."

"Yes," he said. "Naturally. Suggests an ugly picture. Another perfect crime." His finger tips drummed thoughtfully, silently on the desk top. "Well. You're quite safe now, if it's to be poison in the nose drops. But there's nothing that can be done right now. Simply be careful. And don't worry."

"I—I'll try not to," she said, her voice scarcely above a whisper. And then she hung up.

He put the phone down slowly, dark eyes thoughtful. Then he tilted back in his chair, put his rubber heels carefully on the polished surface of the desk. He knew perfectly well this was stalemate, and he hadn't the slightest notion of wearing away his energy in pacing. Let the killer pace. Jeffery Wren would relax.

HE WAS there when dusk in the street brought darkness into the little room. He was there when dusk deepened into night. Then, coming almost on the stroke of eight, there was a sound somewhere on the street floor and at the rear of the building—the crash and tinkle of breaking glass.

Wren took his feet off the desk, still careful about scratches, and sat up. He half expected the skirl of a police whistle. There was none. His right hand went blindly to the second drawer of his desk, pulled it open. His right hand went into the drawer and closed on the butt of a gun. He stood up, moved soundlessly to the end of the desk, between it and the wall.

He hadn't known before that the stairs leading to the magic shop creaked. They were creaking now. He heard the door of the reception room open and shut, then footsteps against the distant drone of traffic. A dim finger of light struck the pebbled glass of the office door, was gone to come again more brightly searching than before. The light went out. The doorknob rattled as it turned. He felt the slight draft as the door swung open. Then the fingers of his left hand turned the button switch of the desk lamp at the same time that his right raised the gun.

The tall man in the door had bright black eyes and a white beard.

Wren said softly: "Sit down, Percy Arbuthnott. Please."

The man with the beard laughed, but not much. He said: "Am I a sap!"

"No-o," Wren said generously. "You're merely unfortunate. Sit down, Percy."

The Beard sighed. He got around in front of the chair that faced the desk and sat down. "It was that damned peroxide, wasn't it?"

Wren smiled—not his nicest smile. "Quite. The damning peroxide, more properly. Marabelle tried to cover for you. She was a bit obvious about it . . . What is it, a Sunday ritual—this beard bleaching?" He chuckled. "It *does* add years to you."

Wren moved around to the back of the desk and sat down. The black gun was dwarfed by the bigness of his hand. He said: "Conclusions might be drawn from the beard. Shall we draw some?"

The man said: "You can draw Li'l Abner, I don't give a damn."

"Thanks. Thanks no end . . . But about the beard. The man who was buried last August in the name of Percy Arbuthnott—he was actually Patterson's uncle Louis Larue—hadn't a beard. There was, therefore, no necessity for you to grow a beard simply to step into Larue's shoes. The obvious conclusion is that you had the beard when you came here. Suggests a disguise, doesn't it? And disguise suggests previous crime."

The Beard played dumb. He didn't know what Wren was getting at. Wren shrugged. "My dear man! You're wanted. Obviously. In the worst way. Some ugly business in California, perhaps. Something that had to do with a gun." Wren raised his eyebrows. "Possibly somebody got shot. Might even have died."

"Nobody died," The Beard cut in. "It was

just a little racket for suckers. May—" He swallowed. "Maybe you'll find out about it some day."

Wren chuckled. "Oh, come now. Who's May? Marabelle? Because there's a suggestion of disguise in the way Marabelle dresses. The way she hides her light under a bushel." He nodded. "You and Marabelle are like that. She found sanctuary by marrying an out-at-the-elbows chemist and dressing like a frump. And you followed her here. No wonder Patterson is tired of the set-up. No wonder he brought me the short-barreled revolver. The gun is registered somewhere in your name. Or possibly in May-Marabelle's name. He took it from her. Caught her with it up on the roof of the apartment—"

The Beard had started forward in his chair. His eyes were hard little beetles peering out of crannies. "So he *did* give it to you. I thought he was trying to throw a scare into me. Good God! And the last thing I said to May before we lammed was to get rid of that damned gun!"

"Oh, yes," Wren said mildly. "Patterson is throwing you over. Now that you've outlived your usefulness."

The Beard said what he thought of Patterson. He had some very expressive adjectives to apply to Patterson, and Wren was thinking there was nothing like the barbs of ingratitude to loosen a man's tongue. Because Patterson, the dirty so-and-so, couldn't have made a go of his laboratory, couldn't have discovered this new synthetic without help from The Beard. The Beard said so. This was how it was: When the police had broken into the sealed room in the Patterson house on the afternoon of August Fourteenth, and there was Louis Larue as dead as they come, Patterson had said that Larue was somebody named Percy Arbuthnott. And without so much as asking The Beard if he'd care about stepping into the dead man's shoes.

Wren nodded. "Because of the annuity. Larue had an income from an annuity. If he died, the money stopped."

"Sure, sure," The Beard said. "Larue was backing Patterson, see? Five hundred bucks a month coming in regular. When Patterson told me what the pitch was and begged me to take over in Larue's place, I said that's for me."

"Oh, naturally. A snug sanctuary from the law. Conveniently close to May-Marabelle, too. Virtually no risk attached either. The Pattersons had lived here only three weeks. And warehouses aren't prying neighbors. Possibly nobody in town knew the real Larue except Mrs. Scudder who cleaned for the Pattersons. And she was killed in an accident."

Wren broke off, frowning slightly. "But wait. The Wilks must have known, too. Mrs. Scudder was Edith Wilk's mother." He nodded sagely. "Yes, Edith knew. But then the Wilks could be bought cheap. Give them the house, rent free. Pay them a small slice of the annuity check. Give Edith a job in the laboratory. Nothing that looks like blackmail. Hardly. Call it charity, nothing more."

Wren leaned back in his chair. He looked pleased. The Beard leaned back in his chair and looked uneasy.

Wren said: "Relax. It's over now. You've a nice cell waiting somewhere. You and May-Marabelle. Not the same cell, unfortunately. You can hardly set up housekeeping. That revolver was turned over to the police yesterday. I'm quite cooperative that way. All-in-all there'll be quite an odor raised. Old dry-wells won't be in it. You see, Percy or whatever your name is, I'm what's known as a sly fellow. I've figured out how Louis Larue was murdered."

THE white beard dropped a good two inches. Then the jaws closed with a snap. "You're crazy!"

Wren chuckled. "Like a fox. Larue was given some sleeping pills—any one of the too easily obtained barbiturates. The killer then turned on the gas heater, neglecting to light it, of course, and planted a key inside the room. With the door half open, the killer applied two strips of ready-pasted wallpaper to the inner surface of the door, allowing an inch for overlap at the four edges. Then the killer stepped out of the room, pulled the door shut, locked it from the outside, used an ordinary vacuum cleaner around the edges of the door. The suction drew the overlapping paper tight against the frame and floor and down into the cracks. Ready-pasted wallpaper sticks like a brother—"

"Well, fry me a banana!" somebody said. "A vacuum cleaner!" Zoe Osbourn stood in the office doorway. From the dust that smudged the end of her flaring nose Wren thought it reasonable to assume she had followed in the footsteps of The Beard and had entered through the broken stockroom window.

Wren smiled at her. "Most opportune. You've a gun, Mrs. O? Well, point it, then."

She got her revolver out of her huge purse and pointed it at The Beard. Wren plucked a red silk handkerchief out of a pocket somewhere, draped it over the end of the black gun in his hand. He pulled the trigger. There was the flash and snap of a paper cap and simultaneously the handkerchief vanished.

Wren said: "Cute, isn't it? Or don't you think so?"

The Beard didn't think so, and while there was practically no similarity between Randolph Patterson and Jeffery Wren he used the identical adjectives to describe the latter

which he had, a moment before, applied to the former. When he was through, Zoe said: "Well, there may be a lot of truth in what you say, but you're wanted down at headquarters. Jeff, that revolver you turned in was registtered with the Los Angeles police in the name of May Atz, so they sort of figure this guy behind the bush is Peter Atz. They were a man-and-wife team in the badger racket. One of the suckers got rough with May Atz, and she plugged him. He lived to squawk—"

"Oh, my!" Wren was shocked. "Such people!"

"Yes," she said, looking grim. "And they're not all crooks, either. Some of those kind of people are on the police force, so help me! That damned Tom Hogan has stolen our thunder."

"What? What's that?" Wren was worried.

"The nose drops. That ass of a toxicologist double-crossed us. 'For your protection, Mrs. Osbourn,' he says, as though little Zoe couldn't protect herself any day in the week! The stuff contained sulfathiazole and about twenty percent potassium cyanide. So what does he do? He turns the bottle over to Hogan who rushes out to my place. I had to tell him, Jeff. It was my job if I didn't. So Hogan trots to Mrs. Patterson."

Wren said: "Oh! My!"

"And Hogan has rigged a trap to catch the killer red-handed."

"Hogan has. Quite!" Wren's voice was heavy with sarcasm. His worry had changed to genuine alarm. He turned to the bearded man. "You've become excess weight. Sorry and all that. But—" He stepped around the desk, swept up a heavy glass paperweight as he did so. He applied the weight to a point at the back of the man's head just below the hat brim. The Beard went limp on his feet, collapsed to the floor, and lay still.

"Self-defense," Zoe said. "I'll swear it was self-defense if he dies, Jeffy!"

"Oh, tut! The occipital is the hardest bone in the body." He was down on his knees beside The Beard. He had taken a pair of handcuffs from the lower drawer of the desk. They were bracelets he had used in an escape trick, but he didn't think The Beard knew any escape tricks. He locked one of the man's ankles to a convenient steam pipe and stood up.

"Now," he said. "Now. This trap Hogan has dreamed up. When's it to be sprung?"

"For all I know it's already sprung. Tonight some time."

Wren picked up his hat. "Let's go. We've got to stop this slaughter. It's precisely what I've tried to avoid. And Hogan—" He had no appropriate word for Hogan which would have sounded well in mixed company. He went bounding out of the office and across the magic shop with Zoe trailing him.

She said: "There's just a lot of this I don't get, master-wit. How did you figure out about the vacuum cleaner?"

"A business card on Lemmy's door. Suggested he had inquired about some electrical appliance. He probably tried to borrow a vacuum cleaner from that shop. They were out of stock, so he conducted his room-sealing experiment at his step-daughter's house. Elfie or F. Harry came in before Lammy could clean up his mess entirely, so Lemmy had to get out, leaving the room sealed as Elfie found it . . . Latch that door, Mrs. O."

He hurried down the steps and through the novelty store to the street. "Where's your car?"

She said: "Between Illinois and Capitol. Wouldn't it just be!" She fell into step beside him, her hard high heels ringing on the sidewalk. "I suppose Mrs. Scudder saw the killer sealing the door of the room with the vacuum cleaner."

"Quite possible," he said. "She witnessed some part of the performance, certainly, and was able to give some part of her information to Lemmy before she died. Lemmy was a while putting the pieces together . . . Can't you go a bit faster, Mrs. O?"

"Not in my Sunday girdle, I can't," she panted. "Look here, Jeff, I can see a reason for killing Lemmy, but damned if there's a motive for killing old Larue. If his income depended on annuities, what good was he dead?"

"Oh. No good at all. But he was quiet. Extremely quiet. Remember the situation at the Patterson house? There was old Larue, there was the guest, this Atz-Arbuthnott we've just bagged. Then there was Mrs. Atz."

"Mrs. who?" Zoe trumpeted to the amazement of some passers-by.

"Mrs. Atz," he said. "May-Marabelle, wife of Peter-Percy. Otherwise known as Mrs. Patterson. She's no such thing, of course. She can't have two husbands. Not simultaneously. You've the motive for the Larue kill right there, undoubtedly. With Patterson away at his lab all day, there must have been some indiscretion between the other two corners of the triangle. Larue got wind of it and heartily disapproved. May-Marabelle faced a black future. A rap for bigamy added to whatever penalty she was hiding from might stretch out for a long, long time. So she killed Larue."

She said: "Jeff, you don't *know* she killed Larue." Zoe clutched his arm as they entered the busy intersection of Illinois and Ohio Streets."

"Contrarywise, Mrs. O," he said, smiling. "Because of the lady's guilty conscience. She's bothered with pigeons."

"Ha! Dangle me from a rope and call me a murderer!" Zoe bellowed. "So am *I* bothered with pigeons."

He chuckled. "Quite. But you make no bones about it. What was Mrs. Patterson doing up on the roof of the apartment with a gun? Obviously, she intended to try and scare away the pigeons that roost on the roof. But she didn't admit it to Patterson. She gave him the wholly unconvincing story that she intended to kill herself. Why did she try to buy jointed snakes in my novelty store? Pigeons again.

"That's the latest wrinkle for eliminating the birds. Festoon a building with toy snakes and the pigeons will stay away. But when I mentioned the toy snakes to her, she denied any interest in them. You see? There are pigeons in the eaves of the old house where Larue was killed. She associates their cooing with the crime of murder. In her mind the pigeons seem to repeat over and over again, 'Looey Larue—Looey Larue.' "

ZOE stopped beside her black coupe and unlocked the door. "She must be off her trolley for sure, Jeff."

"Oh, quite off. That's what makes her so deadly." He climbed into the car after the police woman. "But we've more against the lady than that. Much more. Consider Lemmy Scudder's shoes. Mrs. Patterson wore them last night when she delivered Lemmy's body to Lemmy's house. They were small shoes—too small for most men. Yet a woman could get into them even if the tongue of one shoe was forced down into the toe. Consider the poison-pen notes planted at Lemmy's place. We know they were planted because the lines of the letters were smooth whereas the top of the washstand, on which they were supposed to have been written, was very rough. Remember the spelling error in the word 'deceive'? Mrs. Patterson made the identical error in the word 'receive'."

"I get it," Zoe said as she sprinted the car away from the curb. "She sent the poison-pen letter to herself to provide a phony motive for Patterson to kill Lemmy. And I suppose the muddy heel impression in Lemmy's kitchen is also a plant. Hogan is making a lot of that. It seems one of his boys found a pair of Patterson's shoes in the trash back of the apartment building and the heel of one matches the impression."

"Exactly," Wren said. "Exactly what Hogan is intended to think. Yet the heel impression might have been prepared beforehand, using the earth from the cactus garden in the Patterson living room. Comparative analysis should be revealing on that point."

"Lordy, Jeff!" Zoe was awed by the malignant cleverness of Mrs. Patterson. "The other two killings aren't anything to what she's getting away with now. Or has already got away with. This trap Hogan thinks he's prepared for Patterson! He's given the lady a gun, fully loaded. She's to use it if she has to *save* herself from Patterson. It's all rigged so that she'll ask Patterson to put some drops in her nose. Then, at the critical moment, Hogan and his boys are supposed to break in. She'll shoot Patterson, you know damned well she will, with half the Homicide Squad present to witness it was self-defense!"

"Precisely," he agreed. "And as Patterson bends over her to give her the drops, she will plant the missing page one from her manuscript in his pocket. She'll shoot to kill. She'll be rid of Patterson. She'll be sole heir to Patterson's newly acquired wealth. She'll be free to toddle off somewhere and enjoy life with Atz-Arbuthnott."

Zoe gripped the wheel. Her jaws were set. "You're sure of this, Jeffery? If we *are* in time and if we barge in there, Hogan will raise all kinds of hell. You can't prove she poisoned her own nose drops or something like that?"

"No," he admitted reluctantly. "Unfortunately. She's too clever. Of course, what she did was to put cyanide into the sulfathiazole Patterson kept at the laboratory to prepare her nose drops with. And she had opportunity to adulterate the drug the day Patterson sent her to the wholesale chemists. But that's not proof. The only thing we can prove is that she killed Lemmy Scudder. Her own testimony proves that. You and I know that Lemmy was killed shortly before ten-fifteen—the time when she says Lemmy was in the Patterson apartment. She also testified that Patterson was asleep at the time. He was, of course. She must have drugged him. She was so eager *not* to give Patterson an alibi for the time between a quarter of eleven and a quarter after, that she actually gave him one for the time of the murder."

Zoe brought the car over to the curb and set the brake. Her sigh was gusty. "Well, Jeffy, here goes nothing." And she heaved herself out from under the wheel. Wren got out, caught up with her in the middle of Meridian Street. They entered the apartment foyer together, climbed the three flights of stairs.

There were plainclothesmen outside the Paterson door and by their tense attitudes it was evident that something was about to happen. One of them raised a finger to his lips as Zoe Osbourn approached.

She said: "Where's Tom Hogan?"

One of the men said: "In the dumb-waiter."

Wren chuckled. "Waiting dumbly. No doubt." And then he noticed that one of the detectives had a key between the thumb and finger of his right hand. Wren made an incredibly fast move, snatched the key, and inserted it in the lock. Zoe had a grip on the arm

of the erstwhile holder of the key as the door swung open. They all four piled into the room, the two detectives looking sheepish, Zoe popeyed with anxiety, Wren smiling and assured. Marabelle was reclining on the studio couch, having a convenient attack of sinus trouble. Patterson had stopped half way across the room and he had the bottle of nose drops in his left hand.

Wren said: "Congratulations. You're still alive."

Patterson said: "What's this all about?"

Nobody answered. There was a noise in the rear of the apartment which could only be Thomas Hogan extricating himself from a dumb-waiter. He came boiling into the room with his gun out, and when he saw how things were the color mounted in his face, and he said something that was unbecoming to a police officer and a gentleman.

"And," he added, advancing toward Wren, "I'm damn well fed up with you!"

Whatever fate Hogan had in store for Mr. Wren the latter somehow managed to duck. He went bounding across the room toward the studio couch. Marabelle's move was fast, but not fast enough. He had seen her cram something into her mouth and he made no apology for his method of retrieving it. His left hand pinned her right arm to the couch before she could draw the gun that Hogan had given her from under the pillow. The fingers of his right hand went into her mouth and he was twice bitten before he produced the wad of paper. Pulling the wad from her mouth uncorked a stream of invective the like of which he had never heard from the tongue of a woman. He was not, however, greatly perturbed. He glanced at Hogan, and in spite of himself the man from Homicide looked interested. Wren unrolled the paper, examined it briefly.

"Well!" he said. "My! Page one from your manuscript, Mrs. Patterson. What an incredible place to find it!"

In his triumph he had forgot about her gun. She brought it out, and her first shot went through Wren's hat. Her second went into the ceiling only because Hogan was quick and had got her gun arm up. Hogan twisted the police revolver out of her hand and passed it to one of his men. Patterson came stumbling over to the couch, but he didn't seem to have any words. Marabelle had words, some of them unprintable, none of them convincing.

Her amber eyes flashed at Wren. "He deliberately put that paper into my mouth. He had it palmed. He's a magician. He's trying to frame me. He knows as well as you do, Sergeant, that Randolph Patterson intended to kill me with cyanide in my nose medicine. He was there—"

Hogan said: "Aw-aw." He looked at Wren. Then he sat down on the edge of a chair and stared at Marabelle. "Mrs. Patterson, how did you know there was cyanide in those nose drops?"

Marabelle's mouth fell open. She had beautiful teeth. "Why—why *you* told me, Sergeant."

Hogan was shaking his head. "Nope. I said your nose drops were poison. I didn't specify anything."

Zoe Osbourn nudged Wren. "Feed him crow, Jeffy!"

Hogan looked up at Wren, a lopsided grin on his face. He said: "I guess maybe that's trapping her, eh, Mr. Wren?"

FEMALE OF THE SPECIE

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

A banker really shouldn't make mistakes—his accounts have got to balance. But when a bank robber fouls up, he's liable to find his account suddenly closed, once and for all.

The kid crashed through the glass.

HUMBER worked on the kid for three hours while I just sat on the bed in the cheap furnished room for local color. Humber is a fortyish, brush-cut squarehead with a perpetual expression of delighted amusement. I have promised myself that some day I will catch him in a dark corner and do a lot of scientific work on those jolly features. If you turn your fist at the moment of impact, good hard skin will split like a rotten melon. He had the kid, Taylor Odell, sitting and sweating in a straight chair facing the one window, while he strutted, chuckling, up and down in front of him, no amusement in his cold eyes.

The Odell kid is average height, lean and sallow, with a chin about three sizes too small for him. He slumps on the chair, sweat running down into his collar, though the room is none too warm. Humber has cuffed him around, making sure to hit where it won't show. I am getting weary unto death of the

whole thing. Every time I have to work with Humber it is the same. He likes to think of himself as cold and hard, doing unpleasant work because he has to. But there is a look in his eyes when he's thinking of the best spot to lay his heavy fist . . .

Humber stopped in front of the kid and said with heavy sarcasm: "Now, son. You're asking the two of us to believe that you didn't know a damn thing about this woman. You just trotted over to the bank for her because she wasn't feeling well. You didn't think there was anything fishy about what she wanted you to do. Is that right?"

"Yes sir. I didn't think about it."

"Think a little harder, son." He leaned forward and swung the heel of his hand against Odell's head above the ear. The kid nearly fell out of the chair. He held his head with both hands and moaned softly. "Where is she now, son?" he asked, the expression of great cheer still on his round face.

"You got no right to punch me around," the kid said, his words muffled by his hands.

"That's right, son. We can't do it to you," Humber said, and swung hard enough to knock the kid out of the chair. He grabbed the front of Odell's clothes and dropped him back into the chair. The kid's eyes looked glazed.

I sighed loudly and Humber looked over at me. "What's the matter with you, Marini?" he asked.

"You've busted him, Humber. He don't know a thing. I'm getting sick of your routine. Let's take him down and then look for the babe."

He stood and smiled at me with his mouth. He was on the edge. The kid's stubborn resistance had made him uncertain. Finally he shrugged and said: "O.K., John. He's in it too, though. We'll let him sit in the tank for a couple dozen weeks and think about it."

The kid's head jerked up and he looked at Humber with frightened eyes. Humber was standing by the side of the chair, facing me. I yelled as the kid dove for the window. Humber tried to grab at him and missed. The kid crashed through the glass and there was a split second of silence before we heard him thud onto the shed roof underneath the window. I got to the broken window as Humber's gun snapped into his hand. The kid was rolling down the sloping roof of the shed. Humber tried a shot, but I could see that he was a second too late. The kid had already dropped into the alley.

We pounded down the stairs, out the front door and around into the alley. I expected to see the kid stretched out cold. It was a good drop to the shed roof, and he hadn't hit on his feet. The alley was empty. We both ran down to where it made a right angle turn. He was gone. There were four or five fences he could have gone over, or he could have run right on out into the crowds of pedestrians on the other street.

We stood breathing heavily. Then Humber smiled at me and said: "You were watching him, Marini. You let him get away."

I tried to stare him down, but his fat smile didn't fade. "O.K., Humber," I agreed, "I let him get away. And six months ago I saw you stuff that orphan gun into Chorniwitz' hand after you shot him twice in the gut and once in the head. Humber, the hero."

He turned away and looked back down the alley for a long minute. Then he said: "Maybe I was a little fast on that, John. It was my fault as much as yours."

I agreed and we piled into the sedan and headed back for headquarters. I radioed in the alarm as soon as we got under way. They had the black looks ready for us when we showed up. Lieutenant Dorsey didn't say a word, but his fingers were white, he was holding onto a pencil so hard. He gave me the job of buttoning up the bus and railroad stations. I got a description onto the wires as fast as I could.

Nothing worked. Odell had dropped right off the face of the earth. I followed up with everybody that had known him. It wasn't a long list. He was an orphan kid who hadn't been out of the Navy very long. He had been clerking in Gara's Drug for about six weeks. He had claimed that was where he had met the girl, Rosemary Dunn she had called herself. He had never lived in our town until he got out of the Navy. He had less friends and acquaintances than anybody I ever tried to trace before. My own hunch was that he had shifted over to another part of town and was staying in a room, or he had hitchhiked on out of town.

I'VE been in this business long enough to know that the breaks are far and few between. I never expect any, and I'm seldom surprised by good fortune.

It was three days after Odell had rolled down the roof. I was sitting out in back with a couple of the boys that were due to go on duty at four P.M. Wilson came in and said there was a call for me on the line in the next room. I roamed slowly in and picked up the receiver and made noises like a man answering a phone.

I recognized the high nervous voice of Odell as he said: "Am I talking to Detective Marini?"

I know there was no point in trying to trace. With our dial phones and sleepy phone company, we can generally get a hot report in a half hour. I told him he was right.

"Look," he said, "I had to get out that way. I'm no crook. I had to find her. I know where

she is. She's still in town. She's living with a guy out on . . ." Suddenly he stopped talking. Then I heard him scream: "No! Don't . . ." He was interrupted by the whamming noise a shot makes over a telephone line.

I shouted into the receiver. No answer. I hung on and waited. I shouted again. Finally a quavery male voice came on and said: "Get off the line. I gotta call the cops. Somebody just killed a guy in here."

He wouldn't believe that I was on the force until I threatened to have him jailed on suspicion of knocking off Odell. Then he talked. Two minutes later I was in a sedan with some of the Homicide boys, running through the red lights on our way out to a small-time candy and cigar store on Crestland Avenue.

When we screamed up in front, goops were cluttering up the sidewalk, gawking in through the dirty plate glass. One of the boys started to clean them out, and I stuck to Quill while he asked questions of Santosi, the owner of the store.

I knew in three minutes that we didn't have a thing. The phone was just inside the door, a pay job without the booth. Odell had placed the call to me. Santosi didn't remember anyone hanging around outside. Crestland is a pretty quiet street. Santosi depends on the big Crestland High School two blocks away for most of his business. The kids were all in classes when the shooting occurred.

Santosi had ducked back out into his storeroom to get some lighter fluid to restock his shelf. While he was hunting for the cans of fluid, he heard a crash in the store. He thought it sounded as though a case had fallen over. He rushed out. The door was still closed. Odell was on the floor. He looked as though a .38 or a .45 slug had caught him right on the bridge of the nose. He wasn't pretty. Odell's eyes had been close enough together so that the slug made a mess out of nose and eyes both.

Santosi had had enough sense to run out into the street and look for somebody running away. He hadn't seen a soul. He hadn't seen anybody on the street. There is a public park across from his store, so the chance of anybody looking out a window and seeing it all is very remote for my money.

Flash bulbs are popping as I walk off. The meat wagon draws up. Humber comes charging out of another sedan, looking as gay and happy as a duffer after a hole in one.

He grabbed my arm and said: "Hey, wait up John. So he was an accomplice and the babe knocked him off?"

I shoved his arm off me and said: "I can't tell you nothing, Humber. You got it all figured out." I walked on down the street before he had a chance to ask me anything else.

After about two blocks, I crossed over and sat on a bench in the park. I couldn't seem to think logically. The kid hadn't given me enough over the phone. I decided that I had better do a little talking to a banker. I walked back and hitched a ride into town in the sedan that had brought Humber.

I WALKED into the First Regional Bank and Trust and bullied my way into a quiet talk with a slim nervous banking guy who kept looking at his watch as though I was shooting big holes in his schedule. We hadn't told the other banks about the racket this babe had pulled. She had worked it, with Odell's help, on the Corn Mutual.

As I told him how it was worked, he got more interested, and looked at his watch less often. I summed it all up for him. "So you see how it worked. The babe stands near the counter until she sees somebody prosperous putting dough in a joint account for a man and a woman. She remembers the names. She watches which teller the depositor goes to. She takes a few bucks and goes to another teller and opens a separate account, a cut-rate checking account under the name of the woman she read off the deposit slip. She makes out a new signature card."

He interrupts and says: "But wouldn't somebody get suspicious when they saw the two cards together? Two different types of signatures?"

"Most banks have set up a cut-rate checking account system, where no minimum balance is required, as a separate department. The cards are not filed together. Besides, she figures to swing the whole thing in two days." He thinks a little bit, nods agreement, and I continue. "Then she gets hold of a checkbook for the normal type account and looks for a sucker. She goes to Gara's Drug Store, where she has previously sweetened up one of the clerks. She soft talks him until he figures he's rounding first and heading for second. She tells him she is leaving her husband—that they have a joint checking account. She asks him to do a great favor. He agrees."

He taps his chin with a pencil and says: "I follow you so far."

"Then he goes to a teller in the bank. He presents the signed check and says that Mrs. Blank wants her balance in the joint account drawn out and stuck in the new cut-rate account she has just opened. He gives the teller a couple of deposit slips made out in blank for the cut-rate account. The teller never even bothers to check the signature. Why should he? Nobody's taking any cash out. He fills out the check for the balance in the joint account, and completes the deposit slips, giving the duplicate to the chump."

Light begins to dawn on the banking guy's face. He says: "Hmmm! So then she takes

the deposit slip and goes back to the man with whom she opened the thrift type checking account. She tells him that she wants to close out the new account. He checks the balance, which includes the new transfer of funds. He remembers her. She draws it all out. Why should the teller suspect anything?"

"There you have it," I tell him. "Neat and clean. It all happens so fast that it doesn't gum up the joint account."

"What if the first teller gets suspicious and checks the signature?"

"The goop has been primed to say that her most recent signature card was made out for the thrift account. The odds are that the people behind the scenes will check it against the new signature card. It will match."

"How did you get hold of the clerk she used to do the errand for her?"

"Well, he was stupid. She had just signed a blank check, and instead of filling it out for cash, in which case he might have had a better story, he filled it out as payable to himself, and then indorsed it after the first teller had foud out about the outstanding balance."

At first he looked intrigued as he went over it all in his mind and found out how foolproof it was. Then he began to look alarmed. The little fear bugs crawled up into his eyes and he grabbed me by the arm and said: "What's to stop her from doing it again?"

I leaned back in my chair and looked out across the busy marble and bronze floor of the bank, at the lines of people waiting in front of the dozen tellers' cages. I shrugged. When I looked back at him I noticed that he had turned a little pale. I hope I never get as serious about my work as he was about his.

I FOUND Gara puttering around in the back end of his drug store. He is a solemn old guy with a hearing aid, tobacco stains on his white brush mustache and a passion for scrubbing the drug store.

He hadn't heard about Odell. When I told him he stood very still for a few seconds, his forehead wrinkled. Then he said: "Too bad. He was a good worker. A good boy."

"I know we've asked you this before, Mr. Gara, but I want to ask again. Can't you remember anything about any woman that sat at the soda counter and talked to Odell? We need a lead on her. Then we can find out who shot Odell. Maybe she did."

He shook his head slowly. "I'd like to be able to tell you something. I sure would. But there's so many women come in here. What did Odell say about her?"

"He wasn't any help, Gara. He said she had gray eyes, large ones with flecks of brown close to the pupils. He said she was medium

height with soft brown hair and dressed quietly. He figured she was about five years older than he was."

Again he shook his head, and I could see he was getting anxious to get rid of me. So I said: "No help, hey? Well, I'll see you again. Take it easy." I walked on out.

Whenever I get very wound up with a case I like to talk it over with my wife. Bess is the most stupid woman in North America. She's so stupid that she can't see smoke screens. She had a dumb animal directness about her that sees right through to the fundamentals of a problem. She can't think worth a damn, but I have found that after I listen to her make comments, I get new thoughts myself. So I went home and sat in the kitchen with a beer while Bess ironed curtains.

"How much money did this woman make when she cheated the bank?" she asked me, slowly pushing the iron back and forth.

"She had bad luck. She picked the wrong joint account. There was only two hundred and seventy bucks in it."

"Then she could still be in town, because she can't afford to get far enough away or travel the way she wants to."

"She'd be smart to go away on the two-seventy."

"Maybe there's someone she doesn't want to leave," she said, pushing her shining black hair up away from her forehead and looking at me with that expression that seems to make my neck fit my collar a little tighter. Before I could answer, she said: "And if she thinks she got away with it, she'll probably try it again. Right here."

Bess wasn't any help to me. I groaned and finished the beer and went on down to talk to the lieutenant. He had gotten some ideas. The added attraction of a murder had increased his allotment to three or four men to the case. He was still mad at Humber and me. He stuck me in the First Regional Bank and Trust, Humber in the First Mortgage and Loan Bank, and a kid with the sorry name of Ledwitz in the Liberty Savings.

It was one of those jobs the lieutenant loves to hand out when you get on his big black list. Ledwitz was eightballed for having crunched the fender on one of the sedans. All we had to do was pick up every medium height brown-haired dish of twenty-seven or eight who tried to open up a cutrate checking account. Simple. It turned out that each of us had only one banking character to watch, only one place in the bank, one teller, where such an account could be opened.

Whenever we had a possible applicant for the position of the woman who had sidled up to Odell, we would politely but definitely find

out all about her. I had at least two angry women on my hands each day that I hung around the bank. Humber and Ledwitz had the same average. But they all checked up as decent honorable citizens of our fair community. It was disheartening and boring.

After eight days of holding up one wall of the bank, I was willing to welcome any diversion. I was even glad to see Humber when he came plodding across the marble floor toward me. I was twice pleased when I realized that he might be telling me to go on back to headquarters, they'd found the woman.

Humber walked up, smiling, cleared his throat and said: "Hey, John, I figure the lieutenant's wrong about this thing. I don't like this hanging around banks. We ought to go through that neighborhood near the candy store."

"What did you do," I asked, "just decide to take off? Weren't you relieved? Isn't there anybody over at the First Mortgage and Loan?"

"Nuts, Marini. If they didn't try it during the last eight days, they won't pick a time while I'm not there for a couple of minutes."

"The lieutenant finds out and he tells the deputy and they tie a can on you the size of a Chrysler."

"That scares me to death," he says, looking jolly, but his eyes are cold and gray.

He spends about fifteen minutes trying to talk me into going along with him while he knocks around near Santosi's store. I just keep shaking my head and watching the people near the teller who opens thrift accounts. I am watching for him to hand out the new green checkbook which indicates that the person he hands it to has just opened an account.

Nothing more happened that day, or the next. When the bank closed at four on the following day, I headed for headquarters. I walked in and Sergeant Schultz on the traffic desk said: "The Great Humber has muffed the ball again. He's in with Deputy Chief Rigger. Rigger wants you to go on in."

I opened the door to Rigger's office. Humber sat on the chair on the other side of red-faced Rigger, and for once the smile was gone.

Rigger looked up and said: "Oh, Marini. Stick around. This dumb slob that calls itself a detective says it went over and talked to you for a while yesterday. While it was gone out of the bank, a blond woman opened a cut-rate checking account in the bank where he was supposed to be. This morning a garage mechanic named Heindle came down to the bank and worked the same old transfer of funds from a joint account to the thrift account that she had just opened. This time she called herself Marion Mulvaney. She

cleaned eleven hundred bucks just before lunch. She's gone. This smiling slob queered it for the department."

I couldn't say anything. I let my mouth hang open like that of a tired goldfish. It wasn't what I would call a blow. Humber looked so odd without the beefy smile that I had to keep looking at him.

"What's more," he continued, "the handwriting checks with the other check she cashed in the name of Rosemary Dunn. She just dyed her hair and took us again. Get the hell out of here, both of you!"

Humber and I nearly got stuck in the door trying to get out into the hall at the same second. Humber's grin came back and he made a burlesque gesture of mopping his forehead.

"I can see I'm the popular kid around here," he sighed.

I was too mad to answer him. I didn't like the way he was queering me, too. People were linking our names together. Humber and Marini, the tanglefoot twins.

I found out that the mechanic was still being questioned. I snuck in on the question bee. He was a good-looking kid, with more jaw than Odell had. Blond, with big hands with grease under the nails. He was very upset that the brand new light of his life had turned out to be a crook. But he couldn't tell us where she lived. He couldn't tell us any more than Odell did, except that her hair was blond instead of brown. After the official questions were over, I got permission to take him aside.

I made him go through all the kind words they had exchanged. It made him blush. "She said that she . . . uh . . . liked guys with broad shoulders like mine. And she looked at me with her eyes kind of warm. Funny thing, though . . ." He looked off into space.

"What was funny, Heindle?"

"Whenever I smiled at her, she made kind of a funny face. I asked her about it and she said she didn't like men to smile too much."

THAT was all I could get out of him. I tried to find Humber, but he was off duty. I chiseled a ride out to his house. I figured that the only way I could get off the black list around headquarters was to work out some answers with Humber, so that we could solve the case.

Humber lived in a shoebox cottage near the corner of Noger and Pratt. A tire swing on a twisted rope swayed in the breeze. The tree it hung from looked a bit tired. Somebody had built a bonfire too near it and crisped the leaves on one side. A busted shovel leaned against the front porch.

I walked up onto the porch. There were triangular tears in the screen door. Inside, I could hear the sound of a smack and some kids

yelling at each other. I leaned on the bell.

Mrs. Humber came to the door. Maybe once upon a time before she started having seven or eight little Humbers, she might have been good-looking. I don't know. The years had turned her into a tired spaniel of a woman with a thin mouth.

She recognized me. She held the door open and said: "Come on in and sit, if you can stand the noise. Don'll be back in a coupla minutes. Went to pick up my sister."

I sat and read the evening paper. She kept the kids out of the front room. I could hear her slapping the pots and pans around out in the kitchen. The papers had taken the force for a ride on the bank chisel. We deserved it. Rather, Humber did. He could have squared up the whole thing by just sticking around. I wanted to tell him how much it was going to mean to the both of us to clean up the mess.

He showed up in ten minutes or so. I looked through the faded curtains and saw him stop out in front in his old coupe. He walked up the porch steps with a nice-looking woman who vaguely resembled her married drudge of a sister. I stood up when they walked in.

He looked surprised. His beefy grin faded a little when I told him that I wanted to straighten him out about what we had to do.

After the introduction, I waited for the girl to go on out and help her sister with the supper. Instead she plunked herself in a chair and buried her head in the funny papers.

I was trying to snap Humber out of his attitude when a little kid with a round bumpy head, a boy about four, came wandering in. He didn't go near his father. He ambled over to the girl and climbed into the chair with her.

I had finished with what I had to say. The room was quiet while it was sinking in. In the middle of the quiet, the little kid said to the girl: "Gee, Auntie Hazel, you look pretty with your hair painted."

A dozen things, unbelievable things, clicked

into place. The girl slowly lowered the paper and her eyes were wide and frightened as she looked at Humber. He was still smiling, but it was like a smile that had been carved out of soft wood.

His hand jumped into his coat and flashed back out with a .38 positive. My face must have shown what I had been thinking. The setting sun flamed on her blond hair. The gun pointed at my middle. The little kid backed toward the door to the dining room, half his hand in his mouth.

I put my hands very slowly and deliberately on the arms of the chair. Just as slowly, I pulled myself to my feet.

I stood and said: "I'm walking over and taking the gun, Humber. You can burn me down at any time."

I watched his cold eyes and took the first step. My gut was knotted into a cold lump. I could imagine the tearing impact of the slug. I took another step. The smile had been drawn on his face with a child's crayon. I took another step, and another. I reached my hand out and took hold of the barrel. I lifted the gun out of his limp hand. I stuffed it into my jacket pocket. The girl screamed. I faced her and the scream died in her throat. I walked to the phone. That's the way it was.

She had come to visit her sister after losing her job, and she and Humber had fallen in love. They wanted to go away together. They needed money. She figured out the bank angle—she had worked in a bank for a time. The first haul wasn't big enough, she had to do it again. He figured that he could steer the force away from her. When Odell got away and found her, Humber had killed him, scurried back to the station and returned to the scene of the crime as a detective. If Odell had told where he had seen the woman, the whole thing would have blown up in their faces.

Humber left his post so she could swing the second deal without suspicion landing on him. She made a good haul and they were all set to leave town. Humber wanted to resign first, so that he wouldn't be traced.

When they tried to pin the killing on her, he confessed. It was tough on his wife and kids, but no tougher than when he had been living with them and slapping them around for practice.

And it backfired on the two of them just because I had wanted to get out of the jam Humber got me into, and because a little kid liked his auntie well enough with her hair painted so that he had to say something.

Maybe if he'd known the smile had been getting on her nerves, he'd have let her burn. He still wore the smile when they sentenced him.

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

May the following account be of sufficient warning to the smaller merchants.

A well dressed young man, with a discharge button in his lapel, strolled into one of our leading small haberdashery stores and summoned a clerk. After smilingly explaining that he was just out of the service, he proceeded to select over a hundred dollars' worth of wearing apparel, some of it extremely hard to get, such as shirts, shorts, silk ties, etc. Giving his name and address (a hotel in a not-so-nice neighborhood), he requested that the merchandise be delivered C.O.D. The sale was so large that the manager himself was unusually interested and took it upon himself to meet the appointment.

When he got to the hotel, he went upstairs, paused outside the hotel door, hearing water running inside, and proceeded to knock rather loudly. After a few moments, the door was opened by the customer, who invited the messenger inside.

The "customer," who was shirtless, started ripping open the package, shouting into the lighted bathroom from which the noise of running water was heard: "Oh, honey! Come out here and pay the man for these clothes, please. I am late already." With this, he smiled and rapidly walked into the next room, closing the door.

After sitting still for almost thirty minutes, the messenger suddenly realized what had happened, streaked to the bathroom door, noting the empty shower stall with the water still running, ran across the room to the door through which the "customer" had disappeared, opened it, and viewed another open door, into the outside hall.

It makes me very happy to say that due to an excellent piece of police work, the culprit was caught quickly, but some con men may be smart enough not to get trapped, especially after gypping *you*.

F. B. R.
Memphis, Tenn.

Ready for the Rackets

HERE'S a story with that same old moral—know your merchandise or know your merchant.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

I always was a sucker for bargains, so when the man came around with a truckload of "loam," and that was just what my garden seemed to need, I listened to him.

He had a truckload. Times were bad. People didn't have the money they used to have. Would I give him a drink of water? He was fagged out. Hadn't sold much all day and would have to cart the stuff home again and make another try tomorrow. In the face of it, he was prepared to give me a bargain, the buy of a lifetime. And he could see, he said, that my garden soil was starving. Another year and nothing would grow in it, not even weeds. Rather than haul the stuff back home, he'd give me the whole truckload for five dollars and call it a day. I bought the truckload.

It did everything but kill my garden outright. The expert I called in to see what was wrong with the garden discovered that the "loam" was nothing but waste matter discarded by certain Jersey factories and taken from meadows being filled in with it.

THE ruptured duck is an honorable symbol, but sometimes it's found in dishonorable company. Here is a story of a swindler who took advantage of the good-will it creates.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

One of the worst misrepresentations of the ruptured duck brought me a fifty-dollar loss.

The alleged war veteran told me he had just returned from Europe and that he had some special European products he had bought very cheap and would sell for practically nothing. He then showed me some perfume with a Paris label, some Swiss watches, German cameras and some other items. I gave him fifty dollars, all I had, for the perfume, a watch and one of the cameras. It turned out that the perfume was nothing but cheap toilet water, the watch was appraised at $5 and the camera had a phony glass lens.

The only thing that was real was the labels. They all had big names on them. The watch had a "Made in Switzerland" engraving and the camera had a German stamp. That was the fish-hook he had used to clinch the sale.

Not only do these phony veterans make suckers out of many Americans, but they make things twice as difficult for legitimate ex-G. I. salesmen.

W. K.

THE END

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