


ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



DEC.

15¢ DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION



**THE LITTLE
CORPSE WHO
WASN'T THERE**
*A CASH WALE
NOVELETTE*
by **PETER PAIGE**
D.L. CHAMPION
H.H. STINSON

Missing Page

TERRY TRAPPED THE ALIEN SMUGGLERS AND THEN . . .

HURRYING TO REACH HER UNCLE'S CAMP ON LAKE HURON BEFORE DARK, BETTY ADAMS STUMBLES UPON MYSTERIOUS DOINGS IN WATKINS COVE



HERE'S YOUR CUT, CORBETT... THREE HUNDRED BUCKS. GUIDE 'EM TO TONY'S SHACK AND YOU'RE THROUGH



OKAY, LOUIE. ANOTHER LOAD TOMORROW NIGHT?

HANDS UP!

YOU CAN SEE WHY I HAD TO COVER YOUR MOUTH . . . ONE PEEP WOULD HAVE SPOILED OUR SHOW



GRACIOUS! AND THE "SIGNALER" IS YOUR MAN!

SENATOR CONGDON'S CAMP, MISS? WHY YOU'RE THREE MILES OUT OF YOUR WAY



COME BACK TO BORDER PATROL HEADQUARTERS AND I'LL DRIVE YOU OVER

DO YOU MIND IF I USE YOUR PHONE? UNCLE HARRY MAY BE WORRIED



GO RIGHT AHEAD. MEANWHILE, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I'LL CLEAN UP



THIS BLADE'S A HONEY...THREE DAYS' WHISKERS GONE LIKE MAGIC!



THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING, TERRY



WHY, UNCLE, DO YOU KNOW MR. CORBETT?

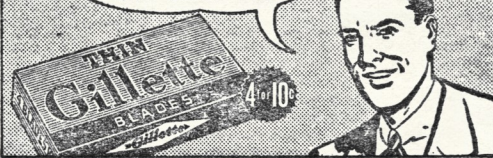


KNOW HIM? WHY MAJOR CORBETT WAS MY BEST INTELLIGENCE OFFICER!

I'D BEEN PLANNING TO VISIT YOU AFTER I CRACKED THIS CASE, COLONEL . . . I MEAN SENATOR



YOU GET SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES IN JIG-TIME WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD, AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY, YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. USE THIN GILLETTES



ALL STORIES
COMPLETE 

15 DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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

Vol. 53 CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER, 1946 No. 1

A SUSPENSE-PACKED FULL-LENGTH MURDER MYSTERY

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

Cover: "Maybe she pulled a gag on Freddie—and maybe he *did* stab her."

From: *The Little Corpse Who Wasn't There.*

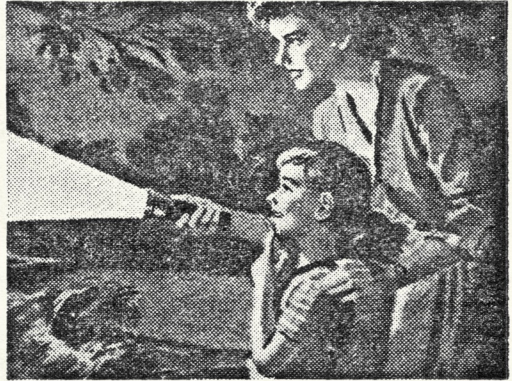
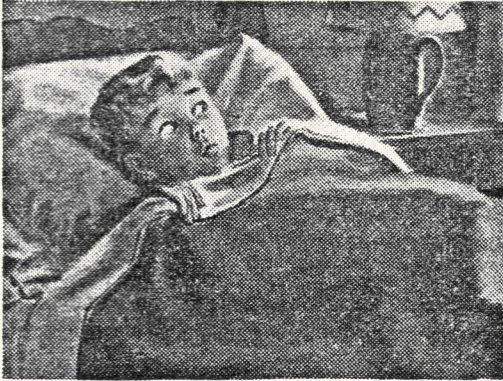
The January issue will be out December 4th

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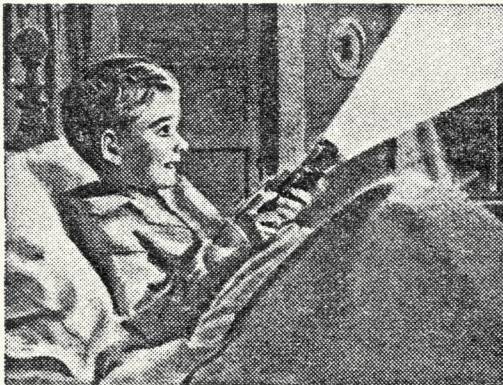
How to help your child fight FEAR OF DARKNESS

... as recommended in the interest of child welfare by Rose G. Anderson, Ph. D.,
Director of the Psychological Service Center of New York



1 Fear of the dark is founded on a dread of the unknown. Many a grown man feels his courage ebb with the daylight. And to a child, whose limited experience makes him even more fearful, the dark can be filled with terrors . . . unfounded fears.

2 Bring back the daylight world he knows, with your "Eveready" flashlight . . . show that the yard, or the basement, is the same familiar place by night as by day . . . that night-time sounds are made by simple things. Let him use your flashlight himself—



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EXTRA LIFE
—AT NO
EXTRA COST**



FOR BEST RESULTS MAY 1947

NO 950

EVEREADY
TRADE-MARK

**EXTRA
LONG LIFE
BATTERY**

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NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY
PRODUCT

3 Encourage him to perform small tasks after dark, when he may use his "Eveready" flashlight, such as putting his toys away or getting something for you from a dark closet. Above all, never frighten him with "Bogeyman"; appeal to his pride. Then he will accept darkness.

FOR ANY flashlight use, rely on "Eveready" batteries. Their reputation for longer life of brighter light has made them the largest-selling flashlight batteries in the world — and *justly!* Ask your dealer for "Eveready" batteries by name; their extra light, extra life cost you *nothing* extra!

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THE JANUARY THRILL DOCKET



MONEY, money, money—everybody wants it. Everybody, that is, but Grady Locke, amateur dick and holder-of-the-bag extraordinary. He came back after three years with the little brown brothers and found himself the unwilling (that's right) possessor of twenty-four thousand lettuce leaves. And he didn't want it! All in all, he spent a week with that moola burning a hole in his pocket . . . a nightmare week that made King Midas' adventures look like a trip through a penny arcade. He had good reason to be worried, too—those ducats were deadly. Everywhere that Grady went, the cops were sure to go—seemed as if the corpses were springing right from the root of all evil. If you want to know how to be unhappy though rich, read WESTMORELAND GRAY'S *Do You Take This Corpse?*



Clarence Darrow Mort whizzes his way through a murder-maze in double-quick time in JULIUS LONG'S thrilling *Murder While You Wait*. It was pretty confusing—the suspects were all so innocent. . . . “You could have knocked me over with a featherbed,” said one. All the rest were equally amazed when they learned that old man Rightmire had keeled over with his brain full of bullets. Who would have thought of killing that rich old man? Or rather, as Mort saw it, who wouldn't?



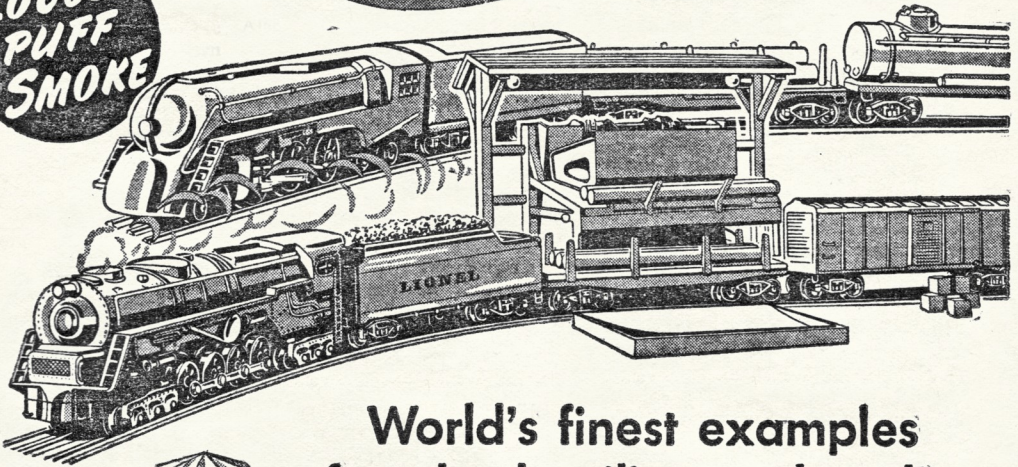
Hold your horses—Doc Pierce is back with a double-deal that would make any gee-gee weep in his oats. Few people ever suspected that that old horse-trader Doc Pierce was an expert on things equine—and the few who did soon found out how wrong their suspicions were. Until they caught wise, though, he had a good run for his money—the trouble was that the money seemed to run faster than he could! Don't miss *The Doctor's Pass* by RICHARD DERMODY.

And many other thrilling features in the new January DIME DETECTIVE, on sale December 4th.



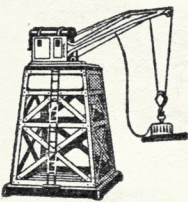
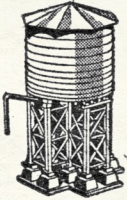
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WITH
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World's finest examples of scale detailing and realism

Brand new operating Water Tower — water lowers and rises in the tank. Remote control operation.



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Please send the full color catalog and Scenery Construction Book — also secret "Pop Persuader". (I enclose 10c for mailing.)

Name

Address

City Zone State

(Please don't forget 10c for mailing charges)

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

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

YOU can be friendly without being a sucker, but it's sometimes hard to draw the line. This victim apparently couldn't draw very well.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

One morning recently a young man came to my door and told me that he lived in an apartment in the same block and that his baby was very sick and he didn't have any money to buy medicine for it, and as they were strangers in town he had no one to turn to for help.

He then showed me his wife's diamond ring and asked if I would lend him ten dollars on it, until pay day. I could see it was a good ring and as he looked so miserable I felt sorry for him and I gave him a ten dollar bill, and took the ring.

About half an hour later I answered the door again and a pretty little woman, very excited, told me she had missed her ring and when she had located her husband he told her how he had got the ten dollars on it. "But to buy drink, not for the baby," she said. She had caught him before he had a chance to spend it and wanted to know if I would take the money back for the ring, which I gladly did.

When I went to the grocery store in the afternoon to cash the bill, to my surprise the storekeeper informed me the bill was counterfeit. They had switched my bill for a phony one, and passed it to me, to avoid detection by the careful storekeepers.

W. C. Stewart
Columbus, Ohio

HERE'S a sure-fire way to lose money—quick as a bunny.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

Yesterday I noticed a familiar farm magazine ad with a new twist: "Raise Rabbits and Make Big Money During the Meat Shortage."

Now, I'll concede that many people make money from raising rabbits. I'll further con-

cede that there's probably an unusual demand for rabbit meat right now, as a change from chicken meat. But I'll still say to anyone interested in rabbit-growing as a profitable side-line or business: BEWARE OF THE RABBIT FARM GYP ARTISTS.

My father recently closed out his rabbitry at a loss of several hundred dollars plus two years of hard part-time work. Here's how he was gypped: He answered many ads for breeding rabbits and finally decided to invest in ten pairs of pedigreed stock at \$40 a pair. Of course that was a high price to pay, but the company signed a beautifully-engraved contract, promising to buy back at \$6 apiece all the young rabbits of a certain age that he sent them. Of course, he had to keep a breeding record and furnish a pedigree with every rabbit they bought at this price.

Dad wanted to go into the business right, so he bought high-priced supplies, hutch fixtures, and foods from this same company. He made half his garage into a rabbitry and produced the first litters. Then when the young rabbits were the right age, he shipped them to the company.

A month passed and he didn't hear from them. He wrote a letter. They replied, pointedly, that he should have asked them first if they could take the stock, as the market for pedigreed breeders was "awfully slow right now." However, they would keep the rabbits until they could sell them, and then pay him.

When his second litter was ready, he wrote for permission to ship. They didn't answer. He wrote again. They finally answered his third letter with a "sorry, but you'll have to wait until the market improves." As for his first shipment, they had been unable to sell those yet, they said. The charges for feed and care already amounted to more than the rabbits could be sold for. Of course, they'd be glad to ship them back to him, collect . . .

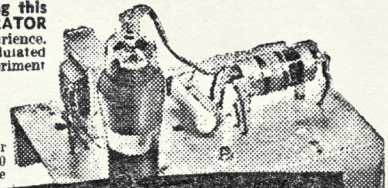
That's the way it went, and after a couple of tries and a talk with a lawyer, Dad never wrote them again. Their dodge tactics were fool-proof because of tricky wording in the contract, the lawyer said. Dad made what he could for two years by selling rabbit meat, pelts, and Easter bunnies. But he never got back most of his original investment.

A. F. Nader,
Williamstown, W. Va.

(Continued on page 96)



Building this A. M. SIGNAL GENERATOR gives you valuable experience. Provides amplitude-modulated signals for test and experiment purpose.



RADIO SERVICING pays good money for full time work. Many others make \$5, \$10 a week **EXTRA** fixing Radios in spare time.

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It's probably easier to get started in Radio now than ever before because the Radio Repair business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even greater opportunities as Television and Electronics become available to the public! Send for free books now!

Find Out What N.R.I. Can Do for You

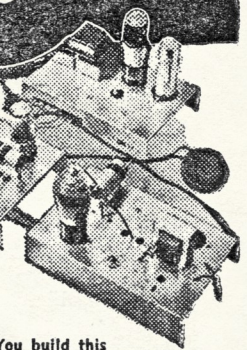
Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my 64-page book. Read the details about my Course. Read letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. See how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just **MAIL COUPON NOW** in an envelope or paste it on a penny postal. **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6NS9, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.**

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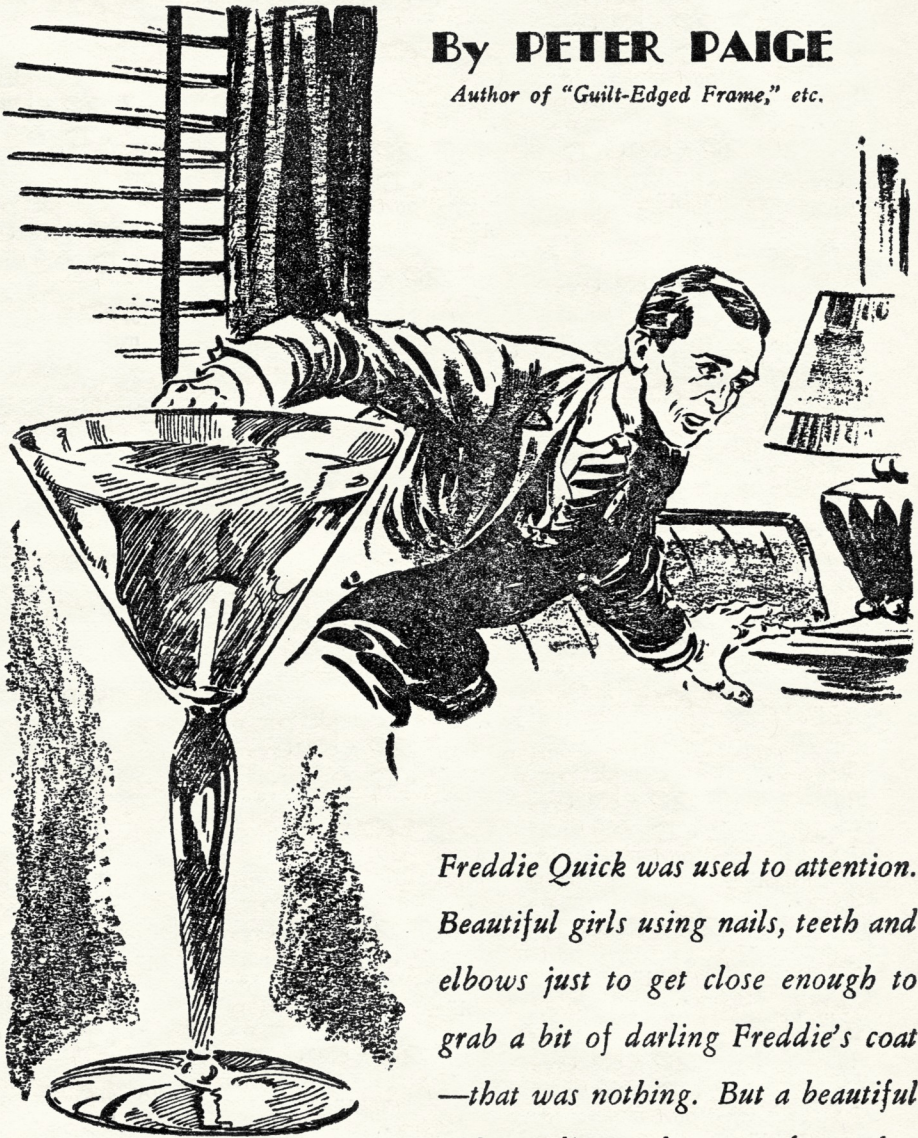
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THE LITTLE CORPSE

By **PETER PAIGE**

Author of "Guilt-Edged Frame," etc.



**A Cash Wale
Novelette**

Freddie Quick was used to attention. Beautiful girls using nails, teeth and elbows just to get close enough to grab a bit of darling Freddie's coat—that was nothing. But a beautiful girl sending telegrams from her year-old grave to avenge her own murder—that was something.

WHO WASN'T THERE

She pitched head-
long to the wine-col-
ored rug.



CHAPTER ONE

Is This Trip Necessary?

THIS is a story about a practical joke and a vanishing dagger and a quick killer and a little corpse who wasn't there. It goes back, as all murder tales must, to the day Cain put the finger on Abel, but we will skip the historical background and pick it

up the afternoon Freddie Quick walked into the office of Abe Gaywin, of Gaywin Productions, Inc. and stated flatly: "Abe, the New York trip's off. Cancel it."

Most people did not address Abe Gaywin like that. Most people, in fact, did not address Abe Gaywin, period. Several obstacles such as studio guards and private secretaries stood between most people and Abe Gaywin. Those who did finally survive the layers of frigid

expressions and wary eyes talked in an entirely different fashion to the ball-shaped czar of the screaming celluloid. Most of them said little more than, "Yes, Mr. Gaywin." Others went so far as to say: "That is a sensational idea, Mr. Gaywin!"

The difference was that most people did not star in flickers that grossed twenty million—million, that is—smackers per. Most people did not titillate the libidos of swooning womankind to the point where they chanted: "Fred-die! Fred-die! Fred-die!"

Abe Gaywin well understood the value of that chant. Therefore he spoke cautiously now, letting each word hesitate before emerging alongside the fat cigar that sagged the right corner of his mouth.

"Freddie, ten thousand dollars a week at the Times Square Gaywin is not to be sneezed at. Every day, for who knows how many weeks, thousands of girls will fight for a place in line so they could brag later how in person they saw Freddie Quick. For a million dollars I could not buy for you that kind of publicity."

"Cancel the trip," Freddie Quick responded firmly. "Never mind why. I'll go to Chicago or New Orleans or Tokio or Moscow or even Texas. If you're so hungry for publicity, Abe, I'll marry a midget. But—" and the idol of swooning millions spat the words through his teeth—"New York is out! That's final!"

Abe Gaywin's cigar jutted upward at a grim angle.

"I love you like a son, Freddie," he soothed, "and I'm telling you it's for the best. Sinatra played the Music Hall last week and they were driving them away with clubs. Believe me, in this business you can be on top one minute and wonder what hit you the next. Besides, a small fortune we have already spent billing you at the Times Square Gaywin. It is too late to change the advertising, Freddie. You will have to go."

The tan of Freddie Quick's face had given way to a shade of dirty snow.

"Abe, you can't do this to me!" he urged hoarsely. "For personal reasons I don't want to go to Manhattan!"

"What reasons?"

"I tell you they're personal, Abe."

"Maybe you don't like New York City?"

"Right now I hate it! I—"

"Stop!" Abe Gaywin shouted, his cigar bobbing up and down from repressed excitement. "Don't say nothing more. I got a idea!" The fat producer followed his cigar to the sound box on his desk and shouted: "Ruth, get me Publicity Get me Steve at Publicity."

"Abe, listen to me—" Freddie Quick pleaded.

"You listen to me, young fellow!" Abe Gaywin shouted, allowing the hand of steel to emerge from the velvet glove. "You just hap-

pen to be the merchandise in some pretty big business. It is too big for your personal likes and dislikes. Right now you're our best selling item. And, just like Mr. Macy don't let a dress on the counter dictate how it should be advertised, I am not allowing you to dictate to Gaywin Productions. Your signature is on a ironclad contract. You want to be blackballed in the industry—don't go to New York. The contract says I can send you to New York. I am sending you to New York. To coin a phrase, *bon voyaging!*"

"But Abe—"

But for Abe Gaywin this interview was ended. His back turned to the pleading star. He shouted into the sound box.

"Steve? Gaywin. I got a angle on Freddie Quick that is positively terrific! Get this: Freddie Quick, who is Mr. Broadway to the whole world, is positively allergic to New York City! You can make it the reason is the women get too close in New York. Remember how they got his underwear even last time?"

"We make him frightened of women. He's shy. He's got a complex. I don't know. Get one of those brain specialists to say it in technical language. We give Freddie a gorilla for a bodyguard to keep the soxers off of him. We send one woman along in the party, a horseface, to be like his chaperone. We—"

And so on.

When this monologue finally parked at the last period Freddie Quick was no longer in the office.

AT THE airport next morning Freddie Quick gaped up at the hairiest, biggest, toughest-looking man he had ever seen. The giant seemed to explode black, curly hair from every exposed part of him. Tufts swept from his nostrils and ears. His brows would have given John L. Lewis a sense of inferiority. His fingers sprouted hair all the way out to the nails.

"Your troubles are over, Mr. Quick," the giant roared in a voice that rivalled the engines that were taxing a four-engined transport along the ramp. "If you don't think I can handle it, watch this!"

A horseshoe appeared in the hairy giant's hands. He proceeded to straighten it, never removing his intense stare from Freddie Quick who gazed in mute fascination at the widening curve of iron.

Nearby stood a woman who eyed these proceedings coldly, but not nearly as coldly as Freddie Quick had eyed her. So far as he was concerned she might as well have belonged to a third sex. Abe Gaywin had asked for a "horseface yet", and there was something in the woman's bony nose and lantern jaw which qualified.

She answered to the name of Dubina Venner. The hirsute giant was aptly known as Monk Malone. They represented the publicity department's idea of a bodyguard and secretary-chaperone respectively.

Abe Gaywin, watching them, felt mildly elated at this materialization of his "idea". He beamed at the airport guards holding back several hundred rubbernecks. He beamed at the Western Union boy who emerged from the throng behind a telegram and advanced toward Freddie Quick.

"Here, boy!" Abe Gaywin called. Several henchmen instantly repeated the call.

But the lad could read and he had seen some movies. He ignored Abe Gaywin and his echoes. Miss Dubina Venner reached for the telegram but the lad sidestepped her, ducked under the muscle-bound arm of Monk Malone and thrust the yellow message into the extended palm of Freddie Quick.

"It says Mr. Quick and that's you," the lad panted.

A moment later several hundred bystanders witnessed Freddie Quick crumple the yellow sheet in his fist and advance upon Abe Gaywin, speaking heatedly and shaking his head in emphatic negatives. Abe Gaywin spoke heatedly back to his prize commodity and nodded his head in equally emphatic affirmatives.

The arguing pair were instantly blotted from public view by Gaywin employees. The compact little group suddenly moved down the ramp to the now waiting transport. Freddie Quick marched swiftly up the ladder, the giant Monk Malone practically on his heels. Miss Dubina Venner followed, and then other, less stellar passengers boarded the plane.

It was not until the giant wings skimmed over distant tree tops that Abe Gaywin examined the telegram he had wrested from his reluctant voyager's fist during the melee.

The telegram was addressed to Freddie at the airport. It said: IS THIS TRIP NECESSARY? It was signed: NORA.

"A joker," muttered Abe Gaywin, frowning over the unlit stub of his perpetual cigar. "Some female is playing cat and mouse with him and he acts like it's a threat, yet."

"Yes, Mr. Gaywin," chorused several heads that crowded over his squat shoulders to read the message.

The ball-shaped impresario of America's dream-stuff shook his ball-shaped head impatiently.

"Impossible. Freddie is a bright boy, right out of Hell's Kitchen in New York where you have to stay on your toes to grow up healthy. He don't fall for gags. Something about this ain't kosher. Stafford," he glanced at the nearest head to his shoulder, "check with Western Union about who sent this from where."

Exit the head. Gaywin's eyes settled on another head.

"Mac, I want you should call Ackerman in New York. Tell him Freddie don't drift loose when he gets there. If Freddie wants a good time, bring it to his suite. Throw a party maybe. But Freddie remains strictly between the Ascot Hotel and the Times Square Gaywin until I get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, Mr. Gaywin—"

"Steve—" the rotund movie maestro singled a third head from among the eager circle—"I want you should get to my office this afternoon all the people close to Freddie—his servants, his girls, his friends, whoever is seen with him lately."

The man called Steve remained put. "Mr. Gaywin—"

"You didn't hear me, maybe?"

"I heard you, Mr. Gaywin. But Freddie Quick has no servants. He lives in a three-room apartment on Oakhurst in Beverly Hills. We had to invent a home and servants for him for the fan mags. And he's sort of a lone wolf—nobody ever gets very close to the guy."

Abe Gaywin glowered. "You are telling me a man I am paying almost a million dollars a year is living in a three-room flat?"

"I don't know about the million a year," Steve replied nervously. "All I know is what I told you. For instance, last week a small music store on Sunset called the studio to ask if Freddie was a good risk. He was buying a five-hundred dollar radio on installments."

Abe Gaywin tore the unlighted stub from his lips and hurled it to the ramp.

"Now you tell me!" he shouted. "Do I have to attend to every little detail in the organization? I write your publicity, I edit your stories, I got to tell the janitors where to push the brooms! Am I surrounded by knuckleheads?"

"Here is a New York boy frightened almost to death to go to New York. He gets millions to spend and he lives in a three-room flat. It's a picture even Charley McCarthy can give me the answers, but do you—you—you knuckleheads see it?"

"Well? Don't stand there with your foolish faces hanging out! Charter for me a fast plane!"

In the transport, skimming two miles above the sprawling Mojave Desert, Monk Malone poured urgent words into the ear of Freddie Quick who stared moodily at the panorama below.

"Don't hold it against me for putting you on the plane, Mr. Quick. It was Gaywin's word and he's the guy who hired me. For instance, if you hired me I'd have to do what you say, see what I mean?"

"I mean something like Mack Grey and Georgie Raft, Mr. Quick." The hairy giant

sent a moist tongue over thick lips and blurted: "That's what I'm getting at. I'd like a permanent job with you. I'm sick of being used like a freak. Ever since I was a kid I was kicked around from one sideshow to another. Sometimes I rassled all comers. Sometimes I held a bat between the yokels and the belly show. I even had a specialty eating razor blades and drinking glasses—until a doc told me I'd kill myself.

"I'd work my head off for a chance at a decent job like being your bodyguard, Mr. Quick. There's nothing freakish about Mack Grey. I've seen people point him out in night clubs and places. I'm asking you to give me a chance at something like that, Mr. Quick."

The dapper sensation of the screaming celluloid mumbled an indecipherable reply and continued to gaze morosely at the vista of sand, cactus and cliff shifting slowly westward ten thousand feet below.

In the seat behind them Miss Dubina Venner stared thoughtfully at the shaggy back of Monk Malone's head and held her counsel.

In the other seats the remaining passengers cast occasional furtive glances at the trio, but left them alone.

It was over Kansas that Freddie Quick addressed his first audible words to Monk Malone.

"Do you pack a roscoe, big boy?"

"You mean a gat, Mr. Quick?"

"That's what I mean."

"You don't have to worry about gats with me around, Mr. Quick," the huge man grinned, displaying yellowed fangs. "Gats don't worry me. See what I mean?"

He produced the twisted length of iron that had been a horseshoe and started to bend it back to its original shape.

"Yeah," Freddie Quick muttered. "You'll scare hell out of anyone packing a roscoe."

"What you say, Mr. Quick?"

"I said you're a clown. Put that damn thing away and shut up!"

A flush suffused the huge man's simian face as several passengers within earshot snickered.

AT La Guardia Airport there was a police escort. There was also a mob of hysterical females. When their hero emerged from the plane there was a fair sized riot that resulted in the police lines being torn asunder as the horde of screaming women swarmed around their idol. Newsreel cameras and newspaper cameras duly recorded the scene for posterity, catching the dramatic moment when the police lines reformed, driving the worshippers back, worshippers who clung grimly to their battle trophies which included fragments of Freddie Quick's topcoat, his hat, some books of matches and a handkerchief from his pocket.

One enterprising adorer retired triumphantly with part of Freddie Quick's tie which she had scissored neatly below the knot.

It was a pale, battered, ragged, lipstick-smearred, raging screen sensation who finally heard the door snap behind Monk Malone and Dubina Venner as they followed him into the Royal Suite of the Ascot.

Miss Venner's prim face reflected sheer daze. Malone was panting and smarting from fingernail marks on his black stubbled cheeks. In his massive paws were clutched fragments of Freddie Quick's topcoat he had managed to wrest back from a few enraged adorers of his charge.

Freddie Quick flung himself into a cream colored arm chair and buried his lipstick smeared face in trembling palms and fervently cursed the day, the hour, the minute Abe Gaywin was born.

Near his elbow a cream-colored phone was ringing. Someone was knocking on the door. The street noises of the gigantic city, muted by cream-colored drapes, sifted into the room on tiptoe.

He lifted his face from his palms and shouted at Monk Malone: "You big clown, start working! Get 'em away from that door. Tell 'em I don't want to see anybody. I don't want to be disturbed!" As the hairy giant leaped to his bidding, the idol of America's bobbysoxhood lifted the cream-colored phone and shouted into it: "Never mind who it is! Stop ringing this damn thing! No calls until I tell you. Got that? O.K.!"

He slammed the receiver into its cradle and became aware of a faint prickling sensation in the middle of his spine. He reached behind him and felt something lumpy under the shredded remains of his topcoat. He rose and turned his back on the still dazed Miss Venner and removed the topcoat and asked: "What's that?"

Miss Venner commenced to laugh. The laugh matched her face—it was something in the nature of a whinny. It ran up and down the scale until tears filled her dazed eyes. Then she slumped to the cream-colored broadloom and sobbed uncontrollably into her folded arms.

Monk Malone, returning from his mission at the door, came to an eye-popping halt. "Boss!"

Freddie Quick slipped out of his jacket and swung it before his eyes. Stuck in the fabric was a slender, cheap looking dagger that had probably been sold as a letter opener. It pinned a note to the back of his jacket. The note said: *Get the angle? There are other angles! Why don't you go home?* It was typewritten on coarse white paper. The signature was also typewritten: *Nora*.

Freddie Quick turned muddy eyes on his stunned bodyguard. "You and your horse-shoe!"

"Boss—" Monk Malone croaked.

"Skip it," Freddie Quick said dully. He gestured at the sobbing Miss Venner. "Help her off the floor." Then, as Malone raised the woman and deposited her on a cream-colored divan with the ease he would have employed in raising a pencil, Freddie Quick's tone sharpened: "Listen, Malone. We have to straighten out some points."

"Whatever you say, boss."

"Forget this. It never happened. Hide that dagger and get rid of the note. Then forget this happened. Got that?"

"Not even the cops, boss?"

The actor's voice climbed to a shout. "Especially not the cops! Under no circumstances are the cops or newspapers or Abe Gaywin to learn of this. It's just among the three of us. Do you get that? *Nobody else!*"

A yellowed smile appeared on Monk Malone's face. "Copasetic, boss! I get your drift. It's personal. It's something you want us to handle on the q.t., just the two of us."

"That'll be the day!" Freddie Quick breathed, clutching the phone and asking for an outside wire.

"There is an incoming call for you, Mr. Quick," spoke the operator rapidly. "Mr. Ackerman, of Gaywin Productions' local off—"

"Freddie?" A man's deep voice boomed over the woman's voice. "I have been trying to contact you for the last fifteen minutes. Miss, will you please get off the line?"

"Go ahead, sir. Here's your party," the woman's voice chanted sweetly.

"All right. All right. Now it's legal. Freddie? Abe phoned. He's coming East—grabbed a private plane around noon. Should be here tonight. Until he arrives he doesn't want you to leave that suite. I don't know what's behind this, but Abe sounded agitated. You been cutting classes, kid?"

"Don't answer! That's between you and him. I had a royal tour planned for you tonight, but we'll skip it. I'm doing the next best thing. I'm bringing the big city to your suite tonight. You'll meet everybody who's somebody, and keep an eye peeled for Helen Reilly, a new thrush at the Stork. She's got it. Even the Mayor might drop in. Sardi will cater it. I'll be up there in half an hour to get things rolling. It's been good bandying words with you after all these years, kid. See you later."

The line went dead. The sweet-voiced operator revived it.

"Did you want an outside line, Mr. Quick?" she crooned.

"Please—no, wait a minute. I can't recall the number. Get him for me, will you? The name is Wale, Cash Wale. He should be in the book. W-A-L-E. That's right."

As he waited, Monk Malone returned from the bathroom where the threatening note had been disposed of. The dagger lay in the bottom of a waste paper basket.

"I got rid of 'em, boss," Malone stated eagerly. "Now it's just between the three of us, hey?"

"And the guy I'm calling," said Freddie Quick dryly.

"We don't need help, boss," the hirsute giant urged. "You just point me at whoever you think did it and then step back." Malone flexed his snake-like fingers. "I'll cure whoever did it from trying it again!"

"Sure. I know. You'll bend a horseshoe for them and they'll pass out from sheer fright. You just keep the dames off me, Malone, and we'll get along fine."

"All I ask is a chance," Malone grumbled sullenly. "Who is this guy?"

"A gun."

"You mean a mobster, boss?"

"He's been called that." The actor shrugged. "All that matters to me is that he has a knack of figuring answers and he's a fast man with a roscoe. And right now the thing I need most in this whole world is a fast man with a roscoe."

The operator's voice broke in: "Here's your party, sir."

Miss Dubina Venner, her sobs finally stilled, sat up on the divan and listened to what followed with a thoughtful expression on her equine face.

CHAPTER TWO

Mine Host, the Ghost

I TOLD Sailor Duffy to tone down the radio and barked into the phone: "Who?"

The voice crackled through my receiver: "This is Freddie Quick."

I said: "This is Adolph. It was clever of you to catch up with me, Freddie. Let's swap autographs."

"Dammit, Wale, stop horsing around! Five years ago you pulled a job for Joe Morrocco at his Casbah Club in Harlem. I did a dance and patter routine. We had some drinks together."

I gaped at Sailor who was bending his fist-smashed face to the muted radio in order not to miss a word the Lone Ranger had to say, and scrambled through the musty corridors of my memory. Then part of it came to me and I whistled softly.

"O.K. You're Quick. What's on your mind?"

"Wale, I need some smart and confidential protection in a hurry! I'm exactly where Joe Morrocco was five years ago and he's still alive. That's why I called you."

"It's a good reason," I soothed, scratching desperately back into the past. Five years are a lot of years when they are spent struggling for odd bucks on the fringe of the law in Gotham. I stalled. "Calling on me was very smart, Quick. The Cash Wale Investigation Service handles cases that are too hot for—"

"I don't need the build-up," he cut in. "Just bring Roscoe along. They tell me I'm throwing a brawl. I'll leave word at the door. I want to see you the minute you arrive. Can I count on it?"

It finally dawned on me. Five years ago Joe Morrocco had gotten in the way of some Harlem citizens who peddled numbers to the clientele of his Casbah Club. There was a block of cement waiting for his feet and a spot under the Harlem River waiting for the cement.

As I recalled it, Joe hired me to keep his feet dry. It wound up with several of the number-peddling gentry dropping dead and, as Freddie Quick so neatly put it, Joe Morrocco was still alive.

"What door?" I asked.

"I'm at the Ascot. I'll have you expected from the desk on up. Will you be here?"

"Joe Morrocco got off with a grand," I told the phone. "But in those days it cost thirty-five cents to get a haircut in a union shop."

"Let's not quibble, Wale. Two hundred a day for the two weeks I'm booked at the Times Square Gaywin, and a bonus if I get back to Hollywood in one piece. That should be ample, Wale."

"That's ample," I agreed. "Sit tight. You've just bought yourself some protection."

I broke the connection and then went over and chased the Lone Ranger out of our radio. Sailor Duffy's eyes narrowed in reproach.

"Aw, Cash! They're burnin' Tonto alive!"

"It'll turn out he's wearing asbestos skin," I told him. "Put on a clean shirt. We're going to a party."

FREDDIE QUICK had left word at the desk of the Ascot, but it took five minutes of elbowing and pushing to get through the mob of swooners who stormed the Ascot's portals. Men in uniforms kept trying to keep clear a lane into the hotel, but what were uniforms to the urge of true love?

The uniforms had better control inside the lobby, and I got a nod from the desk to get into the elevator.

The weeding-out process reached its peak at the door to the Royal Suite where a police lieutenant and a black haired giant and a man with a list stood guard.

"Wale and Duffy," I told the man with the list.

The police lieutenant became interested and brought his hand to the left side of my jacket.

"Cash Wale, hey?" He would have said: "John Dillinger, hey?" in the same tone of voice.

"What you feel," I told him patiently, "is a Colt thirty-two revolver. Serial number 32787721. The permit is in my wallet. You want to waste my time?"

"You invited?"

"That's right."

The man with the list said: "I see a Wale, Cash. But no Duffy."

The hairy giant leered at the Sailor and pointed a hairy finger at the stairway. "That's you, punk. You ain't invited. Scat!"

I laid a restraining finger on the arm of Sailor who ignored the invitation. I said: "Let's get together, fellows. Wale and Duffy are like ham and eggs. We both go, or I don't. It's no skin off my back, but I think you ought to settle it with Freddie Quick."

"Freddie ask you?" the man with the list asked.

"That's right."

"Monk, go tell Freddie that Wale came with a Duffy." Monk faded through the doorway. Then he was back with a sullen nod.

We followed him through a room jammed with talking, smoking, drinking citizens of all sexes. Most of the faces were familiar—you saw them in the rotogravures and newsreels. Some of them made faces at you from the silver screen, others chewed scenery for your amusement across footlights. I spotted two bookies, one judge and half a dozen columnists as I wriggled through the press in Monk's wake. At the far end of the room a small orchestra was competing with the conversation, just adding to the confusion.

Then Monk led us through another door into a room that looked as if someone had spilled cream over everything in it. Monk closed the door behind us, blotting out the confusion, and rumbled: "Here's Wale and a stooge, boss."

A slender man rose from a cream-colored arm chair and crossed the room to meet us. You noticed his wavy brown hair and the cleft in his chin and dimples that deepened with his smile. Mainly, you noticed the way he moved. It all seemed part of a smooth, skimming dance. And it was the way his nimble feet carried him across the shifting screen, over tables and chairs and similar trivia in scenes that had Astaire adrool with envy, that captured the hearts of millions of women like those in the street below chanting his name.

"Nice brawl," I told him politely, shaking the palm he extended and passing it to the Sailor. "This is the rest of my agency, Sailor Duffy."

"You're telling me?" Freddie Quick beamed. "I was just a kid, but I managed a pasteboard

for that scrap. You should have been champ, Sailor."

The big lug melted under the charm. In Sailor's pulpy brain the fight had taken place yesterday—instead of fifteen years back when he dropped a heartbreaking ten-round decision to the heavyweight champion of the world.

"Ya can't win 'em all," Sailor mumbled.

The giant Monk injected a dark scowl into the conversation. "He *that* Duffy? It's a wonder Dempsey didn't put him away in the first round. All you have to do is look at him to see his marbles are loose."

I put a warning finger on Sailor's tensing arm and asked Freddie Quick: "Who's the goon?"

"Just a clown the studio tied on me for a publicity gag," the actor shrugged helplessly. "Monk, don't fool with these people. You're not in their class."

The ape man reached for me with fingers like poised cobras. "Who you calling a goon?" he scowled.

The cobras leaped back and the scowl became a wince as he gaped at the red welts blushing to life across his fingers. His startled eyes shifted to my Colt .32 balanced easily in my palm, then up to the broad grin on the Sailor's face. It always amused the Sailor to watch me add inches and iron to my reach.

"You asked for it, Monk!" Freddie Quick snapped. "Now drag your freight out of here while you're still in one piece. You're not a bodyguard. You're a clown!"

The gorilla's eyes went dead. "You're not firing me," he said thickly. "In the first place you didn't hire me. In the second place, we have a personal secret. Remember?"

For a long moment their eyes traded shots, then Freddie Quick said quietly: "You're a clown. You're a freak. You're turning into a blackmailer. I'm going to have you black-listed in every studio in Hollywood." The actor's voice jittered up to a shout: "Dammit, I'm telling you you're fired! Get out!"

Malone had other ideas. He stood there and drew a length of twisted iron from his jacket. "Now pistol-whip me!" he invited thickly. "I try to do a right job and this movie guy says he'll take the bread and butter out of my mouth. You're out of my class, he says. We'll see who's out of whose class." Then, as he advanced on Freddie Quick with his hunk of iron poised in one hairy fist and Sailor Duffy slid between them: "Hold that slap-silly pug off me before I split his skull open—"

I might just as well have been aiming my finger at him instead of the .32 for all the guy cared. You would think he might realize the issue was never in doubt, but he gripped that iron as if it could ward off a bullet and cocked it at the Sailor's billiard ball of a head.

Sailor stood flatfooted and deadpanned. His left flicked at the bigger man's gut, bringing the iron down in a vicious slice.

My trigger finger almost tightened then—but Sailor's left was no longer in the path of the slice. Sailor's shoulders had tilted slightly and now the left flicked six inches up to the side of the black stubbled jaw.

Monk's head snapped back six inches into wall, then it travelled slowly downward until it lay on one limp shoulder where he sat propped by floor and wall.

I HOLSTERED my .32 and plucked the hunk of iron from the gorilla's lax fingers.

"That's a horseshoe," Freddie Quick said bitterly. "He bends it back and forth. It's supposed to scare hell out of people. It couldn't even keep a knife out of my back."

A woman's voice spoke sharply from the other side of the cream-colored room. "Mr. Quick, that was rotten! I heard everything. You know Mr. Malone has a severe inferiority complex. It roots in being regarded humorously, being regarded as a clown or a freak. And yet you deliberately sneered at him and abused him with those very names!"

She crossed the cream-colored rug; a bony-faced woman in tailored clothes that sagged where they should lump. She caressed Monk Malone's half inch of brow with bony fingers.

"Miss Dubina Venner," Freddie Quick introduced. "Cash Wale. Sailor Duffy. Miss Venner is also part of the gag. She's supposed to be my nursemaid."

The kneeling woman nodded briefly to us and spoke sharply to American womanhood's dreamboat: "You could certainly use a nursemaid. You are vain and thoughtless and brutal and you were probably an only child. I taught child psychology prior to my debut at Gaywin and the symptoms of a spoiled childhood are glaringly evident!"

"Abe can pick 'em, can't he?" Freddie Quick moaned. "My bodyguard tries to open my skull. My secretary dabbles in psychoanalysis. What next?"

"Next," I told him, "you tell how the horseshoe couldn't keep a knife out of your back."

"The back of my jacket," he said. "Somewhere between the plane at La Guardia and here. Probably at the airport because only uniforms surrounded me from there on in. It pinned a note to my jacket which said the blade could as easily have been stuck in my back—if I don't get out of town."

"Where's the note?"

"With the plumbing. Before that there was a telegram at the Long Beach Airport and before the telegram I got seven or eight letters over a period of three weeks—all with the same idea. Stay out of town."

"Except for the use of a shiv," I advised, "it smells of publicity or a crank. If it isn't publicity the F.B.I. should have it."

"It's neither publicity nor a crank."

"How do you know that?"

"The signatures."

I said: "You're making me buck a stiff tide, pal. What were the signatures?"

He tasted the reply to that before letting me hear it. He licked his lips and sprouted moisture on his forehead. I could see paragraphs, chapters and volumes parade before his mind's eye.

Then he said: "Nora."

I said: "What does the F. B. I. say about Nora?"

"They don't know about any of this, Wale."

"Why not?"

No answer.

I tried again: "Why does the name, Nora, make it a legitimate series of threats?"

He said: "Because I tell you it does."

The guy was hoarding his information as if I was J. Edgar Hoover on the business end of an interrogation.

I smiled to ease his pain and asked: "Now, for sixty-four dollars, tell me why Nora is allergic to your presence in the big city?"

Without smiling he answered: "For two hundred dollars a day I am hiring you to find that out! I don't know why. But it isn't Nora, just someone using her name. Nora is dead." Something like pain shone from his eyes when he said that. He added: "I can't see how it would profit anybody in the whole damn world to keep me out of Manhattan. I want you to get to the bottom of it."

"And keep you unstabbed," I said.

"And keep me alive," he nodded soberly.

I glanced at the floor and saw Miss Dubina Venner was still soothing Monk Malone who continued to dream. The guy was taking a long count, probably from the back of his dome against the wall as well as from Sailor's left.

"Wouldn't it be a hell of a note," I asked the perspiring idol of your daughter's school-mates, "if I spent two weeks nosing around and came up with answers you already have?"

"About Nora?"

"That's right."

The guy tried to swallow his Adam's apple and failed to make it. He motioned me with his head to follow him away from the seemingly inattentive Miss Venner. Sailor, at a glance from me, stayed put. The far wall put us out of earshot of the secretary who said she was a child psychologist.

"I told you Nora's dead," Freddie whispered hoarsely. "Leave it at that. Believe me, the use of her name makes the warnings sinister, Wale!"

I said soothingly: "Let me put it like this.

Any menace to you becomes a menace to me the minute I take your dough, which means you're asking me to share your spot without benefit of your information. That's not cricket, pal."

He pleaded: "It's not that I can't trust you, Wale. I can't trust *anybody*."

"Better me than the coroner," I shrugged. I studied his tortured eyes a moment, then said: "O.K., pal. I'll take the job. But I'll take it on the assumption that you had something to do with Nora being dead—and that's why her name on the threats scares the living hell out of you!"

That scored!

FOR a moment I thought I would have to keep the actor from joining his erstwhile bodyguard on the broadloom.

Before he could say anything the man who had checked our names appeared in the doorway and called out: "Freddie, for gossakes join your party before they tag you a snob. They're starting to crack wise. Helen Reilly just came over from the Stork to croon a sad number. How about following her with the soft shoes, sweetheart? Pretty please?"

Freddie gestured weakly. "In a minute, Ackerman." The head vanished and Freddie turned his stunned attention back to me.

"Nora," I said.

"Nora Jackson," he said. He swallowed hard and said: "I'll have to trust you, Wale." He swallowed again and the floodgates opened.

"That was back in 'forty, when I was called to the Coast for my first screen test, about a week before I was supposed to go, but the night before I actually went," he said. "She checked hats in a joint and wanted to be like Dinah Shore. I picked her up in the Automat. I met her in the afternoon, took her to a party that night and wound up in a small hotel on the West Side.

"I didn't know about that until next morning when I woke up with her on the floor alongside my bed. There was blood all over her and the haft of my penknife stuck out of a pool of it in the middle of her slip.

"I didn't know how long she'd been dead; I didn't want to know. I couldn't remember how we got in that bedroom. Someone at the party had passed out reefer and the last thing I remembered was smoking them. I tell you I was scared, Wale. There I was, ready for my big break in pictures, and there she lay, ready to spoil the break—or worse!

"What I did then was all panic. I found my clothes and got out of that bedroom—that's when I learned I was in a hotel. I used the stairs instead of the elevator and, when I hit the lobby, the elevator was at one of the upper stories and I was alone. I found my handwriting on the register. I'd signed as Mr. and

Mrs. Jones, from Newark. I took that register out of the hotel with me.

"I left for the Coast that same afternoon and destroyed the register enroute, getting rid of a few pages each time the train left a station, until it was scattered from Manhattan to Los Angeles. I went through hell, Wale."

"Who wouldn't?" I murmured.

The words continued to pour from the guy. He'd been holding them in so long, now he couldn't spill them out fast enough. "The funny thing is after awhile I began to feel safe," he said. "The screen test fizzed and I hung around the Coast a couple of months,

reading every Manhattan paper I could find—and nowhere was there any mention of a stabbed Nora Jackson. I thought the hotel might have hushed it up—you know how they are about that kind of publicity. I thought a lot of things, but the fact remains no warrant was issued for me. Nobody bothered me. The party had been one of those hit and run affairs where we wouldn't be remembered. It gradually faded in my mind until I practically forgot about it.

"I came back to the city in 'forty-one, working at Joe Morrocco's Casbah, and still nothing happened. In 'forty-two I made a second screen test, this time on Long Island, and



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clicked. I went to the Coast again and made 'Mr. Manhattan'— and *that* clicked. Abe Gaywin tore up my contract, wrote out a new one and began pushing me. Everything was rosy. I was sitting on top of the world. That's when I got the first letter signed Nora.

"It said a friend had followed us to the hotel from the party and then called at the hotel the next morning and found her there alone. It said this friend took her from the hotel to a place in the country where nobody would bother her and where she could go on looking the way I had last seen her.

"It said this friend should be rewarded for being so nice to her, now that I was in the chips. I should send two thousand dollars in a package of twenties, addressed to her at a post office box number in Brooklyn. It said if I bothered her friend he had a letter in a safe place that was addressed to the district attorney of New York. A few days later I received another letter containing nothing but a photograph. It was a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Jones written in my handwriting on the register I had destroyed.

"That was in 'forty-two. I sent the two thousand. A couple of weeks later I got a third letter asking for another two thousand. This letter had a picture of Nora Jackson on the floor alongside the bed, exactly as I had last seen her.

"I sent two thousand more. That's been going on since nineteen forty-two, Wale. Abe Gaywin pours dough at me and I pour it right along to that box in Brooklyn. Whoever is bleeding me allows for taxes and my bare living expenses, but that's all. I've been working for a blackmailer for three years, Wale, and it's still going on."

"Oh, brother!" I murmured.

"You see how I'm situated?" the actor urged. "I can't go after the blackmailer. I don't want you to try. Just—"

"Keep the knife out of your back and learn why the blackmailer wants you out of town," I put in.

"If it is the blackmailer."

"That's a point," I agreed. "A blackmailer might threaten you, but it's just hot air. The blackmailer wants you alive and healthy and successful. He stops collecting those gorgeous two-grand tax-free lumps the minute you face a jury or reach the morgue with a knife in your back."

Something like the dawn of a new day crept into Freddie Quick's expression. "Why didn't I think of that?" he blurted.

"Something else," I went on. "You can hire me to flush the blackmailer and he still won't cause you trouble. He's got you where the hair is short and you can't have him prosecuted, but as long as you don't crowd him into a corner he can't afford to lead cops to the

remains of Nora Jackson with his pictures and story. He can't do that because he's an accessory after the fact. He's guilty of hiding evidence in a homicide and that puts him behind the same eight ball with you. Catch?"

"Wale, why didn't you happen to me four years ago?" Freddie Quick beamed.

"While you're in this mood I'll take the first day's two hundred." I beamed back at him.

He wanted to write a check and I insisted on cash. He said he would have it in the morning. I said that would be all right. He said it was time we joined the party.

"What about your gorilla?" I asked. Monk Malone was on his knees, shaking his head groggily from side to side. Miss Venner clung to his arm and crooned at him.

"That clown?" Freddie scowled. "To hell with him. With her, too! Let's take Sailor out for a drink and catch this Reilly thrush. They say she's got it."

Sailor said a drink was what he needed.

We ignored the weird pair on the cream-colored broadloom and stepped through the doorway into the smoke and noise and music that constituted the "party."

A WOMAN'S voice across the room warbled soothingly about a gypsy.

"She listens good," Freddie pursed judicial lips. "Let's squeeze through and see how she looks. I think—"

I never learned what he thought.

The lights went out. At the same instant something made me sneeze. I heard other people sneezing around me.

In that first moment of total blackness I grabbed Freddie Quick's arm. It stiffened. Then it relaxed. Then it dragged me down toward the floor.

I was still sneezing. The ballad about the gypsy ceased abruptly. It took a little longer for the last sax in the orchestra to give up the melody. Somewhere a woman giggled. A wit made a noise like a falling bomb. A man yelled that everyone should keep calm.

Everyone began talking at once.

That was background. I followed Freddie Quick to the floor and continued sneezing. My hands toured his limp body, then I reached for the doorknob behind me and twisted it open, admitting dazzle from the cream-colored room.

Freddie Quick lay motionless on the floor. He was breathing hoarsely. There was a lump the size of a thimble forming over his left temple, but no other sign of damage. I saw this in glimpses between my sneezes.

I started dragging him into the other room and another pair of hands came to my aid. Our four hands brought him off the floor and past Monk Malone who was on his feet now

and mumbling something unintelligible to Dubina Venner. We deposited the unconscious actor on the cream-colored divan.

Over my shoulder I glimpsed a crowd, impelled by curiosity and a sort of moth instinct, surging towards the door. I yelled for Sailor to hold them back, then fingered one of Freddie's wrists. The swarthy man who had helped me grabbed the actor's other wrist.

From behind I heard Sailor's voice boom: "Hokay, Cash!" Then: "I'll slug the foist monkey that tries in!"

The swarthy man and I grinned at each other. "Freddie used to be one of my boys," he said. "How'd it happen?"

The pulse under my fingers was strong and steady.

"Some comic did it with pepper and a sap," I said, sneezing. I added: "Long time no see, Joe."

Joe Morrocco, a slender, swarthy man who featured a black mustache and sideburns. He operated the Casbah Club, in Harlem. Rumors pegged him as a Turk or Egyptian. Other rumors said he inspired the first rumors to add atmosphere to his club. I never did get to the bottom of that. We had dealings in the past. I knew him as a lad who did not advertise how well he knew the answers, and thus managed to hold his own in a very rough league.

"He'll live," Morrocco said, releasing Freddie's other wrist. "A clean sap job. I don't dig the pepper."

"Pepper's a guess," I said through my handkerchief. "Look at his eyes."

Bloodshot eyes blinked painfully up at us from the divan as Freddie emerged from his coma. He tried to sit up and we forced him down again. I had to keep his knuckles from complicating the irritation in his eyes.

"I think it's pepper," I told him. "Just relax until I get something to wash it out."

The Sailor still held the rubbernecks at bay. Nobody seemed anxious to brave the fists that had given Dempsey a hard time. The uniformed police lieutenant and a fat man who gnawed on an unlit stogie were trying persuasion.

"He says he's Freddie's boss, Cash," Sailor rumbled, pointing at the fat man.

"That's Gaywin," I said. "Let him and the cop in, Sailor. Keep the others out."

The orchestra was trying to revive the festive spirit now that the lights were on again, but most of the assembled citizens crowded around the door.

I grabbed a tray loaded with cocktails and sandwiches from a waiter in the crowd and bore it to the divan in the wake of the cop lieutenant and Abe Gaywin. I plucked the olive from a Martini and dashed what remained into the bloodshot eyes.

"That helps," the actor spluttered, rising

to a sitting position and peering around him through one slitted eye. "Do it again, Wale." The eye settled on Morrocco's swarthy countenance and Freddie grinned wryly. "Glad you made it, Joe. Isn't this something?"

Morrocco allowed it was "something."

There was a tight cluster of us around him now. Beside Morrocco, the cop lieutenant and Abe Gaywin, Monk Malone had drifted over to snag a sandwich from the tray. Dubina Venner's bony face peered over Gaywin's squat shoulder.

I plucked another Martini from Monk Malone's fist as the gorilla snagged it along with his sandwich. The Martini wouldn't pluck. Glass tinkled as the hairy giant clung to the stem and Martini spilled down my sleeve.

That was when the pepper asserted itself in Freddie's nose. Several hands reached out to steady him as his sneezes grew in violence and threatened to catapult him off the divan.

The cop lieutenant was trying to find out "—what the hell is going on here?"

"We're doing him no good!" Abe Gaywin barked over his cigar as Freddie's sneezes achieved major proportions. "Someone get a doctor!"

The familiar accent stilled Freddie Quick's convulsions. He choked: "Abe, you—" A violent sneeze hurled him forward into our hands.

Dubina Venner began to scream. It came in short, croaking bursts that clattered up my spinal column, caused me to swivel my head and gape at her.

She was backing away from the tight little group with her bony hands outstretched, the fingers spread wide. In that first glance I thought she wore rubber gloves.

The cop lieutenant gleaned a different impression. He was also backing away from us. He was clawing the Positive from his hip holster and shouting over his shoulder.

"Klein! Shannahan! Block that front door. Hold everything exactly like it is!"

I knew why Dubina Venner screamed then. I knew why my own hands that helped prop the sneezing actor began feeling warm and moist.

The others were getting the idea—I could see it in their faces. And then we all stepped back from Freddie Quick who was no longer sneezing and we could see it in our hands.

Freddie Quick wobbled unsteadily to his feet and gaped about wildly through squinting, bloodshot eyes. They came to rest on me.

"Wale, they got—"

He crumpled to the floor then—and no hands reached out to break his fall. In that instant before he fell we all saw the crimson splotch growing under the knot of his tie, the same shade of crimson that stained our hands.

"You people," the cop lieutenant ordered

quietly, "will stay exactly where you are. You—Wale—get on the phone and call Homicide."

That was his reaction, and his Positive was drawn to enforce it. My reaction was to finger the motionless actor's wrist. I looked up.

"This is no homicide—yet."

"Get an ambulance also," the cop lieutenant said quietly. "I don't want any of you people in this room to move an inch from where you are now until the Homicide Squad arrives."

He had a point, that cop lieutenant. It looked like a stab. A minute earlier when Freddie recognized Abe Gaywin's voice and looked up there had been no crimson stain on his shirt. In the intervening minute one of the people standing there had done the job.

The blood from Abe Gaywin's fingers had traveled to his unlit cigar. His puffed face bore all the expression of a slab of pork.

Joe Morrocco fingered crimson streaks into his black mustache. He looked as if someone had daubed his swarthy cheeks with whitewash. Monk Malone continued to gnaw methodically on a sandwich that his fingers had striped scarlet. He looked like the feature attraction at a zoo. Dubina Venner was moaning into palms that blotched her bony face. My own mind was grinding out dull curses. The man I had undertaken to guard from a stab in the back had, within ten minutes, been stabbed in the throat.

"That's right, sister," I told the operator bitterly. "Both the Homicide Squad and an ambulance. The guy up here will need one or the other."

CHAPTER THREE

The Dagger Vanishes

LATER that same night Freddie Quick was in the Polyclinic Hospital and Inspector Anthony J. Quinn, shaggy maestro of Manhattan's Homicide Squad, was on the verge of apoplexy.

The peppered, blackjacked and stabbed answer to every discontented wife's dream hovered, by grace of blood plasma and pumped oxygen, between his bed in the hospital and a box in the morgue.

Inspector Quinn roared at me across his desk in his Centre Street office: "It's impossible, shrimp, d' you hear me?"

"They can hear you in Flatbush," I told him dryly. "Anyhow, it's your headache. I didn't do it. The Sailor didn't do it. Turn us loose and buy your own aspirins."

Quinn's face might have been fashioned out of wrinkled leather. His iron-gray hair matched the shade of his eyes which told me,

no matter what words issued from his lips, that he despised my guts, that his only solace would be to see me strapped to the Sing Sing throne where, for a fact, he had been methodically trying to plant me for the last fifteen years.

This anti-Wale attitude stemmed from his suspicion that I had contributed more customers to various cemeteries than his records showed, a suspicion that had brought me before the Grand Jury on seventy-eight occasions. I encouraged such suspicions—they brought me clients. But they had also brought me, through the years, close enough to Sing Sing's throne to feel the heat in my pants.

So much for Quinn's eves. Now his voice overflowed with milk and honey. "We've had our little differences, shrimp," he soothed, "but I never denied you could read a scorecard. You've pulled more than one answer out of a bag I figured was empty. All I'm asking is for you to look at this from my angle.

"This guy, Quick, has a sneezing fit and five citizens put hands under his neck to keep him from landing on his face. One of the five stabs him in the throat with something long enough and sharp enough to slide in over the collarbone about four inches and puncture half a dozen tubes and arteries and whatnot.

"Lieutenant Olson, of the Broadway Squad, is right there when it happens. He's a good cop and he did the right thing. He lets you travel five feet to the phone and holds everyone else where they're at. In the few minutes it took my squad to get there nobody moved an inch. Your stooge, Duffy, is keeping everyone else out of that room and two of Olson's patrolmen are keeping everyone in the suite.

"We get there ahead of the ambulance and it looks open and shut. It's a stabbing and the weapon isn't in the wound, so it has to be on one of you five people who had the chance to do it.

"A few minutes after we get there we take you, one at a time, into the bathroom and give you a total frisk. We even get a police-woman from the precinct to frisk that Venner woman. We strip you each down to nothing and then work over your clothes. We even broke open Gaywin's cigars.

"In the sixty seconds before Quick goes to the ambulance, we frisk him once over lightly in case the stabber ditched the shiv on him. Then, to make sure, we send a patrolman along to the hospital to finish the job.

"Then we strip that room. You know my squad—we wrote the book. We strip that room! After that, just on the off chance that two hundred witnesses were cooking up a her-ring, we go to work on the guests in the other room and then strip the rest of the suite.

"We find plenty of knives, letter openers

and nail files, but my lab eliminates them, every last one. We get the blackjack that was used when the lights went out and the pepper container and its lid, all on the floor and minus prints. We get a print off the light switch, but it turns out to be the Commissioner of Public Works, who turned the lights back on.

"But no weapon. It has to have a jagged point, from what we can tell, and its sides must be round and smooth. It's got to be at least four inches long. It's got to be on one of you five people!" Quinn hammered his fist on his desk top and roared: "Shrimp, where the hell is it?"

"I don't know," I told him.

"Listen." His voice dropped back to the soothing syrup. "We've gotten to where we're making like Dick Tracy. We're going gimmick-happy. We thought of a pencil, but not a pencil in that suite qualified. We toyed with the idea of an icicle and even made one the thickness of the wound and it snapped before breaking the skin of my arm.

"That Venner woman wore hairpins, but the wound was too large for that and if she bunched all the pins she wore, how could she get them back in her hair again with Lieutenant Olson freezing everybody on the spot?"

I said: "It's still your headache."

"We even considered a gimmick that made a *Saturday Evening Post* story some months back," went on Quinn, ignoring me. "Something about a plastic that can be shaped like a dagger, then it turns itself back into an ash tray or some other whatnot when it's dropped in boiling water for ten minutes. They called it 'the plastic with a memory'. But no dice. No boiling water. And inside of five minutes we were on the spot, stripping you people down."

"The idea dawns on me," I said. "I'm beginning to get it. What you're trying to tell me is that the weapon vanished. You're baffled. It's a pretty little problem, pal, but then we taxpayers are shelling out to you uniforms to solve such problems."

"Then take the question of motive," he purred on, still ignoring me. "This Monk gorilla did time in California for using a tent peg on the skull of an acrobat who used language on him. But he knew Freddie Quick less than twenty-four hours.

"That Venner woman is in the same boat. Abe Gaywin is the guy who cashes in on Freddie Quick's box office—I can't see that tub of lard biting the hand that feeds him. Joe Morrocco rates as a friend. One of the last conscious things Quick did was greet him as an old pal."

I said: "If it's sympathy you want, keep right on using my shoulder. If you want me to work out the answers for you, I don't think the city's budget can meet my price."

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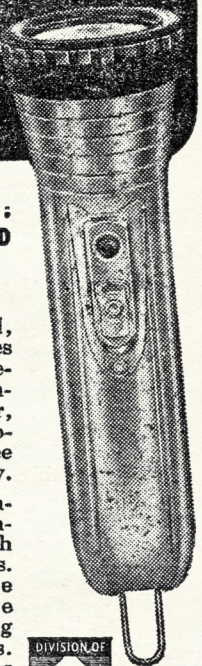


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QUINN no longer ignored me. "Then there's you." He scowled. "A kill-crazy con man with a dollar sign for a heart. Your hand dipped in Freddie Quick's blood along with the others. The switchboard operator at the Ascot says the first call he made was to you. She listened. It went a little fast for her, but she remembers enough. He wanted you for something hot and you fixed a price."

"That's great!" I said. "That puts me first on the suspect parade. Do I confess now?"

"And then," continued the leathery-faced avenger of Manhattan's corpses, aiming a thick forefinger at me, "the last thing Quick is on record as saying is, 'Wale, they got—'. With half a dozen people around, he picks you. He's got a message for you alone."

"Famous last words," I said dryly. "They got me'. So what?"

"So this!" roared Quinn, abandoning all pretense and pounding his fist on his desk. "I want to know what 'they' he meant! I want to know why he hired you! In other words, you homicidal midget, I want you once and for all to quit horsing around with this department! You'll either come across, or—"

"Or *what?*" I roared back, rising with my knuckles on his desk and my face thrust forward until it was six inches from his face.

"If that guy croaks," Quinn spat out the words, one at a time, "I'll have you up for concealing evidence in a homicide. At which time I will continue this interview with a rubber hose until you find some answers."

"Is he dead?"

"I said, 'If he croaks . . .'"

"I heard you the first time. He's alive—it's no homicide. Furthermore, in this town a shamus rates along with a lawyer or doctor when it comes to privileged communications. Furthermore, the real reason you dragged me here was either to hook me as a suspect or show you where your gang of clowns missed the boat—and I don't go for any of your bait. Have you anything else to tell me?"

He had. He did.

Then he let me collect Sailor and my hat and my gun and use the nearest exit.

THAT should have ended it for me.

Had Freddie Quick paid me the two hundred I would have probed around a little, asked the sort of questions the uniforms would overlook of people they would neglect. It was true I had undertaken to keep Freddie unstabbed for two weeks and had muffed the job in ten minutes, but that was just too bad.

Nobody bats a thousand. The best surgeons lose patients. All our armed forces went deaf, dumb and blind at Pearl Harbor. I could not spend my days working for free, not with haircuts peddling for a buck per.

So the Sailor and I washed the taste of

Anthony J. Quinn and the memory of Freddie Quick's blood out of our mouths and minds with various concoctions in divers bistros between Centre Street and Riverside Drive where our office-apartment nestled. It was during the wee hours that I finally keyed the office door and discovered the key wouldn't turn because the door was already unlocked.

Cold sober, I would have done what I did then. If you make a living behind a gun, you want to get in the habit of letting it precede you through such items as doors that are open when they should be locked. Drunk or sober, it was a question of reflex.

When Sailor reached over and slammed the door open I was on my belly, propped on my elbows, sighting over the barrel of my .32 into my office.

THREE people in my office became three statues.

"One more highball and I'd have lost control of my finger," I said wearily to Abe Gaywin as I rose to my feet, holstered the weapon and motioned Sailor into the office with me. "Then where'd you be? Or is it an old Hollywood custom to break through doors?"

The rotund movie mogul waved a bland palm through the smoke occasioned by his fat cigar.

"You will excuse us, please. It was a question of not waiting in the hall. I had to see you tonight yet. As for the door, Mr. Malone, here, managed the lock with one of Miss Venner's hairpins—a trick he picked up in carnivals, he says."

They sat around on clients' chairs. Gaywin and the bony faced Miss Venner were relaxed. Monk Malone ignored Sailor, who bristled at my side, and tried to wigwag signals at me with his John L. Lewis brows.

"O.K. You see me tonight yet," I said.

"This is no time for mincing words," Abe Gaywin said. "I should be in Hollywood this minute where, believe me, a hundred details demand my attention in person. To boil it in a nutshell, I learned from Miss Venner and Mr. Malone how Freddie called you the first thing when he arrived at the Ascot.

"If a detective he wanted, Gaywin Productions has on its payroll the best detectives money can buy, not to mention regular contracts with Burns and Pinkerton. All Freddie had to do was pick up a phone and right away he'd have the best detective brains in the country working for him.

"Yet he calls you!"

"Is that bad?" I asked.

"If you will pardon my expression," he said, "it's terrible. To me it means my Freddie has serious troubles. Right now he is dying maybe, and I can't even see him. All I can do is follow where he pointed. The first thing he

did was call you and the last thing he said was your name. It's blackmail, no?"

"You tell me," I said. "You wanted to see me. I'm being looked at. If you want to talk, I'll keep listening."

The cigar jutted up at a grim angle, then it sagged and the slab of pork expression Abe Gaywin wore cracked into a smile.

"I am used to having people explain while I listen. This is a most refreshing experience." The smile failed to include his eyes, which remained wary over his cigar. "Let me tell it from the commencement," he suggested. "Until Freddie came to the city I had no inkling. But all of a sudden Freddie became crazy to not come to New York. Mr. Manhattan to the whole world—and he's suddenly afraid of Manhattan! Why? It didn't make sense.

"At the airport it commenced to make sense. He got a telegram suggesting he should better not travel. Then I found out all the time I have been paying him millions he lived like a hundred-dollar-a-week script writer and bought radios on installments. Where did the money go? He got no relatives, no girl friends. Publicity romances and parties, yes, but for these the studio paid.

"He made no deductions for gifts or charities in his income tax. He carries no personal insurance, has no trust funds or investments and only fifteen thousand in his banking accounts. What's the answer, Mr. Wale? To me it means secret expenditures, which suggests blackmail. No?"

"You make out a good case," I admitted. "But I don't know the answer," I lied. "Maybe it is blackmail. All Freddie discussed with me were the threats—and they made as little sense to him as they do to us. Now it's a cop headache."

Gaywin nodded thoughtfully.

"Who knows what is behind blackmail?" he brooded aloud. "I can't use our own detectives or call in the F.B.I. until it is positive the answers can't hurt Freddie or Gaywin Productions. You remember Roscoe Arbuckle? A dirty scandal could cost us millions.

"You see where that leaves me, Mr. Wale? A hundred problems demand my attention in California, but I must sit around here with my hands in my lap like a professional mourner until this business comes to a head one way or the other."

I said: "Freddie offered me two hundred a day to keep him unstabbed and get to the bottom of the threats. He didn't pay me, but I muffed half the job—so that's square."

Gaywin's eyes froze to mine. "The police muffed that job also. I still want answers. If Freddie called you he had reasons. Do you want a check now?"

"Cash," I said.

Gaywin had it. Then I had it. We shook hands all around. I was to report to him and there would be a bonus of five thousand dollars if I learned the answers before the newspapers or cops. I herded them to the door.

Monk Malone lagged behind. "I want to apologize for that bullheaded act in Freddie's suite," he whispered hoarsely.

"It was our decision," I told him. "Forget it."

He whispered: "Also, I appreciate the cops not bringing it up. That means you didn't bring it up. It means I keep my job. Mr. Gaywin doesn't have to find out, does he?"

"No law says he does," I said. "I let the cops work out their own puzzles. I told you to forget it."

He grabbed my hand, then he grabbed the Sailor's hand, then he loped after the others and Sailor foghorned in my ear: "'At monkey's a sucker fer a left, Cash. Huh, Cash? We got a job, Cash? Huh?"

We had a job. The pretty little puzzle of the vanishing dagger was now my pretty little headache. All I had to do was beat Anthony J. Quinn and his army of trained eyes to the answers. I had to do it before Freddie Quick passed from his bed in the Polyclinic to a slab in the morgue.

For five thousand dollars, and to keep Quinn's rubber hose off my ribs, I had to do it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Phantom Face

THE blonde had a little too much of everything; too much lipstick, too much mascara, too much peroxide and too short a red dress. At a first glance she resembled a refugee from a red-light district. After a second look I saw she belonged behind an algebra text in high school. She wore bobby sox.

It took three blocks of fast tracking before I was close enough to glean these impressions. In those three blocks she had gotten wind of my pursuit and quickened her pace. Now she turned and faced me squarely in the middle of the sidewalk on Eighth Avenue.

"Hey, Shorty, are you follerin' me?"

She was prepared to avenge her threatened honor by clubbing me to death with the red leather pocket book she held.

"Don't shoot!" I grinned at her. "Some of the girls pointed you out to me and said you were president of the Bensenhurst Freddie Quick Fan Club. I represent Abe Gaywin, Freddie's boss. I'd like to talk to you."

She was both curious and dubious. From this distance I could see her mascara was tear-streaked. There was a tremor in her voice.

This had been the general condition of the

women whose ranks she had just left—about three hundred of them gathered on the streets encircling the Polyclinic Hospital, swooners who had appointed themselves Freddie Quick's death watch.

"Oh yeah?" the blonde sparred. "That's what you say!"

"Mr. Gaywin," I said, stressing the name, "wants Freddie's real fans collected for a dinner at the Ascot. He wants to thank them for their loyalty to Freddie. Not the autograph hounds, but *real* fans—like the girls who went out to La Guardia yesterday to welcome Freddie to New York."

That brought a shine through the wet of her eyes.

"I was gonna make a speech," she said wistfully, "but I didn't get a chance. Gee! Are you on the level? You ain't tryin' to pick me up or somethin'?"

"I'll show you how much I'm on the level," I told her earnestly. "You come back to the hospital with me and help me locate some more *real* fans and then we'll all drive down to the Gaywin offices in cabs and see advance newsreel shots of Freddie getting out of the plane yesterday. Maybe you'll see yourself in the picture."

"Gee! Honest? No kiddin'?"

"What can you lose?"

"Gee!"

Her name was Mabel Schultz. She was at that moment playing hookey from the senior term at Erasmus High School. She had been a Van Johnson addict, but switched to Freddie the first time she saw his feet dance him half-way up a wall and down again into Lana Turner's arms.

Mabel knew her sister fans. It was: "Hey, Gussie, was you out to La Guardia yestiddy? Therese, was you? C'mere, we ain't gonna bite you. My genn'mun friend wantsta tellya somethin'!"

After almost an hour of milling through the horde of mournful swooners, bandying introductions, questions and explanations, and ending in a near riot, with half a hundred eager soxers battling each other for a chance at my ears once the magic name of Gaywin was bruited about, we had thirty-seven tearful but excited females of assorted descriptions in a parade of cabs that brought us to the local Gaywin projection rooms.

No newsreel ever played to a weirder audience. There were moments, when Freddie Quick appeared on the screen, when I felt like crawling up to the ceiling and defending my life with tooth, nail and gun. Those thirty-seven wildcats screeched and stomped and wept and did everything but rush his image on the screen. Right there and then I decided that Sinatra and Van Johnson and Freddie earned every million they got.

When the camera caught the mob of females breaking through the line of uniforms and swarming over their dancing hero, several voices in my selected audience screamed: "That's me!"

The final shot was of Freddie and Monk Malone and Dubina Venner being rescued from the horde of screwy swooners by a flying wedge of uniforms. The screen went blank. Screams and squeals merged into a cascade of feminine chatter as Mabel and her friends returned to their seats. I felt sweat pouring freely all over me.

The projectionist, who leaned out of his booth to catch my signal, rolled his eyes skyward when I gestured for a repeat and drew back into his cubicle.

The second exhibition elicited laughter amid the frenzy, as the girls became conscious of their hysteria.

The third showing was to a still chattering, but no longer screaming audience.

When the fourth time around the newsreel played to dead silence and thirty-seven puzzled expressions, I went up front with a long wooden pointer and dispelled their confusion.

"Girls, I had it repeated until you got all the swoon out of your systems. You're under control now and I can tell you why Mr. Gaywin had you brought here. He wants to make certain no foul balls land in his Freddie Quick Fan Party at the Ascot—he wants only girls who were at the airport, girls who appeared in this newsreel shot.

"You all claimed to be at the airport yesterday. This is your chance to prove it and get invited to the party. We're going to play the picture one more time. We'll stop it as soon as the fans appear on the screen. Then we'll move it along a little bit at a time, giving you all a chance to find yourselves in the mob. And I not only want yourselves—I want you to point out any of your friends who were there and you recognize on the screen. Are you ready?"

Thirty-seven screams assured me they were ready and willing.

For the fifth time Freddie stepped out of the transport and waved a casual palm, Monk Malone and Dubina Venner peering over his shoulders. The camera caught a long shot of the line of uniforms bulging in the middle, then cracking into a dozen floundering cops as the adoring horde swept through. I raised my hand and the action on the screen froze.

"How about it, girls?"

Silence.

I raised my hand again and the screen came to life. This was a close shot. Some of the swooners were commencing to break the pattern. They were struggling away from Freddie. Some of them held what looked like rags, but turned out to be fragments of Freddie's

topcoat, suspended triumphantly over their heads.

"That's me!" screamed Mabel Schultz as the action froze again. She was pointing to one of the first returnees. "That's his necktie, I got!" She giggled. "I hadda woik fast with my cuticle scissors. We're gonna frame the necktie an' put it on the clubhouse wall under our Freddie's pitcher."

Two other faces in my audience pointed to their faces on the screen. Five "friends" were identified.

I had a series of stills that had been made from the newsreel. I marked the eight faces, took names and addresses and gestured for the action to resume. When I gestured next, almost half the swooners around Freddie Quick were facing the camera, bearing away their battle trophies.

"That's me with Freddie's han'kerchief!" a brunette in a polka-dot dress screamed. "Las' night I slept with it under my pilla. I'll sleep with it under my pilla till the day I die!"

A redhead from the Bronx offered her an autographed picture of Perry Como and a piece of Van Johnson's shirt for it, but it was no swap.

Eventually the flying wedge of uniforms removed Freddie from the screen for the fifth and last time and I had identifications of almost half the swooners whose faces appeared in the newsreel.

I made a little speech, shook hands all around and sent my thirty-seven celebrity friends their thirty-seven ways in cabs that were instructed to bill Gaywin Productions Inc.

Then I gulped a cup of black coffee and returned to the streets around the Polyclinic Hospital, selected twenty-nine more Freddie Quick fans who had been at the airport, cabled them to the projection room and did the whole thing over again.

By nightfall a hundred and sixty-three maniacs had screamed their all.

ABE GAYWIN entered the projection room as I wearily pumped the hundred and sixty-third swooner's paw. He followed me back to my seat where I resumed operations on my ninth ham sandwich and sixth container of black coffee.

The bleary-eyed projectionist's head poked from his booth.

"I guess you'll be back tomorrow, hah? How your luck held today, Mr. Wale, I'll put even money you find the last one tomorrow."

"You'd lose," I told him. "Let's bring it to her one more time and we'll call it a day."

Abe Gaywin settled his massive hams in the adjacent seat and mourned: "They won't let me see my Freddie. Nobody can see him. They are feeding him through a tube in the

neck and oxygen he gets from a tent, poor boy! You are making progress, Wale?"

A shudder convulsed me as the screen came to life for the umpteenth time. I was sick of Freddie Quick. I was sick of La Guardia Airport. I was sick of the swooners. I hated all movies to dirty little pieces.

"I've either made progress," I told him, "or I've been sitting here grinding my teeth down to the gums for laughs. You," I told him, "are going to throw a party at the Ascot for a hundred and sixty-three of the battiest, screamingest, swooningest nitwits this side of confusion. But you'll probably turn it into a million bucks' worth of publicity and pocket the difference. Stick around—we'll find out if I made progress."

The newsreel froze for the umpteenth time at a close shot where one of the last women to leave Freddie Quick faced the camera.

She rates a paragraph because her face haunted my mind for the wildest twenty-four hours in my career. It still haunts my dreams on rainy nights, bringing me awake in a cold sweat. And for those twenty-four hours it haunted the minds of ten million citizens in and around this novelty-mad metropolis.

The difference was that to them it represented Cinderella, while to me it was the face that leered at Little Red Riding Hood from among the bedsheets.

But at the moment in Gaywin's projection room it was the face of a dark complexioned woman—an almost handsome face, anywhere from twenty-five to forty years old. The tailored garb that went with the face covered a slender form that was equally ageless. She did not look swoon-happy and she bore no trophy, although earlier flashes showed her swarming around Freddie Quick along with the most fanatical of them.

"She is our progress," I told Abe Gaywin, touching her image with the other end of the pointer. "Out of all the screamers in this newsreel she's the only one a hundred and sixty-three Freddie Quick addicts could not identify.

"What I want," I said, draining the last of the coffee, "are blown-up pictures of her face at every angle in which she registers on the screen. Then I want the best of these to appear in every newspaper in New York. You can say she is wanted for a big role in your next epic and you'll offer a hundred dollars reward to the first person who identifies her. I don't know how you can manage it, but that's the general idea.

"Meanwhile," I said, "get hold of some Bertillon system experts to match all entries against her pictures. You do this tomorrow morning and by tomorrow night we ought to know if we're making progress. Will you do it?"

The globular emperor of America's entertainment puffed slowly on his fat stogie and squinted up at the dark complected face on the screen.

"Suppose we find her?" he brooded. "Then what?"

"Then," I told him, "we ask her why she daggered that threat to Freddie's jacket. This mob scene is the only time anyone but uniforms were that close to Freddie's back between the plane and the Ascot, and hers is the only face not accounted for. If we don't find her, we take the next step, which is to dig into the backgrounds of all the uniforms who guarded Freddie enroute to the Ascot.

"If we find her, we learn if she was at Freddie's party last night.

"Then we find out who she knows among the five of us who had a chance to puncture Freddie's throat. Then we ask that party how the puncturing tool was made to vanish. Then you pay me five grand and you start worrying how you can hand the stabber to the cops without letting the newspapers get wind of Freddie's secret. And that's the program."

The fat cigar bobbed up and down thoughtfully.

"You think," Abe Gaywin frowned, "this woman would be so foolish as not to understand why I am using her picture in the papers? Would she believe I am seriously thinking of her in a Gaywin Production? Would she be such a dope as to expose herself, *Wale?*"

"She doesn't have to," I shrugged. "She has neighbors and she shops in stores and she has relatives or friends or acquaintances. Nobody lives in a vacuum. This deal has a Cinderella twist and the local yokels are fed Cinderella from their cradles on up. They're Cinderella-happy.

"It's a lead pipe cinch," I explained, "that out of all the people who know her or see her around at least one of them will think he's doing her a favor by slipping us her identity—not to mention doing a hundred bucks' worth of favor for himself."

"If," Abe Gaywin pointed out, "she is the woman we want."

I let it go at that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nora Doesn't Live Here Any More

THAT night my sleep was troubled. You could say I dreamed a hunch and then awoke knowing I had dreamed a hunch, but not remembering what it was. A psychologist would say my subconscious mind was trying to flash signals to my conscious mind. I remember no particular dream, I simply came awake and began thinking of the pepper in Freddie's

eyes and the lump over his temple and the stab in his throat and the story he had related concerning the violent demise of Nora Jackson, and the subsequent blackmail.

I grappled with the half-remembered hunch awhile, then tried to plunge back into the dream. I merely became wider awake. Across the room Sailor's snore rose and fell in a gentle monotone. I donned slippers and robe, felt my way to the office, switched on the light and blinked my way to the half-filled fifth in the upper left hand drawer of my desk.

After awhile I became annoyed with my scattered thoughts and tried to organize them on paper. The result on my scratch pad was something like this:

Problem: Why throw pepper in Freddie's eyes?

A. So he wouldn't see who sapped him.

B. Nuts! The lights were out anyhow!

Problem: Why keep Freddie out of New York?

A. He might finger blackmailer.

B. More nuts! Freddie couldn't even afford to stick out his tongue at the guy!

Problem: Why try to kill Freddie?

A. Revenge for Nora Jackson's murder?

B. This is an angle.

C. Another angle is the warnings were friendly, by someone who knew he was in danger; the blackmailer, for instance, who wouldn't want his mealticket jeopardized.

Problem: How did the dagger vanish?

A. ?!%!*

Which was all a load of fourteen-carat nothing! I was about to rip the page to shreds in disgust when the first problem registered in my mind again: *Why throw pepper in Freddie's eyes?*

And there it was!

I crossed out the last three words of my answer, leaving it: *So he wouldn't see—period!*

Somebody at that party wanted to make sure Freddie didn't see somebody at that party! Who?

My gaze swept down the page to the second problem and the same answer clicked in my mind: The somebody who threw the pepper didn't want Freddie to come to New York in the first place *because he didn't want Freddie to see—who?*

I wrote "who?" on the scratch pad and wrote beneath it:

A. Someone who turned up unexpectedly at that party?

B. Someone Freddie was bound to meet in a Manhattan sojourn anyhow?

C. Someone who was not around all the other times Freddie visited Manhattan?

And that left one question burning in my mind: *Why?*

And that did it!

The answer had been creeping around my subconscious mind all night in my sleep. Now it strutted boldly through my conscious mind and left me gaping incredulously at my scratch pad.

It was one hell of an answer!

I spent the rest of that night in my chair, mulling the answer over in my mind, testing it, twisting it, toying with it.

Ten minutes after the Gaywin offices opened for the day's business I was scanning the list of guests who attended Freddie Quick's fateful party.

Half an hour later a woman I had never seen before led me into her Park Avenue apartment's living room and smiled over her shoulder: "This is practically the middle of my night. You must excuse my appearance, Mr.—"

"Frederick," I supplied.

"Yes, of course. You told me on the phone. Mr. Frederick. You told me several other fascinating things on the phone."

"I merely echoed Abe Gaywin," I smiled. "He saw you and heard you at Freddie's brawl the other night. And then, despite the—uh—unpleasantness, your voice and you persisted in his mind. He reasoned if you could impress a talent-hardened cynic like himself so deeply, you were solid box office, which is Hollywood for terrific, sensational, magnificent—and pretty good!"

She threw her head back and laughed. She could do it. It was a ripple of sheer joy.

Green satin pyjamas could not hide the feline sleekness of her. That same cat-like quality appeared in her face, slanting her brown, gold-flecked eyes a trifle. Laughter exposed teeth that would flatter any toothpaste. Her copper-colored hair swept up and back under a green bandanna.

What I mean, brother, that stuff on my chin was drool.

Hers was the voice that warbled about the gypsy when the lights went out at Freddie's party.

Helen Reilly.

NOW she curled her calves under the softness of her on a wine-colored divan beside me and treated me to the full impact of her come-hither-but-tread-softly eyes.

"What happens now, Mr. Frederick?"

"Well, something like a quiz program," I said, snagging the questionnaire I had found in the Gaywin office that morning from my pocket. "Mr. Gaywin has a story in mind, but before he can commit himself to a contract he wants to learn how well you qualify. Do you ride horseback, for instance?"

"Darling, I ride, I skate, I ski, I dance, I sing and I love stories. What story has the fabulous Mr. Gaywin in mind for me?"

"A little ditty entitled, 'The Little Corpse Who Wasn't There,'" I grinned at her. "Horseback riding was for instance. We may as well start at the beginning, Miss Reilly. Vital statistics. Birthplace, parents' names, and so on. May I call you Helen, Helen?"

"Put that thing back in your pocket," she pointed at the questionnaire, "and make with the story and you may not only call me Helen-Helen, but Helen-Helen will buy you breakfast."

"I drink my breakfasts," I said and grinned, folding the questionnaire back into my pocket.

"That's what I said, darling. But it will have to be Scotch."

She slid off the divan and crossed half a mile of wine-colored rug to a smoothly curved bar on the other side of the room. She swung open its doors and then paused to vamp me over her shoulder.

"Go on, darling. Tell me about the picture," she urged.

"It's a crime drama with a new wrinkle," I told her slowly. "It's about a guy who comes out of Hell's Kitchen with a voice that carries him all the way to the top—a Crosby throat and a Raft face, sort of."

"On the way up he bumps into this cigarette girl with ambitions to be a thrush. She amuses herself with him. She's a great kidder, always thinking up gags, and he's one of these natural fall guys, the sort of dope who keeps reaching for the wallet in the street on April Fool's day year after year. Am I boring you, Helen?"

Those gold-flecked orbs crinkled at me from across the room where things were happening to a pinch bottle and two tumblers.

"No, darling. Go on. She toys with our hero."

"On the eve of his first trip to the Coast to make his first pic she squeezes a last laugh out of the sap," I continued. "She slips him a Michael Finn. When he snaps out of it she's on the floor with ketchup all over her and the handle of a knife sticking out of the biggest gob of it. He's got diluted ketchup on his hands. Big joke. The big city rube bites hard. He vacates the premises in panic without making sure the thrush is dead."

"He takes the first plane to Hollywood and makes good. But it costs him, on account the would-be thrush stretches her little prank. Now she makes like a blackmailer—and whad-dyaknow?—she collects! This is real fun! Her cigarette income is from hunger, but this stuff comes in thousand-dollar lumps. You sure I'm not boring you, Helen?"

Helen Reilly's back remained toward me. Her elbows were rooted to her sides. Nothing was happening to the pinch bottle and tumblers. "Go on. I'll tell you when to stop," she said.

"Well," I said, "it winds up with the Gaywin touch. She stops counting her dough one day long enough to see the guy in a pic. She falls for him—she falls all the way. Makeup and Kleig lights and a good writer and a good director turn him into her dream boy. But she can't go to him, not after milking him all these years. So she has a slight face lifting job, changes her brand of perfume and wangles a bit job at his studio.

"To boil it down, he falls for her one more time. They even go so far as to set a date for a double-harness. Then he broods he might do unto her as he did unto who she was originally, fearing a dormant strain of homicidal mania. So he has a lost weekend and broods himself into a bona fide homicidal mania which results in the thrush once again lying on the floor with the haft of a knife sticking out of the best part of her, but this time the red stuff isn't diluted ketchup. Then he blows out his own brains—if any, that is. You like?"

Helen Reilly turned slowly from the little bar until she faced me across that wine-colored rug. The pinch bottle and tumblers remained behind her.

"What name am I supposed to have in this supposed story?"

The lilted joy was gone from her voice now. In its place was something like the drum tattoo before the guy gets shot out of a cannon at the circus.

"Names in pics are like women's hats, Helen," I said easily. "They come and go half a dozen times before the story reaches the camera. Right now I think Gaywin has her tentatively named Nora Jackson."

"For awhile," she said, "you had me believing you were a talent scout for Abe Gaywin."

Her tone said our budding friendship had just crawled into a coffin and died.

I erected the tombstone.

"It was a slight error, easily corrected. As a matter of fact I am a talent scout for Freddie Quick. Except what I'm after is homicidal talent."

Those gold-flecked orbs drew a long sword and held the point of it to my throat.

"Freddie was never blackmailed," she said.

"I won't quibble," I told her. "Let us say, then, he paid out two grand lumps for insurance. Since nineteen forty-two he paid out every cent he earned, above taxes and what it cost to eat. Which makes it about the most expensive gag on record."

That sword never wavered from my throat.

"I would like to hire you," she said.

"I can be had," I told her. "All it takes is money."

"I would like to hire you to blow out your filthy little brain," she said.

THEN her eyes swivelled and the sword was gone from my throat. I was gone from Helen Reilly's life. She was halfway to a closed door on the other side of the room. If a cat walked like a woman, it would have been like Helen Reilly crossing that wine colored rug.

She swung open the door and then turned and brought me back into her world. She was trying to say something. Her eyes were bulging with words. All that issued from her throat was a dull sort of croak. Then she pitched headlong to the wine-colored rug and lay motionless.

From the open doorway issued the angry blast of a gun.

The door slammed shut.

Two blinks later I was crouched against the wall, alongside the doorknob, my .32 angled before me—listening.

There was nothing to hear.

Either the door was soundproof, or the quick killer was doing what I was doing, listening behind it, or he was tiptoeing away. The question was, how far away could he get?

On the rug beside me, Helen Reilly was an outflung wrist leading to limp green satin pyjamas that featured a wild mass of red hair that had come loose from her green bandanna. No bullet wound or mark was visible, but then in the loose folds of green satin all that would show would be a small puncture.

On the other hand, my fingers on her wrist told me beyond question that I would never be in her world again.

This took seconds, and seconds had become like diamonds—if there was another exit from the apartment.

The answer lay beyond that door, but right then the last thing in the world that I wanted was to go through that door. I could think of a thousand reasons why I should stay where I was and use the phone for reinforcements or leave for points unknown and let the uniforms draw their own conclusions.

Two reasons outweighed the thousand and held me rooted there on my knees. For five grand and to keep Quinn's rubber hose off my ribs I had to go through that door.

Then my left hand twirled the knob and pushed. I dove forward, sighting up along the barrel pointing from my right hand.

I was aiming at a kitchen that was occupied only by a cloud of cigarette haze near the ceiling. A door on the far side of the kitchen yawned open.

Precious seconds vanished into eternity while I crawled through that door—into the corner of a bedroom featuring an unmade bed, the mingled aromas of perfume and cigarette smoke and a door in the wall to my left that opened on a corridor.

The bedroom was empty.

The corridor went to a bathroom door, then cut left and opened on a dining room. Corridor, bathroom and dining room were empty.

I wasted five more seconds bellying through heavy wine-colored drapes on the left wall of the dining room—and found myself gaping over the barrel of my .32 at Helen Reilly's corpse!

That was great!

The quick killer could be on his way out the foyer to the street and oblivion—or he could be catfooting through the kitchen again, taking another whirl on the merry-go-round!

I whirled back through the draperies—but failed to see the dining room. I failed to see anything.

Something clicked behind my right ear and the draperies vanished, the apartment vanished, the whole wide world became a black, bottomless void into which I was plunging headfirst . . .

* * *

A man was saying: "It's open and shut."

Another man said: "Fifteen years I been waiting for this! For fifteen years this kill-crazy son of a midget talked himself clear of the hot squat. I'd like to see him bull his way out of this rap!"

My eyes opened on the leathery face of Inspector Anthony J. Quinn and the hungry grin that twisted it. Beyond the grin I saw ceiling. Somewhere behind my right ear a pulse was throbbing madly. My tongue felt like a twist of sandpaper.

I tried to sit up. The sole of Quinn's shoe covered my eyes and shoved me down again.

"Try it again," he pleaded. "Try moving a finger or wriggling a toe. Try to get up again!"

Rolling my eyes from side to side, I saw several of Quinn's Homicide goons pause in their labors to grin down at me.

A yard from where I lay was sprawled the body of Helen Reilly. They had removed the upper part of her green satin pyjamas and I could see the dark red hole, about the size of a dime, alongside her breast. A man was setting up a tall stand over her on which to place his camera for the pictures that would be exhibits if it ever came to trial.

My eyes returned to Anthony J. Quinn's leering face.

"You can talk, Shrimp," he said. "You can start from why you called Miss Reilly this morning. The switchboard operator heard you con her about a movie contract with Gaywin, but five minutes ago Gaywin said he had never considered her for a picture. Then, when my man told him you acted as his stooge, Gaywin

clammed. But it doesn't matter, Shrimp—you'll say the words that will unclam that tub of lard.

"Then you can tell me how you came here this morning," Quinn went on talking. He was having himself a time, this rut-brained imitation of a sleuth. "You were the only non-resident to pass the desk in the lobby. We have the clerk's and the house dick's words for that. She was alone until you arrived. Her maid never shows until noon. That makes it a neat little case with one corpse and one suspect. You!

"And then you can tell us how come you burned her down," Quinn continued, losing his girlish grin. "But it doesn't take much to rate a slug from your rod, does it, Shrimp? All it needs is a loose buck for your trouble and you're right in there pitching.

"And that little clout behind your ear," Quinn's voice droned on. "You can tell us about that. You actually put yourself out and it looks impossible. But you're full of impossible little tricks these days—like making that shiv you used on Freddie Quick disappear. That last is just for our curiosity—it won't increase your rap. They only put you in the chair one time."

I tried to sit up again. This time Quinn's shoe on my chest kicked me back to the wine-colored rug. He could do that, even without his goons on hand. I scaled a hundred and twenty-five, wringing wet.

"The answer to everything," I told his leathery leer, "is that I was not here alone with her. I did not fog her. If you will stop drooling over my corpse long enough to look you will see she was plugged with a thirty-eight, or better, and you damn well know I pack a thirty-two."

"It's one hell of a big thirty-two!" Quian chuckled, nodding at a bald-headed Homicide goon standing alongside him.

BALDY was holding the ends of a pencil on which what looked like an Army Colt .45 caliber automatic hung suspended by its trigger guard.

It was unnecessary for me to feel my armpit holster to realize it was empty. I needed no scoreboard to learn where I stood. The quick killer had not only beaten me off the merry-go-round, he had also done a neat job of substituting my seat for his seat on the hot seat! I needed no crystal ball to predict whose fingerprints would bedeck that Army Colt.

"I want a lawyer," I told Quian.

"He wants a lawyer!" Quinn mimicked happily to his grinning goons. He could afford to be happy. There was a brass band marching and flags waving in his expression.

"The D.A.'s a lawyer," he told me. "We'll get together with him and a Speedwriter and

have a little conversation, hey, Shrimp? You'll entertain us with magic. You'll show us how the dagger vanished. Then you'll show us how you made to vanish whatever you used to knock yourself out."

I tried to sit up again, and again Quinn's shoe slammed at my chest.

But now I was the little man who wasn't there! I was to one side, up on one knee, and burying my fist deep into the bald-headed goon's lap!

Quinn was tripping over the shoe that had missed my chest and trying to claw at his hip at the same time. Vaguely, I had the impression the other Homicide goons scattered through that room were clawing at *their* hips!

Baldy did not enjoy my fist in his lap. He jack-knifed—which brought his hands within reach of my free hand—and gripped in his hands were the ends of the pencil on which hung suspended the Army Colt!

It all happened so fast that Quinn was just sprawling on the wine-colored rug when the pencil snapped. The Army Colt was in my right hand. My left cocked the slide—and that was the difference!

A dozen hands fell away reluctantly from a dozen holsters. Any two of them on opposite sides of me could have drawn and fired; but there were times when it paid to be known as a trigger-happy killer—and this was one of the times!

And then, before they could organize, I was backed into the foyer and the whole room stood frozen under the arc of my new automatic. Even Quinn, halfway up from the rug, held it like that.

"I didn't plug her," I told him bitterly. "But you'd stop at me and never look for anyone else. You'd never look an inch past this frame."

Quinn's face was impassive, but I knew he was spinning like a top inside. I backed out the foyer.

A uniform in the corridor guarded the door. I told him Quinn wanted him inside. As he entered I laid the barrel of the Colt under his ear. Then I stepped over him and scanned the corridor.

At one end of the corridor was a bank of elevators. A marble-banistered stairway curved down to the apartment-hotel's lobby at the other. The third door from where I stood had a red sign over it. Exit.

It turned out to be a built-in fire escape.

Hours later I read how uniforms came charging up the stairway while other uniforms held the elevators in the lobby—the results of a quick phone call from Helen Reilly's apartment the instant I was out the door.

By the time they thought of the fire-escape I was on a Fifth Avenue bus, riding uptown.

I read hundreds of other details, including

the fact that I was wanted for murder and the warning that I was armed and dangerous. Citizens were asked to report me on sight, not to be deceived by my size and attempt to capture me personally.

The papers dwelt lovingly on Quinn's statement that my motive in slaying Helen Reilly was probably linked to my motive in stabbing Freddie Quick. "It's dirty, whatever it is," Quinn was quoted. "And there's a fistful of money at the bottom of it, you can bet your bottom dollar on that!"

There was a small item to the effect that Abe Gaywin had been asked whether I was in his employ and he declined to comment.

The stabbing of Freddie Quick was revived. The dancing swoon-star still clung by a hair to his bed in the Polyclinic. Winchell relayed a tip that Freddie was almost willing himself to die. It was a case where a strong urge to see Tomorrow might pull him through, but evidently Tomorrow bored the dying idol of your wife and daughters.

Winchell guessed that "—here is a mystery to which only *Wale* might hold the key!" He was not far off at that!

And there was more than one column devoted to Helen Reilly whose sudden demise nipped what had promised to be a sensational career in the bud. It was in one of these columns that I came across this:

... born to Charles and Helen Jackson in Pittsburgh, Kansas, in 1920, she was christened Nora ...

But that was already known to me—that Helen Reilly was Nora Jackson!

That, of course, was the reason for pepper in Freddie Quick's eyes when the lights went out. Helen Reilly had been singing when we entered the party. And the guy who spilled the pepper and used the sap—and later became the quick killer who shot the thrush and used another sap on me—that guy simply did these things to keep Freddie from learning he had been shelling out blackmail for four years for a little corpse who wasn't there!

And that explained the telegram at the airport in Long Beach and the daggered threat at La Guardia, warning Freddie to stay out of town.

I knew all that, for it was the hunch that wakened me the night before, the only motive a blackmailer would have to keep his victim away from the scene of the crime.

I had erred only in assuming that Helen Reilly was alone in this, that it was she who staged the original phony killing of herself, and then proceeded to collect.

All I had to do now was find the quick killer. And I thought I had an answer to that. The wheels Abe Gaywin had set in motion should suffice. The woman with the dark complexioned face had to be the quick killer's

accomplice and all I had to do was find her.

I had to get to her before Inspector Quinn's homicidal goons got to me.

That was all I had to do.

CHAPTER SIX

The Reluctant Cinderella

MISS Dubina Venner thrust her bony face at me and said: "You surprise me. I would never have suspected a taste in you for Picasso."

I said: "Who's Picasso?"

Her eyes filled with silent laughter. "You continue to surprise me," she said. Her bony hand included the paintings on the wall of the little room in which we sat, one of the exhibition rooms of The Museum of Modern Art—probably the last place in Manhattan the cops would cover in their search for Wale, the kill-crazy shamus. "Picasso is the man who painted those," she said dryly.

I said that was interesting, but I preferred Ann Sheridan in technicolor and, besides, let us get to the point and repeat the answers to the questions I had wired Abe Gaywin.

In that wire I had said:

HORSEFACE WOULD ENJOY MODERN ART AND A CHANCE TO DISCUSS PORTRAITS.

My signature had been: C. BIGFISH.

I risked a wire because his phone might be tapped. Going to his office in person would have been in a class with suicide.

Most of the day I had spent in the museum, wandering around and gaping at, but not seeing, statues that looked like damaged corkscrews and paintings that resembled bad dreams which, I was amazed to learn later, was their object. All day I had wondered if the Big Ball of Hollywood would fluff that wire.

But Gaywin evidently was a fast man on the uptake. Also, he still wanted to play ball. Dubina Venner had ambled in late in the afternoon, and there we sat.

"Well, let me see," the bony faced secretary-child psychologist ruminated. "Mr. Gaywin spoke quite incomprehensibly to me. But reduced to a précis: the 'Face'—whatever he means by that—has not appeared, although several thousand applicants had stormed the gates. Does that make sense to you, Mr.—"

"Jones," I put in hastily, glancing around at the art lovers who cocked their heads at the melting clocks and half-women and six-eyed babies on the walls.

"Of course," Dubina Venner murmured knowingly, "—Mr. Jones. Do you derive any meaning from that?"

I derived a headache from that.

Every paper in town had carried Abe Gay-

win's advertisement with the photograph of the dark complected woman under the heading: ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD FOR THIS WOMAN'S NAME!

What followed was a personalized message from Abe Gaywin: *I ask the picture-going public of New York to help me locate this modern Cinderella. I need her for an important role in a picture that will go into production before the end of this month.*

How my talent scouts found, and then lost, this Cinderella, but salvaged her photograph from the fiasco, is a Comedy of Errors that would put the Bard to shame!

To the lady of the picture I offer a one year contract with Gaywin Productions Inc.

To the first person who identifies her, I offer a reward of one hundred dollars!

To the picture-going public, I promise to continue producing stories that will equal or surpass FOOTPRINTS, which is breaking records daily at the Times Square Gaywin Theatre.

Abe Gaywin

And now Abe Gaywin was telling me—through Dubina Venner—that thousands of applicants' faces had been matched by Bertillon experts against the phantom face of the newsreel, and they had all been found lacking.

It could mean the woman did live in a vacuum, had no friends, relatives or acquaintances—which was unlikely. It could also mean she was a visitor to Manhattan.

It *did* mean I could find no help in that direction. I would have to seek other means of substituting the quick killer's seat for my seat on the hot seat.

"Have you given any thought to that dagger which vanished so utterly, Mr.—ah—Jones?" Dubina Venner asked, derailing my train of thought. "It occurs to me," she said, "that if you could solve that, it may have a bearing on your current difficulties."

I gave her all my attention now.

"Miss Venner, who told you anything short of a trip to Mars could solve my current difficulties?"

That got under her pallid skin and tinted it pink.

"Mr. Gaywin assured me you were completely innocent, that you were victimized by someone who probably felt you were approaching too closely to the solution of the attack on Mr. Quick. I assume, therefore, that the attack on Mr. Quick and your predicament are related. Had I not had Mr. Gaywin's assurance, I would never have undertaken to deliver his message. You did not do what—" her eyes swiftly canvassed the backs of the art lovers in the vicinity and her voice dropped to a whisper "—what the papers said you did, did you, Mr.—ah—Jones?"

Score another beat for the talkie tycoon!

"I did not," I assured her, gazing steadily into her probing eyes. "And part of the attack on Freddie is related to Helen Reilly's sudden death. But not the stabbing part of the attack. Short of Houdini, I don't see who's going to explain that vanishing dagger. And that goes for the stabbing. Pepper in Freddie's eyes and a blackjack on his head make sense, now that I've nosed out a few answers. The stabbing simply doesn't fit."

Her eyes filled with intelligent curiosity.

"You mean the stabbing was not related to everything else?"

"I can't see it," I told her.

And I couldn't. The blackmailer wanted to keep Freddie from recognizing Nora Jackson who had become Helen Reilly. He wanted to keep them apart in order to go on bleeding the dancing sensation, two grand at a bleed. I could understand him shooting Helen Reilly when she threatened his house of cards. But why stab Freddie? You can't collect a cent of blackmail from a corpse!

And barring blackmail, what motive had any of us to murder Freddie Quick?

"I do not relish being under police surveillance," Dubina Venner said primly.

"Who does?" I shrugged.

"Well then, let's *do* something about it!" she urged, "Personally, I feel certain I know *who* stabbed Mr. Quick. The only difficulty is proving it to the police without explaining *how* the dagger vanished."

I FASTENED two hungry eyes on her bony face.

"Lady, if you can say who did it—"

It became a pinkish face again. "Well, I am not absolutely certain—but it reduces itself to a matter of psychology, does it not?" she queried.

"Does it?"

"Of course it does! Mr. Gaywin certainly gained nothing by trying to kill his most profitable employee. And then you would not resort to knife-play. Your biography is vividly detailed in today's papers and always the violence of which you are accused has been precipitated with guns."

"Nice psychologising," I said dryly. "How about the others?"

"Well, I did not stab Mr. Quick. As a matter of fact I abhor violence."

"I believe that," I said. "But I also believe nobody is immune from murdering, given the proper conditions."

"That may be true. But I could scarcely conjure a motive that would lead me to murder in the less than twenty-four hours I knew Mr. Quick, could I?"

"You're doing the psychologising," I said.

"Herman has practically as little motive as I."

"Herman?"

"Mr. Malone. It is true that Mr. Quick had spoken harshly to him—"

"Quick fired him," I amended.

"All right. But Herman's reaction was to wield a bludgeon, if you remember. Herman is simply not the sort to use a knife, and I can't envisage him employing the subtlety necessary to cause the dagger to vanish. Anyhow, he has reacted to the entire situation in primitive fashion. He has severe stomach pains, a common reaction to emotional upheavals among natives."

I almost developed stomach pains of my own, remembering that hairy Monk as I saw him last, gnawing automatically on the sandwich his fingers had striped with Freddie's blood.

"That leaves Joe Morrocco," I said.

"Precisely!" Dubina Venner said.

I told her: "Don't let the mustache and sideburns fool you, Miss Venner. Joe helped boost Freddie up the ladder. Your mind turns to Morrocco because he's a stranger to you and the mustache makes him a Hollywood villain. What could his motive be?"

"Goodness gracious, Mr. Wa—Jones! I do not know the gentleman. All I did was eliminate those of whom I do know something. It happens that they don't qualify psychologically. He remains an enigma simply because I don't know him. But since the others are eliminated, he remains, period! You said you knew the motive of the pepper and clubbing prior to the stabbing of Mr. Quick. What was that?"

"Blackmail."

"Well then—blackmail."

I said: "If Joe Morrocco was blackmailing Freddie, why should *he* try to kill the goose who lays the golden eggs?"

"That, Mr. Wa—Jones, sounds like the sixty-four dollar question. It does not have to be blackmail. If Mr. Quick and Mr. Morrocco were associated sometime in the past, there may be some motive hidden in that past. Goodness me, I should think you would want to probe the issue further instead of sitting back and belittling my efforts to assist you!"

She had something, this sexless stooge for a Gaywin publicity stunt. The vanishing dagger was a point I had neglected, thinking the explanation would fall in place when I had the other answers.

But now I had most of the other answers and the vanishing shiv was as unfathomable as before.

Logic put the stabbing in a class by itself, apart from the peppering, sapping and warnings, which were all part of the blackmailer's attempts to hide from Freddie Quick the fact that Nora Jackson had become Helen Reilly instead of being worm fodder. All that re-

mained to complete the blackmail picture was the identity of the quick killer. But after that, the stabbing continued to stick out like a sore thumb!

Which meant the quick killer and the stabber could be two different people with two different motives. Furthermore, the quick killer could be any of almost two hundred people who were at the party when the lights went out. The stabber had to be one of five.

I told Dubina Venner: "Your point is well made—not that Joe Morrocco hocus-pocussed the dagger, but that it behooves me to look deeper into the stabbing angle. After all, what can I lose?"

"Precisely!" She nodded.

"Then take this message back to Abe Gaywin," I instructed her. "Tell him to bring you and Malone to Joe Morrocco's Casbah Club tonight. Also, tell him to bring Sailor Duffy along. But warn him to be discreet about it. Inspector Quinn may have one or all of you shadowed and evasion tactics will be in order."

"That will bring all five suspects together," she said.

"Something like that," I nodded. "Joe has rooms for private parties. We'll make it sort of a murder party—throw five possible killers together and let the corpses drop where they may."

She giggled at that and rose to leave, this homely secretary-psychologist who was starting to fancy herself a criminologist.

And then I was alone again with the paintings of inside-out women and clocks that melted into breasts.

Between the time the museum closed and the moment night shrouded the streets of Manhattan I crouched in a dark corner of St. Patrick's Cathedral and mingled prayer with speculation.

Night's shadowy concealment was welcome indeed as I boarded a Fifth Avenue bus for Harlem and the Casbah Club.

THE Negro stage doorman wore a fez and a little red jacket, demonstrating how saturated the Casbah Club was with its Near-Eastern atmosphere. He sat tilted backwards on a chair that blocked the rear entrance to the club. He was peering intently at a book on his lap when I stepped from shadow to glare of an overhead bulb. He gently closed the book, holding his place with his thumb, and glanced up at me inquiringly.

"Tell Joe a friend's out back, Snowball," I told him.

The Negro smiled. "For a fugitive from justice you are certainly in no position to antagonize me by indulging in chauvinistic nomenclature," he said gently.

My hand was halfway inside my lapel when I remembered my .32 was with the quick killer and his Army Colt was jammed in my waistband on account my holster was too small. But then I let my hand drop idly to my side as the Negro continued smiling at me. I leaned over and read the title of his book: *Das Kapital*, by Karl Marx.

I said: "You wouldn't throw me to the Cossacks for a slip of the tongue now, would you, Comrade?"

He enjoyed that immensely. "No, Comrade, I would not," he said when his laughter subsided. "I will convey your message to Mr. Morrocco."

He left the book face down on the chair and glided away. A few minutes later he was back, preceding the black mustache and sideburns that were Joe Morrocco's permanent trademarks.

The night club impresario wore a fez also, contributing his little bit to the atmosphere. He nodded to me, glanced up and down the shrouded alley on which the stage door opened, then motioned me to follow him.

We circled through a winding passageway, then climbed a narrow, spiral stairway to Joe Morrocco's office. It was like stepping into the Arabian Nights. In the ten-odd years the Casbah had been gleaming shekels from



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squares Joe had managed to gradually replace tinsel with the McCoy. The rug was from Persia. There were low divans, draped silks, curved swords and various gadgets such as vases and statuary that could be equalled only in the top museums.

A eunuch and half a dozen dancing girls would not have been out of place here. All that broke the Bagdad motif were a massive desk in one corner and the window behind it. And the window opened on what seemed at first to be a Cairo street scene but which turned out, at a second glance, to be the interior of the Casbah Club.

Customers occupied intimate balconies that stepped up from the Cairo street scene in widening terraces. The show filled the street scene endlessly, and it was all of a pattern; jugglers, acrobats, apache dancers, magicians, with only occasional vocalists. Music emerged from behind bazaar stalls where the orchestra was cunningly concealed, and it was mostly Scheherezade style music.

You did not dance at the Casbah Club. You came to eat overly-spiced foods, drink overly-cut liquors, watch the show and soak up atmosphere. Mainly you came to soak up atmosphere.

At the moment a turbanned juggler was spinning four swords in the air and a colored attendant stood by with a fifth.

The window, I knew from earlier visits, was a one-way affair. To the customers in the balconies it was part of the glassy, star-decked dome that gave the illusion of sky overhead.

Joe Morrocco locked the door behind us and preceded me to his broad topped desk. He sat behind it, leaving me to sprawl on a divan. He transferred his fez from his head to the desk and smiled at me. "What's the lay, Cash?"

"Your boy out back took the wind out of my sails," I told him.

"Sammy will do that," Joe Morrocco smiled. "He's studying medicine at Columbia University days. He recognized you, but he minds my business. You didn't come here to chat about him, Cash."

"Abe Gaywin is supposed to be here tonight," I said.

"That's right," Morrocco nodded. "He phoned in a reservation for a party of six. Wants a private room."

"That includes us," I said. "Abe would like not to have Freddie sliced again, if Freddie survives the last blade. And then I would like to shift the heat off my shoulders. The uniforms don't seem to be making headway, so I thought we might work it out ourselves. It's my brawl on Gaywin's dough. That hairy ape, Malone, Miss Dubina Venner and the Sailor will make up the rest of the party."

"All the potentials," Morrocco murmured

thoughtfully, losing his smile. He added: "I don't feel too easy about that shiv deal myself, Cash. Homicide Quinn keeps dropping back in. He seems convinced my background with Freddie was all nice and friendly, but you can't tell about Quinn."

"That's a fact."

"He makes it seem as if he wants me to help him figure how you made that shiv fade," Joe Morrocco said.

"I've been asked how you did it," I said.

We grinned at each other. Just a couple of city boys patting each other on the back to find the right spot to sink a knife.

Finally, he asked: "You just throwing us all together and trusting to pot luck, or do you have a program, Cash?"

"Spiked Zombies would help," I said, looking deep into his dark eyes.

"That's a program," he nodded thoughtfully. His eyes brightened. "Hell, that's an inspiration!"

IN THE Casbah Club the limit to a customer was two Zombies. They started with five shots of different brands of rum. They added a jigger of grenadine and juice of a lime, and sugar. What space in the glass was left was filled with coke. They stuck a slice of orange on the rim of the glass and after that it was each man for himself.

The Zombie that Abe Gaywin raised to his lips differed from the usual Casbah Zombie in that only two of the basic shots were rum—the other three were almost pure alcohol.

"It is all commencing to look hopeless, Wale," he brooded, referring to the picture of the Phantom Lady in the copy of the *World Telegram* he had spread on the table before him. "On you I was pinning some hopes, yet," he said sorrowfully. "But how you stand with the coppers, what is to be the end?"

I said: "At least we know Freddie's shelled out all these years for a little corpse who wasn't there."

"It was blackmail?"

Joe Morrocco frowned at me over his unspiked Zombie.

"What's this about the kid?"

I said: "He's been bled for rubbing out a jill entitled Nora Jackson. But Nora Jackson was Helen Reilly. That's what the pepper and sap were about. After that the bleeder was on his own. When I faced Helen Reilly with the deal, she made like innocent. The bleeder was close enough to do the job Freddie had thought *he* did four years back. The bleeder had to do it for self-protection. I was in the middle and that's how it stands. Catch?"

Morrocco's pursed lips and raised brows indicated that he "caught."

"All it needs now is the bleeder and you're clear," he said.

"That's all it needs." I nodded.

Monk Malone, who was deep into his second Zombie, swung bleared eyes at me.

"You talk big," he sneered thickly, "but I don't think you can rassle yourself out of a paper bag. Anyhow, who's bleeding who, willya tell me that?"

Dubina Venner, who was only halfway through her first Zombie, put an arm on his shoulder.

"Dear boy!" she simpered at him. "You dear, misunderstood child!"

Sailor Duffy, who had entered this private room with a horse shout of greeting and happy palms on my back, and then spurned Zombies for beer, was busily engaged pencilling mustaches on people's faces in the *World Telegram* Abe Gaywin had brought.

"Wale, if what you are saying is correct," Abe Gaywin, on whom the spiked Zombie had no evident effect, said happily, "then Freddie has been worrying about nothing! There is no dirty scandal!" A new thought wiped the happiness from the slab of pork that served as his face. "But trying to kill Freddie by stabbing, a blackmailer would certainly not do, Wale!"

"How right you are!" I murmured.

Joe Morrocco frowned. "Cash, I don't get it. How could Freddie believe he bumped a dame strong enough to shell out when you say the dame was not bumped at all?"

"Maybe it was done with mirrors," I shrugged. "It's a long story as Freddie tells it. But the point was he saw her from a hangover and trusted his eyes. He never felt her pulse or checked her breathing. He simply took for granted the haft of a knife sticking out of a pool of red on her middle meant she was dead.

"Now that she *is* dead," I explained, "we have to guess at the answers. Either she pulled a gag on him with good clean fun as the object, and the bleeder stepped in later to make something of it, or blackmail was on her mind from the outset. Then again, maybe it was no gag. Maybe Freddie *did* stab her—and she recovered—and the bleeder turned it to his advantage.

"However it happened, she can't tell us, and right now Freddie can't tell us. The only one who *can* tell us is the bleeder, the quick killer who gunned her this morning and dropped the blame in my lap. There can be no more answers until we locate that guy."

"Or girl!" Abe Gaywin cut in. "This girl—where's my paper?"

He had started to point out the dark-complected face in the *World Telegram* ad, but his paper was now under Sailor Duffy's palms, and the Phantom Face in the ad was growing a mustache.

"That girl, Wale!" Abe Gaywin pointed.

"She planted the warning on Freddie at La Guardia. Couldn't she be your quick killer?"

He went on talking, but I was no longer listening. I was gaping through Sailor Duffy's spread out fingers and trying to digest what my eyes registered. My gaze flicked up and caught Dubina Venner's expression and, from the shock that made her pallid face whiter, I knew she had come to the same conclusion.

Then my gaze shifted further and I saw that now three of us had the answer. Joe Morrocco's eyes had risen from Sailor's fingers to meet my eyes.

We could have been puppets operated on the same strings then, Joe Morrocco and I. Both our hands flew under our lapels—but *only his emerged with a gun!*

You go through the years developing a quick draw. You study it for hours every day before a mirror, working out the proper angle for your holster, the proper width of your lapel, eliminating every unnecessary motion, practicing for hours every day, for years on end.

You get to a point where no man living could extract a hand gun from holster faster than you, from any relation of positions between you and your target. You prove this through the years as the difference blasts other citizens to their graves while you go on facing their successors.

And then it comes a time when Joe Morrocco stands next in line and your hand beats Joe Morrocco's hand to your holster—and slaps empty leather!

You remember your .32 is with the quick killer! You remember the quick killer's Army Colt is jammed into your waistband! It may as well be in Siberia!

It does no good to realize that Joe Morrocco is the quick killer!

Joe Morrocco is levelling his gun at your chest, and you know he will have to shoot. Because he killed once that day and another corpse would not increase the voltage load in the chair.

For Sailor Duffy's pencil had added a mustache to the face of the dark complected woman—and now her face was the face of Joe Morrocco!

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Little Dagger That Wasn't There

SO THAT was it. The payoff. The black exit.

And then Joe Morrocco fired the weapon he pointed at me. I knew he fired it because I heard the blast and I felt the wind ruffle my cheek, like the tender kiss of death.

But he fired it blindly—because Dubina Venner had seen what Sailor's pencil had wrought and she yanked the paper from under

the Sailor's palms to see it better, and then she hurled the open sheets, scaling them up before the face of Joe Morrocco. His shot was a wild try. The slug buried itself in a silken drape behind me.

He got the paper away from his face finally, but by that time his Army Colt was out of my waistband.

He spun like a top as the automatic exploded in my fist. I had aimed for his middle, but the heavy weapon was unfamiliar to my grip and the heavy slug caught Joe Morrocco's shoulder and spun him around and backwards.

He hit the door to the private room like that. The door flew open and he whirled out.

There was a lot of excitement and confusion in that room then. Abe Gaywin, who had been caught flatfooted, stared at me as if I was a man gone mad, as if I was indeed the kill-crazy shamus of whom the newspapers had warned.

Sailor Duffy had flung the chair in which he had been sitting. The big guy had lightning reflexes despite the tendency of his marbles to roam. But Joe Morrocco was out the door by the time Sailor's chair slammed through the space his head had occupied.

Monk Malone had too much Zombie. He lumbered half out of his chair—which put him directly in my path to the door after the fleeing Morrocco. And then, after circling the hairy giant, I became entangled with Dubina Venner in the doorway. She had evidently forsaken stenography and child psychology for bloodhoundery.

"After him, men!" she was screaming.

Had Joe Morrocco lingered he would have earned a second try at me then, but Joe Morrocco had seen first-hand instances of my marksmanship and he probably figured that one free shot at me was par for the course.

I barely glimpsed him hurching into a doorway on the other side of the corridor. Then I became disengaged from Dubina Venner and pounded through that door after him. It led to one of those balconies overlooking the Cairo street scene. They had been having a party, two grayed wolves in dress suits and two fluffy blondes garbed in scanty wolf-bait. They had been making with champagne in high stemmed glasses.

Their backs were to me, their attention on something immediately below the balcony railing. Beyond the railing I saw other balcony railings, down to the Cairo street scene where a guy in a turban lay on his back on a bed of spikes. He wore a massive block of stone on his chest and another turbanned guy was slamming a giant mallet down at the block.

The grayheads and blondes whirled to face me as I pounded in through the door.

"This is getting tedious," muttered one of

the gaffers, advancing a step as if to make an issue of it. Then he noticed the Army Colt and decided there was nothing in the world he wanted more right then than a little more tedium.

"Where'd he go?" I yelled at the gaffer. He aimed a shaky finger at the balcony rail.

I took five steps where he pointed and scaled the rail, landing in a crouch on a lower balcony. This one featured a smashed table and a waiter on his knees scrambling to recover salvage from broken glasses and bottles.

Something about the scene reached up and opened a door in my memory and a picture stepped out and leered at me—the answer to how the dagger vanished!

I must have yelled something then, because the Army Major and the brunette in the black satin evening dress jerked their eyes from over this balcony's rail to gape dumbly at me. Their eyes almost immediately jerked back over the rail, following me down to the next balcony. But here the picture was different. A leg was disappearing over this balcony's rail!

Six startled faces swivelled towards me as the Army Colt blasted from my hand and the leg vanished. None of the six made a move to intercept me as I leaped to the point of railing where the leg had been. A bullet was there now!

It was close enough to feel as though a baseball bat smashed into my forehead—then it was up through the glass dome that formed a realistic sky over the Casbah Club. But I didn't know about that until tiny shards of glass sprinkled down on the nape of my neck where I hung limply over the balcony rail, trying to set my teeth against the locomotive that was roaring around steep curves inside my skull.

Through a crimson fog that now shrouded the club I glimpsed Joe Morrocco clambering awkwardly like some giant crab along the Cairo street a few yards below where I hung.

As I watched he rolled to his side and pointed a glint of metal at me.

Then he twitched and rose to one knee, still aiming that metal glint up at me.

He shuddered as the second blast from my Army Colt slammed into him. The gun dropped from his hand. He scrambled for it.

The Army Colt roared two more times in my fist.

When the noise and flash and stink of burning cordite subsided I knew the chase had ended. Joe Morrocco lay spread-eagled on his back. His gun was a good yard from his outstretched fingers.

IT SEEMED a dozen years more from then to the moment I knelt at Joe's side. He was still breathing, but in short, erratic gasps. His eyes toured their sockets in wild agony, then

came to rest on me and dulled. Something between a smile and a wince twisted his lips.

My own breathing was ragged. That locomotive still coasted 'round and 'round inside my skull.

Later, I learned the music had faltered into silence. The muscle man with the mallet forsook his partner on the bed of nails and approached me where I knelt over the dying night club impresario.

But the Sailor had followed me down over the balcony railings and slid between the turbanned muscle and my back, and then the mallet was in the Sailor's hand and the muscle was prone on the floor.

Monk Malone had scaled the last balcony rail a few seconds later, followed by Abe Gaywin. I never did learn how Dubina Venner reached the Cairo street scene, but she was suddenly there with the others.

I was unaware of them and the hundreds of faces peering down at us from the terraced balconies. I was straining every ounce of my attention to separate Joe Morrocco's words from his gasps.

"Started as a gag . . . whole damn deal," he was saying. "Later Nora told me . . . used to play around together. I introduced her . . . Freddie. Big laugh . . . how Freddie swiped hotel register. Others in gag took pictures. Weedheads—they forgot all . . . about it. Scattered. Weedheads. You know . . . weedheads."

"Sure." I nodded. "That left only you, Nora and Freddie remembering the gag, only Freddie never did learn it was a gag. What made you try bleeding him on it, Joe?"

"Horses took me in 'forty-one," he gasped. A trickle of claret emerged from the corner of his lips and I blotted it with my handkerchief. "Kept getting deeper, trying to buck stockmarket," he continued finally. "Thought I'd try . . . what's to lose? Got two grand. Figured Freddie could . . . stand it. Tried again and again. Seemed foolproof . . . Nora just a checkroom punk. Little chance they'd get . . . together again. She worked joint in . . . Newark."

"Take it easy, Joe," I told him as he coughed a thimbleful of claret over his chin. "I can fill in the rest. Nora suddenly clicked as a thrush and became Helen Reilly. You knew they'd meet if Freddie ever hit the big town. And if they did meet, you knew he'd turn Abe Gaywin's bloodhounds and the F.B.I. loose on the blackmail angle and sooner or later they'd get to you."

"Tried . . . to stop 'em," Joe Morrocco whispered. "Told her Freddie burned . . . over gag. Might make trouble . . . keep out of his . . . way."

"But she didn't," I said. "And you knew you couldn't use pepper and a sap a second

time to keep them apart if Freddie recovered. So you were hiding in the kitchen when I needed her. You heard her tell me Freddie was never blackmailed. You knew it was a showdown, with a long stretch for blackmail ahead of you unless you could shut her up and avoid me. And you did that, Joe. You shut her up and not only avoided me, but dropped the blame in my lap . . ."

Joe Morrocco's eyes rolled away from mine then, and the lids fluttered shut. He was still breathing—I could still hear the hoarse, erratic gasps. But they were fading, and I did not want him to die yet—for the sake of ten thousand volts of burning juice I did not want him out the black exit yet.

My own eyes rolled then, but they did not have to search far.

It seemed half the cops in Manhattan were scattered around us, standing with drawn Positives that angled down at me like a hundred spokes of a wheel. And among them, standing just two yards behind me, was the shaggy kill king of Manhattan's "finest", Anthony J. Quinn!

My gesture brought his face down alongside mine, inches from the whitening lips of Joe Morrocco. "Joe! Joe! Tell him, Joe!" I pleaded hoarsely. "Tell the cop!"

It seemed years before the dark eyes flicked open. They searched past my eyes until they found Quinn.

"I . . . shot . . . Helen Reilly . . ." he whispered painfully. "Sapped Wale . . . find his rod . . . my office . . . spent night with . . . Helen . . . old—" his lips twisted slowly into a wry smile—"sweetheart . . . blackmailing Freddie . . . ask Wale details . . ."

His glazing eyes struggled to reach mine.

"No . . . hard . . . feelings . . . Cash?"

Soggy drops beaded my forehead.

"We're square, Joe—"

His eyes turned to black glass.

I HEARD Abe Gaywin choke. "Wale—"

I reached down and pinched one corner of Joe Morrocco's black mustache before Quinn could stop me, and yanked at it hard.

It tore loose.

I looked up at Abe Gaywin who looked down at Joe's face with dawning comprehension as he recognized the Phantom Face, the face of the dark complected "woman" to whom he had offered a year's contract in Hollywood in every paper in New York.

"Shrimp," Quinn growled, "how'd he make that shiv disappear?"

"He didn't," I said wearily. "Joe Morrocco didn't stab Freddie. He had no reason. It takes a reason to stab a guy, but it was all hash to me until I came down those balconies and saw the answer."

"What?"

"Broken champagne glasses," I said.

"That's comical as a crutch," Quinn scowled.

"Ask *him!*" I said, pointing at Monk Malone. The hairy gorilla stood a few yards from the group, gaping down at Joe Morrocco's corpse with a lax jaw. Now the jaw snapped rigid and the guy stared at me from eyes that were hefting war clubs and hurling them at my head.

"His reason," I said, "is Freddie fired him a few minutes before the lights went out. He's a hothead. He tried to skull Freddie until Sailor put him away. He tried to use his paws on me for calling him a goon, the goon. You said yourself he did time for conking an acrobat who used language on him at a circus."

"Except for Quick firing him, it's nothing we didn't know, Shrimp," Quinn muttered.

"Sure, sure, there's nothing to any of it we didn't know. It was right there in front of us the whole time—all we had to do was fit the pieces to make a picture out of the puzzle.

"The last thing Freddie did before getting stabbed was to call out to Abe Gaywin," I said. "We all figured Freddie wanted to say hello—and no doubt Freddie had something like that in mind. But this hairy freak thought Freddie intended to tell Gaywin he had fired Malone. That's your motive. And he was holding a ready-made shiv in his hairy fist. That's your opportunity. And he's a hothead. That cinches it. Ask Miss Venner. She'll tell it to you in psychology."

"All right, Shrimp," Quinn soothed. "You're going a little fast. We have a motive. But what's his ready-made weapon? And how'd he make it vanish?"

"The only way you'd expect an animal to make something vanish!" I told him. "Until I saw the broken champagne glasses I'd forgotten about the Martini in the gorilla's fist. I'd grabbed for it to wash the pepper out of Freddie's eyes, but the animal clung to the stem and the glass came apart. Later, when no pieces of glass were found, nobody remembered it. Nobody figured the stem of a cocktail glass would make a four inch stab with smooth sides!"

"*The stem of a cocktail glass?*" Quinn howled. "Don't pull that, Shrimp! We searched Malone along with the rest of you. There was no stem of any cocktail glass in that room—there were no broken pieces of glass! D'you think my men would overlook a lead like that?"

"How could you notice what wasn't there?" I howled back at him. "I told you he is made like an animal! The freak spent most of his life in sideshows. You told me yourself he used to eat razor blades and old light bulbs! Now he turns up with a bellyache!" I spat the question at the gaping murder master of

Manhattan: "What do you think was in those sandwiches the hairy ape chewed to pieces while you flatheads searched him?"

"You mean he ate the cocktail glass?" Quinn marveled.

I did not have to answer that. Monk Malone was answering it. He was charging at me with cobra-like fingers poised to rip me into small pieces. He was almost on top of me when Sailor Duffy drifted between us.

All I saw was Sailor's left elbow snap forward. Then Sailor stepped aside and I watched Monk Malone crumple lifelessly to the Cairo street scene.

"I keep tellin' ya he's a sucker for a left, Cash!" the Sailor rumbled.

* * *

So that tied it.

Quinn crawled back to his Centre Street hole to resume nursing dreams of me frying on the Ossining pan and I retired to our office-apartment to count and re-count the fifty one hundred dollar bills Abe Gaywin had promptly paid me.

The Fat Boy of filmland took Dubina Venner back with him to give her multiple talents fuller play. Sailor Duffy withdrew to the sweaty confines of a gym where he resumed training for the championship fight that would never be. Monk Malone was forcibly retired to a mental institute and Joe Morrocco was duly retired to Woodlawn.

Freddie Quick regained the urge to see tomorrow, as those of you readers who penetrated the disguise of his name well know. He turned the corner the day he was allowed to see a headline that Nora Jackson had finally become a little corpse who *was* there.

He lives in a mansion peopled with servants and such these days. Gaywin Productions recently hinted that his next epic will be entitled: *Stab!* And it wouldn't surprise me at all if the plot is no surprise.

But the real heroines of this yarn, without whom none of these good things would have happened, without whom Quinn would have gloated while I fried, without whom Freddie Quick would have never found the will to leave his hospital bed for any place but a slab in the morgue, and without whom Joe Morrocco and Monk Malone would still be going their unfettered and homicidal ways—the real heroines, who isolated for us the Phantom Face in the newsreel, continued humbly to throng the streets around the Poly-clinic Hospital.

And all the reward they asked was a chance to press against the cordon of uniforms the day Freddie Quick emerged from the Poly-clinic and lovingly chant: "Fred-die! Fred-die! Fred-die!"



DEATH SENDS ORCHIDS

By JOHN WHITING

Author of "Death in the Cards," etc.



Donlan grasped the wrist and pulled it against the building.

A Mike Donlan Novelette

Gertrude Eisen had what it takes—she brought out the wolf in a lot of males. But one of them whistled too hard—he huffed and he puffed and he blew her life out!

WHILE the mortician beamed at them from the head of the coffin, Mike Donlan and Lincoln Adams viewed the mortal remains of Gertrude Eisen.

"She looks very natural, don't you think?" Mr. Schmidt asked unctuously, still smiling his professional smile.

The police reporter of the Honolulu *Telegraph* winked at Donlan.

"If a ship tied up in port with her boilers

cold looks natural, so does she," Adams said. "Take that wistful expression off her face, smear on a little lipstick, and set a little green hat on the side of her red head, and you might have something. If she saw the way you got her laid out, she'd cuss like a stevedore."

Mr. Schmidt cocked his head at the reporter to see if he was serious, decided that he was, and shook his head. He was not convinced.

"Mrs. Simon thought she looked natural."

Mike Donlan knew what the reporter meant. In death, Gertrude Eisen was merely a little plump woman of forty, with red hair, faultlessly waved, large blue eyes, a small, determined chin, and lots of curves. Even Mr. Schmidt's full-draped white gown couldn't take the latter away from her. Donlan preferred thinner women, who accentuated the positive, but he could see that she would call to the wolf in a lot of males. Her upper teeth protruded just enough to be attractive. He remembered that Adams had said that she lisped slightly, and that there was a warm, earthy quality about her.

The damp coolness of the funeral parlor and the heavy scent of flowers made him feel a little ill. He should have known better than to do this right after lunch. He had to get away from the artificial atmosphere, and from the beaming Mr. Schmidt, before he could appreciate fully that someone had hated the plump little woman enough to plunge a knife into her heart, not once, but three times.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested, and a moment later they were on the street, with the early afternoon sun beating down upon them.

Bathers travelling to and from Waikiki Beach passed them, some hurrying towards the ocean to cool off; others, having taken what the water and the sun had to offer, strolling contentedly homeward, their minds dwelling on a cool drink, a shower, or the sensual luxury of light clothing upon a freshly stimulated skin.

"It doesn't seem real," Donlan said, voicing his thoughts. "That woman back there in the coffin. All these people going about their business and their pleasures as usual. A few days ago, she was just like them. It isn't real to get a newspaper clipping about her murder in the mail, with five hundred dollars in worn twenty-dollar bills but no instructions. If someone wants me to investigate her death, why didn't he say so?"

Lincoln Adams looked up at the ruggedly handsome face of the big private detective, noting his short, slightly lop-sided nose, serious gray eyes, humorous mouth, and preoccupied frown. He chuckled and slapped him on the back.

"There's nothing unreal about five hundred bucks, brother. As long as someone wants to foot the bill, why worry about cause and effect? Stop being Irish, and let's do something practical, like interviewing Doc Justin. He knows as much about her as anyone I can think of offhand."

DR. ABRAHAM JUSTIN rapidly dispelled any sense of unreality which lingered in Mike Donlan's mind.

He was business-like, sympathetic, and co-

operative, all at the same time. A successful psychiatrist, he exuded confidence. He was of medium height, broad of shoulder, and deeply tanned. A full mustache and dark hair were attractively flecked with gray. Donlan estimated his age at forty-five. As he listened to the detective's explanation of his call, Dr. Justin's lower lip massaged his upper one, and, at frequent intervals, he nodded his head in agreement.

"Adams," Donlan continued, indicating the cynical police reporter who was lounging in a rattan chair against the wall of the cool, attractively furnished office, "said you could tell me more about her than anyone else."

Dr. Justin's glance wandered over the reporter then returned to Mike Donlan. "That is true," he said. He put his chin in his hand and gazed intently at the ceiling. "I first met her three years ago at someone's Aloha-party. We became friendly, and I got in the habit of dropping in at her curio store, which is just across the street."

The doctor pointed to the front windows of the office. Venetian blinds cut off most of the view. "Later, she came to me for treatments. That didn't last long, but she had become accustomed to unburdening herself to me, and she has continued to do so."

"What did she consult you for?" Donlan asked.

Dr. Justin moistened his lips. He smiled. "She had had two rather unfortunate marriages, and she felt that there was something lacking in herself. She felt that she was holding back something, or searching for something which was not there, which accounted for the failure of her marriages. She was a curious woman, wonderful in her way."

"What did you advise her to do?"

"I tried various things, without discovering anything which helped her a great deal. I finally arrived at what seemed to me an ideal solution to her problem."

Mike Donlan waited for the psychiatrist to continue, but he was again gazing at the ceiling and pulling at his mustache.

"What was your solution?"

Dr. Justin smiled at him. "I advised her to marry me," he said.

Donlan felt his mouth dropping open.

The doctor laughed. "That surprised you, didn't it? That's when the treatments stopped. I found myself much too interested in her as a woman to be able to take the impersonal approach which one needs with a patient, although I honestly felt that my solution would solve her problem. She thought so too for a time, but at the last moment she backed out. I was quite upset for a while, but finally accepted the situation. Nevertheless, I renewed my offer from time to time. We went along like that, hot and cold, for almost a year. She

would come almost all the way back, then someone else would loom on the horizon, and off she would go. He would last a few weeks, or a few months at the most, then she would tell me all about it, we would resume where we left off, get to a certain point again, then the same thing would happen. At times, there were two or three contenders for her favor at the same time. Some of them were just as casual as she, but, usually, she stirred up something which was a little hard to handle. I managed to extricate her from several rather serious predicaments. I think that is what happened this time. She got into something, it got out of hand, and the man in the case freed himself with a knife."

"Any idea who it might be?" Donlan asked, not expecting much.

The psychiatrist bounced his fingers on the top of his desk, nodded, and said: "I've been doing little but think about it since Monday, when I learned about her death. I've been over it several times with the police. A Lieutenant Kau, particularly.

"Saturday, she took an excursion into the country with Bella Simon, a woman I had warned her against seeing. I have no quarrel with religion, but I have with the sticky sentimental kind which Mrs. Simon radiates. If Gertrude needed religion, and she did if anyone does, she should have gone to a professional.

"At any rate, Gertrude drove with her around the island Saturday evening. Bella Simon stayed with a friend at Kailua, and Gertrude took a room at the hotel. She works and plays hard during the week, and she usually tries to rest over the weekend. After dinner, the three of them, Gertrude, Bella Simon, and her friend, whose name I have forgotten, called on a fellow named Gustafson, whom I do not know."

Adams opened his eyes and said in his dry, New England voice: "Retired shipping man. About fifty-five. Very Nordic. Likes to talk to anyone who knows something. He has

gathered a library together which would do credit to a small college, and he's going through it like Sherman went through Georgia. He's a nice guy. His first name is Erik."

"Someday I'm going to find someone Adams doesn't know," Donlan said, grinning at the psychiatrist.

"That's the man all right," Dr. Justin agreed. "Gertrude was quite impressed by him, and Adams' thumbnail sketch would explain it. No one could deny that she was intelligent and clever. She was capable of reciting a touchingly beautiful poem in one breath, then in the next, telling a story that would make all of your inhibitions stand on end."

"She could tell some whoppers," Adams agreed. "Did she ever tell you the one about the country girl who . . ."

"Let's skip that," Mike Donlan interrupted. "You were telling us about the three women going to see Erik Gustafson."

DR. JUSTIN sighed. "It's hard to believe she's dead. She was so full of warmth and life," he said, shaking his head sadly. "At any rate, the three of them called on Gustafson. They sat around and talked for a while—am I correct in assuming that Gustafson leads a rather monastic life?" He looked inquiringly at Adams.

"You said it, kiddo," Adams answered. A cigarette in the corner of his mouth bobbed up and down as he talked. "He has been attacking his books as if he were afraid he didn't have enough time left to dig as far down as he wants to go."

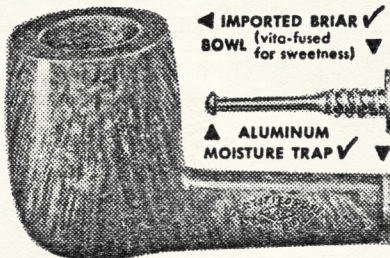
"It's trite to say he is at the dangerous age, so far as a woman like Gertrude is concerned, but you can imagine what Gertrude might do to a man. Gertrude said she noticed a change in Bella Simon, but she didn't think much about it. After a short while, Bella said they must leave. Gustafson suggested that Gertrude stay a while, that he would run her over to her hotel later. Gertrude said no, that she was tired and would go with Bella. When

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the three got up to go, Gustafson detained Gertrude a moment, suggesting that he call at her hotel a little later and take her for a drive. She thanked him but declined, saying she was tired, and followed the other woman to Bella's car. They dropped her at her hotel, saying nothing to her but goodnight, and drove off. About ten minutes later, Gustafson called her from the lobby, suggesting that they have a nightcap together. She went down, had a drink, they talked for a while, then she returned to her room.

Bella Simon was supposed to call for her the next day at one o'clock. One o'clock passed, then two. Finally, she called Bella's friend, asking if something was wrong. The friend told her that she had better not insist upon speaking to Bella, nor expect Bella to drive her back to Honolulu. Gertrude was thunderstruck. She realized all at once what the trouble was, and it hurt her deeply to think that Bella could condemn her without saying a word, either before or after the trip to Gustafson's, to indicate that she was interested in Gustafson in any way, for Bella had made quite a point, in her attempted conversion of Gertrude, of the deep spiritual and all-embracing love she still bore for her dead husband. When I talked to Gertrude Sunday night, she was in tears about it. I have never seen her so deeply affected about anything so trivial."

"You were going to tell me whom you suspect," Donlan reminded him.

The psychiatrist pursed his lips. "I know. This is groundwork for what I want to say. You see, the police told me that she was killed between ten and eleven Sunday night. I'm trying to explain to you how she was feeling then to eliminate one possibility—the unknown sex maniac the police seem to have a tendency to seize upon. Gertrude wasn't above picking up some interesting stranger in a bar, but she didn't do that without a surprisingly expert study of the prospect, which involved several hours, at least. We had one of our long talks Saturday morning, and I know there was no new male on her mind. She was feeling too woebegone to go out, so her murderer must have been someone she knew well. My point is, we can eliminate a casual pickup."

Mike Donlan nodded. "O. K.," he said, "I'll go along with you there. Who does that leave?"

Dr. Justin held up one strong, thick-fingered hand and bent down two square-ended fingers. "I have already mentioned Bella Simon and Gustafson. I think they are both possibilities. Gertrude would have been inclined to see Bella, had she called, hoping the lady was coming around to apologize. Gustafson she might have seen because, having been branded a thief, she might have wanted to eat some of

the fruit. Had she felt that way she would have had him bring her back to town, instead of spending most of the afternoon waiting for the bus, but he might have come to Waikiki to see her."

Dr. Justin bent over a third finger. "Ray Lockheed, a machinist for Inter-Island. He is a solid, down-to-earth character. Gertrude was extremely interested in him until she met his family. He's a widower with two teen-age girls and lives with his parents. Gertrude and the family looked each other over. Gertrude decided they were too solid for her. The family decided, she felt, that she was too flashy. He was her latest prospect, but he went into eclipse about a month ago. He has phoned her several times, but, so far as I know, they haven't seen each other.

"Joe Palermo," Dr. Justin continued, turning down his index finger. "He's a . . ."

"This is beginning to get interesting," Adams commented, sitting up in his chair. "Giuseppe Palermo is the closest thing to a racketeer we got in the Islands. In a nice way, of course."

The psychiatrist nodded. "I was afraid of him. Like Bella Simon, he's a sentimentalist. He's impulsive. He's jealous. He caused some trouble about Ray Lockheed seeing so much of Gertrude. And, in a small way, he's a power on the wrong side of Fort Street. Did you know, for example, that he has a wife in the asylum whom he visits once a week?"

Mike Donlan shook his head. Adams nodded.

"I heard something about it," the lean reporter said, "but I thought it was just one of those things. So Giuseppe has been stepping out with Gertrude?"

"He was one of the violent cases I had to rescue her from," the doctor continued, pulling at his full mustache and staring at the top of his desk. "Gertrude was a remarkable woman. I believe she had more in common with Palermo than anyone else she has ever met, but he couldn't desert his sick wife. She recognized how strongly he was being pulled in opposite directions. She was afraid of what he might do. At two different times, he threatened to kill her and himself, but both times he broke down and sobbed in her lap. For a short time, he seemed better, then he returned, determined to find an answer to an insolvable question. More scenes. I think he suspected the relationship between Gertrude and me. Perhaps she told him. At any rate, he came to me for advice, heard what I had to say, and ended up threatening to take care of me if I did anything in line with my advice, which was for him to leave Gertrude alone."

The doctor wet his lips and shook his head at the vagaries of human nature.

"Is that the crop?" Donlan asked, shifting

around in his chair to ease a leg which had gone to sleep. He was amazed and a little shocked to find that the little red-haired woman could cause so much havoc in the world of men.

The psychiatrist folded his thumb across the four folded fingers, making a fist. "One more," he said, smiling sadly and examining his fist with something like surprise. "It comes out even. The fifth and last suspect is Doctor Abraham Justin."

Mike Donlan found that there was little he could say to that. The psychiatrist's tone was so matter-of-fact and final.

He didn't seem to expect a comment, for he continued: "If I were the murderer, it wouldn't be hard to arrive at a motive, would it? The opportunity is the only stumbling block. Assuming that Gertrude was murdered between ten and eleven Sunday night, as the police say, I was playing bridge with the Templetons. Doctor and Mrs. George Templeton, and their daughter, Inez. They live about a block down the street. We are all such fervent bridge addicts that none of us left the room, with one exception. I went to the kitchen to mix some drinks one hand when I was dummy. After mixing them, I found that the hand was still being played, so I phoned Gertrude. That was when she told me about her experiences with Bella Simon in Kailua."

"What time was that?"

"Very close to ten o'clock, perhaps just a little later," Dr. Justin answered. "She said one other thing which has been intriguing me, mainly because the police and the newspapers have not mentioned it, and it is the sort of thing you reporters delight in, Adams."

"What's that?" Adams asked, standing up and stretching his thin body.

Dr. Justin stood up behind his desk, resting his weight on his two hands, the fingers bent under like those of a football lineman. He shook his head. "She said that on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, she had received a large black orchid, accompanied each time by a verse from Shakespeare."

"Orchids? Shakespeare?" Donlan repeated. "Odd, isn't it?"

Adams ran his fingers through his thin, sandy hair and closed one eye. "Brother, the word for it is screwy," he stated.

Mike Donlan eyed the psychiatrist appraisingly. "There's just one other question," he told him. "Did you mail me five hundred dollars to sit in on this case?"

Dr. Justin smiled. He walked with Donlan and the reporter to the door of his office. "Why would I do that?" he asked.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Donlan answered. "Does Bella Simon live somewhere in this neighborhood?"

The doctor walked out on the sidewalk with

them and pointed to a set of court apartments in the next block. "She lives in the same court that Gertrude did," he said. "Will you let me know if you find out anything?"

"You'll read about it in the *Telegraph*," Adams promised him.

WHEN Donlan explained the reason for his call, most of the welcome faded from Mrs. Bella Simon's face. She was a pleasant-looking woman of about fifty, with a fresh complexion and white hair. There was an element of serenity about her, but her smile was of the practiced kind which is recommended by beauticians to prevent wrinkles about the mouth. She frowned at Mike Donlan, and three parallel wrinkles appeared on her smooth forehead.

"I have told the police all that I know," she protested. "More than once. I have no intention of going over that painful weekend again."

Mike Donlan rubbed his lop-sided nose with one finger and eyed her as a small boy eyes a teacher who has sentenced him to an hour after school.

"It'll save your friends a lot of bother," he said.

Bella Simon gave in. "Oh, very well. What do you want to know?"

Donlan crossed his legs and relaxed in his chair. "To start with, how you felt about Gertrude Eisen's behavior on Kailua."

Mrs. Simon's eyes narrowed, and, for a moment, she didn't emit much serenity. "I was never so shocked in my life. Never. I knew, of course, what Gertrude was like, which is why I took the trouble to try to show her the pleasures one may get from the simple things of life. Even though she's dead, I find difficulty in forgiving her. Imagine flirting so outrageously with a stranger! I could forgive her that, but to make a secret engagement behind my back to see Mr. Gustafson later that evening . . .!"

"Did she do that?"

Bella Simon's eyes snapped. "She certainly did. I waited across the street from the hotel, expecting just such an occurrence, and, sure enough, Erik Gustafson came driving up as soon as he thought we had left."

"You carrying the torch for Erik?" Adams drawled.

Bella favored him with a scorching glance. "I consider Mr. Gustafson to be one of my dear friends. We often have long, quiet talks which strengthen him a great deal."

"There's more than one way to gain strength," Adams agreed.

"Did you see her after that?"

"I did not." Bella Simon was emphatic. "After spending a horrible Sunday, I returned Sunday evening. I couldn't bear the

thought of spending the night so close to Gertrude, thinking the evil thinks I did about her, so I stayed with a friend on the Ali Wai. I suppose you want her name and address?"

Donlan nodded. He made a note of the information. "Thank you, Mrs. Simon. That wasn't too difficult, was it?" he asked.

"You better be careful of the green-eyed monster, sister," Adams advised from the door, winking at her.

"Well!" Mrs. Simon gasped.

DONLAN parked the station wagon beside the shed housing the Inter-Island Shops and went inside. A man with a round, damp face came to meet him.

He shouted to be heard above the pounding of drill presses, the whine of lathes, and the clatter of an overhead belt system: "I suppose you're lookin' for Ray Lockheed?"

Donlan nodded his head.

The foreman muttered something, went to a husky man in loose blue overalls working on a lathe, tapped him on the shoulder, and jerked his thumb towards the door in which Donlan was standing. He shouted a few words in the husky man's ear.

Donlan enjoyed the scent of oil and steel shavings in the shop, but he was glad to re-join Adams outside. He decided he could never like the noise, even if he got accustomed to it.

Lockheed approached them, wiping oil from his hands upon a piece of discolored waste. He was husky, as Donlan had noticed inside, with a hooked nose and a square jaw. His light hair was cut short and stood damply erect. He grinned at Donlan and Adams.

"The Bull of the Woods is getting a little fed up with my visitors," he said. "You from the police again?"

Donlan introduced himself and Adams, and each of them grasped Lockheed's hard, damp hand. "Can you tell us anything about Gertrude Eisen that might help us find her murderer?" Donlan asked.

Ray Lockheed stared at the ground and worried a pebble with the side of his shoe. After hesitating a moment, he looked up and said: "About all I can tell you is that I loved her and wanted to marry her. For a while, I thought she wanted that too, but it just didn't pan out. I haven't seen her for over a month. I called her several times, but beyond a promise to let me know if things changed with her, I didn't get very far. It was the kids, I guess."

Lockheed nodded. "And my folks. She thought they were a little old-folksy, I guess. I guess we are. I'd do anything for those kids."

"Except give up Gertrude," Donlan suggested.

"Including that," Lockheed answered. "She was the most attractive woman I've ever met. Everything interested her. She told me she liked me because I was so virile and always had oil under my fingernails. Funny. She didn't seem to mind about me working with my hands. Another thing she said that stuck in my mind was that aristocrats were above being conventional."

"That's blarney," Donlan said, looking at the man and liking him. "Your aristocrat has a code and a sense of responsibility, if he's an artistocrat. It sounds good, but you see all the trouble it can get you into."

Lockheed didn't look up from his study of the ground. "I suppose so," he agreed without much interest.

"How about Sunday night?"

"I haven't much of an alibi. I took the kids to the early show. We got back about nine-thirty. I sat on the porch for a while, but I was restless. I walked around for about an hour and a half, then I went home to bed."

"Do you live at Waikiki too?"

Lockheed laughed. "Not me. I just play there once in a while. I have a little place in Kaimuki."

"Thanks, Lockheed. Be seeing you."

As they drove off, Donlan looked back. The machinist was standing in the same place, digging a hole in the gravel with the toe of his shoe. "He's sweating it out," Donlan said.

"What about him?" Adams asked.

Donlan shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Could be, but I don't think so. He seems to have his feet on the ground."

"To say nothing of his heart. What's the next stop?" the reporter asked. "It's four o'clock, and I like to start thinking about knocking off about this time."

"The police station. I want to talk to Moki."

Moki, or more properly Lieutenant Moses Kau of the Honolulu Police, had a caller when they arrived.

Adams greeted Erik Gustafson and introduced him to Mike Donlan. As Donlan looked him over, he thought that if nothing else came of the busy afternoon, he was meeting some interesting people. Gustafson was a big man, or he had been. In the course of his fifty-five or -six years, he had fined down. His body was straight and strong, his hair was between ivory and white, and his face was lined. He looked his age, but his was the late middle-age of maturity, not of approaching senility. And he had found whatever it was he was searching for. It was written in his eyes and in his quiet, rather eager voice.

The huge Korean-Hawaiian chief of the detective bureau was in strange contrast to him: the athlete going to seed. His heavy, more than life-size head, with its woolly, graying

hair, his flat-nosed, placid face, half-veiled eyes—all spoke of a man who had met life, knew all of its tricks, and expected to sit there behind his desk for many years to come, becoming wiser, more silent, and more cynical.

"Hello, Donlan," he said ignoring the reporter. "What you want?"

Mike Donlan told him about the retainer he had received in the mail that morning, taking an envelope containing the bills from his breast pocket and throwing it on Moki's desk. As Moki removed the soiled twenty-dollar bills from the envelope and glanced at them without too much interest, Donlan wondered just what the police officer thought of him. He had never said, nor had he ever complained about some of the corners Donlan had cut in the past. It was a subject Donlan thought better to leave unexplored.

Moki tossed the money back with a grunt which could mean anything.

"While Mr. Gustafson is here, I'd like to ask him a few questions," Donlan said.

Moki said nothing. He looked at Erik Gustafson.

"I'd like to hear your version of Gertrude Eisen's and Mrs. Simon's visit to your place Saturday evening."

Gustafson looked surprised.

"Didn't you know Mrs. Simon left Gertrude Eisen in Kailua because of it?" Donlan asked.

"Why, no," Gustafson said. "I realized that she was a little annoyed with me, but . . ."

"You didn't see Miss Eisen after the three women left your place?"

"I saw Miss Eisen for about half an hour at her hotel shortly after that. That was the last I saw of her, until I went around to the funeral home this morning. We had a drink in the bar and talked for a while, then she said she was tired, intended to go to bed and to sleep most of the next day, and went to her room.

"I called at about three o'clock the next afternoon and discovered that she had checked out. I thought nothing more about her until Saturday evening, when I decided to drive into Honolulu and look her up."

Donlan raised his eyebrows at Lincoln Adams, but the reporter was making a sketch in his notebook. "Did you see her?" he asked.

Gustafson shook his head. "No, the only listing in the phone book was her curio shop, and it didn't answer when I rang it. I tried Mrs. Simon's number, but that didn't answer either. I went around to the library and withdrew a book I wanted, then I returned home."

"What time did you get home?"

"About eleven-thirty."

"And it takes a little less than an hour to drive to Kailua."

"I drove slowly. Miss Eisen had disturbed me, and I couldn't get her off my mind. She was the most sensual woman I have ever met, and I've met many women. I was trying to analyze just what it was that she gave out that

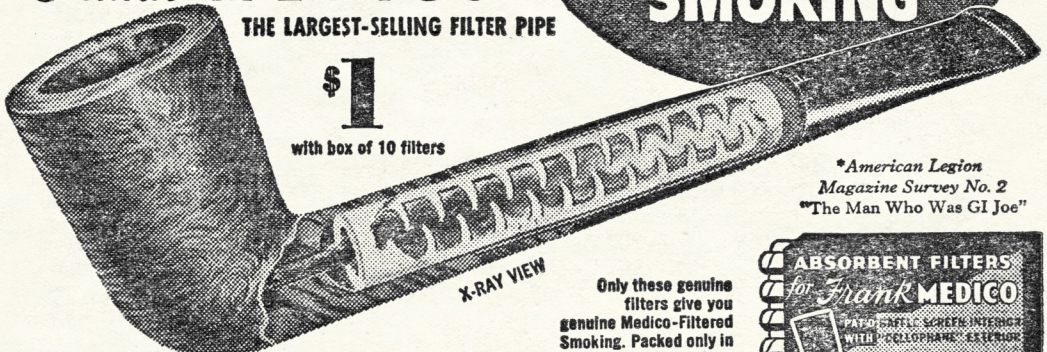
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affected me so. I haven't been so disturbed in years. It was a gratifying feeling in an old man."

"Plain and unadulterated sex," Adams supplied.

"I suppose that is as good an explanation as any," Gustafson said with a sigh.

"Can you tell me anything which might explain her murder?" Donlan asked. "Did she say anything like that when she talked to you?"

Gustafson shook his head. "Except for the twenty or thirty minutes I talked to her Saturday night, I had little opportunity to learn much about her. We talked about religion and Hawaiian legends, for the most part."

"Did you send me this five hundred dollars to investigate her death?" Donlan asked, tapping the envelope containing the money on Moki's desk.

"No," Gustafson said slowly. "I might have, had it occurred to me, but I would hardly do it in such a secretive manner." He stood up. "Is there anything else? If not, I'd like to get back to Kailua. Miss Eisen's death has completely upset my whole routine. That sounds callous, but I see nothing I can do to help."

Moki said: "By-an'-by, maybe I want to ask you some more questions."

Erik Gustafson bowed slightly, shook hands all around, and left the room.

ADAMS lit a cigarette, blew a puff of smoke towards Moki, and looked at the Korean-Hawaiian without pleasure.

"Now that the innocent public has departed, maybe you'll tell me why you held out that item about the black orchids Gertrude received just before someone brought her career to an abrupt end." Adams said.

"Who tell you that?" Moki said quickly. He looked from the reporter to Mike Donlan for an explanation.

"Doc Justin."

Moki opened the top drawer of his desk and withdrew a sheaf of papers with some money clipped to the top of it. The bill on top was a worn ten dollars. He removed the top bill and four others exactly like it from under the clip and three small clippings pinned to blank cards such as florists furnish their customers. He spread all of the collection out on his desk.

"I think I keep this under my hat for a while. By-an'-by, I think, maybe someone say something about it. What Justin say about the black orchids?"

"He merely said that Gertrude had mentioned getting one on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, with verses from Shakespeare. She told him when he phoned her Saturday night," Donlan explained. "He wondered why neither

the police or the newspapers had mentioned them. By the way, Moki, did you check his alibi with the Templetons?"

"Yeah-yeah," Moki said. He passed the three small pieces of cardboard upon which the clippings were mounted to Donlan. "Maybe these mean something to you."

The clippings were cut from a cheap volume of poetry. The type was uneven in shade. All three verses were short. One spoke of love, the second suggested death for the red-haired woman, and the third contemplated an attack by worms upon the body of the sender:

*To me, fair friend, you never can be old;
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still.*

*No exorciser harm thee!
Nor witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill com near thee!
Quiet consummation have;
And renowned be thy grave!*

*No longer mourn for me, when I am dead,
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world, with vilest worms to
dwell.*

"Whew," Adams whistled, reading over Donlan's shoulder. "The boy who gathered those together had something on his mind."

"Yeah," Donlan agreed, "murder."

"You think the guy who send these kill her?"

"I don't see how there can be any doubt about it," Donlan said. "I don't believe in coincidence. Has that money anything to do with these?"

Moki nodded, shoving the five ten-dollar bills forward for inspection. He said: "Thursday morning a small boy come to Island Florists with an envelope. He gave it to them. Inside is this fifty dollars, the three cards, and a note which say to send a black orchid and one card to the inclosed address each evening for three evenings, starting Thursday evening. They think it is funny, but they do it."

"How about the kid? Did you find him?"

Moki nodded again. "All he remember is that a *haole* give it to him. He thinks only of what he will buy with the fifty cents the guy give him."

"Maybe if he saw the guy . . ." Adams suggested.

"I try that too," Moki said patiently. "I take him to Waikiki and let him see Doctor Justin. That is the *haole*, the boy say. 'You smart boy,' I say and give him ten cents. Then I think more-better I let him see another one, so I go to Kaimuki, and we see Mr. Ray Lock-

heed. I ask him a few questions while the boy look at him, then we go back to the car. 'That is the *haole*,' the boy say. I take him to the police laboratory and show him another fellow. 'Yeah-yeah,' the boy say, 'that is the one.' Then I tell him, 'Go home.'"

"What about Giuseppe Palermo?" Adams asked.

"Ah, that one," Moki said, shaking his large, grizzled head.

"I bet he's got an alibi you couldn't shove a needle through."

"You right," Moki agreed sadly.

"Did you check Mrs. Bella Simon's alibi, that she stayed the night with a friend on the Ali Wai, and not in her apartment? That sounds a little pat too."

"She was there," Moki said. "Two-three people see her. Sometimes I think this Gertrude *wahine* is just like the girls on Skid Row. She play hard to get, and some guy stick a knife in her and go home."

"The girls on Shady Lady Lane don't get black orchids," Adams said.

"I believe you're wrong, Moki," Donlan said. "This was a planned job . . . Well, my next call might as well be Joe Palermo. Where are we likely to find him at this time of day, Moki? It's four-forty."

"New Joe's Bar," Moki said. "Be careful with that guy. I think he scare, and maybe he do something foolish."

THE only thing new about New Joe's Bar was the name. It was a typical beer joint on the *Ewa*-side of Honolulu. The plate glass windows were painted black to a gilt line six feet above the sidewalk, but Joe Palermo evidently considered that the glass above that point would escape notice. It was covered with fly-specks.

It was quiet inside. Three customers of varied and conglomerate ancestry sipped their beer in silence, staring into the tarnished mirror or at the worn surface of the bar. Overhead, a four-bladed fan turned lazily, just enough to keep two or three noisy flies buzzing about the room. The bartender leaned on the bar playing poker dice with himself, and he didn't seem to care who won.

Donlan and Adams took a pair of stools. The bartender continued to play with the dice, but he looked at them inquiringly.

"A couple of beers," Adams said, "and tell Joe we want to see him."

One of the three men at the bar left his stool, and an unfinished beer, and disappeared through a door at the rear.

The bartender set out a beer for each of them. "Joe ain't around," he said.

Donlan shoved his glass back across the bar. "Put a little beer in with the foam and tell Joe that either he talks to us or reads

about himself in the *Telegraph*. He can take his choice."

The bartender scooped some of the foam from the two glasses with a rusty fork and replaced it with beer. The man who had disappeared into the back room returned to his stool, nodded to the bartender, and jerked his head towards the rear. He didn't speak.

"O.K.," the bartender said. "You can go back."

Donlan and Adams picked up their beers and walked towards the rear.

"These boys see too many George Raft movies," Adams said as Donlan opened the door and walked into a small office. "Hi, Giuseppe."

Giuseppe Palermo was a small, middle-aged Italian. He was dressed in a gray gabardine suit with a blue pin-stripe. The blue handkerchief in his breast pocket matched his tie. His face was oval, his nose short and straight, and long black lashes fringed soft, brown eyes. He was almost beautiful, Donlan thought.

"Hello, Joe," he said.

Palermo stood up. He looked at Donlan. "Who is he?" he asked, jerking his head towards the private detective but speaking to Adams.

"Mike Donlan," Adams supplied. "We came down to find out what you know about Gertrude Eisen's murder, Joe."

Palermo sat down. He took a cigar from the inside pocket of his coat, trimmed off the end, and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. He tried to look like Mussolini, but he didn't have the chin or the lower lip for it.

"I don't like that," he said. "I don't like you comin' down here at all."

"We hoped you wouldn't feel that way," Donlan said. "What about Gertrude Eisen?"

"She was smart, but she was a slut."

Donlan sat down on the corner of Palermo's desk and looked at him. Palermo, he decided, didn't like anyone as big as he was, particularly when that big someone was towering over him. The little Italian stood up.

"I got the idea," Donlan said, "that you went for her. When did you change your mind, Joe? Sunday night?"

Palermo's soft eyes could get very hard. "I don't think I'm going to like you," he said. He took the cigar from his mouth and spit a piece of loose tobacco on the floor.

"Let's stop beating our gums and start saying something," Donlan suggested. "I don't like you, either. You're too pretty, and you probably pick your nose. What were you doing Sunday night between ten and eleven?"

Palermo smiled. "I was right here playing cribbage with one of the boys."

"That's a new one," Donlan said over his shoulder to Adams. "It's usually poker. More witnesses."

"Everybody was in and out of here," Palermo added.

"Do you suppose you could produce one or two of them?"

Palermo smiled again. He fumbled under his desk. A few seconds later the door behind them opened.

Donlan turned around. The little man who upon their arrival had left the bar was standing in the doorway.

"That wouldn't be the character you were playing cribbage with, would it, Joe?" Adams asked.

"Yeah-yeah," Palermo said. "Come on in, Bonny. Shut the door."

"He doesn't look like he could count," Adams said.

Beyond the fact that Bonny was a little, dark man badly in need of a shave, wearing clothes which didn't fit him very well, Donlan found little of interest in him. Bonny would be a hard man to describe to someone else. He looked a little like everybody.

"Tell them I was here Sunday night," Palermo instructed.

"Yeah-yeah," Bonny said without a change of expression.

"Between ten and eleven?" Donlan asked.

"Yeah-yeah."

"You got more witnesses like Bonny?"

Donlan asked, turning his back on the little man and looking at Palermo, who was lighting his cigar and looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Three or four."

"Don't ask to see them, Mike," Adams protested. "I couldn't stand them on one beer."

Palermo walked around Donlan and Adams and opened the door. He jerked his head, said a few rapid words to Bonny as he passed him, then shut the door.

"I don't want you comin' down here," he said, glancing from Donlan to Adams. "It gives my place a bad name."

"I sort of thought we toned up the joint, Joe," Adams answered.

"He means all of his customers will start hiding out, thinking we're cops," Donlan explained. "I should think you'd want to help us find out who knocked off Gertrude, Joe. You were chasing her pretty hard and fast not so long ago, I understand."

Palermo shrugged. "You make trouble. She's dead. Nothin' I can tell you will make any difference about that. She'll still be dead."

"Then you aren't the one who sent me five hundred bucks to find out who killed her?"

Palermo sneered. "Do I look like a sucker?" he asked.

"Let's not confuse the issue," Adams suggested.

Donlan walked around Palermo's desk and examined a shelf containing some books, magazines,

and odds-and-ends. He picked up a small volume, thumbed through it, then looked around at the little Italian, who had left the neighborhood of the door and was watching him from the other side of the desk.

"Rosetti's Poems," Donlan said. "Do you read much poetry, Joe?" Donlan couldn't tell whether Palermo's flush was caused by embarrassment or anger.

"No," he said. "Gertrude gave that to me."

"How about Shakespeare?"

"I don't know nothin' about Shakespeare," Palermo said. "I think you better put that book back on the shelf and scam out of here."

Donlan replaced the book, circled the desk, and approached the door, which Adams opened. He turned and said: "You've heard about the Black Hand sending out warning notes before they knife somebody, haven't you, Joe? Do they ever send morbid verses about death and graves and worms instead?"

Palermo didn't answer. He was standing behind his desk holding the volume of Rossetti in his hands. Tears rolled down his cheeks and splashed on the pages of the book.

DONLAN closed the door, and he and Adams left New Joe's Bar and started up the street towards his station wagon.

Adams put his hand on Donlan's arm and whispered: "There's somebody in that alley just ahead. It's just like Palermo to try to throw a scare into us."

"You go first," Donlan said out of the corner of his mouth. "I'll cover you."

Adams looked unhappy, but he nodded. As he reached the alley, an arm appeared holding a weighted sock. As it swung towards Adam's head, Donlan grasped it at the wrist, twisted it, and pulled it sharply against the side of the building.

The owner of the arm screamed as it broke, and, as Donlan released his hold upon it, the little man called Bonny dropped to the ground, screaming and holding his broken arm against his body. A second man waited too long. Adams kicked him in the groin, and he joined Bonny on the ground. A third member of the ambush beat a hasty retreat down the alley.

Adams was panting, but there was a pleased expression on his thin, cynical face. He said: "The trouble with these tough characters is that they never figure anyone but themselves will overlook the teachings of the dear old Marquis of Queensbury. Let's go back to Joe's and finish the job." The light of battle was in Adams' eyes.

Donlan shook his head. He kicked Bonny lightly in the ribs to get his attention, then patted a bulge under his own left arm. "Tell Palermo that's just a sample," he told the man on the ground. "I can play a lot rougher than that. Come on, Adams."

Several pedestrians, Orientals for the most part, hurried about their business as Donlan and Adams emerged from the alley and walked rapidly towards the station wagon, a short distance away. Beyond casting stealthy glances into the alley, the local citizenry knew better than to become interested in something which in no way concerned them.

Donlan was thoughtful as they drove through town and out Ala Moana Boulevard towards Waikiki. He answered Adams' attempts at conversation with monosyllables and shook his head to a suggestion that they stop somewhere for a drink. When he reached Waikiki he drove slowly, scanning the house numbers in the block just *Ewa* from Gertrude Eisen's curio store.

"There it is," he said, pointing to a small brass plate over the doorway of a cottage: *Dr. George Templeton*.

"Doc Justin's alibi?" Adams asked.

Mike Donlan nodded, parked the station wagon, and went to the door of the house. A girl of about twenty answered the doorbell.

"Is Dr. Templeton in?" he asked, smiling at her, for she was that kind of a girl.

"Dad's not practicing, you know," she said. "He's retired."

"I'm a detective," Donlan answered.

"Oh," the girl said. She opened the door, indicated two chairs, and, giving them a last, curious glance from a doorway leading into the interior of the house, left the room. She returned immediately with an old man. His right shoulder and arm were stiffened with arthritis. Behind the old man was a stout woman who hovered over him like a mother hen with one chick until he was installed in a chair.

Donlan introduced himself and told them what he wanted. "Dr. Justin was here continuously from ten to eleven Sunday night," he finished. "Is that correct?"

"Absolutely," the old doctor said, nodding his head several times and wincing with each nod.

"He dropped in Monday afternoon about it," the girl said. "He said he was sure he would be a suspect, since he saw so much of Gertrude."

"Did you know her too?"

"Oh, yes. We all did. Dad said she said awful things to him, but she was always nice with me."

Donlan looked at the girl and thought he could understand that. "And no one left the room between ten and eleven?" Donlan continued the catechism.

"Dr. Justin went out to the kitchen once when he was dummy to mix a drink for himself and me. Mother and Dad don't drink anything. It was a funny hand. Dr. Justin and I were partners, and he overbid, or it was a

little too much for my game. He's an expert player. I went down one trick, but I scraped everything I could out of what we had, I thought."

"How long did the hand take?"

The girl moved a lock of hair from her neck to her shoulder and considered. "I don't know. I mean, you know how long a hand of bridge takes . . ."

"And I suppose you had a post-mortem?"

The girl smiled at her father. "You can always count on Dad for that," she said.

The old doctor cleared his throat and mumbled something.

"Well, Adams," Donlan said, looking at the reporter's bored face, "I guess that's that. We can go have that drink you've been wanting."

Adams stood up, looking considerably brighter.

"Do you mind if I use your phone to call my wife?" Donlan asked Mrs. Templeton. "It's just about dinner time, and she'll be wondering what happened to me."

Mrs. Templeton smiled apologetically and laid her hand fondly on the old doctor's arm. "I'm sorry," she said, "but we had it taken out last year when the doctor retired. People were always bothering him, and he was too conscientious about answering calls. We use the one across the street in the drug store."

"Thank you," Donlan said, "I'll do the same." He smiled at the girl, took Adams' arm, and piloted him out the door.

Adams smacked his lips. "Now for that drink," he said. "I'm fairly drooling."

"That can wait," Donlan said emphatically. "Let's clear up this business. Here's what I want you to do. Find a telephone and call Moki and tell him . . ."

Adams pointed across the street to the drug store. "How about that one?" he asked.

"I'm going to use it to call Jane and make one other call," Donlan said, frowning at the reporter. "Stop beefing and listen to me. Tell Moki to . . ."

AS THE doorbell rang, Mike Donlan put the volume he was reading on the small table beside his chair. It was entitled *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.

"I'll get it, honey," he said as Jane stuck her head out of the kitchen door.

"If it's the paperboy, the money's on the table in the hall," Jane said. "How do you want your steak, Mike?"

"You better hold the steak for a while," he told her, going to the door. "Come in, Doctor."

Dr. Justin came in. He looked around a moment then accepted the chair Donlan indicated. As Jane emerged from the kitchen, curious to see who the caller was, the psychiatrist rose. As Donlan introduced her, he real-

ized that Dr. Justin was amused by the pride in his voice.

"Well," the psychiatrist said, resuming his chair and crossing his legs, "just what's on your mind, Donlan? From the general appearance of things here, I don't think you called me professionally."

"I did, and I didn't," Donlan answered. He hesitated and looked at his wife. "Jane, don't you have something on the stove which should be attended to?"

He watched Jane master her curiosity, stifle an unwifely remark, and retire demurely to the kitchen. He realized that he would pay in blood for this, and he hoped she wouldn't take revenge on his steak.

"It's professional insofar as I always like to make a report to my client before I close a case," Donlan resumed. "I have pretty well established, to my own satisfaction, that you sent me the five hundred dollars. If I thought it was important, I could prove it, but that would take a little time.

"I spent the afternoon seeing your five suspects, and I checked with Moki—Lieutenant Kau—on their alibis. This is the way they stack up. You, Mrs. Simon, and Joe Palermo have alibis. Ray Lockheed was walking the streets of Kaimuki, a ten-minute trip away, and Erik Gustafson was enroute from downtown Honolulu to Kailua."

"That isn't very helpful, is it?"

Before Donlan could reply, the doorbell rang again.

"That's probably Jane's paperboy," he said, excusing himself and going into the hall. He was gone about two minutes.

"Rather a heavy-footed paperboy," Dr. Justin commented when Dolan returned and resumed his chair.

"It wasn't the paperboy. A couple of friends. As you said, the alibis weren't very helpful. You can take it for a fact that Palermo would have an alibi for the cracking of a pay telephone in the City Hall. Leaving that for a moment, let's look at the orchids and the Shakespeare that Gertrude got on the three days prior to her murder."

"They are interesting," the doctor agreed.

"Mrs. Simon would send another woman orchids, even black ones. A man did that. Lockheed probably couldn't afford them, and he wouldn't send verses from Shakespeare. Erik Gustafson didn't know Gertrude until Saturday night, so he couldn't have sent them. That leaves you and Joe Palermo."

"So it does," the doctor agreed again. He took a package of cigarettes from his coat pocket and carefully selected one.

"At first blush it sounds like the type of thing Palermo would do. It's flashy. Gertrude gave him a volume of Rossetti, so it might occur to him to send morbid pieces of verse

and black orchids. It's too much of a coincidence to think that the black orchids weren't a preliminary to the murder."

The psychiatrist bowed his head slightly. "You're doing very well," he said. "Did you arrive at a conclusion?"

"Oh, yes," Donlan said. His face was very grace. "There's no doubt in my mind that you killed Gertrude."

THE psychiatrist struck a match and lit his cigarette. The hand which held the match was as steady as concrete wall. "Good," he said. "I like people who can reach logical conclusions. Would you mind telling me how you managed to get around my alibi?"

"That was easy," Donlan said. "You're a good bridge player, aren't you?"

"I'm an expert."

"And the Templetons are sort of dubs?"

"I think that is a fair description of their playing."

"Earlier in the evening you called Gertrude and arranged to drop in later. Then you went to the Templetons. You waited until you got a pretty even distribution around the board with your partner having the strong hand, then you overbid your hand, knowing it would take her a long time to play it. You didn't overbid too much, just enough to make the girl play slowly and carefully, and, since it was going to be so close, all three of the Templetons would be interested only in the play and not in what you were doing. You went to the kitchen, mixed two drinks very quickly, then slipped out the back door. You went to Gertrude's apartment, less than a block away, found her in bed, reading perhaps, and you stabbed her three times with one of your surgical knives. That's why a knife wasn't found. It would have identified you. Then you returned to the Templetons, picked up the two drinks in the kitchen, and returned to the living room. The girl was just finishing the hand, or the three Templetons were holding a post-mortem."

"An unfortunate choice of words, under the circumstances," the doctor commented. "Do you have any proof at all, Donlan?"

"Not much," Donlan admitted. He took out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "When you were telling me about what Gertrude had told you about her weekend, you said you saw her. The big mistake you made was when you said you had telephoned her from the Templetons. They had their phone removed when Dr. Templeton retired, over a year ago."

"I had forgotten that. Anything else?"

"From the beginning, you didn't intend to commit a perfect crime. You wanted to be discovered, but you couldn't bring yourself to the point of killing her, then walking into the

police station and saying: 'I did it.' The orchids and the verse were intended as a warning, as much as anything else," Donlan picked up the volume of Shakespeare from the table beside his chair and opened it to a turned-down page. "I've been reading the balance of one of the verses, the only one which didn't mention death. I believe you deliberately chose it to point to yourself. It goes:

*"To me, fair friend, you can never be old;
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold*

*In process of the seasons have I seen,
Have from the forests shook three Summers' pride;*

Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burn'd,

Three beauteous springs to yellow Autumn turn'd

Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green . . ."

"You were afraid the police were passing you by, so you got me interested by sending the five hundred dollars. When I first talked to you, you told me quite plainly that you had known her for three years, and I believe you decided to let your fate rest with me. If I failed to unravel the problem, well and good."

Dr. Justin nodded. "The motive isn't difficult. I loved her, and I hated her. I loved her for what she could be, and I hated her for what she was doing to me and to everyone else she came in contact with. She was tying knots in more lives than I was unravelling in my psychiatric practice. Yes, the motive was pretty clear."

Donlan was very pale. "Then there was the

similarity between the way you sent the worn ten-dollar bills for the orchids, and the way you sent me the five hundred dollars," Donlan said, wishing he could be as calm as Dr. Justin. "The boy you sent to the florist with the envelope containing the money even identified you for Moki. Moki gave him a dime, then took him to see another of the suspects and a fellow in the police lab, probably giving him a dime for each identification. It must have looked like a pretty good way to earn dimes to the kid, so he identified each party as the man who gave him the envelope."

Dr. Justin chuckled. He pointed to the bedroom door, which was ajar about an inch. "Why don't you have him come in?"

The bedroom door opened, and Moki and Adams came into the room.

Adams tried to make his voice casual, but he didn't succeed. "How about it, Moki?" he asked. "Did you give the kid a dime each time?" Moki nodded.

The doctor bent down to the ashtray and crushed his cigarette butt. He exhibited the end he had had in his mouth to them, saying: "You missed just one thing, Donlan. If you had read the third verse from Shakespeare with as close attention as you did the first, you would have discovered that it was my epitaph. About five minutes ago, I swallowed a capsule I had concealed in the end of this cigarette. In another five minutes, I will have made the verse come true. Out of consideration for your wife, I suggest that Lieutenant Kau and I leave now."

Mike Donlan's face twisted into a wry grin as he followed the three to the door. "Maybe I read that one too," he said.

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CHAPTER ONE

Squirrels to the Nuts

IF it weren't for the fact that the world is full of wacks and queerballs who insist on getting into trouble, a private eye like myself would be idle a lot too often. So, being accustomed to associate with daffiness of practically all types, I didn't worry too much when

Deputy Sheriff Baskerville told me the whole Corliss tribe was nuttier than a bowl of pecans. Maybe it was just as well that I didn't waste any worry then—I had plenty of it to do before I finished up with Noah Corliss and his brood.

At the moment, of course, I didn't know that Baskerville was a deputy. He was just a fat little man I had found behind the counter of the Crest Ridge general store after I dropped off the Inter-Mountain bus there. A car had been supposed to meet me but no such animal was in sight, so I traipsed into the general store which was the only evidence of the human race in a wilderness of trees, cliffs and canyons.

The fat little man looked up from his job of hacking triangles from a big round cheese. He said: "Howdy."

I said: "Howdy, pardner. How far is the Corliss place from here?"

His bright little eyes studied me. Finally he said: "Fifteen-sixteen miles. What's the trouble out there?"

"Trouble?" I said. If I'd known what it was, I wouldn't have told him—not then. But the truth was that I didn't have even a notion on the subject. All I knew was that a lawyer by the name of Fowler had phoned me that a client of his named Corliss would pay generously for the services of a discreet op. I said now: "What makes you think there's any trouble out there?"

"Been expecting it for three years," said the fat little man. "Ever since Noah Corliss moved his bunch of crazy relatives into that valley and locked 'em up. Figured the lid would blow off sooner or later. Then when a detective shows up—"

"What detective?"

The fat little man grinned. "I bet your name is Sam Lynch."

The guy had me a bit startled. I said: "Suppose I was this Sam Lynch—who would you be?"

He flipped back his vest to show a deputy's star. "Deputy Sheriff Joe Baskerville—regular business—storekeeping. Soon as I looked at you, I could tell what you were."

"Doggone it," I said, "I guess it wasn't any use leaving my derby and cigar at home." I grinned at him. As long as the fat little man had spotted me, there didn't seem much harm in taking down my hair for him, what there was of it. I didn't know anything about the Corliss outfit so, if anyone got any information out of a gabfest, it had to be me. I said: "How'd you pull my name out of your hat?"

"I could make a mystery out of it, but I won't. My wife's the telephone operator. She told me Noah called his lawyer and asked for a private detective and the lawyer said he'd send a man named Sam Lynch." The deputy

squinted fat-encased eyes at me. "Now, son, I'm the law around here and I can make you plenty trouble if you don't come clean about what's going on out there."

I shrugged. "All the lawyer told me was to come up here. If there's anything really wrong out there, you'd know about it, wouldn't you?"

Baskerville scowled. "Can't set foot on the place without a search warrant and can't get a warrant unless I have evidence something illegal's going on."

"What's to keep you from dropping in at the Corliss place sort of casual?"

"Plenty—the place is in a valley with only one way to get inside, a little canyon fenced across with a locked gate and guarded day and night. Since Corliss bought the place there ain't anyone been allowed there except the county assessor and a telephone repairman a couple of times."

"What gossip did they bring back?"

The deputy admitted a bit reluctantly: "Said they didn't notice anything peculiar—except the only folks they got to see were Noah and the foreman, a tight-mouthed Mex named Ramon."

"Then what makes you think they're all nuts out there?"

"When a guy worth ten million bucks—"

"Noah?" I said.

He nodded. "Made it in oil. Anyway, when a man with all that money locks his whole family up, never lets 'em out, never lets anybody in, there's something queer about it, ain't there?"

"Maybe he just doesn't like company."

"With his family, I don't blame him."

I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't go on listening. I said: "What about the family?"

"Well, there's a couple of boys and a girl and the old man's brother, and both boys are batty, according to a newspaper fellow that vacationed up here a couple years ago. He said one of 'em had the habit of sneaking up behind women on the street and kicking 'em and the other got arrested half-a-dozen times for running around Central Park in New York wearing just a hula skirt—kept the old man busy getting them out of trouble. This reporter didn't know so much about the rest of the family but if they're not crazy, too, why would the old man keep them locked up?"

I told him I couldn't even guess. "Incidentally, if nobody goes in and nobody comes out, how do they get supplies and mail and so forth?"

"Don't know about the so-forth but Ramon, the Mex, drives down to Santa Maria every week for groceries and mail."

I suddenly got the idea that maybe the fat little man's opinion of the Corliss family might

be colored a bit by the fact that he had a store that didn't get patronized by them.

THERE was the sound of wheels on gravel outside, a thin squeak of brakes. I looked out the doorway and saw a dusty station wagon with "Rancho El Mañana" lettered on the side, panting in front of the porch. A tall, wiry dark-faced man was climbing out of it. "Ramon," said Baskerville from the corner of his mouth.

Ramon came into the store on long lean legs. He looked around thirty and he had a small careful Latin mustache and brown and dark sideburns that came about level with the lobes of his ears. His smile was cheerful and very white and I couldn't notice any evidence of wackiness about him.

He said: "Señor Leench?"

"Oui," I said. "Or maybe I mean 'si.'"

He picked up my bag and went out toward the car.

Baskerville said, still from the corner of his mouth: "Don't forget, son—anything unlawful going on out there, it's your bounden duty to report it to me."

I said, "Sure," and went out, climbed in beside Ramon. He buzzed the motor like a jet-job and took off in a turn that put a door handle halfway through one of my ribs. He straightened out and I wedged myself off the handle and got a cigarette going.

After I had it burning nicely I said: "So how are things going out at the ranch, Ramon?"

He gave me the white-toothed smile. "No spik Eeingleesh, señor." He got his eyes back to the road just in time to keep us from zipping into space at a curve.

After that I figured it was a wonderful idea to let him keep his eyes on the road. We tore up the mountain highway for a mile or so and then swerved onto a one-lane track that climbed steadily higher through a maze of ridges and canyons and around turns that had nothing but cliff on one side and, on the other, sudden death a thousand feet below. And Ramon went right on driving as though he didn't believe in death or the law of gravity.

Eventually we were in a canyon that had walls of black rock jutting almost straight up from the floor and glistening with moisture. We rounded a turn and ran into fuzzy white mist that was really a cloud that had dropped too low and got hooked on the peaks. When Ramon piloted us out of the cloud the canyon walls had closed to within ten feet of the road on either side.

A couple of minutes later he stopped with the bumper of the car nudging a padlocked gate in a ten-foot-high steel-link fence that ran from wall to wall. His horn bleated twice and brought a husky and swarthy lad from a

shack that hugged the canyon walls beyond the fence. He carried a shotgun in the crook of his arm as though he'd been born with it there.

He didn't say anything. Ramon didn't say anything. He unlocked and opened the gate. Ramon drove through and kept on going. As he passed the shack, I could see the swarthy man's twin sitting just inside the door. The only difference I could notice was that the man inside didn't have a shotgun. He wore a holstered revolver on a sagging cartridge belt around his middle.

I looked back and the first man was squeezing the padlock together on the closed gate.

Whether it was that or the armed guards or the gloom of the black-walled canyon or just a delayed take on Deputy Baskerville's gossip about the Corliss place being a booby-hatch, suddenly I wasn't sure I liked this job.

Things got a little rosier when Ramon wheeled out of the canyon and onto a dusty road that dropped steeply away into a valley resembling a hand-painted china bowl ten miles from rim to rim. Towering peaks and cliffs without a break made the sides of the bowl, and the floor of the valley had dabs of delicate green that were meadows, darker-green splotches that were stands of timber, a big house, outbuildings, corrals, everything that goes with a rich man's idea of a ranch. It was home-on-the-range stuff in full Technicolor.

Presently we zipped past the pole walls of a corral, up a driveway between patches of lawn and came to a stop in front of a building that apparently had started out as a three-room log house and had been enlarged with various wings and upper floors and balconies, all in unrelated types of architecture.

A youngish man wearing batik shorts and nothing else was dancing around on a patch of lawn making passes with a butterfly net. It was a little confusing to notice that there weren't any butterflies around. The man in shorts paid no attention to us and Ramon paid no attention to him.

We went inside to a square hallway and Ramon yelled something in Spanish. A Mexican girl, running to fat but still very luscious, appeared at a doorway and jabbered Spanish back at him. Ramon beckoned me toward a stairway. We climbed to the second floor and then up a flight of narrow stairs to a closed door on which he knocked discreetly. I could hear a rumble inside and Ramon opened the door, stuck his head out of sight. There was another rumble and then Ramon stood aside for me.

ON the other side of the door I found myself in a studio that was right out of Greenwich Village or the Latin Quarter, big and high-ceilinged with an expanse of glass

for north light. It was dusty, littered with canvases, lay figures, a skeleton, expensive furniture that hadn't been dusted in months, paint-stained smocks.

A couple of men looked at me. The third occupant of the studio, a girl, didn't give me a glance. She was black-haired, black-eyed, slim almost to gauntness. But her figure had its points. I couldn't miss that inasmuch as all she wore was a very inadequate halter, a pair of very short shorts and sandals—unless you wanted to include in her costume the brush in her right hand, the palette in her left.

One of the men said in a chest-deep rumble: "You're Sam Lynch, are you?" He was tall and he had a thatch of hair between red and gray, overhanging red brows, a big hooked nose and an air of authority.

I admitted I was Sam Lynch.

The other man, aside from a band of tape and gauze around his head, was a badly-blurred carbon of the man who'd spoken. He had the same red brows and hooked nose but he was younger and a bit shorter and plumper. Also, about him there wasn't that indefinable but unmistakable aura of being the head guy.

His voice was a lot more on the tenor side, too, when he said: "Hadn't you better see his credentials, Noah?"

Noah said automatically: "Shut up, Jephtha!" But he held his hand out just the same.

I got out my wallet, flipped it open and held it in front of Noah. He glanced at it.

He said: "I'm Noah Corliss. This is my brother, Jephtha. That's my daughter, Esme."

The girl at the easel went on painting as though there wasn't a soul within six miles. Jephtha nodded. I nodded back.

Noah said: "Like to get cleaned up before we get down to business?"

I shrugged. "That's up to you—you're the guy that's paying fifty bucks a day for my time."

Jephtha's plump face creased in a grin. "Don't worry about Noah's money. He's got plenty of the damned stuff."

Again Noah said automatically: "Shut up, Jephtha!" He eyed me. "Ever handle a murder case, Lynch?"

"I've had my finger in a few."

"This is murder," Noah said gravely. "And complicated by an attack on Jephtha." He jerked a long thumb at the girl who still hadn't so much as glanced up from her canvas. Noah went on. "Esme's husband—a thorough-going parasite named Ernst Gruner who once made a living as a skiing instructor in Switzerland before Esme annexed him—was killed several days ago. We have the body in the icehouse."

"Huh?" I said. "You mean you've just sort of filed the body away for reference?"

"Ernst," said Jephtha, "wasn't important to anyone but Esme."

The girl at the easel said without looking up: "He wasn't so important to me. In fact, I hated his guts—except at times."

Remembering my talk with the fat little deputy at Crest Ridge, I said: "I suppose some time you'll get around to notifying the law?"

"Haven't made up my mind," said Noah. "That's why I've got you here."

"What am I supposed to have that the law hasn't got?"

"Brains," said Noah. "And a close mouth. Do you want to hear about this thing?"

I didn't say whether I did or didn't but he went on.

"Ernst's body was found in a room the former owners had used as a ranch office. That was last Tuesday."

Esme said, not raising her eyes: "Last Wednesday. That was the day I began this canvas."

"All right, all right," Noah said indulgently. "Wednesday. Anyway, it was definitely murder. His head had been battered to a pulp. So I had him put in the icehouse."

"Why the icehouse?" I said.

"Warm weather," said Esme from behind the easel.

"What I'm still trying to find out," I said, "is why not a mortuary—after notifying the sheriff's office? You've no idea how annoyed cops get when you hold out a little thing like murder on them."

"I have my reasons," Noah said. He glanced at a wafer of watch on his hairy wrist. "You'll have to excuse me now—there's a radio program coming on that I never miss. Jephtha will get you settled in your room and you can come to the study in half an hour and I'll give you the rest of the details."

He went out the door and down the stairs in a hurry. I looked at Jephtha. There was nothing but a sort of confused bewilderment in my look but he evidently took it for suspicion.

He bristled. "Don't stare at me. I don't know anything about the killing except that I didn't do it."

"No?" I said.

"No. Whoever did it must have hated him and I didn't hate him. He just wasn't important to me." There was a sort of malicious quirk to his mouth as he glanced at Esme. "Esme was the only person here that really hated him."

Esme said: "Of course I killed Ernst. I put arsenic in his coffee. Then I pushed him off a cliff. After that I drowned him in the lake and finally I sliced him up like bacon—only I didn't do it that day. I was starting a canvas. When I start a canvas I haven't time for murder." She looked up at Jephtha and scowled.

"Quaint child, isn't she?" said Jephtha cheerfully.

She looked at me for the first time and her eyes were a shiny, unwinking black. She said: "I suppose you're going to pry around and try to find out why I hated Ernst. So I'll tell you. He was a beautiful animal and for that reason there were times when he dominated me. I don't like being dominated—and I hated him for that." The black eyes travelled up and down my carcass which is six-foot something, although somewhat battered and bulgy in spots. She said finally: "You must have been a beautiful animal, Lynch—there's still traces."

"This isn't a blush I'm pulling," I said. "I just have high blood pressure."

"Don't worry—you're safe with me." She grinned and suddenly was not only human but likeable. "Come here and take a look at this painting."

I took a look. The thing was a portrait of a leg of lamb straight out of any butcher shop except that the meat was a nice gangrenous green and the skin was a royal purple and the bone, sticking from the shank, was blue. There was a yellow garter around the leg and one lecherous eye stared at the garter from an upper corner of the canvas.

Esme said: "That obscene eye represents Jephtha. He's a satyr at heart."

"A fat lot of good it does me in this wilderness," Jephtha sighed.

"I call the subject 'Cheesecake'," Esme explained.

"It looks to me more like smorgasbord," I told her.

"You don't like it?"

"I think it stinks."

"Good," said Esme. "If you'd liked it, I'd have slashed the canvas. You have a conventional mind."

"That must be a shock around here," I said.

She went back to her painting and Jephtha crooked his finger at me and we went down to the second floor. The bedroom Jephtha showed me into was beautiful—expensive furniture, a bath just a little smaller than Lake Tahoe, big windows filled with scenery. The room, like the rest of the layout, had everything—except straitjackets and padded walls. And, at Rancho El Maniac, that was a glaring oversight.

CHAPTER TWO

Fee for Nothing

AT the end of the half-hour period I followed the sound of a radio to the ground floor and a closed door. I knocked on the door and got no answer and opened it anyway.

Noah was hunched over a radio that was giving out with something about a Captain Eagle who, with his bobby-sox aides, was trapped in some cave on some island by the

crew of a pirate submarine. When the Cap and his pals were really jammed up, the announcer took over and said for the kiddies to listen at the same time next day and if they'd send in a couple of box-tops Captain Eagle would send them cards for his club, the Junior Eaglets.

I was a little surprised that a guy Noah's age, a guy who could accumulate ten million bucks, would be a Captain Eagle fan. And, at the same time, I have to admit that I've been wondering ever since how Cap Eagle and his pals got out of that cave.

Noah clicked the radio off and for a moment his eyes were still those of some kid in a faraway Never-Never land. Then the shine went out of them and his face became that of a tired and worried old man. He wagged a hand at a chair and I sat down.

He said: "You mentioned a fee of fifty dollars a day. That's small change, son. I'm ready to pay you twenty-five thousand dollars to find out—and report to me—who killed Esme's husband and attacked Jephtha."

"That's too much," I said. "Unless you want something besides—my mouth shut afterward."

"Exactly."

"The answer is no. Even if there was a chance of covering up on this, I wouldn't like being an accessory after the fact. But you can't keep this under cover—too many people know about it. My advice is to call in some law, and fast."

Noah leaned forward earnestly. "You misunderstand. I don't intend to protect whoever did it."

"Then why offer me an outsize fee to keep my mouth shut?"

The long fingers of one hand nagged at his long chin. "I'd better give you some background on my family, Lynch." He seemed to have a hard time beginning. "The fact is that my children—all three of them—are . . ." He hesitated. "Well, they're not exactly what the world considers—ah—normal. Charles, the oldest, has always delighted in inflicting pain on people and on animals—"

"A sadist?"

"Yes. Esme is better balanced but she has absolutely no use for ordinary conventions and that's kept her in trouble. The younger boy, Jimmy, is odd in some respects." Again his fingers worried at his chin. "There's undoubtedly a blood strain in them that—" He dropped that thought abruptly and shook his head. "But I can't dodge my responsibility for what they are. I was busy while they were growing up and I turned them over to governesses and tutors and servants. I let them have all the money they wanted and that was wrong, too. It's no wonder that when they grew up they were always in trouble and con-

stantly the butt of filthy publicity and blackmail schemes. Life literally became hell for me, Lynch. I had to do something to protect them from themselves. So I found this place and brought them here where they couldn't get into any serious trouble—so I thought."

"Did they like the idea?"

"No, but, after all, they live on my money."

"How do you keep them from straying?"

"There's just one way out of this valley—the canyon where you entered. That's kept locked and guarded day and night. Also I have a capable staff recruited from Mexico by my foreman. I pay them well and they take orders only from me."

Deputy Baskerville, I reflected, had guessed extcly right—this valley was nothing less than a very beautiful, very expensive and very private nut house. I said: "You evidently suspect one of your kids did the business. Anything definite to go on?"

"Nothing, except that they all despised the fellow and any one of them is quite capable of having done it if the notion struck him."

"What happens if I pin it on one of them?"

"I'll arrange to have that one committed to a place where he—or she—can do no further harm." He leaned forward and wagged his head. "But I've got to have it done quietly. I've gotten too old to go through the hell of a public hearing and all the dirty publicity that goes with it. That's why I put off calling in an outsider—I hoped to get to the bottom of it myself. I haven't been able to and I realized I needed a trained investigator—and one who could be trusted not to talk."

I didn't argue that point although I could have told him I wasn't quite stupid enough to let myself be dragged in as an accessory. I said: "Suppose I find out the job wasn't a family matter—that it was done by some of the help on the place?"

His eyes lighted up. "You prove that and I'll double the fee I named—and let the law take its course."

"Fifty grand for that kind of a deal?"

"It would be worth every cent."

I could see that he'd be very happy to have things wind up that way but that he wasn't very hopeful. Which, considering that he was better acquainted with his offspring than I was, didn't make me too optimistic.

"Now for a few details," I said. "Like who found the body and at what time and when Ernst was seen last by whom and what time the killing could have taken place and where was everybody then and how many people there are on the place and who they are. When we dispose of those, I'll probably be able to think up some more questions."

Noah deliberated a bit and I didn't hurry him, realizing that this was probably the first time he'd been called on to analyze the

whole messy situation and put it into words.

FINALLY he said: "The killing took place some time between seven and ten-thirty in the morning. Estrella, one of the maids, said she took his breakfast to him in his room at seven—"

"His room?" I said. "Esme and he didn't share a bedroom?"

"Each of us has our own quarters."

"Who found the body?"

"Ramon, the foreman. That was around ten-thirty. Ramon got me at once and I went to the old office. Ernst was dead. I didn't have to touch him to know that because nobody could have been alive with his head battered as his was—and there was a lot of blood around."

"What color was the blood?"

Noah was puzzled. "Blood's always red, isn't it?"

"Depends on how long it's been spilled. As it dries it gets brown and finally black."

"I see—you're trying to estimate how soon after seven o'clock the murder took place."

"It'll be a rough estimate," I admitted, "but it might be some help in getting started."

He frowned, calling back the picture of a blood-spattered room. "The blood was red—I remember one large pool vividly. It had just begun to coagulate around the edges."

"That probably puts the killing within the hour. Who was on the place at the time and where were they?"

"The family includes the three children, Jephtha, myself and Anna, Jimmy's wife. Then there's Ramon, a couple of ranchhands, the guards at the gate, the maid, a cook and a laundress. So far as I've been able to learn, only Jephtha, Anna and I can account satisfactorily for the entire time involved."

"How do you cover yourself, Jephtha and Anna?"

"Jephtha and I were together in the study here going over some business matters from six-thirty—we're both early risers—until Ramon reported finding the body. Anna had gone to Los Angeles the day before for some dental work. She didn't get back here until late that afternoon."

"She drove herself down and back?"

"Ramon drove her to the bus at Santa Maria and met her there."

"Did you check the dentist to make sure she was there?"

Noah shook his head. "No, but she couldn't have been here that morning and still have arrived at Santa Maria on the bus that afternoon. Besides, Lynch, she's a rather sweet and harmless little thing, not at all the type to commit a brutal murder even if she had any motive."

I let that go for the time being. "What's

your guess on the motive for Ernst's murder?"

"As I said, the three children dislike him very—"

"I mean a motive anyone else might have had."

"I don't know that anyone else had a motive."

"One more question on Ernst. From what you tell me the killer must have just about waded in blood. Have you found any bloody clothing around?"

"None."

"Now how about the attack on Jephtha?"

"That happened night before last. I'd gone to bed and was just dozing off when I heard someone cry out. I jumped up, opened my door and turned the hall lights on and Jephtha was sprawled at the head of the stairs, bleeding from a gash on the temple. I helped him to his room and cleaned and bandaged his wound and then he told me he'd been reading in the library downstairs and had turned the lights off and started for bed. He was almost at the top of the stairs when he realized there was someone near him in the darkness. A moment later he was struck."

"Where was the rest of the family?"

"Everyone had gone to bed but Jephtha."

"The noise didn't wake any of them?"

"Apparently not."

"Incidentally," I said, "what's Jephtha's status here? Is he—like your kids—an unwilling guest?"

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, he spends some time every year back East."

"How does he stand financially?"

"He has his own income from a hundred-thousand-dollar trust fund I settled on him years ago."

"Would anyone here stand to gain anything if he died?"

"Not unless you include me. If he dies, the trust fund reverts to me but I hardly need the money. Absolutely the only motive I can imagine for the attack on him is a personal one."

"In what way?"

"He's never gotten along with the children and I think they feel he was responsible for my bringing them here. Actually all he did was to look around for a place like this at my request. He found this valley, recommended it to me and I bought it."

I got up. "I'll take a look at Ernst and see what I can figure out. I'd like to collect that fifty grand but I'm not optimistic—you're handing me a pretty cold scent."

I didn't say anything about the twenty-five-grand offer and Noah didn't miss that.

He said: "I'm sure you'll be discreet, Lynch. However, just to be certain, I've told the guards not to let you leave except by my

order. Also—" He pointed at a wire that dangled from a phone box near the radio. There wasn't any phone at the end of the wire. "Also I've removed our only phone temporarily."

I grinned at him. "Maybe you want my matches, too. After all, I could use smoke signals."

When I left the study I was beginning to wonder if maybe old Noah wasn't as nutty as the kids he'd inflicted on the world—did he think he could keep me there the rest of my life to prevent my talking? But probably the only thing wrong with him was the odd outlook a guy is apt to acquire when he accumulates ten million bucks—he begins to think he can buy anything. And he's often right.

I FIGURED the icehouse would be near the water so I picked out a long low building at the edge of the lake and headed that way. A small door at the shore end was held shut only by a five-and-dime store hook. I lifted the hook and propped the door open so I'd have some light.

Inside, ice was piled in neat sawdust-packed tiers and I found Ernst resting on his back in a frosty nook twenty feet from the door. He didn't look comfortable although the body had begun to make a form-fitting bed for itself—one leg was drawn up halfway toward his belly, held in that position by a heel that had sunk into the ice, and he had one arm bent around behind him so that he was lying on it.

A lot of blood, black and crusted now, daubed his gray slacks and silk sport shirt and there wasn't much left of his face but blackened pulp. Whoever had operated on him had been as savage as a rabid wolf. Although the face was unrecognizable, I could tell that Esme had been right about Ernst. He'd been better than six feet tall with wide shoulders, a slim waist and a nice set of muscles. He'd been a beautiful animal.

And, unless he had been off guard when the business began, he'd have put up a stiff fight for his life. Which indicated, I figured, that the killer had got him from behind at the start.

For good enough reasons I didn't want to disturb the body so I got out my pencil flash and knelt beside the niche where he had been tucked. Shining the beam up through the crystal clearness of the block of ice, I could make out, not too distinctly, a ragged triangular wound that had the wide end of the crushed skin about the middle of the skull at the back and slanted down to nothing just under the right ear.

The beam caught and glinted then on a long threadlike shine of gold, a feminine hair that was caught between the ice and Ernst's shoulder.

After a bit I snicked off the flash, put it away and left Ernst to his chilly slumber.

When I was halfway back to the house I saw Ramon coming around the corner of the corral. He waited for me there and when I stopped he shone his white teeth at me in a smile and said: "Hallo, chom."

"Congratulations," I said, "on learning English so fast."

His smile turned into a grin. "The boss ees just tell me she's *muy bueno* eef I talk weeth you."

"Maybe English isn't what I meant," I said. "But go ahead and talk."

"Wat you weesh to know, chom?"

"Are there any blond ladies around here?"

"No, *señor*—ees too bad. I like blondes."

"You and a lot of gentlemen," I said. "Now, if you've got the time, you can show me where you found the body."

"Hokay, chom."

We went back around the corral and through a grove of dusty evergreens that was between the main house and a big red barn. The barn was cool and damply acrid with the odor of ammonia. There was a gangling colt in one stall and further on a rangy sorrel who stuck his head from another stall and watched us come down the length of the building. When I got close enough he stretched his neck and, for no reason at all, tried his very best to bite my arm off.

I dodged and said bitterly: "Even the crowbait around here are psycho."

Ramon led me to the far end of the barn. He opened a door to a small dusty room that was furnished only with a battered rolltop desk and a 1920 calendar on one wall. The only indication that anyone had been in there since that calendar year was a freshly-cleaned floor.

Ramon pointed to a spot to one side of the door. "Ees where I find heem, chom."

"How'd you happen to look in here?"

"I walk een the barn to feed the colt and the door is leaking blood from onderneath from enside. So I look enside. Natch, huh?"

"Oh, natch," I said. "It was fresh blood?"

"Ees frash enough."

I got a cigarette lit before I tried the next question. "What sort of a gal is *Señor* Jimmy's wife?"

Ramon's face, I thought, took on a mild expression of distaste. He shrugged. "Ees all right, chom."

"You like her?"

"But yes—Ramon ees like everybody. Ees any more I can do for now, chom?"

"I'd like to talk to the house help."

He shook his head pessimistically. "Ees no good. They are all dumb—they don't speak soch good Eengleesh like Ramon."

When he got the three women together for me in a big kitchen that smelled faintly of

wood smoke from the long range and very strongly of chili peppers, I found he'd been right. They not only didn't speak good English, they didn't—or wouldn't—speak any at all.

Two of them were elderly *señoritas* with lackluster eyes and stringy hair and not many teeth between them. The third was the plump girl I'd seen when I arrived and it turned out she was Estrella who, according to Noah, had served Ernst his last breakfast. Her poundage was beginning to get away from her but she still had a pair of pert dark eyes, a face luscious in a Latin way and a provocative sway to her hips when she moved.

Five minutes of questions through Ramon as interpreter got me nowhere. They didn't know anything about anything.

"See?" said Ramon. "Soch dommies like I say. You weesh now to talk weeth the men? They are even more dommies, chom."

I said I'd let that go for then, figuring it would be a better bet now to get acquainted with the rest of the Corliss tribe. They'd probably tell me nothing also but at least it would be in English.

"Where do I find Charlie?" I said. "And Jimmy and Jimmy's wife?"

"*Señor* Charlie ees today slaughtering," said Ramon. "*Señor* Jeemmy ees always honting down botterflies or feexing them opp in hees botterfly room."

We went outside and Ramon pointed out the slaughterhouse, a low dingy building at the other side of the corral. He smiled his white smile at me and went his way.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood and Nuts

I'D HAVE recognized the dingy building as a slaughterhouse even with my eyes closed. Nearing it, my nose caught the humid sweetish aroma of fresh blood mingled with the sickening odor of old and stale blood. It smelled like hell. And when I found a door and stepped inside I saw a guy who looked like the devil.

He was tall and spare like Noah and he had ropy muscles and a face that was all down-drawn triangles—a widow's peak of red hair, red eyebrows that flared up at the ends to form V's, a hooked triangle of nose, a long pointed chin.

Maybe you've heard about the little red eyes of beasts of prey? Charlie had them. Actually they were a pale, flat gray but the red veins, the red rims just inside the lids made them seem all crimson.

A calf, its head only pulp, hung from a rack of meat hooks. Another calf moved feebly on the ground. A third, a frightened little animal that was all sprawling legs and floppy ears

and brown eyes bigger than dollars, tugged at the rope that tied it to a stanchion.

Charlie's red eyes stared at me. He moved his feet a little uneasily as though he'd been caught doing something that wasn't nice. The movement drew my glance down and I saw that Charlie was a literal illustration of the old expression about wading in blood. His heavy boots—they looked like paratrooper gear—were shiny with blood. Blood spattered him to his knees.

He ran the tip of a narrow tongue across his lips. "You're the detective?"

"Yup. And you're Charlie?"

"Yes—but it's no use bothering me. I don't know anything. I wouldn't tell you if I did."

He pulled one of the heavy boots back and began to kick the sprawling calf in the head. I got my gun out and shot the calf twice through the skull. It stopped moving.

Charlie halted his foot in mid-air and then let it descend slowly until he was standing with his legs well apart, his head sunk toward his chest. He looked like a vicious dog ready to charge. He said in almost a whisper: "Why did you do that?"

"You wanted the calf dead, didn't you?"

"You don't like the way I slaughter?"

"I'm not nuts about it."

His whisper got thinner. "I like it. These animals are mine—I'll kill them any way I like."

I shook my head. "Not when I'm around, Charlie. You'd make a vegetarian out of me in no time."

Charlie whispered: "You better get out of here before I get mad!"

Before he got mad! If I'd felt like laughing, that would have been a laugh. The guy was already so nuts that he'd have scared even the squirrels.

Well, now I'd met Charlie. So I went back to the main house, wondering whether to look for Jimmy or, before that, to look for some nerve tonic in the form of rye, bourbon or Scotch.

I got inside the hall and a rather pretty girl in white sharkskin slacks and blouse appeared at a doorway. She had curly dark hair, an empty-looking doll face and gray eyes with a sort of stary quality. She put a finger to her lips and made shushing noises. Then she used the finger to beckon me.

I went to the doorway and the girl shushed me again and drew me inside the room, a den with leather-covered furniture and a big smoke-darkened fireplace. She shut the door softly.

She said: "I'm Anna. I'm Jimmy's wife." Her voice was pitched not much louder than the shushing sound she'd made.

I said it was a pleasure meeting her.

She whispered: "Have you found out yet

who killed Ernst?" I didn't commit myself beyond a movement of the head that could have meant anything. The girl said: "I can tell you who did it."

"That's swell."

"Promise you won't let anyone know I've told you?"

Again I didn't commit myself. "You haven't told me yet."

"It was Ramon!" Although she was almost whispering now, there was a load of poison in the way she spat out the name.

"Ah," I said. "Ramon! How do you know, Anna?"

"Maybe I can't prove it. But there's every reason to suspect him."

"What would be some of the reasons?"

"Esme's one. She likes men too much. And Ramon is the kind who would have been jealous of Ernst. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Practically without a blueprint." I studied her under cover of getting a cigarette lit. Her eyes wavered and then the lids drooped, fencing out my gaze. I said: "You think Ramon is not a nice guy, Anna?"

"He means absolutely nothing to me."

I thought, the guy means part of your alibi, Sis. But I didn't say it. I asked: "Who's your Los Angeles dentist, Anna?"

Her lids jerked up. "Why do you want to know?"

"I might need a tooth pulled when I get back to town."

Anna looked suddenly paler. Her breath took on a sudden jerkiness. Her eyes flickered away from mine again. Presently she said: "You want to find out if I was really in Los Angeles, don't you? Well, I was, but I didn't go to the dentist. That was an excuse—if I didn't get away from here once in a while I'd go crazy. So I went to Los Angeles and I spent the time with a—friend. I can prove it."

"That's good," I said. "Now where can I find Jimmy?"

Instead of answering that, she moved closer to me and put her hand on my sleeve. "Aren't you going to do something about Ramon? You could beat him until he confesses. Charlie would help you."

"I don't doubt that. Where can I find Jimmy?"

"He's downstairs in his hobby room."

"Thanks."

I OPENED the door and went out. A spiral staircase took me down to an underground floor where I tried closed doors until I opened one that let me out into a long room fitted up with glass-enclosed display cases that were a riot of color under soft indirect lighting. The color came from thousands of butterfly specimens.

At the far end of the room was the character I'd seen shadow-boxing with a butterfly net on the lawn. He put down a board he'd been working at and peered at me with myopic blue eyes.

He said: "Yes?"

I introduced myself and he said: "Would you care to see my butterflies?"

I grinned. "You mean the ones you weren't catching on the lawn when I arrived?"

He goggled at me. "I wasn't catching any there—I was practicing a new backhand stroke. My theory is that if I walk past them they won't suspect anything and a backhand stroke should get them by surprise. They'll think I'm going whereas actually I'm coming."

I must have had a goggle-eyed look by then, myself.

Jimmy pointed at the board. "I captured those two yesterday—aren't they just the sweetest things?"

Poor Noah, I thought. It was tough enough to have one son grow up to be a sadist. But to have the other one turn out to be a lacy-pants—that was really bum luck.

I looked at the board. There were two sets of wings there. But no butterflies.

"Nice," I commented.

I looked around at several of the glassed-in cases. More butterfly wings, row on row of them. But no butterflies there, either.

"What do you do with the butterflies, Jimmy?"

He made a grimace of distaste. "I love the wings but I simply can't stand the butterflies—nasty little worms! I pull the wings off as soon as I catch them."

"Just one more proof," I said, "that this is an age of specialization. Well, Jimmy, what can you tell me about Ernst?"

"Ernst?" said Jimmy, looking puzzled. "What about him, what's he done now?"

"Somebody pulled his wings off—he got himself killed. Hadn't you heard?"

Jimmy snapped his fingers. "Of course. I remember now."

"Why would anyone want to kill him? Wasn't he a nice guy?"

The question failed to startle Jimmy's vague mind into blurting out anything interesting. He said: "I guess he was all right." He made a disinterested gesture with his hands. "I never paid much attention to him. Will you excuse me now, please?"

I went back upstairs and managed to locate a playroom-bar done in chromium and red leather. There I fixed myself a noble specimen of rye-and-soda and settled down to disposing of it and sorting out a few stray thoughts. I'd jicked up several ideas in the last hour but I still had to fit some particular individual into the frame with the ideas.

The one person who, it seemed, might be

definitely eliminated was Anna. If there had been any hocus-pocus about her trip to Los Angeles, Ramon would have had to be in on the deal. And, in that case, she'd hardly have tried to jockey the guy onto a spot by accusing him of the murder. Why she had tossed Ramon to me, I figured, was fairly obvious. Maybe Esme wasn't the only one around who liked men, maybe Anna had liked Ernst or maybe she'd liked Ramon and he'd given her the brush-off for Esme.

For the moment I gave up and mixed another drink. It was pretty tough for an average mind like mine to guess what went on inside of people like this bunch.

But there was one thing I didn't have to guess about, and on that I wanted to talk to Noah. I had a chance almost right away. He must have heard me clinking bottle and glass and he trailed the sound, getting there before I put the bottle away again. He took it out of my hand and sloshed some into a glass for himself. He looked upset.

He said: "Charlie's threatening to kill you. You shouldn't have shot that calf."

"He's sore, huh? You know, if it was his face that got kicked in for a change, it might do Charlie good. I think I could do it."

Noah shook his head cheerlessly. "I know what you mean. But I've figured if he takes it out on animals—" He didn't complete the thought, took a swig of the rye instead. "Have you found out anything yet?"

"Yes and no. Who's the blond woman on the place?"

He looked suddenly as though I'd given him the hotfoot. The color drained out of his face, leaving his red eyebrows like stoplights on a snowy landscape. He spilled some of his drink and his lips flapped soundlessly a couple of times before he said: "How—how did you know?"

"You held out on me, huh? Why?"

He got himself in hand pretty fast. He said, looking straight at me over the drink: "How did you know about her?"

"There's a long blond hair between the back of Ernst's shirt and the ice where he's tucked."

"You mean that—she might be involved?"

I said: "I didn't say I meant anything. I just asked who she is and why you didn't tell me about her."

He stared for a little into his nearly-empty glass, his red brows working. "She's my wife—and I didn't tell you about her, Lynch, because there isn't any possibility that she could have had anything to do with Ernst being murdered."

"Why not?"

"Because she's kept behind locked doors and watched day and night."

"You mean she's—"

"Yes. Her mind went at the time Jimmy,

the younger boy, was born. That's what I meant when I told you there was a bad blood strain in the children."

"Is she violent?"

"At times." He hit the bar with his fist. "But damn it, man, it would have been physi-cally impossible for her to have gotten out!"

"She here in the house?"

"No. I built a small house for her and an attendant, across the valley where it would be quiet for her."

"I'd like to see the place and have a talk with the attendant."

"I tell you it would have been impossible for her—"

"The impossible happens somewhere every day."

"All right, all right." He looked at his watch. "It's too late now. I'll go over with you in the morning."

We polished off two more drinks and Noah relaxed some and told me a couple of blood-curdlers dating back to his days as a wildcat oil operator and presently there was the sound of a gong and we went to dinner.

THAT dinner with the Corliss family was a dinner, so far as I was concerned, to end all dinners with the Corliss family. I didn't mind so much the fact that the cook had never heard of any seasoning but chili pepper. I could even stand Charlie glowering at me every once in a while from beneath his red eyebrows.

What got me down was the debate that went with the food. Everybody argued. And no two of them argued about the same thing for more than a couple of sentences before riding off in a couple of other directions. When things got too confused everybody would back up and start all over again on something else.

All of them, that is, except Esme who stuck to the subject of neo-symbolism and, inasmuch as nothing she said seemed to make much sense, her arguments fitted in with any and all that went on.

I kept my big mouth shut and my eyes open trying to notice some movement that would indicate that any of them was either left-handed or ambidextrous. Because the killer I was looking for had swung from the port side. I hadn't mentioned that to Noah, mainly because I don't believe in telling anyone, including clients, any more than I have to. Also I wasn't sure he'd keep the information to himself.

But I'd been satisfied, ever since examining Ernst, that the blow on the back of his head, undoubtedly the blow that had floored him, had been delivered left-handed. It had landed high at the back of the skull and slanted downward and to the right. A backhand blow with the right would have followed the same path—but

when you want to knock a guy out, you're going to give him all you've got. And you can't do it backhanded. You just can't get your weight into a smack from that angle.

But nobody at the table did anything south-paw except Jephtha who pinched the plump maid, Estrella, on the bottom with his left hand—and that was only because she served from that side.

Noah growled automatically: "Stop it, Jephtha."

Estrella giggled coyly and went on serving and everybody else went on arguing.

We got as far as coffee—that, at least, didn't have chili in it—and finally dinner was over. Noah got up. We all got up. Noah said he was going to turn in. I had the same idea for myself and I went out toward the stairs.

Out in the hall Esme put her hand on my arm. Her black eyes ranged up and down me.

She said: "Lynch, how would you like to pose for me?"

"Huh?" was all I could think of to say.

"You probably have a very good body," she told me coolly. "What about tomorrow morning?"

"Not me," I said. "No, lady."

"Why not?"

"This weather is too chilly."

She made a sound of disgust. "Oh, you're just narrow-minded."

Up in my room I sat down to smoke half a pack of cigarettes. While burning them down to butts I tried to figure out where I stood. I wound up concluding I had just about no chance to collect that heavy dough mentioned by Noah. I could get it two ways. One, of course, would be to pin the killing on a member of the family and then keep my mouth shut. That was out. I'd meant it when I told Noah I wasn't quite dumb enough to let myself in as an accessory. The other method would be to tap Ramon or one of the women servants or ranchhands for the job and I was about ready to reject that as a possibility. The way the killer had battered Ernst's body long after the guy must have been dead was like a sign-post pointing to an off-balance mind combined with a seething hatred. That didn't fit in with my picture of the ranch help.

After a while I decided I might just as well be stymied asleep as awake. My door wouldn't lock so I propped a chair under the knob. That wouldn't keep anyone out but the business of shoving it out of the way would probably wake me. Then I turned out the lights and went to bed with my .38 making a hard bulge under my pillow.

A long time later I opened my eyes. A tardy moon painted a square of silver at the foot of my bed and I blinked at it drowsily and drowsily wondered for a few seconds what had wakened me. Then I heard it consciously—the

legs of the chair scraping along the boards of the floor. They went on scraping warily, inch by inch, and then the sound stopped and a small dim figure was in the room. I hadn't moved except to slide my hand up to my gun. The figure oozed across the floor and into the square of moonlight.

Esme's voice whispered: "Lynch!"

I grunted, "What the hell!" and quickly sat up in bed.

"Shh—not so loud!" She had on a couple of wisps of chiffon that passed for a nightie.

I let my breath out, half relieved, half sore. "You dope, get back to your—"

"Lynch, I'm frightened! Please let me stay here."

I said: "Will you get the hell—" Then I stopped. There'd been something in her voice that was almost convincing. I swung my feet to the floor. "What frightened you?"

"Someone was on the balcony outside my room."

I found my robe, my slippers and got into them, hanging onto my gun the while.

Esme said in a small voice: "Where are you going, Lynch? What are you going to do?"

"Prowl after your prowler—and bring you back something to wear. Which is your room?"

"At the end of the hall. You can tell it—the door's open."

After the glow of moonlight in my room, my eyes found the darkness of the hallway impenetrable. I took short, cautious steps along the thick carpeting, worrying mainly about suddenly cracking a shin on some lurking piece of furniture.

But, although I saw nothing but blackness, someone else there must have been able to see more. I got halfway down the hall and there was a faint sound of indrawn breath just behind me, the sudden and almost inaudible grunt of someone putting out swift muscular effort.

The darkness had trapped me but it was the darkness that saved my life. Something glanced off the point of my right shoulder, spinning me sidewise and off balance; it was a blow that would have cracked my skull like an overripe watermelon if it had landed on the spot it had been meant for. From shoulder to fingertips my arm had no more life than a sackful of boiled spaghetti. I couldn't even tell whether the hand held the gun I'd started out with.

Down on one knee, I swept my left arm through blackness trying to find something, somebody to fight back against. My hand brushed across the outline of a small, firm, feminine body, and then the roof of the world caved in on me with lights and showers of fire that were like a sixth atomic bomb.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bats in the Belfry

I'M NOT one of those durable dicks they have in the radio sketches, guys who can be socked into dreamland half-a-dozen times a day and snap out of it each time with a wise-crack and the yen to go right out and absorb another brain concussion.

When I opened my eyes again I was a very sick guy. My head ached all the way down to my navel and from there on down my carcass just didn't seem to care. After a while I discovered that a light was shining into my eyes. I managed to turn my head away from the light and then I saw Esme and Noah beside the bed. Esme was slightly more formal now, wearing a quilted robe over the fragment of nightie I'd last seen on her. Noah was in robe and slippers and a state of considerable agitation.

He said: "Good—he's coming out of it!"

I mumbled something that was meant to be: "What's good about it—gimme a drink."

Noah managed to interpret my gurgle. He went across the room which I now saw was the one assigned to me. He came back with a water glass half full of rye and got some of the rye between my lips and a lot of it down my chin. What I got inside began to help. I sat up, and the notion stretched my brain out like a rubber band. Then it snapped back into my skull and I groaned.

I said: "What happened?"

Esme said: "Somebody hit you on the head."

"You're telling me?" I said. "I mean what happened after that?"

Noah took up the story. "A commotion in the hall woke me up. When I got out there the lights were on and Esme was kneeling beside you."

"I heard you fall," Esme told me. Her black eyes were unreadable. "But when I stepped into the hall and got lights on there was no one there but you."

"Where's the rest of the family?" I asked. "Did they sleep through it all?"

"Hardly," said Noah. "Within a few minutes after I found you and Esme in the hall, they were all out to discover what was going on. They were in the way so I sent them back to bed and Esme and I got you in here."

I said: "Was Anna the first or the last one to appear? Did she look sleepy?"

Noah was puzzled. "I'm sure I don't recall."

Esme's eyes were still unfathomable. She said: "Why single out Anna to ask about?"

"Because the person who socked me was a lady. What am I saying—she was no lady!"

Esme said quickly: "You mean you saw who hit you?"

"No—but I've got an educated sense of touch."

"Oh," said Esme. She filched a cigarette from my pack on the bed table and lit it, taking her time. She looked down at me through a spindrift of smoke. "I suppose it's in your mind that maybe I followed you down the hall and hit you?"

"I've thought of the possibility."

"Now you can forget it. If I feel like hitting you over the head, Lynch—and I've been on the verge of it a couple of times—I won't make a mystery out of it. I'll just do it."

Looking at her dark glance, I believed her. I reached for the glass in Noah's hand and put the rest of the rye whiskey into my system. After that I got up and went into the bathroom, lost the rye and tried sticking my head under an icy stream of water from the shower. When I went back to the bedroom, Esme had disappeared.

I started getting clothes on and suggested that it would be a swell idea for Noah to do the same. "Then we'll go out and ring doorbells."

"Ring doorbells?"

"It was a woman that knocked me out," I said. "It's no use my bothering Anna now but I want a quick look at the women servants and then we can take a jaunt to your wife's cottage."

"At this time of the night?"

"Why give this killer a cooling-off period?"

"But I tell you it's absolutely impossible for my wife to have—"

"All right," I said, "it's impossible. But let's take a look anyway."

Five minutes later he joined me in the hallway, dressed. As a starter we prowled the house—all except the bedrooms that were occupied by the rest of the family—from the top-floor studio to Jimmy's butterfly room. We wound up with nothing more interesting than the fact that the front door was unlocked and, from what Noah told me then, it was rarely the other way.

From the house Noah guided me past out-buildings that were black and misty-silver cubes under the moon. We stopped at a squat adobe structure from which came variegated snores. Noah rapped a couple of times and then there was the noise of someone stumbling over something inside, followed by a flow of Spanish curses in a feminine voice—at least, they sounded like curses.

A light went on inside and the door came open and the plump girl, Estrella, was peering out at us. She had a blanket around her in a sort of sketchy fashion that made it clear she slept raw. Her eyes were puffy with sleep, even when surprise widened them.

She said: "*Señor?*"

Noah said something in Spanish and I

stepped in past her. The two elderly *señoritas* were just sitting up in a double brass bed, clutching covers to their bosoms. They stared at me, the pupils of their eyes large and dazzled by the light.

I backed around Estrella and muttered, "O.K.," to Noah.

When we were well away from the adobe shack, he said: "How could you tell anything by just looking at them?"

"They'd all been asleep—their eyes showed that. It's not conclusive, of course, but I doubt if the person who smacked me would have been able to drop off into a sound sleep in the time since then. How do we get to the cottage?"

We went down toward the lake which was shimmering platinum in the moonlight. A big bullfrog sang bass to an obligato furnished by scores of little frogs and the breeze coming across the water was cool and faintly sweet with the odor of growing things. The frogs became quiet as we reached the shore and turned onto a path there. The path took us along the shore and then wound through trees in the general direction of a peak that was a jagged black outline against the ashen brightness of the sky. Behind us the frogs swung into their concerto again.

I had a flash with me but, even going through the trees, its beam would have been an insult to that moon. From the trees we emerged onto a long open meadow where knee-high grass rippled in the wind. After that we climbed a rock-strewn hill to another clump of trees and that was it. A neat white-painted bungalow nestled cosily there, looking more like a honeymoon cottage than a padded cell.

There were no lights in the bungalow, no sounds now but our own hard breathing from the climb and the faint whisper of air through the leaves above us.

Noah said, low-voiced: "I don't want to disturb her unless it's absolutely necessary—and nothing looks wrong here."

There was a streak of black outlining one edge of the door under a small portico. I flicked the flashlight beam at the door, doused the light again. "The front door is ajar a couple of inches. Is it usually kept that way?"

NOAH grunted something shocked but unintelligible and his long legs carried him toward the door fast. I was on his heels when he shoved the door out of his way and stepped inside to fumble for a switch. He found it and lights blinded me momentarily. I heard Noah's breath suck inward suddenly.

He said: "Good God, Lynch!"

My eyes were better now and I maneuvered around him into a living room and almost stepped on the body of a tall, buxom, gray-

haired woman in the blue cotton uniform of a nurse.

Most of the gray hair was blood-drenched. I got to a knee beside the woman and started to feel for a pulse. As soon as my fingers touched flesh, I quit worrying about a pulse—the woman had been dead for hours.

Getting up, I said: "The attendant?"

He nodded, his face and eyes a hundred years old. "Miss Gunther. She's been with my wife for years."

His eyes went toward a door at the far end of the room, a closed door. I opened the door on darkness and complete silence, got lights on and saw that the room was a white-painted cubicle totally bare except for a high-legged hospital bed. The bed was disarranged—and empty. The room was neat as a battleship deck and empty, too.

Looking over my shoulder at Noah, I said: "The impossible has happened."

I couldn't tell which was predominant in Noah's face—misery or relief. He said: "At least this clears the children."

I knew what he meant. For years his wife hadn't been responsible for anything she did, but the kids weren't as yet in that category.

After checking two other rooms—the attendant's bedroom and a small kitchen—I went back to the living room. Noah was staring helplessly at the floor, his eyes avoiding the body of Miss Gunther.

I said: "We'd better rouse the hands and start a search for her."

He brought his head up. "There are things about this I don't understand, Lynch. It's apparent, of course, what happened tonight. She must have found some way to get out of her room, and then she attacked Miss Gunther. But the other occasions—when Ernst was killed and the night Jeptha was almost brained—if she'd managed to get away, Miss Gunther would certainly have reported it to me."

That angle was bothering me, too. I said: "You paid Miss Gunther pretty well, didn't you?"

"Naturally. She had an unpleasant and very monotonous job."

"It's possible, then, that she didn't report because she was afraid you'd fire her for slipping up and she'd lose her fat paycheck."

Noah looked as though he didn't think that explanation was too convincing but he didn't argue. He said: "Another thing—how could she have reached the ranch buildings to kill Ernst in broad daylight without someone seeing her?"

I figured I had the answer to that but I didn't go into it. I said: "Well, there's lots of cover between here and the ranch."

We started for the door and I reached out a hand to flick the lights off. Noah stopped me.

"Let them stay on—she may wander back

here and I wouldn't want her being hurt in the darkness."

After that gory living room the placid moonlight outside was like serene music. We scrambled down the hill through the trees and at the bottom we were halted by a thin thread of lonely sound from somewhere in the night. A woman was crying, crying very softly. Where the sound came from I couldn't tell.

Presently Noah muttered: "Wait here. If she sees you it might startle her."

He went off swiftly through the trees and around the shoulder of the hill while the faint mewling went on and on monotonously.

I got a cigarette lit and found a rock to sit on and wished, first, that I had a drink and, second, that I'd never heard of Noah Corliss and a family so batty it should have been haunting belfries. But there seemed a chance now that I could collect that twenty-five grand. I figured that if Noah's wife was the killer there wouldn't be much point in shooting off my big mouth to the law. All the law could do would be to re-affirm the fact that she was crazy and tell Noah to be more careful of the locks on her door. On the other hand, murder is murder and sheriffs and district attorneys are pretty jealous of the formalities involved. It was a neat little problem, trying to balance the niceties of the law against twenty-five grand.

With the events of the night still sharp in my mind, I should have been more on my guard. As it was, Charlie could have cat-footed up behind me and spilled my brains all over the pine needles with one smack of the maul he was carrying.

Luckily, he chose to stalk me from the front so I'd realize what was going to happen to me. He materialized from behind a tree ten feet off the path.

He said in a low choked voice: "You don't like the way Charlie slaughters!"

I wasn't too worried. I had my gun and, even without it, I thought maybe my footwork would be good enough to take care of the situation. I stood up, got the gun out and said: "Take it easy, Charlie."

The moonlight was so bright that I could see his throat muscles working. I thought I could almost see the redness of his eyes.

He began to sob noisily, working himself up to the moment he'd planned. "You shouldn't have made me mad. You shouldn't have done that. But I'll make you sorry. You'll be sorry you made me mad."

I brought the gun up a little but Charlie paid no attention to that. He made a sudden running lunge at me and the maul came up over his left shoulder and then down in an arc at me.

Two steps to one side made the maul miss my skull by a foot and I used my gun to tap

Charlie on the head as he went by me. The maul dropped from his hands and he took three more running steps, each a little shorter than the last. Then he nose-dived and lay still. I picked up the maul, slung it as far into the trees as I could and then checked on Charlie, hoping I hadn't tapped him too hard. I hadn't. I watched him a couple of minutes and at the end of that time he got to his knees, his feet and went down the path toward the ranch without a word, without even looking at me.

After a while—maybe ten minutes—Noah came around the shoulder of the hill and down through the trees. He was leading someone by the hand and when they got close I saw the other person was a tall gaunt woman. Stringy blond hair draped about her face and slipped feet showed below the thin silk robe she wore. She brushed hair out of her eyes and I saw that they were as empty and yet as haunted as a ravished tomb. The eyes lit on me and the woman began to cry again.

Noah patted the hand he held. "It's all right, dear. Noah will take care of you." He put his finger to his lips when I started to say something. "Noah will take you home with him. Nothing's going to hurt you."

She didn't look as though she could understand the words but the tone did something to her. She stopped crying and Noah led her down the path.

CHAPTER FIVE

Crazy Like a Fox

A CLOCK set into a steer's horn above the bar in the playroom said two in the morning as I fixed myself the rye and soda I'd been wishing for. I had about half of it down when I was joined by Noah and Jephtha. Jephtha, in a brown silk robe that made his short plump body resemble the cocoon the silk had come from, looked cranky and tired.

He said shakily: "Lynch, you certainly picked a hell of a family to spend a weekend with."

Noah said: "Shut up, Jephtha." To me he said: "Jephtha and I got her to bed and filled her full of sedative. She's safe for the time being." He mixed himself a stiff drink and passed the bottle on to Jephtha.

Jephtha poured one straight. He said: "At least it's a relief to know who's responsible for what's been going on."

"You think we know?" I said.

Both of them looked at me, surprised and puzzled. Noah said: "Isn't it apparent that it's my wife?"

"After seeing her, I'd say she couldn't have done all or any of it." I finished my drink while that sank in. "What's her type of mental disorder?"

Noah was still puzzled. "She's suffering with dementia praecox but I don't understand what bearing that has."

"You mentioned that she was occasionally violent. Was that violence ever directed at anyone but herself?"

I could see Noah digging back into his memory. Finally he shook his head. "No. It's always taken the form of suicidal impulses. As a matter of fact, in recent years I've had no report of any such outbursts."

"In my racket a fellow picks up a smattering of information on a lot of subjects, including insanity. If I remember my sketchy reading correctly, dementia praecox is characterized by apathy, loss of memory, inability to take care of yourself, disinterest in your surroundings and, occasionally, a suicidal tendency. Eventually the victim becomes just a lump of breathing clay, without intelligence. It looks as though the mind behind all this business is a crazy mind but it's still a clever mind. A lot of planning went into those two killings."

Noah and Jephtha digested all that while I made myself another drink. Presently Jephtha nodded. "That makes sense, Noah." He looked at me. "Then who is the killer?"

"I'm not sure yet. But whoever it is wanted the blame to be put where it couldn't do any harm—on an insane woman. The way I figure it, that blond hair was planted on Ernst's body after the body had been put in the ice-house and very probably after it became known that a detective was on the way here. It was so conspicuous that it couldn't have been missed when the body was first found if it had been there then. That disposes of the problem of how Mrs. Corliss could have gotten away from the nurse to kill Ernst and attack Jephtha. She didn't. Tonight, I think, was to have been the pay-off, so the killer went to the bungalow, knocked the nurse on the head and led Mrs. Corliss out into the night. True to her type of mental disease, she didn't wander around, just stayed where the killer had taken her. She'd be found loose the next morning and, so the killer reasoned, it would seem apparent that she was responsible for the whole reign of terror."

Noah didn't exactly like the line I was taking. He'd thought everything was nicely niched and now I was spoiling it all. He said: "What do you mean by the pay-off?"

"If the killing of Ernst had been the whole of the plan, your wife would have been turned loose at that time to serve as the red herring. It's probable that the attempt to kill Jephtha wasn't the climax for the same reason although I can't be as sure about that as I am about Ernst's murder. Perhaps the murderer planned to kill the nurse and turn your wife loose after finishing off Jephtha—and when

Jeptha escaped death, there wasn't any point in going through with the red herring deal that night."

Jeptha scrubbed a fat cheek with nervous fingers. "That sounds like good reasoning except for one thing—why would anyone here try to kill me? Nobody would have anything to gain by it."

"Unless," I said, "it meant satisfying a grudge."

"Good Lord," said Jeptha, "no one here hates me that much."

"I don't think anyone knows just what grudges Charlie is nursing, perhaps has been nursing for years."

Noah put his glass down hard. "You think the boy is the killer, Lynch?"

"I don't know," I said. "There's at least one confusing angle but on the other hand a lot of things point to him. For one thing, Ernst was killed by someone who used the weapon lefthanded. The same holds for whoever slugged me." I explained how I had figured that out.

Jeptha shook his head. "No one in the family is lefthanded."

"Charlie is," I said, "when he swings a maul." They both wore a shocked look when I told them about my conference with Charlie in the moonlight. "He swung that maul up over his left shoulder. I'll admit that surprised me because I watched him at the table tonight and he did things right-handed. However, I know of plenty ballplayers who do things right-handed except when they step up to the plate. Another thing that points to Charlie is that he seems to be suffering from paranoia—he has delusions of persecution and homicidal impulses, his sadism being one manifestation of that. But, aside from those characteristics, a paranoiac's brain is as good as yours or mine. Sometimes it's even a brilliant brain. So Charlie would be perfectly capable of planning all this."

Noah asked bluntly: "But do you think he did?"

"I said there was one confusing angle—the person that socked me tonight was a woman. It could have been one of the women here cooperating with Charlie or Charlie could be entirely innocent and the woman could be doing the job alone. And don't ask me who the woman is or what her motive might be—I haven't got those things figured out." I mixed myself another drink, a short one this time. "But meanwhile we'd better find Charlie and get him into the house. And after that, Noah, you'd better build another bungalow for him—one with good strong locks—or park him in an institution where they can handle his case."

Noah dragged in a weary breath and nodded. "You're right. I should have done that with him long ago." He turned toward the

doorway. "I'd better look for him by myself."

Jeptha frowned. "Now look here, Noah—the boy attacked Lynch tonight so we know he's in a violent mood. It'll be safer if Lynch and I are with you."

Noah said stubbornly: "I'll have less trouble with him if he doesn't see you two." He went out.

Jeptha gave me a worried look. "I don't like Noah roaming around out there in the night alone, not after what almost happened to you."

I shrugged. "It's his boy—he ought to know what he's doing."

"I'm not too sure," said Jeptha. He was uneasy but hesitant. Then he seemed to make up his mind. "Confound it, I rarely go against Noah's wishes but I feel you and I had better get out there and try to keep an eye on things. I'll get dressed and be with you in a few minutes."

HE WENT out and I heard him trotting up the stairs to the second floor. I absorbed my drink slowly and waited. I didn't know whether I'd go out with him to prowl around after Noah or not.

I was still waiting—maybe it was three minutes, maybe it was five—when a hoarse animal howling welled up in the night somewhere close to the house. It rose and dropped and then turned into a savage snarling sound.

I hit the hallway and shoved the front door open and got to the porch with my gun in my hand. The moon was clipped to half a pallid disc by the rim of mountains but there was still enough light for me to see Charlie a hundred feet away on the lawn. The snarling was coming from him and he was raising a hammer, poising it to smash down at a huddled figure on the grass at his feet.

I yelled and started my sprint but I knew it was too late to stop what was going to happen. I was right about that, wrong about what I thought would happen.

Flame and sound spurted from the huddled figure on the ground. Charlie's body jerked. Two more shots banged out and the hammer dropped from Charlie's hands. He turned half around, folded slowly at the waistline and fell on top of the hammer.

When I got there Charlie wasn't moving and the dark spreading stain just above one red eyebrow showed he wasn't ever going to move again.

The other figure was stirring, getting to hands and knees. It turned a gory macerated face up toward me and Jeptha's voice came out of the wreckage.

It said: "Noah—over there—under the trees."

I got Jeptha by the arm, helped him up.

His voice got a little stronger. "I—saw

Charlie from my window—stalking Noah—”

“Why didn’t you yell for me?”

“No time—I ran out to—the balcony and down the outside stairs but—too late. Before I could reach them—he beat Noah down—he was snarling that Noah wouldn’t live to—send him to an asylum like he planned.” Jephtha staggered a little, caught himself. “I’m—I’m all right. Help Noah.”

Ramon materialized out of shrubbery that edged the lawn.

I shoved Jephtha at him. “Get him to the house and hop back to help me with the boss. After that I’ll have other things for you to do.”

It took me a couple of minutes to locate Noah. He was sprawled on his face, half under a low spreading bush. He wasn’t dead but he wasn’t all right, either—nobody would be all right with about a quarter of his scalp hanging loose like a pennant.

Along about seven o’clock Estrella slapped some breakfast on the dining room table for Esme and Anne and me and Jephtha. Jimmy, it seemed, had had a bite an hour before and gone out to chase butterflies—nothing swerved that guy from his career.

Jephtha’s face was pretty much of a mess—Charlie had landed a couple of socks with the hammer, one of them smashing Jephtha’s nose and taking out a couple of front teeth and the other almost tearing an ear off, and there was no doubt that the guy was lucky to be alive. The doctor whom I’d sent Ramon for, along with Deputy Sheriff Baskerville, had patched the shambles up pretty well with gauze and tape but it was understandable that Jephtha didn’t have much appetite.

Neither did the two girls but I did fair justice to the eggs and enchiladas and black coffee. I couldn’t tell what Anna was thinking or how she felt—her face was still that of an amiable but blank-minded baby. However, Esme looked more than a little shaken. She’d been able to take the murder of a husband in stride but apparently when nasty things happened to a brother, a father and an uncle, she wasn’t quite so cold-blooded.

During my second cup of coffee, she came out of a long silence. She said: “I guess there’s no doubt that Charlie did all this, Lynch, but there’s still one thing you haven’t cleared up. Who was the woman in the hall last night, the one that hit you?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but there were two gals up there at the time—you and Anna. Would Anna have had any reason to be cooperating a little with Charlie?”

Anna said casually: “No reason at all.”

Esme thought it over. Finally she said: “Not unless she’s crazy. And I’ve often thought she is. Otherwise, why would she have married Jimmy?”

Anna said without heat: “That’s funny—*a* Corliss calling anyone else crazy.”

The sound of feet coming down the stairs put an end to that debate. After a moment the footsteps stopped and Deputy Sheriff Baskerville’s fat body appeared at the doorway.

His bright little eyes in the folds of flesh beamed at Jephtha. “Got good news for you, Mr. Corliss. The doc says your brother’ll make the grade. He’s conscious now and it looks like he got only a concussion.”

“Thank God,” said Jephtha. His sigh of relief came from deep down. “Sit down, Mr. Baskerville, and join us. Won’t you have some coffee?”

“Don’t care if I do,” said the deputy politely. He hadn’t thought much of the Corliss outfit the day before but it was amazing how personal contact with a ten-million-buck family could change a guy’s point of view. He sat down and shook his head sympathetically. “You folks sure have had an unhappy time of it. Now, if you folks had just called me in to begin with—”

He gave me a glance that put me in my place as a sleuth. I grinned and said: “I’ll admit I’ve been pretty slow. However, I’ve been waiting to hear if Noah had anything to say when he snapped out of it.”

“Not much,” said Baskerville. “Just says he all of a sudden heard a step behind him and then Charlie growled something about Noah never sending him to an insane asylum. Next thing he was hit.” He took a noisy swig of the coffee Jephtha had poured. “Well, guess all there is to do now is collect the three bodies and take them down the hill.”

I said: “Why don’t you take the murderer along, too?”

“Murderer?” said Baskerville very slowly.

“What murderer?”

“Jephtha.”

THERE was a complete silence around the table for a little.

Then Jephtha said, looking utterly bewildered: “What are you talking about?”

“About the fact that you said you heard Charlie tell Noah he’d never send him to an insane asylum—and the fact that Noah said he heard Charlie say that.”

“I don’t understand,” Jephtha said.

“Me, too,” said Baskerville.

“There were just three persons who knew Noah had decided to lock Charlie up—Noah, myself and Jephtha. Noah made the decision just a moment before he went out to look for the boy. So it must have been Jephtha who said those three or four words and then struck him down.”

“That,” Jephtha said warmly, “is utterly ridiculous. If I’d tried to kill my brother last

night—something I'd have no reason to do—what motive could I possibly have had to make him think it was Charlie?"

I said: "If you'd slipped up and Noah had pulled through—as he seems to be doing now—it would have been another red herring. You're pretty fond of dishing out red herrings, Jephtha."

Astonishment had given way to anger on what could be seen of Jephtha's face among the bandages. He snapped: "Even if that weren't nonsense, you couldn't prove it. What it indicates is that Charlie was listening near the playroom when Noah decided to have him confined."

Baskerville nodded slowly. "That could have been, Lynch."

I sighed and poured myself some coffee. I said: "I'm too tired to get into a big argument. Suppose I just tell you a few things I know, a few things I suspect and a few guesses I've made. Then the law can use its own judgment. Let's start with motive. Jephtha is a guy who likes the ladies but doesn't find much chance to exercise his talents in a hideaway like this—"

"I can leave here any time I wish," Jephtha said, his voice getting louder. "I have my own money."

"Sure," I said. "A hundred-thousand-dollar trust fund. That sounds big but the income from it by today's interest standards probably isn't over three hundred a month, which is small change if you want to play the ladies."

Jephtha started to interrupt and Deputy Baskerville shushed him politely. "Let's hear him out, Mr. Corliss."

"Jephtha," I said, "wanted to get away and do it on heavier dough. We'll probably find that Noah's will bequeaths a hunk of the estate to Jephtha. So Jephtha began to toy with the thought of liquidating brother Noah. Naturally he wanted to do it in such a way that suspicion couldn't possibly touch him and it must have seemed a grand opportunity to have so many screwballs on the ranch. He'd make Noah's death seem like part of an insane murder orgy. The first step would be to kill Ernst as only a maniac would have done it."

Jephtha pounded the table. "You see, Baskerville, Lynch is the one that's crazy. He knows I've got an absolute alibi for the time when Ernst was killed."

"We'll take that up later," I said. "Now here are a couple of things I'll have to make a stab at. Either you're left-handed when you swing a weapon or you did it that way to build up Charlie as the suspect. I'm inclined to think, though, that you really swing from the left like Charlie and that your original idea was to implicate Noah's wife by getting

hold of some of her combings and putting a gold hair on the body when you heard I'd been sent for. Anyway, after disposing of Ernst, then you faked an attack on yourself to shove suspicion farther from the right door. And last night you decided it was time to wind the thing up. You went to the bungalow, killed the nurse and turned Mrs. Corliss loose. Then you came back to the house and started for Noah's room. But you alarmed Esme and she woke up. I got smacked in the hall—"

"You yourself said a woman attacked you!"

"I could have been fooled. It could have been a fat man—with a bosom as chubby as that of a small-busted woman." I reached across the table suddenly and ripped open the dressing robe and the pajama coat that Jephtha wore. He cursed me and jerked the clothing out of my hand, wrapped himself up again. But we'd had a glimpse that made a possibility out of my guess. I said: "But you still hadn't killed Noah and you'd lost Noah's wife as your red herring. However there was still Charlie as a suspect and it must have seemed like a wonderful chance when Noah went out alone to find him. You ducked up to your room, ostensibly to dress, and then out to the balcony and down the balcony stairs. You were lucky enough to see Noah almost right away. You caught up with him quietly, imitated Charlie's voice and socked him. But you hadn't counted on the fact that Charlie was out there, too. He saw you hit Noah and he didn't like that. He charged you with the hammer, you tried to get away, you didn't quite make it." I turned to Baskerville. "How does that sound?"

"It kinda don't hang together," said Baskerville, "less'n Mr. Corliss here started by killing the Ernst fellow. And he claims he's got an alibi."

Jephtha was pale but still fighting back. He said steadily: "The best alibi in the world—I was with Noah that entire morning."

"It's a pretty good alibi," I admitted, "but not quite good enough." I raised my voice a little. "Ramon—bring the girl in like I told you."

From the hall Ramon answered. "Si, chom." He came in, holding Estrella by the arm. She was paler than I thought an olive skin could get.

I said: "Ramon, tell Estrella what happens to good little girls who tell big bad lies about murder."

Ramon said things in Spanish. The girl muttered back sulkily, looking at the floor.

"She says she don' know of what you are speaking, chom," said Ramon.

I WAS getting pretty weary. "Then I'll have to add the postscript to the story. Estrella lied about having served breakfast

to Ernst at seven o'clock, because Ernst was dead long before seven. When you take a look at the body in the icehouse, Baskerville, you'll notice how one leg is drawn up, how one hand is draped in a very awkward position under the body. That means that when the body was found by Ramon and carried to the icehouse, it had already stiffened in the position it had been left in by the killer. Otherwise the leg would have slid out straight and the arm wouldn't have stayed draped around the body. Rigor mortis takes five-six hours and sometimes longer to set in after death. So Ernst had to have died quite a while before he supposedly was served breakfast. My idea is that Jephtha woke Ernst during the night, held a gun on him, made him dress and then marched him down to the barn for execution." I looked at Ramon. "Ask Estrella who bribed her to say she served breakfast to Ernst at seven. Ask her, too, if the same guy didn't provide her with a bottle or jar of fresh animal blood that she could pour around the body during the morning, particularly just outside the door so you'd notice it when you came to feed the colt. Which, of course, would lead to your finding the body."

Ramon spat Spanish at her and Estrella seemed to shrink inside her dress. She nodded, licked pallid lips and began to talk to Ramon. Finally she quit.

Ramon was very disgusted. "She is such a dommy, chom. She says *Señor* Jephtha ees her sweetheart and he promised her a meenk coat and marriage eef she would do jost like you say. She is a domb one."

I'd taken my eyes off Jephtha because I wasn't worried about him. I still wasn't worried when I heard him make a croaking noise in his throat and I looked around and saw he'd overturned his chair and was on his feet, backing away from the table and pointing a gun. The gun was pointing at me but even that didn't bother me. I'd unloaded it hours ago.

Esme stood up, crouched a little. Her eyes were on Jephtha and she began to stalk him. I tried to say, "Take is easy, Esme—the gun's not loaded," but I didn't get it all out before Esme uncoiled herself like a lithe cat and was suddenly all tangled with Jephtha. Jephtha's gun went off and something shaved fuzz off my ear and I knew Jephtha hadn't left the gun unloaded.

Beside me a gun banged twice as loud as Jephtha's and Jephtha was suddenly down on the floor with Esme sprawling on top of him. I looked around and Deputy Baskerville was fanning smoke from the muzzle of an old Frontier model and muttering: "I'll be dog-goned if rich people ain't the oddest people."

I went over and helped Esme up and noticed

that she didn't seem damaged. But Jephtha was ruined forever. Baskerville's slug had slid right over Esme's shoulder and taken the guy at the bridge of the nose.

Esme was bawling like a baby and I held her and said: "Why'd you jump his gun like that—are you crazy?"

Between sobs she said: "Do you have to ask a Corliss that question?"

Well, that was that. Except, of course, for the discovery of Jephtha's shillelagh, a length of lead pipe, under the bushes where he'd flung it when Charlie jumped him. It had Jephtha's fingerprints all over it which meant that my big scene at the breakfast table had been entirely unnecessary.

So I guess I didn't rate any more than the fifty bucks and expenses I billed Noah's lawyer for and which was all I ever got out of the business. Unless you want to include an offer about a month ago when I was sashaying along the Strip out near Beverly Hills on a studio assignment to corral a certain star whose Lost Weekend had turned into a month.

There was an exhibit of weird paintings in the window of an art store and off in one corner was the portrait of a leg of lamb complete with yellow garter. All the other paintings were equally screwy. I went inside and a tall gal wearing a pair of those Harlequin glasses—and clothes, of course—came over.

I said: "Could you tell me anything about the artist who painted the leg of lamb called 'Cheesecake'?"

Esme came out of a room at the rear. She looked trim and pretty and her black eyes were as unwinking as ever. She said: "Hello, Lynch." She glanced at the tall gal and the gal left us and went back to the cubbyhole at the rear. Esme said: "You still look like a beautiful animal, Lynch."

"How're things?" I said.

"Wonderful. I'm having an exhibit of my work."

"I mean the family."

"Dad's gone back to the oil fields and he never should have left them. Mother is dead. Jimmy is in South America chasing butterflies. We kicked Anna out with a half-million which was what she wanted all the time. I married Ramon."

"I hope you'll be very happy."

"Oh, I've divorced him."

"He was too dominating?"

"He wasn't dominating enough." She looked me up and down. "I'm living over on Doheny Drive, Lynch." She gave me the address and I took it down. "I wish you'd drop over, Lynch—any evening."

"The first open evening I have."

I seem to have nothing but closed evenings. Esme is a very neat package and I love 'em neat. But not nutty.

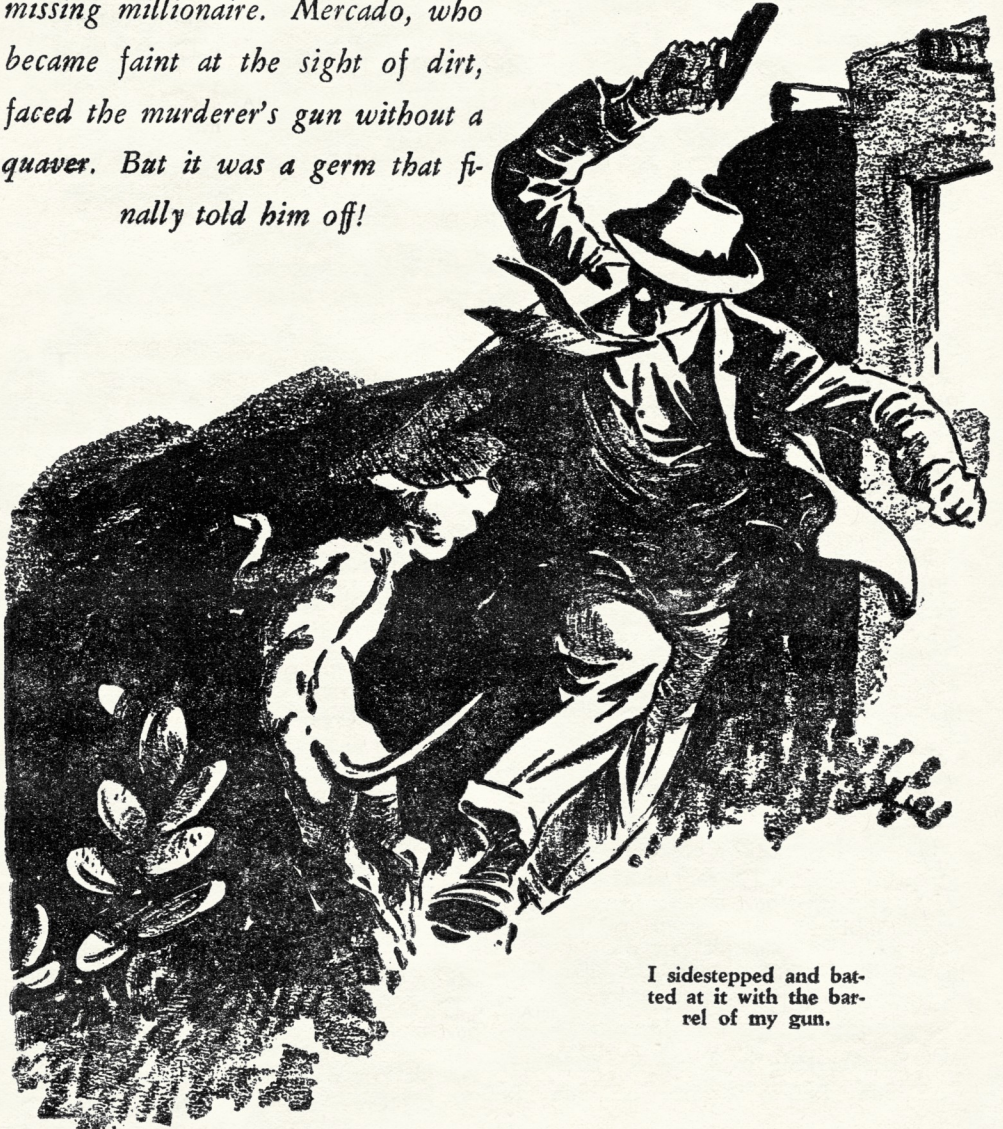
A HOUND FOR MURDER

*At the risk of hydrophobia, septi-
cemia and amebic dysentery, Mari-
ano Mercado dropped his battle
with bacteria to solve the case of the
missing millionaire. Mercado, who
became faint at the sight of dirt,
faced the murderer's gun without a
quaver. But it was a germ that fi-
nally told him off!*

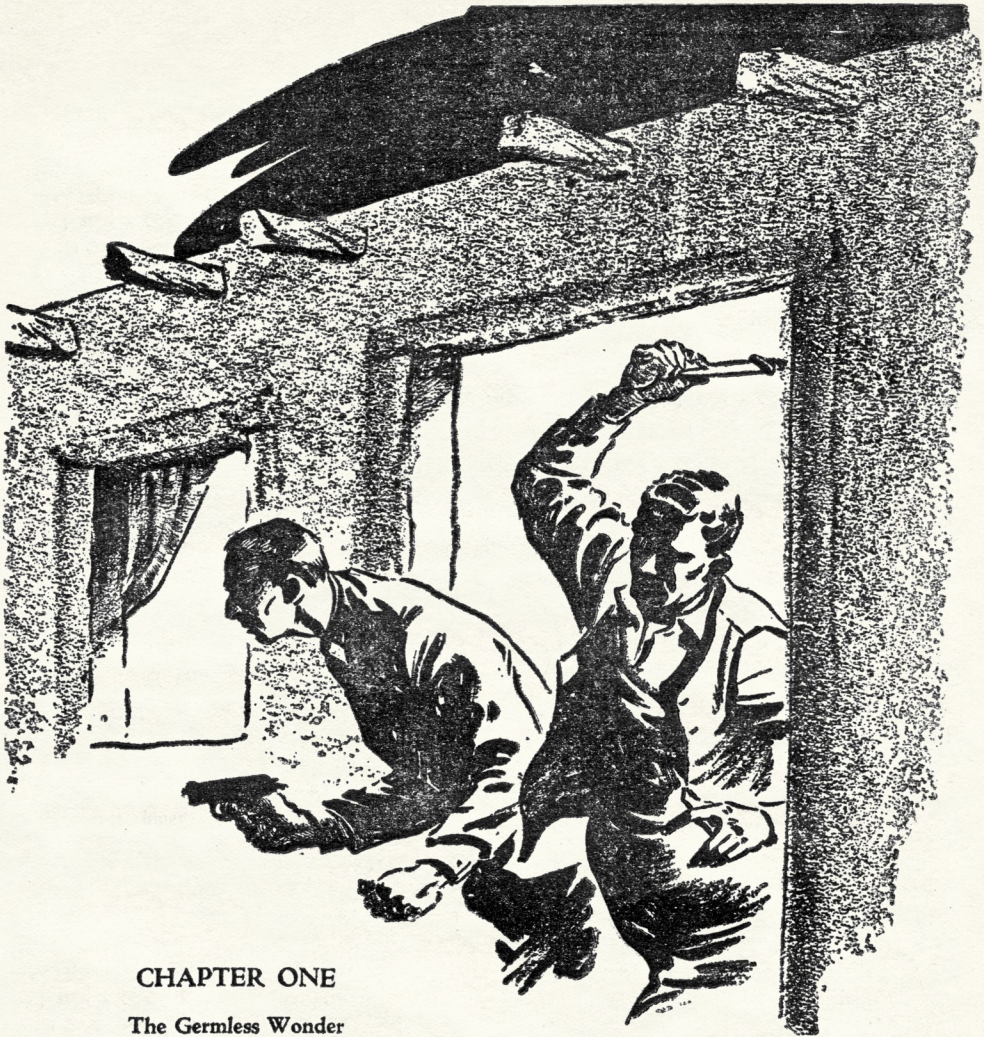
By D. L. CHAMPION

Author of "No Place Like Homicide," etc.

A Mercado Novelette



I sidestepped and bat-
ted at it with the bar-
rel of my gun.



CHAPTER ONE

The Germless Wonder

IT was a bright summer morning. The Mexican sun beat down bravely on the lush foliage of Chapultepec Park. High on a hill overlooking the lake stood the majestic ancient palace where once the ill-fated Maximilian and his empress had lived.

Mariano Mercado and I had breakfasted well and were permitting our digestions to work quietly as we sat on a bench beneath a bower of bougainvillea. The sole disturbing note to the serenity of the environment was Mercado's raiment.

His suit was a nice cross between bottle green and canary yellow. Its cut proclaimed his tailor a redoubtable individualist. His shoes were of two tones either of which would have caused an art critic to wince and his socks were of a blue which put the cloudless sky to shame.

His shirt was gray and if you think gray can be nothing more than a melancholy color you don't know Mariano Mercado's haberdasher. However, the crescendo point of the entire ensemble was his tie. The cravat which encircled his rather scrawny throat was an admixture of every hue known to man, ancient and modern. It hit the eye like a baseball bat and left the observer blinking and shaken.

A hundred yards or so off to our right a group of workmen were busily engaged in applying a fresh coat of crimson paint to the bandstand. Before us the lake was crowded with boats and the sound of clashing oars and imprecation filled the air.

A well-dressed man sauntered down the walk, paused at our bench, then sat down on the end of it. Mercado was at the other end, a good six feet from the newcomer with me

sitting between them. A sudden shudder coursed through his slight frame.

"*Dios*," he muttered in a stricken tone. "Let us move to another bench. *Pronto!*"

The expression of horror on his chocolate-colored face was quite familiar to me—I knew what had caused it. I shot a hasty glance at the stranger.

He was a man of medium size, with an impressive mustache, the ends of which curled upward in the general direction of the *Pleiades*. His complexion was lighter than that of Mercado, making it easy to see the little network of pimples on his skin.

I turned my head back to Mercado but he had already risen and was twenty feet away, moving as fast as he could without actually breaking into a dog trot. I sighed, stood up and followed him.

He selected another seat, squatted on it and thrust an anxious hand in his pocket. He withdrew an atomizer and sprayed into his mouth some secret solution known only to himself and his pharmacist. He replaced the atomizer and dug a small bottle out of his pocket. This lotion he rubbed carefully over his hands and his face.

I said irritably: "What's the matter with you this time?"

"If you are fool enough to risk your life it is your own affair," he said coldly, "I have no intention of perishing of some ghastly disease."

"What disease?"

"I don't know. But you saw that *hombre's* face? You saw those hideous ulcers?"

"Ulcers!" I snorted. "They were barely perceptible. In all probability the man suffers from some allergy."

"Perhaps," said Mercado incredulously. "But I do not gamble with my life. Do you know how many millions of virulent virus can exist on the point of a pin?"

As a matter of fact I knew quite well. He had told me often enough. I possessed more health statistics than an insurance actuary. I had become a walking compendium of disease since I had thrown in my lot with Mariano Mercado.

He possessed the physical courage of an enraged lion—when he was faced with visible adversaries. I had seen him tackle an armed thug with his bare hands. I had seen him wirily wrench a knife from a man twice as big as himself who was bent on putting an end to the career of Mariano Mercado. But once he suspected the presence of a germ, he was the lieliest-livered poltroon in all the world.

His array of lotions, medications and drugs with which to battle with the invisible hordes of bacteria cost him half of each peso he earned in his private detective business. The lengths to which he went to avoid all contact

with anyone who had even a slight cold seemed weird even to a guy who knows several psychotics.

And now he sat on a park bench, thoroughly terrified by a stranger with a dozen pimples on his face, disseminating vital statistics into my reluctant ear.

IT was I who saw the *tourista* first. She was a fat woman with vast bosoms and thick bare arms. She was dressed in white and the inevitable camera was slung around her shoulders. She rounded a clump of trees some fifty yards from where we sat and even at that distance I could see that she was excited.

She grabbed the first pedestrian she met, seized his coat lapels and screamed something unintelligible at him. The victim, a little old gentleman taking his morning constitutional, stared at her, broke away and loped down the path.

The *tourista* kept on going. A boy and a girl passed her and she yammered at them. They too stared, then hurried on their way. When the woman was about twenty paces from us, I could see her white face and her gaping eyes.

She said aloud and apparently to Heaven: "Good Lord, is there no one in this benighted country who can speak English? Dead men lying all over the park and no one understands what I am talking about!"

Mercado and I exchanged glances. We rose simultaneously. Mercado bowed to her and said: "May we help, Madam?"

Her frightened eyes transfixed him. "Can you speak English?"

He could speak it infinitely better than she could but he forebore to tell her that. He said simply: "Yes."

"Well, there's a dead man back there. In the bushes. My string of pearls happened to break. One of them rolled into the bushes and I went in after it. Then I saw him. A hole in his head. He's dead. It's disgusting. Nothing like this could ever happen in Central Park!"

The New York Police Department could have refuted that remark but there was no use pressing the point. Mercado and I followed back in the direction whence she had come. We turned away from the lake and followed a narrower, less frequented path. On its left was a thick growth of bushes. The *tourista* pointed a be-ringed finger at the center of the foliage and said: "There! He's in there!"

I plunged into the bushes, Mercado at my heels and the *tourista* peering fearfully over our shoulders. Lying on its back, sombrero at its side, was the body of a man. Dead center in his forehead was an ugly crimson scar. He was clad in shabby blue pants and a dirty shirt. A pair of cheap *huaraches* covered his sockless feet.

Mercado and I stared at him for a moment. Then it came to me that a faint odd droning sound was pouring into my ears. It took me a moment to place it. Then I burst into laughter. The corpse was snoring.

I heard the *tourista* gasp behind me. Mercado bent down and shook the man. He opened his eyes, blinked twice, then came to his feet with the respectful air of a peon.

"But he *was* dead," cried the American woman. "I know he was dead."

The corpse shook his head and said: "*No digo Inglis.*"

Mercado said in Spanish: "What are you doing here? What's that red stuff on your forehead?"

The man grinned. "Sleeping, *señor*. That is all. I was watching the bandstand painters and I got myself daubed with a little paint."

We stepped back out of the bushes to the footpath. The *tourista* was shaking her head emphatically. "Surely, I know a dead man when I see one."

"And," said Mercado, "how many dead men have you seen, *señora*?"

The woman shook her head and made a gesture which implied that she washed her well-manicured hands of the whole thing. Muttering, she took herself off in the direction of the park's exit.

At that moment I heard a footfall behind me and turned around to see the man who had driven Mercado off our original bench. He came to a sudden halt and glared like a headlight at our recently revived corpse. The latter met his gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes.

Mercado now caught sight of the new arrival. An expression of horror flitted across his face and he turned and walked up the path as quickly as his tiny feet would carry him. I was about to go after him when the pimpled individual said loudly: "*Hijo de perro. Cabrone!*"

He took a step forward and unleashed a hard left which took the other dead on the point of the jaw. He staggered backwards and fell. The pimpled man looked at his fallen adversary for a moment, then at me. He took a deep breath and to his heels almost in the same instant.

He raced away in the opposite direction to that taken by Mariano Mercado. I shrugged my shoulders and moved off myself, leaving our corpse flat on his back in precisely the same position as we had found him.

THE combination office and dwelling of Mariano Mercado was a model for any hospital. It was as sterile, as sanitary as a hundred pesos' worth of the most modern drugs could make it. It possessed neither curtains nor draperies. Such fripperies as these

may have been pleasing to the eye but on the other hand they were, as Mercado said often and loudly, an engraved invitation to any homeless germ to move right in.

The white medicine chests in his bathroom held an array of bottles that would have impressed a stockholder in a chemical company. The top of his desk held the overflow, plus a few items, such as his atomizer, which were in constant demand.

The hour of the siesta was over. It was a little after four o'clock in the afternoon. I was glancing through the evening paper while Mercado pored over a medical report concerning the incidence of amebic dysentery in the state of Chihuahua.

I heard the footfalls on the stairway outside. A moment later the doorbell rang. I put down my paper, crossed the room to the foyer and opened it.

The moment I saw our visitor I knew he would not be welcome. It was the pimply-faced man who had driven Mercado from his bench that morning, the man who had knocked out the sleeping peon. He said: "I wish to see the *señor* Mercado."

I led him into the living room and tactfully gestured toward the chair which was farthest removed from Mercado's desk. He sat down and removed his hat. Mercado looked up from his medical report, stared at the stranger and shuddered fearfully as he recognized him. His hand stretched out in a reflexive action and gripped a bottle of antiseptic. Only an innate courtesy prevented him from using it then and there.

"My name," said the stranger, "is Luis Mendoza. I saw you in Chapultepec Park this morning. I knew your face was familiar. Later I recalled having seen it in the newspapers. I knew then that you were Mariano Mercado, *detectivo particular*. I knew also you were the man I wanted. I wish to retain you, *señor*."

Mercado was staring at the rash on the man's cheeks. He had a death grip on the bottle of antiseptic. He said in a nervous tone: "What is it you want me to do?"

"To find a man. I will pay you five hundred pesos if you can tell me what has become of Juan Ruiz."

"First," said Mercado, "the details."

Mendoza bowed. "Very well. Juan Ruiz is a friend of mine, my best friend. Our fathers stood shoulder to shoulder in the revolution. Juan and his brother, Pedro, inherited a valuable silver mine in the state of Guerrero. Pedro was always a spendthrift who devoted his days to dissipation and vice. His brother advanced him thousands of pesos. So much that he will be entitled to nothing from the mine for years to come. However, he still owns a fifty percent interest."

Mariano Mercado released the bottle of antiseptic long enough to make some sketchy notes on a scratch pad. Mendoza sighed and went on with his story.

"Recently, two attempts were made on Juan's life. He was shot at twice, each time from ambush while riding to and from the mine. He apparently had no enemies. He became badly worried, so he telephoned me. He wanted me to take charge of his property while he went away for a while. His nerves were upset because of the attempts on his life. When I spoke to him he sounded very much afraid. He made an appointment to meet me in Chapultepec Park last night."

Mercado nodded. "And he did not show up?"

"He did not. I waited until after midnight. Then I went home to bed. I returned to the park first thing this morning. It was then that I saw you. It was then, also, that I saw the sleeping peon."

"The *hombre* you slugged in the jaw," I said. "And why did you do that?"

"I lost my head. But when I saw him I was certain he had something to do with the troubles of my friend, Juan."

"But why should he have anything to do with Juan Ruiz?"

"Because, *señor*," Mendoza spoke very softly, "because that peon you found sleeping in the bushes was Pedro Ruiz, the brother of my friend."

I glanced over at Mercado. In my book this was either a very large coincidence or there was something fishy here which did not meet the naked eye—my eyes at least. Mercado wore a thoughtful expression as if he was on the verge of an answer.

Finally he said: "And you will pay me five hundred pesos if I tell you what has become of your friend?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"Then," said Mercado slowly, "I think I can tell you."

Mendoza gaped at him. For that matter so did I.

I said: "You mean you know the answer right now?"

"I think so," said Mercado again. "However, for five hundred pesos, it is better to make sure. Latham, you will return immediately to the park. You will question those workmen. You will find out if there was a parked car which had broken down anywhere near the bandstand when they came to work this morning."

I stood up somewhat puzzled. "Is that all you want me to find out?"

"That's all."

I shrugged and left the room, leaving Mercado alone with the man of the pimply face. I knew what he was going through for those

five hundred pesos. It was like leaving anyone else to face an artillery barrage.

I took a taxi out to the park, dutifully asked my questions, jotted down the answers and hailed another cab for the return trip. I was back in Mercado's flat well within the hour.

THEY were sitting in exactly the same positions as when I had left them. Mercado looked up as I entered and said: "Well, was there a car?"

"There was a car," I said. "It was parked when the men came to work. Shortly after that another car drove up. Two men got out and repaired the first car. The second car drove off."

"And what then?"

I shrugged. "That was about all I could find out. The other car, I presume, drove off too. But I don't see what all this has to do with the disappearance of Juan Ruiz."

"You don't?" said Mercado with a faint tilt of his eyebrows. "Well, Juan Ruiz was in the car which had been repaired."

I looked at him incredulously. Mendoza said excitedly: "Then where is Juan Ruiz now?"

"I am not a theologian," said Mariano Mercado.

It took some twenty seconds for this remark to penetrate my skull. When it did, I said: "You mean he's dead?"

"He is dead," said Mariano Mercado, "and I have earned five hundred pesos."

Luis Mendoza ran a hand over his pimples. He said: "Would you kindly explain this, *señor*?"

"*Por favor, señor.*" I said not without irony. I had seen him pull some odd rabbits out of some oddly assorted hats in my time, but I didn't see how on the basis of the facts he was so certain that Juan Ruiz was a corpse.

"I am a man of fixed prejudices," said Mercado, "and I hate to admit that a *tourista* could be right about anything. But she was."

"You mean she actually *did* see a dead man?"

"She did. She saw Juan Ruiz."

"She did not. She saw his brother, Pedro."

Mercado shook his head. "*We* saw Pedro," he said gently. "*She* saw Juan."

Mendoza and I both waited patiently for further enlightenment.

"I am not a strong believer in coincidence," said Mercado. "Juan is supposed to be in Chapultepec Park on Wednesday evening. On Thursday morning his brother is discovered there sleeping in the bushes, with a spot of red paint on his forehead. It is a strange place to get smeared with paint. There was none on his hands, none on his clothes."

A faint light flickered for me now. "Go on," I said.

"Very well. Suppose someone is aware of the fact that Juan Ruiz is to be in the park on Wednesday evening. We will assume it is the same person who already has tried twice to kill him. He waylays him in the park and does what he has already failed to do before. He has a car with him in which to carry off the body. But at the crucial moment the car breaks down. What does he do?"

"Well," I said, "he fixes the car and gets the body away as soon as he can."

"And if he can't fix it himself?"

"He calls a garage."

"Not after ten o'clock in Mexico, he doesn't. There aren't any garages open. He must wait until morning."

"So," I said, picking it up, "he can't just sit there with a body in his lap until dawn when he'll be observed, so he drags the corpse into the bushes."

"Right. And at nine o'clock or so, he calls a garage, they send a repairman who fixes the car. Now, in all probability, he intends to leave the body where it is and pick it up at night when it will be safer. But a *tourista* blunders onto his body, just at the time when the car is fixed up again."

"All right. But why doesn't he just run away and leave the body there?"

"For some reason," said Mariano Mercado, "he does not want it known that Juan Ruiz is dead. He doesn't even want to gamble by taking the body away and letting the *tourista* howl that she saw a corpse in the bushes a few moments before. That would interest the *policia* and our killer, for some reason, still unknown, does not want the *policia* interested in the case. So, he simply daubs the forehead of Juan's brother, Pedro, with red paint and has him pretend to be asleep. It is now simply a matter of a hysterical female *tourista* who has made a comical mistake."

"You just remarked," I told him, "that you were not a strong believer in coincidence. Is it not an incredible coincidence that Juan's brother happened to be there just when he was needed?"

"*Valgame Dios!*" said Mercado. "You have the mentality of a retarded goat. In view of what *Señor* Mendoza has just told us, is it not most likely that the ne'er-do-well brother may well have been in the plot?"

HE turned to Mendoza. "*No es verdad, señor?* And have I earned five hundred pesos?"

"*Creo que si,*" said Mendoza, reaching for his wallet. He counted out five hundred pesos in creased and dirty bills. I gathered them up knowing quite well that Mercado would not have touched them with a gun at his head. Money, he had told me often enough, was a favorite breeding place for bacteria.

"And now," said Mendoza, and there was anger in his voice, "would you care to earn another thousand pesos, *señor?*"

"I was rather waiting for this," said Mercado. "You want to find out who killed your friend?"

"And why."

Mariano Mercado nodded. "Very well. First, tell me where this Ruiz mine is situated."

"In the mountains between Taxco and Iguala. The mine office is in Taxco."

"Leave your address with the *señor* Latham and I will get in touch with you."

I jotted down Mendoza's address and he left leaving a trail of repetitious Spanish thank-yous behind him. The instant the door closed behind him, Mercado uncorked the bottle.

He atomized and sterilized himself. He sprayed the chair on which Mendoza had sat. He swallowed two pink pills. Then for the first time in two hours he relaxed.

"A man like that should be quarantined," he said.

"Why? He's only got some slight skin rash. He—"

Mercado leaned forward and brandished a forefinger under my nose. "Do you know what a skin rash might lead to? Do you realize—"

This was a variation on a speech I had heard at least three thousand times since our association had begun. I essayed to cut him off.

"It seems to me," I interrupted, "that you've just picked up a thousand pesos in the gutter."

He dropped the health lecture and said with some indignation. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you've been offered a thousand pesos to find out who killed Juan Ruiz and why. Since the brother will doubtless inherit the mine, since the brother was apparently on the scene at the time of the murder—always provided your prime theory is correct—even the mind of a retarded goat can figure out that your villain is Pedro. It's merely a matter of finding him and assembling some evidence."

Mercado shook his head slowly. There was a doleful expression on his face.

"It won't be that easy, Latham. I do not deny that Pedro is mixed up in this but it's hardly a matter of simple murder. If it were, Pedro would have killed his brother and put as many kilometers between himself and the corpse as possible. He would not have loafed around all day at the murder scene. He would have gone out of his way to arrange an alibi which, I regret to say, is all too easy to do in my country."

I thought it over, then advanced a daring hypothesis. "Of course," I said, "you may be wrong. Juan Ruiz may be alive. All you have is a pretty abstract theory, you know."

"Well," he said, "the first move is obvious. We'll check the Taxco office. See if they think they know where Juan is. Telephone them. Also see if you can find out the value of the mine. The Federal Department of Mines will have that. There's no rush. Let me know in the morning."

By now it was time for me to return to my hotel and change my clothes for dinner. I bade Mercado farewell and went on my way.

CHAPTER TWO

When Is a Corpse Not a Corpse

I SPENT an evening dabbling lightly in the fleshpots along the Paseo Reforma, got home at two o'clock only mildly cock-eyed and slept the sleep of the just. In the morning I put through a long distance call to Taxco, and visited the Department of Mines.

I arrived at Mercado's with my report a little before noon. I was glad that he had already completed every detail of his morning toilet. The bottles on his desk had been used and tightly recorked. He was bathed, shaved, atomized, antisepticized and thoroughly disinfected.

He sat behind his desk perusing the morning paper, *Excelsior*. He was not reading the political news, nor the charts of yesterday's racing at the Hippodrome, nor the scores of the *beisbol* game in *Señor Pasquel's* stadium. No. He had discovered an article on the malarial mosquito. And he was giving it every ounce of concentration he had.

He looked up as I came in. "Latham," he said in grave and hollow tones, "listen to what this article—"

This time I didn't worry. I knew I had something that would keep him from a sanitation lecture for a little while.

"You listen to me," I said. "I've done some checking for you. That Ruiz mine outside of Taxco is worth something over two million pesos at present silver prices. At least that's what it sold for yesterday."

He blinked slowly and temporarily dropped the matter of the malarial mosquito.

"It was sold yesterday?"

"To an American. For two million, two hundred and fifty thousand pesos. His name is Apthorp and he's staying at the Hotel Los Arcos. Juan Ruiz' secretary is there also and Juan himself is registered though he wasn't in his room when I checked."

"That," said Mercado, "fails to amaze me."

He tapped a thoughtful and sterilized finger on the desk top.

He said: "How was it sold? What were the terms of the sale? How could it be sold without the presence of the principal owner, Juan Ruiz?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "There are a couple of guys over at the Los Arcos who doubtless could answer those questions. I can't."

Mariano Mercado stood up. Today he was wearing his blue suit but it was not a blue that you have seen in the window of any tailor shop in all the world. It was a brighter blue than the prism ever suspected. His shirt was yellow and his tie matched his socks which were utterly ineffable.

He selected a fawn-colored hat, donned it and said: "*Vamanos. A Los Arcos.*"

J. Wellington Apthorp was a stereotype. He was more typical of the American business man than anyone has a right to expect. His air was thin and receding so fast you could almost see it go. A pair of shrewd blue eyes stared out from behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses. His clothes were conservatively cut and both their style and color made them seem shroud-like next to Mercado's blazing haberdashery.

His demeanor was brisk but pleasant. His manner was that of a man who counts every minute and every dollar. We were admitted to his suite, offered cigars and chairs.

Mercado showed his credentials and said in his precise and perfect English: "*Señor*, I am working on a case for a most important client, a member of the Federal Government. I need some assistance from you."

Of course that statement was a blatant lie. Mercado was using it in order to obtain what information he wanted. When a foreigner buys property in Mexico he finds himself hedged in by various complicated laws which require the services of at least four lawyers and all the friends at court that can be assembled. Since Apthorp was about to engage in mining he would think twice about rebuffing a private detective who was working for a government official.

"Certainly," said Apthorp. "Anything at all."

"First," said Mercado, "I understand that you have bought a mine in the state of Guerrero."

Apthorp nodded. "Signed the final papers yesterday."

"What time yesterday?"

"Early. About eight o'clock in the morning."

"May I ask who signed those papers other than yourself?"

"The mine owners. The Ruiz brothers."

Mercado's eyebrows approached the ceiling. "*Both* of them? Pedro and Juan?"

"Naturally. They are the joint owners of the mine. How could I buy the mine without their signatures?"

I grinned. It wasn't often I nailed Mercado in an error. But it was obvious that if Juan

Ruiz had signed a paper in this hotel room at eight o'clock yesterday morning, he could not have been a corpse hidden in a bush in Chapultepec Park.

Mercado sighed. "Was anyone else present at this contract signing?"

"Yes. Mr. Drayton. He's an American. He is the Ruiz general manager."

"And has the money been paid?"

"Twenty percent of it. The rest is to be paid into the Ruiz bank within thirty days. Then I will take over the property."

Mercado sighed again. I could see he wasn't very happy.

"Would you mind if I asked Mr. Drayton to come up here? I understand he is registered at this hotel."

Apthorp reached for the telephone. "Certainly. And would you care to see Mr. Juan Ruiz? He, too, is registered here."

"You may try him," said Mercado. He glanced at me and added stubbornly: "But he won't be in."

IN that, at least, he was right. Juan Ruiz' room did not answer. After a few minutes there was a knock at the door and Apthorp admitted Drayton.

Drayton was a man of medium height with a sunburned face and narrowed eyes. Apthorp introduced him to us. After he was seated, Mercado said: "I just want to be sure that both Juan and Pedro Ruiz were in this room yesterday between eight and half past in the morning."

"Sure they were," said Drayton. "They signed the sales contract."

"You know both brothers?"

"Sure, I do."

Mercado sighed again. It was obvious that he didn't like this at all. He tried again.

"Were both the men here at the same time?"

Apthorp shook his head. "No. Pedro came in about ten minutes after Juan had signed and left."

"You see," explained Drayton, "there was bad blood between them. They didn't want to see each other if it could be avoided, so we avoided it."

Some of Mercado's melancholy seemed to leave him. "Tell me, Señor Apthorp, did you find they looked very much alike?"

Apthorp shook his head. "Not at all. Juan has a mustache, is taller and extremely well dressed. The brother is dressed like a peon, clean-shaven and stooped. I wouldn't have known they were brothers if I hadn't been told."

"And you," said Mercado to Drayton, "you saw both men yesterday?"

"Sure I did."

Mariano Mercado passed a hand over his

forehead. "All I can say," he said, "is that I am baffled. Thank you, señores and *bueno dias*."

He turned on his heel and left the room. I trotted along after him.

We got out into the street in silence and I followed Mercado into a *cantina*. He sat at the bar and ordered a *habanero*. I said, "Dos," to the bartender and sat down beside him.

Mariano Mercado wiped the glass carefully with a gleaming handkerchief before he tilted the bottle over it. He sighed, lifted the *habanero* and drank it. He performed the same rite three times. I went right along with him.

He set the glass on the bar finally and said: "I think we shall visit the señor Mendoza. Perhaps he can clear up some of the questions in my mind."

We hailed a taxicab and journeyed to the hotel of the señor Mendoza. It was a third rate hostelry over near the colorful Juarez market. A thin and dour-faced clerk informed us that the señor Mendoza occupied room number 118.

There was no elevator. We climbed up a narrow staircase over a worn carpet. We walked down a dim corridor and halted before a door.

I was about to knock, when Mercado whose eyes were those of a precocious eagle, said: "Mira! Look down there."

I looked down at the dingy carpeting which his forefinger indicated. I failed to see anything.

"What is it?"

"There is a liquid seeping from beneath the door."

"Probably water. Maybe he upset a glass or something."

"It is not the color of water," said Mercado gravely. He paused for a moment and added: "It is the color of blood."

Then he put his hand on the knob and turned it. The door, it appeared, was unlocked. Mariano Mercado and I walked into the room. I took a single glance at Mendoza's huddled figure on the floor and slammed the door shut behind me.

In the next instant Mercado and myself were on our knees beside Mendoza. He wore no coat and there was a red stain on his shirt in the region of his heart. There was a trail of blood from the window to the door indicating that he had been shot down on the other side of the room and had crawled across it. He was indubitably dead.

There was a pencil on the floor near the body and in his left hand was clutched an unsealed envelope. I took the envelope from his hand and examined it. It was addressed to Mariano Mercado.

Without speaking I handed it to Mercado. He put his fingers inside it and withdrew a

thousand peso note. Scrawled across its face was some scribbled writing.

Here is the fee. Now find out also—

Mercado sighed. He stared at the pimply face of the dead man and he did not appear horrified. Apparently he had even forgotten his fear of handling money, for he held on to the bank note as he looked at the dead man.

He said at last in a voice, deeply moved: "He is an honest man, Latham. Even as he died he thought of my fee."

"And revenge," I said. "He doubtless wanted to make sure you'd get the guy who killed him."

He glanced down at his tiny hand, noted that he still held the thousand peso note and shuddered.

"Here," he said, thrusting it at me, "bank this."

He stood up and thoroughly scrubbed his hands in the wash basin.

I put the money in my pocket and said: "What do we do now? Call the gendarmes?"

He shook his head. "They'll find him soon enough and it is better that *el coronel* Gomez does not know that we have any knowledge of it."

That was true, enough. *El coronel* Gomez of the local police was no bosom friend of Mercado's.

"All right," I said. "What do we do? Just put the thousand pesos in the bank and forget the whole thing?"

He regarded me with disapproval. "Our client may be dead but the work is paid for. We shall find out who killed him. We shall also find out who killed Juan Ruiz."

"How?" I said very practically.

He didn't answer me. He opened the door and went out into the hall. I followed him, closing the door carefully behind me. We took a taxi back to Mercado's place.

THERE he washed thoroughly with disinfectant and used his atomizer. Then he sat down in his sterilized chair behind his sterilized desk and heaved a weary sigh.

"It seems to me," I observed, "that we're up against a blank wall. Your original theory, obviously, was incorrect. We have nothing to go on."

"Oh, yes, we do," he said. "First, telephone that Apthorp and find out the address of Pedro Ruiz. He must have given it when he signed the contract. I think I shall ask him some questions."

He went back into his reveries as I used the telephone. I obtained the information and wrote it down on a scratch pad which I pushed over in front of him.

As he looked at it I heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

I opened the door and a voice, harsh and

completely un-Mexican, said: "You ain't Mercado, are you, bud?"

I said that I was not. The visitor pushed roughly past me. He said: "I want to see Mercado."

He walked into the living room and leaned against the door jamb. I looked him over in the bright sunlight that came through Mercado's curtainless window.

Compared with anyone else than Mercado himself, our visitor's clothes would have seemed loud. He wore a pin-striped blue suit which fitted him tightly. His shirt was midnight blue and his tie matched. His shoes were bright yellow, his socks were the same color.

He was a man of about thirty. His face was absolutely white and his black eyes were half shut. I knew his type quite well. He was one of the mob boys. Probably, I guessed, from Chicago. He was tough and bloodless. From the dilation of his pupils I imagined he would have preferred a shot of heroin to a Scotch and soda.

He jerked his head in Mercado's direction and said: "You speak da English?"

Mercado flushed. "I speak English if that's what you're asking."

"Good. Then it ought to be easy for you to understand me."

Mercado looked at him curiously. He was of a type with which Mariano Mercado was not familiar. He said icily, "I do not anticipate any difficulty in following your vocabulary, *señor*. What is it you wish to say?"

"My name," said the gungsel, "is Sammy Renault."

"Are we supposed to be familiar with it?" I asked.

"You would be if you hung around the Midwest. I got something of a rep up there."

"As what?" I said. "A pillar of the church?"

"Don't be a wise guy, chum. What I have to say is for this Mercado, not you."

"Well, say it."

"O.K." He fixed Mercado with his little black eyes. He opened the side of his mouth slightly and two harsh words dripped out.

"Lay off."

Apparently, Mercado had overplayed his hand a trifle when he had assumed he would have no difficulty in following Sammy Renault's vocabulary. His eyebrows lifted themselves and he stared at the gunman inquiringly.

"Lay off?" he repeated. "What does this mean?"

Sammy sighed in the manner of a man whose patience is being tried.

"Lay off. Keep your nose out. Don't be a buttinsky. Or else."

Mercado who knew more English words than any American I had ever met, did not

understand any of these. I stepped into the conversation.

"What is it you want him to lay off?"

"Whatever it was he was doing for Mendoza. He is also to keep his mouth shut."

"About what?"

"About anything he might know."

"And what does the 'or else' imply?"

Sammy Renault's lips became a thin vicious line. He looked at me through his half-closed lids.

"Listen," he said, "if a guy can get away with murder in Chicago, it's a cinch he can get away with it in Mexico. Mexico ain't tough. The cops ain't tough and it's easy to hide in the hills. Now, do you know what I mean by 'or else'?"

Now I knew and I said so.

"O.K.," said Sammy. He jerked a thumb in Mercado's direction. "So tell him and he'll know too."

I put it into the language Mercado would comprehend.

"He says that you're to stop working for Mendoza, that you're to keep your mouth shut if you know anything and that he'll kill you if you don't."

For a moment anger flashed in Mariano Mercado's eyes. He opened his mouth and I expected wrathful words. But he closed his lips again without speaking.

Then he said quite politely: "I need five minutes to think this over."

"Take half a day," said Sammy. "But be sure you decide right."

MERCADO looked at him for a long time. Sammy still lounged in the doorway. He took a jackknife from his pocket, opened a murderous blade and proceeded to pare his nails.

From time to time he raised his slotted gaze and looked at Mercado. On each occasion that he did so, Mercado drummed his fingers nervously on the desk and registered timidity. This circumstance caused me some surprise. Of course, Mercado lived in deadly fear of bacteria but I had never seen him even mildly afraid of any tough guy that ever lived.

At last he said hesitantly: "I would like to discuss this privately with my assistant. Then I shall be able to tell you what course I can pursue."

Sammy Renault waved the jackknife deprecatingly. "I'm a patient man," he said. "Take all the time you want."

Mercado signalled to me and I followed him into the gleaming, germless bathroom. He closed the door cautiously.

"I don't blame you for being nervous," I said. "I know the type. He's a tough boy. A killer."

Mercado snapped his fingers and uttered a

magnificent "Pouf!" He added: "I am not afraid of him. I am lulling him into a sense of false security. Now, listen. Where is our car?"

The coupe was in the garage around the corner and I told him so.

"All right. You have the address of Pedro Ruiz. How long will it take you to drive there?"

"Through Mexican traffic, say, twenty minutes."

"That will do. You will drive there at top speed the instant the gangman has gone."

"Gunman," I said.

He ignored me. "Within a short time after you have arrived at Pedro's home, he will leave. You will conceal yourself and wait outside. When he leaves you will follow him. When he arrives at his destination, you will endeavor to keep an eye on him and also telephone me telling me where you are. Do you understand?"

"I understand. But why? And how far is he going? And—"

He held up a silencing hand. "Later. There is no time for talk now. I must return and speak to this gangman."

"Gunman," I said, but he was already on his way to the living room.

He resumed his seat at the desk. Sammy Renault closed his knife and replaced it in his pocket. He said: "Well?"

"I have decided that this is all no affair of mine," said Mercado.

Sammy nodded and smiled bleakly. "A wise decision," he said. "It'll save us both a lot of trouble."

"But," said Mariano Mercado, "I must point out to you that it makes very little difference whether or not I quit the case. For, you see, the body is gone."

For the first time since he had entered the room Sammy's eyes opened wide. He said harshly: "What do you mean by that?"

Mercado spread his palms. "Simply that the body has been taken. And without the body you're in difficulties. At best there will be an investigation and it'll take a long time before there is any profit on the deal."

I hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about. Sammy apparently did. "How do you know this?" he snarled.

"Mendoza told me."

"Then who took it? Where is it?"

Mercado spread his palms again. "He did not tell me that."

Sammy swore explosively. He slammed his right fist into the open palm of his left hand and swore again. Then he turned abruptly and raced from the room. I heard his heavy footsteps diminuendo down the stairway.

Mercado said: "*Vayase!* And quickly. There is no time to lose!"

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D. L. Champion

I galloped down the stairs after Sammy. I raced around the corner to the garage and jumped into our coupe. I drove out into the streaming and chaotic traffic and headed for the address which Pedro Ruiz had given when he signed the contract.

CHAPTER THREE

Mad Dogs and Mexicans

IT was a dilapidated three-story rooming house set a few feet back from the street. A rusted iron fence surrounded it and there was a tired palm tree standing in a weedy garden. Parked directly in front of it was a small sedan.

I parked my car on the corner, climbed out and stood behind it, peering through the window to the door of Pedro Ruiz' house. I remained in that position for some twenty minutes.

Then the door opened and Sammy Renault emerged. Accompanying him was Pedro and a mongrel dog about thirty percent terrier. Pedro was, I noticed, rather better dressed than when we had seen him in Chapultepec Park. He wore a dark business suit and shoes instead of *huaraches*.

They got into the sedan and set off to the south. I climbed back into the coupe and followed along.

I knew quite well that following Mercado's instructions would not be easy. The traffic in Mexico City is chaotic. The Sunday drivers are out every day and each man at a wheel is a thorough-going individualist.

However, I managed to keep the sedan in sight until we moved out into the suburbs and after that it looked somewhat easier. It appeared as if they were headed toward the Ruiz mine. They took the road to Xochimilco, then continued on toward Cuernavaca and Taxco.

I cruised along after them. They drove speedily but there wasn't much traffic and I had no trouble keeping them in sight. My present worry was the fact that dusk was coming down and that it was going to be harder sticking to their tail in darkness.

On the other side of Cuernavaca, they braked before a restaurant and went inside, leaving the dog locked in the car. I figured that they were going to eat and that would give me enough time to call Mercado with a preliminary report.

I found a phone booth at a gas station and put through the call. I told Mercado where I was and in which direction we were headed.

He said: "Good. Write down the number

A Hound for Murder

of the booth you're in. I'll come out right away. When you reach your destination, phone me there. At least, I'll be part way to wherever we're going. And don't lose them."

I hung up, bought some *tacos* from a street vendor and washed it down with a bottle of beer. Then I got back in the car and waited for my quarry.

They came out shortly afterwards and the sedan moved on to the west. After a moment, so did my coupe.

The night came down over the Taxco mountains and the sedan turned off the main road about fifteen kilometers before we reached the historical old Borda silver mine. We bounced over a rutted dirt road, through a tiny hamlet of adobe houses.

Now, I permitted them to pick up quite a lead on me. Apparently they hadn't yet suspected that they were being followed. On this deserted, traffickless road it would become obvious if I remained in sight.

I slowed down to almost nothing and switched off my headlights. I drove with care, keeping my eyes on their tail light. Suddenly, it glowed a deeper red as the brakes were applied. I came to a full stop, pulled off the road into the bushes at its side and got out of the car.

The lights of their car went out completely. I heard the distant bark of their dog as he yapped happily at his freedom from the constricting limits of the sedan.

A moment later a light flickered a little to the left of the spot where the sedan had halted. I took my .38 from its shoulder holster and moved forward on foot.

Just then a faint new moon came gently over the top of the mountains to the west. It enabled me to see the dim outlines of their car up ahead and a larger bulk to its left. This second object was a house which apparently was built right up against the side of a hill.

I made my way along the edge of the road as silently as possible. As I drew near I saw a ramshackle, ancient adobe house whose back had been built flush up against the hillside. There were three small, high windows, following the fashion of Spanish colonial architecture peculiar to this region and a single door which faced the road beyond what had once been a garden and was now a lush tangle of trees, Spanish moss and shrubbery.

After observing these things, I went back to my car, praying that the *pueblo* which we had just come through boasted a telephone.

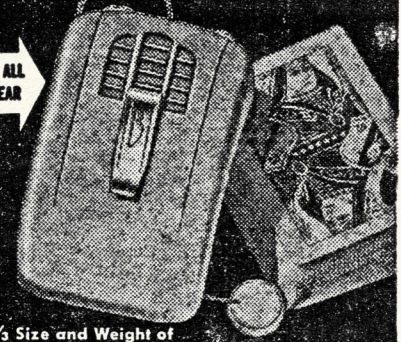
It did, though I had to route the local storekeeper out of bed and bribe him with ten pesos to let me use it.

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D. L. Champion

I got Mercado at Cuernavaca and told him precisely where I was. He instructed me to return to the house and watch, to follow immediately if Sammy and Pedro left.

I went back to the house. I didn't believe I was going to have any more tracking to do that day. Kerosene lamps flickered inside the house and it seemed certain that the two of them intended to spend the night where they were.

Not that this made me very happy. I'd have to sit outside under a tree alone waiting until Mariano Mercado came up with more instructions.

I DID exactly that for a while then boredom and curiosity overcame me. I had no idea what Mercado was up to, nor for that matter what Sammy and Pedro were cooking. I decided to see if I could find out.

I went up to the house on stealthy feet. I maneuvered myself under one of the windows, then elevated myself on tiptoe and peered inside. I saw a rudely furnished room containing a rickety table, three broken-down chairs and a door which argued there was another room in the house.

Sammy was sitting at the table, scowling. Pedro bent over, lighting a lantern. The dog scratched up against the door and whined.

"Let that damned dog out," said Sammy. "He's getting on my nerves."

I noticed that Pedro, who could not speak English in Chapultepec Park seemed to understand it well enough now. Before I could move, he threw the front door open. The mongrel bounded out into the garden, then pulled up short.

I cursed for having left myself this wide open. The dog glared at me then barked frantically. Sammy sprang up from his seat and an automatic was in his hand.

I turned and faced the dog holding my .38 in fingers which were none too steady. The dog growled and sprang. I sidestepped and batted at it with the barrel of my gun. I missed, and in that moment both Sammy and Pedro were facing me. Pedro held a knife in throwing position and Sammy's automatic was aimed at my heart in a most professional manner.

After completing my futile pass at the mongrel, the muzzle of my own gun was pointing at the adobe wall. Thus, when Sammy said, "Drop that gat, chum," I did so.

Pedro picked up my fallen gun and Sammy dragged me roughly inside. He threw me into one of the creaking chairs and slammed the door. He kept his automatic dead on my heart and said from the side of his mouth, "Wise guy, huh?"

A Hound for Murder

I decided it was politic not to answer. I certainly did not feel like a wise guy. I felt like an egregious idiot. Whatever Mercado had planned, I had quite probably messed it all up. Not to mention the fact that I considered my own life was, at the moment, hanging by a thread.

All I could do was pray that Mercado and the Marines arrived in time.

"What do you guys think you're pulling?" said Sammy. "Are you trying to cross me?"

Since I didn't know what we were pulling, I couldn't tell him. He glared at me through his narrowed lids, then said abruptly to Pedro: "Get outside and see if it's there. We'll attend to this guy in a little while."

Pedro nodded. He picked up the lantern and went outside. Sammy, the automatic and I sat in silence.

Then suddenly from the darkness outside came some sharp words in Spanish. I heard an oath, then Mercado's familiar incisive tones. There was a yell and the crackle of two shots. An instant later Pedro raced into the house, breathless, slamming the door behind him. A bullet pinged up against the panel a second later.

Sammy stood up. His attention for a moment was removed from me.

"Mercado!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "I'm in here."

His voice came out of the night. "Is the gangman there?"

"Gunman," I yelled. "Yes!"

"That is good."

What was good about it I couldn't see. Sammy scowled at me and said: "Keep your mouth shut or I'll blast you." He lifted his voice and shouted to Mercado. "Come in and get me, spig."

"Oh, no," cried Mercado. "You come out."

"And get blasted in the doorway?" said Sammy. "Am I crazy?"

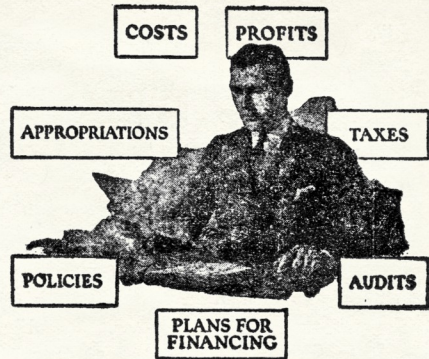
"You'll have to come out sometime," said Mercado. "And I can wait."

There was a long silence as all parties considered the situation. As I saw it, it was an absolute stalemate. If Mercado essayed to force an entrance single-handed, he would doubtless be killed. For that matter, so would I.

On the other hand if Pedro and Sammy attempted to leave the house by its only exit, Mercado, no mean marksman, would simply pick them off as they stepped outside the door.

Moreover, it was impossible for Mercado to go for help. Once he left, the pair in the house could make an easy getaway.

Sammy glanced over at me and sighed. It was evident that he had reached the same conclusions as I had.



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He kept his gun on me and spoke to Pedro. "Was it there?"

"Si. It was there."

Sammy looked at me. He said, "Wise guy," again from the corner of his mouth. He added: "Now I see what that little monkey was trying to pull."

"So," said Pedro Ruiz in broken English, "what is it we do now?"

"We got to get out of here," said Sammy Renault, "before that monkey out there can get the coppers."

"He can't go for the *policia*," said Pedro, "without letting us get away."

"Damn it," said Sammy, "we can't all sit around here for the rest of our lives. Stand away from that door and push it open a bit. See if the monkey's still there."

Pedro put his body against the wall, stretched out his arm and moved the door so that a tiny beam of light shone out into the garden. There was a sudden report and splinters of wood ripped from the panel.

"He's there," said Sammy grimly. "And he ain't a bad shot."

The night wore on. Once every hour Sammy ordered Pedro to open the door in order to ascertain that Mercado was still on sentry go. A well placed bullet always answered his question.

Sammy never relaxed his vigilance over me. Just before dawn he cursed and said: "It's going to be worse in daylight."

Pedro looked up suddenly. "No," he said. "*No es verdad*, I have an idea. Come with me into the bathroom, I shall tell you."

"I can't leave this joker here."

"You can tie him up."

Sammy considered this idea and found it good. Pedro produced a line of stout cord from somewhere and I was secured to the ancient chair on which I sat. Sammy and Pedro went into the other room.

I heard a murmur of conversation. The mongrel, already having betrayed me, was now prepared to make friends. He rubbed up against my knee and wagged his tail happily. I suspected he was full of fleas and did not relish his attention.

A little later the gray dawn came up and Sammy and Pedro emerged from the bathroom.

"All right," said Sammy, "we'll try it but I still think it's nuts."

"No," said Pedro, "it is a well known fact all over Mexico City."

"Wait till it's a little lighter and we'll try it. Is the monkey still out there?"

Pedro went through his door-opening routine once again and another bullet attested to the fact that the "monkey" was still there.

A Hound for Murder

THE bright sun climbed up into the brilliantly blue sky and I wondered what strategy the enemy was about to use. I also wondered what was going on in Mercado's head. He wasn't the sort of guy who just sat down and let things happen to him.

"O.K.," said Sammy Renault, "get started."

Pedro bent down and opened a cheap suitcase which he had apparently brought with him. He took from it a shaving brush and one of those celluloid toilet sets affected by travellers. Then he went into the bathroom. In the doorway he turned and whistled to the mongrel. He snapped his fingers and said: "Aqui, perro." The dog wagged its tail and ran to him. He shut the bathroom door behind them both.

By this time my curiosity developed into complete bewilderment. Sammy kept his head away from the windows. Mercado, I knew, was well covered by the shrubbery and trees.

Then Pedro flung the door open and yelled to Sammy: "All right, open the front door."

Sammy stood to one side, turned the knob and flung the door open. I caught a swift flash of the mongrel leaping past me to the threshold. He was slavering. His muzzle was covered with white foam.

If I could have achieved complete objectivity in that moment I would have laughed. But I didn't. Pedro, aware, like most of Mexico, of Mercado's hypochondriac fears, had plastered shaving soap over the mongrel's muzzle and unleashed him on the little detective. I knew quite well what would happen.

From outside came a sudden shriek of terror. Sammy lifted his head gingerly and peered through the window. He turned around again and blinked in amazement. He said: "I never would have believed it. Come on, Pedro, quick!"

They flung open the front door and raced out toward their car. Through the doorway I had a perfect view of the ignominy of Mariano Mercado. He was racing like a deer across a wide uneven field at the far side of the dirt road. Behind him, enjoying the game, ran the dog, leaving flecks of shaving soap behind him.

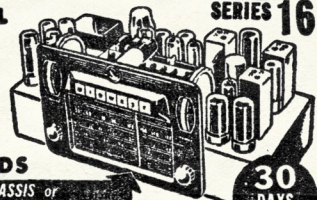
Mercado was headed toward a gnarled and ancient tree which was now some fifty yards away from him. He stumbled once and fell. The dog gained on him at every step. Down the road I heard the sound of a car starting and knew Sammy and Pedro were on the last lap of their getaway.

Mercado reached the tree a bare step ahead of the dog. He scrambled up it like a man in deadly fear of his life, which, not to put too fine a point upon it, he was.

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D. L. Champion

The dog leaped playfully, scratching its forepaws on the trunk. Mercado gained the first crotch of the tree and sat there an exhausted and terrified man.

I swung my chair around and banged it against the wall. Using my body to move it, I smashed it three times against the hard adobe. On the last try it broke into three pieces. I extricated myself from the rope and dashed out to the tree where Mercado sat.

The mongrel wagged its tail as I came up. Mercado regarded me with fearful eyes and yelled: "Go back, you fool. The dog is mad. It has rabies. Do you want to die?"

"Come down," I said. "It's not rabies. It's shaving cream. Look."

I patted the dog's head and whisked the foam away with my handkerchief. Mercado looked at me incredulously as I explained how he had been tricked. Panting and dishevelled he slid down the tree trunk.

"Dios," he said, reaching in his pocket for a bottle of iodine. He swabbed his scratches while I watched him disapprovingly.

"I don't know what you've been trying to do," I said. "But I am absolutely certain that you haven't done it."

He corked the vial and replaced it in his pocket. "Ah," he said, smiling brightly, "but I have."

I registered disbelief.

"Do you know what is in that small shed to the left of the house there?"

He pointed toward the ramshackle structure a few yards from the adobe house.

"No."

"The body of Juan Ruiz."

"What about it?"

"That is what we had to find. The body was necessary to them so we had to find it. I told Sammy that the body had been removed. I figured that would panic him into going to the place where the body was to check. That is why I had you follow him and Pedro."

"Even so, they've got away now."

Mercado shook his head. "Oh, no, they haven't. My plans are all working happily. You see, there is quite a little traffic on that little dirt road at dawn."

"Can you be less cryptic? I'm tired."

"Surely. At dawn that road is traveled by peons on their way to market. I stopped two of them and gave them messages to the *Jefe* of the next village. One took my message north, the other south."

"You mean that Sammy and Pedro will be stopped in the village by the *Jefe* there?"

"Of course. Now, let's us go along and see. I have instructed *el coronel* Gomez to meet us in Taxco this morning along with some other people."

A Hound for Murder

"How did you get out here? In a car?"

"A taxi. I dismissed him and sent him back to town. I didn't expect to find out *inside* the house, you know."

I didn't discuss that point.

WE WENT back to our own car, turned it around and drove rapidly into the *pueblo* near the main road. We stopped in the middle of the village and a fat, swarthy man with a huge mustache came forward to greet us.

"I have him," he cried. "I have captured the great American gangster."

I grinned. I could well imagine what sort of message Mercado had sent in order to stir the local *Jefe* into action. Doubtless, it had contained chauvinistic references to the great republic of Mexico and its duty to apprehend the notorious gringo gangman who was about to perpetrate horrible depredations on homeland soil.

Mercado addressed a flowery sentence of praise to the *Jefe* who then led us to a mud and grass hut on the outskirts of the village. There, encased in gloom and tied securely to a post, sat Sammy and Pedro. The *Jefe* proudly produced the guns he had taken from them.

"Was there no trouble?" asked Mariano. "No difficulty in such a gallant capture?"

The *Jefe* beamed. "No, *señor*. I put my burro on the road to stop their car. Then five of us put machetes at their throats while we took their guns away."

"*Olé*," said Mercado. "The Republic shall not forget."

The *Jefe* handed me the captured weapons. I held them on Sammy and Pedro as Mercado untied them. Then we herded them into the car. I sat with them in the back, keeping them covered. Mercado took his place at the wheel and headed into the lovely village of Taxco.

Thirty minutes later, I found myself in the office of the Ruiz mining company, situated just off Taxco's *zocalo*. In addition to Mercado and our prisoners, I discovered the presence of *el coronel* Gomez, a swarthy, beefy man, Drayton, Juan Ruiz' secretary and my compatriot, Apthorp.

As I herded Sammy and Pedro into chairs in a far corner of the room, I glanced inquiringly at Mercado. He smiled back at me.

"*Señor* Drayton is here because he was brought here by *el coronel* Gomez at my request. *Señor* Apthorp is here as a courtesy. I thought he would like to know what has happened."

Gomez cleared his throat and played with his mustache. "My little friend," he said to Mercado, "I am a busy man. I hope you have



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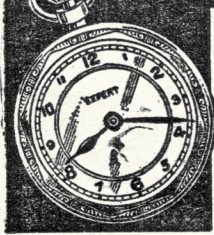
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not forced me to travel all the way from Mexico City on some frivolous errand."

"Is murder frivolous?" asked Mercado rhetorically. "Is theft?"

Gomez shrugged. "Let us get down to cases."

"Bueno. First, Juan Ruiz is dead. He died a few days ago in Chapultepec Park. His body is in a shed some distance away."

"You mean," said Apthorp, "that he died after he signed my contract, of course. You know, I saw him that day."

"So did I," said Drayton emphatically.

"Neither of you did," said Mercado. "Apthorp *thought* he did. Drayton knew he didn't. Apthorp merely saw Pedro *twice*."

"But," protested the American, "it couldn't be. They looked entirely different. They—"

Mercado held up a hand. "Wait," he said, "let me tell you exactly what happened. When the time came for the signing of that contract, Juan was dead. He would never have signed it while he was alive. But two signatures are necessary. So what happens? For some time Pedro has practised signing his brother's name. On the day the contract is ready, he has grown a mustache. He attires himself in decent clothes. He wears glasses and stands upright. He enters the room, signs and leaves. Moreover, he exchanges a few words of English with Apthorp."

There was silence in the room. Apthorp looked incredulous. Pedro and Sammy seemed scared. Drayton watched Mercado like a hawk.

"Then," went on Mercado, "Pedro leaves the room. He rushes into another room at the hotel—probably Drayton's—shaves his mustache off. Uses crepe hair and spirit gum on his face to give an unshaven tramp-like appearance, changes into dirty pants and shirt, puts on *huaraches*, then shambles back into Apthorp's presence. This time he can speak no English and he is not wearing glasses. His back is bent and he shuffles in pronounced contrast to his actions when he impersonated Juan.

"Moreover, he has another great advantage. Nationality is a funny thing. Americans say all Chinese look alike to them. To a Chinese all white men look almost alike, too. To Apthorp a Mexican is a Mexican. To him there isn't much different between them. Thus with Drayton helping the illusion out by addressing the first signer as Juan and the second as Pedro, he never dreams he is seeing the same man twice."

Gomez leaned forward and for the first time looked intensely interested.

"Go on," he said. "There must be more."

"There *is* more," said Mercado. "Pedro

A Hound for Murder

wanted money. But he is a crude operator. Twice he made attempts on his brother's life and failed. Drayton was aware of this. Then Drayton in his role of trusted employee heard that Aphorp was willing to pay a high price for the mine. Drayton knew quite well Juan would not sell, so he withheld the news of the offer and got in touch with Pedro, making a deal. But Drayton knew Pedro was a bungler so he imported an American gangman, Sammy, here, to do the actual killing.

"Drayton knew Juan had communicated with his friend Mendoza, that they had an appointment in the park that night. So it was easy for him to tip Sammy off when Juan left the hotel to keep the date with Mendoza. Sammy shot him in the head. The conspirators had a car ready to remove the corpse. But the car broke down. They were compelled to leave it there all night until the garages opened. So they hid the body in the bushes where the *tourista* found it—"

"I'm beginning to see it all now," I said. "Just at the time the car was fixed up, the tourist blundered on to Juan's body and ran howling down the path."

"Right," said Mercado. "That forced them to put the body in the car at once and

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in broad daylight. They couldn't wait for night as that would expose the fact that Juan never signed the sales contract. They were forced to gamble. Apparently, they did successfully. No one saw them put Juan in the car. But then a bright idea comes to them. Even if no body is found, the *tourista* will cause a police investigation. Perhaps Pedro has time to dab red paint on his head and take a pretended siesta in the bushes which will fix up everything. If they don't have time, they're just where they started but it's worth another gamble. It succeeded. Pedro is lying down with the paint on his head before anybody understands what the *tourista* is talking about."

"And Mendoza?" I said.

"Ah, Mendoza. Drayton was sure Mendoza suspected something, especially after he slugged Pedro. He was doubly worried after he knew Mendoza had called on me. Sammy called on him, thinking he knew or had figured much more than he did or had. Sammy killed him. Then came to threaten me, not being certain how much I knew.

"Now, they had to have Juan's body, in order to arrange for someone to find it a few weeks later to establish Juan is dead, and had been killed after he had signed the contract, so that Pedro could collect all the money. Without it, they'd have to wait for years until Juan would be declared legally dead before they could collect his share of the sale."

"So you told them the body had been taken in order to find out where it was?"

"Precisely."

DRAYTON spoke for the first time. "It's a nice theory. It's also entirely without proof."

"Sure," said Sammy, "you ain't got a thing on us, chum. If you don't leave me out of here the consul will hear of it."

Gomez turned a worried face to Mercado who smiled faintly.

"Sammy," he said, "you must know that there is no capital punishment in Mexico."

Sammy nodded. "Sure. Even if you had any evidence, which you ain't, I'd draw maybe a ten-year rap."

"Right," said Mercado. To Gomez he added: "Of course, there is the law of the fugitive. And Sammy here is a brave American gangman."

"Ah, yes," said Gomez, "the law of the fugitive."

"What cooks?" said Sammy Renault.

Mercado explained. "Our coppers are tough, Sammy. So, since there is no capital punishment in Mexico, it often happens that the

A Hound for Murder

perpetrators of heinous crimes try to escape. Naturally, it is the duty of the police to shoot them down."

"Naturally," said Gomez, "and a brave American gunman would not submit tamely to arrest. He would try to escape."

"Of course," said Mercado. "I am sure he will try to escape."

Sammy looked from one to the other apprehensively. "You mean—"

"We mean," said Mercado, "that if we get a complete confession involving your confederates, you will serve perhaps ten or fifteen years in prison. If you don't, then you will try to escape."

"And get killed," said Sammy with finality. "It is very likely," said Mariano Mercado. "I wouldn't have a chance," said Sammy. "You wouldn't have a chance," said Mercado.

Sammy's face was suddenly nerveless. His facial muscles twitched. He could have done with a shot of heroin right then. He said tremulously: "Who do I talk to?"

"We shall go to the local *policia*," said Gomez, "all of us, and make arrangements there." He paused and eyed Mercado narrowly. "And the credit for arresting this American gunman?"

"Yours," said Mercado. "The last thought of a dying man was that I could help him. I've done so. The credit is yours, *mi coronel*."

Gomez stood up beaming. He advanced upon Mercado, flung his arms around him in Latin embrace. Their cheeks touched twice.

Mercado broke out of Gomez' grip with a shrill cry. His little hands patted his pockets then he turned to me with a face like death.

"*Dios!*" he cried like a wounded cat. "*Dios, I forgot my atomizer. Dios, Dios, Dios!*"

He ran like a madman from the room. From the window I saw him pounding pell mell over Taxco's ancient cobblestones in the general direction of the local *farmacia*.

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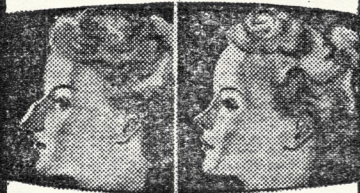
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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

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The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Dear Sir:

While traveling across the broad plains of Kansas I chanced upon a meeting with perhaps the world's youngest swindler. I was in the Army at the time and was coming home on a furlough. Our train had been struggling along for two hot days and nights from "deep in the heart of Texas." As we came to a stop in the Emporia, Kansas station, I stood on the coach platform looking very tired and feeling very thirsty. "Oh, for a nice cool dish of ice cream," I thought.

A boy of about eight years looked up at me and said: "Soldier, would you like me to get you some ice cream? Your train is stopping here for ten minutes and the drug store is just around the corner."

The boy must have read my mind. I immediately gave him a half-dollar, the only change I had, and he was off in a flash.

So was the train!

Somehow, I sensed the moment I gave him the money that he wouldn't come back and that the train would probably leave right away. I determined to remember that particular station on my return trip.

Sure enough, on my return to Emporia, there was that juvenile swindler to greet the train and to "take" another thirsty soldier. A humorous and small "take" you might say, but from such small beginnings might come a sad ending for some future and much more ambitious misadventure.

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The Rackets Editor
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Dear Sir:

Recently, one of our neighbors saw an advertisement for an accident and sickness insurance with a large death payment and a substantial sickness indemnity. He sent for a policy, paid his premiums, and told me about it. I was interested and asked my boss to help me fill out the blank.

My boss looked it over and advised me to write and see if the company was licensed to do business in the state. I did so, and found they were not licensed and had no right to sell insurance.

I informed my neighbor, although it was a little late, for he had already sent in several

Ready for the Rackets

premiums. My advice to anyone wishing to take out insurance by mail is to write to the Banking and Insurance Department in his state capitol and find out if the company is licensed to sell insurance in his state. It may save him money and lots of embarrassment later.

R. A. L.
Windsor, Vt.

ANOTHER swindle aimed at veterans, with the unwitting aid of an innocent government agency.

The Rackets Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

A veteran friend of mine went to the United States Employment Service to apply for a job. He was sent to the office of a Mr. Jones, who, as far as the U.S.E.S., knew, was perfectly honest. My friend found otherwise, to his sorrow.

Mr. Jones gave him a long personal interview, explaining that his jobs were of a semi-cooperative nature. His men worked in restaurants, meat markets, and hotels, in a nearby large city. He was interested only in veterans.

He asked to see the GI's discharge papers, asked a few questions about his service, and then said, with respect in his voice, "Sergeant, a man of your intelligence could handle a manager's job. Managers get \$150, less \$15, until you own a \$5,000 share in the business, which pays a dividend of more than \$500 a year." He looked through his papers, announced that he had no openings at the moment, unless a young man who was supposed to show up at 11:00 failed to appear. They waited until 11:30, the young man of course did not show up, and my eager friend gave Mr. Jones a large deposit for his "semi-cooperative venture."

The next time he went to the office, it was empty, and he was never able to locate either Mr. Jones or his money. Veterans, take heed.

D. Brady
Maquoketa, Iowa

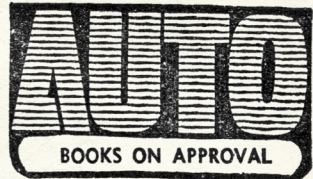
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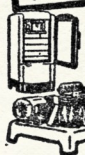
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