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COMPLETE



JUNE

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IN MY COFFIN**
by H.H. STINSON

**DEATH -
ON THE HOUSE**
by PETER PAIGE



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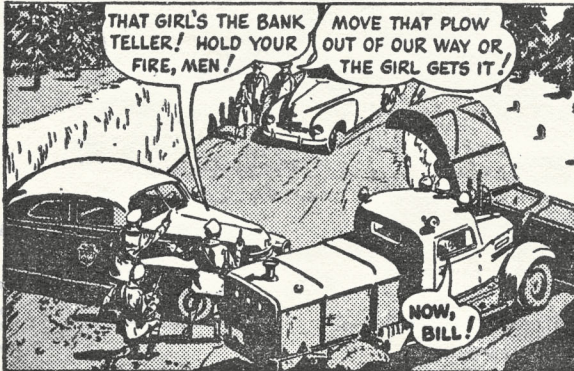
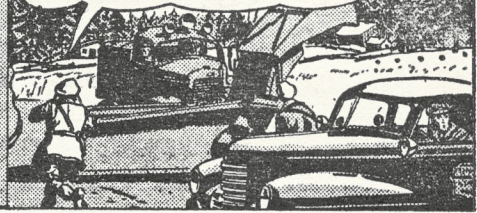
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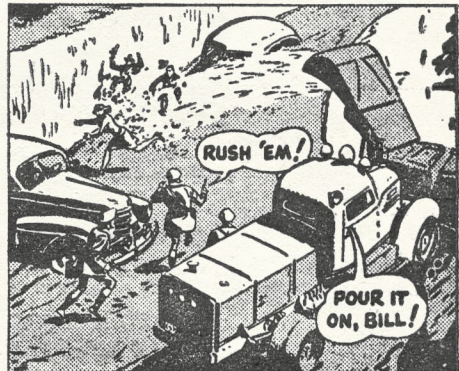
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YOU MEN ARE HEROES IN ALBAN. THE MAYOR INSISTS I BRING YOU OVER RIGHT AWAY

WE'LL CLEAN UP AND BE RIGHT WITH YOU

A RAZOR? TRY MINE



WHAT A SWELL, SLICK SHAVE. THIS BLADE'S A MONEY?

YES, THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING

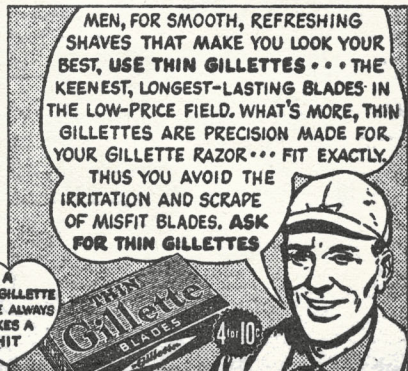


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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 54

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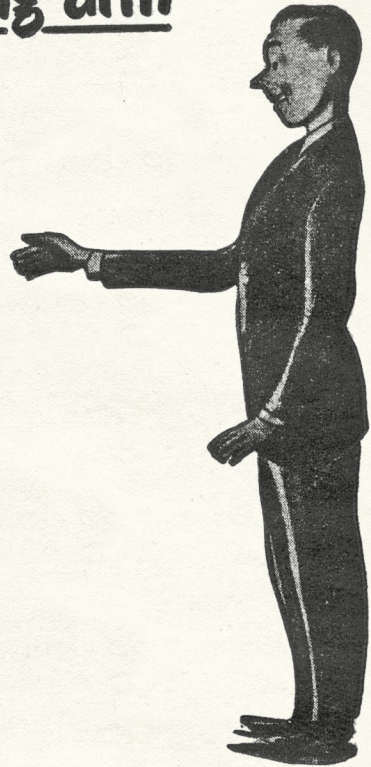
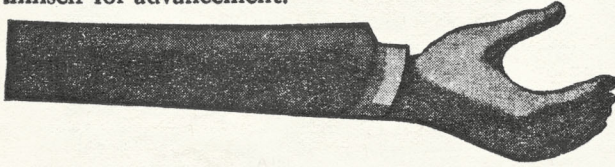
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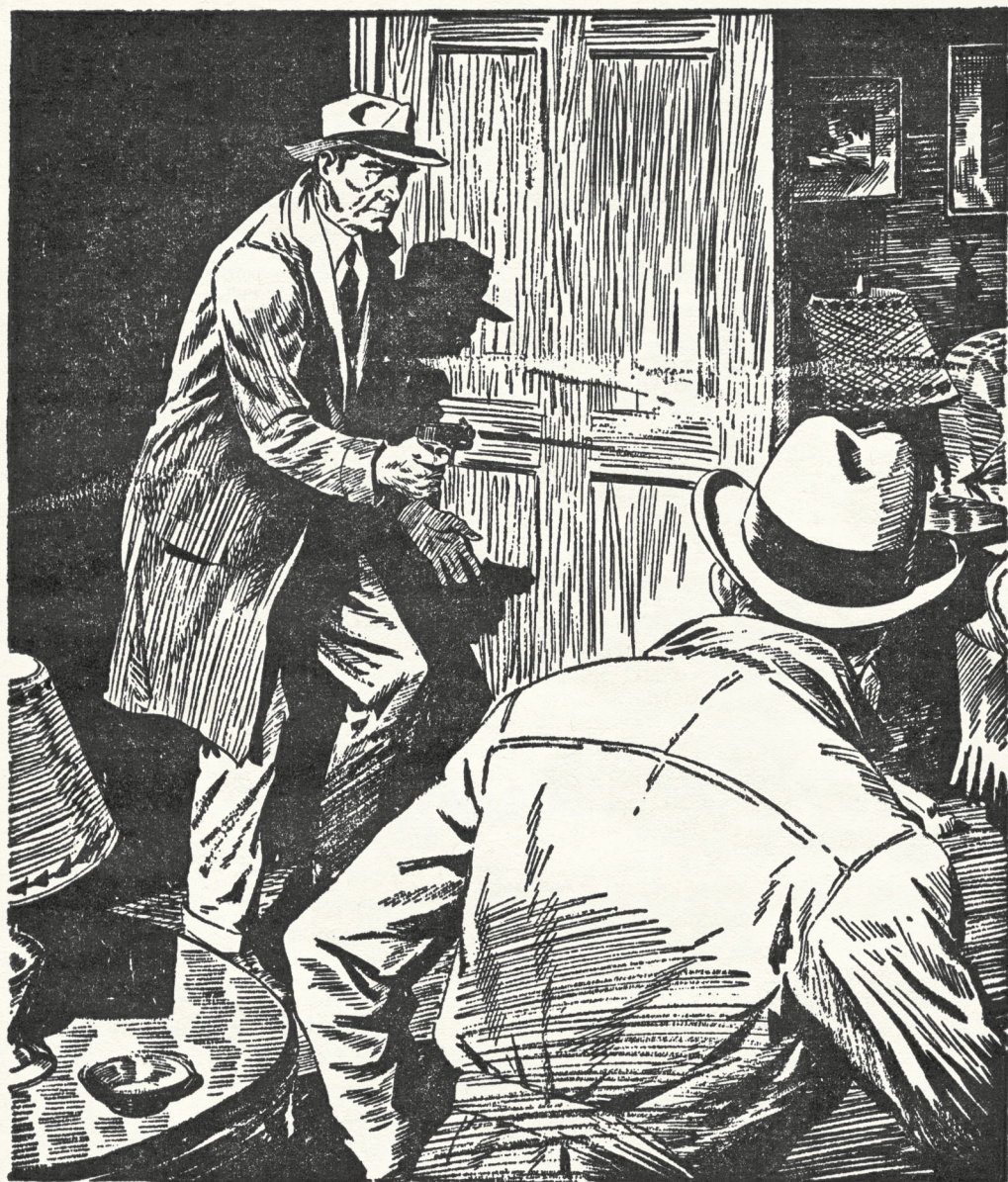
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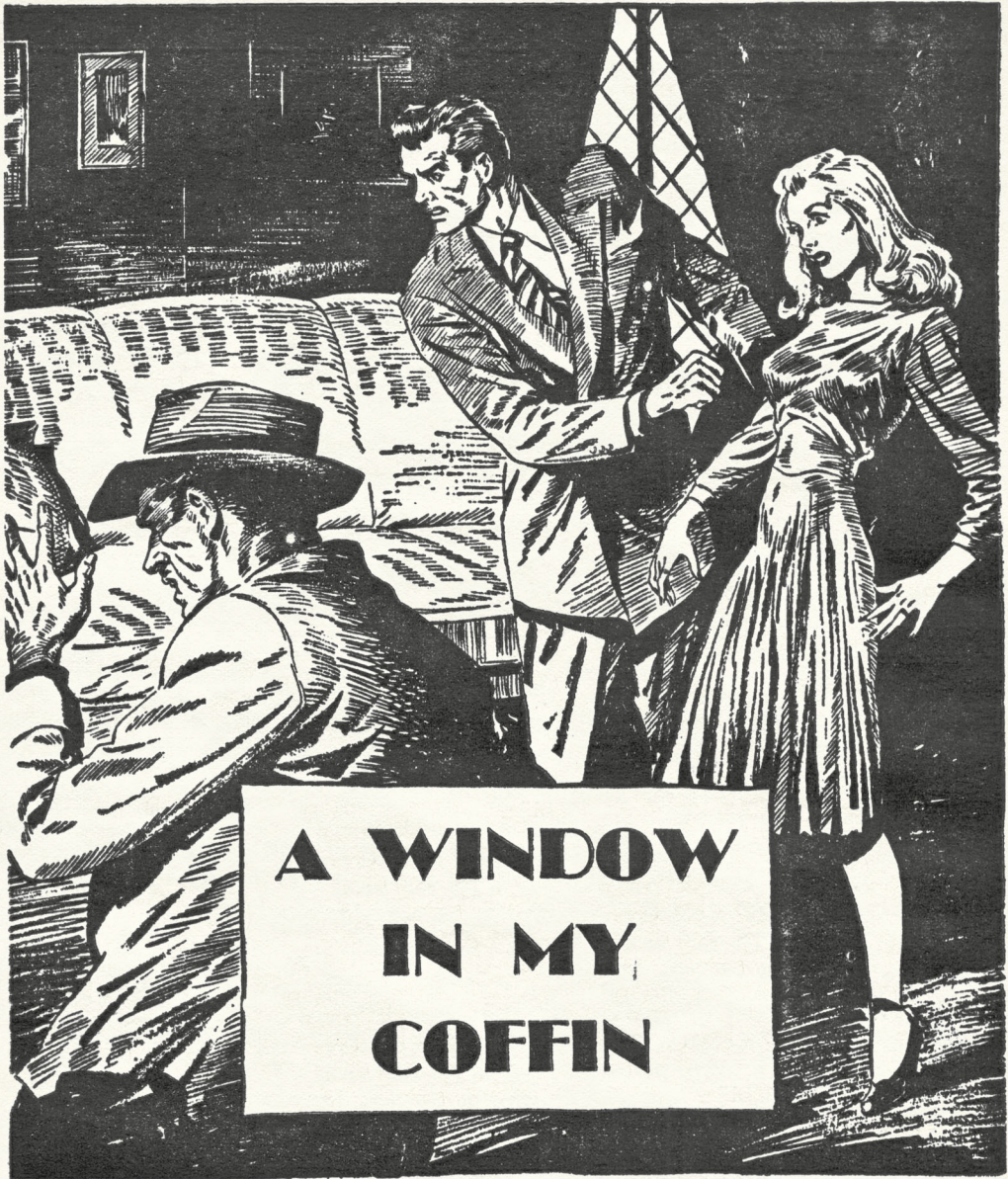
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By H. H. STINSON

The .45 banged deafeningly in the small room.

Private Op Kerry Monahan didn't mind impersonating a liquidated hitch-hiker—for a G.I. buddy, a luscious blonde and a cool five yards ... as long as he didn't have to take the rap for his own murder!



A WINDOW IN MY COFFIN

Gripping Detective-Action Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Exit Kerry Monahan

HE WAS standing there in the darkness beside my car, a husky and wide-shouldered guy, when I came out of Mamie's Truck Cafe on Highway 103.

He said: "Lift to Cape City, Mac?" The

darkness hid his face but his voice was rough and deep.

I figured he'd made a mistake. I'd parked my car headed away from Cape City, not having made up my mind I was hungry until after I'd buzzed past the joint.

But that wasn't the mistake I had in mind. My idea was that he had me spotted and that he'd pulled a boner by asking for

a lift to where only a guy who had me spotted would know I was headed.

"Maybe," I said.

I dug out a pack of cigarettes, offered the guy one and had one myself. I lit a match and held it for him. The light glowed orange on a hard-angled face, hooded eyes, a day's growth of dark whiskers. I lit my own smoke, blew out the match and snapped it into the darkness.

"Know how to drive?" I said.

"Are you kidding, Mac? I'm a trucker. I drove Army trucks all through the war."

"Okay," I said. "Take the wheel. I've had a lot of hours behind it and I'm beat up."

He took my key and climbed in the left door of my sedan. I climbed in the other side. He made practiced motions with the key and the starter button and the shift. We rolled smoothly out past a couple of big tractor-trailer jobs. He U-turned onto the pavement and began to roll toward Cape City at a smooth sixty. He handled a car.

I keep one gun, a .38 Police Positive, under my left arm. It's a solid piece of artillery, good in any company. Tucked down between the cushions of the car I keep its little brother, a .32 belly job, that appears only at surprise parties. Now I slid my right hand around behind my back, dug up the .32 and held it out of sight on the cushion by my right thigh.

I didn't know what this husky, whiskey lad might have in mind for me. That made us even. He didn't know what I had cooked and ready to serve him.

We rambled maybe a mile through cool darkness behind the funnel of yellow made by my lamps. There was enough salt dampness in the air to indicate that the ocean wasn't too far away.

He said: "These '46 crates are sweet, Mac."

"Not bad," I said. "Live in Cape City?"

"Nah," he said. "Never been there. My first time on the Coast for that matter. What's the burg like?"

"A little place that got big during the war. Still going—eastern industries have taken over the war plants as branch factories. Lots of hauling out of there if you're a trucker."

"That's what I figured. I got me a bellyful rolling the big jobs over snow and ice

back East last winter. Figured I'd live longer behind a wheel out here."

The dialogue had a straight sound that didn't fit in with my preconceived worries. I tried again just for the hell of it.

I said: "What made you think I was going to Cape City? My jalopy was headed the other way at the hamburger joint."

"Huh?" He sounded momentarily puzzled. "Oh, I get what you mean. I was flattening the seat of my pants on the wall outside when I saw your job go by. Couple of minutes later I saw it come back. I figured you'd suddenly decided your stomach was empty." He glanced at me curiously in the dim light from the instrument board. "All that make any difference to you, Mac?"

"No. I'm just a guy that gets curious."

A few pinpoints of yellow ahead of us began to grow into the street-lamps of a village. We flashed past a reflector sign that said: "Glenview—Population 178". The husky lad dropped us to thirty-five, and we eased along a few hundred feet of main street between darkened storefronts, and went on out of town.

Another couple of miles, maybe three, dropped behind us, and I still hadn't made up my mind about the husky boy. I was mulling it when, without any warning, the sucking sound of tires, the snore of a hard-driven motor mingled with the smooth hum of my car. There hadn't been any lights behind us, nothing to put me on my guard.

I jerked my head around and saw the dark shape of a big car nosing out around us to the left. It came even with us and its lamps sprang on suddenly.

The husky lad said, startled: "What the hell!"

I hunched as low as I could get.

A gun made a booming sound, the kind of sound you get with a sawed-off shotgun. The husky lad lurched against me silently, pulling the wheel as he did. I grabbed for the wheel and began to fight it. We angled into the shallow ditch beside the road, up the other side on two wheels. A fencepost splintered and the headlamps went out. Barbed wire made an eerie squealing noise along the metal of the body. The car bounced, went over on its side, slid along in soft dirt, hit something and tilted upright to a stop.

It was very quiet, very dark in the field.

I pried myself from between the wheel and the husky lad. His body bowed slowly over the wheel and there was the steady drip of blood on the floor mat. I didn't feel too good but it didn't seem to be my blood.

The words of the husky lad went through my mind—that he'd live a lot longer behind a wheel on the Coast. He'd been wrong about that and I was sorry. But that was no reason I couldn't take advantage of it.

I BEGAN to work fast in case someone stopped—or came back—to investigate. I unloaded the dead man's pockets: wallet, keyring with two keys, cigarettes, matchbooks, two dirty handkerchiefs. I took his wristwatch and felt to see if he had initials on his belt-buckle. He had. I eased the belt off. I risked using my pencil flash to check for initials in his hat. There were none so I left him that.

Then I traded him my pocket watch after wiping prints from it, my belt, handkerchief, keys, cigarettes, matches. I wiped the belly gun clean and stuck it in his coat pocket. I slid my wallet into his hip after taking out my driver's license, my agency credentials and all but ten bucks. The law might think it peculiar I didn't carry a driver's license. But there were lots of guys who were careless about a little thing like that.

The matter of my footprints across the soft earth of the field had me worried. I got a break there. The thing the car had hit last, the thing that had turned it upright again, was a string of irrigation pipe. On that I balanced my way to the edge of the field and got back on the road.

Cape City was a glow in the sky to the northwest. Where I stood the darkness was a million light years high, the silence a thousand minus decibels. I began to walk, ready to dodge into the ditch at the gleam of headlights. I didn't want reports of a lone hiker near the death car to give my reception committee the notion that they hadn't done a proper job.

Walking, I thought back to where this thing had started.

That had been in the ETO where a couple of guys named Jack Marshall and Kerry Monahan, the latter being me, had

slogged through a lot of mud and muck and slaughter as pfc's in an infantry company.

The second chapter had been an AP story from Cape City some six months ago. It was about one Jack Marshall who had come back from the wars and found his sweetie married to another guy, a guy who had hit the jackpot in real estate when the war boomed the town. It seemed, according to the story, that Marshall had been pretty sore. So, one evening, he had oiled up his souvenir Luger and cornered the husband at his office. The two men apparently had talked for a while and then the Luger had talked—rat-tat-a-tat—and both men were dead.

Murder and suicide. So said the Cape City bluecoats, as briefly reported by the AP.

I remembered Jack as a good kid, so I felt kind of sore at the dame who'd do that to him. But life goes on and Jack slid out of my mind, became to me a name that a few of us would mention at division conventions.

The third chapter had begun at noon of this day when a girl walked into a small office in downtown Los Angeles. The lettering on the door said: *MBI*. That stood for Monahan Bureau of Investigation. It wasn't quite as big a bureau as J. Edgar Hoover's; in fact, it was strictly a solo operation. But it was doing all right for Monahan.

The girl was yellow-haired and built very good where it counted. She had big brown eyes and a pan that was a little on the pert side but sweet, too. As for clothes, she wore some, and to my unpracticed eye they looked very slick indeed.

I stood up. She sat down.

She said: "Kerry Monahan?" I nodded and sat down and she said: "I'm June Kobak from Cape City. Mrs. Helen Russell asked me to drop in on you."

"Convey my thanks to Mrs. Russell," I said with a grin that appreciated the picture June Kobak made. "Whoever Mrs. Russell is."

The girl pulled her skirt down over her knees. "You might recognize the name Helen Carmody."

"No."

"Jack Marshall?"

"Click," I nodded. "What's the connection?"

"Helen is the girl Jack was engaged to when he went in the Army."

"I get it. The one who didn't wait for him, the one he blew his cork about six months ago." I felt my grin fading. "What would a gal like that want from one of Jack's pals?"

The girl skipped my tone. "Helen's dying."

"What can I do about it? I'm no medic."

She put on a smile, not without effort. "Would you like to count ten before we go ahead?"

"It's just that I feel—"

"I know how you soldiers feel about girls who did things to their men while they were overseas. But Helen doesn't want you to do anything for her. It's for Jack."

"It seems a little late."

The brown eyes began to snap, the mouth to firm. She bit out: "Look, I'm only the messenger girl. You don't have to take out your nasty Irish disposition on me!"

"My nasty Irish disposition! What kind have you got?"

"Hunky—and everyone says it's lovely."

We scowled at each other. Then that seemed funny and we both laughed.

I said: "I'll shut my big mouth and listen. How can I help Jack Marshall now except by saying God rest his soul?"

"It might rest better if his name was cleared of murder."

"It might. So tell me the rest of it."

SHE opened a big gray handbag and began to fish inside it. "I've got a note from Helen. She's in a small hospital in Cape City—the Greeley Hospital—and they keep her under opiates most of the time."

"You mean against her will?"

"Oh, no. She's dying of an incurable disease and in constant pain. Opiates are standard treatment for her condition." The girl finally found a sheet of notepaper folded twice. "Here it is."

She passed the notepaper over and I unfolded it. In cramped and unready handwriting the note said:

Dear June,

I am in an awful lot of pain but I made them skip the morphine this afternoon so I could write to you. You are the only one I know that I can trust. I have to make things as right as I can before I die, and the worst

thing on my conscience is letting Jack be remembered as a murderer and a suicide. He and Pete were both murdered and I can prove it if I have help. But I don't know who I can trust in Cape City but you, and I don't want to get you in danger. However, there is a private detective named Kerry Monahan in Los Angeles. Jack used to write me from Europe and tell me Monahan was a good friend. So please get in touch with Monahan and ask him to come up here and help me square things for Jack. But tell him nobody must know he is working for me or things might happen to him. I am inclosing a check for five hundred dollars made out to you. Please get the cash and give it to Monahan. I know you won't let me down.

*Love,
Helen.*

I put the note down on the desk, smoothed it out.

After a moment the girl said: "Well?"

"Give me some details on the killings. The papers here carried only a few paragraphs."

"And all I know is what I read in the Cape City paper. It seemed that Russell very often put in the evenings working alone at his office in a downtown building. This night a very heavy storm blew up. A policeman coming by around midnight saw that the lights were on in Russell's office and that the window was up and the shade was flapping around in the gale. He knew whose office it was and wondered why Russell hadn't closed the window against the rain and the wind. So he went upstairs, found the door ajar and stepped in to find the two bodies, both shot through the head. According to the newspaper, the police decided it was murder and suicide. Jack Marshall's wound was powderburned, and it was his gun that had been used and his prints were on it."

"But Helen Russell thinks the cops are covering up a double murder?"

"She must, since she's afraid to trust them with her evidence."

"What would be behind it?"

"Things like that happen in the rackets."

"Rackets, huh?"

She nodded. "Russell's real estate business was just a front. Before the war, when Cape City had only about twenty thousand people, he ran a roadhouse near town. The war boom brought factories, turned Cape City into a port, more than tripled the population. The rackets—women and gambling and dope and all the

rest of it—grew along with the town. And Russell was the organizer. I know that from little things that Helen let drop to me.”

“You must have known the girl pretty well for her to tell you things like that.”

“We went through high school and business college together and were secretaries at the same war plant before she married.”

“How’d she happen to marry Russell?”

“Money. It couldn’t have been anything else. He was such a fat, snuffly, greedy little man.”

“Who took the town over after the funeral?”

“I don’t know. Those things don’t get noised around in places where I’d hear them.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, the way it shapes up—if Helen Russell’s note means anything—is that somebody moved in on Russell. And when a stranger in town walks into a set-up like that, he’s asking for lead in the puss—unless he knows just where to set his feet.”

“I guess you’re right, Mr. Monahan.” She watched me frown and shake my head. She said: “I don’t blame you for not wanting to take a chance on something like that.” But her tone said that she was disappointed that I’d be such a lily.

I growled: “Quit trying to needle me, Miss Kobak. It’s just that you hand me a tough one. I’m supposed to get my information—under cover—from a dame who’s doped most of the time and is probably under the eyes of doctors and nurses the little while that she’s conscious. What’s her room number at the hospital?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. She hasn’t been allowed visitors since she was taken to the hospital a month ago.”

“You sure make it easy for me. Well, I’ll drift up there some time late today. Where can I contact you if necessary?”

She gave me numbers—street, apartment and phone—and I jotted them down. We got up and shook hands.

She gave me a big smile and on her face it was something to look at. She said: “I think you’re swell, Mr. Monahan.”

“You’re not hard to take, either,” I told her.

“I mean the way you’re being loyal to Jack Marshall.”

“No.” I said. “To the five hundred bucks. Remember?”

“Oh, yes.” She dug in her bag again, looking as though I’d let her down by being so crassly commercial.

I said: “I don’t know where people get the idea that private cops take chances for the sport of it, like mountain climbers or something. I make it a rule never to work for anything but money.”

She looked up at me and shook her head. “You don’t look like a man who’d think about nothing but making money.”

“Right. I think mostly about spending it. I’ll spend some now on a lunch for two.”

“I’m sorry. I have to catch a one o’clock bus for Cape City.”

She handed me five crisp centuries. We shook hands again. She had a nice, firm, warm clasp.

When she’d gone I put what she’d told me on paper in the screwy shorthand that only I can read—and sometimes even I can’t. I filed it, locked the office, had lunch at the corner drug store, got my shiny new car from a parking lot, drove to my apartment, packed a bag. Around four o’clock I went downstairs, slung my bag into the rear seat and lit out in the dreamboat.

Now, after the accident, I was walking. I was pretty sore about that, recalling how long I’d waited for the new car that was now just a wreck.

There was something else I was unhappy about. Someone must have been tipped off on who I was, why I was coming to Cape City, the approximate time I’d show up, the kind of car I’d be driving, its tag number. I didn’t like what that suggested about the brown-eyed gal, so I decided there had to be some other explanation. Only I was damned if I could think of any other explanation.

CHAPTER TWO

Flunky for a Hunky

A COUPLE of hours later I was in the washroom of the bus station at Cape City. I’d scrubbed a few small splotches of blood from the dark material of my suit, and now I was going through the husky lad’s wallet to find out who I was.

It seemed, according to various cards I

found, that I was one Tom Kinsella of Cleveland, that I was a member in good standing of the Teamsters' Union and that I had expressed my suitcases from Los Angeles to Cape City. I put the wallet away with the pious hope that, using Tom Kinsella's identity, I could make somebody pay for what had happened to him. Someone in Cape City had a lot of pay-offs to make.

A southbound bus pulled in at two a.m., dropped half a dozen passengers. I mingled with them, and then walked down the street toward the electric sign that said in letters so small they were almost apologetic, *Hotel Tracy*. The room I got for three bucks should have been apologized for.

At nine-thirty the next morning I dropped off a municipal bus at Fourth and Descanso. I walked up Descanso alongside a high brick wall. Just inside the wall acacia trees grew, and their dense foliage made a gloomy umbrella for the wall and the sidewalk. I found a wrought-iron gate, above it a sign that said *Greeley Hospital*, and went through the gate and found myself on a brick walk that wound between one-story bungalows to a two-story main building.

There were maybe two dozen bungalows in all. I noted as I followed the path toward the main building that each bungalow was made up of two separate apartments. An open door here and there showed me the apartments consisted of a bedroom furnished in a fashion not too hospital-like, a dressing room in an alcove, a bath. Venetian blinds made the windows neat. Shrubbery that was as orderly and precise as an operating room clumped around each bungalow. The layout was more like a resort hotel than a hospital; if you had to be sick it was a nice place to be sick in.

I passed patients sunning themselves on benches, patients being wheeled by trim nurses. Entering the main building, I brought up against a U-shaped desk. A gray-haired nurse behind the desk said: "Yes?" and I inquired about the possibility of a room for my niece, Miss Angela McGurk, convalescing from a greenstick fracture of the tibia.

The nurse smiled. "You mean either fibula or tibia."

"Her leg got broke."

"I'm sorry but we have no vacancy now."

"It wouldn't have to be one of the bungalows," I said. "Just a little room here in the main building."

The nurse shook her head. "We don't have patients in this building. It's used only for offices and labs and diet kitchens and so on."

I thanked her. I really did appreciate the information she'd given me; it was going to be a lot easier getting to Mrs. Helen Russell in one of those bungalows than it would have been in a hospital building.

A couple of blocks away on Fourth Avenue I'd noticed a florist shop. I walked back there and ordered a bouquet of purple cinerarias, pink roses and orange poppies. The girl who took my order shuddered.

"Nice?" I said.

"Well, spectacular. You could see it three miles away against a sunset."

I wrote out a card that said: "Love, June," and sealed it. I paid for the bouquet and ordered it sent to Mrs. Helen Russell at the Greeley Hospital. After that I walked back to the wrought-iron gate, went in casually and sat on a bench where I could view the grounds, trying to look like a husband whose wife had to have her sponge bath before she could see him.

There must have been a back entrance because I never did see the florist's delivery boy. But in about forty-five minutes a slim nurse paraded along a side path carrying a tall vase filled with purple cinerarias, pink roses and orange poppies. She took it to the third bungalow from the street in the row by the west wall, went into the north half of the bungalow.

I got up and left, trying to look like a husband who couldn't wait for his wife to finish her sponge bath.

A brisk wind had begun to whip in from the ocean, scattering the sea haze, and when I got to the street I could see that the hospital stood high on the knees of hills rimming in Cape City. There was a huge mirror-like bay between outstretched tongues of land. Half-a-dozen anchored freighters rode blackly against blue water. Wharves and docks made a toothed crescent at the edge of the water. I could see clusters of small factories, several really big plants, a business section that looked cramped and crowded, an area of tree-lined streets that was probably the original

residence district, a far-flung naked expanse of hill and mesa covered with a scabrous crop of trailer camps, Quonset huts, garage houses, tents. That would be living quarters for the sixty or seventy thousand who'd moved in on Cape City's original twenty thousand since the beginning of the war.

It was a town too big for its pants, a town that had a lot more money in those same pants than it knew what to do with. A town that would be rich pickings for smart people.

Back downtown, I bought some toilet articles, picked up the husky lad's suitcase at the express office and went to the hotel. There was nothing in the suitcase that didn't square with my play. After that I started out to ramble.

My ramblings took me through a dozen bars on Bay Street, the Skid Row of Cape City. Without half trying, I found out where fun could be had. Or games or reefers or bookies. I learned that a guy named Gill Macker had moved in from Las Vegas after Pete Russell's death and had really opened up the town, thrown the key away. I got other names—Slippy Vance who handled the reefers, Johnny Cotton who took care of gambling and Little Pete Vasov who ran the books. Vance and Vasov were part of the old Russell outfit, Cotton had moved in with Gill Macker. People didn't seem to have any inhibitions about mentioning names; tongues wagged freely.

As for the cops, everybody said they were swell. If you killed a guy or lifted his poke or parked overtime, they hopped on you. But they were willing to let people have their fun.

I took a look at Little Pete Vasov at the cigar store he ran on lower Bay Street. He was built like a small barrel, had a lot of black hair, liquid black eyes, a smile for every customer and a mouth that was as cruel as a kick below the belt.

Late in the afternoon the Cape City Argus hit the streets with the news of my murder splashed pretty large on the front page.

The splash was mainly pictures. There was a shot of my car from the road, showing how it had crashed the fence and plowed across the field. There was a close-up of the husky lad's body still draped over the wheel. There was a medium shot

of the car and the body and of a short, wiry man with a harshly-cut face and one shoulder lower than the other. He stood beside the car, looking important. The picture caption identified him as Abe Mallow, Chief Investigator for the D.A.

There wasn't a great deal of story to go with the picture. The car and body had been found at dawn by a produce trucker. Papers on the body had identified the victim as one Kerry Monahan, Los Angeles private detective. The crime having taken place in county territory, the investigation was in charge of Mallow, who was in touch with Los Angeles authorities to check the victim's background and recent movements. Mallow's tentative theory was the murder was the upshot of an attempted highway holdup.

Nowhere was there any hint that Monahan might have been interested in any Cape City doings. That was fine with me.

AT NINE-THIRTY I was squatting in the darkness among the shrubbery outside the hospital bungalow into which my bouquet had been carried. Thanks to a badly-adjusted slat in the Venetian blinds, I could see the flowers glaringly brilliant even in the softness of a night light.

I could see, also, a dark-haired girl in the hospital bed. Her face was wasted, her arms hardly more than pipestems. She slept, pale lips puffing in and out with her breath. I'd seen her get a needle at eight o'clock, and she'd been sleeping ever since.

The shot, given her by a big raw-boned nurse, had been big enough to put the normal person away for the night. But they'd probably been lacing this girl with dope for weeks or months, and that builds up a tolerance. I had a hunch she'd begin drifting to the surface again in two or three hours. I was right; at ten the girl began to move, to shift her head and lick dry lips and utter an occasional spasmodic sigh. I'd have preferred to wait longer, give her more of a chance to snap out of it; but I figured the rawboned nurse would know just about when the next shot was due.

I eased around the bungalow, through an unlocked door and leaned over the girl in the bed. Her eyes were closed but her throat worked as she swallowed dryly. Her tongue tried to dampen lips that were

nearly as white and bloodless as her face.

I leaned close. "Helen! Helen Russell!"

The eyes didn't open but the lips moved, mumbled something. The sound stayed far back in her throat, incoherent.

"Helen, this is Monahan! Kerry Monahan!"

Her eyes opened slowly. But they were dull, empty.

I whispered: "You sent for Kerry Monahan, remember? About Jack Marshall! Wake up, Helen, and talk to Kerry Monahan!"

The eyes looked at me, trying to focus. She breathed: "Ker—Monhan—"

"Yes. What did you want to tell me about Jack Marshall?"

"He—didn't—Jack didn't murder—"

She decided she couldn't make the grade. Her lips drooped. I put my hand on her shoulder. Under the hospital gown she was hardly more than bone and skin. I shook her a little.

She got her lips open again, her mouth open. I couldn't hear what she was saying. I put my ear close to her lips, felt the shallow breath, caught words.

"The—picture—"

"You have a picture that proves Jack wasn't a murderer?"

"Where is this picture?"

"Yes—picture—"

"At—house—" She licked her lips weakly. "Hidden."

"Hidden where?"

"Gateway—in Mission Gateway—"

Somewhere outside in the night but close by, a throat was cleared. The sound was casual, natural, made by someone going about their business—or the business of the hospital—and getting rid of a frog at the same time.

I backed away from the bed into the darkness of the dressing room. There was the noise of the door opening and then the dressing room mirror gave me a billiard-angle glimpse of the rawboned nurse crossing toward the bed. She carried a hypo and a wad of cotton, and she was humming "Give Me Five Minutes More." I wished somebody had.

She passed beyond the vision of the mirror. I waited, holding my breath. My eyes began to accustom themselves to the half-light of the dressing room, and I saw there were a couple of framed pictures on

the dresser. One of them was of a plump little man with an incipient bald spot and bugged-out eyes. I supposed that would be the late Pete Russell.

The other was of Jack Marshall in uniform. He'd been a pleasant-looking kid with steady gray eyes, a blunt chin and, most of the time, a half-grin on his pan, the same grin that was in the picture. There hadn't been anything spectacular about the kid, but if you had to go on a night patrol he'd been a swell guy to have along. I cocked a finger at him and said silently: "Hi, guy. Wish you were along on this patrol."

The reflection of the rawboned nurse crossed the mirror, this time toward the door. I heard it open and close, waited another couple of minutes and stepped out for a look at Helen Russell. She was off to slumberland again, and I didn't feel like hanging around another two-three hours for her to travel back to me.

If anyone saw me leave the bungalow, they were too shy to say anything about it. I walked down the path quietly, as one should walk around hospitals, and went out through the wrought-iron gate.

A FOURTH Avenue bus let me off at Crestview Drive, and I tramped north along a wide tree-lined avenue. It was quiet there, very nice, an elegant neighborhood for elegant people. There were big homes set back on wide lawns, some impressive apartment buildings with doormen standing around under awnings that ran from entrance to curb. There was a view that took in the riding lights of ships at anchor in the harbor, the garish neon illumination of Bay Street, the twinkling gridiron of street lamps outlining the rest of Cape City. You probably couldn't live in Crestview drive on a nickel-and-dime income.

The street number June Kobak had given me turned out to be an apartment, six stories of modernistic white limestone. I turned from the side walk under a marquee that spanned the six feet between walk and heavy bronze-and-glass doors. A doorman who had been taking it easy on a chair inside the lobby, hopped up, trotted to the big doors and helped me with them.

He was a rosy-cheeked little fellow, with gray hair peeping from the sides of his uni-

form cap and only about a hundred and fifty pounds under his green-gold-and-blue uniform coat. In Los Angeles we buy our doormen bigger and more impressive but, I figured, Cape City was a smaller town and therefore could use them smaller. He was polite.

"Beautiful night, Sir."

"Wonderful," I said.

He beamed as though the night had been his favorite child and I'd patted it on the head.

An automatic elevator lifted me quietly to the fourth floor, slid its doors open and waited politely for me to get out. There were six doors to six apartments in the T-shaped hallway. I pressed a button beside the door at the bottom of the T.

Seconds jerked by and I was ready to give the button another try when a small voice sounded on the other side of the door.

"W—who is it?"

"An Irishman calling on a Hunky."

A bolt pulled back and the door opened. The girl looked at me with eyes as big as poker chips. Later on I noticed she wore silvery Chinese silk pajamas and robe and wine colored slippers that made her feet look tiny, and that her yellow hair was a little tousled. All I noticed just then was the size of her eyes.

She breathed: "Monahan! But they s-said you were dead!"

"Who said so?"

"The p-papers."

"They've practically got me buried. But I'm having 'em build a window in my coffin so I can keep up with what goes on."

"Monahan, I could yell with relief!"

"Not here. The neighbors might complain." I stepped in, closed the door.

The girl shot the bolt. "It was horrible reading that—and I've been scared to death for myself ever since. What happened? Who was it got killed? Where have you been?"

"I'll need the help of a drink to answer all those questions."

"Of course." She crossed a big living room, went through a swinging door into a kitchenette.

I sat down and looked around. It was a big room, as I've said, and the furnishings were some French period, feminine, in excellent taste and very expensive. The combination radio-phonograph in a period

cabinet alone would have run into four figures.

June Kobak returned with a tray that held a freshly-opened bottle of bonded rye, one of soda, a bowl of ice, two glasses. She had herself in hand now. We sat on a soft divan while I did the honors, mixing drinks strong enough to float a coal barge. I said: "Here's to crime—where would I be without it?"

She drank, shuddered, made a face and said: "Gee, that's good. Oh, Monahan, I felt terrible about you."

"Why?"

"Why? Why, because I liked you."

I put my hand on hers. She took hers away from mine.

"I thought you said you liked me."

"That was when you were dead." We both laughed and she said: "I didn't mean it just that way. Will you tell me about it?"

"I was lucky. A guy bummed a lift. On the chance it was a plant, I had him drive while I sat with my little roscoe in my lap. A few miles out of Cape City a car pulled alongside, lights out, and someone blasted. The hitchhiker died; I got off with some bruises."

June Kobak shivered a little. "Who was he?"

"One Tom Kinsella, a citizen of no great significance but a guy who would have liked to live just the same. I switched identity with him and came on in town to do some prowling." I finished my drink. "Incidentally, you got any idea how someone with a gun knew I was due in Cape City last night?"

"I haven't the slightest—" She broke off while her eyes got big and the scarlet mouth got thin. "Why, you dirty black Irishman, are you implying that I—?"

"Ah-ah!" I cautioned. "Don't let that Hunky disposition slip its collar! There's two reasons I can't believe you'd have put Mrs. Monahan's boy on the spot. One, I don't peg you for that sort of gal. Two, if you didn't want me messing in the Marshall business, all you had to do was not ask me. It's still certain someone was tipped to my arrival here last night in a certain car with certain plates, all of it information that you had. Think hard, Baby. Did you do or say anything, unconsciously on your part, that might have tipped someone?"

SHE concentrated, putting wrinkles in her smooth forehead. "Let's see. I got the letter evening before last. I'd been out all day and when I got home around six, the letter was in my mailbox. I tried to get you by long-distance that evening."

"How'd you know my number?"

"I asked Information for the number of a Los Angeles private detective named Kerry Monahan. She got it for me and put the call through, but your phone didn't answer. So I decided to take the bus down next morning and see you personally. But I didn't tell anyone about the letter or my plans."

"Your phone go through a switch-board?"

"No. It's a direct line."

"Notice anyone you knew on the bus? Or anyone tailing you in Los Angeles?"

"No."

"Was the letter left around at any time for a maid to see?"

"I haven't a maid. And the letter wasn't left around." She looked up at me suddenly. "Do you think perhaps someone read the letter before it left the hospital— or here before I got it?"

"That wouldn't add up. If someone was so anxious to keep a dick off the Marshall case, they could have forestalled it by just destroying the letter before you got it."

She shook her head. Her brown eyes were clear, guileless. "Then I can't imagine how anyone could have known about you."

"Me, too," I said. "Anyway, I managed to have a little talk with Helen Russell tonight—a very little talk." I told her briefly how I'd engineered it and what I'd got.

"A picture? Hidden in the Mission Gateway?" She looked puzzled. "How could a picture prove Marshall didn't kill Russell?"

"Maybe we'll learn when we find it. What's this Mission Gateway business?"

"It's an old, crumbling 'dobe arch, one of the local sights. It's all that's left of an outlying station of one of the early California missions."

"How would that hook up with Pete Russell?"

"It's on an estate Russell bought when he and Helen moved from here."

"From here? You mean this apartment?"

"They had the penthouse on top."

"Could something be hidden in the archway?"

"I suppose one of the old 'dobe bricks might be pried loose and something hidden and the brick replaced."

"Where's the estate?"

"It's called Los Padres and it's on the point north of town. Helen closed it. There's only a caretaker there now."

"Would he let me prow around?" I asked.

"I know him. I guess I could take you out there."

"Swell," I said. "Ever hear things about a guy named Macker?"

"The name sounds familiar but I don't place it. Who is he?"

"The guy that runs Cape City now."

"Oh. I know I've heard or seen the name somewhere."

I finished my drink and stood up. "Nice spot you have here. Not many secretaries have 'em as nice."

Her lips pulled together and the brown eyes got smoky. "Clear that up, Monahan, and fast. Or go somewhere and get your mind washed out."

I grinned. "I'm not a guy that gets his exercise by jumping to conclusions. I just thought this was a nice place."

"It so happens my father left me some money. I did secretarial work during the war because I wanted to do my share. And anyway, I got this place reasonably through a realty corporation that Pete Russell was interested in. Everything clear now?"

"Like crystal. When do we look at the Mission Gateway?"

The girl hesitated. She stood up, still not speaking. Then she put a small, red-tipped hand on my sleeve softly. She said: "Monahan, I'm scared. Maybe we'd better not go ahead with it. We could write the District Attorney anonymously and tell him to look for something in the Mission Gateway—"

"If you're scared, Babe," I said, "forget it. I can handle it solo."

"But—I'm afraid for you. You see, Monahan, I—I sort of like you. And you've already done everything that your loyalty to Jack Marshall calls for."

"Maybe," I said. "But not everything that five hundred calls for. And I've earmarked that dough to pay bills."

"Don't worry about the money. I'll re-

place it in Helen's account. And I'll pay for your wrecked car."

I frowned down at her. "You're forgetting something. I'm supposedly in the county morgue. I can't just materialize my ectoplasm back in Los Angeles and no questions asked. I've got to pin the killing of this Tom Kinsella on someone else or it'll likely be pinned on me. So I've got to crack the Marshall-Russell business now to clear myself. Get it?"

"Uh-huh, I guess you're right, Monahan." She looked small and forlorn and as though she needed cheering up.

I tried to cheer her up. Her mouth was soft, warm under mine.

I said: "You kiss pretty good for a Hunky."

"The Hunkies could teach the Irish any time."

"Put me down for lessons. Say, have you got a car?"

"Yes."

We made a morning date at the Hotel Tracy and I got going.

When I got down to the lobby, the rosy-cheeked little man was dozing uncomfortably in a chair. It was tough, I thought, to reach his age and get your night's rest in catnaps. So I didn't disturb him. I opened the door for myself. And also for Little Pete Vasov who stepped into sight outside as I reached for the knob. His liquid black eyes passed over me without interest. He murmured a polite, "Thanks," and went past me to the elevator I had just quitted. The doors closed and I watched the indicator move, held my breath as it approached "4", let the breath go as it moved past and stopped at "6".

I opened the street door again and walked down Crestview Drive in the soft spring night, wondering about Little Pete Vasov. He hadn't gone to June Kobak's floor. On the other hand, if he'd had any reason to want to throw somebody off the track, he could have gone to the sixth floor and walked down to four. I just wondered.

CHAPTER THREE

Take No Chances

ANOTHER Fourth Avenue bus took me down to Bay Street where I knocked off three highballs, a New York steak and French fries. I walked two

blocks to the Hotel Tracy and walked up to my room.

I flicked lights on and saw Chief Investigator Abe Mallow sitting on the bed, pointing a .45 at my belly. Seen in the flesh, he was dark and lean and his face was hungry. The dropped shoulder was very evident under his fawn-colored topcoat.

He said: "Kick the door shut." His voice was low, clipped.

I shut the door and my eyes took in the ransacked suitcase.

I said: "If this is a stick-up, I haven't got a hell of a lot."

The darkness of his face got a little red but he said evenly: "This is no stick-up, Bud. Have you got any identification on your person?"

"Yeah," I said. "Have you?"

His dark hard eyes narrowed. The .45 waggled at me a bit. He said: "Don't be difficult. Let's see the identification."

I dug up Tom Kinsella's wallet, handed it over. Mallow said, "Face the wall," and I did. Presently he said, "Okay," and I turned back. He was holding the union card.

"Truck driver, huh?"

"Right."

"When did you hit town and how?"

"Two a.m. this morning—by bus from Frisco."

He got up and walked around me to the door, slipping the long-barreled gun into his coat pocket as he went.

I said: "Wait a minute. What's this all about? Or do I have to stay awake the rest of the night trying to guess?"

He shrugged. "I'm looking for a guy, You're lucky."

"I'm lucky how?"

"Your hair is the wrong shade, Bud." He opened the door, eased out, shut the door quietly after him.

I put the union card back in the wallet and sat on the bed for five minutes, staring at the wall. This thing didn't add right. Mallow must have pegged me in some way on last night's killing or he wouldn't have been waiting for me with a .45 cuddled in his lap. But when I had showed up, he'd been casual, careless, easily satisfied. He didn't look to me like a guy who'd be easily satisfied.

My next visitors were neither casual nor careless.

I was still sitting on the bed, firing up a cigarette, when the door was whipped open. Two men came in, single file like Indians and almost as quietly as Indians. They stepped abreast inside the room, one of them heeled the door shut, and the round, dark emptiness of gun muzzles was covering me. It was like a song-and-dance act but not as entertaining.

One man was short, sturdy-necked and very blond with whitish, lowering brows above a fixed, pale stare. The second was a goodlooking kid in his twenties, as dark as the first man was blond. He had a thin line of black mustache across his swart upper lip, and about him there was an air of carelessly insolent good-humor.

The blond man said brusquely: "Police business," and, with the effect of doing a sleight-of-hand trick, flashed a Cape City police buzzer in his left palm.

His partner said cheerfully: "Hello, Monahan."

Monahan!

Then the D.A.'s-dick hadn't been so easily satisfied. Just satisfied to bypass trouble with a guy that might be tough, satisfied to leave the job to a couple of strong-arm cops.

I didn't know whether it would do me any good to keep on stalling but it certainly couldn't hurt any. I scowled and said: "The name is Kinsella."

The blond man gave me his fixed pale stare. There was something about his eyes that was cruel, a little subhuman. He said flatly: "You're not kidding anybody. We know you're Monahan and you're wanted on last night's shooting. Let's go down to headquarters."

"Put on your skimmer, Monahan," said the dark boy.

I'll argue with cops once in a while, but never with cops holding guns and looking eager to use them. I put on my hat and stood up. Blondy edged around behind me, dusted me, found my gun and took it. We went out. I turned toward the front stairs. They rounded me up and turned me toward the back stairs.

We went down uncarpeted steps, along a corridor dimly lit by one small bulb and out a back door to where a small sedan sat in an alley just beyond rows of ash cans. I was beginning to wonder a little about these guys: cops didn't usually bother to take

prisoners off to the clink as discreetly as this. But the looks of the sedan reassured me; it was a standard police prowler car, red spotlight mounted above the windshield, siren mounted back of the bumper.

The dark lad climbed under the wheel, Blondy loaded me and himself into the back seat. The car began to roll. We got to the street that ran alongside the hotel and there we turned south.

City Hall and police headquarters, I'd learned during the day, lay north. I didn't like the idea this suggested.

I said: "Can I get a cigarette out, boys?"

"No," said Blondy. He had his arms folded, the gun in his right hand so that the barrel was thrust toward me between his left arm and his body.

The boy at the wheel got out cigarettes and lit one for himself with the lighter from the dash. He got the lighter glowing again and passed it back to me along with a cigarette.

I said: "Thanks." I'd rather have kicked him in the teeth for being so helpful. I'd wanted my own cigarettes and, particularly, my own book of matches; I'd once successfully worked that gag of more or less accidentally setting an entire book of matches ablaze and getting rid of it in the face of a guy who held a gun.

There's not much you can do along those lines with an electric lighter.

I got my cigarette glowing and started to reach the lighter over the top of the front seat. My cigarette slipped out of my mouth to the floor, and I cursed and bent over to retrieve it.

When I was sure my ribs and kidneys and spine were well forward of Blondy's gun, I threw myself sidewise across him, let my weight pin his arms and the gun back of me. I threw three punches into his stomach as hard and as fast as I could. He yelled and doubled forward, and I squirmed around to make a try for his gun.

I FELT the car jam to a stop. The dark lad slugged me on the crown, and I slid off Blondy's lap and landed on my back on the floor. Blondy held his left hand to his stomach, cursing and grunting with pain. He stuck the gun into his pocket and balled his right hand into a hard fist and began pumping it into my face. One, two, three, four. A pause while he cocked it higher.

Five. I tried to roll my head with the punches but there wasn't much room to roll.

The dark boy said sharply: "Cut it!"

Blondy cursed. "Look what he done to me!"

"Cut it. We've got to walk him through a lobby. We can't have him looking like a dollar's worth of hamburger."

Blondy unballled his fist and filled it again with his gun while I boosted myself to the seat.

The dark boy said: "What made you unhappy all of a sudden, Brother?"

"I know where headquarters is—not this direction."

"We've just taking you visiting, Monahan. But don't be so hard to get along with or you won't arrive where we're going. Get me?"

"Okay."

Two blocks further on we turned onto Fourth Avenue and rambled east. Presently we reached Crestview Drive, turned and came to a stop at the curb in darkness a hundred feet from from the white stone apartment building.

Blondy growled: "No tricks or I'll split your skull." He sounded as though he'd be delighted if I did try tricks.

They walked me between them toward the apartment. We got to the doors and everything in the lobby looked just as it had the last time I'd seen it—dim lights, quietness, the little old boy in the gaudy uniform still snoozing on a chair just inside the doors. But this time the doors were locked.

Blondy rattled the knob, pounded the glass. The doorman gagged on a snore, jumped to his feet with his eyes still closed. They didn't open until he was halfway to the door. He was yawning as he clicked the bolt back. Blondy yanked the door open.

The doorman swallowed his yawn suddenly as his eyes lit on my mauled face. He stood, blocking the doorway and pointing at me.

"W-what's wrong here?" he stuttered, shrillness and alarm in his voice.

Blondy growled: "Outa the way."

"B-but this man's been hurt. If you're looking for a doctor, there's no doctor in the building."

"I said get outa the way, Grampa!"

Blondy put his left hand on the old man's chest and shoved.

The doorman took four flying steps backward, caromed off a pillar and lit, sitting, on an ornamental bench against the wall. The wall bounced him upright again. His face had an outraged look. He wagged a shaking but indignant finger at Blondy.

"You better get out of here before I call the police!"

Blondy did his trick with the police shield. "You don't have to yell loud. So go back to sleep, Grampa."

We walked to the elevator, stepped in. The dark boy punched the button for the sixth floor and we started upward.

The dark boy said: "Did you have to slam that little guy around?"

"Ah, he made me sore."

"You get things done in a nice quiet way."

"Nuts," said Blondy.

The elevator door slid back and we stepped out to a corridor that was a match for the one on June Kobak's floor, except that a wrought-iron staircase took over where the elevator left off. It led us to a steel door, and the steel door let us out onto a roof in the middle of which sat a white-painted, green-shuttered Cape Cod cottage. A light above the front door showed a tiny latticed porch, a graveled walk and flowerbeds sprouting out of transplanted earth.

The dark boy went ahead and stuck a forefinger at a bell push. Chimes went bing-bong inside and we waited. We waited maybe a minute before the door was opened by a tall, well-built man with dark, graying hair; small, sullen eyes, and a mouth that was just a slash over a jutting chin. He wore slippers, silk robe, pajamas.

"We got him, Boss," said the dark lad.

"Yep, Mr. Macker," said Blondy. "We sure got him."

Mr. Macker said curtly: "Get inside and shut the door." He sounded irritated, upset.

Blondy prodded me inside. We were in a living room that was cheerful with a log fire, brightly-covered furniture, several softly-glowing lamps. A half-consumed drink and an opened magazine were on a low table by a comfortable chair.

The tall men picked up the drink and carried it to a desk where a phone lay out

of its cradle. He lifted the phone and said into it sourly: "But, damn it, they've got him here now. What am I supposed—" He broke off and listened, frowning. "But if you didn't want—" He stopped again. Finally he said: "All right, damn it, all right!" He dropped the phone into the cradle.

He turned his scowl on Blondy, on the dark lad. "You got the wrong man. Turn him loose."

The dark boy looked blank.

Blondy was mad. "Wrong man, hell, Mr. Macker! This is the guy we was sent after. What's the idea?"

"The idea is we turn him loose."

BLONDY cursed. He said bitterly: "We turn him loose! I stick my neck out a mile to grab him and he damn near kills me getting him here and we turn him loose! What kinda stooge am I supposed to be, huh?"

Macker said glumly: "The same kind I am. We both take orders. For a plugged dime I'd chuck the set-up and go back to Vegas." He looked at me. "Run along, Mister. And if you're smart you'll just forget all this."

I said: "Okay, but first—"

Blondy snarled: "You heard! Scram!"

"First my gun."

"Oh, you want your gun?"

"I want my gun."

"I'll give you your gun," said Blondy in his throat. He hauled my gun out of his pocket, took two steps and laid the barrel across the bridge of my nose.

I weaved backward against the wall, my eyes jumping from my head with pain. Blood began to drip from my nose.

Macker snapped: "Get him out of here before he ruins my rug!"

Blondy and the dark lad manhandled me out to the porch, along the graveled path and to the steel door. The dark lad held the door open; Blondy heaved me down the stairway. I wound up on hands and knees in front of the elevator doors and the steel door slammed above me.

When I got down to the lobby I had the bleeding stopped, but I must have looked like a fugitive from a street riot. The rosy-cheeked nightman stared at me and got his indignation all fired up again.

"They beat you again, did they? Some-

thing ought to be done about police brutality like that! If you want to make a complaint, I'll certainly be your witness, Mister."

I shrugged. "Don't you know that cops never beat anyone? Citizens always fall down getting out of police cars."

"Oh, they do, do they? You saw that policeman shove me!"

"He'd swear you assaulted his hand with your chest. 'Night."

I shoved out through the doors and walked down Crestview Drive toward the bus line, a guy full of aches and pains—and questions without answers. The deeper I got into this business, the less sense it made.

I tried adding it up from the beginning. Somebody had been so worried about Monahan being on the loose in Cape City that they had tried to gun me out. Somebody had learned that Monahan had ducked the lead and was on the loose in Cape City; so they'd had Monahan picked up. The next step in the question should have been Monahan's body in some ditch. Instead, Monahan had been told he was the wrong gee and excuse it, please, and Monahan was on the loose again.

It didn't come out right. It was like adding two and two and getting five—or nineteen.

There were plenty of other questions. Where and when had Abe Mallow and the dark boy and Blondy got the idea that Monahan would be at the Hotel Tracy under the name of Tom Kinsella? Nobody had bothered me there until after I'd talked to brown-eyed June Kobak, the lovely Hunkey. But that didn't fit, either. As I'd told her, if she hadn't wanted me prowling the dark past of Cape City, she needn't have included me in. And, by no stretch of the imagination, could I see her as the gal behind the guns. Could Vasov have recognized me and had me tailed? No, that didn't work out; Mallow had been waiting at the hotel when I got there.

But the \$64 riddle was—who was running this show? It didn't seem to be the tall Mr. Macker; he'd admitted he was taking orders. Or had that remark been just for my benefit?

I began to feel like getting some of the answers before I hit the hay. The way my face ached, I didn't think I'd sleep anyway.

Halfway down the block before Fourth there was a deep pool of blackness under acacia trees. I let the blackness swallow me, ducked along a driveway onto the softness of a lawn and cut between darkened houses to an alleyway. There were trash cans in the alley, so I prospected, found a short slim length of rusty pipe and took it along with me. I came back between houses toward the street at the spot where the police car had been parked.

It was still there, unoccupied. I did a fast sneak across the sidewalk, eased into the rear seat of the car, closed the door softly and crouched in the well between the seats. I thought that, with the element of surprise in my side, I could handle both the dark boy and Blondy. What I hoped for was that they'd come down separately and that the first of them to arrive would be Blondy.

Just by the law of averages a guy gets a break once in a while. I'd been hunched down there maybe five minutes when the driver's door opened, the car sagged as someone climbed in under the wheel, the door slammed. I peered up. It was Blondy's head I could see above the top of the seat. I could hear him manipulating things on the dash. The starter whirred, the engine caught and began to hum.

I raised on my knees and laid the rusty pipe on Blondy's skull with gusto. Without even a groan, he fell sidewise and out of sight on the front seat.

A voice nearly frightened me out of my shoes.

It said: "Cape City Police Department—calling all cars! Repeating our broadcast Number 43. Be on the lookout for a man going under the name of Tom Kinsella, wanted for murder. About six feet, hun-

dred and ninety pounds, gray eyes, reddish hair, old two-inch scar on left cheek. Last seen wearing dark blue suit, light gray hat, tan shoes. This man is armed, desperate and dangerous. Take absolutely no chances in apprehending him. That is all."

I reached over and turned the radio low. After that I cursed. So that was why I'd been turned loose! I was supposed to trot back to the hotel like a woolly lamb and run into some copper who just "happened" to be in the neighborhood. He wouldn't take any chances in apprehending me; he'd just fill me full of lead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Picture Puzzle

PRE-DAWN moonlight silvered the mesa that lay to the east and high above Cape City. It glistened on the smooth sweep of the bay to the west and on the cluster of dark little cubes in between, cubes that were houses and factories and hotels and office buildings. In the houses people were sleeping happily, enjoying those last few hours before they'd have to get up and start worrying about things like the atom bomb and the high cost of living.

"Nice view," I said.

"Arrgh," Blondy said. He was on the front seat of the police car beside me with his arms behind him and his wrists in his own handcuffs. He wasn't comfortable and he wasn't happy.

We came to a little track that angled off from the highway and across the mesa toward clumped trees. The road looked lonely, disused; the moonlight didn't show me any sign of life within miles. I turned onto the track, drove past the trees to



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ☆

where the car couldn't be seen from the highway and parked.

Blondy said: "What's the idea?"

"The idea is I gave you a chance to answer some questions. And what did I get out of you?"

"Wait'll I get you down at the station, Brother."

"Yeah," I said. "That's exactly what I got out of you—a lot of yah-yah. So I'm going to have to beat the answers out of you."

"You let me get my hands loose and you'll see!"

"Climb out!" We got out. I said: "Turn around. I'm a fathead, I guess, but I don't like to cut a guy to pieces when he has his hands tied behind him."

I unkeyed the cuffs, shoved him away from me, tossed the cuffs in the car.

He pivoted, poised himself but didn't advance. "Yeah—you still got two guns."

"You want everything," I said. "Okay." I put both guns inside the car and he rushed me instantly.

He caught me hook-handed across the nose as I side-stepped. I grunted with pain and water sprang to my eyes, and for a moment I wondered if I'd been smart. After all, the guy had forty pounds on me.

But what he didn't have was condition and some of the techniques that G.I.'s pick up in basic. He rocked me a couple of times. But I kept working around him methodically in the moonlight, slashing his face and softening up his belly. I feinted him wide open and steamed a right to his nose. I felt cartilage crunch. Then I kept chipping away at the nose. He'd groan and try to clinch and I'd sink my left in his midsection, and he'd back away and I'd tap the nose. Finally I decide he was ripe. I drove my left into his belly almost to the wrist and, as he doubled up, I flattened his nose the rest of the way.

He didn't fall. He just sat down slowly and put his face in his hands and began to sob and moan.

I said: "Now do we talk?"

"Hell—with you!"

I grabbed a handful of shirt and jerked him upward and knocked the nose in again. I let him go and he slumped to the ground, blubbering.

"Do we talk?"

"A-all right, damn you."

"Swell. Who was it tried to blast me on Route 103 night before last?"

He mumbled: "I dunno."

I took him by the shoulder and showed him the knuckles of my right hand, bloody with his blood. "Look, Chum, I can play kick the wicket with you until I get the answers. And I'll know the right answers when I hear them. Who was in that car that passed mine?"

"Mickey," he said. "Mickey Denver."

"And who is Mickey Denver?"

"The guy that was with me tonight."

"He's a cop?"

Blondy shook his head. "Hell, no. He works for Gill Macker, came here with him from Las Vegas."

"Are you a cop?"

For some reason he seemed to resent the implication that he was a phony. "Certainly I'm an officer. I'm Sergeant Gennsler, head of the vice squad."

"That shooting was a two-man job. Were you the other guy in the car?" When he didn't answer I wagged my fist a little.

Then he said: "All right, I was. But you got no witnesses. I'll deny it."

I let that ride. "Now give me the rest of it. Who engineered it and how?"

"Mickey phoned me about seven that night that a guy was heading for Cape City and the boss didn't want him to get there. Mickey had a description of the car and the tag number. We just waited off the intersection at Glenview until we saw you."

"The boss? You mean Macker?"

He shook his head. He was talking better now; it's funny how once you get a reluctant guy talking, the words come easier and easier. He said: "Macker ain't the boss. I dunno who the boss is. But I know a stranger like Macker couldn't walk into Cape City like he did a few months back and take over unless he had the green light from somebody. Why, Macker had like a blueprint of everything—who handled what and how much the collections oughta be and who got the grease, the whole layout. Matter of fact, when Russell was top dog before Macker, I had a hunch he took orders from somebody. But I never knew who."

I said: "Would it perhaps be Abe Mal-low?"

Blondy grunted contemptuously. "That dummy! He's been kicking the gong

around for the D.A. for fifteen years, and I bet he still ain't got two nickels to rub together."

"It wasn't Mallow that tipped you off to me being at the Tracy?"

"Nah. Mickey phoned me the boss had spotted you there. How Mallow got onto you, I dunno. We saw him come outa your room as we got up to your floor. We pulled back outa sight in a cross hall and sapped him as he walked by. We didn't want him hanging around to see us take you out."

I didn't go into it with Blondy but I figured I had at least one answer now: Mallow, thinking I'd followed him and sapped him, had had that broadcast put out.

"Okay," I said, "so the boss had you pick me up. So then he had you turn me loose. Where does that fit in?"

That seemed to make Blondy sore. He growled: "Ask me, just ask me. It made be sore as hell, all that trouble grabbing you."

I was beginning to feel frustrated. As far as getting information was concerned, talking to this guy was like talking to myself. And, yet, I had the feeling that he was telling the truth.

But I tried some more. "Who really killed Pete Russell?"

"A kid named Marshall. He was sore because Russell stole his gal."

"That was the official version. What's the inside of it?"

He looked up at me, his battered face puzzled. There was earnestness in his voice. "If you know any different, you know more than me. I never heard a peep about a coverup. And the way I stand, Brother, I'd have heard."

"Who handled the case?"

"Homicide and Abe Mallow."

"Ever hear of anyone named Kobak?"

"Sure—Joe Kobak. He did some bootlegging before repeal, and then he had a big saloon on Bay Street and also a dance hall over in Dominguez Heights. Joe's been dead four-five years now."

I scratched my dome while I tried to think of more questions. I couldn't think of any offhand so I stepped to the car, found Blondy's handcuffs and said: "Upsy-daisy, Pal."

"Huh? What you—"

"Up!"

I picked a slim but sturdy eucalyptus

tree and handcuffed Blondy's arms around the trunk. He made quite a fuss about it. I told him he was breaking my heart and left him.

THE moon was balancing on one horizon, the grayness of dawn on the other, by the time I located the place I wanted. It had a high ornamental wall of fieldstone bordering the Coast Highway for a quarter mile and, about centered, a pair of wrought-iron gates across a driveway. The spotlight of the police car picked out a small sign on one gate—Los Padres. I parked the car down the road a bit and hiked back to the gates, unlatched one and stepped through to the driveway.

Darkness lay there under arching trees and I didn't disturb it with my flash. The gravel of the drive was soft and sound-proofed with layers of last fall's leaves that had matted in the winter rains. The salty breath of the ocean flowed among the trees, making little sighing sounds, and at a distance the surf chewed at the shore with the regularity of a metronome nibbling away the hours.

Taking my time, I followed the driveway and made a turn where the bordering trees indicated a turn. I walked another hundred feet, and then my foot swung ahead into something solid. The same thing hit my shin, pitched me forward and then down. My hands, outflung to break the fall, skidded and lacerated themselves on hard angular fragments. Climbing back to my feet, I cursed first. Then I got out the pencil flash.

The light showed me chunks, big chunks, little chunks, medium-sized chunks, of what had been 'dobe bricks. I could tell that they had been very old 'dobe bricks by the way a surface here and there had been eroded. I widened the swing of my flash and saw that I was standing in a little patch of lawn about which the drive had divided to make a circle.

The circle of lawn had been planned as a frame for an old 'dobe archway. I could see the bare oblong spots of its foundations. There wouldn't have been two like it at Los Padres; so it had to have been the Mission Gateway. Now it was a mass of disintegrated dirt. The indentation of tires, showing on the grass, gave me a picture of what had happened. A car had been driven

against the arch, toppling it. The impact and the fall had shattered most of the 'dobe. Large chunks that had survived the fall had been hammered into smaller pieces; the marks of a maul were evident here and there on the fragments.

I switched off the flash, didn't bother to paw around through the rubble. Whatever had been hidden in the Mission Gateway was certainly in somebody else's hands by now.

Whose hands?

The answer that had been knocking at the door of my so-called brain came back and knocked again. This time I opened the door and took a good look at the answer, and it still had the face and figure of a blonde brown-eyed gal. And I still figured it had to be the wrong answer.

But I went right on needing an answer to get me off the spot I was on with Abe Mallow and the Cape City law.

Dawn was oozing upward from the rim of eastern hills as I stood there, still in darkness, chewing things over.

That archway hadn't gone down without noise even on the soft turf. The maul that had been used on the bricks afterward must have made even more noise. When a guy hears noise in the deep of night where noise shouldn't be, he gets curious. If there was a caretaker on the estate, why hadn't he got curious?

Or had he?

I followed the drive around another turn and saw the faint ghostly gleam of white walls on a little knoll a few hundred feet ahead. Getting closer, I could make out a long colonnaded portico like that of a mission. The driveway made a graceful sweep and brought me to a flight of shallow steps at the center of the portico.

Going up the steps silently, I snapped the beam of my flash toward a doorway. I don't remember now whether I was surprised to see that the door, a massive affair of nicely-matched planking, stood open a couple of inches. I do remember going very softly across the wide porch and pushing very slowly and gently against the door.

It swung wider and wider until I could step in. I did. The flash showed me that I needn't have worried about being quiet and not disturbing the caretaker. He wouldn't have been disturbed by six swing bands plus a broadside from the Battleship

Missouri. He had been a little man, clad in a woolly yellow bathrobe and pink pajamas and worn carpet slippers, and he lay on his back almost centered on the tile floor of a big square entrance hall. His mouth hung open, showing he'd taken his dentures out for the night. Some blood, not much, had leaked down the slope of a bald skull toward the top of his right ear. The blood had thickened, hadn't yet crusted.

I walked around the body and started exploring. It wasn't that I hoped to find anything that would help me. But I didn't want to miss on anything, either. It was a big shack—sunken living room to one side of the hall, refectory to the other. A den, a solarium, a billiard room, library, kitchen, pantries, all on the ground floor. Six bedrooms, four baths on the second floor.

The caretaker had picked the biggest bedroom for his use. His clothing hung in the closet, the bed there had been slept in. But there was nothing there that seemed of interest, so I went back downstairs and into the den, where a telephone stood on the inlaid top of a very fancy desk.

I PUT the lights on and sat down and looked at the telephone. I asked myself: Suppose you wanted to make some noise around a place and you knew the noise would wake a caretaker? Would you wait for him to be waked up and then settle the trouble he'd start? Or would you forestall trouble by waking him first and fixing him so he'd not bother you? The latter, of course.

You'd probably ring the bell or knock on the front door. And he'd get up, yawning and puzzled. He'd put on a bathrobe and slippers and turn on lights. The light in his bedroom, the light in the upper hall and that in the entrance hall. Maybe even the porch light. Then he'd open the door and your gun would go bang and you'd have the estate to yourself. But you wouldn't want to leave those lights on. You'd go through the house turning them off. You'd be wearing gloves. Or maybe you'd be careless and not have gloves and you'd leave some prints here and there—on light switches, railings, doorknobs, panels. That wasn't likely with a smart killer—but it could happen.

I thought it would be nice to have the kind of help that could check for prints.

I bounced that idea around for a while as I stared at the wall of the den. The wall was practically plastered with enlarged snapshots of Western scenery. I wasn't seeing the pictures; I was just aware that someone had been a camera enthusiast. Yosemite. A rocky shore with spume blown high. Mountains. The Golden Gate Bridge from Nob Hill. A gnarled and wind-tortured scrub oak against sailing clouds. An old stage station. A padre standing in the doorway of an old church.

I finally said to myself: "It's got to be Abe Mallow."

I didn't know whether I could trust him. But I had to trust somebody. And Blondy had said: "That dummy! Kicking the gong around on the D.A.'s staff for fifteen years and hasn't got a nickel."

I swung my chair to reach for the phone and found myself looking at a picture, not particularly conspicuous, of a crumbling 'dobe arch set in the circle of lawn made by a gravel driveway. I took my hand away from the phone slowly and my pulse began to step faster. My lips felt dry. The girl at the hospital had muttered about the Mission Gateway—and a picture hidden there! Why couldn't she have meant something hidden in a picture of the Mission Gateway? This picture!

Two steps took me to the wall and I had the picture. My nail ripped away the brown paper pasted across the back of the frame. It revealed nothing but the usual cardboard backing and I began to feel the steam going out of me. But my fingers went ahead practically on their own and twisted out the little brads that held the cardboard backing in the frame.

The cardboard fell out in my hands, showing a single sheet of notepaper that had been flattened between the backing and the print. There was small, even handwriting on the notepaper. It read:

I know that Jack Marshall did not kill my husband and then commit suicide because he was not that kind of a boy at all. Besides, I talked to Jack a month before, and he said he was not sore about it any more because he had met a girl he liked, and he was glad now that we had not got married. So somebody else must have killed both Jack and Pete and tried to make it look like murder and suicide. I don't know who could have done it because I never knew much about Pete's business, except he did say once he was having trouble with someone who was partners with him. I

guess I should take what I know to the police, but I am afraid to on account of a couple of days after it all happened, a man telephoned me and said if I was smart I wouldn't talk to anybody about what I knew about Pete's affairs. Well, I was scared but I thought fast, and I told him right back that I had written a lot of things down in a letter and put it in a safe place, and if anything happened to me the letter would be found and everything would come out.

Helen Russell.

I put the note down and said out loud in a voice that sounded strange and tinny to my ears: "So now everything comes out. Everything!"

If I'd been a woman I might have gotten a little hysterical. Maybe I got a little hysterical anyway. I snarled some curses and then I laughed, but it sounded more like a hollow groan. I thought, if Party X, the mystery mind behind this rat race, were only here to know the kind of "evidence" we've been fighting over, we could have a swell laugh together.

Then I stopped laughing and tried to use my head.

Party X didn't know and therefore would still be worried.

I reached for the phone.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Tigress in the Hand

GILL MACKER got there around seven, faster than I'd expected. A big tan car pulled up in front of the portico, flinging gravel from hard-braked wheels, not fifteen minutes after I'd put down the phone.

A thin mist was drifting in from the ocean, swirling around the big house. It wreathed the tan car but, watching from the hallway, I could see that the car held only Macker and Mickey Denver, the dark boy.

I stepped out and came down to the car before Macker could climb out. I said: "Well, where's the certain party?"

Macker narrowed his sullen eyes at me. "I told you on the phone I couldn't get in touch with him."

"And I told you I don't do business with stooges. I told you I had Helen Russell's letter and I wanted to talk it over with a certain party. I told you I hadn't decided what I wanted for the letter—maybe fifty grand, maybe a cut on the Cape City take.

So run with that message, and say I'll be here until noon and I deal only with principals."

A gun suddenly looked at me solemnly in the hands of Mickey Denver. He said: "Mister Macker, you want me to handle him?"

Macker said quietly: "Put the gun away, Mickey." He kept looking at me. "I've got a nice side deal for you, Monahan."

He paused. I didn't say anything.

He got a thick packet of bills, very crisp bills from his pocket. He said: "There's ten grand here in hundreds, Monahan, for the name of that certain party you found in the letter."

I gaped a little. Then I said: "Are you trying to tell me you don't know the name of the guy you take orders from?"

"Sounds screwy, doesn't it?"

"It is screwy."

"Nevertheless, it's a fact and it's driving me nuts. I like this Cape City setup, but I don't like being run by a guy that might as well be a ghost. He seems to know practically everything I do, everything I think. He's on my neck by telephone all the time but I never see him. I'm going absolutely bughouse."

"This is one for the book," I said. "How did he turn the setup over to you if you've never seen him?"

"He did it all by phone in Las Vegas. When I said 'yes' to the deal, he mailed me the key to a locker in the Cape City railroad station. I got here, opened the locker and found typed instructions for everything—contacts, who handled what, how they were to pay off, who got the grease among the cops. Hell, even that I had to live in that damned penthouse. I hate penthouses—I don't like high places."

"How do you pay off to him?"

"I haven't yet. He's told me to keep his share ready in my safe-deposit box." Macker cursed briefly but bitterly. "I tell you, I'm going nuts. Give me that name for ten grand, and after that I'll tell him about you when he calls me and you can do business with him for the letter. And, after that, I'll do some business with him. Is it a deal?"

I said: "Brother, you give me something to think about. You say this guy knows practically everything you do—but you've never seen the party?"

"I hardly blow my nose without him knowing."

"And you were told you had to live in the penthouse?"

"Yes. What are you getting at?"

"Are you dumb? The place must be wired for sound."

"A dick?"

"Probably a dozen ears around the place. Have your boy drive the car around back where it'll be out of sight."

"What's the idea of—"

"Quit wasting time."

I stepped back and the car began to move, disappeared past the corner of the house. I followed on foot. The car was parked by a service porch and Mickey Denver and Macker were climbing out. I crooked a finger at them, and they tailed me to a thick clump of shrubbery a hundred feet from the house, but in a spot where we could see the driveway, the front door.

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

"Cripes, do I have to draw diagrams? If your place is wired, it's nine chances out of ten our certain party knows what we talked about on the phone. And anyone who's gone to so much trouble to hide an identity isn't going to waste any time on this letter deal. I'll give you nice odds that we'll have a visitor soon." I gave him a slow wink. "And afterward, I think, you and I could run Cape City in a big way."

"Sure," said Macker. "Sure. Swell idea. I've been thinking along the same lines."

He didn't mean it and I didn't believe him. It was just conversation to pass the time.

We waited five minutes.

I said: "What's this guy sound like on the phone?"

"Sort of a high, thin voice—he reminds me of one of those female impersonators."

"Or maybe," I said, "of a woman trying to sound like a man?"

He looked at me curiously. "Is that just conversation or does it mean something?"

"I don't know yet."

We were quiet for another fifteen minutes. The mist thickened.

It was thick enough to make a wraith of the small figure that moved stealthily from tree to shrub to tree at the other side of the driveway, closing steadily toward the house. But it wasn't so thick that we didn't

recognize the figure when it passed us and mounted the steps of the house.

Macker breathed: "Well! Say, that girl lives at the building, I've seen here there! You mean she's—"

"Stick here," I said.

The lovely Hunkey had vanished through the front door. I stepped from the cover of the shrubbery and walked quickly but quietly to the steps, up them, across the porch and into the hallway. The hallway was still in half-light; darkness in the corners, silence hanging heavy. Then there was the faint sibilance of movement in the sunken living room. I stepped around the little man's body toward the living-room archway.

A gun banged once—twice—from the living room. Bees hummed angrily above my head and clunked into plaster and I dropped, lay still on the tiles. There were cautious footsteps. Closer. I eyed an ankle and grabbed it, and a soft, nicely-rounded body came tumbling down.

I had a tigress in my arms. Sharp-pointed shoes flailed my shins. Nails raked my cheek. Teeth sank into my neck. I tore my flesh away from the teeth and ran my hand along a slim, strong arm and down onto a gun. I squeezed the gun out of clutching fingers and said: "Guns down, Baby."

The tigress relaxed.

June Kobak said in a small sobbing voice: "Monahan!"

"That's me, Honey."

"Monahan—I almost shot you!"

"You're sorry it was almost?"

We got up together, stood close. She said, then, in the small voice: "Monahan, you mean you think I knew it was you—and tried to shoot you?"

"Wasn't that what you came out here for?"

The voice wasn't small now. It was angry. "Monahan, you're a fool! A man called me, said you were out here and had been badly hurt and needed me. I didn't want to call the police; I didn't know what to do—because I felt it might be a trap. But I kept thinking it might be true; you might need me. So I put a gun in my purse and came out here. And there was that body there—and then I heard someone come into the house and start toward me—"

The front door opened wide and Gill Macker and the dark lad came in. My Hunkey and I didn't pay any attention to them.

I said: "Let's drop the act, Baby. I've had you figured ever since they tried to gun me out on the road. But I was a fat-head. I liked you. I liked you so much I wouldn't believe what I knew had to be the truth."

"Oh, Monahan, you're so wrong!"

There was enough light so that I could see the brown eyes begin to leak some beautiful, round, crystal-clear tears.

I felt sour, disgusted, sore at the world, at myself and at this girl. I said: "Let's go in the den where we can at least be comfortable, and I'll give you a blueprint, Baby."

June Kobak didn't say anything. She stuck the tip of a pink tongue out a little and used it to blot one of the tears that had reached the corner of her mouth. It made her look like an unhappy little girl and that made me even angrier. She had no right to look that way.

WE WENT down into the living room and on into the den, with Gill Macker and the dark boy following us silently. It was dim in the den with the grayness of the misty morning, but I didn't turn on the lights. Grayness seemed to fit the way I felt.

I stuck the girl's gun in my pocket, lit a cigarette. "Here it is," I said. "Maybe a detail blurred here and there—but the design is clear. First we have a girl whose daddy, Joe Kobak, made his dough in bootlegging, a girl who therefore would have known about the rackets from the time she was a kid. Her dad died. The girl saw no reason why she shouldn't carry on in the rackets. But she was a smart girl. She knew a woman couldn't swing things. So she decided not to be a woman. She'd be just the secret brain behind things.

"But she needed someone to shoot the bullets she molded and she picked Pete Russell, backed him with the dough her dad had left. But Russell got too big for his pants. Maybe he decided he didn't need the girl any longer. The girl didn't like it. She was familiar with the triangle situation between Russell, his wife

and Jack Marshall, and she decided to use that to engineer the exit of Russell. How she got Marshall's gun, how she got the two together, I don't know. However, it wouldn't have been hard."

The girl looked disgusted. "You make me sick, Monahan. Even a dumb detective like you ought to see it doesn't hang together. If Helen Russell thought I had killed her husband and Jack Marshall, she wouldn't have written me that note, would she? And out of your own thick head you thought up the one about why would I have brought you here if I hadn't wanted you here?"

"There's probably good answers to both those riddles," I growled. "How do you explain the fact that I was ambushed on the road when you were the only one that knew I was on the way at that particular moment? How do you explain that a couple of goons grabbed me at the Hotel Tracy right after you found I was staying there? And also, that nobody bothered the Mission Gateway until I found out tonight—and told you—that it figured in the case? And that you show up here right after I phone Macker that I've got the evidence in the Mission Gateway? Riddle me those things, Babe."

Macker cut in, dry-voiced. "I thought you said you had a name in that letter, Monahan. If you've got a name, we don't need all this argument."

"All right, there's no name," I said. "But there're leads in the letter that stretch right to this gal's doorstep." I looked at June Kobak. "Is the letter and my silence worth fifty grand of your dough?"

She didn't answer. She was worrying her lush red lower lip between white teeth.

I said: "Well, how about it?"

"Will you shut up, Monahan? I'm trying to think. It'd have to be someone who was around a lot but nobody's around me a lot. Let's see—" She stopped, worried the lip again.

"Quit stalling," I said.

She might as well not have heard me. I looked at Macker, at the dark boy. Macker's eyes were on the girl, thoughts glinting behind the half lids. I figured I knew what he was thinking—that from now on he wasn't going to cut Cape City with any dame. Mickey Denver whistled softly, his face careless and good-humored.

Silence. Nothing going on. Except thoughts.

A little sound crept into the silence on padded paws. Not enough of a sound really to warn us. It might have been the scuff of a shoe or an indrawn breath.

June Kobak saw the guy first. Her brown eyes popped wide, her lips parted. She said: "Why, John!"

Her stare pulled the eyes of all of us around. The rosy-cheeked little man, the doorman, was standing in the doorway of the den. He looked mild, insignificant, in a brown suit, a tan overcoat, an old and shapeless felt hat. But there wasn't anything insignificant about the gun he held. It was a .45 Army automatic, and it was perfectly steady in his small hand. He smiled a little apologetically.

Macker snapped: "Regan, what the hell is this?"

"Good morning, Miss Kobak," said John Regan. "And you, Mr. Macker. It's nice we're all here together at last. And so convenient. Everything can be taken care of at once."

The .45 banged deafeningly in the small room. A round dark hole appeared suddenly under Mickey Denver's right eye. His dark face wore for a moment a look of utter astonishment, that faded almost instantly into the blankness of death. He was still falling as the little man's gun muzzle swung toward me.

Abe Mallow rose from behind a divan and gunflame and sound ripped through the room from the gun in his hands. The little man coughed painfully. The .45 dropped out of his grip and clunked on the floor, and then his knees buckled and he fell down on top of the gun, rolled over and began breathing like a spent runner.

Mallow came out from behind the divan, fanning smoke from the muzzle of his gun.

I wiped my forehead and said: "Brother Mallow, I thought you were never going to go into action."

"Who is he?" said Mallow. "You didn't say anything about him when you phoned or when I got here. You just said you wanted to trap Macker or the girl into talking while I listened. Who the hell is this little squirt?"

The little man on the floor breathed resentfully: "This—little squirt ran—this town, you—big squirt!"

AROUND ten o'clock that morning I came out of a room at the City Hospital, walked down a long, bare, clean-smelling corridor to a solarium and found June Kobak sitting among the potted ferns. The way I felt, I'd like to have been potted myself. I sat down.

"Okay," I said. "This is your first good chance to tell me off. So tell me off. I'm a heel, huh?"

She said sweetly: "Not a heel, Monahan. Just dumb Irish. Is he going to live?"

"Long enough to walk to the gas chamber some morning."

"Did he talk?"

"Like a politician bragging about his record. He's proud as hell how an insignificant little guy like he is could run a town for years. Well, you got to admit I figured out some of it—except that I sort of got the wrong name."

"Just sort of," said the girl.

"Okay, I apologize again. But, anyway, it all started when the little guy was the silent backer of Pete Russell in that roadhouse setup. Along came the war and they foresaw how Cape City would boom. So they decided to organize the rackets with Russell as front man. Then Russell got independent and Regan decided he had to get rid of him. He'd heard about the Marshall-Russell feud over the girl, so he prowled Marshall's hotel room one day and found the kid's Luger. After that it was just a matter of getting the two men together. He did that a few nights later through a phone call to Jack Marshall that brought the kid down to the office building.

"He killed Russell first and let Marshall have it when he arrived half an hour later. The cops called it murder and suicide as

he'd expected, and he had only one worry—that Russell might have spilled his business setup to his wife. So he gave her a threatening phone call. Her reaction confirmed his suspicion that she knew something. But he was afraid then to liquidate her because she'd said she had fixed up a letter that would come out if anything happened to her.

"He'd been to Vegas several times and had noticed Macker's flair for running a gambling joint, and he'd tabbed the guy as Russell's successor. He brought him here but he figured he could handle him better by being a mystery man. So he wired the penthouse and installed the guy there. And, incidentally, he wired your place, too, since you'd been Helen Russell's close friend, and he hoped to keep tabs on her after a fashion that way. Everything that was said in either place was taken down on a wire recorder in the little room the guy lived in down in the basement. That's how he knew you'd tried to call Kerry Monahan, a Los Angeles private dick."

"But how could he have known why I was calling you?"

"He wasn't sure he knew why. But he'd seen a letter in your mailbox that day in a Greeley Hospital envelope. He had no chance to get it before you got it. But he put two and two together. He tailed you the next day, watched you board a Los Angeles bus. He rushed back, got his car, caught up with the bus and tailed you to Los Angeles and, finally, to my office. Then he stuck with me, saw me load my suitcase in my car and followed me to Route 103. He felt sure I was headed for Cape City, so he got on the phone to Macker and gave orders to have me stopped.

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"He learned last night, of course, that I hadn't been stopped. And, listening in on our talk, he learned about the Mission Gateway stuff and where I was staying. He sent two guys to pick me up while he scooted out to Los Padres, killed the caretaker, searched the arch by demolishing it—and found nothing. He zipped back to the apartment and had just arrived when the guys brought me in. So he put on an act to divert any possible suspicion I might have had. Incidentally, he's very mad at the cop that pushed him around when he put on the act—although the poor cop didn't dream he was mussing up the big boss.

"While the guys were taking me upstairs, he was phoning Macker. He'd found nothing in the Mission Gateway so he decided to have me turned loose to go on looking for Helen Russell's evidence. If I found anything, he was sure I'd bring it to you and then he'd hook me again. Early this morning, he got a recording of a call I made to Macker. What Macker said made the little guy think I'd definitely gotten the dope and that Macker was going to buy it. By then he was getting tired of the whole merry-go-round. He decided to get us all together and wipe the slate clean. You had to be in on it, so he phoned you about me needing help out there. When we were all together, he walked in on us. But he didn't know that I'd gotten hold of Abe Mallow, told him everything and fixed it for him to listen while I tried to trap you into admitting things!"

Abe Mallow came in, hard-heeled, hungry-faced, one shoulder drooping. He looked bothered. "That guy is screwy. If you were the boss of Cape City, would you want to work as an apartment doorman?"

I shrugged. "If it was me, no. But the little guy had never known anything else. He made his first dough working in an apartment and saving enough to buy it. He'd always worked in apartments, according to what he said. Working in apartments was his job."

"But he owned that apartment; he had all the dough in the world. He was the big shot."

"Being a big shot was just a hobby."

"He's screwy."

"Maybe," I said. "But you read about guys like that all the time. Guys that die in a flophouse with a hundred grand in the bank. Old women that live in one filthy room and die leaving thousands in currency stuffed in a lousy mattress. Those people get a kick out of looking like paupers and knowing they could buy and sell twenty of the well-dressed folks that snoot them. This guy got a kick out of sitting back and looking like a worm and knowing all the time he was running the town. He's screwy but he has lots of company. Look, there's one thing I want to know. How did you happen to be waiting for me at the hotel last night?"

Mallow shook his head. "I was just checking the dumps and everybody that registered after the shooting. The folks at Mamie's lunch counter said the driver of the car had picked up a blackhaired guy when he left. You had red hair so I figured that let you out. Well, I guess that winds up everything. Macker's in the can for murder conspiracy. The racket boys have heard the word, and there was a very heavy passenger list on every plane and train this morning. The town's clean."

"Until the next bunch move in. What are you going to do about Sergeant Gennler of the vice squad?"

"What about him?"

"He was the other guy with Mickey Denver in that highway shooting. He's handcuffed to a tree out on Cape City Mesa."

Mallow chuckled. "By now he must have a sunburn. Well, I'll wander out there some time today and pick him off."

"He was the guy that sapped you."

Mallow swelled visibly. His dark face got darker. He bit out: "He's the guy that sapped me? I'll round up that guy fast!"

He was gone with a swirl of fawn-colored topcoat.

June Kobak said to me: "Did you mean it when you said this morning that you were a fathead about me?"

"Can't you tell just by looking at my Irish puss?"

"I'd have to look at it a lot more. Continuously. Practically day and night."

"That's what I mean, Hunky."

She grinned at me. "Me too, Irish."

OPERATION MURDER



Peggy drew back
in horror . . .

A killer roamed the chaste, white halls of the hospital—while in the operating room, a surgeon fought a desperate battle for his wife's life.

NOTHING I could do would shake the ominous feeling. I chatted with the nurses. I checked patients and kidded them along. Then Mrs. Smith caught me in the hall and gave me a check for the hospital in payment of her husband's appendectomy.

I strolled down to the office of the superintendent of nurses, which doubled for a cashier's cubicle. I was anchoring the check under the .38 revolver Greta Shaw kept in her desk against burglars—a good idea because some nights the hospital took in quite a lot of money—when Peggy came in.

"Hi, Darling," she whispered, her blue eyes as bright as if she hadn't seen me for a month. She turned up that lovely red mouth. "Gimme, quick. Nobody's looking."

Our lips were very pleasantly occupied when Greta Shaw appeared and caught us.

● ● ●
By KEN KESSLER

We both blushed. I don't know why because, after five years of marriage, it was certainly legitimate.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," Greta said.

"He forced me," Peggy teased. She'd never grow up, which was part of her charm. The rest was a slim, youthful figure, a keen nurse's mind, and a face that made up in personality what little it lacked in looks, which wasn't much. "On my way to surgery, Darling. See you when I get through." She hurried out.

I told Greta Shaw about the check so she could enter it on her ledger, and went back into the hall.

The heavy sensation I couldn't shake was present all evening. Just a feeling, nothing more. Nothing that I could diagnose. But every surgeon develops a strange, almost uncanny intuition. You'd know what I mean if you ever held a human heart in your palm and depended on some power outside of yourself to do the right thing. Dr. Stuart had this intuition to a remarkable degree. That was one reason he was such a fine surgeon and why working under him was a rare privilege.

So I thought about Peggy, the customary indicated antidote for anything that ails me. We had been married while I was interning in a hospital in Missouri. Five years. But that isn't long when you're married to the right woman. After my internship came a year of post grad, while I studied heart surgery, and then two years on our own. When the opening occurred here in Michael Meagher Memorial, with its opportunity of working with Dr. Stuart, we moved in.

I was deep in my thought when Vic Belden glided up. His face was wet with perspiration.

He said: "Wish me luck. Here I go." His big frame was shaking like a student nurse's gown during her first trick in surgery.

"To be or not to be," I grinned. Vic had his troubles. To begin with, Dr. Stuart was a rigid disciplinarian and Vic was a free soul. He drank quite a lot. He broke rules—if not intentionally at least regularly.

"It's hell," he said. "I finished my internship yesterday. Now all that remains is to get the old man to sign the certificate.

That's the rub. Will he?" He took a deep breath. "Well, the worst can happen is that I'll be here another year. And that's the *worst*."

I could sympathize with Vic. His heart was set on getting into general practice. He already had an office rented and some of his equipment moved in. I watched him stride off, his rubber gloves and stethoscope jiggling with his steps.

Dr. Stuart's office was at the end of the hall, next to the elevators to surgery. Vic hadn't been gone more than a minute when I heard a weird scream. It was Vic, his voice breaking.

"Alex! Dr. Regan!" He was beckoning to me crazily. "Hurry!" I wasn't half way to him when he yelled: "He's dead!"

I broke into a tip-toeing run. "Take it easy! You'll have everybody on this floor excited."

Vic's face was white. "Looks as if somebody struck him on the head with a bone mallet."

It sank in. "Murder?"

He nodded dumbly. Together we raced into the superintendent's office, heedless now of the noise.

Dr. Stuart lay on the floor behind his plain, scarred desk. His eyes were wide and glassy, staring unblinkingly into the bright ceiling bulb. I bent beside him, raising his head. Blood from a large gash over his temple wasn't coagulant yet, but it had stopped coursing. I cupped his head in my arm and touched my stethoscope to his chest.

"Dead?" Vic murmured.

I nodded. But that was defeat, a thing which Stuart himself had never admitted in forty years of surgery. "Maybe adrenalin!" I snapped. "Quick, Man—"

Vic spun into the hall. I placed the body flat until Vic returned with the hypodermic needle of adrenalin. I seized the long needle and plunged it between the ribs directly into the heart muscle. Try running a needle into a man's heart some time. It's an awesome experience.

Dr. Wally Crown, Dr. Stuart's son-in-law, appeared in the door. I yelled: "Oxygen!" He faded from the door. When he reappeared, he was accompanied by Greta Shaw, who helped with the equipment. I ordered artificial respiration, thirty to the minute.

BUT I had had the right answer the first time. There was no life left to be reclaimed. The eyes remained glassy, heart sounds negative without even a flicker. I allowed the shaggy head to recline gently.

Greta Shaw's face was expressionless. I said: "Call the police, Greta."

Wally Crown cleared his throat. "I must remind you that I'm in charge now."

I looked up at him. His dark, smooth face was calm, his return gaze almost stony. "So you are. Forget what I said, Greta."

"Carry out Dr. Regan's orders, Miss Shaw." When she'd gone he regarded me with those slow, cool eyes. "For two years you've been the fair-haired boy around here, Alex. I just want you to know that it's over. My wife inherits his interest in the hospital. Your resignation will be accepted whenever you tender it."

I stood up. "I knew you disliked me, Wally, but damned if I thought it was that much. Or that you'd spring anything at a time like this."

Blood off the surgeon's body was soaking through my white jacket. I stepped around Wally and examined the instruments on a small table near the desk.

From the door, Vic said: "He did a bone graft on the patient in B-11 earlier tonight. I assisted. He gave me hell for adjusting the fracture clamp the way I was taught in med school. He wanted it his way." He shrugged futilely. "I can't win. Anyway, they're his tools."

All bone instruments, there were a brace of wire twisters, a curette, cartilage knife—the usual set. The bone mallet, which weighed around six pounds, was on the out-pulled leaf of his desk. The sharp, striking edge was streaked with blood.

Tellegen arrived. He was homicide, a sergeant; hawkfaced, tough, smart. He frequently visited the hospital on criminal cases. Followed by photographers, fingerprint men and the medical examiner, he strode in. For five full minutes he just looked. Then, spotting the blood on my jacket, said: "How?"

I explained. He asked: "Who discovered the body?"

"Talk to Dr. Crown. He's in charge."

"I wasn't here and you know it," Wally snapped. "I was in the basement inventorying narcotics."

Vic stirred nervously. "I found it, Telle-

gan. I came into the office to see Dr. Stuart. I knocked first, but he didn't answer. The door was unlocked but I—I never got all the way in."

Word had spread through the building and an assemblage of nurses, staff doctors and orderlies crowded the room. Dr. Stuart was not a popular man. He was more respected than liked, which accounted for the blank, emotionless stares.

Tellegen wrapped a handkerchief around the mallet and weighed it in his palm. "Did anybody see anything strange going on? Like, say, some person in the hall that didn't belong?"

All eyes regarded Greta Shaw. "I didn't," she snapped. "I know I'm supposed to see everything that happens around here. But I happened to be in the office with Dr. Regan."

"How long ago was that?"

"I'd judge fifteen minutes," Greta shot back.

"Means nothing," Tellegen remarked heavily. "This man may have been dead a half hour. The blood's started coagulating."

The medical examiner, a broken-down M.D. who used barbiturates too freely, nodded his head as if that would get him a drag with the detective.

"It has started to coagulate now," I said, "but it hadn't when I first got here."

Tellegen's lips curled brutally. "Speaking of narcotics, I recall the barbiturate episode of several years ago. Dr. Stuart called off the police. Whatever happened?"

Greta Shaw turned fiery red. She had to wait before she could speak. "Damn you," she blurted huskily. "Won't people ever let me live that down? Why do you think I stayed here, except to defy the whispers and talk? Dr. Stuart was wrong. He admitted to me privately that he was, after it was over. And now you bring it up again!"

I doubted that Dr. Stuart had admitted his error, although I was sure he had made one. Barbiturates, sleeping capsules, are difficult to keep up with in a hospital. Stuart, in one of his temperamental bursts, had discovered a shortage in the inventory and accused Greta, who carried the narcotic locker keys at night, of filching capsules.

Tellegen said: "I'm not bringing up

anything except as it might bear on this murder."

Wally Crown smoothed his cheek with his finger. "Dr. Stuart assigned me to check inventory daily after it happened. I've never found any discrepancy. I'm not being disloyal when I say that my father-in-law was capable of—er—unfair prejudices."

Wally's statement seemed to gain the assent of everybody present, and they started breaking up. A fingerprint man who had been examining the bone mallet reported that the instrument carried no prints. "Wiped clean," he announced emphatically. Tellegen grumbled at this news.

After the others had gone, Tellegen touched my arm, detaining me. "You ought to know hospital politics. It shapes up that somebody got into the office from this door, since there's no other entrance. Then he slugged the superintendent and slipped out. Now, who might have had a motive besides, let's say, Shaw or Crown? Dr. Crown, of course, stands to inherit a fortune."

I raised my brows. "You mean his wife does. But don't ask me. I don't play that way. If I could help name the murderer, I would. But if I gave out a bum steer and got some innocent person embroiled, I'd never feel right again."

"I see," he said, and moved off down the hall. Abruptly he stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "You have the rep of being a great surgeon. Every day you fight against death. But you need assistance—nurses, medical equipment. I deal in death, too. Sometimes I need help. Get it? Think it over, Doc." Then he strode off.

MY JACKET was soaked with blood from holding the dead man, and I went to our quarters to change. Peggy and I were installed in a small suite in the interne's building, which was really a wing attached to the main building by a covered passageway.

I was thinking over what Tellegen had said and getting no place while I changed. What is motive for murder for one person may not be for another. Stuart was a fine surgeon, admittedly, but he had none of the tact of an executive. He'd been known to humiliate nurses, orderlies, even staff physicians, without a great deal of provoca-

tion. Tempers flare quickly. Under the right circumstances, it could have been any number of people.

I had finished dressing and was thinking of how shocked Peggy would be when she got out of surgery and heard the news, when somebody screamed. It was a piercing wail that died abruptly on a high note. I descended the stairs three at a time, burst into the corridor and saw the prone white figure of a nurse crumpled up on the floor.

"Peggy!" I cried, but I was talking against deaf ears. She had fallen on her side; I turned her slightly. She had been stabbed with a gouge, a sharp instrument about sixteen inches long. I didn't remove it.

Greta Shaw burst out of the main building. "I heard a scream—" She recognized Peggy and gasped, throwing her hand over her mouth. "Oh, Dr. Regan!"

I grasped Peggy's wrist. Her pulse was fast, weak. "Open doors ahead of me," I ordered. I got her into my arms. "I'll carry her to surgery. Call Dr. Fuller."

Max Fuller was the only other heart man of any repute in town. I wasn't a surgeon now. No doctor is when someone he loves is involved. My senses were too numb to speculate, but my intuition was at work again. From the angle the gouge had entered her abdominal wall, I was sure it had penetrated into the pericardium, the heart sac.

I carried Peggy up the four flights to surgery without using the elevators. I didn't want her out of my arms to put her on a stretcher. Several nurses were in the operating room ahead of me, waiting. I lay Peggy on the table, her small, relaxed face the color of the sterile white covering.

Detective Tellegen arrived before Greta Shaw had finished telephoning. "I was snooping around on the first floor. Heard about your wife. Any ideas?"

I shook my head. Sweat fell off my chin. "She had just left surgery. She must have just heard about Dr. Stuart."

His eyes brightened. "And she was trying to reach you, to tell you something. She had seen the murderer leaving Stuart's office but didn't think anything about it at the time." He snapped his fingers. "And she wanted to consult with you before mentioning it."

I suddenly couldn't take any more.

"Good Lord, man, lay off. My wife is halfway between life and death and you're prodding!"

Greta Shaw ran up, white faced. "Dr. Fuller is out of town. I talked to Mrs. Fuller. He can't be reached."

I gaped at her without speaking. I couldn't speak.

"You'll have to operate yourself, Doctor. There is nobody else who could handle an operation like that."

I stepped back into the operating room. The room began to spin. I braced myself against the wall. I looked at Peggy lying there, white and barely breathing. "I can't—" I began. But it wasn't a question of whether I could or not. It was Peggy's life. She wouldn't live long. I shook my head to clear it. To the anesthetist I murmured: "Put her under." To another nurse: "Ask Dr. Belden to assist."

But Vic was already there. I hadn't seen him. Wally Crown was in the doorway, too. Wally said: "An interne? On an operation like this?"

I knew Vic's temper, saw him glare at Wally. "In here, now, I'm in charge, Dr. Crown. I want somebody who's at least compatible." Vic was appeased and went out to scrub.

We were in the east operating room, the one with an amphitheater where students sometimes come to observe. The word had been passed about what was happening, and when I came in from scrubbing, the seats above were filling with tense, rapt faces. Vic joined me, his hands up, waiting for a nurse to put on the sterile gloves. He whispered: "Are you all right?"

I assured him that I was. The nurses moved noiselessly, readying the instruments, their eyes on me.

The anesthetist murmured: "Ready, Doctor."

I glanced at Vic. He nodded. "Ready."

Once it started, once I felt the incisive slice of the scalpel, I thought it would go better. But it didn't. I couldn't seem to dismiss from my mind the knowledge that in my hands—in my now shaking, sweating hands—lay the fate of my wife.

I pulled the gouge from her body. Then began the race against time, against the unleashed flow of blood. The small, still sounds of the operating room hardly broke

the silence. The only sounds were the crisp slip, clip of the hemostats and muted orders from my own throat that I hardly recognized.

I made a U-shaped incision over the heart area and removed portions of two ribs. Vic's hands trembled violently while he was sponging. The fascia retracted, blood vessels ligated, I walled off the pericardium with gauze packs and then, longitudinally, opened the heart sac itself. Vic drew back his hands. There, before our eyes, was revealed the convulsing heart muscle. Carefully I withdrew it by slipping two fingers and my thumb into the opening. It was a strange and terrifying experience, holding Peggy's beating heart in my hand.

THE wound was not large, thank God. The tip of the gouge had penetrated the heart muscle about a quarter of an inch. Rapidly I stitched the wound. My hands were steadier now, steadier than Vic's. Frequently he looked up for a quick glance at my face. I replaced the heart, put the rib sections back, and stitched the outer flesh. A donor was at hand, thanks to the efficiency of Greta Shaw, and I ordered an immediate transfusion.

"Pulse, one thirty-two, Doctor," said a nurse.

"Respiration?"

"Sixteen."

"Will she—?" It was Greta Shaw.

I shook my head. I hadn't thought of it that way. "I don't know. I just—don't know."

Peggy was wheeled out, her nostrils still dilating as she gasped for air. "First floor with her," Greta said. "I have a room vacant opposite the isolation ward."

Several of the staff doctors who had observed the operation flocked around, their faces flushed. Dr. Corniss, a surgeon himself, burst out: "Masterful, Regan! I've never seen anything like it."

I couldn't feel exalted. Later, when I went back to change out of the sterile suit, Vic was dressing.

"Thanks for letting me help," he said. "I know now how far I've still got to go." He stuffed a billfold and thermometer case in his pocket.

I nodded, changed and stumbled downstairs. I made the first flight fine. Then

the emotional shock set in. I knew I was fainting. My last thought was; "Regan, this is ridiculous." And then I blacked out. When I came to, I was perched against the radiator on the landing, my clothing sopped with sweat. Grasping at the radiator to push myself up, my hand touched a rubber glove, wedged in under the radiator frame. I held the glove up to the light on the floor above. There was a hole torn in one finger.

I started to put the glove in my pocket, decided against it, and dropped it back where it had been. Then I hurried on down to Peggy's room.

"Pulse?" I asked the nurse.

"Down a little. One-twenty."

I sat down beside her bed. Outside the door I saw Tellegen and Wally Crown conferring. In the other direction was a window, raised now, that overlooked a part of the lawn. Beyond it was the isolation ward.

Peggy was quieting some, which in itself can be dangerous. Sometimes it means respiratory failure. I sat there praying. It's a helpless feeling when a patient begins to sink, any patient. It's doubly, triply so, when it is somebody dear to you. Because then it ceases to be technique and knowledge and becomes a tangle of love and heartbreak.

"You must get out of here," Greta Shaw urged. "I'll have coffee sent to you. Go to the doctor's lounge."

I glanced again at the open window and a bell rang somewhere in my frenzied mind. "Thanks, Greta, I'll take you up. But make it in your office."

On the way out, Tellegen blurted; "Doc, do you remember if one of those gouge gadgets was in the collection in Stuart's office while we were there?"

I said: "No," and shoved past him. Wally Crown was not present then, nor was Vic Belden. I went into the office and directly to the desk where Greta kept the .38 revolver.

The gun was gone!

Closing the desk, I waited in the door for the girl to arrive with coffee. Tellegen, the relentless, strolled over. "Doc, I hate to keep prodding, but this is serious. Whoever tried to kill your wife did it to close her mouth."

"I know."

He squinted. "If she recovers enough to talk the person is right back where he, or she, started from. Get it?"

It was on my tongue to tell him about the disappearance of the gun, when Greta appeared with a tray. "I made it myself," she announced. Her usually harsh voice was tremulous. "For you, Doctor."

Tellegen drifted away then, and Greta stayed to see that I finished the coffee. Later, when I asked about the detective, Vic Belden said Tellegen had taken the gouge to headquarters. He wanted the lab to check it thoroughly for any segment of fingerprints left after my handling the instrument, which I had done withdrawing it from Peggy's flesh. Vic was wearing a white belted coat. He looked natty.

WHEN the coast was clear, I eased down to Stuart's office. The body had been removed but everything else seemed intact. I ran through the desk, examining the contents of all the drawers. Vic's interne certificate was there with his name typed in but, of course, unsigned. There were other papers, memos, correspondence, the usual medley of things.

My shoulders slumping, I walked back to Peggy's room. It was a crawly feeling, knowing that somebody was loose with a gun. But I reasoned that it would not be used unless, or until Peggy made a turn for the better. That was the pattern, as nearly as I could figure it. Disclosing to Tellegen now that the gun was gone would only drive the killer to disposing of the weapon. A sneak search wouldn't work, either—not in the hospital, where word traveled so fast.

I was suddenly grateful I had said nothing.

A guard assigned by Tellegen, a big gorilla with a holster pouching his coat, sat in a corner of Peggy's room. I studied the chart and consulted the nurse, a tense, wistful blond.

I stared at the chart. "It can't be," I protested desperately. "Temperature and pulse unchanged! Respiration slow, labored!" I drew my hand across my face. "It's hopeless. She hasn't a chance."

The nurse regarded me sympathetically. Outside, the clan waited for news. Wally and Vic and several others. They looked at me anxiously when I came out. I shook my

head. "No miracle will save her," I said tonelessly. "One of you call Tellegen. You can say he's got *two* murders to solve."

My face in my hands, I stumbled down the hall. This had to be good, and it was. I could feel them watching me. When I was out of sight, I turned off the hall and broke into a tip-toeing run. I used the east corridor and doubled back, easing myself into office again. The light was off, which was fine. Doubling up, I wedged myself between the desk and the wall.

There I waited. It could be a long wait, or a short one. Knowing that Tellegen would be coming back and that I would not say my wife was dying if she weren't, the killer would try to get rid of the gun as fast as he could. I intended to be there when he did.

It was a short wait.

I quit breathing as the door opened and a form stepped inside, closing the door after it. Soft footfalls crossed to the desk. I calculated the time it would take, intending to wait until he dropped the gun in the drawer and closed it. Then I got over-anxious—and leaped too soon.

The gun went off as I spun across the desk. It was a bad moment. The slug missed the first time, but my fingers, clutching in the dark, slipped off his clothing. That left me wide open. The second one got me in the shoulder and I went down. My good arm, the right, was near his legs. I grabbed an ankle and twisted.

But he didn't drop the gun. He wriggled free and leaped up. Then he drew a slow aim right in my face.

The door opened quickly. Tellegen rasped: "Drop it!"

It seemed a lifetime while the gun, un-wavering, remained on my face. Then, slowly, it descended. The light snapped on. Vic Belden murmured: "I see it now. She wasn't dying. It was a trick."

I stood up. The detective surveyed my left arm. "Solid nick." He took the gun from Vic. "How'd you get onto this?" he asked me.

I told him about finding the gun missing from the desk. "The guard you put in Peggy's room meant one thing to the killer. If she started coming around, he would have to shoot from outside. The isolation ward windows furnished a direct view

across her bed. Therefore it required a gun, and every employee knew where this one was kept."

"I see. Good thinking, Doc. Go on."

"Peggy saw him leaving Stuart's office as she went to surgery. He knew then that he had to kill her before she put two and two together. He doubled around the hall and gave me the spiel that he was just then going to see Dr. Stuart about his intern's papers, when in reality he had already been there. Stuart had refused him. Vic lost his temper—went crazy mad, seized the mallet and struck him.

"I judged he picked up the gouge and put it under his clothes while we were all in Stuart's office. He got a break when Peggy, leaving surgery, started over to tell me before anybody else."

Vic glared at me. His hands balled into fists.

"It added up," I went on. "He was entirely too nervous during the operation. Another thing, he always carried rubber gloves, yet when he left the scrub room he put only his billfold and thermometer in his pocket. He ditched the gloves behind the radiator on his way up. He'd torn one of them when he attacked Peggy.

"He felt safe as long as Peggy couldn't talk. After all, Wally and Greta were the two with motive, Wally out of greed, and Greta out of hatred over the narcotic incident. To play safe, though, he took the gun while he could get to it. Then, when I said Peggy couldn't live, he—"

Vic couldn't hold it. His face was purple. He swung at Tellegen, hit him glancingly, and made it to the window before the detective got back his balance. A shot through the glass stopped him. He looked around, glassy-eyed, and Tellegen put the bracelets on him.

"I'm not a killer," he swore. "I only wanted what was mine. The old devil—"

"Sing it, Son," Tellegen said.

I rushed back to Peggy. Greta Shaw was beside the bed. "She's coming out from under it," Greta beamed. Then she reproached me. "You lied about her chart, Dr. Regan. She's reacting splendidly."

"Just a white lie, the usual surgical variety," I said, and kissed Peggy the first time her eyes fluttered open. Then, to ease Greta's mind, I let them bandage my arm.

VIOLENCE FOR VICKI



"Sure, laugh. Make it a good one, a loud one"

By
**SEYMOUR IRVING
RICHIN**

Waiting for Vicki in a cheap rented room, Fred Jason planned to stir up the embers of a dying love — or drench them with hot blood.

FRED JASON had never thought of murder until now. Not in his lifetime, not once. But *now* was different. He would kill her now. He had to.

Alone in the dim quiet of a boarding-house room, he waited for her. All along, he'd sensed it must come to this. He'd sensed it must come to this. He'd tried to be the patient husband. He'd sought to have her understand him. But it was no use.

"Vicky," Fred Jason thought. "Why did you do it, Vicki? It was supposed to be me and you all the way. Worldbeaters, that was us! You said you loved me. You said you'd help me—even in my painting. And

then, Gilbert. Did you think you could do that and live?"

Jason was a thin man, thin in face and thin in body. The boxed shoulders and measured drape of a coffee-brown jacket didn't hide it. He sat, bony knees crossed, in an overstuffed chair in one corner of the room. He was tired. Fatigue was in the pallor of his face, in the dispirited sag of shoulders, in his loosely hanging hands.

A cane lay slanted against a fat chair arm. It was a tuxedo cane, long and tapering, and it had a hard gold bulb for a head. Jason didn't look at the cane. It seemed he kept his eyes deliberately away from it, but he knew it was there. Under a hard-muscled arm, that gold bulb could crush in the back of a head. Jason knew that.

But his glance was on the door. It was closed but unlocked. Soon the knob would roll and she would walk in—Vicki. She'd enter, head high and smiling, never dreaming that soon she was to die.

Jason looked around the room, face twisting. It was old and forlorn. The gaudy wall paper was faded and torn. A pink light in an inverted ceiling bowl cast wan illumination upon the scene. Under it, the shabby room was less ill at ease, like a woman with age to hide.

"A rotten place to die," Jason muttered.

There was the usual mahogany four-poster with a sway-backed mattress. It looked slept in and walked on. The linen was weeks old and no one worried about it. There was a much-scarred dresser with the usual fat faced mirror.

On one end of the dresser, a copper tray held a huddle of crushed cigarettes. There was a green fedora sitting on its crown, a hairbrush, a twisted tube of toothpaste, a dumping of cheap, soiled ties, and a black dime store comb, missing three teeth.

For a time Jason kept hard, dark eyes on the door. Then he remembered something suddenly, and he moved both face and eyes to see it. It was only a painting, a water color, which lay slanted against the wall. His dark eyes softened.

Jason stared at the painting—an expanse of heaving ocean trapped in a thick, gilt frame. There was fury in the waves and sky; a storm was loose, but it couldn't stop the ship. An old sailing vessel, puffing white chests in the wind, crashed proudly through and won. He'd felt a similar vic-

tory when he'd completed it, and he'd rushed to Vicki and—

Fool! He writhed under the memory. Why, she must have been laughing at him all the time. She'd hated his painting really. And he had honestly tried to make her a part of his work. *Her!* She'd nodded and she'd smiled. She'd said she'd loved him dearly—while behind his back, she'd been meeting other men. And then, when the break came, she'd hurt him the way she could hurt most. Savagely, she'd taken a knife to his pictures. This watercolor had been the only one he could save.

Jason sighed deeply. He removed a Sherlock pipe from a patch tweed pocket and tapped it against his teeth. He looked toward the door knob and then at the gleaming golden cane head, and back to the door again. After the murder, he could get out of here unseen. Of course, there would be the inevitable questions. Like:

"You loved your wife, Mr. Jason?"

"Yes." He'd say it quietly with an undertone of grief.

"That doesn't mean you were jealous of her?"

"It means only that I loved her."

"Yes? What would you do, Jason, if—"

"If what?"

"I'll put it this way. I'm married, too. But if my wife played Juliet to any Romeo, you know what I'd do? I'd kill her, Jason. Not him, you understand. But I'd kill her. . . ." A pause. "Would I be doing right, Jason?"

"A—a man shouldn't kill."

"A woman shouldn't play around. Should she, Jason?"

THE pipe stem clicked on Jason's teeth. They'd suspect him, all right. It was only to be expected. He was ten years older than she, with more gray than black in his hair, and she was young. They'd say she liked night clubs and a fast wild time, and they'd be right. They'd be right.

Especially, he feared Hughes.

Strange, that. Strange that he should fear his best friend. Good old Hughes. He'd be sick in his heart if he were forced into the case. He'd remember the times they'd sat talking painting by the hour, just the two of them. No one was more enthusiastic about painting than Hughes, although he painted little, if at all.

Hughes' questions would be different. He was a clever man, there was no doubt about that. His build was balloon-like, his midsection gross and his face a moon circle, and he looked more a barkeep than a detective. But he was one of the shrewdest men on the force.

"Sorry, old man," would be the first thing he would say. Then he'd pull up a chair, sit on it backwards and sink his chin into the fat sandwich of his hands.

Then: "I hate doing this, Fred."

"I know."

He'd pause a little, nibbling at a lip. "You didn't kill her, did you, Fred?"

"I didn't kill her." Perhaps he'd smile a little, bitterly. "You, too, Hughes?"

"She wasn't much good, was she, Fred?" Hughes had seen the Vicki beneath the paint and powder, the cheap and spiteful Vicki.

"She didn't have much faith in me, if that's what you mean."

"Yeah," Hughes would agree. "You know, Fred, I never used to say it but—"

"But what?"

"I used to pity you, Fred. Know what I mean? She just wasn't your kind of girl. She didn't deserve you, Fred."

"Sometimes she was tired," he'd apologize.

"She was tired. How about you? You had no cinch at your job downtown. Don't I know? You'd come home dog-tired, and only wanting to paint a little, and she'd tear at you like a jungle cat. Don't make me laugh, Fred. She was tired!"

"All right, all right. . . ."

"You weren't smart. She walked all over you, Fred. Like that dough you had saved. How many years did it take to scrape up one thousand bucks? Four, five? It was supposed to mean a year off in a fishing village and a chance to paint. That was the dream, wasn't it, Fred? But a fur coat was more important. And the thousand bucks went like a handful of pennies. Did she ask if she could spend it, Fred?"

"I—you—" he'd stammer.

"Hell, she never cared any about you. You were just someone to kick around. Why—" he'd pause here, and the beginnings of a laugh would wreath his face. "Why, if I didn't know you so well—"

"Yes?"

The laugh would rumble through Hughes

and the soft face would dip back, jowls shaking. "It's so funny, Fred. Hell, you wouldn't hurt a fly. But you've got to admit—" Again there would be a heaving spasm of laughter.

"Admit, Hughes?" softly, lightly.

"That you'd be better off without her. Alone, you could save up that thousand bucks so easy—"

"That's not funny, Hughes!"

"Easy, Fred. It's my job, you know—"

"It's your job to find the murderer!" he'd flare at him. "Sure, Vicki wasn't much. But she was my wife, and now she's dead. Someone's got to die for that, Hughes."

The thick hand would join his in a pledging handshake. "I'll find the killer, Fred."

JASON twisted in the overstuffed chair. He reached for a pouch of tobacco. A smoke would do him good now. A glance at his watch told him he hadn't much time. Five minutes more. Probably she was on the street three stories below, scanning the buildings, and checking with the address he'd written on the note. She would be puzzled, of course; the neighborhood would revolt her, and she would wonder who this Conway was.

Conway.

A smile moved on Jason's face. It had been a clever idea, signing that note Conway. He'd known what would lure Vicki here. A shady reference to her husband—a promise of information to be discussed at an appointed hour and place—and the unknown signature of one Conway would be irresistible to her. Clever, it had been clever.

At that, his whole plan was clever. Like the soft green fedora sitting on the table there. It wasn't his. It was not his size and the initials were E. C. instead of F. J. The police, when they came, would be confused by a maze of tangled clues. They'd find a hat the murderer never wore.

And the cigarettes. What would the police think of them? Fred Jason didn't smoke cigarettes. Even Hughes would attest to that. Their quarry would be a cigarette smoker who wore the cheapest kind of hat. . . .

The ties, too, had been a clever touch. He never wore such ties. They were

gaudily colored, and of the cheapest quality—a harsh contrast to his soft, conservative dress. *Hughes would say that, too.* Yes, it was a clever plan, all right. He was planting clues to lead to another man—a man who didn't exist.

"*Hughes,*" Jason thought. "*You'll actually be of help to me.*"

Jason looked toward the gleaming bulb of the cane. His face went tight. He felt a needling sweat; his collar was too tight, and he dragged at it with two fingers.

He rose and moved toward it, slowly. This would kill her. This hard, yellow thing. His hand would grip it a foot or two below and he would bring it smashing against her head. And it would be over.

The sweat dripped and he dried at it. What was the matter with him, anyway? It wouldn't be hard. She wouldn't suspect a thing. All he had to do was move quietly behind her. He would be able to manage that. And then one wild, bursting moment of fury and. . . .

Damn, there was so much sweat. Mopping at it didn't do much good. Would she never come? He laughed a little, and in that laugh, was a crazy, climbing note of fear. . . .

He realized suddenly that he hadn't moved at all. He wanted to; he had risen for that purpose but his feet clung to the floor. There was no will in them. He loosened his tie and opened his collar. He wormed the tie down a few inches.

Move, he told himself. Seize that cane. Do it, you fool! You must! She'll be here soon; there isn't much time. Do you want to fail? Think of what she's done to you, her viciousness, her spite. Do you want her to laugh at you forever?

He moved. Slowly at first, but then in a rush of steps that brought one hand tremblingly above the yellow head. It was cold beneath his touch.

He forced himself to do it. His hand slipped down the glossy length of the cane and caught in a white grip. The knuckles bulged. He couldn't drag his eyes from the cane head. So cold, he thought, so hard. He hefted the cane, testing its weight. He brought the yellow bulb in a wide arc heavily against his hand. He felt its impact all the way to the shoulder. She wouldn't know what hit—

A sound snapped off his thinking. It

was behind him, in the hall outside. He spun, one hand frozen to the cane. That was a footfall, he'd heard. Vicki?

The step sounded again, heavily. The tenseness drained like water from Fred Jason's limbs. Not Vicki. That footfall was too heavy for her. She'd come on light, clicking heels. This was some tenant or the landlady making a routine call.

Jason sighed, wishing for a drink. He put the cane away, glad to get his fingers off it. He was halfway to the door when the knock sounded.

"Who is it?"

"Landlady. Open up." The woman's voice was one that wanted no back talk.

He opened the door swiftly. He ought to be able to handle her easily enough.

"Wuz ya gonna keep me waitin' all day?"

She moved into the room on dirty, slippered feet. A dirty apron was tied around a dirtier dress, which hung untidily above her bare ankles. Her face was as round as a dish and sagging with flesh. She peered at Jason uncertainly through thick glasses and pushed half heartedly at limp curls that were as attractive as mop ends.

"Want these, Mister?"

She meant the leaden gray linen which she held in one fat hand.

"No," Jason said gently.

"Sure?"

He tried to coax her out the doorway. "It's all right, perfectly all right—"

He kept apologizing as he got the door shut, inches at a time. Gratefully, he heard her heavy tread recede and die on the stairs. And, as he relaxed in the overstuffed chair, he remembered the woman's thick glasses. She'd never be able to give a description of him. She'd only be able to tell the police a name. Jason smiled. A name that belonged to no one.

VICKI arrived fifteen minutes late. He was strangely calm when her heels sounded on the rugless hallway. The cane lay stiffly against the far wall as she walked into the room.

"Conway?"

She saw him, recognized him, and her mouth fell open. Then composure came to her and her mouth tightened. Hard. She walked toward him on pink suede shoes.

"What does this mean?"

"Nothing."

"Talk. I want to know."

"Nothing, Vicki." His glance slipped past her to the hard yellow bulb. "Sit down, won't you?"

"What is this Conway thing?"

"I wanted to get you here. I wanted to talk to you—alone." He said it timidly.

She relaxed a little. He was a man and she had hurt him, and still he wanted her. This was something she could enjoy.

She sat on the chair edge, crossing trim ankles carefully. There was a glittering jewel on her left hand. It had come from another man—Gilbert, this time—but she made no attempt to hide it. His eyes, moving toward her, met an insolent stare.

Oddly, it no longer mattered. His eyes were on her, but he wasn't seeing her, really. He was seeing the yellow head of a cane. It leaped in his mind, and smashed down, beating her, beating her, until she was dead.

"Vicki," he said softly.

"There's no use, Fred."

Her pointblank statement stunned him. She actually thought he wanted her. The stupidity and galling vanity of her! She thought she was a prize. Her legs were slim and shapely; she could smile prettily—the Queen could do no wrong.

"Where are you going, Fred?"

"To the window. Kind of stuffy in here."

He got past her easily enough. He moved to the window and hauled it open. A breeze cooled his face and rustled his tie. It was incredible that she suspected nothing. The yellow bulb was one, two, at the most three paces away now. He had to proceed cautiously. He had to get his body between her and the cane. . . .

"Oh, this old thing," Vicki said.

She'd seen the painting. She sent a cool, brazen stare toward him. "So here's where it is." A little laugh escaped her. "You were afraid of me, weren't you, Fred? You thought I'd find it and ruin it."

He didn't answer.

"Poor, poor Fred."

He moved forward silently.

"Just a ship," she was saying. "Always painting ships. You'd think you knew something about them." Again her laugh mocked him. "Poor Fred."

Her laugh incensed him. *Poor Fred, eh?* he thought. *You think so much of yourself, don't you Vicki? You're so wonderful, so*

beautiful, so lovely—nothing like you ever lived! Well, it won't be long now. Sure, laugh. Make it a good one, a loud one. It's the last laugh for you. . . .

He was staring at the back of her head. The ring of flowers caught a dark disc of hair like the core of a target. He couldn't take his eyes off it. He lifted the cane; the yellow bulb went overhead and his hand was an aching grip above him.

Unexpectedly, she turned.

"Gilbert wants to marry—"

The beauty vanished from her face. Her eyes were sick with fear, the lips loose and trembling. She saw the murder in him and rose. Her lips moved but no word sounded. Jason rushed between her and the door as she backed away from him. It didn't matter that she knew. It would just take a little more time.

The pink suede shoes faltered. They stepped back. They backed up until there was no more floor behind her. Panicky, her eyes moved up toward the hard yellow bulb.

Sound burst from her. It was only a feeble whisper. She flung herself at him, kicking, butting, tearing at his arm. She wasn't human now; she was just an animal, trying to live.

Jason flung her against a wall. She hit it, one knuckled hand sinking against her teeth.

Then the cane crashed down, breaking through her upsweep, the flowers. She staggered. And then she fell in a loose heap on the floor, like a marionette with the strings cut. He saw there was blood, lots of it.

He was backing away. The sweat poured from him and he dried at it with his sleeve. His jaw was limp as he stared at the cane, at his hand tightly on it. He moved back; was that his hand? Had he done this?

And then cold control came to Jason. It was done with; nothing could change it now. She was dead.

He moved swiftly. He ripped a sheet from the bed and dropped it over her, blotting her out. He took a handkerchief and wiped every object in the room. There'd be no prints to check with this murder. And then he went for the painting.

He saw the blood at once. There was a crimson stain on the painting, on the waves. He stared at it, face stiff. He knew sick-

eningly that he couldn't clean it off. Watercolor paper was too thin for that; it would bruise or tear. Burn it? But how could he burn this last, best loved painting? He couldn't! And besides, Hughes knew of the painting. He would be suspicious if it suddenly disappeared.

But he could fix it. He could paint over the bloodstain—a sailboat or a skiff or a sloop, with a red hull. No one would look beneath the paint. . . .

Jason moved out of the room, softly closing the door behind him. The watercolor was in one hand, and the black cane was in the other. No one saw him leave.

THE CRIME was a week old now. The murderer of Mrs. Vicki Jason, aged 26, had not been found. Her husband had been questioned but could throw little light upon the matter. He was a timid, inoffensive sort. He knew of no person named Conway.

On the tenth day, interest in the killing subsided somewhat. The sob sisters had shed their tears, there were the usual jibes at the police, and the crime was now relegated to the inside pages of the tabloids.

Somewhere in the city was a killer who smoked Old Favorite cigarettes. He wore a size seven hat and liked flashy neckwear. He probably didn't have a lot of money. The police promised to find him.

"Hello, Fred."

Hughes was waiting for him in his hotel room when Jason returned from the store. He was standing at a French window looking down on the black city far below.

Jason closed the door with the back of one shoulder. "Hello, Hughes." He tried to appear unworried. "Thought I'd drop down for some beer. You're just in time."

Hughes didn't move from the window. He bit a lower lip, stared vacantly at the deep blackness outside.

"No, Fred, I don't feel like any beer."

He watched Jason lift three damp bottles out of a manilla bag, and place them on the table. There was a scattering of other things there. A tin full of squares of paint. Some newspapers were spread on the floor beneath. There were a few wet brushes, and an easel supported a new seascape.

The old sailing vessel was proudly framed in the middle of a gray tinted wall.

Beside it, a rust-colored sloop keeled on the waves.

"I've been here an hour, Fred. The superintendent let me in." A pause. "I came about—Vicki."

Jason almost toppled a beer bottle. "Vicki." He brought himself to steadily face his friend. "What—?"

Hughes sighed. "The boys, you know, are looking for a man named Conway."

"I know."

"That's a mistake, Fred."

"A mistake?" Hughes wasn't facing Fred Jason now. Instead, he moved for the framed seascape.

Hughes said slowly: "Sure, a mistake. It's not so hard to figure; not if you know Vicki. I told them, but they said I was crazy. Know something? I'm surprised you didn't figure it yourself, Fred."

That sweat was beginning again, that damned sweat. "Figure what?"

"The Conway thing." For awhile Hughes was silent. The seascape absorbed his attention. He found two inches of a cigar in his pocket and stuck it in his teeth. "Fred, there wasn't any Conway."

Jason stared.

"Think it over, Fred. There's a man living in a third-rate flop house. He's so low on the ladder, he's practically in the mud. He smokes cigarettes that are as cheap as his ties. Now—would Vicki go with a man like that?" He shook his head slowly, sadly. "She thought she was a jewel. There has to be a special setting for a jewel, Fred."

Fear took its grip in Jason's middle, a big, clenching fist of fear. "Go on."

"Then, there were the hat and ties. No fingerprints at all, but he left the hat and the ties. Nice of him." The cigar twisted in Hughes' face. "I told them down at Headquarters, but they said I needed more proof." He looked intently at his friend. "So I began to look around. I came here and I saw this painting."

"But—"

"You see, this murder was planned, Fred. Like this picture, this seascape here. You *planned* this seascape. You knew exactly what you were doing. And now what's happened? This!" He pointed at the red-hulled sloop.

Jason couldn't answer. He stared at
(Please continue on page 96)



By
PETER PAIGE

CHAPTER ONE

Wrong Town

HIS fingers still gripped the highball glass, although the glass was empty now. His right arm was folded on the redwood bar and his head lay on his arm. I looked up from his face—soft and gentle like a sleeping baby's face now—and I saw Bud Willson's face, full of worry and questions.

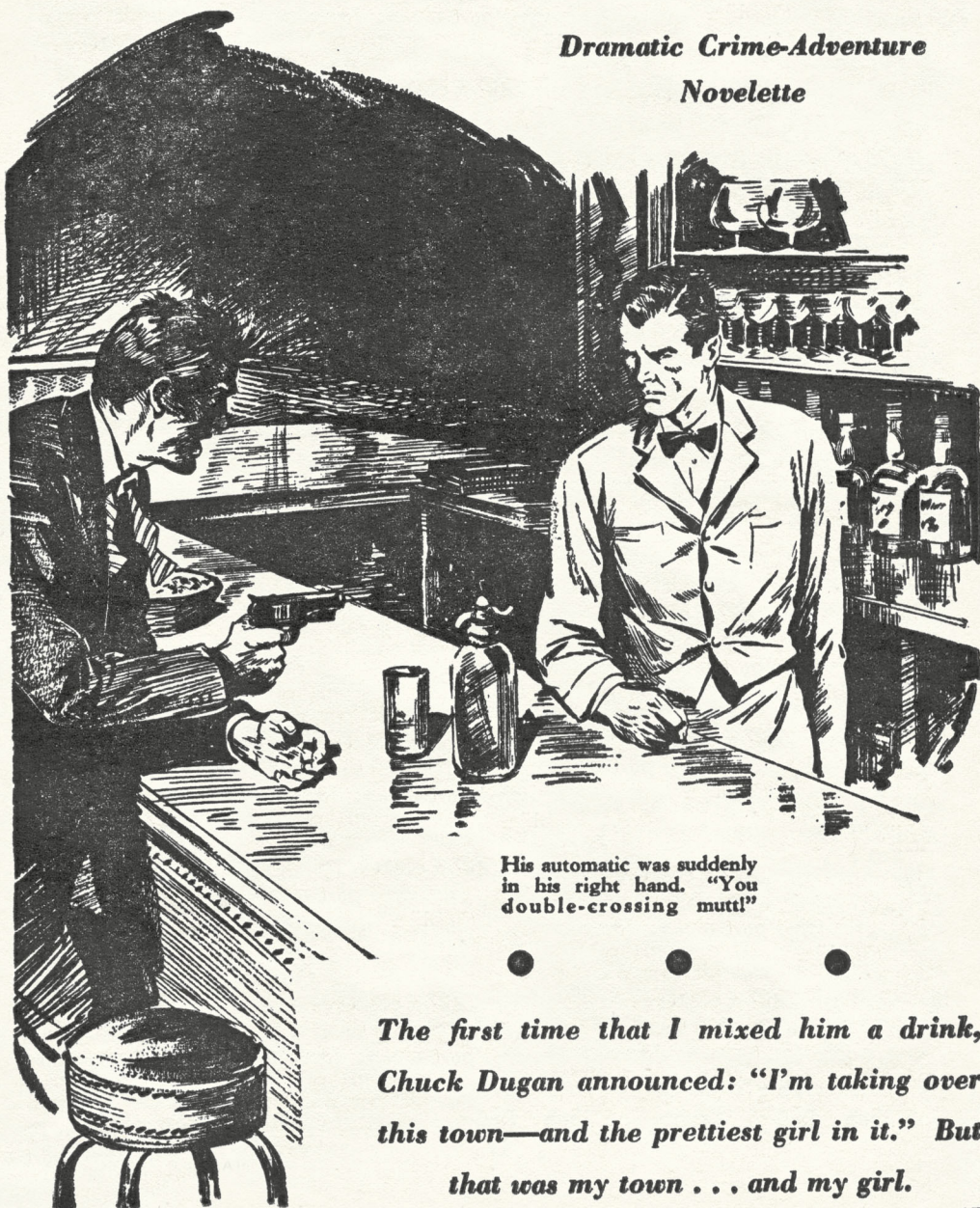
"He this way long, Al?"

"Half an hour, Mr. Willson."

He shook the sleeping man's shoulder

DEATH— ON THE HOUSE

*Dramatic Crime-Adventure
Novelette*



His automatic was suddenly
in his right hand. "You
double-crossing mutt!"

*The first time that I mixed him a drink,
Chuck Dugan announced: "I'm taking over
this town—and the prettiest girl in it." But
that was my town . . . and my girl.*

hard, but the man went on sleeping. Bud Willson looked real troubled then.

"Al, how much longer do you think—?"

"Two hours, maybe longer."

"That's too long!"

I just looked at Bud Willson. His eyes grew enormous and I could see the wet appear on his pale skin.

"Al, you didn't—!"

I nodded.

"Get out of here, Al!" he whispered hoarsely. "Go a thousand miles and don't ever come back! Grow a mustache and dye your hair and call yourself Zilch!"

I asked: "What'll you have, Mr. Willson?"

"I told you once to always count ten. You should have remembered that!"

"What'll it be, Mr. Willson?"

"Coke highball—and heaven help you, Al!"

I poured him a coke high. . . .

* * *

Everybody talks to bartenders. It started somewhere in the talk that came across my bar. It's hard to say exactly where because bartenders only hear what has already happened or what is being planned to happen—sort of like hearing the middles of a lot of stories that overlap.

Maybe it was the time Chuck Dugan first walked in. He came down to the end of the bar where I was cutting limes and said: "Scotch high with soda. I mean pinch bottle."

I looked at him.

He grinned and said: "All right. Don't hit me. I can dream, can't I? What Eastern beers you got?"

I shook my head.

He said: "Listen, if I asked you real nice, could you find me a bottle of California beer?"

I set up a bottle and a glass and laid change from his dollar bill on the bar and stood there polishing glasses. It was a slow Thursday afternoon. Nobody else was at the bar. I kept myself busy and he sipped his brew. After a while he ordered more of the same and said: "Nice town."

I nodded.

He said: "A man could operate in this kind of town. There's enough dough floating around summers, how I hear it, to make it worth a man's while. I mean a smart man. I'm a smart man. Listen, Sonny,

you listen when I'm talking to you! Get it?"

I looked at him.

Chuck Dugan wasn't grinning now. He was in dead earnest.

"Who takes the big cut around here, Sonny?"

I looked at him.

He rubbed his thumb against his finger and winked at me.

"The cut. The take. The percentage. I mean who's on top of the hill—the guy who tells the mayor when to shave?"

I said: "Wrong town."

He made his eyes big. They were brown and matched his hair and his tan. His teeth were like milk. He wore tan clothes and he wore them easy.

"No! Don't tell me! A mayor that works for the *peepul*, cops who don't hold itchy palms out, no percentage boys—this close to Frisco!"

I nodded.

He laughed. "They don't call you Gabby, do they, Sonny?"

"Al," I said.

"The one syllable kid himself. Well, Gabby, take a good look at me! Before I'm through your town is going to be under there." He showed me his thumb. "What's the biggest bank in town?"

I told him.

"Okay. I'm going to have the biggest account in that bank. Who's the prettiest girl in town?"

I looked at him. I was thinking he must be awfully lonely to open up that wide to a strange barkeep; that's who crack widest, the loneliest. Some of the loneliest are married—but that's something else again.

Now he laughed. "Your girl, of course! To each his own. Well, I'll find mine and then she'll decorate the arm of Mr. Chuck Dugan. Remember that name, Gabby. Chuck Dugan!"

He slid off the stool, smoothed his tan jacket, tilted his tan fedora at a cocky angle and walked out smartly, leaving a four bit tip on the redwood bar.

He was wrong. I had no girl.

But he was right. He was a smart man. I learned that the following Tuesday afternoon, the next time Chuck Dugan walked in. He walked in cocky, sat on the same stool, flashed that wide grin and asked: "Remember me?"

I nodded.

"The same old Gabby!" he grinned. "Remember what I told you?"

I nodded again.

He winked and made a circle with his thumb and forefinger and said: "I'll have Scotch highballs out of that fifth I see at the end of the second shelf. Five of 'em. Just set 'em in front of me, Gabby." He took out a billfold so fat with paper money it sprang open when it got out of his pocket. He peeled out a hundred and I saw a lot of other hundreds behind it.

The only other customer then was Bud Willson, who always drops in around four thirty—"To get the taste of justice out of my mouth," he says. Bud Willson was the kind of lawyer people said would end up in jail or in Congress.

He was the kind of guy who could wear stiff collars and a black homburg and carry a skinny cane and get away with it—which is a good trick in our easy dressing town.

Another thing about him, he's a great kidder. He liked to drop sneeze powder on the back of someone's hand, or send a toy mouse scooting along the bar—stuff like that. Sometimes he had me laughing so hard I could hardly tend bar.

Now he looked over where I set the five highballs in front of Chuck Dugan and he told Dugan: "You were arrested Saturday, arraigned yesterday and freed this morning. If I read your expression correctly, you settled out of court. Am I right?"

FOR a second I didn't know what to expect. Dugan's tan lips wiped out his grin, and his eyes changed from brown to black. He held it like that while Bud Willson looked back at him with brows raised like two question marks; then the milky grin crept back into Dugan's mouth and his eyes softened a little.

"Yeah. That's right. I settled out of court."

Bud Willson nodded and sipped his coke high. That's what he drinks; a coke high with bar whiskey. He says it's a pity to waste good whiskey on him since he can't tell the difference.

He said: "Let me reconstruct the picture, my friend—"

"Dugan," Dugan smiled. "Chuck Dugan."

"Chuck, then. On Saturday you entered Nickel's new store, the chain's hundred-

thousand-dollar venture in our town, and you asked to see some cigarette lighters. You examined several of them near a window at some distance from the counter. You acted suspiciously; furtive glances over your shoulder, a wary eye on the salesgirl. When nobody seemed to be watching, you slipped a lighter into your pocket.

"You dropped the remaining lighters on the counter and took a long time reaching the street. The moment you hit the sidewalk, Riley, the store detective, nabbed you. A prowl car had been summoned. Riley and two patrolmen escorted you back into the store where you were searched. A ten dollar lighter was found in your inside jacket pocket. Am I correct up to there?"

"Right as rain, Mister—"

"Willson—with two 'L's. My friends call me Bud."

"That's how it went, Bud."

"Well, Chuck, you claimed to have purchased the lighter in Trask's Department Store down the street. You said you merely wanted to compare it to Nickel's lighters to see if they actually had the lowest prices in town as they advertised.

"Riley testified he saw you stuff the lighter into your pocket after taking several of them to the window. Nickel's manager swore to the complaint and you were booked in our local tank. On being arraigned Monday, you repeated your story. The Public Defender, as a matter of routine, checked your story and learned you actually had purchased a lighter in Trask's.

"Further inquiry revealed a tiny scratch marked on the lighter in question, a mark put on Trask's items for identification. Whereupon, Nickel's immediately withdrew their charges—but the fat was on the fire. They had arrested you falsely, which left them wide open for a suit—and their new store couldn't stand that kind of publicity. How much did you get?"

"Five grand," Dugan grinned.

"Smart! You may have drawn ten through the courts, but your lawyer would have gotten half. Planning to linger a while?"

"That's the idea, Bud."

Willson said: "The gag has whiskers, of course, and its beauty lies in the fact that you committed no illegal act in any step of the process. For the sake of my curiosity, would you tell me how much money you

had when you entered Nickel's with Trask's lighter in your pocket?"

Dugan laughed softly.

"Fifty-seven cents. My last ten bucks went for the lighter."

Willson laughed out loud. I even found myself grinning. I don't know why, but you always get a kick out of a big outfit like Nickel's being skinned. Willson brought his coke high to the stool alongside Dugan, and he dropped one of his business cards on the bar in front of Dugan.

"Keep that, Chuck. Sooner or later you're going to need legal talent, and you may as well have the best."

Dugan looked at me and asked me: "Is he giving it to me straight, Gabby? Is he the best?"

I nodded. Dugan laughed.

"My favorite character!" he told Bud Willson.

"Al's the bedrock of our civilization," Willson smiled. "His ears are mightier than the pen which is mightier than the sword. What he hears elects presidents, wins wars and pays Bing Crosby. He's the Great Inarticulate who drives our busses; builds our houses, grows our food and, in the end, listens in judgment upon the rest of us. He also feeds us dream juice. To Al—and long may he wave."

They touched glasses and smiled at each other as if they had a secret joke. About then people started drifting in, and I lost track of their talk.

After a while Sylvia Lubock came in with her brother, Tony, and maybe that is the real start of what happened.

By that time the only two vacant stools were on the other side of Chuck Dugan, and when Dugan looked around to see who sat next to him the way a man will at a bar, his face lost that milky smile a second time—but now his eyes didn't turn to black glass. They became smoky.

He just sat there looking into Sylvia's eyes until Bud Willson leaned over and said: "Sylvia, this is Mr. Dugan, who is thinking of residing in our community. Chuck, Miss Lubock. If you ever feel the need for literary research, you will find Miss Lubock behind the desk in the library. And—oh, yes. Tony Lubock—Chuck Dugan."

Dugan's smile crawled back on his face. "The words I want to say," he said, "are

'Hubba hubba!'—followed by a long, low whistle. Let's drink to the night the boom dropped on Chuck Dugan." He shifted that smile to me. "Gabby—"

Chuck Dugan's personality, if it hasn't gotten across up to here, packed a wallop. He was the sort of guy you'd notice at once in a mob. He had the kind of voice you'd listen to in the middle of a dozen guys talking at once. When he grinned you couldn't help liking the guy and hoping he liked you.

Sylvia Lubock, who knew how to make an icicle look hot, just sat there and melted into the sort of smile I'd had to know her three years to rate. Tony Lubock, who always wore a black sort of scowl, turned it into a grin now.

I poured a beer for Tony and a coke for Sylvia, and then had to move down the bar to take care of other people.

There was a lot of talk and they kept the juke box noisy—and the next time I was up that end of the bar there were two vacant stools between Bud Willson and Tony Lubock.

"There went your girl, Al," Bud Willson told me. "I'd keep an eye on Mr. Dugan and count ten. Always remember to count."

I told him: "Not my girl."

Bud Willson winked at Tony Lubock, who grinned and winked back at him—which goes to show you can't keep a secret in a town like ours, even if you never mention to anybody how her voice creeps into your blood and becomes vitamins; how the world lights up like a Christmas tree when she comes in the door; how your sleep is filled with her smile and her walk and the way her neck curves so smooth. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

"You Have No Girl"

THE man with the broken nose, the one they called Lupino, came in and stood behind where Chuck Dugan lay with his head on his arm on the bar and shook him a couple of times. Then he looked up at me with his tiny red eyes and croaked: "Whatsamatta?"

I shrugged.

Lupino shook him again. Then he looked at the other one, the one they called Sniffer, the one with the scar on his cheek.

Sniffer whispered to me: "He tell you anythin', Gabby?"

I nodded.

"What?"

"He told me: 'Tell the boys it's all off. The heat's on. Tell 'em to scatter.' He told me that before he drank his last shot."

Lupino croaked at me: "You're lyin'! He's lyin', Sniffer!"

Sniffer shook his head.

"Not this baby. This baby don't know how. The boss tol' me hisself. How many shots he take, Gabby?"

"Eighteen," I told him.

Sniffer bent his nose to Chuck Dugan's lips. Then he straightened up and nodded. "Could be."

Lupino shook his head. "It reads sour. We wuz shiftn' into high. We'd a been in the saddle by tomorrer. An' how about Tony Lubock? He tol' us that's the good woid—Tony Lubock. He tellya about Lubock, Gabby?"

I said: "I told you what he told me. Before that he phoned in a plane reservation to St. Louis."

Sniffer shook his head slowly. "The boss ain't gonna blow his top fer nothin'. You know what I mean, Gabby? Anythin' else ya c'n tell us?"

I said: "Just before he started drinking he heard about the F.B.I. men who've been asking questions about him and the Association all around town this afternoon."

They looked at me. They looked at each other. They suddenly tore out the door and into the night.

Bud Willson shook his head sadly.

"Ten wasn't enough, Al. You should have counted to a million. You're the salt of the earth, Al—but you're practically dead! I'm pleased to have known you. Draw me another coke high, Al."

I poured a jigger of bar whiskey into a glass full of cracked ice, filled it with coke and set it before him. . . .

* * *

It is hard to say where anything really starts. A writer who used to hang around summers once told me whenever he started a story he was tempted to begin with his characters being born. But then he'd want to go back to their parents and, to understand them, go back to their parents—and finally all the way back to the first words in the Bible. Any other beginning would really be the middle of something and the end of something else.

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I know what he meant now that I'm trying to put down exactly where the trouble started.

For instance, it was sort of an end for Matt Chargin, who had owned the bar since as long as I could remember, the day he came out of the back room and told me: "I sold her, Al. But you keep on working. He says you're his lucky piece."

That was a couple of months after I first saw Chuck Dugan. I'd seen him now and then and heard about him more. He even showed up in a gossip column that mentioned how a bunch of high flying movie actors dropped their shirts in a poker game with a well known gambler known as "Chuck-a-luck."

Now Dugan and Bud Willson followed Matt out of the back room with all sorts of papers in their hands and Dugan said: "He certainly does keep his job. What you making, Gabby?"

"Ten a day," I said.

"From now on it's fifteen a day and you call me boss."

"Okay," I said.

"Your outburst of gratitude overwhelms me!" he grinned.

"Al just believes one word is worth a thousand pictures," Bud Willson said. "You going to run the game in back, Chuck?"

"No. This'll be home plate. We'll keep all the action in the outfield."

"Okay, pal," Bud Willson nodded.

"From here on in the word is boss," Chuck Dugan said.

He wasn't smiling. . . .

IT WASN'T long before citizens who packed weight in our town got the habit of dropping in for a drink with "Mr. Dugan." Maybe Chuck didn't have the biggest pile in the bank, but it was big enough for Mr. Huntsman, the manager to become a hand-shaking regular. Even Mayor Bowry got the habit.

The first time he walked in could have been the start of all the trouble. He came in alone and sat next to Bud Willson, who didn't notice who he was. Bud had too many coke highs by then to notice much. But he did notice Mayor Bowry's glass of beer.

Bud winked at me and started dropping something into the glass. He dropped it in-

stead into Chuck Dugan's palm which had slid between his hand and the glass. Dugan nodded to me and reached over Bud Willson's shoulder and I took it from him; sort of a white tablet, like an aspirin.

I put it in the register and forgot about it until after closing when Dugan and Willson sat alone at the bar and Dugan asked:

"What was it, Bud?"

"What was what?"

"The gimmick."

"Oh, *that!* I didn't know it was old Bowry. It would have been funny to see it work on him, though."

"Funny, eh? What would it do; make like the stuff you put in Wanda Kelly's highball?"

"Where's your sense of humor, Chuck? It was only chloral hydrate."

That was the second time I saw Chuck Dugan's eyes turn into black glass.

"A mickey for the mayor," he said softly. "That's great! That would be a minor sensation. It would even make a good headline: MAYOR MICKEYED IN DUGAN'S! That's about as funny as pneumonia!"

Willson had a lot of bar whiskey in him by then. He grinned: "Aw, can the Bogart, guy. Can't you take a joke?"

The next moment Willson's black homburg was dropping to the floor, and he was tripping off the stool over it, and there was a red stain on the pale of his face from Chuck Dugan's palm. Willson finally caught his balance and stood there looking at Chuck Dugan. He took a step toward Dugan, and then he stopped and his eyes grew big.

Dugan's hand had sort of flicked under the lapel of his jacket. We all knew what he carried there in an armpit holster. The whiskey brought Willson's knowledge to his lips and eyes. He just stood there and hated Dugan's guts.

Dugan said: "I'll tell you this just once. There will be no more horsing around at home plate. Catch?"

Willson nodded slowly, as if he was seeing Chuck Dugan for the first time. Then he picked his hat off the floor, dusted it and set it carefully on his head. He picked his cane off the bar and put it under his arm. He said: "Whatever you say, Mr. Dugan." He turned on his heel and walked out, letting the door slam behind him.

Dugan looked at me.

"Well, Gabby?"

I looked at him.

"One of these days you're going to speak a whole sentence and your jaw is gonna fall apart!" He gave a short laugh. "All this respectability I'm accumulating; it gives me the jitters. Sylvia Lubock. Quite a gal, isn't she?"

I nodded.

"Willson tried to hand me a line about her being your girl. You told me you had no girl."

I said: "That's right."

He said: "Let's remember that, Gabby. Goodnight."

I said: "'Night."

His eyes started turning black. Then he gave another quick laugh and walked out, shaking his head.

I didn't need an ouija board to tell me where Dugan had gotten the money to buy the bar or where he was getting the money that sparked the big smiles the bank manager always had for him. The suckers came to me in the first place. They didn't look like chumps; they looked dough-heavy—bigs in chauffeur-driven limousines from Frisco, and sports from Reno and as far east as Denver, and movie stars from Hollywood—that kind of people. They'd order a drink, then call me over and ask: "Where can I find Chuck-a-luck?"

That was the word. I'd tell them the hotel and room number for that day. They'd go out and I'd never see them again.

This was through the summer when our hunk of the Pacific Ocean brought vacationists from the cities and heat sufferers from the valleys, and the population tripped. I don't know what kind of games Chuck Dugan ran in those hotel rooms; but I do know they must have been quiet and reasonably square. There was no trouble. The "Chuck-a-luck" people were lost among the tourists and nobody official ever noticed them coming or going.

By the summer's end Chuck Dugan was jumpier than a cat. He had a brand new safe in the back room full of stuff that would have gotten even bigger smiles from the bank manager.

AFTER September most of the cottages and hotels closed, and people stopped asking me about Chuck-a-luck. It was

around this time that Sylvia Lubock walked in one morning—and that might have been the real start of the trouble.

I had been going over the paper work with Chuck Dugan. He usually let me do the buying. But now and then he checked the figures. He always wound up shaking his head like he couldn't figure it out. He'd tell me: "Too much profit, Gabby. Couldn't you reach into the till once in a while and keep my income tax down?"

Maybe he meant it as a joke, but I always tightened up inside and it probably showed on my face. He'd always wait for that. Then he'd grin and say: "Stick to the straight and narrow, Gabby. One of these years they'll elect you dogcatcher of this town."

We hadn't gotten to this point yet when Sylvia Lubock came in. I knew they'd been going to the Saturday night dances at the Coconut Grove and out driving in his Buick Sundays. I was surprised to see the chill in her eyes when she looked at him. She smiled hello at me, then turned the chill on Chuck Dugan and told him: "I want you to keep away from Tony, Chuck."

Dugan's eyes were smoky, like they always got when he looked at Sylvia. Now the smoke got dark.

"Is that what you want, Syl?"

"His trucks are doing all right, Chuck. He has three now, and he started with only one half-ton. The future looks good—but not the kind of future you painted for him—ten trucks by winter! I don't know what else you told him. It's your business, not mine. But I don't want it to be Tony's. I want his feet back on the ground."

She said this in that voice which dug into the soft parts of me, and Dugan took it in with his lips in a funny half twist—like he didn't know whether to smile or frown. He sort of sighed.

"You're so right, Syl—about it being my business. But you're wrong about Tony's feet. Organization can't hurt him. As it stands today, a couple of dozen small independents are cutting each other's throats for pennies.

"Look at the broad picture, Syl. Back in the hills and along the coast, all these little towns built around packing sheds and canneries, all that perishable stuff that has to be moved fast—and no railroad or shipping to reach most of 'em. It's trucks or bank-

ruptcy. So the shippers play all these little guys like Tony against each other and keep the rates down to nothing.

"All I suggested was that Tony get the other truckers together and we form an organization; then we make the shipping rates. Besides that, we pool our resources and cut expenses; one community garage and repair shop instead of a dozen, group insurance at lower rates, a little political pressure to keep the roads good and traffic laws reasonable—stuff like that. What's the harm in this?"

"None, as far as you've told it," Sylvia said, tired-like. "But we both know you're constitutionally incapable of settling down to a legitimate routine for small profits. There will be dues—and that's where you'll be—and pretty soon Tony and the others will really be working for you.

"Then other boys will become men and buy trucks and you'd have to absorb them or keep them out of business. You couldn't absorb them all—so you'd keep them out of business—because their competitive bidding would make your organization worthless.

"That would lead to violence. Corruption of public officials would follow. And then you would expand into other organizations, like shady politics, protective associations—or should I say rackets?—and open gambling and so on—until all of our town is under your thumb."

Chuck Dugan looked at me and his eyes were like black glass. He swung them to Sylvia and they remained black.

"You read too many books, Syl. You were right the first time. It's my business. But I will always be glad to continue this discussion. Suppose we argue the next round some place like—" his eyes softened a little—"like the Coconut Grove Saturday night?"

"No!" she said.

The door slammed behind her.

Chuck Dugan sat looking at his thumb as if it was a part of him he had never really noticed before. Then he turned a tight, crooked grin on me and said: "The key to Sylvia Lubock is you, do you know that, Gabby?"

I looked at him.

He said: "You're her favorite topic of conversation."

I looked at him.

He waved at the door.

"There went your girl, Gabby."

I kept looking at him and he sat there looking back at me. Then he wandered into the back room, shaking his head, and left me looking down at my hands.

They were trembling.

CHAPTER THREE

Surprise for Mr. Tough

HENRY WATSON came in with a scared look on his face and looked at Chuck Dugan where he lay sleeping on his arm on the bar. Henry turned the scared look on me and asked: "That was him I talked to on the phone, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

"Then what's he doing about it?"

"Sleeping."

"Why?"

"Must be tired."

Bud Willson laughed out loud at that.

Henry Watson gave Bud a scared look; then he leaned over Dugan's sleeping form and whispered to me: "He's gotta wake up! Tony came right outta his house and nobody stopped him! I followed Tony down to Vet's Hall and there was a hundred guys there and some of 'em had rifles and shotguns. You gotta wake Mr. Dugan up!"

"You wake him," I said.

Henry Watson tried. He shook Dugan's shoulder; then he reached over and slapped Chuck's face. Then he shook him some more. Dugan groaned a little—but he went right on sleeping.

"It ain't natural!" Henry Watson whispered.

"Must be very tired," I said.

Bud Willson laughed like this was the funniest joke he ever heard.

Henry Watson's scared eyes jumped from Bud Willson to me to Chuck Dugan. He shook his head and started backing away. "Something's fishy!" he whispered. "I don't like it. I don't like it one little bit! I'm gettin' outta here!"

He spun on his heel and pushed past some people coming in and raced out the door.

Bud Willson pushed his empty glass toward me.

"Strong whiskey to kill the taste of a rat, Al. I'll be the chief mourner at your funeral. When I'm mayor I'll have them erect

you a statue. My dedication speech will be brief: 'To Al, who didn't know when he was dead!'

I poured his drink. . . .

* * *

When Lupino and Sniffer arrived the first time, I knew there was going to be trouble. I was alone behind the bar one morning, and all of a sudden they were standing there; two guys who looked a little too well dressed and had faces that shouldn't have been well dressed at all, if you know what I mean.

A brown face with a broken nose and little red eyes; that was Lupino. Sniffer wore a scar that went from the middle of his left ear to the left corner of a tight mouth across skin the color of the sidewalk outside.

Lupino's voice was like a hoarse croak. He jerked his chin at me. "Hey, you! Where's the boss?"

I said: "Out."

"When'll he be back?"

I shrugged.

Sniffer gave me a hard look and said out of the side of his tight lips: "Talkative basket, ain't he?"

"My ears is wore out from listenin'," Lupino croaked.

They didn't smile. They walked up to the bar together and straddled stools, keeping their hard eyes on me. Sniffer said: "Drown two shots of rye in a glass of beer for me, Blabberpuss."

"A glass of straight coke for me, Blabberpuss," Lupino croaked.

I poured the drinks and they each put a bill on the bar. I made change and went around filling the cold box with beer bottles, starting the coffee and laying out the "factory" sandwiches—so the California Equalization Board couldn't say we weren't a restaurant—and generally kept busy.

They sipped their drinks and didn't talk and watched me with their nasty eyes—until Chuck Dugan came in the door, saw them and stopped in his tracks. They turned on their stools to look at him.

"Chuck-a-luck," Lupino croaked, "I brung Sniffer. You heard of Sniffer. He worked with John in Indiana and then Abe in Brooklyn."

"Hello, Lupe," Dugan nodded, smiling. He nodded again: "Sniffer."

Sniffer said: "Meetcha. Have a shot—if

Blabberpuss here can tear hisself away from polishin' a glass long enough."

"That's Gabby," Chuck Dugan said easily. "Lay off him. He minds my business."

Lupino turned and cracked his face in the middle, showing black teeth.

"No hard feelings, Gabby."

"Okay," I said.

Sniffer nodded to me. I nodded back.

"Let's go in there and chew over the lay," Chuck Dugan said, waving toward the back room. They slid off their stools and followed him in.

They came out about two hours later. The place was empty again then. They walked out in front of Dugan and his hands were around their shoulders.

I saw Lupino shoot Sniffer a fast question with his eyes. Sniffer stuck out his bottom lip and nodded. Lupino showed his black teeth.

Chuck Dugan said: "That's how it is. Just a little pressure in the beginning—then we'll be in the saddle. How's it listen?"

Sniffer said: "I ain't heard nothin' so sweet since Prohibition."

Lupino laughed like he was happy. He nudged Sniffer.

"I tol' ya Chuck-a-luck's the smartest gee this side o' Denver!"

"Just one thing," Chuck Dugan said. "This is home plate. All the action takes place in the outfield."

"Listen t'him!" Sniffer said. "He t'inks we was born yestiddy!"

They shook hands with me before they left. When Sniffer leaned across the bar his jacket spread apart a little and I saw the black butt of an automatic sticking out of an armpit harness.

When the door closed behind them, Chuck Dugan came over to the bar and asked me: "Who just walked out, Gabby?"

I looked at him.

He nodded slowly. "That's right, Gabby. We've been alone here all morning, just the two of us. That's how it's going to be."

That's how it was—because nobody ever asked me.

THE trouble showed its face that same night when Tony Lubock and Henry Watson came in a few minutes before closing. They hung around until all the customers were gone.

You might say the trouble showed on Tony Lubock's face. You wouldn't think he was Sylvia's brother to look at him. He was big and dark and slow moving. He'd been captain of the football team in school, and later he'd become a major piloting a B-17 over Germany. People in our town always sort of looked up to him. It was hard to figure why. Maybe because he usually tasted his ideas before he put them into words.

Now he stood near the juke box and looked at Chuck Dugan sitting at the end of the bar, smoking a cigarette and looking back at him. And while there was no expression on Chuck Dugan's face, Tony Lubock's face looked on the edge of trouble, if you know what I mean.

Henry Watson stood a little behind Tony, like a small shadow. A little guy with a long nose and a face like a skeleton, he usually hung around bigger guys' elbows.

It was Tony Lubock who started the talk.

"Dugan, I want to talk to you."

Dugan waved the cigarette.

"Go ahead. Talk."

You could see Tony taste his next words before letting them go.

"I decided your idea's only good up to a point. We could certainly use a sort of loose organization—but not the tight deal you want."

Dugan squashed his cigarette in a glass ash tray. He got up lazily and walked slowly toward Tony Lubock.

"That's what you decided, hey?"

"We don't want a strangle hold on the packers and canners," Tony Lubock said. "Just enough organization to stop cut-throat competition. Maybe a common garage and group insurance. But we wouldn't like to keep other fellas from putting trucks on the road. And we don't want to meddle in politics or pay dues that actually amount to a protection tax."

Chuck Dugan stood squarely in front of Tony Lubock now. He had to look up into Tony's face.

"You seem to miss a point, Lubock," he said softly. "What *you* decided isn't very important. Several of the boys have already signed with our outfit. More are coming in. We'll set a deadline and then *only* men in our organization will move trucks along these highways."

"How about the rest of us?"

"That would be up to the packers and canners, wouldn't it?"

Tony Lubock nodded thoughtfully.

"You mean you'll cut rates until we're out of business, then buy us out and raise the rates to suit yourselves?"

Chuck Dugan shook his head and talked as if he was explaining how to shoot marbles to a dumb little kid.

"That would be much too slow. I mean the packers and canners will soon realize it's smarter to pay higher rates *and be sure the stuff is delivered.*"

Tony Lubock wasn't a dumb little kid. He said: "That's pretty tough talk, Dugan."

"I'm a pretty tough guy, Lubock," Dugan said. "Like this!" The palm of his left hand whipped across Tony's cheek.

What happened next is still something I find hard to believe. Tony Lubock was big people and tough people, and his left jabbed out like a steel piston—but Chuck Dugan rolled with it easily.

The next instant Tony Lubock was reeling back with his hands to his jaw. Dugan stood on the balls of his feet, gripping his black automatic easily, sort of balancing it in his palm and poised for another crack at Tony's jaw with it.

I never saw a pistol used like that before. I never saw a pistol appear from nowhere so quick before.

I don't think Tony Lubock did either. He lurched back into the juke box, shaking it. Then he pulled his hands away from his jaw and looked at them, as if looking for blood. There was no blood, just a red welt along the curve of his jaw, bright and red against the dark pale of his skin.

He looked at the pistol in Chuck Dugan's hand and nodded slowly.

"You're pretty tough, Dugan," he said.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Dugan asked him quietly.

Tony shook his head.

"I guess not. I guess everything that could be said has been said."

"That's right," Dugan nodded.

"Let's go, Hank," Tony Lubock said. He put his hand on Henry Watson's shoulder and they walked out the door.

For a long time after the door closed Chuck Dugan stood looking at it. Then he buried the automatic under his jacket and turned to look at me. We stood looking at each other even longer than he'd

been looking at the door after Lubock left.

Then he said: "You don't think I'll pull it off, Gabby." He wasn't asking me; he was telling me.

I said: "Wrong town."

His eyes froze into black glass. He shook a finger at me. He yelled: "Listen, wise guy!"

That was when the door opened again and Henry Watson walked back in, little, pale Henry Watson with his long nose and scared eyes. He looked carefully out into the night, then closed the door and walked up to Chuck Dugan and stammered: "I—I—I'd like to j-j-join the organization, Mr. D-D-Dugan—"

Dugan looked at me with eyes full of horse laugh.

"Go home, Gabby," he said softly. "I'll lock up. Mr. Watson and I have some business to discuss. Sweet dreams, Gabby."

He was right about that much at least. I spent the night dreaming about Sylvia Lubock as usual. . . .

IT WASN'T long before the whole town knew that trouble had arrived. First there was a big ad in the local paper and then things happened to three trucks, and it didn't take a genius to put two and two together and get Trouble.

The ad was signed by the Pacific Byways Trucking Association; Chuck Dugan's outfit. It was a clever ad. It said the Association was out to protect the packers and canners by giving efficient service, and it would protect the public by encouraging new safety laws, and it would fight the Reds by making little business strong. In fact, the ad made it look like anybody who owned a truck and didn't join the Association was practically a traitor to his country.

One truck broke through the wooden guard rail on the horseshoe bend in the Santa Cruz Mountains coming south from Watsonville. It dropped over two hundred feet of cliff and smashed up on the rocks below, scattering packed apples over an acre. The driver said his steering wheel suddenly got out of control and then his brakes wouldn't take.

The driver said that a few minutes before he died from a broken back.

But the truck was smashed too much for anybody to check the wheel and brakes.

The other two trucks were destroyed in a

big garage fire when nobody was around.

After that the Association started growing. Chuck Dugan opened an office upstairs from the bar. He hired a secretary and a lot of men drifted up those stairs, one at a time, and signed up. It wasn't long until almost half the independent truckmen in town belonged.

But then almost a week passed and there were no more recruits. It began to look as if about half the truckers would stay outside the Association.

"I can't understand it, Willson," Chuck told the lawyer one night when Bud Willson was in to check some papers. "The panic was on. It looked as if I'd have 'em all inside of a month. But it suddenly dribbled to nothing."

"You got the sheep," Bud Willson shrugged.

"Aren't they all?"

"You're overlooking the denominators in this equation. The sheep in your outfit fall in one category; the fellows who are staying out fit into another."

"Get to the point."

"Little items known as honorable discharges. You've got the late Four F's, the late war workers, ex-felons and the men who were over age or had large families. The vets are staying out."

Chuck Dugan whistled softly.

"You're right, Willson. That's it." Then he asked: "Why?"

"Ask Al."

Chuck Dugan looked at me as if he was seeing me for the first time.

"You a recent hero, Gabby?"

I looked at him.

Bud Willson said: "You couldn't get him to talk about it with a blackjack, but Al brought home more decorations than any other guy from these parts."

Chuck Dugan continued to gape at me.

"Okay, Gabby. Spill it. What's keeping the heroes out?"

I said: "Wrong town."

Bud Willson laughed softly.

"There's your epitaph, Dugan."

Chuck Dugan looked for a moment as if he was going to sink his teeth into Willson's throat. Then he thought of something and his eyes laughed at the two of us.

"Wait a minute. That Watson guy; he wears a gold button."

"Even Jesus had Judas," Willson said.

I thought Dugan was going to hit the lawyer. He didn't. He just sat looking at him. Then he nodded.

"That's right, Willson. That should wind you up for tonight."

Willson left. Chuck Dugan carried his thoughtful expression under the counter to the phone at the far end of the bar. I didn't try to listen—but then I didn't exactly plug cotton in my ears either.

It went something like this:

"Watson? . . . Listen, Hank, I'm reading you out of the Association. . . . Don't get a wild hair in your personality, kid. I'll tell you the reason the next time I see you. . . . No, not here. As a matter of fact, I don't want you to show around here again. . . . Well, when will you drive a load to Frisco? . . . Good enough. I'll meet you at the Mark around noon. In the lobby. Okay? . . . That's right."

He broke the connection and grinned at me crookedly.

"I wasn't a hero, Gabby. I was an ex-con, which made me a second class citizen. I don't even like parades."

He drove up to Frisco in the morning.

* * *

After that it was just talk that drifted across the bar. Like the time Doc Pederson came in with the blood almost out of his lips, his mouth was so tight. Mark Campbell, chief of our police force, drifted in behind Doc and sat on the next stool.

They sipped their beers in silence a while; then Campbell asked: "Will he pull out of it, Doc?"

The doctor nodded.

Chief Campbell said: "I can't figure it. Harris never bothered anybody. He wasn't robbed. They left his truck alone. It doesn't make sense."

"Violence always makes sense if you look in enough sewers," Doc said.

Campbell noticed me listening and said: "You know Louie Harris, Al?"

I nodded.

"Someone dragged him out of the cab of his truck and worked him over with a club. Broke three ribs, dislocated his arm, knocked half his teeth out, and only God knows what else—or why. . . ."

Then there was the time Dinky Simon came in with a long face and ordered a hot buttered rum. Someone at the bar—Danny Shropshire, I think—called over and asked:

"You have your truck insured, Dinky?"

Dinky shook his head and drank slowly.

Someone else asked: "What was it, crazy kids? Or someone who had it against you personally?"

Dinky rolled his eyes up toward where the Association office was. I think I was the only one who heard his whisper: "That black-hearted son!"

I asked: "What happened, Dinky?"

He said: "My gravel truck, Al. Someone drove it to the end of Fishermen's Wharf last night and pushed it into the bay."

We looked at each other a long time. Then he gave a sort of helpless shrug and walked out.

Then there was the afternoon Tony Lubock once again walked through the door with Henry Watson. They ordered beer, as usual, and Tony read the question in my eyes. He flashed me his dark grin and put a hand on Watson's shoulder.

"You're surprised to see us together again, hey, Al? Well, Hank, here, finally saw the light. He quit that scab outfit cold."

Henry Watson smiled weakly.

I asked: "How's trucking, Tony?"

"We're bucking a stiff tide, Al. The Association trucks meet contracts and make schedules, while the rest of us happen into quote, accidents, unquote." He rubbed a palm against the black stubble on his jaw. "We could make the accidents mutual, of course—but I think someone wants us to do exactly that. I notice characters riding along on Association trucks now and then—the sort of characters who tangle with Humphrey Bogart in pictures."

I nodded.

He said: "I think we're gonna surprise Mr. Tough, though. We're organizing the Veteran's Truckmen's League. That'll give us the same basis of negotiation with the packers and canners." Tony gave me a careful eye and said: "Tell Mr. Tough, will you, Al?"

I said I would.

Henry Watson worried: "Tony, that's gonna lead to trouble, isn't it?"

Tony scowled at him.

"Not to trouble, Hank. To *more* trouble!"

Chuck Dugan seemed to enjoy the news. It was the same evening. He sipped his Scotch highball and grinned: "You mean

Lubbock came in and asked you to tell me this, Gabby?"

I nodded.

After a while he went to the phone. And again I didn't exactly stuff my fingers in my ears.

"Lupe? . . . Listen. Chuck-a-luck. It's coming to a head. . . . Yeah. What I want to know is, how soon will it take to move in the boys? . . . Well, *quick*, know what I mean? . . . That should be soon enough, Lupe. How I read it, we sock 'em in the gut one time and they'll fold. . . . After that the gravy train. . . . Okay, Lupe."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I Just Work Here."

CHIEF of Police Mark Campbell came in and stared down at Chuck Dugan sleeping on the bar. Then he stared up at me and asked: "What's the matter with him, Al?"

"Tired," I said.

Bud Willson didn't laugh. Bud Willson sat looking at Campbell with a hungry, curious look in his eyes.

Campbell nodded as if I had told him something he couldn't figure out for himself.

"Me, too, Al. I'm tired. My entire force is in jail—with armed veterans holding the keys. We're in a sort of state of revolution, or civil war, or mutiny, or something. It's too big for me. State Police are on the way now and I'm very tired. Tell Mr. Dugan I'm tired also, will you, Al? Tell him I'm going home to bed."

I nodded.

Chief Campbell reached into his hip pocket and brought out a white envelope that was sealed and fat with something inside. He laid it on the bar.

"And, Al—give this to Mr. Dugan. Tell him I didn't get to use his loan after all. Tell him—well, tell him good-by. You understand, Al? Tell him I said it's been nice knowing him and I dropped in to say good-by."

I nodded and put the fat white envelope in the register. When I turned around again Chief Campbell was gone.

Chuck Dugan began snoring with his face on his arm on the redwood bar. Some people leaned over to look at him. They whispered to each other and giggled.

Bud Willson said: "No coke this time,

Al. Fill the glass with whiskey. The rats have left the sinking tub and now it boils down to you two. No ice, Al. Just whiskey. I can't bear to witness an execution sober."

I filled a tumbler with bar whiskey and set it before him. . . .

* * *

So it became Chuck Dugan's Association and Tony Lubbock's League, and the trouble showed itself a dozen times and really exploded the night of the riot in Vet's Hall. There were two versions of what happened.

Charley Vargas told me his over the bar next morning; he told it through a hole in the bandages for his mouth, nose and eyes. The bandages covered the results of half a dozen beer bottles that had been smashed on Charley's head.

"Tony called the meetin'," Charley said. "You heard about the cops layin' for us? First they arrested guys who rode guard, said it needed a gun permit and a private detective bond and permit. Then they sock it to us in traffic. You know what I mean, Al? It's sort of personal—as if the cops are workin' for the Association."

I nodded.

"So it's a meetin' on drawin' up a protest to the Attorney General of California, askin' for an investigation. Everythin's goin' along quiet. The next thing, about fifty guys nobody ever sees before are all over the place, wreckin' the hall. Bustin' chairs, tippin' over the bar, tearin' pictures off of the walls. So we mixed it, but it was so sudden we hardly stood a chance. The next thing cops were all over the place and about twenty of us needed first aid and half a dozen of our guys started battlin' the cops. That's what the meetin' was about—the cops—remember? So. . . ."

That was one version. The other came in the story that followed the VETS RIOT! headline. It was way down past the middle and it was in Chief of Police Mark Campbell's statement:

. . . the claim that strangers came in with clubs and bottles and attacked them seems to be without foundation. We found no strangers. It just seemed as if the boys tried to mix alcohol and business and wound up re-fighting the war. . . .

That happened the night after Chief Campbell had spent half an hour in the back room with Chuck Dugan, during which time I heard the safe door clang open, then shut.

The finish came the day after the "riot," and it started somewhere in the afternoon when Chuck Dugan was out somewhere. I was alone behind the bar when Sylvia Lubock walked in.

She didn't smile; just sat on a stool and looked at me. I set a glass of coke before her, but she didn't touch it. She said: "Al, it's getting bad."

I nodded.

"You've got to stop Chuck. Tony is like a wild man. The others are ready to follow him. They've lost all respect for law and order. They're going to hold that meeting again tonight, and this time they will bring guns and they'll post guards. If nobody bothers them, it will be all right. But if the same thing happens—" she reached across the bar and gripped my wrist with her cool fingers—"if they're attacked again tonight it will be the most terrible thing that ever happened in this town."

I nodded.

"Al, you've got to stop Chuck!"

Someone said: "Sylvia, I just work here." That was me.

She pulled her fingers away and touched the glass of coke, then bunched her fingers into a fist and held it in front of her eyes and sat like that with her face bent into her fist and her shoulders shaking.

After a while her eyes begged me through their wetness.

"Al, isn't there *anything*?"

All I could do was stand there and look at her and feel as if I would have to stand on my toes to reach the underside of a snake. And then she turned and ran out of the place, leaving the door open, and someone said: "That's supposed to be your girl." That was me again.

I looked down at my left hand where I had been squeezing a beer glass so tight, it sort of crumpled in my fist. I picked slivers of glass out of my hand and found some peroxide and worked some gauze and tape over the cuts. Then I started polishing glasses I had already polished once before. . . .

IT WAS just two hours later that Chuck Dugan got his last call from Henry Watson. I happened to be up at that end of the bar slicing limes and I heard Dugan sort of choke when he heard the voice at the other end of the wire.

"What's that, Hank—*guns*? . . . *Tonight*? . . . Listen, Hank, there's only one way to handle this and I'm going to do it. But I have to know where he is every minute from here until then. . . . That's right. Stay across the street from his front door, but keep out of sight. I should be along in about fifteen minutes. Just wave and scat. If he leaves his house before I get there, follow him; then get word back here where he goes. . . . Get started!"

He broke the connection, spoke another number into the mouthpiece. Then:

"Lupe? . . . Chuck-a-luck. It's the pay-off. It boils down to T.L. He's organizing an opposition routine tonight. Without him they fall apart. But tonight they're doing it with boom-booms—so it's got to be without him, catch? . . . No, I'll take care of *him*. You hold everything else ready to move in on the sheep as soon as he's out of the way. . . . I'll bring you the good word in person. Just stay on your toes. . . . Thirty minutes at the top. . . . Okay!"

It was a little after seven. The bar had a pretty good play. Someone was overworking Hoagy Carmichael on the juke. Nobody seemed to notice Chuck Dugan straighten up from the phone. He didn't seem to notice anybody. He raised the counter board and stepped out from behind the bar. He walked to the back room and forgot to close the door behind him.

I could see him take the black automatic from his clip holster, pull out the magazine and look at it. He got some rounds from the box on the shelf and filled the magazine, then jammed the magazine back into the butt. He worked the slide once, cocking the piece. He dropped the automatic back in its holster like that. He put on his brown fedora, cocked it the way he always did and came out of the back room.

He put a leg over the end stool like he usually did before going out.

"One highball to send me on my way, Gabby," he said without looking at me.

I had to use the register first. Then I poured a jigger of Scotch in an iced glass and covered it with soda. I stirred the soda into the Scotch with a glass rod, then slid the highball across the bar to him.

He drank it fast like he usually did. He set the glass down and stared at the door and the blackness of night outside. I don't think he heard Hoagy Carmichael on the

juke or saw all the people along the bar. He patted his lips with the handkerchief from his breast pocket, then put the handkerchief back with an automatic look in the mirror to see if it was right.

The shiny blackness of his eyes dulled a little. He frowned. He glanced at me now, but he seemed to have trouble focusing his eyes. He slowly gripped the empty glass and tried to peer into it. His face came down close to it, then sagged past it and rested on his arm on the bar.

He lifted his head once and muttered:

"*Gabby, what did you?*"

His head dropped back to his arm.

He was asleep. . . .

* * *

Chuck Dugan stirred and opened his eyes. He looked along the empty bar and frowned. Then he raised his head a little. He saw me. He sat all the way up. He shook his head as if to clear it of confusion.

It was after midnight. The only other person there was Bud Willson, who stood with his back against the juke box, a coat of wet on his pale face.

Chuck Dugan shook his head again. He looked at his watch as if he didn't believe it. He brought it to his ear to make sure. Then his eyes snapped to me and he stared as if he didn't believe what he saw. He reached for the empty glass in which I had served his Scotch highball and dropped his gaze to it. He looked at me again. I had never seen a pair of eyes as black and hard as Chuck Dugan's eyes at that moment.

In the night outside I could hear the rumble of heavy wheels on pavement—like a motor convoy moving out of a town during the war.

Bud Willson started talking in a low voice.

"Those are the lads who wouldn't join, Dugan. They decided to hold their meeting in Vet's Hall without interruption tonight. They came with rifles and shotguns and pistols and clubs, and the first thing they did was pick up every cop they found and lock him in the city jail. They sent armed patrols to replace the cops. The drivers from your Association were persuaded to transfer loads to the Vet's League and take a holiday. The Vets are riding with armed guards and legal sanction they got from the Attorney General by way of fast telegrams."

Chuck Dugan licked his lips. His eyes

never left mine for a second as he spoke.

"Is what the shyster's saying the goods, Gabby?"

I nodded.

"Did Henry Watson call?"

I nodded again.

"What happened to him?"

"Left town," I said.

"How about Lupino, Gabby? Did he call?"

"Lupino and Sniffer came in," I said.

"Then what?"

"Left town."

"With the boys?"

I nodded.

Chuck Dugan could have been carved from marble. He sat there with his black eyes rigid on mine. Even his lips scarcely moved.

"Campbell, Gabby," he said. "How about him? If all this happened, he should have sent word—"

"He came," I said. I turned to the register and felt Chuck Dugan's eyes burn into the back of my head as I got the fat white envelope from the register. I laid the envelope on the bar near his hands. His eyes never dropped from mine to glance at it.

"He said he didn't need your loan after all," I said. "He said he was tired and he was going home to bed. He said to tell you good-by."

Bud Willson said: "That's what tore it, Dugan. It's just you alone now, against all those armed vets. Tony Lubock can't hold them in forever. It shouldn't be long before they come looking for you—"

Chuck Dugan acted as if the lawyer wasn't there, as if we were alone, just two guys looking into each other's eyes across a redwood bar. He said: "The last I remember was about five hours ago. You handed me a drink. Then what happened?"

"You fell asleep," I said.

He looked at me and licked his lips as if there were a bad taste in his mouth. There probably was.

He said: "Go to the register and get me that tablet I took away from Willson a couple of months back—the one he tried to slip into the mayor's beer, the Mickey Finn."

I didn't go to the register. I kept looking into the black shadows that were his eyes.

"It's gone," I said.

He raised his empty highball glass between us.

I nodded slowly.

His automatic was suddenly in his right hand and pointing at my chest. He said: "You double-crossing mutt!"

I looked at him.

He said: "Start walking. Get out from behind that bar and walk to the door."

I just stood there and looked into the coal pits that were his eyes.

The automatic drooped slowly until its muzzle touched the bar. "Why?" he whispered.

"Wrong town," I said.

HIS EYES finally slid from my eyes down to the fat white envelope. He holstered his automatic and tore open the envelope, spilling hundred dollar bills across the bar. He scooped them into his pocket, then got off the stool stiffly and walked into the back room. I heard the safe door clang open.

Bud Willson tried to smile at me. He couldn't make it. He pulled a pack of Camels from his pocket. The pack shook loose from his fingers to the floor. He left it on the floor.

Chuck Dugan reappeared with a bulging briefcase in one hand and a blank sheet of paper in the other. He laid the paper on the bar, scrawled his signature on the bottom of it with his pen, returned the pen to his pocket and said: "Give me what's in the register."

I did.

He said: "Give me a dollar out of your own pocket."

I did that.

He spoke over his shoulder to Bud Willson: "That's my Hancock. You fill in the double talk over that. A bill of sale. For one buck this dive goes from me to him. Make it legal. Okay?"

Bud Willson just stared at him.

Dugan gave him a short, hard laugh.

"Now you're getting like Gabby!"

I said: "Why?"

Dugan shot me a crooked grin and said: "Because I never push a weak hand. Because you tipped me in the first place, but I was too dumb to believe it." He patted the briefcase. "I'm ahead. I'm still young. Sooner or later I'll find the right town." He grabbed the briefcase and was halfway to the door when something occurred to him. He came back to the bar and reached into his pocket. "I didn't pay for that last drink, did I?"

I said: "That was on the house, Mr. Dugan."

He nodded and took his hand out of his pocket and this time he reached the door. He looked back at me with his hand on the door.

"The year you run for dogcatcher, Gabby, pass the word along to me. I'll come back and vote for you twice."

Then he tilted his fedora at that cocky angle and walked out the door without looking back.

Bud Willson gaped at me with dazed eyes.

"I'll never figure this out if I live to be a hundred!"

I said: "That makes two of us."

But there was more. He was just finishing the bill of sale when Sylvia Lubock came in the door. She came in with her face flushed and her eyes melting my insides and her voice stirring them into whirlpools.

"Al! I was awakened by the craziest phone call from Chuck Dugan! He said I should stop worrying; that everything was going to be all right. He said you had something important to tell me."

Bud Willson gaped at her.

He said: "Before I go completely berserk, sign this, Sylvia. I'll be the other witness. I'd give my right arm to be able to stay here and listen to Al try to tell you what Dugan said he would—but I won't. Just sign this and I'll go quietly."

She did and he did. But I made it up to him later. He was best man at our wedding.

THE END

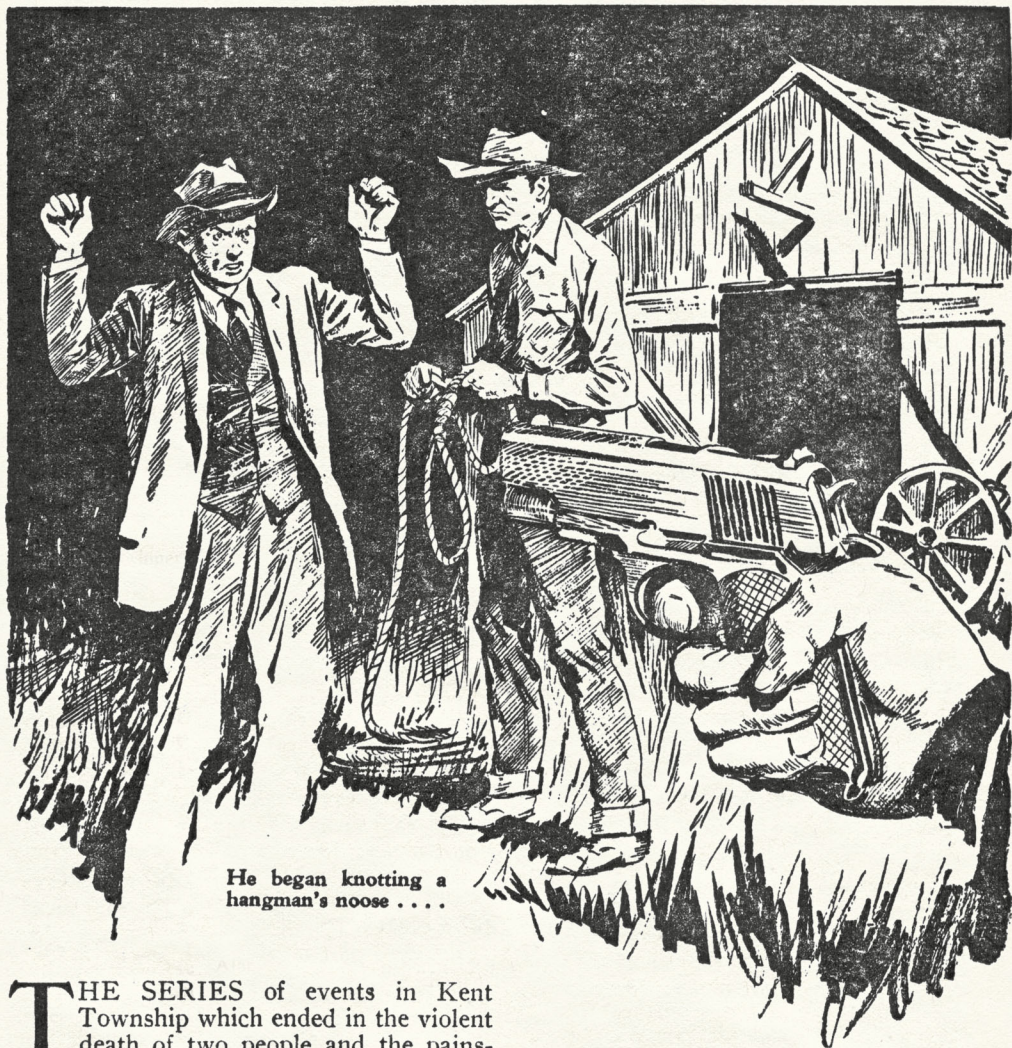
YOU MIGHT CHECK THIS

★ According to the French Surete it is perfectly possible to tell whether a man or a woman has slept in a given bed. Women make small, even wrinkles on the sheets, while men muss up the works! ★

—EJ

When a murderer tightens his purse string too much, he's very apt to tie a slipknot in the . . .

NOOSE OF RETRIBUTION



He began knotting a hangman's noose

THE SERIES of events in Kent Township which ended in the violent death of two people and the painstakingly considered hanging of a third was already well underway on that Saturday noon when Sam Hall arrived at the farm of his neighbor, Otto Kestler. Sam's half-wit stepson, Willie, was with him, astride a beautiful palomino stallion. His other stepson, thirteen-year-old Jerry, was helping Otto grease a tractor.

By
**STANLEY C.
VICKERS**



"The power line that crosses your pasture is sagging," Sam announced without dismounting. "If it works down any more, some of my cows are liable to run into it."

"That's bad," Otto agreed soberly.

"It's real bad!" Sam growled. "I'd like for you to phone the power company about it. Right now." He grinned broadly. "Just so you don't forget, I'll wait."

Otto's round, good-natured face flushed. He was used to being kidded about his slowness, but not by somebody he disliked as much as Sam Hall. He went into the house, and when he returned he said stiffly: "I told Bert Degnan. He said he'd be out today and fix it."

"You were talking to Bert?" Sam demanded sharply.

"That's what I said," Otto replied evenly.

Jerry stood beside Otto like a ramrod, studying his grease-covered hands so he wouldn't meet his step-father's gaze and display the hate in his eyes. Willie slouched on the gold and silver stallion, his listless look mirroring the brain that wasn't able to catch the clash of the two personalities.

Sam's scowl slowly relaxed. "Now, don't get riled, Otto. Bert ain't usually in the office. That's why I asked. Besides, cows are valuable these days."

Otto didn't reply. He was studying the palomino. Even if he wasn't as crazy about horses as Sam Hall, he could still appreciate a beautiful animal. "I heard Willie was the only one could handle him," he observed.

Sam grunted. "He's bringing fancy stud fees, and in a couple of years I'll sell him for a good price. Meanwhile," he laughed, jerking a thumb at Willie, "riding's about the only thing he can do right, and the exercise is good for the horse." He wheeled his own horse and trotted toward the road. Willie followed him on the creamy, golden horse with the silvery mane.

"I could ride that palomino, too," Jerry murmured bitterly. "He won't let me try. Says the horse'd run away with me."

"Well, if I didn't take Sam Hall's advice on anything else, I believe I would on horses," Otto answered carefully.

Ever since Sam Hall had married Jess Harper's widow, a kind of armed truce had existed between him and Otto. Their only dealings were occasioned by the fifteen acres which Otto rented to Sam for pasture

land, and by the fact that young Jerry spent every moment he could at Otto's place. Otto shared the general opinion that the gaunt, handsome man who had never held any steady job in his forty-five years in Kent had married the widow for the fine stable of horses and good dairy which Jess Harper had left her. He couldn't have hated Sam for that, but he did hate him for the shabby way he treated Jerry and his mentally twisted older brother. When the new Mrs. Hall died a year after Sam had married her, Otto had suggested to Sam that he'd like to adopt Jerry. Sam had turned him down.

"I'll keep him as long as I can lick him," he had sneered. "He's as good as a hired hand. Tell you what, Otto," he had roared with glee, "if you're just looking for cheap help, I'll give you Willie."

That was as close as they'd come to a fight. But Otto had just driven his clenched hands into his pockets and strode away. Otto's long suit was patience. He reasoned that a time would come for a real showdown with Sam Hall.

* * *

Two days later, on Monday, Otto went in the house for a glass of water and discovered that his automatic pump had stopped working. He tinkered a while with it before he discovered that all his electric power was off. A vague worry in the back of his head, he telephoned the Kent Power and Light Company. Taylor, the office manager, answered.

"Hey," Otto complained, "my power's off."

"That so?" Taylor responded affably. "You check your fuses?"

"Yep," Otto replied, then added casually; "You fellows fixed that low line, didn't you?"

"What low line?"

"The low line I told Degnan about Saturday," Otto answered. "It's in my south pasture."

"I didn't recall any complaint of a low line," Taylor answered slowly. "Anyway, I'll send Degnan out right away to find out what's wrong."

Otto left the telephone wondering whether he'd got Degnan in trouble unnecessarily. "This might not have anything

to do with that low line," he thought aloud. "And now poor Degnan is probably catching hell over forgetting it."

"He should catch it," his wife answered sharply. "Degnan drinks too much for a fellow working on power lines."

Degnan drove up in the green power truck within thirty minutes. His cheeks looked pale beneath a stubble of beard and his mouth was set hard. Otto figured he'd caught hell from Taylor all right.

After making a hasty check of the power lines around the house and apparently finding nothing wrong, Degnan said, "Let's look at the low line you were talking about."

OTTO led him across the road and down through the meadowland. It was about a ten-minute walk and took them well out of sight of the farmhouse. They topped a rise and were started down into the entrance to the pasture land which Sam Hall rented for his herd when they saw the line swaying about seven feet off the ground. It crossed a cleared space and then trailed into the underbrush before it climbed to the top of the next pole.

Otto whistled. "I'd say it was swinging low!"

"You better watch your step," Degnan warned. He surveyed the line closely for a minute, then shrugged. "I'll have to go back and phone in for 'em to turn the juice off."

Otto didn't answer. He was peering at the brush on the other side of the clearing. "Is that a horse stretched out there?" he gasped.

Degnan strode across the clearing. "It's a horse all right," he announced crisply. "And the kid that was riding the horse!"

Otto scrambled after Degnan. He was sick at what he thought he was going to see. He reached Degnan and looked at the body of the animal and, just beyond it, the crumpled figure of the boy. But it wasn't Jerry. It was Willie, and there was a great blackened patch on his back where the 4800-volt charge had burst out of his body.

"Well, he never knew what hit him anyway," Degnan said.

Otto rode over to tell Sam Hall while Degnan notified the power office. He found Sam in the barn unsaddling a horse. Before Otto finished his story, he saw Jerry

standing at the other end of the barn listening.

"I wondered what was keeping the damn-fool kid," Sam said finally. "We were both out riding, but we weren't together. He always rides down into the south pasture by the old horse barn, but I didn't think to warn him about that line 'cause I figured it'd been fixed by now." He was silent a moment and when he looked back at Otto his expression was a mixture of indignation and triumph. "Why the hell wasn't it fixed? You know, Otto, that's going to be a damn expensive question for somebody to answer."

The inquest was held the next morning at the village court house. Dr. Davis, the coroner, called six witnesses: Otto, Sam Hall, Bert Degnan, Taylor, and the two state troopers who had made the routine accident investigation.

Dr. Davis questioned Degnan first about the condition of the line, how low it was and how it could have gotten that way. It developed that all the lines were inspected semi-monthly. "There was probably a weakness in that line when it was inspected," Degnan said, "but the spotters must've missed it. That happens once in a while."

Otto noticed that Taylor glared at Degnan when he said that.

There were a lot more questions directed at Degnan and Taylor, mainly dealing with the technical set-up of the power lines.

"I understand that you made a complaint about the line being low?" Dr. Davis finally asked Otto.

Otto nodded. "Last Saturday," he answered. "Hall told me about it. I telephoned the power office and Degnan answered."

"What did Degnan say?"

"He said he'd be right out and fix it."

"But he didn't fix it until your power shut off and you were obliged to call again yesterday?" Dr. Davis said slowly.

"That's right," Otto agreed.

The inquest was over.

The next day the news was all over the village that Dr. Davis had rendered a verdict of death due to gross negligence, and that Sam Hall was bringing suit for damages against the Kent Power and Light Company.

Taylor confirmed this ruefully when Otto met him on the street. "Guess we were in

the wrong," he admitted. "That low line should have been attended to same day it was reported. You know, Otto," he continued, "coincidence is a funny thing. If Bert Degnan hadn't happened to be the only one in the office when you called that day, the complaint would have come to me directly and I would have seen to it that it wasn't filed and forgotten. And if you hadn't called up during the noon hour, Degnan wouldn't have been alone in the office."

"Sure is funny the way things happen," Otto murmured.

"They won't happen just that way again," Taylor concluded grimly, "because Degnan has been fired, naturally."

OTTO had been sorry to learn about Degnan being fired. He had no special liking for the man but he couldn't help feeling that it had been partly his fault that Degnan had got into the mess. And, although he saw no particular significance in Taylor's remarks about coincidence, the conversation remained obstinately in the back of his mind like a persistent tune.

Then, on Friday, Jerry dropped over to see him. He was riding a shabby black mare. "He still won't even let me try to ride the palomino," the boy muttered disgustedly.

Otto's mouth dropped open as it usually did when he was thinking hard, and he recalled how deathly sure he had been that day that it was Jerry who had been killed. Suddenly, Otto began to hear words to that persistent tune in his head.

That night he drove into the village to see Bert Degnan. He found him in his room in the shabbiest of Kent's two hotels.

"What in hell do you want?" Degnan demanded darkly.

"I want to talk to you," Otto said. "I got to thinking about Willie's death. There are too many coincidences, Bert."

Degnan sat down on the bed as though somebody had pushed him. His eyes blazed their interest.

"Why should Sam Hall have come to my house that day to get me to telephone in a complaint about the low power line?" Otto demanded. "He could have called himself just as well—unless maybe he wanted another witness to that call."

Struggling to make clear the suspicion which had grown too big to contain within

himself, Otto continued: "When I saw that horse lying dead in the brush that day, I figured sure Jerry had been riding it. Afterwards, it struck me why. It was because I saw that horse wasn't the palomino, and because I knew Willie always rode the palomino."

"He wasn't riding the palomino that day," Degnan snapped.

"That's exactly it!" Otto pointed out. "That one day he wasn't riding the palomino. He was riding the sorriest looking nag in Sam's stable, as if Sam maybe knew what was going to happen. . . ."

"You saying Sam Hall *planned* the accident?" Degnan demanded.

Otto hesitated only momentarily. "Yes," he replied flatly, adding: "If we could prove he did plan it, it would change things for you, wouldn't it?"

Degnan took a drink from a whiskey bottle which was setting under the bed. "I don't know," he muttered. Then he asked: "Who you told this to besides your wife?"

"I haven't even told my wife," Otto replied.

"Get the hell out of here and let me think," Degnan said. "You'll hear from me."

He waited until he heard Otto descend the front steps of the hotel. Then he ran to a telephone booth in the lobby. He called Sam Hall, and when Sam answered he said: "This is Bert. I've got to see you at the old barn in twenty minutes."

"You crazy?" Hall snapped. "Suppose somebody else had answered!"

"Somebody else didn't," Degnan shot back. "This is important." And he hung up. He started back up the stairs to his room and then, when the desk clerk had returned to his magazine, he slipped back around the corner of the stairs into the basement.

* * *

Otto lived seven miles outside the village limits. He drove slowly. When he was a quarter of a mile from home, another car came up behind him on the dirt road. It was Bert Degnan, waving for him to stop.

He jammed on his brakes and Degnan's car pulled over in front of him. Degnan jumped out and strode back to Otto. He had an automatic in his hand.

"You hop in my car and drive," Degnan ordered brusquely.

Otto looked at him and looked at the gun and suddenly everything was painfully clear. He did as he was ordered. When they had gone a few hundred yards down the road, Degnan had him turn into an old abandoned wood road. They left Degnan's car there.

"You know where the old horse barn is from here," Degnan said. "Start walking."

THE NIGHT was clear and an almost full moon made a flashlight unnecessary. Crossing the meadowland, Otto realized that he hadn't carried his coincidences far enough. If he had, he might have wondered why Sam Hall had asked him to call the power company during the noon hour and been so anxious to make certain that Degnan had answered. He might have even realized that if Sam Hall had planned such a murder, he needed an accomplice. It was necessary that the Kent Power and Light Company make itself liable to lawsuit by failing to fix the line. Degnan had answered that necessity and was now awaiting the culmination of the lawsuit for his pay-off.

When they reached the deserted barn, Sam Hall stepped out of its shadows, a revolver in his hand.

"Otto got an idea you planned Willie's death," Degnan informed Sam. "He came to me first."

Sam stood there. There was fear in his face, but there was also vindication. "I always said the guy was stupid," he choked.

Degnan continued matter-of-factly: "I'll admit he came to my hotel room tonight. I'll say he was worrying himself crazy that he was to blame for the kid's death for not making sure that line had been fixed."

Sam's mouth hung open as he struggled to follow Degnan's words. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"You got a rope in that barn," Degnan answered savagely. "Get it and I'll show you. You never hear of a guy going wacky over something like that and committing suicide?"

Otto listened dumbly, as though he were hearing voices in a dream. He watched Sam stiffen, then nod his head. Sam got

the rope and began knotting a hangman's noose.

Suddenly Otto heard the sound of hoofbeats, bursting over the hilltop and descending upon them in a heightening crescendo. Then, out of the shadow of the hillside and galloping madly toward them into the moonlight, came the palomino with a waving, shouting rider.

It happened in a moment. The silver-maned stallion saw them in his path and reared back, his forelegs pawing the air furiously over Sam Hall's head.

Hall jumped and sprawled, and the horse fell over backwards toward Otto and Degnan. Degnan whirled and Otto dived over the horse's belly and landed on the gun that Sam Hall had dropped. He picked it up, and in the mad swirl of the palomino struggling back to its feet, he saw Degnan getting off the ground with his gun still in his hand.

Otto took frantic aim and shot. Degnan dropped. Then Sam's head rose quickly from the dirt, and Otto hit it hard with the butt of the gun.

Then he walked over to Degnan and saw that Degnan was dead. He went on to where Jerry was hugging the earth. "You all right?" he asked.

The kid looked up dazedly. "I—I guess so," he whispered.

"I took the palomino out for a ride after Sam left the house," he explained. He sounded on the verge of tears. "I wanted to try riding him—Sam wouldn't ever let me."

"But why did you ride here?" Otto asked.

"I didn't!" the boy sobbed. "The palomino ran away with me."

Otto sat down on the grass and put his arm around Jerry and hugged the boy to him. "Willie always used to ride the palomino down this way," he reflected.

He looked back up the hillside in time to see the palomino reach the crest and stand for a moment silhouetted in the moonlight. Otto almost fancied he could see a rider. He sighed, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes hard. He looked down at Jerry.

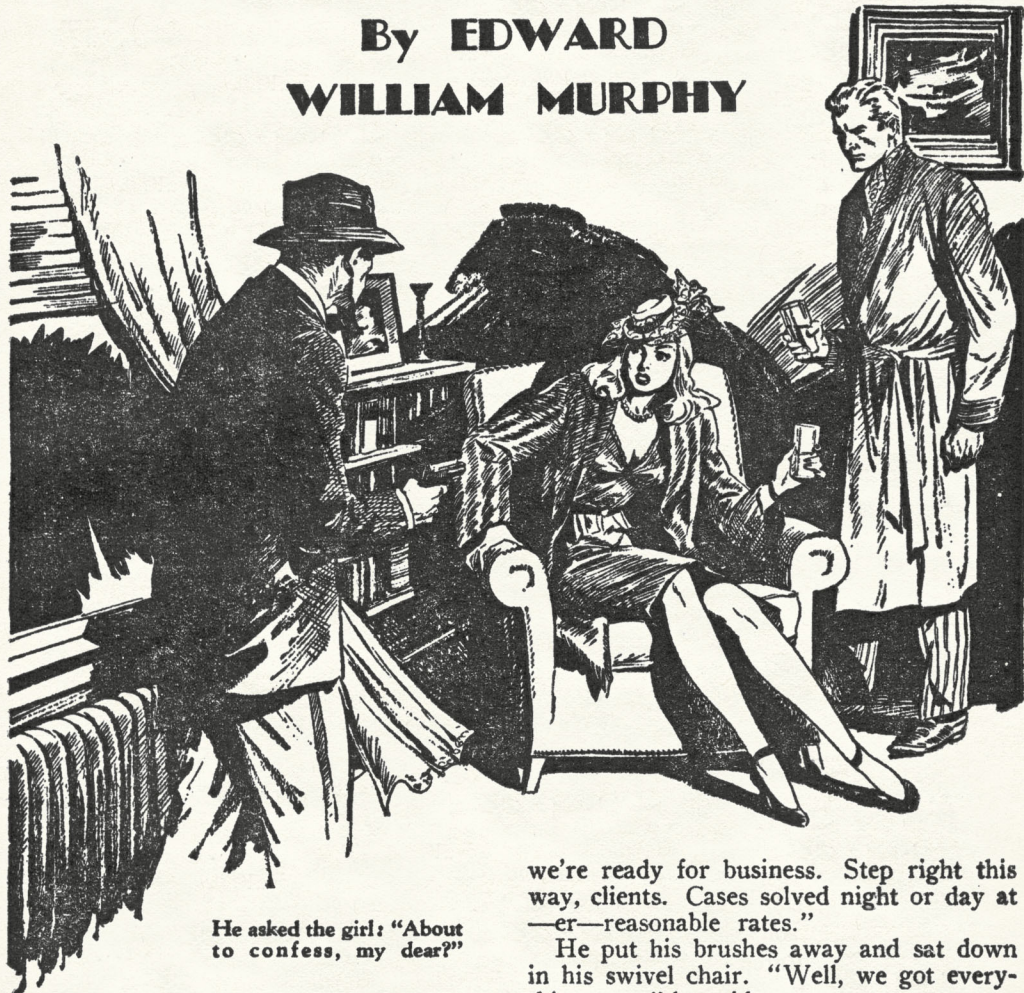
"Willie could sure handle that horse," he said.



Brannigan and Duane, tender babes in Sherlock's game, were breezing merrily through their first case—until they learned even a beautiful client may have . . .

KILLINGS ON THE CONSCIENCE

By EDWARD
WILLIAM MURPHY



He asked the girl: "About to confess, my dear?"

I WAS lolling back in my new swivel chair watching my partner, Mickey Duane, put the finishing touches to the gilt lettering on our door:

*Brannigan and Duane
Investigations*

"There," Mickey said, "that's that! Now

we're ready for business. Step right this way, clients. Cases solved night or day at—er—reasonable rates."

He put his brushes away and sat down in his swivel chair. "Well, we got everything now," he said.

"Everything but clients," I said gloomily. "And the small matter of enough dough to keep us eating."

At that moment, the telephone rang. Our first call—the phone had just been installed that morning. The number was still unlisted in the phone book. I looked over at

Mickey. He shrugged and said: "Two to one it's a wrong number." I scooped up the phone and said in what I hoped was a crisp professional tone: "Brannigan and Duane."

"Hello, Brannigan, that you?"

"Yes, this is Brannigan speaking."

"Hi, Boy, this is Pendleton over at Missing Persons. Some Jane was in looking for a character—wanted us to drop everything and help her look. When I didn't whip out my magnifying glass and start hot-footing on the trail, she asked me to recommend somebody who would. I thought you might like a fast start in the business, so I sent her to you. She should be up soon."

I was still thanking him when he hung up.

"Business," I told Mickey. "George Pendleton over at the Missing Persons Bureau is sending a girl over. She's looking for a man."

"What girl isn't these days?" Mickey said.

We sat around for about fifteen minutes waiting for our door to open. When it did, a fine mist of expensive perfume drifted in, followed closely by a mink coat. The mink covered as fancy a frame as I've seen in years. Bronze-colored hair fell to her shoulders. She had green eyes and a straight nose, and she was wearing a shade of lipstick that would give a wooden Indian ideas.

"Mr. Brannigan?" she fluted at me. I looked around to see if any swarms of bees were attracted by her voice.

"That's me," I said.

Mickey whistled appreciatively. I glared at him, but the girl smiled.

"Won't you sit down?" I asked, pointing to our customer's chair.

She sat down and crossed her legs smoothly. If Mickey's eyes went out any further, I'd have to help him search the floor for them.

"To start off," she said, "my name is Carol Rogers. I'm looking for a man named Wainwright Kincaid. I'm prepared to pay one thousand dollars to find him."

I liked the sound of that "one thousand dollars." "We're the firm who can find him," I said.

"Good," she said. She opened an alligator-skin handbag and pulled out an envelope.

"Here are some pictures," she said.

I took the envelope and fished out several

photographs. I hid my surprise, I hoped, by coughing behind my hand. The photographs were regular police line-up pictures. Mr. Kincaid had been picked up by the San Francisco Police at one time or another.

Kincaid, even in the bad police photos, was a sleek-looking bird. He had a good profile. His hair was as carefully fixed as that of a model for a hair-oil ad. He looked to be about thirty-five, but I wouldn't have bet on it.

The full length photo told me he was five-eleven. He was well built.

"As long as women go for good-looking men," I said, "Mr. Kincaid will never have to work for a living."

She brushed that aside. "If you want any more information—"

"Yes, I do," I said. "Have you any idea where he is now? These pictures were taken in Frisco. This is New York. There's plenty of country in between."

"He's in New York, I'm sure," she said. "But New York is a big place, too. Other than that I can't help you. When you find him, just let me know where he is. It won't be necessary even to talk to him. Just locate him for me."

"We'll do what we can," I said.

She fished in her alligator-skin bag again and produced a thick leather wallet—the long kind that doesn't fold over. Inside the wallet, a sheaf of new bills nestled. She riffled through several bills and looked at me questioningly.

"Our rates are twenty a day, plus expenses," I said.

"I won't quibble about rates," she said. "For twenty, you'd just give me ordinary service. I want special service and I'm willing to pay for it. Here," she slid out five bills, "is two hundred and fifty dollars. I want the man located by tomorrow night. If you locate him, you've got seven-fifty more coming. If you don't, just forget the case and keep this money."

She jotted a telephone number down on one of our cards and said good-by.

Mickey almost broke his neck opening the door for her. She swayed out gracefully, leaving behind the expensive scent and five crisp fifties. I fingered the bills; they felt good to touch.

Mickey came back into the office. He looked as though love had smitten him a back-hand blow. "Yum Yum," he said,

"I'd work for her even if she didn't have all the dough the mint printed this week."

"Let's go out and get us a good meal," I said.

STANDING in front of the restaurant, we picked the remnants of prime steak out of our teeth and debated the best way to find the missing Mr. Kincaid. We decided to call the police first.

I called Charley Homer at Identifications and learned that Mr. Kincaid was not in their files. Charley said that the Broadway Squad might know something, though, and told me to call O'Day.

O'Day has been spotting wrong guys for so long that he can tell one a mile off. He's got a photographic memory, as a number of residents of the Sing Sing cage can testify.

"Well, so it's you, Brannigan," O'Day roared in his normal voice. "How are you, Boy?"

I held the receiver about a foot from my ear. O'Day doesn't need a phone; you can hear him from the Battery to The Bronx. On a clear day, even the Westchester citizens complain.

"I hear you're starting an agency, Boy," O'Day went on. "Good for you."

I broke in: "Look, O'Day," I said, "we're on a case. We're looking for a guy named Kincaid, Wainwright Kincaid."

"What does he look like?" O'Day belted.

"I'll be right over with a couple of prints. Where can I meet you?"

"The statue of Father Duffy'll be fine," he said.

When you hear O'Day over the phone, you expect a mountain of a man. He doesn't disappoint you in person. I spotted the huge form standing in front of the statue at the same moment that he saw me.

"Hello, Brannigan," he bellowed loud enough to stop traffic.

Mickey and I hurried over to him.

I showed O'Day the pictures that we had of Kincaid. He studied them closely.

"Brannigan, me boy," he said, "you've come to the right party. I spotted this guy only the other night at the Club Du Val. He looked as though he were pretty well known there. In fact, he was talking to Du Val himself. . . ."

We thanked O'Day and hustled over to

the Club Du Val on Fifty-first Street.

Rene Du Val used to be known as the Patent Leather Du Val when he was a young gun-packer, but he had come a long way since then. He still had the patent-leather shine though: sleek black hair, sleek mustache, sleek black clothes and a sharp black eye.

"Well, Brannigan. Here for business or social reasons?" he asked, as he gave me the white-toothed smile.

I wasn't deceived by the smile. "Social, strictly," I said. "This is my new partner, Mickey Duane; I'm showing him the town."

Du Val shoved a graceful hand at Mickey and gave him the "any friend of Brannigan's" routine. Then he waved us over to the bar, and we hoisted a glass to the old days.

We had two more, alone, before Mickey poked me with an elbow. "Kincaid," he said under his breath.

Wainwright Kincaid was passing through the smoke-layered room, tossing greetings into the air like a fine spray.

I sauntered over to a phone, screwed the dial vigorously and said: "Hello, Miss Rogers. Brannigan. Your man is over at the Club Du Val on Fifty-first Street."

WE HAD hardly polished off another drink before Carol Rogers came into the club. She had on a white evening gown that was designed to be worn just as she was wearing it, and a short fur jacket. Her hair was upswept and had a jeweled tiara in it. Gorgeous was the word for Miss Carol Rogers.

She spotted us at the bar, but gave no sign of recognition. She swept into the tabled area and greeted Kincaid. I might have been mistaken, but it seemed to me Mr. Kincaid went a trifle pale.

In a few minutes, Mickey and I drifted out. We eased into a doorway diagonally across from the night club marquee and waited. About ten minutes later, Miss Rogers and Kincaid came out arm in arm. They climbed into a taxi and as it sped away, I saw the beginning of a torrid embrace.

"I wish some luscious damsel would look me up for purposes of osculation," Mickey said wistfully.

I agreed with him.

At nine thirty the next morning, a mes-

senger showed up with an envelope containing seven hundred and fifty dollars in crisp, crackly fifties. He had hardly cleared the doorway on his way out when O'Day barged in. He flopped heavily into the customer's chair and said:

"The Inspector's looking for you."

"What's up?" I asked.

"That guy you were looking for last night. We found him this morning. He's over at the morgue now. Somebody chilled him about three this morning."

"You working on it?" I asked.

"Nope. I'm just giving you a tip. I should be home in bed now, but I figure you might like to know."

"Thanks, O'Day," I said.

O'Day said: "He was chilled with three .32 caliber slugs. If I remember rightly, you go for .38's."

"That's right," I said, pulling my Police Positive out and laying it on the desk.

Mickey produced a .45 automatic. He goes in for heavy artillery since he got the habit of carrying a .45 during the War.

"Now, boys," O'Day protested. "It's not accusing you I am. I'm just passing you the tip."

I gave O'Day a big shot of bourbon for his tip. When he had gone, I said to Mickey:

"Well, let's find the babe."

"Please," he said, "you're talking about the woman I'd like to love."

We arrived at Carol Rogers' hotel just in time to see a bellhop carrying her bags to the elevator. She was still in the room giving a last check to her makeup. When she saw us in the mirror, she turned.

"Hello," she said with that honey tone. "Come to see me off?" A frown creased her lovely brow. "Or hasn't the messenger delivered the money yet?"

I kicked the door shut. "We got the dough," I said, "but we have some other things to talk about. Why did you want Kincaid found, Miss Rogers?"

She was annoyed. "I don't see—"

I broke in: "Look, Miss Rogers, we took the case and handled it in confidence, but we're in a spot now. We have a right to have your motives explained."

Her green eyes were snapping at me as she answered. "If you must know, Mr. Kincaid and I were engaged to be married. He ran off at the last minute. I had to find

him to learn his reason." She started to fish for a handkerchief and I hastily handed her mine.

Remembering the kiss, I thought the story might be true. "Okay," I said. "I'm sorry I had to do that, but—"

At that moment, a knock came at the door.

It was the bell-hop. "Your elevator is waiting, Miss," he said.

She thanked him and turned to us.

I said quickly: "I wouldn't go, if I were you. Your friend Kincaid was shot to death last night. The Police will want to talk to you about it."

I wasn't expecting fireworks, but what I got was dynamite. She said softly: "Yes, I know," and closed the door behind her.

Both Mickey and I reached the door in a split second, but we were too late. The elevator door clanged shut as we reached the hall. I jabbed a button, but even as I did I knew she'd beat us to the street.

Silently, we watched the gauge above the elevator spin down to the number 1.

"What now?" Mickey wanted to know.

"We pump that bell-hop," I told him.

The bell-hop told us that the girl had taken a cab, but he didn't catch the address. We killed time until the cab came back, which wasn't over five minutes.

"That swell looker—sure I took her for a little cruise," the cabbie said. "But she only wanted to go as far as the subway." He leered. "I tole her I'd take her any place free, for nothin', but—"

I cut off his monologue. "Take us to the same station," I said.

In a few minutes, the cabbie pulled up to the curb in Herald Square. "I dropped her right here," he said.

We got out of the cab and looked around. "That's fine," I said. "She could only take the Sixth Avenue Subway, the BMT or the Tubes, or duck into a department store, or—"

Mickey cut me off with a nasty word.

WE ASKED about a million people, but got nothing out of them except a few insults. The girl had chosen a perfect spot to disappear in. Finally we gave up and returned to the office.

"What now, Sherlock?" Mickey asked.

"We sit and wait. Something always turns up if you just wait around."

We didn't wait long. The telephone jangled.

"Hello, Brannigan. This is Homer of Identifications."

"Yeah, Homer, how's tricks?" I asked.

"Not bad with me, but I understand they could be better with you. That guy you asked about. He's dead."

"I know. I'm waiting for the Inspector to catch up with us now."

"He'll be there, soon, I'll bet," Homer said. "But, Wise Guy, did you know Kincaid did a stretch in San Quentin for manslaughter? He killed some old guy in an auto accident?"

"No, I didn't know that," I told him.

"He just got out about six months ago. The name of the guy he killed was Rogers."

"Any details?" I almost yelled into the phone.

"Nope, that's all so far."

"This drives it home," I told Mickey. "Carol Rogers had a motive, and a good one at that. This Kincaid killed a relative of hers in an auto accident. Homer said an old guy. Maybe it was her father—we'll have to check on it."

I called the telegraph company and sent a wire to a firm out in San Francisco that I knew.

That night I got a reply.

SILAS ROGERS RUN DOWN AND
KILLED BY WAINWRIGHT KINCAID
STOP KINCAID WAS BLIND DRUNK
AT TIME OF ACCIDENT STOP
CAROL ROGERS COMMA WIDOW
COMMA SUSPECTED OF COMPLIC-
ITY STOP KINCAID DREW THREE
TO FIVE FOR MANSLAUGHTER
STOP RELEASED SIX MONTHS BACK
STOP KINCAID HIRED US TO FIND
CAROL ROGERS BUT LATER CALLED
US OFF STOP SEND FIFTY BY RE-
TURN MAIL STOP.

I handed the yellow form to Mickey. "Read this," I said.

We read the message over twice. "So," he said, "she had a better motive than you suspected before. She and this Kincaid guy must've hatched a little deal. Kincaid got stuck with the dirty end of it."

"Right," I said, "and Kincaid hired them to look for her as soon as he got out. Evidently he was going to pay her off for a double-cross. She ran away, but he followed her here. She got us to finger him and then she slipped him the goods: three .32's."

"Listen, Bran," Mickey said, "remember what she told us when she hired us—that we had to locate him by tonight or forget the case. Why was she in such a hurry?"

I shook my head. "I can't figure that time element out. It must mean something." We sat and thought, but nothing hatched. All I could think of was Carol Rogers' shapely gams, and from the sly grin on Mickey's face, he had similar thoughts.

After awhile we went over to the Club Du Val, which so far was our only lead. I was getting a little worried about the fact that the Inspector hadn't bothered us yet. Maybe he was fishing in deep waters. I hoped he'd pop into the open soon. I don't like these undercover games.

Du Val, himself, was not in evidence. Nor was O'Day or anybody else from the Broadway squad.

I braced the headwaiter. "Du Val around?" I asked.

He looked past my ear. "M'seu wishes something?" he asked in return. His tone was strictly disinterested.

I let him see the corner of a five, without visible results. "Tell Du Val that Brannigan wants to see him," I snapped, getting hard with him. "If he's smart he'll see me. Tell him it's about Kincaid."

Mickey and I held up a corner of the bar for a half hour. I watched the headwaiter disappear down a corridor, and later come back. He passed us without a glance.

On his way back, I reached out, grabbed his tails, and dragged him over to us.

"Where's Du Val?" I asked.

"He's not here."

"Well, when he gets back, tell him Brannigan doesn't like to be kept waiting. You hear me?"

He heard me.

As we left, Mickey carefully trod heavily on the headwaiter's foot.

THE NIGHT was blustery when we left the Club. There wasn't a cab in sight, and the doorman wasn't around. We had to walk over to the avenue.

I saw something move beside me and heard Mickey yell. About that time my hat was rammed down by a blow from behind.

I pitched to my knees but was up before a second blow could hit me. I heard Mickey yell again. He was battling two shadowy

figures. I jumped in only to get clipped again from behind. I spun. The guy who was wielding the sap was an amateur. I got in under the blow and sent two hard lefts sizzling into his plexus.

When he doubled, I kicked him, once, hard, in the teeth. I don't play with guys who sap me.

Mickey was down when I got to him. I swung a roundhouse at a punk who was bashing Mickey's head against the concrete sidewalk. It dazed him, but he was still astride Mick. I sledge-hammered him with a rabbit punch. He moaned and slid off Mick.

The other Joe didn't wait. He took off down the street, going like a jet plane.

I started to pick Mickey up. "You all right?" I asked him.

"Sure I'm all right," he said. "If you think only two guys can take me, you're crazy."

The boy I had kicked in the teeth moaned.

"What did you do to him?" Mickey asked. "Hit him with a pile driver? Let's make the bum talk."

We lifted him up. His mouth was bloody. He was semi-conscious.

"Who set you on us?" I asked him.

Before he could answer, a string of sharp pops went off. Brick dust stung my cheek. We'd been under fire before; we knew how to flatten out behind a dime.

The punk hadn't had our training. He swayed on his feet, and then sagged loosely to the ground.

I had my .38 out and sent two slugs whistling across the street.

A light went on in a window. Silhouetted against the light was a black shape. I fired. The hat leaped into the air. Glass crashed. The light abruptly went out again. But before it did, I saw the shine of plastered hair.

"You see what I saw?" I asked.

"But why should Du Val spend his time sharp-shooting at us?"

"That's what we're going to find out." I was up on my feet and across the street in a zig-zag rush. Mickey covered me with blasts from his .45.

But Du Val had gotten away. The street was bare. Inside the house, I could hear somebody praying.

I heard the wail of a siren. "Let's dust," I said. We dusted.

We got to our apartment and tossed to see who took the first shower and who mixed the drink. I won. Mickey went into the kitchenette, grumbling.

When I got out of the bathroom, I saw that we had guests: O'Day and the inspector himself, Peter J. Steele.

"Hi Inspector; O'Day," I said. "Have a drink?"

"This is business," the Inspector snapped.

"So?" I asked.

"So this, Brannigan. We play square with the people who play square with us. The others—" he broke off to let me fill in my own picture.

I said nothing.

"Your partner says that you do the talking for the firm," the Inspector said. "Start talking."

"What do you want to hear?" I asked him.

"About this case you were working on. Brannigan, did you spot Kincaid for the murderer?"

"I don't know that myself, Inspector," I said. "We were hired to find a man. We found him, and the next morning he was dead. That's all I know."

He looked closely at me for a long minute. "I'll take your word for it," he said slowly. "I know how you feel about your clients, so I won't ask you who hired you." He laughed. "We already know that!"

He handed me a circular, freshly printed. It contained a description of Carol Rogers, who was wanted for questioning in connection with the murder of Wainwright Kincaid.

"Well, now," the Inspector said, with a glance at his watch, "it's after hours. Where's that drink you offered us?"

Mickey scuttled into the kitchenette for the drinks.

The party broke up after an hour or so. I didn't tell the boys about the shooting. I like to settle little affairs like that in my own fashion.

I WAS carrying the empty glasses out to the kitchenette when the buzzer sounded. I went to the door and opened it.

"Well," I said. "Hello."

"I wondered what kind of reception I'd get," said Miss Carol Rogers.

I ushered her in and showed her a chair.

She looked tired and her hands were trembling slightly, but she still had plenty of grace. She sank easily into the chair and smoothly crossed her legs.

She saw Mickey and smiled at him. "I was just telling Mr. Brannigan that I wasn't sure of my reception here," she said.

"Figuring at the rate of twenty dollars a day, you're still our client for a long time to come," I said.

She shook her head. "I agreed to pay a thousand dollars for the work you did. That is over. Anything else you do from now on will be paid for under a separate agreement."

"If that's the way you want it—"

"It is," she said. "Now tell me, what is the situation as of now?"

"You're wanted for questioning in connection with the Kincaid killing," I told her. "The cops just left a few minutes before you arrived."

"Yes, I know. I was waiting for them to leave," she said.

"That's all I know," I said. "Maybe you'd like to clear up a few things?"

She looked at me and shrugged her shoulders tiredly. "I suppose I'll have to tell you," she said, "but I'd like a drink first, if I might."

She hadn't finished the sentence before Mickey was in the kitchenette spilling liquid into a glass. We waited, listening to the gurgle of the bottle.

Carol took the glass Mickey handed her and drained it. She dabbed at her full lips with a wisp of lace. The highball worked miracles. She straightened in her chair and smiled.

"It's hard to find a place to begin," she said. "It started five years ago—"

Glass shattered with a terrific smash. I spun. The man who had just kicked the window in was standing on the fire escape with a gun in his hand. The gun was aimed at Carol Rogers.

"Mind if I come in?" Rene Du Val asked smoothly.

He slipped through the window. Glass cracked under his feet, as he stepped down from the window sill. He leaned against the bookcase. His gun hand drooped negligently, but the muzzle of the small automatic was always pointed at Carol.

"About to confess all, my dear?" he asked the girl.

She looked at Mickey and me helplessly.

I was cursing myself for not having a gun in the pocket of my robe.

"You don't answer," Du Val said. "Afraid of what I know?"

"You lie," she snapped. Her face was white.

Du Val looked at me.

"What's your angle, Du Val?" I asked. "Tonight you had a couple of strong-boys jump us. After that, you took a couple of shots at us, and now you bust in here and think you can shove us around. I'm about out of patience, Du Val. You'd better speak up, quick, and make it good."

Du Val brought the gun to bear on my stomach. I could feel my skin creep. His eyes were glassy.

"I missed you before, Brannigan," he said, "but I won't miss now." He squeezed the trigger.

I heard the shot and waited for the bullet to smack into me. Instead, I saw Du Val begin to totter. He clamped his hands over his chest. When he brought them away, blood was smeared on the palms. He looked incredulously at the blood for a second and suddenly wilted.

The girl still sat in the chair. Her face was whiter than ever. "I think—I'm—going to be—ill," she said shakily.

The gun she had used dropped from her limp fingers. Mickey grabbed her and hustled her into the bathroom.

I bent over Du Val. His breath was rasping noisily. His pulse still beat slowly. He wasn't dead yet.

I picked up the phone and called a doctor I knew. When he arrived, he treated Du Val, gave Carol a sedative and advised me to call the police.

"He won't die, unless complications set in. It's really only a flesh wound, but it should be reported," the doctor told me.

"Don't worry, Doctor, I'll report it," I said. "But first, I want these people to talk."

WHEN we were alone, Mickey said: "I suppose you've got it all figured out." He waved a hand at our bedroom, where the girl was sleeping. "She got any killings on her conscience?" he asked.

"Two," I said.

He whistled softly. "A murderess!"

(Continued on page 97)

THRILL

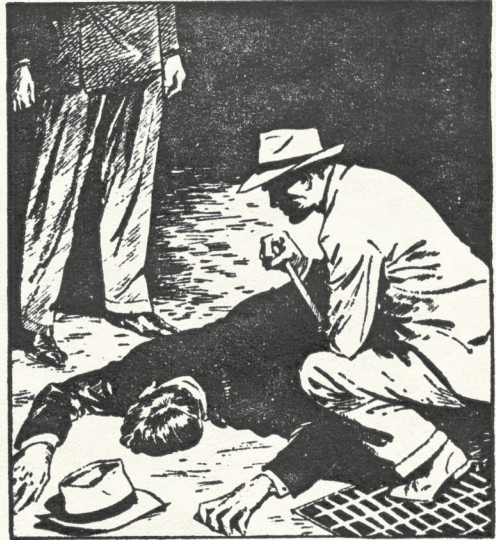
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



HEADLINER FILES, INC., who dug up the dirt, data and details on celebrities, sent cynical Thackery Hackett to interview Richard Vernon, movie idol of the moment. But a gun-toting stranger had gotten there first and tried to make his escape. . . . Hackett's instant reaction was to strike with his cane.



IN DEFIANCE of the law, Hackett, an ex-private detective, followed the manhunt trail to Greenwich Village where he found Bert Seaver, a boudoir-snooping shamus. Hackett said: "It comes close to home—when a private op gets killed. His fifteen bucks a day isn't supposed to include dying."



LUSCIOUS movie-star Angeline Lane was spitting mad as she told Hackett: "When I get through with my perfect husband, the whole cockeyed world will know he's a two-timing louse." Then she added: "Imagine that! Two-timing me for some other dame! Tell me, Mister, why would any guy want to?"



IN THAT question lay the killer's secret. . . . And as a mysterious brunette saw her world about to crash, Detective-Lieutenant Blackly drew his gun on the murderer. . . . The complete story will be in Frederick C. Davis' detective novel—"Murder in Two-Time"—in July DIME DETECTIVE—published June 4th.

SUICIDAL



Emmet said softly: "Start to talk, sweetheart — and make it good."

Bill Emmet, flying-squad strong arm, drew a pink-tea assignment to go back to his home town—and write off a damning confession . . . he'd signed ten years ago.

JOURNEY



*Novelette of
Thrilling Suspense*

**By JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

CHAPTER ONE

Two-Man Task Force

TANNER had come to town to supervise the traveling gang that Marty Schor used to break up the picket lines. Tanner had rented a double office in a moldy building in downtown Buffalo.

Bill Emmet slouched in a scarred oak chair in the outer office, along with Charlie O'Day, waiting for Tanner to call them in. Emmet was weary and disgusted. The muscles in his lean, tough body ached like hollow teeth. There was a strip of new adhesive pressed diagonally across the outside corner of his right eyebrow. His eye was swollen and discolored. "I'm so damn sick of this merry-go-round," Emmet said suddenly.

Charley O'Day grinned at him. "What don't you like about it? The pay is good and you don't work too hard."

"I don't like pushing these guys around. I know, you call 'em the working stiffs and say they're all suckers. But I wonder."

O'Day took a drag on his cigarette and blew it out reflectively. He said, "You know the trouble with you?"

"What is it, Boss?"

"You're soft and you got too much education. You think too much. If you don't like the business, why don't you get the hell out? Nowadays there's lots of jobs. That's why I don't feel sorry for these jokers we smack around."

Emmet didn't answer. There wasn't any answer. He had been juggling the idea of quitting in his mind for a year, and he knew that it was only a wish. He couldn't get out until Marty let him out.

The door to the inner office opened and Tanner stuck his head out. "Come on in, boys." They followed him in. "Sorry that call kept me so long." He sat behind the desk and O'Day and Emmet sat opposite him. Tanner was Marty Schor's right hand, a right hand constantly curled into a ridged and waiting fist.

He smiled at Emmet and O'Day. "You can lay off smacking these jokers around. I have a new job for you."

"How big a crew?" O'Day asked.

"Just you two, Gentlemen."

"Geez, what is it? A strike in a candy store?"

"It's a big prospect with a fat fee, and there's no strike involved. This is a different type of job. Marty is sending Wheeler to take charge of the present crew. For reasons which I will tell you as I go along, Emmet will be in charge of this assignment. You will take your orders from him, O'Day."

O'Day jumped up. "The hell you say! I've been with Marty for thirteen years and no punk is going—"

"Shut up!" Tanner snapped.

O'Day sat down meekly.

"Now listen to me. This probably won't turn into strong-arm stuff, O'Day. This requires some intelligence, which you aren't well stocked with. Marty or myself would handle it if there weren't two more big jobs coming up. It's a job in Laurie City—your home town, Emmet."

Before he had time for conscious thought, an instinctive "No!" from Emmet's lips broke flatly into the still air of the smoky office.

Tanner said, "O'Day, you wait in the other office. Shut the door on your way out." O'Day looked at Emmet with amused curiosity, got up and walked out. The door slammed behind him.

"Now listen to me, kid," Tanner said softly, "Marty has all the angles figured on this deal. You know the people we'll be tied up with in Laurie City. You had your trouble a long time ago—but not too long ago. Marty's still got that statement you signed and he isn't going to act too damn sweet if you try to welch out of this. . . ."

As Tanner spoke, the meaning of his words faded into a drone that filled the office. The years turned back, like wind whipping over the pages of an open book. Emmet was back in Laurie City, his parents dead two months, two years of college behind him, excited over the prospect of working for Howard Ballery.

BALLERY, a widower, had his home and his office in a rambling grey stone building on the south edge of town. Jim

Ryan, Ballery's gangling red-haired nephew, was in charge of the office staff. The reports from the Sedwill Brewery, Ballery Precision Tools, the Baldwin Hotel and Guther, Ballery and Stine, Real Estate and Insurance — these reports all filtered through the office in Ballery's home.

It had happened ten years ago, when Emmet was eighteen. It might have happened yesterday. He could see the ridged gleaming nails on Ballery's plump brown hands, smell the cigar smoke and whisky on his breath. Every detail of the stone house was familiar.

He could remember being called into Ballery's bedroom. "Emmet, meet Mr. Schor." They shook hands. Schor was small, thin, dark with quick, bright eyes and the ageless vitality of a lizard.

"Emmet, you better be grateful to Mr. Schor."

"Why, Mr. Ballery?"

"Mr. Schor saw you the other day. He likes your looks. He's already paid me the money you lifted from the brewery receipts."

Schor, thin lips stretched in a tight grin. Ballery, chubby, brown and completely indifferent.

"But, Mr. Ballery, I didn't—"

"Don't try to hand me any denials, Emmet. I got Ryan's statement that he saw you take it, and I got Stan Walker's statement that you went down the same night and dropped three thousand on his crap table. You're hooked, kid, and except for my friend, Marty Schor, you'd be taking a long rest. I got no use for people stealing from me."

It had been unbelievable. They had hammered at him with the unreal words until at last he had signed a confession. That had been stupid. For ten years he had been telling himself that he had been stupid. A lot of good that did.

That same night, on the train, Marty Schor had made it clear. Emmet could still remember the satisfaction with which Schor had tossed off the warm whisky in the damp paper cup and smiled his tight, thin-lipped smile.

"The trouble with my business, kid, all I can get is mugs. You know you've been framed into this, don't you?" Emmet had nodded. "Don't let it worry you, kid. Ballery owed me a favor from way back. You

won't regret it, once you get used to it. You got to get used to the idea that if you ever cross me up, Ballery and I sick the cops on you and they stick you behind bars where you can think it over. I own you, kid, and I'm going to use you. I been thinking about this for a long time."

"What—what is your business?" Emmet had asked.

"You might call me a public relations specialist. But as I say, all I can usually get is mugs."

"Why didn't you just ask me to work for you?"

"Hah! You might have said no. You might have said it was too risky. This way, you got to say yes. Take me, I can't talk so good. I haven't got the education. I see big things ahead for my line of work. I got to have a smart front man some day—when I move into the big time. First you're going back to college and take some of that psychology and economics. You better think of me as your pappy, kid, so you can relax and enjoy this."

He had originally dropped out in the second year, and it took three years to get the degree. Then there was a year of traveling with Marty and Tanner, sitting in on the deals, listening, absorbing—hating most of it.

Then Emmet was drafted in November, 1940. A year of training and three years in the islands. Discharged, November, 1945. One hundred and seventeen points. Tech. sergeant.

He awakened out of the past. Tanner was still talking. "... and Marty says that this is a new kind of job, the sort of thing he wants the organization to get into. You been no use to him so far, that is, no more use than any bum he could have picked up for peanuts. He's got an investment in you, and you got an obligation to produce."

"What is the deal?"

"Maybe you remember, since Laurie City is your home town. There is a Walter Wythe who is a big shot. The family has always had dough. Anyway, Wythe has always been gunning for our chum Ballery, stating to anybody that Ballery's business methods are more than a little sharp for a town like Laurie City. Wythe is president of Cathedral Bank and Trust. They have always been behind Ballery Precision Tools. Ballery needs big dough, a big loan to tide

him over on reconversion. Wythe is influencing the board of directors of the bank to lay off. If the loan isn't made in the next sixty days, Ballery goes under. Ballery is paying Marty a fee to send somebody to town to go to work on Wythe. Nothing rough. Just a little persuasion."

"Why can't Ballery use some of his own monkeys?"

"He doesn't want to take the chance of having it kick back on him."

"People will remember that I worked for Ballery."

"He doesn't think so. You worked there a month. That was ten years ago. Besides, you've changed a lot. Who's going to remember?"

Emmet shrugged. Nobody would remember. Except one person. She'd remember. But she'd probably have two or three kids to worry about by now. "How is this delicate persuasion supposed to be handled?" he asked.

"You write your own ticket on that. Dig around and see if Wythe has any babe stashed away in an apartment somewhere. Find out where the bank is overextended on his say so. Anonymous phone calls to the other directors. You go on in there with O'Day and try anything that looks ripe. Just make sure that inside of sixty days either the directors will go over Wythe's head, or Wythe will be willing to play ball. All Marty wants to see is results. And don't go near Ballery. Use O'Day anyway you want to. Mail a report once a week to Marty. Here's twenty-five hundred expense money. Good luck."

When Emmet walked back from the wash room, the berths had been folded up. Charlie O'Day was sitting on the green plush, looking out with distaste at the flat land east of Laurie City. He glanced up at Emmet and said, "Boss, this is one hell of a flat chunk of country. What kind of a town is this Laurie City?"

"Same as every other town in the states with about two hundred thousand people in it." He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to go. Suddenly there was a sense of excitement in him. It turned his stomach hollow and made it hard to take a deep breath. He squeezed in beside O'Day and placed his cheek against the cool glass of the window, trying to see ahead. The morning sun was behind him. The train rounded

a gradual bend. First, he could see the glistening sides of the cars, the locomotive puffing far ahead. Then, the high brown towers of the city, shouldering out of the morning river mist, the sun glinting on a thousand high windows. He pulled his cheek away from the glass.

"What's the name of this joint where we got the reservations?"

"The Baldwin."

"Damn it, Emmet, I can't get through my thick head what the hell it is we got to do."

"I'll figure that out. After we register in, you go locate a car we can rent. Something inconspicuous, like an old business coupe. Put it in the hotel garage and then go to the movies. Read a magazine. Do anything you want to. I'll see you tonight. Just stay off the liquor."

O'Day grinned. "Sure, Boss." He managed to say it in a way that expressed amusement and contempt.

Emmet left the lobby of the Baldwin and walked along the morning sidewalk, a tall, hard man in a dull grey tweed suit and a battered grey felt hat. His long face was impassive, but his eyes, grey and steady, flicked from face to face. There was a trembling in his muscles and a stiff feeling in the back of his neck. This was his town.

At the Cathedral Bank and Trust, he walked back through the bank, his heels hitting hard on the marble floor. The row of tellers' cages were on his left, junior executive desks behind walnut railing on his right. He stopped at one of the neat desks, staring down at the dandruff part of a young man who was making pencil notations on the edge of a page of figures.

The young man looked up, hesitant, wary: "Yes?"

"I want to see Walter Wythe, the president of the bank. Where do I find him?"

The young man pointed with a yellow finger. "Elevators in the back of the bank. Fourteenth floor. He sees no one without appointment."

Emmet walked down the corridor in the direction that the elevator man had pointed. An opaque glass door read: *Offices of the President—Walter C. Wythe.*

Emmet walked in, taking off his hat. A thick green rug, pale walls, an oak secretarial desk. A dark head at the desk. He stopped and looked down at her—knowing even as she knew, sensing it as she did.

Steady grey eyes staring deep into the clouded blue ones. And her face was back in his mind, printed so deeply that he could never again forget. Blue-black hair, soft, curled into two thick rolls on top of her head. Ivory skin. Thick, black brows. Wide blue eyes. Emphatic nose. Wide, firm mouth—stubborn, sensitive. She wore a black suit with a blazing white blouse and open starched collar. A bracelet of crude silver cubes.

She said, simply, "Why did you?"

THE sound of her own words in her ears broke the spell for her. She sat more straightly and gave him a social smile. "Why, Bill Emmet, how nice to see you again after so many years! About ten years, isn't it?"

"Ten years. What are you doing here?" he asked heavily.

"Why I've been here ever since I got out of school, three years ago. I've been Uncle Walter's secretary for nearly a year, ever since Miss Holcomb retired. And what are you doing here?"

"I want to see Mr. Wythe."

"I'm afraid you'll have to tell me your business and then let me see if I can make you an appointment." She was in possession of herself again, crisp and confident.

"My business is confidential."

"I have my instructions to deny appointments to anyone who won't state their business."

Emmet stared at her and she colored slightly. "I'll write him a letter," he said.

"I open all his mail. You might as well tell me what you want."

"Is the word efficient or officious?"

"There's no point in being rude, Mr. Emmet."

He knew she was angry. "Are you Mrs. or Miss?" he asked.

"That is none of your business. Ten years ago you made it none of your business."

Before he walked out, he said, "Please inform Mr. Wythe that Bill Emmet is registered at the Baldwin Hotel and wishes to discuss with him a matter of great urgency and secrecy. If he doesn't call me, I will personally see that you are blamed for any resultant difficulty."

As he was closing the door behind him,

he heard her say, defiantly, "I have my orders."

He had decided on his line of approach. He would inform Walter Wythe that he was representing an unnamed firm who was interested in taking over Ballery Precision Tools. If he could be assured that Ballery Precision Tools would be in a sound financial position at the end of sixty days, he would feel free to sign an option for the purchase of the controlling stock interest from Mr. Ballery. He would hint that his clients didn't think much of the executive ability of Ballery.

Then it would be a case of faking the option so as to make Wythe feel secure in making the loan, confident that Ballery wouldn't last as president of the firm. Then the option could be canceled and the mission would be over. It would depend on making the proper impression on Wythe, and thinking up several good reasons why the interests he could pretend to represent couldn't come in with enough cash to save Ballery Precision Products' financial position. If he could talk a good enough game, there would be no point in having O'Day around.

He spent the afternoon in the Chamber of Commerce Building examining the published financial statements of Ballery Precision Products, and in the Public Library tracking down technical data on cutting speeds and alloy steel—data that he would need to impress Wythe with his grasp of the subject at hand.

He met O'Day in the room at six.

"How are you coming, Boss," O'Day sneered.

"Beautifully. So well in fact that you can go out and get stinking. I won't need you tonight."

"Gee! Thanks, Boss."

"You got the car?"

"Black Ford sedan. 1940. With a new motor. Here's the ticket on it."

"Keep it."

Emmet showered and changed and walked down onto the streets. He walked over to Christopher Street and leaned against the front of a closed store. It was a street of movies, restaurants and bars.

The staccato neon flashed: *Dine and Dance. . . . Bar and Grill. . . . Hostesses.*

The tires whined and made soft rippling noises on the asphalt.

The air was perfume and gasoline and cooking grease. Women laughed. Heels clicked and soles shuffled. A warm, ripe, October night and the people were at play.

Emmet had a steak and coffee in a noisy restaurant with low, fake beams and clouds of smoke. He was picking up his change when they walked up to the booth and looked down at him. Jim Ryan; thirty-four or five; angular; flaming hair. Mary Wythe was with him, clinging to his arm, her eyes too bright and her face flushed.

Ryan asked, "Aren't you asking us to sit down, Emmet?"

"Sit, if you want to. I'm about to leave."

Ryan stood aside while Mary slid into the booth, across from Emmet. Then Ryan slid in and sat too close to her. He grinned down at her and said, "Friendly guy, isn't he, Honey?"

"What's the gag?" Emmet demanded, knowing that Ryan's air of familiarity with her annoyed him. It was silly to be annoyed. She was forever lost.

"Mary told me you were back in town when I met her after work. We've been celebrating your return. And you growl at us. Fine thing!"

"Okay," Emmet said, "You are both my dearest friends. I'm grateful to both of you. Especially you, Ryan. For all you've done for me. What do you want?"

The smile left Ryan's face. "Take it easy, Emmet. Maybe I should mention that you got off lucky a long time ago. And I've kept my mouth shut."

"About what?" Mary asked.

"I'll skip it, if he will," Ryan told her.

"I'll skip it," Emmet said dully.

"Okay, Emmet, and now I can thank you for coming back," Ryan said. "For a long, long time, I've been trying to tell Mary that I was the guy for her. But she wasn't sure. She still had you in the back of her mind. I didn't know that. She told me that over the third Martini tonight. Now she's seen you again and she knows that she's outgrown that kid stuff. Now she's saying yes, yes, yes."

"Congratulations," Emmet said dryly. "Your two uncles ought to be delighted. If I remember rightly, they've been hating each other since they were little kids. This ought to make everything dandy."

"It'll be okay. I'm quitting my job with Uncle Howard Ballery and going into busi-

ness on my own. I got the dough saved up."

Emmet pulled his long frame out of the booth. He looked down at the two smiling faces for a moment and said, "Blessings on you, my children." He left. He walked the streets of the city until it was late enough for him to go down to the river and look at the house in which he had been born. It meant nothing. The city meant a great deal. He stared at the house, grey in the street lamp. Then he walked back to the hotel. O'Day wasn't in yet. He went to bed.

CHAPTER TWO

Brunette Alibi

THE SKY was light when he awakened. Somebody was hammering at the door, loud, rhythmic knocks so heavy that they set up a sympathetic clatter in one of the windows. O'Day was snoring heavily. Emmet cursed as he rolled out of the bed and padded across the floor. The key was turned on the inside. He unlocked the door and stepped back as it opened into the room with great force.

There were two of them. One was taller and broader than Emmet. He wore a light tan topcoat and a brown felt hat pushed well back off his fleshy face. The smaller one was wearing a dark-blue suit, no topcoat, and a pearl grey felt hat. His nose was lined with bluish red veins. He held a .38 pistol pointed steadily at Emmet's middle.

The big one flipped open a greasy black wallet. Emmet caught a glimpse of a nicked badge before it was shoved back into his pocket. "Headquarters. You Emmet?"

"Yes. What's the trouble?"

"Questioning. Wake up your friend and the two of you get dressed and we'll ride on down."

The smaller one closed the door and leaned against it. The pistol barrel didn't waver. The big one walked over and sat in the chair by the window. He yawned. They both looked red-eyed and sleepy.

Emmet shook O'Day awake. The stocky man sat up and stared at the gun. "Police," Emmet told him.

"Kinda early for you boys, isn't it?" O'Day asked.

"Just get dressed, friend," the big one said. "Is that too much to ask?"

Emmet was dressed first. He leaned against the foot of his bed and waited. He wondered what the questioning would be about. Being picked up was nothing new. It had happened before. Marty's lawyers always took care of it. But there was something about these two that he didn't like. The gun, for one thing. And the carefulness. And the time of day. Six twenty. Too early for a routine check. When he walked back out, the big one was checking O'Day's pockets.

The big one gave instructions in the hall. "No talking between you two guys. Not a whisper. The car's out in front. Leave the key at the desk. We'll have somebody check your stuff."

The Headquarters building was new since Emmet had left. It was a three-story building in brown marble, with some kind of a J. Edgar Hoover quote chiseled above the door. They hurried them in so fast that he didn't have a chance to read it.

"Up the stairs, boys. We'll book you later. The lieutenant wants to talk to you so he can go home and get some sleep."

The stairs were wide and clean. The lieutenant's office was at the end of a corridor paved with sound absorbent plastic. It was a normal office door. Wood up to the middle and opaque glass from there on up. It had writing on it: *Lieutenant Richard C. Ring. Homicide*. There was no breeze in the corridor, but Emmet felt something chill him when he read the word, *Homicide*.

Ring was unimpressive beside the scratched and burned oak desk. He was a frail man, pale, with a thin stringy neck and large red knuckles. He wore a suitcoat and shirt that looked a bit too large for him. His eyes were large and brown and lustreless. He looked up.

"Emmet and O'Day," the big one said.

"Thank you, Roberts. Dolin, you stay here. Suppose you knock off now, Roberts."

"Thanks."

"Who's dead?" Emmet asked.

Ring looked at him. "Are you William Emmet?"

"Yeah. Who's dead?"

"Does someone have to be dead?"

"Either that or you borrowed this office."

"That attitude won't get you anywhere,

Emmet. . . . O'Day were you with Emmet last night?"

The stocky little man grinned. "Lieutenant, I don't know from nothing. Emmet and I, we got the same lawyer, only he has to come from out of town. He can maybe fly in and be here this afternoon. Then we'll be happy to chat."

Ring considered that for a moment. He kneaded the knuckles of his left hand until one snapped loudly in the still room. Finally he said, "We don't want to hold you, O'Day. Just answer a couple of questions and you can go back to the hotel. What time did you leave Emmet last night?"

O'Day glanced at Emmet. The look said, *This is your picnic, Boss.* Aloud, he said, "Maybe six thirty."

"When did you see him again?"

"He was in bed when I got in at four o'clock."

"Where were you?"

"I found a friendly little gal. I was around drinking with her and then I went over to her place. Met her about seven thirty and left her at quarter to four."

"Name and address."

"Wait a second. I got it written down here someplace. Yeah. Julie Duval. Eighteen Hundred Eighteen West Street. Upstairs."

Ring picked up the phone on his desk and said, "Give me Walker. Walker? Julie Duval. Eighteen Hundred Eighteen West. Got it? Check her and find out where she was and who she was with from seven thirty last night to quarter to four this morning. Get a description of the man." He hung up. "Okay, O'Day. They'll be through with your room by now. You can go back to the hotel. Don't leave the hotel. We may want you in a hurry."

The door shut behind O'Day. Ring and Dolin stared steadily at Emmet. He felt uneasy, but he was determined not to show it.

Lieutenant Ring asked, "And where were you last night, Emmet?"

"I went walking. Suppose you tell me what's up."

"You went walking."

"So I just said."

"We know you went walking."

"Then why the hell do you ask me? What's going on?"

"You walked out to a place where you used to work. It's called Riverest. Howard

Ballery used to live there. Up until last night—when you shot him through the head. It was a clumsy job. You were seen hanging around the place. We know the motives. We know it was you. Why try to horse us, Emmet? Get it off your chest."

All expression left Emmet's face. He folded his long arms. "First I talk to a lawyer, Lieutenant. I want to make a phone call."

It took a half hour to get a collect call through to Marty Schor. At last he was on the line, sleepy and annoyed, saying, "Kid, I told you to report to me by letter. I don't like this phone business."

"But listen a minute, Marty. I'm calling from the police station here. Ballery was knocked off last night and they got me figured for it."

There was a long period of silence and Emmet thought they had been disconnected. He said, "Hello!"

"I'm still here, Kid. I'm thinking. This is nasty. I'm afraid of publicity. Any newspaper stuff all over the country would ruin me, but good. Now if you hadn't quit working for me—"

EMMET gasped, and then realized Marty's strategy. Ballery was big time. The papers would jump on it. The line was probably open, with the conversation being recorded. There was no room for loyalty in Schor's makeup. He had to think of himself. With Emmet as an ex-employee, Schor and his operations wouldn't be dragged onto the front pages.

"Then we're through for keeps?" Emmet asked.

"You get out of this rap and I'll talk to you about it. I'll rehire O'Day if he wants to look me up. Good luck to you, Kid." The line clicked. Emmet hung up slowly.

Ring asked, "How'd you make out?"

"I better get some local talent to represent me." For a moment he considered saying that his boss had disowned him. There was no point in such a move. He'd be unable to prove that he was still on Marty's payroll up until the time he put the call through.

"I'm going to hold you, Emmet. And I'm not going to waste my time questioning you now."

"Do I take him across town?" Dolin asked.

"No. Put him in the bridal suite on the second floor. Let him get hold of a local lawyer, if he wants to. I'm going home and sleep. Call me if there's anything new."

Emmet remembered that Calder and Hemstro was a reliable firm. Their man, a Lawrence Bond, came to see Emmet at nine. Emmet's cell was an oblong room with two barred windows, a green linoleum floor, a table, two chairs, a wash stand, and a cot with a bed lamp. The door was of wood, reinforced with a steel plate, locked by a sliding bolt on the outside. Bond was let in and the door closed behind him. He was young, tall, dressed in a tweed suit and a flaring necktie. He had a reddened, sensual, intent face and an easy smile.

They shook hands and sat at the small table. Bond gave Emmet a long appraisal. He said, "You're in a spot, Mr. Emmet. I've just finished talking with Dick Ring—and, very briefly, this is what they've got already. They may have more that he didn't tell me. You were identified by James Ryan, Ballery's assistant. Ryan said you were hanging around during the afternoon, watching the Ballery home. Ryan has told Ring about your stealing money from Ballery ten years ago, and about a Mr. Schor making the loss good in return for Ballery suppressing your confession.

"O'Day has told Ring that you and he quit working for Schor a few days ago, and that he came here with you at your insistence. He said he didn't know you had anything special in mind. Ballery was shot from behind, apparently as he was bending over a filing case in the corner of his office. It was a fire-resisting file with a combination lock. It was open. Ryan said that your confession had been kept in that file, along with supporting documents.

"It's gone now. Ring believes that you killed Ballery in order to get that old confession back, and also to justify a perverted desire for revenge. Dick Ring has you pegged as a moody type, likely to pull a job like this. Frankly, it doesn't look good. Now tell me your angle."

Emmet waited a moment, organizing his thoughts. "I don't know how much of this you can use, Bond. Ten years ago I worked for Ballery. I was framed into that confession to force me to go to work for Marty Schor, who is a friend of Ballery's. It was kind of a gag on their part. Marty couldn't

keep anybody working for him but a bunch of thugs. He had big plans for me. He sent me to college for three years and then kept me with him until the Army clipped me. They kept me five years. Then I went back to work for one of Marty's crews."

"Crews?"

"Yeah. Marty Schor hires out crews to manufacturers, that are tied up with strikes, for any kind of dirty odd jobs that comes up. Marty's crews bust up picket lines, stoke boilers, give the officials protection, make it rough on pickets—and in general make the strike as unpleasant as possible for the working stiff. He works on a national scale, and his advertising is all by word of mouth. He gets fat fees and pays his men well."

"And you quit?"

"No. He sent me here on a special job. Just the two of us. I'd prefer to keep that to myself. Ballery was paying the fee. It has no bearing on the case."

"How do you know it hasn't?"

"Just take my word that it hasn't. Anyway, when I called Marty and told him what had happened, he told me that he was sorry that I had quit a few days ago. I can see his point. He'll help with the legal talent up to a point, but this is too hot for him. I'm on my own. He'll probably send some more dough to help with expenses, but without any clue that it came from him."

Bond asked, "What did you do yesterday? Times and places as well as you can remember."

Emmet told him. As he spoke, he realized how vague he was being. He didn't like the look on Bond's face. When he was through, having included the two meetings with Mary Wythe, Bond glanced up from his notes and said, "It's always good policy to tell your lawyer everything, Emmet. If you did this thing, you better tell me. I'll still handle the plea the way you want it handled, but I'll be in a better position to give you advice."

"I didn't do it."

Bond looked into Emmet's steady grey eyes. He shrugged. "So you didn't. Did they take a paraffin test?"

"Sure, but what does that mean? Any guy that knows about it wraps his hand in a handkerchief or wears a glove. Dolin told me that they figured I wore a glove and then wedged it through the trigger guard

and tossed the gun into the river.”

“The time of death is set at one o’clock in the morning. Ryan found him when he got in at three.”

“They checking Ryan’s alibi?”

“Dick Ring is no punk. He’ll check everything a hundred ways. He’s a careful man. The inquest will tie it to you. From where I sit, it doesn’t look good. If you looked like the type that would go to pieces, I’d try to kid you along. But you look sensible and quiet.”

That’s right, Emmet thought. I look sensible and quiet. I will sit here like a little gentleman and let you public-spirited citizens electrocute me. No fuss. He said, “I figure Ryan is tying the can to me, Bond. I want you to check him a little closer than the cops do.”

BOND scratched at his chin. “You ought to know this town, Emmet. You lived here when you were a kid. This is a tight little town. Close knit. Take Ryan for example. Junior Chamber of Commerce. Community Chest. Genial host. It’s hard to buck that kind of thing. He isn’t exactly first-family stuff, but he’s potent.”

“But he was the guy who, according to Ballery and Schor, signed a false statement that he had seen me lift dough from the brewery receipts. To give him the benefit of the doubt, Ballery and Schor might have lied. But check him with the idea that there are holes in his story.”

Bond agreed and left. Emmet paced the room for a while looking out the windows at a back alleyway where shining refuse cans glistened in a soft rain. It would be a long day. There would be many long days. He forced himself to relax. At last he was able to sleep.

Lieutenant Ring came in with Dolin and a stenographer at four and took his detailed statement. They made him go over it three times.

Ring paused at the door when they were finished and said, “That’s a pretty feeble story, Emmet. Ryan says the only confidential documents missing from that safe are your confession and supporting papers. That’s like a gun pointed at you.”

“And if I had done it, I would have taken a whole flock of papers, Lieutenant. I’m smarter than I used to be. You better start

tracking down whoever framed me. My choice is Ryan.”

Ring laughed. “With a record like yours, I should look for a frame!” The door banged shut.

Emmet tried to go back to sleep.

They brought his clothes over from the hotel in the morning. He changed and had breakfast. The man who carried the dishes away announced that there was a Miss Mary Wythe to see him.

She stood leaning against the closed door, her hands locked together in front of her in a gesture that he remembered. Her eyes were wide and she held herself too straight.

Bill Emmet said, “This is damn nice of you, Mary, visiting the condemned. Sit down.”

“Bill, you sound so—so cynical about it.” She sat in one of the straight chairs. He perched on the edge of the table, conscious of his unshaven face.

“Why shouldn’t I be? Future matron of Laurie City gathers material for a story to tell her grandchildren: *How I visited the desperate criminal during his last months.*”

Her eyes hardened. “Don’t you think you owe me more than a few cheap remarks? You left me without a word or a message. Do you think that was easy on me?”

He slid off the table and stood in front of her, his big fists clenched, his grey eyes darkened. “And it was easy on me. To be framed into leaving town, knowing that I couldn’t bring myself to you with a confessed record as a thief. Sure, that was damn easy. Just as easy as the years I’ve spent working for a man who held that confession over my head.”

She looked at him queerly. “Framed?”

“Certainly I was framed. Do you think I was the kind of kid to take dough that didn’t belong to me?”

“But Jim said—”

“The hell with what Jim said. Ballery told me that your darling James signed a statement that he had seen me take the money. Maybe he didn’t sign it. I don’t know. Anyway, I was framed—and I knew it was better to leave and never see you again.”

“But I would have stood by you.”

“Mrs. Jaillbird Emmet.”

“I wouldn’t have cared, then.”

“And it’s much too late now.”

She lowered her head. “Of course it is.

You carry a torch until your heart gets tired. Then you can't lift it again. I'm marrying Jim Ryan."

"On your wedding night, please remember that he killed Ballery and framed me into the chair."

She jumped up. "He couldn't have! You're going mad in here!"

"Why couldn't he have done it?"

"I can't tell you."

Bill Emmet said, "So you're helping him set me up on the other alley?"

"That's not fair. You've gotten so—so hard, Bill. You're not like you used to be."

"They don't pin murders on me often enough. I guess I'm not used to it. But you've got to tell me why your precious Ryan couldn't have shot Ballery."

"I haven't got to do anything. I didn't have to come here. I'm sorry I did. I told Lieutenant Ring why Jim couldn't have shot Ballery. That's enough. I don't have to tell you."

"I get it, Mary. Ring promises to keep you out of the papers. Ryan was with you until he went back and found Ballery dead. That's great. A wonderful alibi."

She flushed, but she stared him in the eye. He looked down at her. He bent over so quickly that he startled her. He held her chin between his big thumb and forefinger. He murmured, "Remember, Mary, how I used to kid you about your not being able to lie to me? Do you know the penalty for perjury?"

For one long second he looked into her eyes. She shoved his hand away, stood up and brushed by him. At the door she turned and said, "There's something small and mean that's grown inside of you, Bill."

He grinned at her with a cheer that he didn't feel. "I wonder how long it's going to take you to get to sleep tonight, wondering why Ryan asked you to lie for him."

She called the man in the hall who unlocked the door and let her out. She didn't answer Emmet or look back at him.

CHAPTER THREE

A Couple of Dragons

FOR a long hour he paced the floor, tense and nervous. He knew that Mary's loyalty and stubbornness would keep her from opening her mouth.

The spot was looking worse by the minute. He was a friendless stranger in his own home town. If he could only have a few minutes alone with Ryan. But that was impossible. Or was it? He thought of trying to break out, and then dismissed the idea. It would be an admission of guilt and make his position worse. If his position could be any worse.

Lawrence Bond came in to see him in the late afternoon. He was glum. "It looks terrible, Emmet. I'm beginning to think you killed him. What a mess! The District Attorney's office is hot after you. They need you as a statistic before election. Everybody is clammed up. You sure you can't find something in your memory that will make it self-defense? We might have a fair chance on that even if he was shot in the back of the head. Ballery didn't have too many friends in town."

"I wasn't anywhere near his place at any time."

"They had the funeral this afternoon. I was up there just to look at the little office where he got knocked off. It makes me feel sick to think of how little we can do for you. I grant you it's all circumstantial, and as such, you'll probably pull life—that is, if nothing else comes up in the meantime . . . and I don't see how it can."

Emmet did some intent and quiet thinking. If only he could talk to Ryan for a few uninterrupted minutes. He turned to Bond and said, "I want to talk to O'Day. See if you can get Lieutenant Ring to send him over here."

O'Day came while Emmet was eating. O'Day wore the same amused smirk. He sat on the edge of the cot.

Emmet said, "You certainly did me a lot of good, Charley."

"What the hell could I do, Emmet? I got a call from Marty. It must have been right after he talked to you. He told me what to say. If I say something different than what he told me, I got to go to work for somebody else—who might not appreciate the special talents of O'Day."

"I want to get out of here."

"That's what they all say." The stocky man grinned.

"I'm saying it and I mean it. You're going to help me. If they've got this cell rigged for sound, I'm out of luck. I'm not going to run for it. I'm just going to locate a

party and have a little chat. Then I'll come back like a lamb. I may bring this party back with me."

"You're nuts! I help you out of here and I go in myself."

"Okay, Charley. Don't help me. I tell Ring that this Julie Duval was paid a hundred bucks to give you an alibi. I tell Ring that Marty sent you here with instructions to knock off Ballery. I tell Ring to check your prints with Pittsburg and with the F.B.I. I can't make anything stick, maybe, but I can give you a hell of a lot of fun for a few days. And if they finally clip me for it, I'll confess and tell them, by damn, that you held Ballery while I shot him. I won't have anything to lose, and I'll make you wish you never saw or heard of me."

O'Day gulped visibly. "You're a nice guy, Emmet."

"Everybody's been telling me that lately. Get the car you had and park it down in that alley. About nine tonight. I'll get hold of a spool of thread. I grabbed a rubber band and a paper clip from the lawyer. I'll shoot the paper clip down over that back wall into the alley. They don't guard this place too well. You pull easy on the thread until you come to sheeting. Tie a small crowbar on the end of the sheeting. Have it tied in towels or something so it won't clang."

It took about ten more minutes of simple, direct statements before O'Day agreed. After he had gone, Emmet obtained a spool of thread on the pretext that he wanted to mend his clothes.

He went to work at quarter to nine. He slid the window open quietly, exposing the wet bars. The wind blew rain into the room in fitful gusts. He unwound all the thread off the spool and piled it carefully on the windowsill. He knotted one end of the thread to the paper clip. He was on the second floor. It was difficult to see down into the alley. There was a space of about twenty feet between the wall and the side of the building.

Working with quiet, steady speed, he tore his one sheet into one inch strips, tearing the long way of the sheet. He stopped when he had enough, knotting the ends together to form a frail rope. As he was knotting the last one, he heard the sound of a motor, heard a car stop in the alley. He looked out. The car was dark. He waited a few

minutes and then fitted the paper clip into the rubber band. He aimed toward the black bulk of the car sixty feet away and waited until the wind died.

He pulled back and let it fly. He listened. There was a metallic click. A lot of the thread had followed the clip out, but he couldn't tell yet whether or not it had broken in flight. He could only wait.

The rain began to come down with more force. He watched the pile of thread. Suddenly it jerked and began to slide smoothly out the window. He knotted the free end to the rope of sheeting. When the thread was all gone, he stood at the window and paid out the sheeting between the bars, careful not to allow any sudden strain. He knew the rain was soaking into the sheeting, and he was afraid that the dampened weight would part the thread.

At last he felt two small jerks on the sheeting. The bundle was being tied on the other end. He pulled gently. There was a considerable weight on the other end.

It caught. He tugged as hard as he dared, sawing from side to side. It came free. Suddenly all tension was gone. He felt cold. It had broken. He reeled it in and then the weight came back on it. He realized that the drop from the top of the wall was what had released the tension. He pulled it slowly across the yard until the white strip of sheeting stretched straight down the side of the building. He pulled it in quickly, reaching through the bars and grasping the wrapped bundle.

It took three minutes of wrenching effort to tear one bar loose at the bottom and bend it up. He managed to spread the two bars on either side of the gap far enough to give him room. He realized his good fortune in finding the bars sunk in concrete rather than steel.

He stood on the sill and grabbed the bars, shoving his feet and legs through first. Once through the bars, he hung by his fingertips from the outside sill. The rain blew against his face. He pushed himself away from the wall with his knee and dropped. He hit hard, on his heels, and fell over backwards, scraping his hands on the gravel yard. He listened for any sound of alarm. He rolled up onto his feet and ran at the wall.

The adrenalin of fear gave him the strength to yank his body up onto the wall, disregarding the broken glass set in the con-

crete that slashed one finger deeply and dug through the fabric of his coat and shirt into his chest. He dropped into the alley and ran to the car. The door by the wheel was open. He slid in, clicked the switch up and pressed the dashboard starter. The motor turned over.

He stiffened at the sound of a low whisper, "Hello, Boss."

O'Day was in the back seat. As he started up, he said, "I told you you didn't have to stay around, Charley."

"And miss the fun? Not Mrs. O'Day's little boy. Where are we going?"

"Good. I might need you. First we're going out to this place where I was supposed to have knocked off Ballery. Ryan's the guy I want to see. I want to see him so bad that it hurts. He used to live there, and it's my guess that he still does."

"Have any trouble getting out?"

"Not a bit."

HE DROVE as fast as he dared, the wipers swishing the heavy rain off the windshield, the tires whining on the asphalt. The road down to Ballery's place didn't seem right, and it wasn't until he saw the lights of the house itself that he was able to be sure.

Riverest was off to the left of the main road, a long stone house on a small knoll. Behind the house, the yard sloped down to the river. A curved drive, bordered with white-washed rocks, wound up to the main entrance. Several windows were lighted.

Emmet drove on by the house. The rain bounced high on the road, six inches of spray dancing in the headlights. He cut the motor and lights as he turned off onto the soft shoulder. In the sudden silence, the rain was loud on the metal roof.

"What now?" O'Day asked.

"I know the yards. We cut down this field to the river and then back along the river bank. Then up through the yard to the back of the house. You stay close to me and keep your mouth shut. I'm going in alone. You wait and if I yell, come in on the run. If I don't come back out in half an hour, go on back to the car and get the hell out of here."

The grass was high and wet. Emmet stumbled on the uneven ground. His torn finger smarted. At last, above the whish of the rain, he heard the roar of the yellow

river close in front of him. He moved cautiously as O'Day blundered into him.

He felt his way down the bank toward the back yard of the Ballery place. Once beyond the row of hedges, he could see the misty light from two rear windows shining down across the yard. It was easier to go back up toward the house.

He avoided walking directly toward the windows. He flattened himself against the wall of the house and whispered to O'Day, "Stay here. Near the window." O'Day grunted. Emmet remembered the location of the back door. He ducked under the two windows and then felt along the wall until he touched the knob.

He turned it with infinite caution. The door opened under gentle pressure. He stepped up into the rear hallway, leading to the kitchen. The kitchen was dark. He stepped quickly into it. The water dropped from his soaked clothes onto the linoleum floor with small popping noises that were too loud in the stillness.

He edged his way into the darkened dining room. He stood for a moment on the rug, listening to the murmur of voices. He was too far away to tell who it was or how many there were. A board creaked under his foot and he froze. The voices continued.

The light shone from another hallway into the dining room. Standing at the edge of the path of light, he listened again. He picked out Mary's voice first. And a strange man. And Ryan. The odds weren't as bad as he had expected. It would depend on surprise. He was chilled through and his muscles were stiff.

He walked silently and swiftly into the hall, prepared to run without regard to noise as soon as he was noticed. They were in the library. He felt glad when he saw that they were bunched in front of the fire. Ryan and Mary were sitting side by side on a couch at right angles to the fireplace. A strange man sat opposite them. Ryan and the stranger held glasses.

Emmet went at a half run toward them. Ryan's head jerked up and his eyes widened. There was an exclamation from the other man. He was quicker in getting up off the couch than Ryan was. Emmet slammed him back down onto the couch with a straight left. He turned as Ryan struggled to his feet. He slashed out with his right hand open, catching Ryan just under the ear with

the edge of his palm. Ryan crumpled onto the floor, the glass breaking under him.

Mary made a dash for the door, but he caught her by the shoulder and yanked her back. She stumbled and fell. The stranger was up again. He poked a doubtful left at Emmet's face. Emmet grabbed the man's left wrist and spun around with it. The twisting forced the man around so that his own left hand was held up against the small of his back. He gasped with sudden pain. Emmet clubbed him in the back of the neck with a heavy right, caught him as he fell and tossed him onto the couch. He'd keep for a half hour.

Mary stared up at him as she slowly got to her feet. There was bright hate in her eyes. It hurt him to see it. But there was not time to talk—to explain.

He crossed over and shut the heavy library doors, pocketing the key. One of the extension phones was on a table inside the door. He looked at it briefly and decided that nothing would be gained by tearing it out.

As he turned, he saw that Mary was trying to lift Ryan up onto the couch. Emmet said, "I'll take care of him."

"What did you come here for? To kill him like you killed Gallery?"

"You wouldn't understand. Now go back into the corner and keep your mouth shut and stay out of his sight. You do that and I promise not to mark him up. You open your mouth and I'll give him a face to scare children with."

"What good is a promise from you?" she said, but she did as she was told, backing into the far corner to which he had pointed.

Emmet picked Ryan easily off the floor and sat him on the couch, holding him upright by the lapels. Ryan's head lolled on his chest. Emmet picked up an unspilled drink and threw it in Ryan's face. The ice clicked off his teeth. Ryan groaned. Emmet slapped his cheeks smartly and at last Ryan opened his pale eyes.

Ryan looked drunkenly at Emmet for several seconds. He said thickly,

"You—what you want here?"

"Truth, Ryan. Just the truth."

Ryan woke up. "Take your hands off of me. What the hell's the idea?"

Emmet said softly, "Start to talk, sweetheart, and make it good, or I'll kill you with my hands." He slid his right hand up and

clamped it around Ryan's throat, almost lovingly. The redhead fought him, but he couldn't tear the hand away. His face began to purple and there was fear in his eyes.

Emmet let go. Ryan coughed and gasped. "Just like that, sweetheart. Just like that. Unless you tell me what I want to hear. While you were out, your little gal friend told me the truth. You didn't stay with her as long as you told the cops. Now give it to me. You killed Gallery." As he finished, he glanced at Mary. He was afraid that she would interrupt and spoil it. She wasn't looking at him. She was staring at the back of Ryan's head and there was an odd expression on her face. Emmet realized that she wasn't satisfied with the explanation Ryan had given her, and she wanted to hear what he would say.

"Where's Mary?" Ryan gasped. "What have you done to her?"

"She's okay. A friend is watching her out in the other room."

RYAN relaxed. He tried to laugh, but it was a hollow sound. "Guess I got to tell you how it was, Emmet. You know. Both men of the world. I left Mary about midnight and stopped in on the way back to see a friend of mine. Her husband's in China. Stop in every once in a while. If I really get in a jam on this thing, I can use her as a witness and I know she'd back me up no matter what it did to her marriage. But why hurt an innocent woman like that? I got Mary to back me up by telling her that I love her so much I took a long, long walk—just to think about her—and she agreed to cover me. You know how it is, Emmet. Hell—if I told Mary, I'd lose my chance of marrying her. You know how she is. What the hell could I do?"

Emmet felt sick. He had seen enough of truth to know that this was it. Ryan wasn't making it up. There was a tap on the door. Emmet whispered to Ryan, "Ask who it is."

Ryan asked.

The voice answered, "O'Day."

Emmet glanced at Mary and fished in his pocket for the key. He pulled it out and threw it to her. She stood, her face stricken, her eyes dead. The key hit the front of her dress and clattered onto the hardwood floor. She stooped and picked it up mechanically. "Let him in." She walked to the door.

O'Day, dripping and grinning, walked in. "Hello, Citizens."

"Why didn't you stay outside?" Emmet asked.

"I worried about you. Besides, I began to get the feeling that it was raining."

"Settle down, Charley. I'm almost through here."

Ryan was swiveled around on the couch, staring with his mouth open at Mary. She wasn't looking at him. He spun back and said, "You told me that she was out in—"

"Forget it, Ryan. I got one more thing to say to you before I go. You told Ring that you saw me hanging around this place in the afternoon. You lied. You take it back, or I'll still arrange to fix you."

"But I did!" Ryan exclaimed. "It had to be you. That's what the agency said over the phone, that you rented the car, and I had the license plate checked. I always do that with any car parked around here. You know, Uncle Howard was uneasy about strangers and—"

"Wait a minute. All you saw was a license plate? On a rented car? And found out that it was rented in my name and you assumed that I was driving it?" He didn't wait for an answer. He spun on O'Day. "Were you out here in that rented wagon?"

O'Day had a baffled look on his face. "So that was it," he said. "Sure, I came out to see how the other half lives. Professional curiosity."

Emmet was silent for a few minutes. It didn't ring true. He looked at the grinning O'Day. At last he said, heavily, "We got another call to make, Charley."

"And what would that be?"

"To see a little gal whose address you happened to have at the right time and the right place. I want to hear her talk about your charms."

O'Day was still grinning, but there was a flat .38 automatic in his hand. He said, "Show's over, Citizens. Brace yourselves."

Glass tinkled sharply and they all looked toward the window. Lieutenant Ring said in a tired voice, "Drop it, O'Day."

O'Day swung the automatic toward the window. A shot crashed in the room and O'Day was slammed back against the doors. He fell onto his face. He lifted his head, his face twisted with effort, and tried to haul the gun up again. Emmet took a quick step forward and kicked it out of his hand.

Mary sighed and slid down onto the floor, her eyes closed. Ryan held his face in his hands. . . .

Lieutenant Richard Ring sat behind his oak desk and yawned. Emmet said, "But wasn't that a big chance you took, letting me get out?"

"Depends on how you look at it. When they played me the record of your talk with O'Day, I knew you wouldn't be likely to go very far. We had the license number so we blocked every road out of town and stuck a guy or two at the railroad stations and bus terminals with your and O'Day's picture. We had a tail on both of you and we wanted to see what would happen."

"But I thought you were convinced that I did it."

"That's why I'm going to lose this job one of these days. I'm a lousy cop. I go too far on hunches. Well, maybe I had more than a hunch. That phone call of yours to Schor. When I had that played back, it didn't sound to me like the kind of a call a guy would make if he'd just knocked off one of our citizens. And Larry Bond's a good friend of mine. He tried to tell me you were on the level. Also, you impressed me a little when you said that you'd never take just the papers that pointed to you. It sounded as though somebody was trying to sink you."

"Besides, the D.A.'s office was needling me to clean it up quick, and this was one way to do it. But I don't like shooting a guy. I don't sleep good for a month afterward. Keep dreaming about them. Another reason—in the play-back of the talk with the girl, you sounded as though you knew she was handing out a line about this Ryan being with her. And, of course, Ryan's identification of you through a license plate wasn't much good. I let Larry Bond think it was a positive identification."

"But how can you be sure right now that I didn't do it?"

"Easy. Found this taped to the underside of the glove compartment of the rented car." He tossed a paper on the desk. Emmet unfolded it. It was the original of the confession signed ten years before. "You can keep it if you want to. We got some decent prints of O'Day off the back of it. Glazed paper. Got pictures of 'em. If O'Day hadn't died, I'd have had to keep it."

"But how about the motive?"

"One of those things, Emmet. Don't know as we can find out for sure. I've been thinking. I figure that this Schor you worked for has finally decided that you're too soft to ever make a go of his business. But you know too much about his operations. You spell future trouble for him. And that signed confession is no good to him. Hell, that was no good four years ago. . . . So Tanner and Schor send you and O'Day here, letting you think you're in charge, and giving you a fake assignment.

"O'Day is really the gu in charge. He had his secret orders to spot you for the long ride. This guy Schor probably gave O'Day orders to knock off Ballery in such a way that you'd be blamed. He bribed a gal to front for him, which is always bad, and went out there and did it, taking away your confession, gambling on the chance that Ryan would notice it was gone. If he hadn't noticed, O'Day still had the confession which he could plant in a likely spot. Then, when you told him you'd claim his alibi was a fake, he couldn't take a chance on not helping you."

Emmet thought for awhile. It seemed logical. It was the only answer that would fit. Marty must have realized that some day he would break loose—some day soon. Tanner would have relayed the instructions to O'Day. And O'Day would do anything—for enough money. Also, there was the possibility that Ballery, needing money, might have been pressing Marty Schor for a loan, promising that if he didn't get it, he'd give Schor a little publicity. Two birds with one stone. O'Day talking Ballery into getting the confession out of the file, and shooting him.

"By the way," Ring said, "there's two guys from the Internal Revenue waiting to ask you some questions about Marty Schor and his operations. As a favor to me, will you stop and answer their questions?"

"Glad to do it."

"I won't want you again. Listen, this isn't a bad town. Why don't you dig in here?"

"I'll think about it."

A long time later, Emmet walked out of one of the downstairs offices and out the front door. It was two thirty. The black streets were deserted. It was still raining. He felt a touch on his arm and looked down into Mary Wythe's eyes. The hurt was still there, but there was something else too.

"I've been waiting," she said.

"Yeah." He looked down at her. She took her hand off his arm.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I want to talk to you. Can't you take me home?"

"There's nothing to talk about." The words came fast. "Maybe when I read a book when I was a kid about the gal waiting in the tower while the guy rode off to kill dragons it made too big an impression. I'm no guy on a white horse, but I've just killed a couple of dragons. It took me ten years to kill one. And you're the babe in the tower. But you didn't wait. That doesn't hurt, but having you think that I was a thief and a murderer did hurt. It wiped you right out of my mind. You just stick around and take care of that Ryan. He needs a wife with a chin like yours."

She stood on the top step and watched him disappear into the rain, a big man in a wrinkled grey suit and a battered grey hat. And she knew that he'd never be back.

THE END

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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, 805 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Old Game—New Twist

Dear Sir:

The "gold-brick racket" which has been worked off and on ever since the precious metal was discovered in the northland, is prevalent in Canada again.

This is how it is usually worked. The victim is called on by a man, often a supposed miner, who confides that he is the owner of a brick of gold which he has just brought down with him from the mining district. There is a hush-hush air about the whole thing, because it is pretty well known in Canada that all freshly mined gold must be sold to the government through regular channels at a fixed price of \$35 per ounce. The stranger makes sure that this fact is understood.

The stranger then goes on to say that he can sell the brick in the United States for something way up in the thousands, but that he has no money to finance the trip and pay certain expenses involved. He then produces for brief inspection a heavy, yellow brick weighing anywhere up to 20 lbs. and suggests that the victim advance enough money to enable the sale to be completed. In return, the stranger promises to split the profits with the victim and to return the loan in full.

Instead of a brick, a smaller operator will open a suitcase and produce a handful of "nuggets". Whatever the form of the supposed gold, however, it is actually nothing but lead or other heavy metal, covered with bronze.

While arrests and convictions have been made, most of those who have been victimized are reluctant to talk because in laying a complaint, it is necessary to admit that they, themselves, had been willing to become party to a little law-breaking.

Yours very truly,
Roy Woodbridge
Ottawa, Canada

P. G. Course in Gyps

Dear Sir:

You might not expect to find swindle exorts carried into churches, but on entering the service of a well-known west-side Chicago institutional church, I learned differently.

Coming fresh and green from the theological school, I was surprised to find that in our social aid department set up to help the needy, there was a constant stream of chisellers, seeking to gouge out a few dollars. Many would come to the church

office with a crutch, a bandage, or an arm in sling, announcing they were just out of some hospital, broke, and unable to work. Inquiry as to which hospital, and what ward, would be answered. The doctor who cared for the case would be readily named. But a threatened check-up by phone would usually send the cheater scurrying, saying: "He would not put us to such bother," or "He could accept no favors from people who doubted his word."

One, however, caught us napping. He preceded his visit by a 'long distance' call on the phone. He said he was calling from New York and gave as his name that of a well known radio preacher, whom every minister and many laymen across the country would know. His voice resembled the radio speaker's voice. He said: "I am Dr. —, calling from my study in New York City. I have a young friend, whom I love as my own son, just being dismissed from your Cook County Hospital. He is coming to your office at my insistence this afternoon. Will you lend him a hundred dollars for me, as he is entirely without funds, and I will send you a check in today's mail." He asked about the old Pastor emeritus, whom he said had long been his good friend, stated how glad he was that I had come to take over and relieve him of the burden of the great work there, and with a few other disarming pleasantries, hung up, after I had promised to extend the needed funds.

In mid-afternoon the young man answering to the name given dragged himself in with all the appearances of having just come from the hospital. He gained our confidence. We gave him our sympathy and a hundred bucks. "We were glad," we said, "to serve him and his friend, the good doctor in New York." We saw his face no more. Neither did we receive the check. Upon later inquiry, we found the telephone call had come from a nearby suburban exchange instead of from New York.

We wrote off the loss as post graduate education and reported the swindle to the police, who informed us that the same trick had been worked on other new ministers in other cities. A warning was published in an interdenominational journal which is widely read, but we hope this letter may save some other unsuspecting minister from similar loss through helping some apparently deserving racketeer.

Sincerely yours,
Jerry Maier
Mazomanie, Wis.

Fagin's Fo'teenth Dime

Dear Sir:

To my front door one day came a little colored boy. Rolling his round eyes cooly, he said: "Missus, ah's jus' going round collectin' dimes to hep send a gif to ah pahson in vet'ran's hospital. Now ah's got fo'teen dimes in mah pocket. If you-all jus' gimme one mo dime, ah'd be the fust boy in mah class to git a dollah and a haff."

He was so little and had such a wide smile, I could not resist his appeal, let alone his apparently earnest desire to help his "pahson in vet'ran's hospital." This was a good little boy, I was sure. Of course I gave him his "fo'teenth" dime, and a fifteenth, and a sixteenth.

It would have been all right, except for the fact that during that particular week every housewife in our town was given exactly the same opportunity to donate a "fo'teenth" dime. Not until a considerable sum of money had been collected was it discovered that this boy was one of a group of little boys sent out by a slick man. There was no "pahson" involved, and no vet'ran's hospital—only a planned swindle project, in which the boy operators were given ten percent of their takings.

B H S
Oswego, N. Y.

Rich Deposits

Dear Sir:

One of the meanest ways of fleecing veterans of World War II is described in a warning being issued by the police of Brooklyn, N. Y.

Contacting veterans who have, or hope to get, homes of their own, the racketeer takes them to furniture stores, posing as a salesman who can get them "bargains." One necessity for getting a bargain, though, is paying a deposit, which the so-called salesman accepts.

When the furniture fails to arrive, the salesman cannot be found, and the store in which the furniture was presumably bought knows nothing about him.

"We had no such salesman. If we noticed him walking about the store with you, we thought he was a customer," the furniture dealers say. The police are convinced they are not in on the swindle.

One suspect has been arrested in New Orleans, the police say, but they warn G.I.'s to be on the lookout for similar men with similar schemes. They have received twenty-two complaints thus far and estimate that the energetic "salesman" collected at least \$1,500 in "deposits" on furniture he didn't own.

Arthur H. Larabee
Jamaica, N. Y.

Passing the Buck

Dear Sir:

I learned about a petty racket the hard way—by investing one dollar.

An advertisement appeared in the Personal Column of a magazine. It read something like this:

*Earn Money at Home.
Millions of postcards must be addressed.*

Write for particulars.

I wrote to the address given and soon received a letter of glowing "particulars". All I had to do was sign the enclosed card, mail it and one dollar to Box 423, and I would be sent instructions so I could get to work. It was explained that the dollar was just to show good faith on my part. The card I was to sign contained what seemed like an iron-clad promise. However, it turned out to be a very neat gimmick. The promise was:

"If you follow my instructions, and do not earn \$75 the first month, I will refund your dollar."

It sounded good. I sent my dollar, and the signed card.

About a week later I was jolted when I got another card which explained some "particulars" obviously overlooked by the writer of the come-on sheet. I was to buy flimsy, mimeographed cards—at \$2.50 per hundred—address them to anyone, using a telephone book or a city directory, and mail them out—putting a one cent stamp on each card, of course. If—a lovely little word—if anyone bought the shoddy gimcrack advertised on a card I sent out, I would receive a twenty-five per cent commission. (This last was very funny, but I didn't bother to laugh.)

I wrote to the operator immediately, demanding that he return my money. I knew this was futile, but at least it gave me an opportunity to let off steam.

He returned my letter with a penciled notation in the margin: "You haven't followed my instructions and you have no kick. Besides, you signed the card. . . ."

This nasty little racket preys mainly upon the aged and the handicapped, who are unable to work at a regular job.

W. C.
Tiffin, Ohio

Lawyers, Losers

Dear Sir:

A nicely dressed man came to the office of my employer, a well-known attorney, and said that he was moving to this city in two weeks, and wished to retain a local attorney to represent him in a suit arising out of an automobile accident in which he had been injured. He went into considerable detail regarding his injuries: what the doctor's reports had been, the circumstances of the accident, etc. He had a very good case, and the attorney said he would be glad to represent him.

He gave the lawyer his name and present address, and then remarked that he had intended having a prescription filled but was afraid he didn't have enough cash with him, as it cost \$7.50. He remarked that of course he could write a check, but the bankers here didn't know him. Naturally, with a fat fee in the offing, my boss offered to cash his check for him.

I hardly need to add that nothing was ever heard of him or his lucrative suit again. I asked the attorney whether he thought that kind of a racket paid much money, and he said why not, since there were thirty-six attorneys in this city alone, and Providence alone knew how many he tried that story on, as they were not very apt to

compare notes and admit that they had been taken in. He pointed out that the interview with him had taken only twenty minutes and netted the crook \$7.50. If you multiply that by only ten, it isn't a bad day's wages!

Miss X
Janesville, Wis.

One for the Album

Dear Sir:

After my engagement was announced in the newspapers, my fiancée's telephone was rarely silent. Salesmen representing silverware concerns, linen manufacturers, photographers and furniture dealers called upon my fiancée and her mother frequently.

Most of the offers were brushed aside, but one salesman had an appealing offer. His idea was to make a recording of the entire wedding ceremony for \$25, approximately half of what other salesmen asked for the same service. He called at my fiancée's apartment by appointment, with an album of sample records and an impressive sales talk.

The women, who are now my wife and mother-in-law, were thrilled at the prospect of having a permanent record of the ceremony. They paid the salesman the \$25 in advance, receiving a receipt for the money on letterhead paper and a promise that the man would appear in the church two hours before the ceremony to install his apparatus.

The salesman, needless to relate, was a phony. The only permanent record we had was his receipt, for he failed to show up. I wonder how many other engaged couples fell for his fine talk.

D.L.E.
Bronx, N. Y.

Short Haul

Dear Sir:

Here is a racket that is being worked, and worked successfully. The swindlers' mode of operation is simplicity itself.

This is the usual procedure. They insert an ad in the classified section of the local paper: "Leaving for Florida Friday morning. Can carry three passengers cheap. Call 9-6543 for arrangements."

A friend of mine answered the above ad and made arrangements to accompany the man to Florida for the very reasonable price of \$50. My friend and two other passengers were picked up in front of the local theater. The driver of the car parked in front of a downtown business establishment, explaining that he had to pay a bill before leaving town. After waiting in the car for an hour, my friend and the other two passengers discovered that they were waiting in a car which was rented from a U-drive-it company. They were the victims of the racketeer for the sum of \$50 each.

James Lee
Columbus, Ohio

Watch Out!

Dear Sir:

Paying a high price for a flash article that looks

all right but doesn't work is an easy way to get badly gypped, particularly if your purchase is a watch.

This reminds us of the old Gilbert and Sullivan verse: "The works that go into the watch, tra-la, have nothing to do with the case." I bought a watch too hurriedly from a downtown jeweler who had a similar watch displayed in the window of his little store. The case was O.K.—the works, N.G. Even my inexperienced eyes could see that the works were old when I pried off the back of the bright new case. I returned it and demanded a new one in its place. He made the exchange without comment, for he could see my attitude of grim determination.

The recased watch racket is worked mainly with common pocket watches having a retail price of about \$2. These watches are popular as casual gifts to boys and young men unlikely to ever think of returning a useless gift, so a large proportion never come back. The gloomy picture of a crooked jeweler bent over his workbench as he puts worn-out movements in new cases for trusting folks to buy as gifts for their young friends, is what happens behind the scenes. His glittering array are fakes.

Sincerely,

Herbert Peter Jones
Philadelphia, Pa.

Sob Story

Since I am a woman, and a housewife, it is embarrassing to admit having been caught by this form of swindle. I am, however, consoled by the knowledge that I was only one of many who were duped before the swindler was caught.

I was living with my husband and two children in a Mid-Western town when a woman knocked one morning at my front door. Obviously pregnant, she told me a sad story of losing her husband in an accident. Here she was, she said sadly, getting ready to have a baby, and she couldn't get a job for herself to provide funds for the coming event.

Her plight made me feel ashamed, knowing I had a husband with a decent job, and two healthy children. So I gave her not only my youngsters' outgrown clothing but a little money as well. Thanking me with a tender look on her face, the woman left.

She went on, as it turned out, from my house to every other house on our block. I heard her mentioned, in fact, all over town in women's clubs. All in all, she must have collected a truckload of clothing and an amount of money that must have pleased her.

That woman made one mistake. Four months later she reappeared in that same town. Her size was exactly the same as it had been before. Walking up and down our streets, she kept her future plainly visible, to appeal to housewives' sympathy. But this time she ended up in the hands of the local policewoman. Investigation showed that pillows had done the woman's trick. From then on other housewives and I were more wary of sob stories told at our front doors.

B.H.
Oswego, N. Y.

CLOTHES MAKE THE MUG

By JHAN ROBBINS

BENNY the Mug was wanted for murder. The headlines screamed it, the police posters proclaimed it, and all the half-world of the San Francisco waterfront knew about it.

They were a little impatient with Benny—the pickpockets, the whisky smugglers, the strongarms and the rest of the professional riff-raff. “Flubdub! Butterfingers!” they said to him scornfully, for it was obvious that Benny had killed not for profit but from sheer stupidity.

A dozen times The Mug had tried to explain his carelessness. “This guy didn’t act like he knew what was a gun,” he protested, spreading his arms descriptively. “I put the rod in his ribs and said, ‘This is a stick-up!’ and the jerk turns around to gimme an argument. Natchally, I blew his head off!”

Unfortunately, the gentleman who was thus decapitated through his own courageous folly was a pretty big man—Herbert C. Brandt, California’s fiery state senator. The papers, seeking a motive, were implying that the shooting had a darker angle and that Benny had been hired to clean house by the senator’s political opposition.

Thus, the waterfront was crawling with police and detectives, the net was drawing tighter around Benny’s thick neck, and by the third day of the all-out alarm the fugitive was walking miserably along the docks weighing the odds on his future.

It would be a gamble, he knew, as to who got him first. The law was close behind him. This afternoon, they had even had a complete description of what he was wearing, down to the labels on his undershorts. On the other hand, there were plenty of dockside residents who felt mighty uncomfortable on their own account at the appearance of all these brass buttons so close to home base. He couldn’t find it in his heart to blame anyone who turned him in.

With the clothes he was wearing, he was practically a dead pigeon anyway. “Brown knit cap, yellow shirt, gray sweater, striped

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Jhan Robbins

gray pants, brown shoes, green leather jacket. The criminal is five foot six, weighs 140 pounds, blue eyes, long brown hair." The description was hopelessly accurate. He couldn't even board a streetcar without being picked up, let alone get out of town. And none of his erstwhile cronies would stick his neck out to lend him any clothes.

Footsteps ringing hollowly on the dock made Benny the Mug dodge suddenly behind a crate. Peering out, he saw not a blue uniform or the even more obvious attire of the so-called plainclothesman, but a well-dressed stranger who stumbled as he walked and caught his breath in long, sobbing draughts as though he had run a long way on legs that were used to riding.

The stranger hurried to the end of the fog-bound dock and proceeded in a very peculiar routine. Dimly, through the swirling mist, Benny saw him reach into his overcoat pocket and fling an object into the water. Then, piece by piece, the man shed his clothing, piling overcoat, suit, shirt, shoes and underwear in a neat heap. Completely bare, he raised his arms above his head, flung one look over his shoulder and leaped into the water.

THE SPLASH startled Benny out of his fascinated stare. He scratched his head. "What a hell of a day to go swimmin'!" he muttered. Suddenly he realized that he had witnessed a suicide. Shouting heedlessly, he rushed to the water's edge. But only the sucking slap of green water against the rotting piles made any answer and below him, there was not a trace, not a bubble, not even a floating shoestring.

Benny could accept death philosophically enough. But it was the bundle of clothing at his feet that struck him dumb. If they had dropped from the sky, they couldn't have hit anyone who needed them more desperately. He picked up the pants and held them up to his slender frame. They fit perfectly.

When he walked back up the wharf a few minutes later, he was almost unrecognizable. Clad in what was roughly \$1000 worth of custom tailoring, his was an entirely new appearance. A few hours later, he walked boldly into the nearest barber shop and asked for a shave. The disguise was perfect. The sad-faced gentleman who

Clothes Make the Mug

had ended his life on the foggy wharf a few minutes ago was abruptly reincarnated. The fugitive gunman who had so carelessly shot the senator was dead, his clothing piled carefully on the edge of the fatal dock and a body somewhere in the water to prove it.

Lolling in the barber's chair, the new Benny read the headlines over another customer's shoulder. "Benny the Mug a Suicide!" screamed the black type. He smiled, and pulled out his new wallet, which was bulging comfortably with bills, and paid the cashier. His name, he noted carefully, was Wallingford, Rufus J. Wallingford.

Suddenly, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and he swung, startled, to face a cop.

"What's your name?" asked the officer.

Benny hauled out wallet, driver's license, and other identification frantically. Wallingford, Rufus J. Wallingford."

"That's what I thought. You're under arrest. Come along!"

As the iron hand of the law clamped itself on the collar of the first linen shirt Benny the Mug had ever owned, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a story in the left-hand column of the newspaper whose headlines were celebrating his own death.

"Police Press Search for Society Killer," it ran. "Officials predict Rufus J. Wallingford, millionaire banker, will be apprehended for his wife's murder by nightfall. Police are in possession of a detailed description of the clothing worn by Wallingford when he fled his home yesterday. . . ."

The barbershop door swung shut behind Benny and his escort and their feet turned relentlessly toward the station of the 18th precinct, which was handily near by.



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Seymour Irving Richin

(Continued from page 43)

Hughes, his eyes averted from the seascape. "Yet I'm your friend, Fred." The words trembled a little. "I'm your friend who's been standing here for an hour thinking and thinking and not knowing what to do. What's right, Fred? I know this sloop means something. Because you're too good an artist to make such a mistake. *The picture is out of balance with this additional touch; you never made that mistake before.* And if we tested that red paint, what would we find? Eh, Fred?"

Jason's glance slipped past his friend to the window. He had time to notice the breeze swelling the curtain there. He said: "You'd find blood, Hughes. Her blood." Hughes sighed. "What's right? What's right, old friend?"

"She—she wasn't much good, Hughes."

Hughes took away the cigar, stared at it. Softly, he repeated: "What's right, Fred?"

"Only one thing's right." The breeze, Jason saw, billowed the curtains far into the room. "It's my life, isn't it, Hughes? Either that or jail. Jail would be worse."

"What can I do, Fred?"

"You can leave for a minute. And take the seascape, will you? Keep it. Would you believe I haven't slept at all since it happened?" Jason took a deep breath. "There's a cane in the closet with a yellow head. That's what I killed her with."

Hughes followed his glance to the window. His face whitened. "Maybe," he stammered. "You know, sometimes a guy can get a break, can't he? I—I can say you turned yourself in and—"

Jason shook his head. He laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "They wouldn't understand. They didn't know Vicki."

Gently, he urged his friend out of the room. Alone, he locked the door. He took a stiff breath and moved for the window. The breeze played lightly with the curtains and he watched them for a while. Then he went over.

Halfway down, Jason screamed. It was a thin scream that plunged down with him, ending in horrible silence.

And in the hall was Detective Hughes with a gold-bulbed cane and a painting. A lodger, passing by, gave him a second, curious glance. He wondered why the stout man was standing in the hallway, crying.

Killings on the Conscience

(Continued from page 72)

"I didn't say that. I said she had two killings on her conscience. One thing bothers me, though. The time element. What is going to happen at midnight tonight?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I'm going to as soon as you make some strong black coffee."

When we poured four cups of coffee into the girl, I was sure she'd stay awake.

"Now, Carol, tell me two things. First, why did you set a time limit, and, second, were you still in love with Kincaid?"

She laughed shakily: "Do you know the rest so soon?"

Yes," I said. "Everything else fits."

"The will," she said. "The will is going to be opened tonight."

"And the second question?" I prompted.

"Yes, I loved him," she said.

"You can go back to sleep now," I said as softly as I could.

I went into the living room and dialed Inspector Steele's phone number. "Hello, Inspector? Brannigan. Will you come over to my place? I've got a story to tell you."

"Hey, what develops here?" Mickey demanded.

"As Carol said before, it goes back some five years. Carol was married to old Rogers. She met Kincaid and fell in love with him. The two of them wondered how they could get out of the mess they were in. Carol had one idea—divorce. Kincaid had another—murder. He, Kincaid, hired Rene Du Val to kill old Rogers. But Carol begged him to call Du Val off. Then one night Rogers was knocked down and killed by a car driven by Kincaid.

"Carol suspected that Kincaid had murdered Rogers, but she still loved him enough

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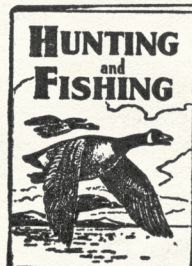
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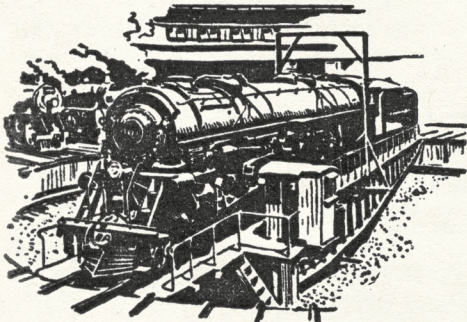


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Edward William Murphy

to save him from the gas chamber, so she never mentioned Kincaid's plans.

"She heard that Kincaid was looking for her when she got out of prison, and so she fled to New York. When she heard that Kincaid had followed her, she decided to find him and settle the matter once and for all. For some reason, she had to do that before old Rogers' will was read. She went to the Club Du Val after we tipped her off, and demanded an explanation.

"If you remember, Kincaid was drunk when he ran Rogers down—too drunk to remember what had happened. He remembered that Du Val had been in the car with him and suspected that Carol had hired Du Val to kill Rogers and lay the blame on him, Kincaid.

"When the explanations had been made on both sides, they realized that Du Val must have killed Rogers. Later that night Kincaid pumped Du Val about it, and Du Val killed him.

"Du Val had been blackmailing Carol Rogers. He called her up and told her that Kincaid was dead and that she was suspected. He told her to flee, knowing that if she did, his hold over her would be all the stronger. He hoped to grab the whole Rogers estate."

Mickey just looked at me. "How did you get on to it?" he asked finally.

"I began to get a glimmer when Du Val jumped us. Remember, I told the waiter we had something on him. Du Val thought that Carol had talked. He had to get us out of the way.

"Carol decided to fight back; that's why she came here tonight. Du Val was following her. He knew he had to kill her before she talked."

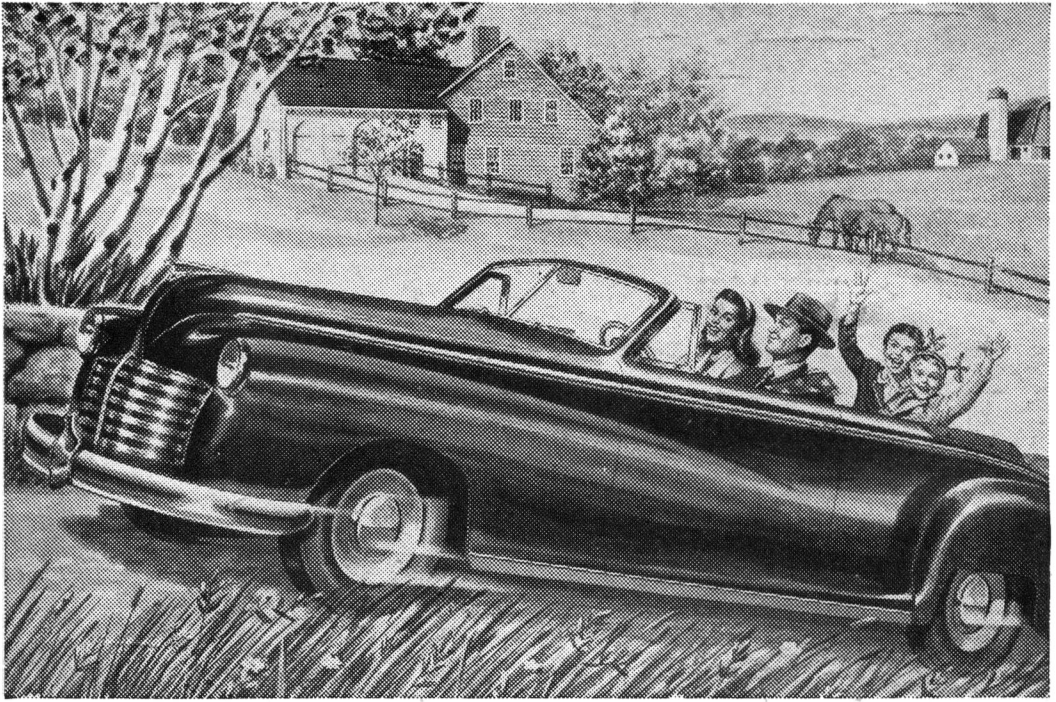
"But," Mickey chimed in, "if he killed her, he'd have to kill us, too."

"Exactly," I said.

Mickey gulped. "In the future," he said, "I'm wearing a gun even in the bath!"

We have one of the pretty fifties framed along with an autographed picture of Carol Rogers on our desk at the office. Not a bad way to start an agency, I always say.

Carol? Oh, the last time I saw Carol, she was holding hands in a neighborhood movie with a cocky little private dick named Mickey Duane.



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