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CHINESE DEVILMAN

By JAMES G. MacCORMACK

NEW YORK CITY'S TOMBS had many colorful personalities, but none ever lent as much cachet to that forbidding old structure as did Lee Ah Bow, its first Chinese prisoner.

In 1840, just two years after the Tombs was constructed, a Chinese junk, *Ki Ying*, anchored in the East River. New Yorkers, most of whom had never seen a Chinese, came in droves and eagerly paid to prowl about the old ship and watch the pig-tailed crew working in stalls below, turning out souvenirs for the customers—at a fancy price.

The junk caught fire one night, and the English promoters who had brought it to this country disappeared. The stranded crew settled on Mott Street between Chatham and Pell, and New York's Chinatown was born.

The Chinese are reputedly a quiet, philosophical sort, with a record of little crime. But when they do turn out a criminal, he is likely to be a holy terror such as Lee Ah Bow, who somehow got into the police blotter as Quimbo Appo, probably because New York's Finest were as poor at names then as they are now. The records are a bit confused as to whether Quimbo Appo was on the junk or came to the city at a later date.

Lee had a very unoriental short temper and enormous arms on his small brown body. He served four terms in the Tombs for murder and several other stretches for attempts with the same end in mind.

Lee, at that time was something of an oddity even for the Tombs, and was the particular target of the missionary ladies who haunted the prison in those days. They all but pulled him apart in their efforts to get him into heaven by their route. Lee never objected strenuously to these efforts to redeem his soul as long as the ladies brought him presents. He was quite willing to swing from one religion to another for as small a temptation as a roast chicken or a good cigar—or a small bottle of good whiskey from some of the more zealous missionaries.

On March 9, 1859, Lee Ah Bow came

home to his flat on Oliver Street. It had been one of those raw, miserable days, and Lee was something out of sorts. Catherine Fitzpatrick was suffering from a bad case of the beer hiccups, and the warm dinner Lee expected was far from done. In the midst of the ensuing argument, Lee lost his temper and bit her. When Miss Fitzpatrick called for help, Mary Fletcher, a neighbor, ran in. Resenting her interference, Lee stabbed the neighbor in the heart with a dirk.

Soon after this Lee was caught and taken to the Tombs where he was sentenced to hang, but the missionaries came to his rescue and he served seven years for that crime.

Three weeks after he was freed, Lee got into another argument with a Miss Lizzie Williams, a Bowery landlady, and stabbed her to death. But the missionaries were still equal to the task. They got him a good lawyer and soon he was again released.

In 1872, Lee in something of an alcoholic pet dug a cobblestone out of a street and bashed in the head of a laboring man named John Linkowski. Linkowski died. By this time Lee Ah Bow was tagged Devil Appo and the Chinese Devilman, by the New York press and for his latest murder he received three years. His sentences were of such short duration simply because the missionary ladies refused to believe they couldn't make a good Christian of this murderous little man.

But the Law was becoming tired of his repeat visits to the Tombs. When, in October 1876, Lee, who fancied himself as a checker player, lost a game to a derelict named John Kelly and very unsportingly stabbed him to death, Lee Ah Bow paid his last visit to the Tombs. Coroner Woltman, rather weary of the little Oriental's fatal moodiness, suggested that Lee was mentally unbalanced, and the Chinese Devilman took up permanent residence at Matteawan, the state prison for the insane.

The doctors figured Lee Ah Bow was around ninety-eight years old when he died on June 23, 1912.

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THE CASH WALE

That pint-sized private-eye, Cash Wale, had the setup of a lifetime—a chance to waltz off with a million-dollar chunk of ice . . . and a luscious Mata Hari.

My mind was screaming that I was shooting the wrong man. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Charged to the Ears

By **PETER
PAIGE**

DEAR PETE: It's probably on your radio this minute and you're wondering what happened to me and where I am—you and the cops and about

MASSACRE



Dramatic Novel of a Judas on a Joy-Ride



ten million thrill-hungry ants who populate this hive. Okay, I'm sitting in a swivel chair which I can't leave. There is no sensation below my belt, no control of my legs at all. But there's plenty of paper and a write-forever pen on this desk, and about the last thing left to kill around here is time.

You never heard of Kenneth Wilder. Neither did the radio, the cops or the ants. But you will, Pete. He's due for headlines. The funny thing is that an hour ago the guy would have paid half a million dollars to avoid headlines. Now it makes no difference. Maybe it isn't so funny at that.

He might have stepped out of a glossy *Esquire* ad the day he first appeared in my office. He was a six-foot study in browns and tans. There were silver streaks across his temples. His features were taut, as if he was about to bark or spit. His eyes were jet black and unwavering.

He entered my office as if he owned it, glanced at Sailor Duffy with an expression of immediate distaste, then sat on the edge of my client's chair as if it had germs.

"Have a seat," I invited dryly from behind my desk.

He ignored the sarcasm and handed me a snapshot from inside his jacket pocket.

"My wife," he said. "Helen Wilder. I'm Kenneth Wilder."

She was smiling into the camera. A brunette with nice teeth and large eyes. She had the usual assortment of arms, legs and so forth, but most unusually assembled. Oomph. It registered in the first glance.

"I'm pleased to meet you both. I'm Cash Wale," I said, tearing my gaze from the unusual assembly and returning it to the animated whiskey ad.

"Helen is a strange person," Wilder said, returning the snap to his jacket. "Her father was much too severe for these times. Periodically she goes on a—" He groped for a word with long tan fingers and I supplied:

"Binge?"

"Well, say an *emotional* binge. In her own words, she gets an uncontrollable urge to live dangerously. She vanishes for a day or two—or longer. One time it was eighteen days."

I said: "I'd rather work with your lawyer, Mr. Wilder."

"What lawyer?"

"This is a divorce, isn't it?"

"Good Lord, no! I can see how you'd glean such an impression. This is no question of divorce evidence. Nor do I want information. I have no wish to spy on my wife. Having known her father, I understand her need for a periodic—ah—binge. It's merely that she gets into the damndest scrapes. One time I had to settle five thousand dollars worth of gambling I.O.U.'s she couldn't recall signing. Another time I had to quash a morals indictment; she'd been caught in a raid on a marihuana party. There have been other times. . . ." Tilden waved a tan hand, dismissing the other times.

"What I want," he said, "is for you to protect her from such predicaments this time. Your reputation—"

"You mean she's doing it now?"

He nodded sadly, then scowled at the Sailor and asked: "Does he have to do that?"

The Sailor was sitting with his heels on the ledge of our window that was open to woo any vagrant breeze. He was squinting at a comic book and nibbling raw cabbage leaves. It was audible.

"He's after the vitamins—which he needs to lick Louis, he thinks," I told the man. "A job like this will come to fifty a day plus expenses, in return for which I will keep your wife away from gamblers, reefer jags, and so forth."

"After you find her," Kenneth Wilder said.

"Find her, guard her or both, the price is the same. A hundred dollar retainer will launch me."

"You will have to move swiftly, Wale. She has been gone two days now. I understand that a search of this nature is difficult even for the police—and you can readily see why I cannot involve the police. But they told me you were amazingly resourceful."

"When I have resources," I told him dryly.

He dug out a fat wallet.

"The fee is satisfactory, Wale."

"Then I want a list of the clothes she took with her, the amount of dough she probably has, an idea of her personal habits; her pet eats, drinks and amusement, for instance. I mean, paint me a picture of Mrs. Wilder. . . ."

IT STARTED like that, Pete. A hunt for a streamlined screwball. I was "amazingly resourceful" and I "moved swiftly." It took a cute angle; we'll get to that later—but two days later this old hag of a landlady keyed open a door in a rooming house west of Central Park in the Nineties, and then blocked my way with an expression that mingled worry and greed.

She had the face for both; all pasty sags and wrinkles framed in hair that looked like dirty white straw in need of a rake.

"I ain't sure this is right," she worried.

"Five is my limit," I told her.

"Suppose she comes back while you're in her room?"

"She won't," I lied.

"Well, just suppose."

I didn't feel like supposing. I held out my palm. "Let's have my five back, Sister. It's not that important to me."

Greed overcame her worry. She slid away from the doorway and I entered the furnished bed and sink. She tried to follow. I told her my five bought my privacy. I closed the door on a face that now included suspicion as well as worry and greed. Then I regretted the five.

I hadn't lied, after all. Helen Wilder would never be back. The bureau drawers were pulled out and empty. Nothing but hangers in the closet. The bed was unmade, and there was a long silken hair in a depression in the pillow—silken and black. That and the perfume bouquet were all that remained of Helen Wilder in that room.

The perfume rates a paragraph. It was nothing you could buy for twenty-five bucks an ounce. It didn't belong in that furnished bed and sink. It belonged in a Turkish seraglio, in a Rajah's harem, in Kubla Khan. I tell you it was heady stuff, and it suddenly made that day worth while.

The hag was poised outside the door. I told her: "You could have told me she carried her bags out."

"You're crazy! She had two shiny suitcases. Silver. You think I wouldn't notice her carryin' two suitcases?"

I gestured into the room and followed mine hostess in. She darted into the closet. She squatted to peer under the bed, then under the bureau. She glared at me, then headed for the room's solitary window and

leaned out into the afternoon sunlight. That had to be it. A fire-escape with a drop ladder lead down to the paved yard behind the brownstone. The ladder had been dropped.

Back in the perfumed room, greed crowded other expressions from the old hag's face.

"She owed me a week's rent. Eight dollars."

I let her see my wallet and watched her greed become a live and ugly thing.

"I don't think you'll have to worry about her rent. You say she left an hour ago?"

The dirty straw nodded eagerly.

"Then you didn't notice her come back. That cuts it down to maybe thirty minutes. How'd she act while she lived here?"

A bony claw gesticulated.

"Stuck in here mostly. Made her own bed. In the four days she's been here today was the first time she went out so early. Usually she didn't go out until around ten at night."

"What time would she return?"

"Around one. She'd be in a cab." A bright red tongue wet her bloodless lips nervously. "Ridin' cabs! And now she skips. I'll have the police on her, that's what!"

"That may not be necessary," I smiled. "You mean she ate only once a day?"

"I didn't say that. Hank, from the delicatessen, came around once a day with bags of stuff. I thought it was queer how she stuck to her room. But I never caught anyone else going up to it—and they'd have to pass my door."

"Did she have much to say?"

"She's the quiet type—at least that's what I thought. But I guess she didn't want me to learn too much about her, not with her intendin' to skip without payin' me the eight dollars she owed!"

I nodded and returned the wallet to my hip pocket. I said: "Maybe you'd better put the cops on it at that."

The old hag's eyes grew enormous. Her mouth grew enormous. A cascade of enormous words poured down the stairs after me.

I entered the hot sunlight of the back yard, skirted a pile of old bedsteads, ducked through a gap in the board fence and grinned pleasantly at a young redheaded guy who occupied a beach chair in the ad-

joining yard. He wore a billion freckles, tan shorts, a dark red epidermis and a leer that was ten years older than he.

"I'd be after her, too," he leered. He smacked his lips. "A dish. Strictly."

I said: "You put two and two together pretty fast."

"Why not? I seen you look outta her winda. All week it's been her lookin' outta the winda an' me lookin' up at her an' makin' wit' the hows-about-it, Babe? An' a while ago she's like a monkey up an' down the ladder with two hunks of airplane luggage. I tell her when she comes by I'll put her up, an' she gives me the crawl-back-under-your-rock, Woim! From her I'll take it. I mean a dish!" He winked with half his face. "But I ain't tellin' you nuttin'!"

"Strictly a dish," I agreed solemnly. "How long ago is a while?"

"Ten minutes. A hour. You figure it out, layin' here under that—" He gave me a candid, bitter description of the sun.

"If that's how you feel about it, why let it cook you?"

"Vitamins."

THE apartment-house doorman across the street from the alley through which Helen Wilder had to emerge had a more accurate idea of the time element.

"I'd say fifteen minutes, Shorty. Your wife?"

"Yeah."

The doorman shook his head sadly.

"I'd let her go and give thanks. Me, I'm a two time loser. I'm hangin' on to the present missus only to keep me from doin' it again. I can't say no."

I grinned patiently and said: "It's just that I want to catch her with the other guy. It takes that for a divorce in this state."

"Is that all you want, Shorty? You wouldn't be packin' a heater now?"

"Do I look like a—*gunman*?"

"You sure don't at that, Shorty," the doorman grinned. "Although they say Cash Wale is a little guy like you."

"All I want is to locate the guy, then I'll put a private dick on him and wait for evidence."

"Well, it's your headache. I saw her go in the subway. The uptown side."

"You sure? A tall brunette in a gray suit and carrying two silver-colored suitcases?"

"And gams, Shorty. I have to hand you that. You picked a very lovely set of gams. My missus now—the present one—the only way I can tell the bottom of her from the bottom of the piano is she wears shoes."

* * *

She had taken an uptown local. The elderly man plying the broom on the uptown platform couldn't say whether it was a Concourse or Broadway local—just that "De lady smelled lak all de angels in hebbin."

Which made it a headache. If flight was her object, she could transfer to a downtown train and ride out to Flatbush or Queens—and sneaking her bags down a fire-escape indicated flight was her object. On the other hand, Manhattan being the hive it is, she might consider another neighborhood far enough. So I played it like that.

I rode a local to the next station, went up to the street and interviewed half a dozen loungers soaking up sun on a park bench ten feet from the uptown kiosk. They would have noticed Helen Wilder, considering her airplane luggage and so forth. They didn't. Neither did the bench loungers at the next stop—nor the next.

The fourth station was 110th Street and I had run out of park and benches. The filling station attendants suggested the cabbies across the street. I skipped through the street. I skipped through traffic and was about to address the first hackie when an odor engulfed me that smelled like "all de angels in hebbin," the Taj Mahal effect I had first inhaled in the vacated bed and sink.

It came from a small eatery facing the cab stand.

She was sitting on one side of the horse-shoe counter and toying with what looked like a cottage cheese salad. The two silver suitcases were propped against the wall behind her.

I sat on the other side of the horseshoe and ordered coffee with cherry pie.

I tell you, Pete, the lady had it. That one black hair on the pillow wasn't even a fair sample. She wore the stuff in a page-boy bob, and it was as black as the split insides of a lump of coal. The snapshot hadn't done justice to her face. Offhand,

you might think her nose too small and her eyes too large. Her lips were poised somewhere between a smile and frown. Not the enigmatic Mona Lisa simper. There was intelligence and character behind this expression.

She had high, wide cheekbones and velvety cheeks that hollowed delicately down to a firm chin. I guessed her to be between twenty-three and thirty and gave her the benefit of the doubt.

Very clean, very nice, very smart looking; I couldn't in a million years imagine that woman kicking the traces in periodic "emotional binges."

Her wide gray eyes, after one thoughtful glance at me, returned to her salad, but I felt that she remained acutely aware of me from the moment I sat down.

THE waitress brought my pie and coffee and I grinned at her. "Don't hit me. I'll just ask it this once. Have you any idea where I can find a furnished room around here?"

The waitress, a big, blonde, tired-looking woman, rolled her eyes. A cabby snickered and a schoolgirl clucked her tongue. Helen Wilder smiled into her salad.

"You and a million others," the waitress said dully. "We thought it'd get better after the war, but it gets worse. My sister runs a couple of apartments around the corner on Manhattan Avenue. Used to be, they'd come and go every few weeks. Now she has 'em years at a time. I'll call her if you want."

"Not an apartment," I said. "Just a room."

"That's what Mabel's got. Two five-room apartments make eight rooms and two kitchens for kitchen privileges. You want I should call?"

"Tell her I'll marry her if necessary."

She liked that. She ignored the nickel I slid across the counter and waddled to the rear where I heard her voice in muffled talk. Half of my pie later she returned with a tiny sparkle of life in her tired eyes.

"Mister, you're lucky! Mabel's got *two* empties! Boy and girl got married and moved out to his folks in Ohio."

The cabby said I was probably the sort of guy who found pearls in my oysters. The schoolgirl clucked her tongue again. Helen Wilder eyed the big waitress thoughtfully

as I dropped four bits on the counter and wended my way out.

It was a climb of five flights of stairs to the *Vacancy* sign on the doorknob.

Mabel turned out to be bigger and more tired looking than her sister. She tried to brighten the effect with peroxide updo, eye shadow and a red and blue kimona, but it just served to accentuate the licking life had administered.

In due time she had fifteen of Kenneth Wilder's dollars and I was lounging in my shirtsleeves on a bed that was slowly giving up the struggle. And, in due time again, I heard the bell ring, followed by chit-chat between Mabel's whine and a low, throaty voice full of female hormones.

"I heard about your having a room vacant. Is it still available?"

"Well, I never! They only moved out two hours ago—and five minutes ago I rented one of 'em to a nice little salesman. Mind you, Dearie, it ain't exactly a sweet at the Waldorf—"

They drifted into the next room. A tissue-paper wall. I could hear them breathe. I listened to Mabel's routine, the other's responsive murmers—and, finally, "Yes. I'll take it."

Then Mabel was gone. Water splashed in the next room. A lock clicked open. A bureau drawer was opened. Footsteps tripped lightly across the floor. That sweet, musky perfume bouquet sifted into my room, filled my lungs and imagination until it was like the third shot of Scotch after a hard day at the track.

I got off my bed and used the wash basin, donned my tie and jacket and fedora and stepped out of my room. Her door swung open before I was halfway to the apartment door.

"Oh, Mister!"

I came back to face her. She stood smiling in her doorway.

"Will you be coming back soon?"

"Couple of hours. I want to collect my bag at the Y."

"A couple of hours will be soon enough. I wonder if you could get me some things when you return."

"Sure." I clicked my fingers. "Say! Weren't you in that eatery where I heard about this room?"

She smiled at her gray suede pumps, then raised the voltage to my eyes.

"I heard the woman tell you there were two rooms."

"I guess you're pretty lucky, also. I'm Bob Carey, by the way."

"Shaw. My friends call me Ruth, Bob."

We smiled at each other. That is to say she smiled. I stood there grinning like a ten-year-old idiot.

"I hate to eat out all the time, Bob. I like to eat and read in bed. That's what I want, delicatessen and reading matter. Anything you select—but not sardines and not movie magazines. You sure this won't be too much trouble?"

"Of course not."

"And that Turkish candy—halvah. About half a pound of it. Here, I'll give you—"

I waved away the bill she proffered.

"After I get back."

"All right, Bob. Thanks—and please don't forget the halvah."

"Not if I have to go all the way to Turkey for some."

Her smile followed my idiotic grin out the apartment door. I felt like turning cartwheels down the five flights of stairs. Call it a sudden torch. All I know is that it was like being charged to the ears by a lightning bolt. She had so much affect on me that I double-crossed her husband.

CHAPTER TWO

Strange Rendezvous

IT'S HARD to get this on paper, Pete—not like the times I've talked over cases with you in your apartment over a glass you kept full of Scotch highball—and how I could go for some of that smoky juice now!

I didn't mind reading those cases later in detective magazines under your byline. I got ten times as much from the free advertising as you got for the stories. Citizens read about Cash Wale and his fast rod and his knack of pulling invisible answers out of thin air, and they'd look me up; the kind of citizens with troubles too hot for the cops and too delicate for the big agencies, the sort of citizens who could afford to buy my time—like Kenneth Wilder.

I don't know if I sold him to you properly. South of the border they'd say he was

mucho hombre. An Alaskan would call him *skookum*. I mean, when his stony-faced butler led me into Wilder's library, I almost felt like taking three paces toward where Wilder stood with his back to the fireplace, coming to attention and whipping him a G.I. salute.

This was his home on Madison Avenue, a brownstone job full of oak panelling, leather and mahogany furniture, Persian rugs that felt like sponges underfoot and that library fireplace almost half the size of that room I had just rented in South Harlem.

He stood now with his back to the three trunks in the fireplace and snapped: "Well, Wale?"

"I found her."

That almost crumbled his poise. His tan face split in the middle, revealing a gash of white.

"Well, well, well!"

"I lost her again."

Thin lips wiped out that smile. His eyes dug into mine and stuck.

"That wasn't very clever, Wale."

I almost blew a fuse at that. "Okay, Chum! Hire yourself another boy. I thought I was pretty damn clever."

"Can you be more explicit?" he tempo-rized.

"Sure. You may as well get an idea of the expense account. In two days I made four hundred and sixty-three calls from the wholesalers—on you!"

"What wholesalers?"

"Halvah, remember? That stuff you said your wife couldn't get enough of. I went to the halvah wholesalers in this town, got lists of their retailers and phoned 'em a dream. Told them, as a promotional stunt, I was trying to locate the biggest halvah fiends in the city. There would be awards for the fiends and fifty bucks to the retailers who fingered said fiends."

Wilder grinned appreciatively.

"Who would have thought of a stunt like that?"

"Me. You owe fifty to a guy named Hank who runs a delicatessen on Columbus. In the Nineties. He reported a Joan Gilbert, a stacked brunette, to use his language, who'd been buying the stuff in half pound lumps daily for the past four days. He identified the snapshot, but your wife had moved away from there half an hour

before I arrived. Maybe she couldn't live dangerously enough in that neighborhood; I don't know. I traced her as far as an uptown local on the Independent Line. After that the trail forked. I tried the Concourse Line, asking station attendants and cabbies if they'd noticed an attractive brunette with two hunks of airplane luggage—but no soap. Tomorrow I'll work the Broadway Line."

"You were pretty damn clever at that, Wale."

"Okay."

The stony-faced butler appeared. The guy, so help me, was standing at attention.

Wilder barked at him: "Well, Riley?"

"Sir, Miss Kurtsinger is on the phone. She wants to speak to Mr. Felix. You remember, Sir. That housekeeper in the castle in—"

"That's all, Riley!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"I'll take the call in the study."

"Yes, Sir!"

I expected him to salute. But he whirled and paced out of the library; a big, solid sort of butler. He wore sandy hair that was an inch at its longest. His bent nose, square chin and pale eyes could have been chiseled from marble. As he turned to go, I noticed a bulge under his jacket at the right hip that was too large for a wallet.

"Is there anything else, Wale?"

"Just the expense account."

"Submit it in writing and I'll handle it."

"That's all then."

"Good night, Wale."

Riley had my hat at the front door, still at attention. I took the fedora and snapped: "At ease!"

So help me, the guy's left foot shot out and his hands dropped behind him. He caught himself, snapped back to attention and ignored me gaping at the tide of pink engulfing his marble features.

The door slammed a little harder than necessary behind me.

Riding the crosstown bus back to the office, I considered things in general. I had a nice, simple case. As soon as I was satisfied Helen Wilder was bent on sowing a few spare oats and nothing more, I would "find" her, maybe help her sow a few—on hubby's fifty a day plus. A military butler with a rod on his hip, a Miss Kurtsinger from a castle who wanted to

talk to a Mr. Felix had nothing to do with Mama Wale's little boy, Cash.

MY FUTURE seemed uncomplicated and pleasant as I entered my office door. The Sailor glanced up from the sport page spread out on my desk and foghorned: "Hiya, Cash! Who's ya pal?"

I asked: "What pal?," followed the Sailor's gaze past my shoulder and lost all powers of further speech.

The man crowding into the office after me would have made the Sailor resemble a midget, and the Sailor was big enough to have almost been the world's heavy-weight champion. Give the guy seven feet and you might miss by an inch one way or the other. Give him a build encased in a brown double-breasted suit to match the altitude. Give him a complexion the color of mahogany, a nose that hooked hawkishly down into a thick black mustache that curled fiercely up at the ends, and you'll commence to understand my reaction.

He was an Arab, Turk or Moor—I never did learn which.

Now he shut the door behind him with a massive paw, scowled appraisingly at the Sailor, then dropped the scowl to me.

"I wan' it straight de foist time, Short Stuff. De Cap'n pullin' a double X?"

Pure Flatbush! Coming out of that Middle Eastern giant, it had my eyes straining to leave their sockets.

What finally squeaked out of me was: "Did you say—Captain?"

His scowl became something that would send Gargantua scurrying for cover.

"Lissen, punk, yer Vanderwink, ain't-cha?"

"I'm Cash Wale."

His scowl shuttled between the Sailor and myself.

"Dere was a Cash Wale uster peddle his rod in de booze days."

"Same difference. I'm a private eye now."

"C'n ya prove it?"

I shoved him the license in my wallet, the one with my name and thumbprint. He returned my wallet, shaking his head dubiously.

"Why's de Cap'n cuttin' someone else in, willya tell me dat?"

"What Captain?"

"Don' gimme de big eyes, Wale. I'm

jus' afta follerin' ya from his house on Madison. Ya wanna han' me a line now ya don' know de Cap'n?" The giant winked. "I'm on t'the pitch, Wale. He ain't tol' ya about me an' Freda, hey?"

I said: "If you're talking about Mr. Wilder, he didn't tell me anything about you or a Freda or whoever you took me for—this Vanderwink."

"How's about Felix?"

"Who's Felix?"

The giant snorted at Sailor Duffy. He leered. "At's a laugh! Now he's askin' who's Felix!" The Giant's eyes widened. "Hey, youse is Sailor Duffy, ain'tcha?"

The Sailor grunted: "Meetcha."

The Giant strode across the office and gripped the Sailor's palm. "Hey, I seen ya fight de champ! Boy, in de thoid roun' ya almos' token de crown! Ya was good! Me, I'm Abdullah. Usta rassie inna sticks."

The Sailor grunted again: "Meetcha."

Abdullah whirled and aimed a finger as brown and big as a cigar at me.

"An how's about Vanderwink's goil, dis uppity Helen broad, hey?"

Ten icy fingers gripped the base of my spine and squeezed.

"Come again?" someone squeaked. It was me.

"De looker. Helen Hendryx. How's about it, Eye?"

I said: "Listen, Chum, all I know is this Wilder guy wants to exchange chitchat about rods. I'm known as a sort of authority on rods. Like this."

I showed him the Smith and Wessen .32 from under my arm. I mean his smoky eyes blinked. My hands had been empty one moment, then full of .32 the next.

He nodded somberly.

"Speedy. Youse is Wale, okay. Youse was sayin' de Cap'n was askin' about rods—like *dis*?"

I wouldn't have believed it. One half of my mind was arguing with the other half that it wasn't possible. I mean, an ordinary stopwatch couldn't have measured the difference. There was suddenly about ten pounds of revolver in his fist—I mean *suddenly*! His lips curled back from yellowed teeth in a full-grown leer.

We stood there poking stares into each other's eyes, then I dropped my S. and W. back into its nest. His revolver vanished.

We grinned a little hungrily, a little nervously at each other.

"That's about the size of it," I said. "You recognize the Sailor. I'm Wale. The stuff you've been slinging is Greek to us. We run our agency and stay clean. Wilder wanted talk about rods; how to wear one for a fast draw; how to yank it without tangling it in his haberdashery. He paid me ten bucks for my trouble. I didn't even know he was a captain."

Abdullah scowled. He had two expressions; the leer and scowl.

"Could be. Could be. If youse is levellin', jus' call me Mr. Popoff. If ya ain't—" He allowed the scowl to complete the thought. He shrugged. "Well, it lays like dat fer now." He waved a brown ham at the Sailor. "Glad t'meet ya, Champ!"

Sailor Duffy waved back.

"Likewise."

Abdullah nodded thoughtfully at me and backed out the door. I heard his heavy tread along the hall, then down the stairs. I passed a handkerchief over the wet that had sprouted on my forehead.

"Big guy, hagh, Cash?" the Sailor opined. "But I take a rassler easy. He talks American good fer not bein' one, hagh, Cash?"

"Just like he came from Harvard. Pack a bag for me, will you, Sailor? Overnight stuff. I want to think."

I could have used Einstein's brain for the job. My uncomplicated little case had grown into confusion. What concerned me most was Abdullah's references to my brunette neighbor, the Helen he called, "Vanderwink's goil," the lady whose surname was evidently Hendryx, not Wilder.

I was suddenly glad about the whim which kept me from telling Kenneth Wilder I had actually found his "wife."

* * *

She said: "You're a dear, Bob! How much was it?"

I felt like telling her it was on me. Knowing she was not Wilder's wife was part of it. Other parts were her voice shinnying up and down my spine, her eyes socking voltage into my eyes—and that musky perfume making all those suggestive ads and comical cartoons come true.

I told her, "Six dollars and four cents," and took her money, even the four cents.

Her door got between us. I went to my room, washed my hands, opened the suitcase, sat on the bed, dropped a spare shoe from the suitcase to the floor, waited a reasonable interval, then dropped its mate. I pulled the light cord, lay heavily on the bedsprings—and listened.

I heard her fuss around a little. She used a faucet. She unwrapped the packages of food I had brought. I heard her eat something and the slow rustle of pages being turned.

About thirty minutes of that—and then everything became deathly still. I forced myself to breathe deeply and regularly and worked in the ghost of a snore.

She began moving around her room softly. Several times she paused, as if listening. She heard my snore slowly gain momentum. I heard a sharp metallic click followed by another listening silence. I continued to snore.

Her door opened and closed quietly. Her footsteps in the hall were almost inaudible. The apartment door creaked open, creaked shut.

IT CREAKED open again possibly fifteen seconds later as I stood listening to the footsteps fading on the stairs below. It was five flights down and I kept a flight between us all the way. I could do that, carrying my shoes in my hand as I did.

It was touch and go in the street. Eleven o'clock, according to my watch. Low clouds and a hint of fog shrouded the night. She wasn't in sight as I emerged on Manhattan Avenue. I headed toward Central Park, the subway and hack stand there.

A cab was pulling away from the curb as I rounded the corner. I leaned against the building and glimpsed her silhouette as the cab started up the 110th Street hill.

The driver of the next cab at the stand was dozing when I clambered alongside him on the front seat and poked my fist in his ribs. A human frog, sleepy and sullen. I showed him the ten-spot in my fist and he lost some of his sleepiness. I dropped my shoes and tore the bill in half and he became wide awake.

I thrust one half at him, waved at the tail-lights climbing 110th toward Amsterdam with the other and yelled: "It's your tip if you stick with him!"

The guy had reflexes—also a sprinkling

of luck. Our quarry was stalled by a red light on top of the hill. We were halfway up when the light turned green. The cab ahead swung north on Amsterdam. We swung after it on two wheels and a prayer—and a curse from a man who had started across Amsterdam.

After that it became as hard as accepting a tax refund. I was able to lace on my shoes. Ten minutes later my frog-man braked around the corner from where the other cab had parked and reached for the other half of the ten-spot with a toothless leer.

"I seen her when we passed, Fella. You got somethin' there!"

I told him I most certainly had, paid the fare and waved him back to Harlem. Then I peeked around the corner, ducked back again as the headlights from her cab swept away from the curb, leaving her gazing up and down the street.

It was a good street for apprehensive gazing that close to midnight. Park Avenue that a few miles south housed Manhattan's elite. Here it housed the elevated tracks of the New York Central overhead. Across the avenue from where Helen Hendryx stood lay gaunt, ramshackle warehouses and beyond them the piers and jetties and wharves that marked the south shore of the Harlem River.

The house before which she stood was fire-gutted and abandoned—theoretically—as were several blocks of similar houses. The theory is violated by the traffic that is reputed to exist there in such savory items as cocaine, heroin, marihuana and morphine.

There are still other denizens of these charred and gaping ruins; the dispossessed of Harlem, its outcasts and homeless—for this is Harlem's Bowery, the dismal slum in Manhattan.

Now, as Helen Hendryx stood on the sidewalk, the windowless, doorless ruins loomed gaunt and silent in the night. Across Park, under the shadow of the elevated railway, a group of homeless bums sat around a small fire. No other signs of life were visible; no pedestrians, no passing traffic.

I heard the brittle tap-tap-tap of her heels as she crossed Park toward the warehouses. From my corner I watched her melt into the shadow formed by the alley between

two of the grotesque, massive structures.

The bums sitting around the fire ignored her.

They ignored me a few seconds later, slipping into the shadow of that alley after her.

A sign looming out of the darkness almost jerked a sound from my lips. Painted on the side of one of the warehouses was: *The Wilder River Transport Co.*

Then I was between the warehouses, inching through blackness toward the sound of water slapping against wood. I emerged on rotting planks. There was a darkened watchman's shack and the shadowy shape of a pier reaching past it into the river.

The fog was thickening a little. River lights wore dim halos, and their reflections danced and quivered in the shiny waters. Headlights crawled back and forth over the bridge to the left, and other headlights on the Bronx streets across the river were softened by fog into ghostly blurs.

It was very quiet. I filled my hand with my Smith and Wesson, and crept forward.

I stood in deep shadows formed by a group of tall crates and pressed the balls of my eyes against the murk. A sound out on the pier somewhere swung my attention there.

A shadow was growing at the end of the pier. It approached, passed through the dying glow of a distant street lamp, became Helen Hendryx briefly, became a shadow again as she tried the door of the watchman's shack.

The door seemed to be locked. She turned away.

She continued to approach the alley. When she came abreast of the tall crates among which I stood, she came to a sharp, breathless halt. I could have touched her with a ten-foot pole.

A moment later I could have touched her with my left hand. She had backed toward me between two of the crates. Another three feet and she would have backed into the muzzle of my Smith and Wesson .32.

But she stopped, fumbled in her bag, then set the bag down at her feet. I heard the snick of metal sliding on metal. Then there was silence.

She waited.

I waited.

CHAPTER THREE

Temptation

ONE HUNDRED and seventy-five years later the silence of that place was disturbed by heavy footfalls coming swiftly through the alley. A tall figure emerged from the shadows, walked directly to the watchman's shack. He didn't try the door. He used a key and opened it, went inside. A knife edge of yellow appeared along the rim of a drawn window blind.

The headlights continued to cross and re-cross that bridge. The slap, slap of wavelets against the pilings muffled the breathing of Helen Hendryx and myself. I could feel the fog creep around my ankles and neck. My lungs were filled with the fishy, salty taste of the river and the subtle sweetness of her perfume. I enjoyed the situation a little. There seemed to be nothing I could lose—and answers to certain questions to gain.

Midnight came and went like that.

A hundred years later—maybe fifteen minutes—the knife edge of yellow vanished from the window. The man emerged from the shack, keyed the door shut and strode toward the alley. He passed briefly through that dying halo from the distant street lamp.

Kenneth Wilder.

He continued through the alley. We could hear his footfalls grow fainter as he crossed Park Avenue. A car engine sprang to roar. Gears clashed and the engine melted away into the other night sounds of Harlem.

Then—nothing but the monotonous slap of wet against wood.

I sneezed.

She had quick reflexes, Helen Hendryx. I also have quick reflexes. My free hand caught her right wrist as she spun around, held it away from me as flame and roar blasted from her hand to the crate at my side.

Then my S. and W. was back in its leather nest. I pried the tiny automatic from her reluctant fingers—a German Walther, as it turned out later.

Our breathing sounded hoarsely over the sound of the river now.

She tried, in a whisper: "*Vandy?*"

I pocketed her weapon and struck a match between us.

"Surprise!" I grinned.

She looked surprised for an instant; surprised and a bit fearful, and something sparkled in her wide, gray orbs that could have been flickers of excitement—or merely reflections of match-glow.

"*You!*" she breathed.

The match winked out.

I said: "Vanderwink couldn't come. He sent me. He told me to locate you first, check on you a little—then be here at midnight if everything seemed under control."

"Vandy told you this?"

"That's right."

"When?"

"Last week."

There was a pause as we faced each other in those shadows within shadows. Then she said: "All right. Give me the money."

I said: "He told me to be satisfied everything went off all right before I did that."

She said: "Tell him it went off perfectly. He knows me. He trusts my word. Now stop talking and give me the fifty thousand dollars."

I said: "You think I'd carry it *here*? Besides, something happened to scare Vandy. He saw Abdullah. He wants *me* to be sure everything's all right—and I can't just take your word for it."

She suddenly burst into laughter. I mean she threw back her head and let forth peals of gay laughter that sent the shadows scurrying and turned that sinister part of Harlem into a gay and charming place.

She put strong fingers on my arm and said: "You're wonderful! You're the most engaging liar I ever met! Last week, when you say Vandy told you these things, he was in the middle of the Atlantic, enroute from Antwerp. And he wouldn't know Abdullah from Ghandi. He never saw Abdullah; he never heard of Abdullah. And there simply is no fifty thousand dollars! Come, take me where we can talk. I want to learn where you heard of Vandy."

SHE lifted her purse from the rotting planks and led me through the alley and back into Harlem. It took three blocks of walking to find a cab, ten minutes of riding to reach an all-night restaurant on upper Broadway—and then I was grin-

ning across two pairs of ham and eggs at her and confessing:

"Okay, I'm a liar. It wasn't Vandy. The guy who sent me was Felix."

She had been using that smile to paint goose pimples on my bones. Now she grew solemn.

"You're still a liar, Bob."

"Cash—as in Cash Wale. You're still right. How about Abdullah; could he have sent me?"

She shook her head gravely.

"Abdullah would have sent you to find Felix."

"Freda?"

"No."

"How about the Captain?"

She nodded thoughtfully.

"It must have been Kenneth." She continued to regard me thoughtfully, the way a kid might an assistant Santa Claus in a department store after getting the cynical lowdown from an older kid. She suddenly smiled as if we had become old friends with secrets. "I'm glad you didn't tell Kenneth you found me, Cash."

I gaped at her.

"How do you know I didn't?"

"I'm still alive, Cash"

"*What?*"

That smile again.

"Oh, he would have given you some plausible reason for seeking me. Didn't he?"

That gimmick in my throat that manufactures sounds ran out of oil. I stared at her. She smiled at me. After awhile words came.

"He told me you were his wife—out to sow a few latent oats."

"Is that your work—finding people?"

"Among other things. I hold a license to detect privately in this town."

"That must be fun."

"Sure. But this Captain—Wilder—you said he'd—"

"Kill me?"

"Didn't you? I mean, isn't that what you meant?"

"I'm not his wife, Cash. I'm no man's wife—or woman."

"Okay. But you said—"

"Let me tell it my own way, Cash. It's been swelling up inside of me until I was afraid it stood out all over my face in neon lights. I'm tired of hiding and I'm afraid

of that little gun I have to carry, and most of all I'm afraid of Kenneth Wilder and his man, Riley. I have to talk it over with someone. I need help. You found me—and you didn't tell Kenneth. Why?" She looked steadily at me.

"I don't know. Your perfume. Your voice. Your eyes. Go look in a mirror and figure out your own answers. Anyhow, I'm the kind of guy who's looked forward all his life to being wooed over to the enemy by a Mata Hari."

She loved that. Her smile generated voltage and I became a grinning idiot again.

She said: "Let's go home, Cash."

I got to my feet.

We left two sets of untouched ham and eggs on the table behind us.

* * *

"It happened in Germany, in the first days of the Occupation," she said. "I was a Red Cross nurse in a town occupied by Wilder's troops. We stayed at this castle which belonged to a baron whose job had been to loot the treasures of Europe for Goering. The baron was also in the castle—under house arrest—he and his housekeeper and bodyguard."

"And Felix is—?"

"The Baron. The housekeeper's name was Freda Kurtsinger. The bodyguard had been a scout for Rommel in Africa—Abdullah. They lived in one corner of the castle. The officers and our Red Cross unit occupied other parts of it. In time, the Baron and Kenneth and I came to know each other quite well. You understand why I'm telling you this, Cash?"

We were in her room and talking in whispers and nibbling on delicatessen sandwiches in lieu of the breakfasts we had abandoned. I knew why she was telling me this. She was simply trying to angle me onto her team in this league. And I knew she knew she could do it, and she didn't care whether I knew it was happening—and I knew and didn't much care either.

I said: "Wilder's paid me up to here. I don't need any more of his dough."

She said: "It was the black market in a big way. Everyone else was doing it. Instead of trading G. I. soap and cartons of cigarettes for household silver and Lugers,

we swapped the Baron's escape from Germany for a few million dollars worth of something no bigger than an egg—"

Before she could go on, I said:

"It has to be a diamond. It's always a diamond."

"The biggest, sparklingest diamond in the whole wide world, Cash! A little bauble the Baron had neglected to turn over to Goering, part of the Polish crown jewels—with a long history of blood and lies and medieval treachery. The Komasky blue-white."

"It would make a nice doorknob," I said. "You couldn't peddle a rock like that in a million years."

"Before I went to Germany, I was stationed in Amsterdam. I became acquainted with a lapidary."

"Vanderwink?"

"Vanderwink. I became well enough acquainted with him to know he always wanted to come to America, that he had purchasable scruples."

The jig-saw was coming together. A lapidary could slice a million-dollar rock into three quarters of a million dollars worth of smaller, less traceable rocks. It was expert work; it called for weeks of study before the first cut. The guy would have to know exactly how the grain went, the curve and direction of each striation, in order not to slice away a million-dollar fortune.

I waited for her to go on.

She said: "That's the background, Cash. We brought the Baron to America and arranged for the others to follow by way of Egypt. Felix brought the Komasky with him. Vandy was to have arrived day before yesterday. Then the arrangement was for him to make contact with us at the watchman's office on Wilder's pier the first midnight that was feasible after his arrival, whether it was the first night or a week later."

"And you were there tonight—to intercept him," I said.

"Yes."

"Because you shuffled the rock away from Captain Wilder."

"Yes."

"And now you want me to help keep Wilder from finding you, and Vanderwink from finding Wilder."

She just sat there smiling at me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Million-Dollar Egg

THIS is hard to put on paper, Pete. How can I put across that woman's effect on me? You know my rep: Cash Wale, the quick killer with a dollar sign for a heart. That columnist once wrote: ". . . Don't get me wrong. Wale wouldn't sell his mother to a Jap—not unless the price was right!" And I couldn't sue the guy. No jury in this town would give me the benefit of anything except a squirt of voltage.

Okay. You know I worked that rep. It saved me unnecessary shooting here and there. Clients expected my rates. That rep was part of my advertising. But I'd never double X'd a client before—although dough and dames had been used in efforts to switch me from other clients.

Now I went over like Quisling.

This love routine was a gimmick I'd always figured for laughs, but I guess it's been going on a lot longer than Wale and now I was a believer. I mean it was that elemental stuff that sold the first he jellyfish on the first she jellyfish and came up through the jungle and history and finally pointed at the hard little guy whose sentiments were as mushy as the sidewalks he walked and said: "You're it, Bub!"

Never mind the finer details. I haven't the strength or time to go into everything she said and I said and the way she looked and the taste of her lips.

I mean Cash Wale was settling down to the prospect of a future in South America with a lump from this Komasky blue-white and a Mrs. Cash Wale and—in time,

maybe—a batch of cute little Cash Wales. Okay, laugh! I tell you it was on the level coming as well as going. The lady and I clicked like crazy, like it never happened before, like—

Ah, to hell with that! Take it to the next afternoon when I walked into that brownstone on Madison and found Kenneth Wilder had company in his library—my pal, Abdullah, and a female doll.

The doll had straw-blonde curls, apple-pink cheeks, huge blue eyes and a sort of Betty Boop figure that a green tweed suit couldn't tame.

Wilder didn't wink. He didn't have to. It was in his voice. "Ah, Wale! Back for another session with weapons? I believe you met Abdullah. This is Miss Kurt-singer. Freda, Cash Wale."

The doll nodded. Abdullah leered. Wilder said: "I know your time is valuable, Wale." He turned to the others. "Would you care to join us on the range?"

Something passed between the Arab and Freda. Abdullah shook his swarthy head.

"Nah. We'll jus' latch onto this here giggle juice. Hey, Freda?"

A smile fitted briefly over her features. They sat facing each other across the fireplace. They held tall glasses full of amber sparkle. Wilder led me into the hall, down a flight of steps and onto a basement pistol range.

There was a small workbench in the rear, full of vises, ramrods, gun patches, oil cans, bore brushes, small hard tools and disassorted disassembled pistol parts. Over the bench was a rack holding about twenty different makes and calibers of pistols and revolvers. Over the rack was a shelf full of trophies from—as I read the engraved



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★

legends—various army and civilian pistol meets.

Along the far wall were paper-covered targets, cardboard half-man silhouettes and disappearing targets that were managed from this end by cords and pulleys.

"Nice," I said appreciatively.

Wilder cast a wary eye at the door.

"We may as well fire a few. The range is soundproof for ordinary conversation, but shooting can be heard."

He selected an Ivor Johnson Hammerless off the wall, palmed half a dozen slugs into the chamber and casually poured six rapid blasts across the range. He glanced at the bull's eye with its six new holes clustered in the black and said:

"Abdullah followed you from here last night, told me you'd said our relationship was confined to guns and asked me if that was a fact. A simple soul, Abdullah."

"He took me for some guy named Van-something."

"A wrestling promoter. Before the war caught Abdullah in Africa, he wrestled locally as the Angry Arab."

"That what he is?"

"I don't know." Wilder ejected six cases into his palm, dropped them into a basket full of coppery metal under the workbench and reloaded the Hammerless. "Fire a few, Wale," he invited. "Then you can tell me what progress you made today."

I fired six.

I mean the guy, for once, stopped acting casual. Okay, I'm bragging—but he didn't see my Smith and Wessen appear and he didn't see it vanish again. He just saw it briefly in my fist as six slugs chased themselves across the range into an even smaller cluster in the black than he had made.

"I could take some lessons from you at that!" he murmured.

I TOLD him: "Not much news. So far it's no dice on the Broadway Line. Your wife may have doubled back in the subway and gone downtown—even out to Brooklyn, which would louse us up properly and I'd have to start the halvah routine all over again."

"I don't think she'd go to Brooklyn," he said, frowning.

He was thinking of the midnight rendezvous with Vanderwink.

"Well, I intend to work the neighbor-

hoods around the uptown stations first," I said. "Stores and cabs. She'd have hit one or the other, asking about furnished rooms—and they'd remember an attractive brunette carrying two silver-colored suitcases."

Wilder nodded. "Keep working on it. We may as well fire a few more."

We fired a few more. Then Wilder insisted on cleaning our revolvers. He was a bug on the subject. I let him have my S. and W. and wandered around reading the legends engraved on his trophies.

The range door banged open and seven feet of scowling Arab charged in, followed by a scowling blonde doll.

"He didn' show, hey?" Abdullah roared at Wilder. "It come outta ya yap so easy I ate it raw! How's about dis, hey?"

A battered old briar pipe was clutched in his left hand. He waved it at Wilder, who gaped up at him from the workbench.

"Freda tells me don' trust ya!" Abdullah howled. "So she has me shake de dump—an' where ya t'ink I fin' his pipe, hey?"

Wilder's voice crackled like a stutter gun: "Don't be an idiot! I don't know where you found it. I brought it back along with other souvenirs and mislaid it. You should know better than to sound off like this!"

Abdullah's scowl shifted to me, back to Wilder again. An element of uncertainty smoked his eyes. He was simple, for a fact.

Freda turned loose a barrage of guttural language that sounded like a Hitler speech in a prewar newsreel. It passed me by—but registered with Wilder. The *Esquire* ad came half out of his chair, barking: "Enough of this nonsense!"

Then he sat back in his chair and gaped at Abdullah.

The giant's confusion was out of his eyes and that huge revolver was in his fist—like that!

Which was great. My .32 and Wilder's Hammerless were in pieces on the workbench. We were sitting ducks. Abdullah didn't seem like the kind of guy who observed game laws.

"Ya hoid 'er!" he growled at Wilder. "Wrap up de Eye. Freda'll wrap youse up, an' den we'll case dis dump, Freda an' me, like we was toimites! G'wan, Cap'n—make wit' de rope!"

Wilder licked tight lips.

"Okay. He was here. But it's not what

you think. He—" Wilder turned a thoughtful eye on me and switched to German. He talked fast and hard. I caught my name a few times. I caught a "fraulein" and a "Baron Felix." But the rest of it was gutteral gargle.

Abdullah's scowl succumbed to confusion again. He glanced uncertainly at Freda. She rattled some fast talk at Wilder. He batted it back. This went on a few times—and then Abdullah's revolver sagged. Freda's voice came out of high gear. Wilder turned to me wearily.

"You must understand some of the background, Wale. These people attended my wife when her father was a consul in Germany years ago. I appreciated your refusal to tell Abdullah why I engaged you. As you see, they're impulsive and may have suspected she had come to harm when they didn't find her here. Which is why I went along with your little deception—and added a touch of my own; that she was visiting friends in California. Now I want you to tell these two exactly why I hired you."

Freda looked at Abdullah who translated this into a series of grunts. She nodded and Abdullah asked me: "What's the score, Eye? Spill it."

I spilled it. Freda gobbled at the big Arab, who translated it to Brooklynes for me.

"She wantsta know howsome ya miss Helen yestiddy."

I spilled that and it went through the grinder again. Freda dug a snapshot out of a green leather bag and handed it to me with some more language.

"She wants you to pick out my wife," Wilder translated.

It was a group snapshot of half a dozen girls in Red Cross uniforms lined up before a pile of rubble. I pointed to Helen Hendryx smiling into the camera from the end and said: "That's Mrs. Wilder."

"Goot!" Freda nodded.

Abdullah scowled at me: "Ya levellin', Eye?"

"For fifty lousy dollars a day, you think I'd buck that?" I angled my chin at his sagging pistol.

Abdullah said: "It's like de Cap'n says. We t'ink he done her doity. We blew a fuse."

"Okay," I said.

ABDULLAH toyed with a grin that would have terrified Frankenstein. He dropped the huge revolver under his lapel. Wilder returned to the workbench and calmly reassembled our weapons, exchanging gutteral chitchat with the now docile Freda.

On the way upstairs, Abdullah burst into loud laughter. "Hey! I fergit all about Riley! 'At's a laugh, hey?"

The butler didn't seem to appreciate the joke. We found him bound and gagged on the floor in the library.

Wilder led me to the door.

"This won't affect our—ah—relationship, will it, Wale?"

"Why should it?"

Abdullah's head poked from the library. "Ya woikin' fer de whole gang of us now, hey, Eye?"

I glanced at Wilder who nodded solemnly. I told Abdullah I was working for the entire menagerie, then I walked out to Madison Avenue and wondered who was kidding who.

* * *

Helen giggled. "Kenneth's almost as big a liar as you, Darling."

"He didn't sell your favorite boy friend, Honey. Abdullah and Freda were blowing fuses about Felix, not you. That was a dodge to ease me away from there quietly. It had something to do with Abdullah finding the Baron's pipe—"

"Felix was a funny little blond man," Helen mused aloud. "Always forgetting where he'd put his hat, his books, his pipe—just like an absent-minded math prof in a Midwestern college. He had a dry way of speaking; as if lecturing to a class of backward pupils. He would tick off each point on his fingertips: why psychopaths should be exterminated instead of cured, why democracy was an antique in this modern age, why marriage was an outmoded superstition—that was his favorite theme. He made it personal. How would you like to be kissed by a man who tried to convince you with reasons he ticked off his fingers?"

"I'd rather hear about his pipe."

She wrinkled her nose at me. I tell you, Pete, I could spend a lifetime watching her wrinkle that cute little nasal gadget.

"Abdullah probably found it under the mattress in the Baron's room—or on the floor under a radiator. In the castle they used to spend hours each day trying to find where he'd last misplaced it."

"Okay. Why didn't they find the Baron?"

"He'd lost his bargaining point. The diamond. I think he began to realize they weren't just holding him in that house on Madison Avenue to await Freda and Abdullah. He must have realized he was being held prisoner. They probably planned that from the outset, Kenneth and Riley. It would have been dangerous for them to turn him loose. Suppose he was caught—and then implicated them? Then how could they explain the Komasky—or the money from it?"

"So they planned to erase him," I nodded. "Why wait?"

"But they had to wait—in order to bring Abdullah and Freda across. They had to come by way of Egypt and it took longer. If they suspected anything had happened to Baron Felix, there was no telling what they might have done. They were devoted to that funny little man. Even if they did nothing directly, a word in the right direction would have pointed the F.B.I. right at Kenneth, and then where would he be?"

"Okay. So the Baron suddenly realized all was not copasetic in Denmark. Then what?"

"It was the night I left. I heard them arguing in the hall. Riley had caught the Baron trying to sneak out of the house. There were a lot of words and then—about the time I peeked down the stairwell—Kenneth struck the Baron. It was how he did it. That blond head sort of bounced on the edge of the bottom step, then lay motionless. Riley came over and felt his wrist and said he was dead. Kenneth said sooner was just as good as later. Riley asked how about the dame.

"The dame, I tell you, was scared silly. It was the cold-blooded way they went about it. I guess soldiers get that way about life and death—but it seemed so personal. I realized my bargaining point had been Vandy. But now Kenneth knew Vandy was en route and would make his next contact some midnight in the watchman's office in Harlem. Suppose they intended to stop all leaks; Freda and Abdullah—and *me*?"

"Nice supposing," I nodded. "How'd you sneak the rock?"

"Someday remind me to correct your English."

"After the rock becomes pesos, or whatever they use for wampum in South America. How'd you do it?"

HELEN smiled. "The safe was behind a set of Victor Hugo in the library. I never exactly trusted Kenneth—I guess people don't trust each other in a situation like that. I had made it my business to watch him open the safe."

"How could you do that?"

"With his own field glasses from outside the library window. It was a simple combination. Five to the left, eight to—"

"Never mind that now. Then what happened?"

"Well, I had packed my bags. I couldn't hear them below. So I sneaked down the stairs. I heard them then—in the basement. The library was empty—and the safe was not."

I said: "Listen, Honey. You don't hear things from that basement. This is right out of the horse's mouth."

"They were using a pick to break the cement floor in the basement."

"Oh!"

"Yes, oh! . . . Are you sure this Sailor friend will want to come to Brazil with us?"

"Let's stick to the subject. He'll come to hell and back with us. Now what comes next is where's the rock?"

"Don't ask me that."

"Why?"

"It isn't only Kenneth and Riley. The F.B.I. or G2 or any number of agencies will be after it. If any of them—Kenneth or the agencies—learn about us and try to force information from you, you couldn't tell them what you didn't know."

That was a good point. I had another point.

"Look, Honey, suppose we forget the whole deal? I have about ten G's salted away—ten thousand dollars, in English. Let Wilder and the agencies battle it out. Ten G's are enough for—"

"You look, Mr. Wale!" She gripped my arm and brought her eyes inches from mine for emphasis. "Before the war I took dictation in a realty office. In order to

learn how to take dictation, I had to stand on my feet eight hours a day waiting on tables. Before that I was starving and dreaming in an orphanage—and that's as far as my memory goes.

"It isn't as though anyone was being hurt. The Komasky blue-white would have ended in a museum for the dubious entertainment of people who couldn't tell it from a lump of cut glass. It means security for the rest of my life. Unless you've lived in an orphanage, you can't realize exactly how much that word 'security' can mean. What I'm getting at, Darling, is that little Helen is never going to live in another furnished room or spend her days avoiding fat laps without seeming to avoid them in order to grub along on pennies!"

I closed the gap between our faces and that settled the issue.

It was nearing eleven p.m. now.

Half an hour later I stood motionless amid the crates in the shadow of Wilder's warehouse and watched that worthy enter the watchman's shack. Nobody else came along. Half an hour past midnight, Wilder emerged again, locked the door and strode away through the alley.

I walked out to the end of the pier and gazed down at a ladder that led down into the shifting wavelets.

I climbed down a few rungs, then gaped up into the blackness under the pier. A match disclosed the undersides of planks, cobwebs, heavy bolt heads and something that looked like a bird's nest. Maybe it was. When I touched it, it fell apart and dropped to the water with a dull *plop*.

I let myself down further, until the next rung lay under water. I reached into the cool wet and groped around the slimy wood of the ladder and felt—the slimy wood of the ladder.

I passed my hand around under the dancing wavelets in a widening arc—until I touched a metal ring attached to the fat, scum-covered piling alongside the ladder.

Attached to the ring was some sort of wire. It came up easily under my pull—about five feet of wire with a dripping cloth bag at the end of it and something hard about the size of an egg inside.

The next instant all the red and green and yellow river lights twinkled and danced in the object in my palm.

I had always wondered how it felt to

hold a million dollars in my hand. Now I knew. It felt as if I was standing on a ladder a few inches over the Harlem River and balancing a heavy hunk of cut glass in my palm.

I put it back in the cloth bag, wrapped the end of wire around the bag's opening and let it sink back into the river again. If that cache was good enough for Helen, it suited me.

A couple of million dollars in one lump hanging unguarded just a stone's throw away from a hundred thousand of the poorest people in America!

A hell of a note, isn't it, Pete? All that stuff about me on the radio as I write this, all those prowling buggies screaming through the city in search of me—and they haven't the foggiest notion of what started the shooting. They don't know a single, solitary thing about this weight I'm using to keep the breeze from blowing these papers away—this fabulous Komasky blue-white!

I wonder what Homicide Inspector Quinn would say?

CHAPTER FIVE

All in a Dick's Day

TAKE it to this morning, Pete. Or yesterday morning—it's well after midnight now. I'm still sitting here with my diamond paper weight and my paralyzed legs and—but on with the story.

Helen said: "I'm worried about Vandy, Darling. He's been in New York days now. He should have appeared at the shack. It wasn't only the hundred thousand American dollars he was supposed to get out of it." She turned pink. "It was also a little—personal. I mean from his side of it."

I grinned: "Does it always become personal?"

Her blush stuck.

"Don't be a beast!"

"Does it?"

"What do *you* think?"

I thought it had never been personal until now—with me.

I told her: "I've been thinking about Vanderwink also. He may be stymied on Ellis Island. Or he could have gotten on the wrong express in the subway and he's still trying to find his way back from Canarsie. Or he became personal about

someone else on the boat coming over. Or he's in the morgue—"

Her eyes widened and I shrugged. "It happens all the time, Honey. I'll give it a treatment today—before I tell Wilder how elusive you continue to be."

"Cash, suppose something happened to Vandy?"

"Then I'll split that rock with my own hammer and chisel."

"Don't forget to bring me halvah, Darling."

"It'll be my grounds for divorce. Something like: *Our marriage has come to an end, my dear; the past is withered and dead. I refuse to live any longer with a fiend who eats halvah in bed!*"

"My grounds will be that your poetry stinks. Love me?"

So help me, Pete, I loved her.

* * *

In the library of that morning paper which prints all the news that's fit, I found no recent mention of an accident or death involving a Dutch emigre. My phone call to Ellis Island elicited the information that nobody named Vanderwink was being detained. Nor was there any recent corpse answering to the specifications of Vanderwink among the interesting corpses I viewed in the morgue. My calls to a dozen hospitals in and around the city proved as fruitless.

As a last resort I visited the offices of the Dutch Atlantic Line and found, on the passenger list of the ship he had been scheduled to arrive on:

VANDERWINK, MITNER, MR.
441-B. *Reservation cancelled.*

And that, to coin a phrase, was that!

* * *

It was early noon when I dropped into our office and found Sailor Duffy involved in a phone conversation with a poll taker who wanted to know whom the Sailor favored for the Presidency in the coming elections.

"Al Smith," the big guy rumbled into the mouthpiece. "Alla time I vote fer Al Smith. I t'ink he got it all over Hoover."

I gently disengaged the receiver from his perspiring fingers and pronged it, break-

ing the awed silence from the other end. "I don' go fer Hoover, Cash," Sailor grunted.

"Me neither. I'm going to vote for Lincoln. How'd you like to live in Rio de Janeiro?"

"Californy's hokay, Cash."

"This one's in Brazil—in South America."

"Hokay, Cash. W'en we goin'?"

"Soon. But keep it under the old hat, Sailor. Right now, pack our traveling bags. We'll store the rest of our stuff in trunks. Anybody calls, you don't know where I am."

"Hokay, Cash!"

* * *

Riley, the military butler, said: "Mr. Wilder said to wait. He'll be back soon. He suggested you try the bar, Sir."

This was later in the afternoon. I had helped Sailor with some of the packing, and I had purchased a hammer and chisel. My idea, after stalling Wilder for another twenty-four hours, was to collect the Komasky, Helen, the Sailor and our luggage and ship them to Baltimore while I closed my sundry affairs, chopped the rock and peddled the pieces, arranged air transportation to Brazil and then follow them to Baltimore. The only reason I selected Baltimore was it sounded like the kind of place they'd never look for me.

Now I told Riley: "The bar sounds fine."

He led me into the library where he pulled the end volume of a set of Dickens, causing the set to swing out and back, revealing a tidy little bar. As Riley poured my Scotch highball I asked him if Freda and Abdullah were with Wilder.

"I believe they are, Sir."

"But nobody checks on you, hey?"

"No, Sir."

I examined the afternoon glow in the library window through the sparkling amber in the glass Riley handed me.

"How long you been with Wilder, Riley?"

"Five years, Sir."

"That's a lot of years."

"Yes, Sir."

"How about joining me?"

"Thank you, Sir. I never drink."

"Well, here's mud in your eye!"

"Very good, Sir."

THE Scotch was a mite raw—but that's to be expected these days. Riley filled my glass again. I felt like asking him to swing back the set of Victor Hugo and show me the safe. Instead I invited some more mud in his eye, learned that he still considered the prospect very good, Sir, and downed the highball.

After awhile it no longer seemed very good. For one, I heard a gun blast and couldn't get my hand under my lapel. Then I heard two quick blasts followed by a delayed third. I still couldn't reach the Smith and Wesson .32 caliber Hand Ejecter under my arm. It wasn't that anything held my hand back—it was just that I was too tired to move it. After awhile I did move it and my armpit holster was empty.

I tried to concentrate on this fact, but my thoughts wandered off to Helen and a dream of the two of us together on the creamy beach in Bahia, Brazil. And, finally, Riley no longer seemed to be Riley.

He seemed to have become an *Esquire* ad with jet black eyes fixed thoughtfully on me and a crisp voice barking: "Wale! Wale! Do you hear me? Dammit, Man, snap out of it!"

I didn't want to snap out of it. I wanted to get back to that beach in Bahia. Someone began using ping pong bats on my cheeks. Someone else poured liquid fire down my throat and followed that with ice water on my face.

This time I recognized Wilder as Wilder. He emerged from haze that resolved itself into the library settling out of its lazy spin. There was moisture on his face. His hair was dishevelled. He gripped an empty glass tumbler. On a table nearby sat an empty coffee cup.

My wrist watch said eleven past nine. It had only been four hours, but it felt like the end of a lost weekend.

"You certainly tore one, Wale!" Wilder scowled, wiping the wet from his brow.

I reached under my lapel, felt the reassuring butt of my Smith and Wesson. I dragged it forth and twirled the cylinder. Loaded. I dropped the revolver back in its nest and asked Wilder:

"What does Riley put in his Scotch highballs besides nuclear fission?"

"Never mind that, Wale. Where's Riley?"

I didn't know where the military butler was. Wilder said he had returned to find the front door open, me in a stupor in the library and Riley gone. I said that was his worry. He said he didn't know I was such a sucker. I told him that made two of us. He asked me if I had anything to report. He had to wait until I staggered back from his bathroom, a somewhat lighter man.

"It narrows down to Washington Heights," I lied to him. "She left her bags in a drug store and picked 'em up the same night. It's a neighborhood crammed with rooming houses and apartments—she may have holed up with a family. I've covered about half the neighborhood. I ought to catch up with her by tomorrow."

Wilder nodded solemnly. "I have every reason to believe you will. Remember, you're not to frighten her."

"Sure," I said. "Just keep her out of trouble."

"And let me know where she is."

"You want me to help you find Riley?" I asked.

Wilder considered this, then shook his head.

"No. I'll take care of that. Good night, Wale."

"Good night."

That should have ended this letter—and the signature on the bottom should have been "Juan Doe." I had a choice then, as I left Wilder's house on Madison, between going up to Harlem or my office—not that it would have made any difference. I went to the office because it was closer. I took a cab, walked up the two flights, keyed open the door and walked into two sets of powerful hands that gripped my arms.

Another hand dipped under my lapel and emerged with my Smith and Wesson.

The lights blinked on.

The man sitting in my swivel with his flat feet on my desk was a grayed, shaggy goon with a face tooled from wrinkled leather and a jaw heavy enough to hammer spikes.

Anthony J. Quinn, Inspector of Gotham's Homicide Squad. He growled: "Bring Little Poison over here. I want to see his face when he talks."

THEY dragged me to the client's side of my desk. Aside from the goons on my arm and the lowbrow who had my gun, there were four of the legal no-goods grouped around the Sailor. Okay, I don't like cops. I've been conditioned to hate uniforms ever since I was old enough to yell: "Chicky!" at the sight of one. It took four of them to watch the Sailor. The big guy eyed me mournfully.

"It'll be hokay, hagh, Cash?"

"It'll be hokay," I told him.

Quinn's frosty stare rendered an unprintable opinion of me.

"You can start lyin' now, Shrimp," he growled.

"Damn you!"

"Inspector," the goon who had snagged my heater said, "it's been fired recently, maybe in the last six hours. He started cleaning it, but never got to the bore."

Quinn nodded. "Take it to ballistics, Markowitz. I want a quick report on it. Shrimp, you can tell us about it now, or we'll get it by reflex. We're scientific these days. It's a lie detector—or that new drug, scopalamine. One way or the other, you'll talk. The rubber hose ain't gonna be for information; just for my personal pleasure. I don't want to know *if* you did it; that's in the bag. I don't want to know *how*; we practically got a movie picture of the job. It's just that we can't figure the why."

He wasn't talking for his health—or mine. The guy has a mind that plows along like the Fatbush Express. Somewhere in the city there was a corpse, and he saw his way clear to linking it with my gun. He probably even had witnesses who saw the killer escape and thought he looked like "that shady private dick, Cash Wale."

"My lawyer talks for me," I said.

"He couldn't talk fast enough. You ought to know that, Shrimp. You're headed straight for the black exit."

"It'll take a few gimmicks for that, Flathead, like an arrest and a trial and a sentence."

Quinn nodded and shifted his hoofs from my desk to the floor and rose on them.

"A good point, Shrimp. We'll start with the arrest. Let's go."

"I want to see my lawyer."

"I don't want you to see your lawyer."

The four meathooks on my arm jerked me toward the door. There was nothing for

me to do but be jerked to the door. I weigh a hundred and thirty-five with a lot of silver in my pockets. Quinn's goons averaged two hundred.

One of the four bruisers around Sailor Duffy asked: "What about the meatball, Inspector?"

"Give us a chance to get out of the building, then turn him loose."

"Suppose he calls a shyster?"

"It'll take more than a shyster to locate Wale the next forty-eight hours—and after that he can call the whole damn Bar Association. Give us about three minutes—then watch yourselves getting away. The Sailor's slap-silly, but he can still punch the head off a horse."

They dragged me out into the night and into the rear of a squad car. They didn't use cuffs. Without that equalizing gadget under my arm, a couple of Boy Scouts could have controlled me without cuffs. Quinn settled in the front seat alongside the driver and we rolled north up Riverside Drive.

You know how it is, Pete. This was routine. It's been happening about once a month for the last ten years; each time Quinn looked at a gunned corpse a picture of me flashed in his simple mind—a picture of me strapped in that Ossining throne—and I'd have to take a ride to some out-of-the-way precinct and play games with his goons until my lawyers cleared the air or the actual killer fell into their clutches.

This was more of the same, I thought, and settled back to enjoy the fast ride.

I didn't even recognize where we had landed when the squad car braked to a halt and I was dragged to the sidewalk. Two prowl cars stood nosed to the curb. Patrolmen were holding back a mob of curious citizens of all sizes, ages and sexes.

They hustled me into that apartment house and up five flights of stairs. By the last two flights they had to run to keep up with me.

We tore like that into the apartment, into—

How can I describe it, Pete? Something like all my insides melted into soft jelly. That's not it. I feel now, writing about it, the way I felt then. It's worse than the shock wearing off from this slug in my left shoulder and the two hunks of lead in the middle of me. . . .

Her feet. I saw them first—sticking over the foot of her bed. As if she had stepped into a deep pile of coal dust—but it wasn't coal dust. Matches might do it—or a cigarette—or a cigarette lighter. Something like that.

Her feet, motionless and charred black.

And her face—there was a harsh blue welt around her cheeks and mouth. Where someone had wrapped a tight gag. It was blue now. It had been red when the life was still in her.

And that tiny bullet hole through which her life had escaped.

Helen. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The Black Exit

IT WAS like coming out of my sudden drunk at Wilder's. I just stood there with my eyes closed, and I couldn't say a word. The voices beat dully into my consciousness.

"They all have a cracking point, although I had some doubts about Little Poison. I've seen him ice his way through a rubber hose routine that would make the Sphinx confess he shot Lincoln. I guess this was personal."

That was Quinn's voice. Then one of his goons:

"Inspector, ya think he caught her two-timin'?"

"Something like that."

"I don't get it, Inspector. He's supposed to be a smart guy, yet he leave his prints all over the place. Then he sends a dame to tell the landlady he's in trouble and she should go with the dame. The landlady gets

in a cab and the driver turns out to be a big Arab. They take her 'way out into Van Cortlandt Park and kick her out of the cab, and later we find the cab in Harlem. When the landlady gets back here, she finds the dame like this.

"I mean, Wale's always been such a smart guy. If he had a dame and a Arab hooked in with him on this deal, why couldn't they ditch the corpus where the landlady couldn't find it? Why mention the name he was usin' to get the landlady outta here? Then all he'd have had to do is move away, and after a couple of weeks it would be just another Missing Persons case. See what I mean, Inspector?"

"I don't know, Cox. There'll be reasons. Nobody acts logical in a passion kill. The way he burned her feet, five gets you ten it was to make her finger the other guy. And another five'll get you another ten, the other guy'll show up in a day or so with half a dozen of Little Poison's slugs in his biscuit. As for the decoys, Little Poison knows enough grifters in this town hungry enough for a couple of bucks to pull a job like that. It won't be hard to figure once we cinch the evidence. If ballistics—"

A third voice:

"Inspector, Sergeant Markowitz phoned from Center Street. They matched Wale's revolver to the slug the doc dug outta the dame."

"That ties it! Bring him along, Cox! He'll have plenty of time to think it over before he shuffles through the black exit!"

Someone gripped my arm and started shaking it as if he wanted to tear it loose. The next instant he probably wished he'd torn it loose.

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I mean he'd been pulling it. Now I pushed it in the same direction and bunched my fingers into fist. It was like punching a pillow. I think my fist went right through his relaxed gut to his spine.

The man's fingers slid off my wrist. He would have fallen on me.

I wasn't there. My hip was slamming Inspector Quinn's hip where he was clawing for his Positive. Quinn jarred the wall hard enough to rattle the window.

I was diving headfirst through the window. I don't know what the other men in the room were doing. I hadn't looked around; particularly, I hadn't looked at the bed. A General Sherman tank couldn't have dragged my eyes around to that bed. I dove through that open window and under the guard raid and down the stairwell in the fire-escape platform.

Rusty metal stairs leaped up at me from the night. My hands broke part of the fall. A dozen metal clubs seemed to smash into different parts of me in rapid succession—until I lay panting on the fourth-floor platform.

A head poked out of the window I had just left. The next instant lightning flashed down at me.

Metal smashed into the metal slats on which I had been lying. I was slipping through the stairwell in this platform and continuing my downward flight. I swung over the stair rail and dropped to the third-floor platform, dove headfirst through its stairwell and tumbled to the second.

Thunderbolts were smashing repeatedly into the metal slats of the platform overhead. One slug passed close enough to yank the elbow of my jacket.

Then I was dropping ten feet from the foot of the drop ladder to confusion in the yard below.

Confusion was welling all around the backs of those apartment houses. Lights were flashing on, windows slamming open and heads poking out. Men and women's voices calling out to each other, and Quinn's voice roared over all of them: "*Get that little guy just went down the fire escape! He's a killer!*"

Half a dozen assorted voices yelled: "*There he goes!*"

I had landed in the middle of a crap game!

About seven bedraggled guys had been

huddled over cubes being rolled in the glare of a flashlight. They had paused to gape up at the confusion taking shape overhead—when I dropped from the night into their midst!

They abandoned their flashlight and the dice and the piles of coins and scuttled in seven assorted directions.

That was when the voices screamed: "There he goes!"

I heard Quinn bellow: "*Where?*"

And then: "Right back into that house!" "Out to 110th Street!" "111th Street!" "No—I saw him head for Eighth Avenue!" "*He's hiding behind that ash can!*"

Quinn roared: "Everybody in sound of my voice stop dead in your tracks! The police are going to shoot at anyone who moves!"

I was practically beyond the sound of his voice by then, racing through a dark alley toward 111th Street.

The next instant I was walking down 111th Street, a Harlem canyon filled with citizens cooling themselves in the night air, clustering around apartment house stoops, filling the darkness with talk and laughter.

AS I reached Eighth Avenue, a prowler car screamed around the corner with its siren wide open and its spotlight bringing a swath of brightness to the sidewalks. I turned the back of my head to the light as it passed and asked a well dressed young man for a match. He stared somberly at the prowler car until it passed, then he told me he didn't have a match.

I stepped into a cab, grinned back at the driver's grin and told him: "Fifth and 110th. I'm in a hurry."

His eyes rolled at a new prowler car racing into the neighborhood.

"Man, man! They say there's a killer loose."

"Me," I told him.

He enjoyed that right down to his funny bone. He probably laughed all the way to Fifth and 110th. I would like to have seen his face when he parked to let me out.

I had slip out into the night at Lennox, just as the light changed to green.

It was ten-thirty then.

It was ten forty-five when Sailor Duffy's bellow emerged from the receiver in the booth of a drug store several blocks north of there.

"Cash? I t'ought ya wuz—"

"Don't think. Listen. I'm in trouble. I need a heater. Get the Colt .32 from the safe and bring it to Harlem. On Park. Walk north from 125th. Keep on the left side. Keep walking until I stop you. Catch?"

"Park Avenoo, Cash?"

"That's right. Quinn may have left a tail on you. Ditch him. Trot around a few blocks—against the traffic of one-way streets. If nobody trots after you, grab a cab."

"Cash—"

"Ride the cab to 72nd Street and then use the subway. Ride a Bronx Express to 125th Street and walk to Park. Got it?"

"Cash—"

"Quick-like, Sailor Quinn's probably got goons on the way there now!"

"Cash—"

"What?"

"Ya wan' I should bring bullets also, Cash?"

I clamped my mind's teeth on my screaming nerves and told him to fill his pockets with thirty-two caliber bullets, then put the gun in his pocket, then put out the light and lock the door and walk downstairs and trot around a few blocks on the way to Broadway where he was to pick up the first cab—and so forth.

I carried ten extra pounds of sweat out of that booth.

* * *

We connected the first try.

I stepped out of a doorway and whispered: "Sailor!"

His hands tried to break the bones of my shoulders. I took the .32 from his pockets, checked the ammo, dropped it under my arm.

"We got trouble, Cash?"

"Me. You're clean. Go home and forget it."

He stood there and shook his punch-scarred head.

"Nagh, Cash. Ya got troubles, I stick. Hokay?"

"Not this time, Pal. It's very personal. The cops catch me, I fry. No 'ifs' or 'buts'—I fry. They catch you with me, they salt you away and lose the key." I made it strong. "They'll say you're punchy to hear

noises nobody else hears. They'll put you with other guys who listen to funny noises."

It was strong. It was under his belt. I could see the idea rock him as no heavy-weight fighter in the world could rock him.

"Ya mean a *nuthouse*, Cash?"

"That's what I mean. Beat it. There's about ten grand in the bank. Your signature's good for it. It's all yours. Now blow!"

He stood there and gaped at me, and the sweat bubbled to the surface of his face.

I reached up and slammed my palm into the wet.

"You hear me, you big ape? We're washed up! Powder!"

He just stared at me.

I couldn't look at him looking at me like that. I broke away and crossed under the trestle to the other side of Park Avenue. I glanced back once and saw him motionless on the sidewalk and staring after me.

I didn't look back again.

The alley alongside Wilder's warehouse was still the darkest, most deserted spot in Harlem. I tiptoed its length, hugging its left wall, the .32 balanced in my fist.

Abreast of the packing crates, I noticed that the light was on in the watchman's shack.

I tiptoed past it, paused once to listen, heard nothing but the river and distant sounds of traffic. I backed out to the end of the pier, holstered my revolver, climbed swiftly down the ladder to the shiny wet and groped for the wire. I found it, hauled it up.

The dripping bag at its end was empty.

I CLIMBED the ladder again, palmed my revolver again, made my way back to the door of the watchman's shack again and once more stood listening.

I still heard nothing.

Okay. I could have continued out the alley, out of Harlem, out of New York and away into limbo. It was possible. A man watches his step, plays his cards carefully, plays it alone—he can live out his life without being caught by the Law. It's been done.

I didn't want to get away. I didn't even think about puncturing Quinn's case against me—although now that I look back on it I

see it couldn't be punctured. All I wanted right then was to go into that watchman's shack.

I did.

It was a question of gripping the knob easily with my left hand, suddenly twisting, shoving, diving to one knee with my revolver cocked at—*emptiness!*

There was a desk with some papers. A metal filing cabinet. A swivel chair.

I knew the score then, knew it as if I had written the script. But it was too late. There was nothing I could do about it. This sort of deal was the guy's business. He probably did it by the numbers and in cadence. I have quick reflexes—but his voice sounded before they could function.

"Inside the office, Wale!"

I rose and stepped into the shack and heard him cross the sill after me and heard the door swing shut.

"Stand exactly like that, Wale. Your back to me. Don't even glance over your shoulder. I didn't expect you to get away so fast. *Habeas corpus?*"

I could have made a play then. The revolver still hung in my fist, and I didn't much care what he did with the gun he probably gripped in his. But I wanted some answers.

"You're pretty dumb," I needed. "I could have been the cops."

"No, Wale. The only one who could lead them here is you. And as long as you thought you had a chance at the Komasky—well, even if she meant that much to you and you didn't care, it would have been simple for me to get away had it been a uniform at the door instead of you."

"You're still dumb. I could have sent them to your basement where they would have dug up the Baron."

He laughed. That murdering son actually *laughed!*

"And Freda and Abdullah and Riley—all killed by bullets that carry the markings of your gun! What do you think of that, Wale?"

"I know about that now," I muttered through my teeth. "That time you disassembled my Smith and Wesson to clean it—you switched barrels. You used my barrel on another gun—"

"But how did I get your barrel back on your gun, Wale? Do you know that?"

"I didn't pass out from Scotch this after-

noon. Riley fed me a mickey. You had four hours in which to have your massacre, then switch the barrel back."

He laughed softly.

"Wasn't that nice of Riley?"

I said: "You're in too deep. Too many corpses. And you can't stop. After me, Vanderwink. You intend to bury him with the others in your basement?"

"Oh, no, Wale. Haven't you heard? I don't live there anymore. I have other plans for Vanderwink—after he performs a little task for me. You never saw him, but he bears a slight resemblance to the Kenneth Wilder you once knew. When the police finally discover his remains, they will have every reason to think he is Kenneth Wilder. Won't that be nice of Vanderwink? By the way, aren't you curious about Helen?"

I had to use every ounce of energy I had to force the next words through my teeth.

"Just how did I give myself away?"

"Her perfume, Wale. That day on the range. You reeked from it. *Nuit d'amour*. Riley followed you back that night. If she hadn't used it so lavishly—but she did. Wasn't that nice of her?"

So that was it. I had killed her as if it had actually been my finger on the trigger, tortured her as if it had been my matches on her feet. . . .

I don't think he expected me to do what I did then. I think he was squeezing his trigger anyhow. Oh, I was fast. Facing away from him like that, it called for dropping and spinning and snapping a shot at him from a crouch—but he was already squeezing his trigger.

Like a baseball bat slamming my left shoulder as I started to drop and spin.

But that pushed my spin, brought the Colt all the way around as that baseball bat slammed into my gut.

I didn't pull my trigger. I was falling back to the floor. But the Colt was kicking in my fist—reflex, nervous reaction; I don't know how. It kicked twice and my mind was screaming that I was shooting the wrong man.

Instead of a dark brown *Esquire* ad lurching back into the door, it was a tall, blond man with glassy blue eyes and a small blond mustache, a man in faded dungarees and sweatshirt—and a tiny splotch of scarlet appearing in the middle of the sweat-

shirt—and a sheet of angry flame leaping from his fist as that baseball bat slammed into the middle of me again.

The automatic clattered from his fingers to the floor. He stared at me glassily and shook his head. He commenced sliding limply down the door panels, shaking his head.

The door suddenly came alive and threw him past me to the floor where he lay motionless on his face.

Sailor Duffy appeared from behind the door!

"Cash! Ya hoit?"

Wasn't that a hell of a question?

* * *

So that's the score, Pete. I'm writing this in the shack. The Sailor propped me into this swivel. I'm afraid to open my belt. The guy used a .38 and it feels like I'm sitting in a pool of wet. It doesn't hurt too bad, but this dizziness keeps creeping through my head like clouds of fog.

The Sailor said he'd find a boat. But that was hours ago. He's probably in some precinct back room driving Quinn crazy by not talking.

It doesn't make much difference. The only doc I know who'd risk handling me now is a guy I know in Jersey. But how can I get to Jersey when I can't even get across the room to Kenneth Wilder?

I want to prop him back against the wall where the Sailor left him. He sort of fell over and I can't see his face. The blond mustache is off now, and Sailor cracked the blue contact lenses out of his eyes.

And the Komasky is making the naked bulb overhead look like a million chandeliers on this old desk.

Anyway, I don't think a doc could help me now—that fog in my head is thickening.

THE END

Funny. If the cops found me they'd patch me up—just to fry me.

Keep an eye on the Sailor, Pete. Some punk's liable to talk him back into the ring—and then it'll be a nut factory for sure.

The Komasky keeps getting brighter and brighter. Nice.

Everything else is foggy. . . .

The black exit

* * *

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The above letter was given to me by Inspector Quinn. It was found on the desk of the shack in Harlem a week after it was written, by children playing on the pier.

Besides this letter, the police found the body of Kenneth Wilder and a large clot of dried blood on the swivel chair. There was no other sign of Cash Wale, nor was there any sign of the Komasky blue-white.

Some row boats were reported missing from various parts of the Harlem on the night of what the papers chose to call: *The Cash Wale Massacre*—but none of them was traced to the Jersey shore of the Hudson, although the police of both states have been searching intensively for one, as well as for Wale, Duffy and the diamond.

Up to this writing—and a full month has elapsed—there has been absolutely no indication regarding the fate of Wale, Duffy or the diamond, although wild rumors filled the press the first few weeks and speculation continues to be rife.

There is considerable doubt whether Wale still lives. It behooves me, therefore, to reproduce here the message on a postcard that arrived at my home this very morning. It was post-marked in San Francisco, California.

Pete,

There was another exit!

C. Bigfish

HOUNDED

The slickest con man of modern times might be a Louisiana alias boy who recently found prison and civilization too confining and took to the woods. Authorities sent a number of posses and a pack of bloodhounds after him, and sat back to wait. Absolutely nothing happened—or so they thought.

Then they discovered they'd lost the bloodhounds.

Reconstructing the events gave them that funny feeling you get on a merry-go-round. Their quarry had made friends with the hounds, had used them to gain membership in one of the posses—and had earnestly hounded himself into the next county, where he left the dogs with the sheriff before traveling on!

E. J.

TO LOVE, HONOR —AND BETRAY



Scott grabbed her arm, pleaded: "Take it easy, Kid. . . . You're crazy."

Scott's wife was in hiding from him . . . and a murder rap — so wheat-blond Billie came calling, scorching to light her torch.

TONIGHT he couldn't stand it and he suddenly found out that getting drunk didn't help. It wasn't just that this would have been their anniversary. It was everything all at once, ten months later, boiled up and come to a head.

He stood by the window and somewhere

By ROBERT TURNER

thunder rumbled and the still, thin, summer night air grew articulate. City sounds merged and made crazy music that he could hardly take. Because every beat of it was Lila.

It was Lila down there on the street, under the arc light, her arm around a guy's waist, her laughter coming up to the window, high and sweet. The roar of the El a block away, that was Lila—and the sob of a clarinet in the blues pulsing from the radio behind him. Distant midnight traffic sounds, the hoot of a river tug boat, a baby crying in the next flat, the keening of an ambulance leaving Bellevue—it was all Lila.

He remembered the night of the murder. He had fought and screamed at the cops that they were crazy to size things up the way they did.

But Lila's fingerprints were all over the weighted walking stick that had crushed in Kay Grant's skull. Kay must have come home suddenly, they figured, and caught her husband, Allan, and Lila together. In the scene that followed, Lila had killed Kay in a fit of temper, and then she and Allan had run away together.

The newspapers made a splash sensation of the case. A five-state alarm was sent out for Lila and for Allan Grant. But they were never caught. Gradually the thing was forgotten—by everybody but the principals involved.

Remembering, he wheeled from the window, trembling and white. He was not a big man, smaller than average, even, but compactly built and lithe, with a lot of lazy grace. A kick of his foot shut off the radio and got rid of the crying clarinet. He swept glasses and bottle from the table, and the sound of the breakage was good for the savagery of his mood.

He turned to Lila's picture on the fireplace mantle where he'd put it a half hour ago, after digging it out of the closet. He knocked it to the floor and ground his heel into the smiling face.

"You go to hell," he told the mutilated picture. "A man *can* forget. You don't bother me, Lila. What's an anniversary of marriage to a murderess, a cheap little—"

The words clotted in his throat. He twisted across the room to the easel under the big skylight and floodlamps, picked up a shard of broken bottle glass that had skittered across the floor.

The girl on the canvas was supposed to be a red-haired, green-eyed minx. She wasn't. She had hair brown and shiny as a chestnut. She had moist, dark eyes and a full, innocent child's mouth. She was supposed to be a magazine cover that would net him \$500, but she wasn't and she wouldn't. She was like a dozen others he'd done lately. She was Lila underneath, and it showed through.

Two slashes of the glass shard ripped the canvas. He dropped the glass stiffly and pushed his hands through his short blond hair until it was a tousled mess.

Someone knocked on the door. Without turning, he said: "What the hell are you waiting for? Come in. The blamed door's not locked."

He heard the door open and a silky voice say: "Scott Manning, you're holding out on me. What are you celebrating? This place smells like a distillery."

"Oh, sure." He pushed his knuckles into his bloodshot eyes. "Celebration. A big time for the old clown tonight. Tonight we make merry—that wouldn't be your name, would it?"

She was big and blonde, with small blue eyes and a red twist of wide, mobile lips against the pallor of a powdered, rougeless face. Her wine-colored sweater and char- treuse skirt were too tight on her full-curved figure.

"Oh, *now*," Scott said, "I remember you. You're Billie Van Ness, the girl I *didn't* marry. Weren't you lucky? Go 'way, Billie. Leave me alone."

Blue eye corners crinkled momentarily and the scarlet mouth turned up. "You don't want to be alone, Scott," she said. "Not tonight."

He straightened stiffly. "No? You know what tonight is? Good old Billie." His eyes flicked over her. "Nice Billie. Smart, too. Come over here."

She acted as though she hadn't heard him. She walked to the slashed canvas, stood in front of it, silently.

"Okay," Scott said. In four strides he reached her, spun her around, pulled her roughly against him and jammed his mouth against hers. All the time he was kissing her, she didn't put her arms around his neck and there was no return pressure from her lips. After a while, Scott released her.

UNDER the powder her face looked gray, but she was in full control of her senses; it was as if she hadn't even been kissed. A mocking grin formed on her odd features. Low and steady, she said: "Stop whistling in the dark, Scott. You'll never be good for anybody else. You're still dizzy about her. You haven't forgotten Lila. You—"

"All right!" He picked up a package of cigarettes, took one, and lit it.

"Look at you," Billie went on. "Breaking things, ripping to shreds a picture it took you six days to paint."

He pulled smoke into his lungs so hard his cheeks hollowed. He stared at the broken bottle and glasses on the floor and the spilled whiskey, glistening in the light. He said: "I need another drink bad. You have any down in your place, Billie?"

"Sure," she said fast, as though she were holding her breath. "But you're not going to get it. You've had enough to-night."

She began pacing the floor in her tigerish, graceful stride. After awhile, she stopped and lit a cigarette. She said: "You kissed me tonight, Scott, the first time ever. That's funny. You burn yourself up with longing for Lila and drink and get mad and make love to me—all to try and put out your torch. That would be all right, understand. Even *that* way I'd be glad to get you. . . . Except—why did you have to kiss me tonight, Scott? Why not last night—or tomorrow night?"

Lines formed between his wide-set gray eyes. "What are you talking about?"

He watched the way her wheat blonde hair caught light and was rich looking and thick in the long bob that caped her broad shoulders. It was funny. All the years he had known her, and he'd never thought of her as anything but a swell gal who could talk intelligently about anything, didn't get bored at a ball game and sometimes whipped him good at golf and tennis. That was Billie. And now—

She was standing in front of him, arms akimbo. "—don't know why I'm telling you," she was saying. "Maybe I'm like you were tonight and it's bottled up in me and popping loose. Ever since we met three years ago, Scott, I've been so crazy for you I couldn't see straight. I never had a chance, but I wouldn't give up. You

couldn't see me for sour apples, but I thought some day—and then you went down south to visit your sister and met Lila."

She kicked at a stray piece of glass and it clinked against the wall. "When you married Lila," she went on, "that only made it worse. I hated her guts. Sure, I played sweet and nice to her—so I could be around and still see a lot of you. All right, I'll tell you now. I was glad, Scott, *glad* that night ten months ago when Kay Grant was murdered and Lila ran away. I told myself, 'Now I'll get him and she won't ever have him again after this. He'll hate her and now I'll be able to break him down and he'll be mine.' But it didn't work out that way."

He got off the arm of the chair, pushed a hand through his short-cropped hair. "You're crazy, Billie. You don't know what you're saying. What's the matter with you?"

She shook her head so that her long blonde hair whipped about. She stamped her foot. "Don't tell *me!*" she cried. "Who nursed you back to health when you almost drank yourself to death after the murder? Who took care of you this Spring when you had the flu? Who sat up all hours of the night and listened to you talk about the killing, over and over, trying to ease Lila out of her guilt in your own mind?"

"Hell, Billie, I—I didn't know!" Color flowed up from his throat and around his ears. "I thought you were just being a good kid, a pal. I thought—"

She came so close to him he could feel her breath on his face. He could see his own distorted reflection in the hard brightness of her narrowed eyes. She said: "That's right. Make it worse. Tell me I was like a sister to you. That's just what a girl likes to hear. Now you've got me down in the dirt, rub my nose in it. You—"

She broke off, brought the flat of her hand up in a full swing from the hips, across his face. The sound was like a pistol shot. Scott's jaw was askew and it took him ten seconds to get his mouth closed. The red nails of Billie's right hand pushed into the roots of her hair, and she crammed the knuckles of the other hand into her mouth.

He stood there, dumbfounded, feeling the stinging pain of her slap, watching her

as she stood limply, sobbed soundlessly.

IN A few moments she stopped, fisted the tears from her eyes. She said, not looking at him: "Well, that's the way it goes, I guess, Scott. Because you see, Lila's downstairs in my place, waiting for you."

"That's fine." He walked to the table, kicked the broken glass. He wheeled around. "What did you say?"

Billie's long hands, white, palely veined on the backs, with nails like carmined claws, were tearing an empty match book. She let the pieces fall to the floor.

She told him: "Lila—your wife—remember? She's downstairs in my apartment. The anniversary today got her, too, and she couldn't stand it any more than you could. She wants to see you."

The room swam. His face was burning eyes and a wedge of pallid skin taut over bone structure. There wasn't any color even in his mouth. He grabbed Billie's shoulders and big as she was, he shook her like a child. "Your sense of humor stinks. You *are* kidding, aren't you? What made you say that?"

He stopped shaking her and like when he'd kissed her, it had no effect. She stood there, not mad, nor afraid, not anything. Her eyes closed and her lips peeled back from her teeth. Her head was thrown back.

"What made her come to me, Scott?" she asked. "Why couldn't she have gone someplace else? 'I was the only one she could trust,' she said. 'Would I please do this for her,' she said. I—"

He cut her off. "Why would she go to you first?"

"She didn't know how you'd be," Billie said through her teeth. "She was afraid maybe you hated her now. She wanted to fix up a little, too, if it was going to be all right. She's been on a train, five hours."

His hands left Billie's arms and he backed slowly away from her, shaking his head, color coming back into his face. Without looking at Billie, he said: "Is Allan Grant—he's—with her?"

"No." Billie's eyes were moving all over him and it was like she was touching him. There was an expression he had never seen on Billie's face. He'd seen a mother watching an adored child at play in a park look like that, once. Then the expression fled away and Billie curled one corner of her

mouth. Her eyes narrowed, catlike. She laughed, without amusement.

"Lila started crying the moment she saw me. It was touching." The bitter laugh again. "After the histrionics, she couldn't wait to tell me anything. 'Go upstairs and get Scott,' she said. 'Give me a few minutes though, to sort of fix up,' she said. So, here I am."

He was looking at framed reproductions of some of his national magazine cover paintings on the wall. He cracked his knuckles, a small, sharp sound in the quiet of the studio. He turned toward the door suddenly as though Billie was no longer there. He'd forgotten Billie.

Going downstairs, memories of Lila and the aching he'd had for her all these months, piled up in him. He reached the door of Billie's flat, pushed it open, stepped inside. It was like a sudden, terrific intoxication, and his ears rang. His pulses hammered. His hands and feet seemed suddenly numb and clumsy. Then he had walked the short hall and was entering the living room, cluttered with its odd, expensive furniture and knick-knacks in every available space.

He stopped inside the room. Lila had heard him coming. She rushed across the room. Her face looked a little pinched and she was wearing a cheap cotton frock. She needed a permanent and her eyes were pink-rimmed from crying. But it was Lila.

He held her so tightly against the slamming of his heart neither of them could breathe. After a moment, she pulled away. Awkwardly, arms around each other, they walked toward an oriental, brocaded love seat.

Lila said, huskily: "I had to come, Scott. I'm going to stay. I'm not going to run, anymore. I'm going to fight it—if it's all right with you?"

"Sure," he told her. "I—" He got what she had said. He stiffened. "What do you mean? You—"

"I didn't kill Kay Grant," she broke in. "Even though everybody thinks I did, everything looks as though I did it. Scott, I didn't. It's probably hopeless to prove that, but I'm going to try."

Her eyes were full on his and there was no flinching. She said it simply, and a great wave of belief in her broke over Scott Manning.

"Why did you run in the first place,

Kid?" he said. "What happened that night? Tell me."

She poured it out breathlessly. "Remember, Scott, you were out at an Art Association dinner. I went upstairs to see Kay Grant and when I knocked on the door and nobody answered, I tried the knob. The door was open and I walked in. The radio was playing and a light showed underneath the door, so I assumed Kay just hadn't heard the knock."

LILA'S hands started to twist together, nervously, as the memory of that night came pouring back into her mind. She went on: "I—I walked along the hall calling Kay's name, but nobody answered. Then I stepped into the lighted living room and saw Kay sprawled on the rug.

"Scott—it—Scott—it was so horrible. Her dark hair was all splotched with blood and there was that bloodied walking stick on the floor next to her. That—that was the last thing I saw, Scott. Then something slammed the back of my head."

When she had come to, Lila explained, she was back up on her feet, standing there dizzily, and the blood-stained walking stick was in her hand.

"I looked around," Lila said, "and Billie Van Ness was standing in the doorway, staring at me. I tried to run past her, panic-stricken. I must have dropped the cane on the floor. Anyhow, Billie stopped me. I—I don't remember that conversation too well, Scott. I guess I told Billie what had actually happened but I knew she didn't believe me.

"Then she talked me into running away. She told me that no jury in the land would believe me. She said that she'd have to testify against me, tell about passing along the hall and seeing the door open and, when she looked in, seeing me standing there over Kay's corpse with that bloody cane in my hand. She told me that if I ran away, she wouldn't have to tell about that. She said I couldn't go through all that mess, go to jail, stand trial and all that—if—if what I thought—"

Lila broke off, and some of the terror and fear fled from her eyes. Little lines about her mouth softened in a slight smile. "You see, Scott, I wasn't too sure, then, so I hadn't said anything to you. But I—I'd mentioned it to Kay and to Billie, my

two closest friends. That was what Billie meant—to think about how going through all that would affect our—our son, Scott."

His hands, gripping hers, got white at the knuckles and she winced from the sudden pressure. She continued: "So I took Billie's advice. She gave me fifty dollars of her own money. I ran away to a town up in New Hampshire and the baby was born there a couple of months ago."

He kept shaking his head, his face screwed up as though in physical pain. "You poor kid," he managed.

"It—it wasn't too bad," she said. "Nobody knew who I was and my landlady was a nice, motherly old soul. She was sweet to me. She's taking care of—"

She broke off quickly got control again and went on. "So I'm going to fight it out, Scott—for him—for you!"

He blurted: "There's something crazy about this. Why didn't Billie tell me about it? She never even mentioned seeing you that night."

"I guess she was afraid you might try to find me, might tell the police, spoil things," Lila said. "Billie's awfully sweet. She—"

"You'd better park that opinion awhile, Lila," a voice from the doorway broke in. Billie Van Ness came into the room, blowing a big cloud of blue smoke. She had made up her face. There were no outward signs of her previous tantrum. The cigarette drooped from one corner of her restless red mouth, smoke curling from it. She was death-pale under a new coating of powder.

"I hope the reunion's over," Billie said. "The police will be here any minute. I called from your phone upstairs, Scott, told them Lila was here."

Lila's jaw dropped. Fright and unbelief clouded her eyes. "But, Billie," she said. "I—I was going to give myself up, anyhow."

"Yes?" Billie took the cigarette from her lips, blew the ash off, watched it flake to the rug. "No, you weren't. You came here to get Scott. He was going to run away with you—that's what I told the police. Try and convince them otherwise. You got tired of Allan Grant and ditched him somewhere, Lila."

Lila grabbed one of Scott's hands tight with hers. "Don't talk like that, Billie," she cried. "You know I never went away with Allan Grant. I never even saw him that

night. I don't know anything about Allan."

"No?" Billie said. "Then where did he go?"

Scott stood up, too. "If your story is true, Lila, where *did* Allan Grant go? Who *did* kill Kay—and frame you for it?"

He shook his hand free from Lila's. He stepped across the room toward Billie. He suddenly saw for the first time how still and glittery her narrow blue eyes were. Her mouth was tight at the corners and there was something about her strangely attractive face that prickled his skin.

"She hasn't got a chance, Scott," Billie said. "My testimony will crucify her in court. I'll *make* it. Send her away again, and tell her to stay away. Do that, Scott, or see her rot in prison, or maybe read about how many minutes it took the juice to kill her."

The scene with Billie upstairs in his apartment came back to Scott word for word, as he stood there. He said now: "You are a little insane, aren't you? You'd really do that. They wouldn't believe Lila was going to give herself up, if you stated otherwise. If you can't have me, you're going to see to it that she doesn't. Aren't you, Billie?"

Her lips skinned back from her teeth. Her eyes narrowed so that only pinpoints of reflected light showed. "Yes," she told them. "I'm through being a sucker. I wasn't going to let you know she was here and I was going to tell Lila that you hated her, but then I saw how crazy this anniversary had made you, Scott, saw how you still loved her and I got soft. Especially after you kissed me. But that's over. I hate her. She's everything I've always despised in a woman and she's got the only thing I ever wanted."

Scott stepped back and his eyes left Billie's face, traveled up and down the tall, curved loveliness of her. He grew pale and the expression of loathing on his face was almost animate.

Billie broke. "Don't look at me like that, Scott!" she cried.

He didn't take his eyes away. He reached out a hand to Lila. He said: "Get your coat, if you have one, Baby. We're getting out."

"I have no coat." She took his hand. "Scott, I don't think—"

His voice, whip-lash sharp, cut Lila off.

He told Billie: "All right, Lila's going. You win—or *do* you? *I'm* going, too!"

Billie's eyes grew wide and staring. "You—you can't go with her. I didn't think of that. I—"

They started to circle around her. "So long, Billie!" Scott's tone was acid. "And thanks!"

"They'll catch you!" Billie screamed.

"**MAYBE.**" He and Lila started for the door. But just before they reached it, Scott heard a rustle of movement behind them, half turned. He whipped away from Lila, back into the room. In three strides, he reached Billie Van Ness, standing by a desk, hunched over it, her blonde hair hanging over her face, her scarlet-nailed hands frantically trying to force a .22 automatic from a drawer that had jammed.

Scott grabbed her arm as she pulled the weapon free from the drawer. He pleaded: "Take it easy kid. . . . You're crazy!"

"Leave me alone!" Billie cried. "I said she won't get you and—"

Twisting her arm, sweat was suddenly all over Scott Manning. He could hear his own strained breathing and Billie's. Her face was so close he could see the bottomless wildness of her eyes and her teeth showing like an animal's.

From the corner of one eye, he saw Lila starting across the room to help. So did Billie. Her hand, holding the gun, tried to twist in that direction.

"Get back, Lila!" Scott yelled. "Stay away from her!" He put his last bit of strength against Billie's arm.

The crack of the small-calibered gun was half muffled against their bodies, and for a few seconds Scott didn't even know it had gone off. Then Billie dropped the gun and it clattered on the floor between them, smoke curling from the muzzle.

Billie stepped back, pushing her long pale hands into the wool of her sweater. Blood seeped between her fingers, the same color as her nail polish. Slowly her legs gave way and she went down onto the floor, not taking her hands from her stomach. She didn't look at Scott, nor at Lila. She made no sound.

Just then the police came, in answer to Billie's phone call. The next few moments

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**Spine-Tingling
Mystery Novelette**

**By
JOHN KNOX**



I heard the hot, feminine whisper: "A man ees going to strangle you. . . ."



Sure that the vicious strangler was hiding in the dingy cantinas of Benito, I blundered into that sinister half-world—and a nightmare rendezvous with a black-eyed hussy . . . and Moonrake.



CHAPTER ONE

The Crawler

FIRST it was a girl named Ora Shannon, a sophomore at Del Norte Normal. They found her in an alley not far from the campus. Big bruises were on her throat, and knee and toe marks in the dirt nearby. Others followed fast: a high-school girl in the smelter section; a youth from Banks Military Academy, found in the salt cedars down by the river. All had the marks.

It wasn't until the third strangling that it came out that last year's star football player, Bo (short for Boa-Constrictor) Wickard, had dropped from sight the day before the Shannon girl died. He was something of a hell-raiser, not too bright, and they said he had got to smoking reefers.

This suited the police just fine. It was nice and simple. The peculiar knee and toe marks around each crime scene had been noted, and the newspapers dusted off a nice gruesome title: "The Crawler." Everything was set for the finalé, the curtain bows. Of course, they had to catch him.

Everything being all settled, the fourth victim came almost as an anticlimax. Telephone operator. Young. Nondescript. No

THE HALF-WORLD— AND MOONRAKE

boy friends. They could not rake up any connection between the victims.

I got me a picture of Bo Wickard and studied it, and I told Hap Otis (Sergeant, Homicide) that they were all wet.

Hap said: "You're awful smart, Hair-brain. How come?"

"Wickard," I said, "has got red curly hair."

You're laughing too. All right. Bo Wickard was of medium height, with broad shoulders, tremendous chest, short bull neck and red curly hair. The perfect hairy ape. Sure. And that's why he wasn't the killer. He was pure *adrenal*. And it wasn't an *adrenal* crime.

Keep your seats. It wasn't all that simple. Endocrino, or glandular, criminology is pretty complicated. But some types stand out.

I am Horace Santine, and when I opened my small detective agency in Del Norte, it wasn't because of any romantic notions about the game. It just seemed a pretty good way for a man with no trade and not much education to make a living. I was small fry—still am—and don't turn up my nose at cheap tailing jobs.

I came to Del Norte because I had been stationed there on the border during the war and had got to like a certain lazy golden charm the place has, plus a quality I call *unexpectedness*. I mean you have the feel of never being sure just what's around the next corner. For instance, Moonrake. . . .

I said right off the killer was hiding over in Benito, across the bridge. Benito is not the wickedest town in the world, but it *looks* it. And the place to hide a tree is in a forest. There was a big reward, and the idea kept chewing at my mind that I might just accidentally happen on the fellow somehow. . . .

Anyhow, it was a balmy Southwest night, with a sort of magic snapping from the hot bright stars, and a faint spice of sage blowing off the Franklin foothills. I was fancy free, nearly broke as usual, and wondering if I could afford the five or six magintes of Monterrey beer it would take to fuel a few hours prowling through the bars and cantinas. Debating the point, I wandered into the swank La Fonda, where a pretty good orchestra in brilliant Charro costume was playing for the tourists.

There were a lot of them, flushed and big-eyed with cameras slung over their tropicals, and the little-women hanging on their arms, all thrill jittery, having bought silver and turquoise bracelets and plaited huaraches in Benito, and maybe a drink or two of anisette, sold to them with solemn warnings as "imported absinthe", and feeling wicked as all get-out.

I was standing back a little from the crowd, enjoying *Quatro Milpas*, even if the tourists did like it, but conscious of my shabby clothes, and then there was this little fellow standing beside me.

He wasn't Moonrake. Moonrake comes later; he comes in like a mountain veiled in storm. This fellow stole on your attention like a lizard by the road, or a queer uncouth-looking bird. There was something of both about him. He was Ahrens.

Ahrens was five-feet four, and weighed about a hundred and ten pounds. He had a face that must have made his mother hang onto him when they went to the zoo, and it had later got some rough treatment in knife fights, or maybe under the treads of a tank.

The nearest I can get to a thumbnail sketch is that it reminded you of a starved horse, the wasting away of whose flesh has thrown the big teeth into relief and allowed the eyes to grow hollow. But a horse—and get this—who has definitely not lost his aplomb for all that; a devil of a horse, a horse who is still laughing.

"Do you like that?" Ahrens asked me, nodding at the orchestra.

I didn't see that it was any of his business, so I looked him over a minute. He was dressed in a pair of tough-looking, woolly-tweed britches, old but well kept. His shirt was of the type they used to call "hickory," with thin black and white stripes, and on the outside of its buttoned-up collar was a maroon scarf, flaring its jaunty defiance to convention. On the longish head, flattened across the forehead and flanked by lobeless jug ears, was a thatch of tousled sandy hair. But if you think Ahrens was embarrassed by his appearance, you are mistaken. His manner was one of complete disdain.

"Why," I said, "*Quatro Milpas* is *Quatro Milpas*, no matter where it's played."

"You ought to hear *my* orchestra," said Ahrens.

That called for another glance. He understood it, but bore it unabashed. "Want to go to Benito and hear some real music?"

"Whereabouts in Benito?"

"Native quarter. You don't care for the tourist joints." The tone was flattering. "I've seen you around. Shamus, ain't you? Might get a line on that 'Crawler'."

He had a sharp, trained eye. He interested me. I get bored at puzzles that really amount to something—like how to make a million dollars. But puzzles just for the hell of it send me.

I said: "I'm just about stony."

"How much dough you got?" he asked bluntly.

That was a compliment, too. Trying to snag a tourist for a guide-fee, he wouldn't have scared his prospect like that. He was recognizing that I had been around. Which, of course, didn't mean that he didn't consider himself a hell of a lot smarter, nor that he might not be planning to roll me right now.

I said: "Two dollars and thirty cents." The truth.

Ahrens bared his big teeth in a grin. "Cripes, Pal, you're a millionaire. What are we waiting for?"

WE WENT out together and down the lighted street. It dimmed by degrees as it approached the river, but when I made for a streetcar stop he pulled my sleeve. "Don't waste your dough, Pal. Let's walk. Hell, I like walking."

He made it sound true. There was a breezy zest about him. That he was a cheap little tout or chiseler on the fringes of the underworld was patent at a glance. But it was just as plain to common sense that he wouldn't put on a big play just for my two-thirty. What was his game? If he had a game.

As we walked, he chattered, a swift stream of cynical, witty comment, not at all like a routine spiel. "I rolled a drunk right here one night," he said with a comradely snicker as we passed a villainous-looking alley between two grimy tenements. "The sucker would have lost it anyhow. Suckers will be suckers."

Down the dark reaches of Santa Anna St., the lights of the Avenida Carranza shone ahead, fireflies in a crimson neon mist. It was at a lonely spot that Ahrens

suggested: "Why not give me the dough, Chum. I can see you got extravagant habits."

"How far do you think you can stretch two-thirty?" I asked.

He didn't laugh. "Would all the Mex food, drinks, smokes, girls and music you'd want for one night be enough?" he asked.

"You can't do it," I laughed. "Just leave off the girls, and you still can't do it. But by gosh, you can try." I handed him over the bill with Jefferson's picture on it and all the small change except a dime I kept for carfare.

He took it, carefully counted out pennies for the bridge toll, and put the rest in the pockets of his greenish, woolly pants. "You'll see."

Well, I did. Ahrens was as good as his word—better. He didn't weasel, or try to budget me. He was prodigal. "Want this? Want that?" If I demurred, he jingled the money. "We got plenty left."

He had changed it into Mexican money, of course, and we went into places my explorations had never reached. And it dawned on me that the coppery centavos would buy things. In these places. If you spoke their language. Ahrens did. In low-ceiled, dim-lit cantinas beyond the *Calle Diablo*, that sinister region which, like hell itself, has no very definite littorals, I began to discover that the little man was a king by night.

He even had the orchestra. Or he appropriated it. There was an orchestra, and if their costumes had less color, they were (and I felt them at Ahren's insistence) of finer stuff, though dirtier, than those in the LaFonda lobby. And they greeted Ahrens with a flash of white teeth, accepted his strutting direction and peremptory orders and treated me, as did bartenders, dancing girls and the other denizens of this half-world, like the visiting prince I must be to be in Ahrens company. It was very strange.

But it was fun. I was plied with Mexican food and Mexican drink, and the girls, neither slinky nor sinister, Indians mostly, seemed rather fresh and natural in the smoky light. They didn't cadge drinks, though I forced Ahrens to buy them a few, and I danced with a black-eyed little hussy named Laurita who took a shine to me. I was pleasantly foggy, having a good time,

and amused to see how far Ahrens could stretch the money.

The jolt came finally, but not from Ahrens' direction at all. I will swear to this day that Ahrens never had any intention to swindle or extort a centavo from me. The fact is, Ahrens was afraid of the man himself.

I barely noticed him at first—there in the dive where I danced with Laurita. But as we moved on to other places, the simple reiteration of a facial pattern began to impress itself on my mind unpleasantly—a face well formed but which had the hard glassiness of brown obsidian, utterly deadpan, but with a curious, feverish aliveness in the black, brilliant "pop" eyes. Then I became aware of a powerful body attached to this face, a broad-shouldered body, neither overly tall nor overly heavy, but giving an impression of massive strength by reason of a poised and catlike quickness of movement.

He was a Mexican, sleek of hair, rather flashily dressed, but in a dark suit, shirt and hat. And I began to notice that at the appearance of this person, though he stood quietly enough at the bar and stared at us only occasionally, a cloud would darken the gaiety, not suddenly, but with a slow accumulation of unease, distrust, dread. It began to sober me. I spoke to Ahrens and he had noticed, too.

"That's why I been moving around," he said. "Come on. Let's barge."

We would barge. But the face would show up again. I think it finally drove Ahrens beyond his beat—the range where his patter was good coinage. We came finally to a bleak place near the river, a place with the dingy and frigid bareness of a dockside bar for workmen. It probably was—for a certain type of workman: the gray-faced fellows who lounged about a trifle too casually, who inspired you with distrust precisely because they did *not* stare at you.

We ordered short beers and sat at an old iron-legged table. Ahrens kept looking at the open windows. There were several; one was right near our table. I began to look, too. I was about to suggest that we move on when Ahrens with a sudden, rather sick look, rose and started toward a curtained doorway that led to the rest rooms.

"I'll be back," he said.

Something rang false in the sound of it, and I scanned the windows to see what he had seen. Men at the bar were watching me in the glass now. They glanced away when I saw them. The beer I had swallowed rolled coldly on my stomach. Well, Ahrens had been a little too good to be true. You couldn't expect him to be a hero also. I knew now that he wouldn't be back. But the revelation of his cowardice wasn't nearly so important right now as the question of how I was going to get myself out of there.

I wasn't really surprised when the swinging doors opened slowly and the glass-faced man came in. He came slowly. He didn't look toward me at all. I'd have preferred it if he had. He didn't speak to the men at the bar either, but those gray, faceless shadows seemed to know him. You sensed it as they swung about to their drinks like synchronized parts of the same machine and began to speak in casual undertones. You felt it in the way they held their glasses, glancing at me a moment over the rims before they drank.

The pop-eyed man must have ordered, though I did not hear him speak. But the bartender brought whiskey, and the man poured and downed a drink. Then he turned and leaned against the bar and just looked idly at the door.

His hands, I noticed, were very wide at the knuckles, short but powerful. He broke a match stem and began to pick his teeth. It looked horrible. Because it had just come to me that he was the Crawler! He was the phantom strangler; his was the face I had pieced together by glandular deduction. And what was worse, another memory came—out of the foggy hours in the pulqueria—a remark dropped boastfully to Laurita about being a detective, about being on the trail of the Crawler; some other witticisms that were very funny at the time, but that were not at all funny now.

I had already stopped breathing, was trying to summon enough strength to my knees to rise, when something happened which robbed me of what little gumption I had left. From the open window which was so close that a hot breath reached my ear, came a quick, low whisper—feminine, familiar. It said very distinctly:

"A man ees going to strangle you. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Moonrake

IN A case like that I sometimes get weird reactions. This time I felt a hysterical impulse to laugh and say aloud: "Thanks, Chiquita, but I'm ahead of you. . . ."

What I actually did was take a painful swallow of air and get up. My intention was to make the same sort of exit the canny Ahrens had made. But when I had tottered upright on shaking knees and made one wobbly step in that direction, another disturbing thing happened. The corridor I was making for was curtained, and that curtain moved.

It moved, but not to let anyone out. It moved just enough to show that someone behind it was shifting his position.

Moments like that distill the essence of nightmare. I made a quick turn that was pure reflex and found myself facing the bar. The shadow men were watching me. They glanced away, picked up their drinks as if in a drill. I looked wildly toward the door. Then, for the first time since entering, the glass-faced man looked directly at me. The look said "No," as plainly as if he had spoken it. I went toward the bar.

If you've ever been in a jam like that, you know that real terror doesn't come from shouted threats and waved guns. You know that people who mean business do things in a quiet way, with as little fuss as possible.

When I got my hands against the cold bar and my foot on the brass rail to steady me, I could feel the sweat clammy on my face. But the bartender appeared not to notice. He came up, polite, but terribly impersonal. I managed to croak, "Tequila," that being a ten-cent drink, and he brought it and took my dime—the only one I had.

I drank the stuff with a gulp, but it did me no good, beyond a hotness in throat and stomach. It never reached my knees—where I needed it. What did stiffen me, if only with panic, was another sound—a shuffling of feet, coming from the direction of the curtain which had moved.

This sound fitted better into the conventional pattern of menace than the glass-faced man's slow annihilation of my nerves. This was something you could react to

normally, so without daring to turn enough to look, I jammed my right hand into my pocket and got hold of my penknife, the only weapon I had. I gripped the futile little weapon, rolling my fingers over it, trying to open the blade, and the crackpot idea of Aladdin rubbing the magic lamp popped into my head, and I thought: Boy, if I had a geni!"

The steps had stopped beside me; I still hadn't turned to look; and just then a deep bass voice pronounced: "Whiskey."

The bartender shifted toward us, but hesitated. His eye fell on me. He saw the hand in my pocket and asked: "Your friend? You pay?"

I had no money, but the question startled me so that my head jerked automatically in assent, and as he poured the drink I got the courage to look.

What a sight! The man who was following me had seemed big, but this man dwarfed him. He stood a good six feet two, and the hand that gripped the whiskey glass looked like it could crush a coconut. He was an American. His clothes were baggy and he had a thick-featured, slab-browed face, with tousled hair falling over a great bulging forehead. His eyes were deepset and haggard, but when the sudden realization came that he was scarcely conscious of me at all, he looked like a rescuing angel.

The bartender had taken a couple of steps away.

I husked:

"Mister, I *need* a friend."

"Eh?" the man blinked. "What's wrong?"

"The pop-eyed guy," I whispered, "he's after me."

The big man turned, turned back. "What pop-eyed guy?"

I turned too. The man who had followed me was gone.

No need to describe how I felt; you can guess. I wanted to sit down.

"Come over to the table," I managed to say to the newcomer, "I want to talk to you." He downed his drink and followed me, and we sat down and I said: "Brother, I owe you something. I don't want you to think I'm trying to weasel out of paying for your drink, but the fact is, I'm broke."

"So am I," he replied. "I intended to bum payment for my drink from you."

The bartender was coming toward us now. He stopped by the table and put a fist on one hip and gave me the eye. "The dreenk," he said. "You deed not pay."

I reached in my pocket and brought out the little penknife, gold-plated, cost a dollar twenty-five. "Amigo," I said, "I'm out of cash. Would that be good for what I owe you and two more whiskeys?"

He snatched the knife. He opened the little two-inch blade, scowled. "What ees she for, to peek the teeth?" He flung it back on the table. "*Dinero!*" he snapped. "*Pronto!*"

Well, that was out of the question. Then I thought of my fancy belt. It was an item I was both proud and ashamed of. It was of fine leather, polished to a mahogany tint, stamped and studded with bosses of real silver. It had a heavy carved silver buckle, too, and I had bought it one night for three pesos, but I was a little ashamed to wear it in Del Norte and usually kept my vest pulled over it. However, it was the one thing I had which would appraise well to Latin eyes, so I whipped it out, draped it over my wrist like a snake charmer, and said: "All right, I'll give you this—for what I owe and two more whiskeys."

The bartender cocked his head and the glitter of the silver bosses worked their magic. "*'Sta bein,*" he said and took it. He marched back to the bar and returned with the drinks.

THIS time the drink helped me. It did not seem to help my friend. He sat moodily, his great hands folded, the weight of the whole world brooding in his sombre eyes, dragging down the muscles of his heavy face.

"You sick?" I asked.

His glance came back from far away. "Eh? Sick? Oh." His huge shoulders moved dispiritedly; a big forefinger tapped his massive skull. "It's up here. . . . I have worries—cosmic worries."

"Well, you can't drown 'em in this stuff," I said brightly, shaking the last beaded fluid in my glass.

"Not in *that* stuff, no," he said.

"You usually drink champagne, I guess?"

He smiled, the smile of a ruined Titan, a buzzard-gutted Prometheus. "Honeydew," he said softly, "the Milk of Paradise. . . ."

I have learned not to judge a man too

quickly by that kind of talk. "Anyhow," I said, "let's get out of here. I can get some dough in Del Norte. I might even buy you one drink of this honeydew. . . ."

"Would you?" he asked earnestly.

"Come on," I said, and got up. "Let's blow for Del Norte."

He hesitated, but finally got up and lumbered after me. Now that Glass Face had vanished, my courage was rising, and I was hatching some big ideas of how I could use this guy. But in the dark just outside the door he balked. "I don't think I shall go across with you," he said.

"Why not?"

He looked at me, then down at his shabby clothes. "In my present state of disrepair, I prefer to stay over here. I go out only at night."

"Listen, would you like to make some dough—real dough?"

He studied me from under his beetling brows.

"I know I don't look like money," I told him, "but I got a plan." I scanned the shadows carefully, then whispered: "I got a line on the Crawler. He's the guy that followed me in there. Earlier in the night, I unwisely blew my top to a girl about being on his trail. Just after he came in this dive, that girl gave me a warning through the window."

He seemed to stiffen, his sunken eyes retreating into his skull.

"You are a detective?" he asked.

"Private," I said.

This did not seem to make him enthusiastic. "Still, I don't quite see—"

"You will," I promised. "The two of us will work together and split the reward. But we can't talk here. Come on."

I started walking, and after a moment he came lagging on, undecidedly. I paused under the window through which I had got the warning but could see no tracks in the packed dirt. I went on. The man had caught up. He was breathing a little hard.

I paused a moment to glance into the alley that ran behind the dive. It was narrow and black as a rat hole. Some warning hunch twitched at me to move on—so I took a step into the alley. The big man suddenly clutched my arm.

"Don't go in there," he said.

"Why not?"

A stray beam from the cantina's yellow

light crossed his face. It had a tense, uncertain look. "I just wouldn't," he said.

I pulled away from him. A very bold gesture, considering that if he hadn't been there, you couldn't have dragged me in. I took two more steps and somehow began to wish I hadn't.

At the back entrance to the dive, there was a stack of empty beer kegs, and resting across one overturned keg, and half propped against another, was something that might have been a very large doll—but wasn't.

I did not really want to see any more, then. But it was too late to turn back—the thing just drew me toward itself with an invisible compulsion. I noted the awkward laxness of the lower limbs, contrasting with the unnatural stiffness of the torso, and the way the head was thrown back. Then I fumbled out my lighter and struck a flame with shaking fingers, and the picture leaped at me—the girl Laurita, her bared throat circled with dark bruises, each in its web of tiny scarlet veins, and above that the waxen face with its swollen tongue, a tongue whose last words may have been: "A man ees going to strangle you. . . ." I put out the light and reeled away.

I expected that the big man would be gone from the alley's end, but he wasn't. He stood there hunched and intent.

"Well, you asked for it," he growled. He grabbed at my sleeve. "Come on."

"We got to call the police," I said miserably.

"The police!" he rasped. "Are you crazy? The Benito police? Listen, Boy, did you ever see their *carcel municipal*? Did you ever see the mud-floored cells and their ulcerous occupants? Did you know they can throw a gringo in there a year and keep him from getting a word out?"

I knew it all and more. But I knew that girl had died trying to save my life. "Look here," I said. "I owe it to that girl to try to catch this killer. Will you help me—if I skip the police report?"

"I won't go to Del Norte," he said. "But if you want to come up to my place, I'll try—"

"It's a bargain," I said and extended my hand. He took it. He had a powerful grip. But so have I. All the strength of my short, solid body runs to my fingers. I gave him pressure for pressure.

"Horace Santine is my name," I told him.

"Mine is Moonrake," he said.

MOONRAKE lived on the second floor of an old and weathered adobe building which fronted the plaza. You reached the two rooms he occupied by a flight of rickety back stairs. From the front you would never have known there was any living-quarters up there, the front of the building, top and bottom, being used as storage space for great bales of goods bound in native grasses. They were the property of Moonrake's landlord, the owner of a curio shop on the Avenida *Cinco de Mayo*. The two rooms consisted of a living-and-bedroom, and a smaller kitchen, furnished with what seemed an unnecessarily large wood stove and some decrepit chairs.

The living room had a bed, chair, table, and five old trunks. The trunks were stacked against the wall, and seemed to have something in them.

Moonrake lit a kerosene lamp, offered me a chair, and sat down on the sagging bed. The room had a stale sour-sweetish smell, and I soon learned what caused that.

Moonrake, after a little hesitancy, went over and squatted in a corner of the room. He carefully removed a small section of the baseboard and brought out a long bamboo pipe with a small steel bowl, and some other equipment. Sitting on the bed again, he began to poke into a small tin can with an instrument like a knitting needle, which he twirled round and round until he had collected a drop of blackish gummy stuff. He roasted it over the lamp, got the residue into the pipe, let it frizzle over the flame, then took a couple of long inhalations and stretched out on his side.

"The honeydew," I said.

Moonrake nodded dreamily. "It is the only thing," he said, "which lifts me out of my—worries. Smoking it is the least harmful form. . . ."

Well, he didn't have the look of a confirmed hophead; I hoped he wasn't. Since I wanted his help, I wasn't too critical. I deadpanned it, like opium-smoking was the commonest sight in the world to me.

"So you want to catch this strangler," Moonrake said, after a bit. "And you're convinced this fellow you saw is your man?"

I nodded and lit myself a cigarette. It was a Mexican cigarette and stank to high

heaven, but I did not like the opium smell. "He followed me after I'd popped off. The girl warned me, and the girl died. But that's not all of it. He fits the picture I already had of him."

"A picture of him?" Moonrake took the pipe from his lips.

"Know anything about glands?" I asked.

"Why," he hesitated, "a little."

"Did you know that, given the *modus operandi* of a crime, you can type your killer according to his glands, and then build up a physical picture of him?"

"Oh, that kind of picture," Moonrake said. "Yes, I suppose—"

"It's like this," I said. "I eliminated that football player, Bo Wickard. His physical description makes him a pure *adrenal* type—the thickset, ruddy, apish fellows. They tend to drunken crimes, impulsive crimes, murders due to loss of temper and with a lot of brutality."

"You don't call *these* crimes brutal?" Moonrake asked.

"Not brutal for the sake of brutality," I said, "not hot-blooded brutality. They are brutal in a cold-blooded and cunning way."

"Go on," said Moonrake, interested now.

"Wickard's reputation runs true to form—bad tempered, a little haywire, maybe a marihuana smoker. If he'd have done these killings, they'd have been brutal in a bloody, animal sort of way—unimaginative, heavy-handed, varying with the circumstances. There'd probably have been some beating up, maybe mutilation. Actually the crimes are almost scientific, hellishly cunning, imaginative, quiet, quick and coldblooded—all alike."

"So you get?"

"Well, first *thymus*," I said flatly. "That's your base. That's the childhood gland—imaginative, secretive, unpredictable. Thymocentrics commit the *weird* crimes that deliberately mystify. You agree?"

"I should say yes," Moonrake agreed slowly. "But I've read that about seventy percent of *all* criminals have thymus trouble, so—"

"So it doesn't get us far? Not if we leave it there, no. But a pure thymocentric is rare, and wouldn't get far in any undertaking. Too unstable. But our man's got nerve and daring. He takes great risks, but doesn't get seen much. He's got a

system, a flair, and a penchant for killing women. So I say that hyperthyroidism stares you in the face.

"The hyperthyroid is your mass-killer, woman-killer, Jack-the-Ripper. He's thrill crazy, but cold and cerebral in his planning. He's your 'modern' killer, who resorts to every new crime-technique. He's vain and boastful, but he doesn't run *amok* like an adrenal, or go to pieces like a pure thymus. He is the gonadoid combination: a thymocentric-hyperthyroid."

I could see in Moonrake's face a dawning respect for me. He'd figured me for just an ignorant plug. Maybe I was—except on that one subject I'd studied up on.

"Ahhh," he said slowly. "And the physical build?"

"Start with the thymus," I said. "His chin will be receding, if only slightly, hair rather fine, face youngish for his age, and maybe not bad looking. Then add the hyperthyroid characteristics: the large, brilliant pop eyes, the tendency to be a flashy dresser; a smooth, sleek fellow. . . . Well, did you see that guy there at the bar?"

Moonrake sat up and leaned a little toward me, his pipe held idly. "I paid no attention. How about size?"

"There," I admitted, "we are on uncertain ground—from the gland angle. Your thymus-hyperthyroid is more apt to be medium sized than really large. Your man is usually apituitary, the well-balanced and extremely brainy type. Still, I say our killer is above the average in size."

Moonrake's wide, bony shoulders hunched toward me even more. He was very intent now. Some force in him which before had been shattered, sick, diffused, now seemed to be coming to a focus in the pupils of his eyes.

"By the way," he asked carelessly, "what type would you call me?"

CHAPTER THREE

Portrait of a Killer

I STUDIED Moonrake in the dim light, and the silence pushed at me.

"Mainly pituitary," I said quickly. "You're tall and bushy-browed; your face spells brains. Not at all," I added, "the feverish cerebration of the hyperthyroid, but the cold intellect of the planner."

"Hmmm," Moonrake said. "Still, you say the killer is big?"

"Yes. First there's the print of big powerful hands."

"Some small men have powerful hands. You yourself—"

I smiled at the compliment. He had felt my grip. "But that's not all. This man overpowers his victims without giving them a chance to get their hands on him. The only bruises are on his victims' throats—no sign of a fight—odds too unequal. And they've never found anything under the victim's nails, not even lint from his clothing."

"Maybe he works from behind."

"The prints of his fingers don't look that way. But there's another thing: my own deduction from the knee and toe prints, from the fact that he's called the Crawler, the fact that there've been reports of a dim figure, on hands and knees, seen near the killings—"

"How would his size account for that?"

"Simple," I said. "If he's an abnormally big man, that fact would be spotted at once. And he knows he's apt to be glimpsed. And if a *big* man is definitely seen just once, it gives the police a chance to eliminate a big percentage of the population. So he works on the ground as much as possible, scuttles away from the scene of his crime."

Moonrake was really interested now, captured by my logic. He swung his legs off the bed and laid his pipe aside. "What else you got?"

"One more thing," I said hesitantly, "and I don't want you to feel offended. But I believe our killer—of that particular glandular type—is apt to be a narcotics addict."

He just stared at me, not saying anything.

"Er, you don't agree?" I asked.

He suddenly let out a very harsh, loud laugh.

"Ha! Yes, I agree to *that*!" He laughed again, though I could not see anything very funny in it. "Yes, I will follow logic, Santine, no matter where it leads." He leaned nearer, brought his big hands forward, thrust them out. "Because," he grated, "logic is the one thing which is *inescapable*!"

As he pronounced the word, there came

an odd rush into his voice, a sort of rasping ecstasy, and he leaned so far toward me that I instinctively drew back, tilting my chair at a dangerous angle.

Moonrake, rising, made a grab.

His fingers fastened on my shoulders. I choked just then on my cigarette, and tried to pull away, coughing. I might as easily have got out of a strait-jacket.

"There!" said Moonrake, and laughing, he planted my chair down solidly on all four legs. "These rickety chairs will kill you if you don't watch them. And I'd *certainly* hate to have a guest die on his first visit. Ha, ha. Well, you are a logician; I'll say that."

He went back and sat down on the bed.

"Well, thanks," I said, as soon as I could get my breath back. The smoke still burned in my throat, so I got up and wiped my brow and started to lean against the stack of trunks.

"Er, don't—if you don't mind," Moonraked cautioned. "You might upset them. They hold some things I—rather value. . . ."

"Sorry." I sprang away. I moved the chair a little farther from the opium fumes and sat down again. "Now," I said, "the next question is one of procedure? What to do? Well, let's go at it from the killer's angle. What will *he* do? I think it's likely he will feel bound to kill me."

"That's probably inevitable," Moonrake agreed.

"But," I said, "he may not want to do it at once. He may want to play me along and see how much I really know—or may have told."

"By the way, who *have* you told your theories to?" Moonrake inquired.

"Oh, I've got a friend at headquarters." I said, "Sergeant Hap Otis. I've *tried* to tell him, but he won't listen. So the hell with him. If you will just help me—"

Moonrake had reclined again. "I may perhaps do more even than you ask," he said. "And I can help. It just happens that I have sources of knowledge which you have perhaps not guessed. And you must not let the fact that I smoke this diabolical and heavenly drug confuse you. For you see," and again he sat upright and began to work his hands, "it *implements* my brain, gives it fresh and powerful mandibles," he clawed his fingers, "hooks of logic with which to seize truth and squeeze, squeeze,

squeeze. . . . What's wrong? Too hot in here?"

It was—and full of smoke. I stepped to a small window and opened it a little. Below I could see the roof of a one-story building. I stood there and enjoyed the fresh air.

"You don't think I'm a screwball?" Moonrake asked.

"Oh, no, far from it," I said. "It's just that—"

"That my enthusiasm for logic carries me away," Moonrake laughed. "Yes, and this stuff," he picked up the pipe, "is sheer magic. Why, it shows me the moons of Mars and the moons of Saturn, rolling in hot and smoky opalescence, where the pearls of space lie looped in rainbows round the throat of Time. . . . Hey, where are you going?"

I had made a few steps toward the door. "Maybe we could talk things over later," I suggested, "when you aren't seeing quite so much."

Moonrake leaped from the bed. He leaped like a monstrous cat, clearing the footboard and landing in the space between me and the door.

"Running out on me?" he challenged.

I backed away. He shifted toward the window. I backed against the stack of trunks. At worst, I could leap on them, hurl them down. . . .

MOONRAKE seemed to read my thoughts; he looked hurt. "Ho, man," he said, "don't you see why I can't let you leave—thinking I'm a loony? Sit down, I have things to tell you. Only—" he glanced sadly at the table where his pipe lay cold—"only I am afraid that was the last smoke I have. I was going to ask you. . . ."

Well, here it came—the typical junkie's touch. But I was in a mood to bargain. I craved fresh air. I said carefully:

"That might be managed."

Moonrake's face lit up. "Splendid," he said. "In that case—" He went and sat down on the bed again. "Tell me something," he said. "You don't think young Wickard is the killer. Well, what happened to him?"

"He's dead, of course," I answered readily.

Moonrake's eyelids flicked a trifle. "You are not so dumb, Horace. Of course he's

dead. One doesn't need your glandular theories to know that that young fool could not have murdered five people and remained uncaught. So he's dead. But a corpse is a bothersome thing. Where is it?"

"It hasn't been found," I said. "He wasn't thrown in the river. So he must be buried somewhere."

"Sure," said Moonrake, "and I know where he's buried."

"You know?" I gulped in astonishment.

"I know and I don't know," Moonrake said. "It's like this: I was out walking one night, and passing a patio wall which I could see over, I saw two people dragging a heavy bundle toward what looked like a hole in the shadows. Normally, I should have done something about it. But I was full of hop. I passed on and the thing blended with my opium fancies, and it was only later that I realized what it was that I must have seen. . . ."

"Well, where?"

"That's it," said Moonrake. "I don't know. I have searched and searched. I haven't found it, but I have narrowed the field. And there are certain landmarks, a certain *atmosphere*—only vaguely recalled, but which becomes quite sharp when I am under the opium. So—"

Well, that was putting it up to me squarely. Only I wasn't sure he wasn't lying just to get more of the drug. "Maybe you imagined it," I began.

"Ah," he said. "I anticipated that. It just happens there is something I picked up when I passed the gate to that patio, something to which I attached no importance at all, at the time." He got up and opened a table drawer. He brought out a small object, and my heart jumped.

It was a little gold football, with a scrap of chain attached to it: I did not have to look to know that the initials: *B.W.* would be on it. But I did, and they were.

I let out a low whistle, looked at Moonrake. "Wickard's been missing a week."

He nodded. "It was about a week ago."

"You should have taken this to the police."

"Are you going to?"

I had to grin. I stuck the thing in my pocket. "We'll see. Now where do you get your dope?"

He frowned. "I've got it at a number of places. But they've been adulterating it.

I wanted to find a new source for it."

"I never bought the stuff. I don't know where."

"But surely you are not so unresourceful," Moonrake said. "Didn't you mention some habitue of this place who was with you tonight?"

"Oh, Ahrens," I said. "Well, Ahrens ought to know. . . . And the little rat, he owes me something. I'll try him. But it will take me a couple of hours. I've got to go back to Del Norte and promote some dough. Will you be here when I get back?"

Moonrake shrugged. "Where else would I have to go? But Horace—" he wagged a big finger at me—"no running to the police and telling them."

"Okay," I agreed. "Take it easy till I get back." I went out.

Outside, I began to have misgivings. Still, I had that gold football in my pocket, like the key to a mint. And though I was going to *have* to go to the police, to get the dough I needed, I was *not* going to give Moonrake away. *That*, I figured, was what I had promised.

Near the *Avenida Cinco de Mayo*, I hailed a cab driver I knew by sight and put the bee on him for a C.O.D. ride to Del Norte. But when he found I was going to police headquarters, it was no sale. I was turning away, when he asked: "Hey, did I see you with Ahrens tonight?"

"Sure." I added quickly, "He's a pal of mine."

"No kiddin'?" Squinted eyes appraised me. "Well, if you're a friend of Ahrens What you want with the Del Norte Johns anyhow?"

"A little dough," I said, and winked, "for Ahrens. I'm going straight to Ahrens as soon as I get back. It's a little deal we got on."

He looked at his cigarette, threw it away. "I'll take you on," he said. "I'll wait for you. I'll see you *do* go to Ahrens."

That suited me. Ahrens' influence, it appeared, extended beyond the smoky half-world where he floated like an improvident mayfly. But this guy apparently knew where to find him. That was a double payoff.

We went across the bridge, and my driver parked around the corner from police headquarters. I was lucky enough to find Hap Otis there.

OTIS is a gangling man of medium height, bony framed, bony faced, sal-low, freckled, and with the most skeptical pair of milky blue eyes you ever saw. He was pacing up and down his cubby-hole office, chewing a ragged cigar butt and stopping to spit out the window into the hot, still night. There was a rumpled pile of reports on his desk.

"Hello, Hairbrain," he said. "All out of breath, I see, with some swell new theory. What's it this time? Astrological-deduction? 'Hitch your killer to a star?'"

"You are funny," I said, "but not in the way you think. Still trying to put Bo Wickard on the hot squat, I guess?"

"Who said I was?"

"Well, you haven't found him I'll bet."

"You'll *bet*?" he sneered. "Bet with *what*?"

"With the twenty bucks you're going to give me," I said happily.

His loose lips came away from the cigar they had been fondling, and it stood isolated between his yellow teeth. "Eh? Give you twenty bucks? For what?"

"For about a thousand bucks worth of info," I said, and whipped out the gold football and flashed it before his eyes.

He grabbed it, and the cigar dropped from his mouth, hitting the floor with a geyser of sparks and ashes. "Where did you get this?"

I extended a hand and let the middle finger make coaxing gestures against the thumb. "Gimme," I said.

"Give you, hell!" He glared at me. "Why, I could throw you in a cell for this and—"

"And beat my brains out with a hose," I said. "But where would it get you?"

Out came the billfold and he peeled off a couple of tens. After I had folded them and pushed them into my watch pocket, I said: "Okay. I got the football off a lush who picked it up in an alley somewhere. I'm going back and try to get him to lead me to the place."

"You shoulda already done that."

"Be reasonable. The guy is a wino—crazy for another drink. I got to handle him with gloves, coax him along, get him to recall where he found this thing. I gave him the only buck I had left, and he'll stay put until he drinks it up. Then I'll be able to handle him."

Otis looked sadly down at the dropped cigar, hesitated, stepped on it, picked a fresh one from his vest. "Then you coming back to *me*?"

"Cross my heart. Soon as I get results," I added.

He rolled the little football between his fingers. "You better be on the level, Horace. And now, there a few things you might as well know. We ain't got the heat on Bo Wickard quite so strong now. We got another suspect. Somebody real close to home."

"Who?"

He slumped down and glanced at the crumpled papers on his desk. "The uncle of that first victim," he said, "Ora Shannon, the Normal College student. This guy is her uncle and guardian."

"I read some mention of him," I nodded. "A psychology prof, isn't he? Name of C. C. Shannon?"

"Christopher Columbus," Otis said. "Well, it seems this C.C. is a sort of screwball anyhow, full of wild theories, and acted pretty queer after the girl was found, talking to himself, mumbling about 'being to blame for it.' The faculty figured he was suffering a nervous breakdown, so it was suggested he take a leave of absence. Well, he did—and how. He never came back and can't be located at all."

"About," I said, "what sort of looking man was he?"

"Big lug," said Otis, "the beetle-browed, brooding type. When we got to nosing in his private affairs, we found he'd been carrying on some off-the-record work—sort of free psychoanalytical clinic. He got a lot of girls and punks together to confess their troubles, and so on."

"Hell, that's just standard procedure—" I began.

"I know, I know," Otis said. "But it happens this Bo Wickard was one of that bunch, and at least one other of the victims has been traced to it. And why has this guy gone and hid out?"

I was trying hard to keep a straight face, but I guess I didn't.

"What's up?" Otis asked. "Ain't seen *this* guy, have you?"

"Oh, no," I lied, "no. I'm thinking of that wino who may get away before I get back to him."

"What does *he* look like?"

Now when a guy like Otis asks you questions, you better not fumble for your answers. My mind slid off Moonrake and landed on Ahrens, so I then described Ahrens.

Otis said: "Oh, that guy? I've seen him. Shabby little vermin who preys on tourists. But if it's him, he's probably playing you for a sucker."

"But there's the football," I countered swiftly.

"Well. . . ." Otis looked away. I saw his mind change then before my eyes. It was a boner, describing Ahrens. He knew Ahrens, knew he was too sly a chiseler to have turned that football loose for any buck. But Otis had decided to let me go and have me tailed. Well, I had thought of that, anyhow, when I had described Ahrens, and I *was* going to him. I'd be in the clear at least that far."

"Well, chase along," he said, "but be sure you come back." I was almost to the door when he halted me. "Oh, by the way, Horace, there's been a strangling over there in Benito tonight. Have you heard about it?"

I turned. "Holding out on me? Who—where?"

He shrugged. "Tavern girl, Mex. Different type from the other victims. Maybe the guy is getting scared. We're working on it, along with the Benito police. They got something they think is pretty hot—a belt. You know how those bruise patterns on the victims' throats are almost the same? Well, the Benito police have had the idea that the guy was using some sort of strangling weapon. Now they've found this belt—it was in the garbage can behind the dump where she was killed—and the belt has got big silver bosses on it. A guy was seen wearing it in the cantina. . . . Hey, hold on!"

I had started for the door again, but now stopped. I held my breath, trying to keep my expression from changing.

"Turn around here," Otis said.

This is it, I thought. I didn't know if my vest was pulled down over my belt loops or not. I bunched my coat a little, turned, sort of hunching.

"No tricks now, Horace," Otis said and wagged a finger.

I almost fell right smack out the door with relief.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Glass-Faced Man

MY TAXI-DRIVER was waiting, a little impatient, a little leery. He softened when I flashed the two tens, paid him for the round trip, but he was still suspicious.

"You a regular stoolie?" he asked.

"I'm not a stoolie at all," I said. "Now you want to take me to Ahrens or you want to get snotty?"

"No hard feelings," he said, and we started back.

I felt pretty good. I was still tingling from my close shave with Otis in the matter of the belt, but once we were across the bridge, I began to relax and expand.

I knew that bartender had lied to the cops about the belt. He'd probably ditched it and would deny having had it. And he'd given then a description of me. But I meant to keep out of sight. I warned the driver that Otis had probably put a tail on us, but he knew how to handle that. He doubled and circled through dark streets and alleys until I didn't know myself where we were.

Finally he slowed on a dark corner and rasped over his shoulder: "Jump out, hide, and wait. I'll be back."

I opened the door, lurched out, and without halting, scuttled to a dark doorway and crouched there, watching the cab vanish around a corner. No car followed him.

In about ten minutes the driver was back. We were in a residential section, if you call it that; just a solid wall of mud dwellings, all alike, dark and secretive, with doors like tight, pinched mouths, and here and there a single lighted window like the one good eye of a blind man.

The driver had a key, and he opened the very door before which I was crouching. We went into a tunnel-like corridor, sour with garlic, tequila and cheap powder smells. From away ahead faint music came, subdued voices and a slow shuffle of dancing feet. At a heavy curtain my guide muttered something, and it parted and admitted us to a large, low-ceilinged room with a bar, tables and a dance floor.

It was one of those hideout native cantinas, supposedly beyond the reach of the Law, where, twenty-four hours a day, everything goes on from gambling to worse.

Among the soiled-moth, painted girls were sleek-looking Mexicans and some American slummers, male and female, who raked me with guarded, furtive glances when I came in. I paid no attention to them and went on toward a corner of the dive where I had spotted Ahrens.

He sat at a table near the orchestra, still in his clownish get-up, with a glass of seltzer water in front of him and nothing else. When he saw me, his sharp eyes winced just a little at first; then he grinned with his horse mouth and wrinkled his lop-sided nose.

The driver had stopped and was saying: "This guy says he got business with you. If he ain't, just say so and—"

But then he saw Ahrens face and just slid away, while Ahrens said: "Well, you made it out of that place, Chum."

"No thanks to you," I said and sat down.

Ahrens yelled to the bartender: "Bring a whiskey, Pablo—Scotch. Now, pal—" his lips folded back over his teeth again—"I am a little guy. I can't afford no trouble. I coulda cut that big bruiser up with a broken bottle, I guess, if he'd come at us, but then what? Cops. I can't afford it. I got a nice quiet little racket, small time, but steady. I like to go along quiet, havin' fun, makin' friends—"

"Selling reefers?"

"That's it," he nodded. "Why not? The stuff ain't as bad as it's cracked up to be—not like coke, or junk."

"You wouldn't peddle *that*, I guess?"

He rolled his glass of fizz-water between his fingers. "I wouldn't *recommend* it. If a guy insists, well, I could find it for him."

I peeled out a ten-dollar bill and laid it on the table. "Find me some," I said. "As much as that will buy."

Ahrens looked at the bill. "It won't buy a lot," he said, faint scorn in his voice. "I could get you *chandoo*—for smoking. . . . But look here, Pal, you don't want to get on that stuff?"

"It's for a friend," I said.

"Can't he buy his own?"

"He says they been adulterating it. He has to change."

"Changes around, does he?" Ahrens eyes narrowed. "Say, what sort of a looking guy is he?"

"Big man," I said. "Educated. Gentleman gone to seed."

"I think I passed that guy," Ahrens said, "when I skipped out of that dive tonight. He was mooning in the curtained passage. Yeah, I know the guy—know fellows that have sold him stuff. He always squawks about the quality. Pal, you lay off that guy. He's nuts."

"Nuts? Why he's got more education than you and I ever will have. He's a psychology professor."

"Don't doubt it," Ahrens said. "They're all half wacky; that's why they go in for it, trying to cure themselves. Then when one of them goes haywire, he really is something to deal with."

"Do you know anything against this man?" I asked.

"Know? Why, it ain't my business to know things." Ahrens looked away. "I mind my own business. Live and let live, that's little Ahrens."

"Still, you're warning me—"

"Okay." Ahrens fiddled with his glass. "But I brought you over here. I'll admit I tied into you there in the lobby because there was a Del Norte john giving me the big-eye, and guiding tourists around is supposed to be my racket. Anyhow, I like you. So I warn you. But beyond that—" He shook his head. "I'm a business man, small-time, but all business. I don't fool around with messy stuff."

"Ahrens," I said, "you do know something. You got plenty contacts. You could give me all the info I need."

"For what?" Ahrens snapped. "I don't want to know things."

"Not even if you could help catch a guy who strangles helpless girls? Haven't you got any conscience at all?"

Ahrens wriggled his lips around over his teeth. "Not much," he said. "Why should I have? The world never give me anything but kicks in the face. I'm strictly gutter. But I'm doing all right. . . . Gimme the dough." He picked up the bill and vanished in the tobacco smoke near one of the back exits.

I SIPPED my drink, considering Ahrens gutter-snipe mind. I had got him uncomfortable, and I might get something out of him yet. As for his warnings about Moonrake (or C.C. Shannon, as I knew he must be), I considered that Ahrens was making the same mistake Otis was making

—ignoring glands. Moonrake was not the glandular type for those killings, no matter what they said. Besides, I sort of liked the guy.

Ahrens came back in a very short time. He slapped down a small flat tin wrapped in brown paper. "There," he said, "that stuff is good enough for a mandarin. Don't let your screwy friend say it ain't. And you don't get no change."

"You don't have to get hard about it," I said coldly. I got up. "Well, thanks for a small favor anyhow," I started out.

I was halfway across the dancefloor when he called: "Horace!"

I hesitated, then went back. Ahrens was looking down at the table cloth, making scratches with his horny thumbnail. "What sort of line is this guy handing you, Horace?" he asked.

"No line," I said.

"You better lay off him. Now, look here, just because you're a dumb, innocent jerk, I'm gonna tell you—" He paused, considered. "No, I'm not either. You got too much cop smell on you. You ain't a stool, but you got cop friends. I won't be dragged into no court. But—" he got up—"I'm gona walk a ways with you. Let's go out the back."

He led me through a series of dim adobe corridors and out by a patio door into the dark street. I started walking toward a reddish glare that indicated the downtown section, and he came along beside me. We reached the neighborhood of the plaza, and I ducked into an alley and came up behind the building where Moonrake lived.

There wasn't any light in his room. The rickety back stairs ran up like a gray chalk mark to the bare back door, shining in the dim half-light. The single visible window gave off a glazed and non-committal stare. We looked at the place in silence. Ahrens could feel my hesitancy.

"Well, go on," he said. "I'll just wait here."

"Scared of the guy, are you?"

"You *aint*?"

I started to give that a laugh, but just then, behind the glazed window pane, something seemed to move, to flutter—a vague whitish smear, like the wings of some monster moth, beating and falling back. An idiotic ripple of fright went through me, and I cursed Ahrens and Otis, too, for

putting damn fool ideas in my head. Ahrens had caught my arm.

"He's watching," he whispered, "shifting around in there like a big caged ape. When that type gets on the junk, Pal, you never know."

"Rats," I growled. I pulled free and went forward.

My knee joints were wobbly and my breath was coming short; I was mad at myself for acting like a kid. Moonrake had given me that football, a pledge of good faith that should have convinced me. And did, only—

The stairs creaked to beat hell. I hadn't noticed it before. Good burglar alarm. They moaned and whined, and when I reached the top, the little landing seemed to sway slightly. The hell with it!

I called softly: "Moonrake!"

There wasn't any answer. But something had been moving in there. Curtain fluttering? There wasn't any breeze. Maybe he hadn't heard.

"Moonrake, it's Santine," I said, lips close to the door.

Still no answer. I looked back and down. I couldn't see Ahrens now. Had he skipped? I could leave and come back later. Only I didn't want Ahrens to see me tucking my tail.

I took hold of the doorknob and found the door wasn't locked. I pushed it open about thirty degrees. Faint, dirty light filtered across the bed and table, and there was the opium smell, but the room seemed empty. "Moonrake," I whispered, but nothing answered; nothing moved.

I did not like that. Because something *had* moved in there before.

Standing there undecided, I heard a furtive sound of feet moving on the ground below. I glanced down, and in the shadow of the building saw a moving figure. It stopped, looked up. I froze. A moment later, he moved forward again. It was too big for Ahrens, not big enough for Moonrake. He reached the edge of the shadow then, and I saw the face under the low-pulled hat—the deadpan, pop-eyed features of the glass-faced man.

I stood perfectly still until he was out of sight under the landing, just below me. I took a breath then stepped into the room. I stepped clear of the door and turned to close it, and hands grabbed me from be-

hind. One set of fingers bit into my shoulders, while another closed around my throat. I was drawn inward as by a powerful suction. A voice was hissing in my ear:

"Quiet, Horace, quiet, Man." A hand reached around me and slid the bolt.

Then I was aware of the gray blob of Moonrake's face close to mine, the eyes seeming enormous under the thick dog-brows, a faint sweat glistening eerily on his skin.

"That man down there—" his whisper came—"I can't have him up here. He's a Benito detective. I appeal to you to help me, Horace."

I was not in much of a position to bargain. "What—?" I began.

"The window," he hissed. "Make a break for it, and he will follow you." He finished by giving me a shove.

I was perfectly willing to go. My palms struck the window sill, and I vaulted over it and landed on the tin roof below like a rockslide. I ran to the parapet and paused just long enough to see Glass Face halfway up the stairs, and then I dropped over and landed on the trash heap, picked myself up and ran.

I didn't look back. I heard feet hit two of the steps, then pound on the packed earth. I caromed into an alley and rocketed toward the street opening. A voice called, "*Alto!*" and a gun crashed.

BUT the alley's mouth was only two leaps away, and the devil was in my legs. I'd have made it too, if just then a bulky shape in the flat-brimmed white hat of the Mex police hadn't stepped out in front of me. I ran square into him. There was a grunt and a grab of powerful hands, and I was uprighted and swung toward my pursuer, who came up panting, gun in hand, his glass face cracked in the first grin I had seen on it.

"Nice work, Arturo, he's our man—" this in Spanish. Then to me, "Wal, Fran, you geeve us the chase, huh?"

"Where do you get that stuff?" I growled rather pointlessly.

He laughed. "Where you belt, *Amigo?* He flipped up my vest and exposed the empty belt loops. He looked at Arturo. "See? I am following heem and I notice the belt. I have heem cornered in a bar, and then I step out to get the halp, and then he

ees all gone. Then the gorl ees keeled.”
 “Hey,” I said, “I sold the belt to that bartender there.”

I knew it was no good. He just laughed. A crowd was gathering.

To me he said: “The bartender got weetnesses.” He spoke to Arturo again, something about “ten-thousand dollars”. They began shoving me down the alley.

“Listen,” I said, “I got a friend on the Del Norte force. Sergeant Hap Otis. You call him—”

“Sure, we call,” Glass Face said. “*Manana.*”

They would not call tomorrow or ever—not with a ten-thousand-dollar reward posted. Near the alley’s other end there was a waiting police car.

“Where we going?” I rasped.

“*Carcel municipal.* Where you theenk?”

I did not think *there*. Let them shoot me, damn them; they would not bury me in that pest hole! I let them get me to the car, let Arturo get behind the wheel, let Glass Face open the door for me. Then I let him have it.

I had both hands on the door and I swung it hard against him. The edge of it struck his face and threw him far enough back for me to duck past him. After that, he had to either run or shoot; he couldn’t do both—effectively. He shot. I was glad. I figured he’d be better at running. When he’d emptied his revolver and the slugs had burnt the air around me and cleared the alley opening of spectators, I charged across the street in a tangle of snarled and hooting traffic and made the opposite alley.

Now there was a little space between me and the hue and cry. I ran like hell. But presently it came to me that the best way would be to double back to Moonrake’s place, since it would be the one place they wouldn’t look for me—yet.

I skidded to a halt, wiped my face carefully, stepped into a lighted street and started back, walking casually, looking in windows. I made it to the alley behind Moonrake’s place, and sure enough, there was nobody around. Later they’d come back, but right now they were too busy following a man running in the other direction.

I went up the steps quickly and was surprised to find the door again unlocked. Probably Moonrake had skipped out. I

closed it and stood in the darkness, breathing hard, letting my eyes get accustomed to the gloom. I sat down on a truck lid and it grated, as if it had been recently opened.

Suddenly my hand was touching something—something light and silky, like a woman’s undergarment. Funny thing for Moonrake to have, I thought. I dropped it and got up, and just then noticed that an inner door, one which presumably led to a storeroom, was standing ajar. . . .

I stared through it and nothing moved, nothing made a sound. I made a little sound and stepped nearer, curious. “Moonrake,” I said aloud, thinking maybe he was waiting to identify me, “I made it, but it won’t be long now before—”

I stopped. Staring into the darkness which was clearing gradually. I could glimpse the big piles of merchandise. Now I noticed lighter objects spaced about, like flour sacks, or pillows tossed there—only too long for either—draped over the bales. One, two, three, four. . . .

I moved into the doorway, but still couldn’t see well; the piled stuff made a barrier against the light from the front windows. I stepped past the doorway, craned, took a long and difficult swallow. The whitish shapes looked very much like human bodies reclining there. An opium den? Was Moonrake running an opium den?

The figures were very still. There wasn’t much smell of opium in the storeroom itself. I took another step.

Of course I was a fool. But Moonrake was just not the glandular type for the crimes, as I had classified them. . . .

It was an arm that went around my throat this time, and it cut off my breathing completely. A backward heave lifted my feet clean off the floor, and then a rag was being crammed into my mouth by another hand. I tried to struggle, but you’ve got to have breath for that—and it was as if a gorilla had me.

Only when the gag was in my mouth and tied there did the beartrap let up on my throat. Then I just wilted, and my arms were yanked around behind me, tied, and I was shoved to the floor. I tried to stagger up then, but he grabbed my ankle. The fall this time stunned me, so that the next thing I knew, the ankles were tied too, and I was being dragged across the floor, tossed

like a sack of beans into a sheltered spot behind a bale of goods.

CHAPTER FIVE

Benito Nightmare

I HADN'T even glimpsed him, but now I did. It was Moonrake all right, but what a difference! He moved with slumped shoulders and great arms swinging, like a giant troglodyte in the gloom of his cave, going quietly and busily about his game which was, maybe, raiding the timid village tribes for prey. . . .

I did a lot of thinking then about atavistic survivals—throwbacks to the cave man. If *he* survives—such an ogre—in the racial blood, would it be in cretins, as we often think? *He* would be shrewd and cunning, because he was an outcast, and had to be. And if *he* did come back, might *he* not choose rather the bloodstream of big men, brainy men—powerful, brooding men—like Moonrake? Was there *anything* wrong with his—the Ogre's—glands?

Where had he gone now? Somewhere among the shadows of the bales he had lost himself. Hiding again. Waiting. For what?

Then there came a sound—from the direction of the back door. It had opened, feet were moving in, slowly, cautiously. Well, I had figured the Benito police would get back here finally. And Moonrake had better have a better weapon than his hands now. Because even a Benito cop's gun is dangerous at close range.

The inner door—just beyond the dark semicircle where the silent figures lay on their bales as on altars—was opening wider now. A figure showed against the dim light from beyond—a short body, hunched, scrawny of shoulder. Ahrens!

I wanted to yell at him, but I was gagged, and already he was past the second door. The awful suspense of his slow advance into that trap paralyzed me. I saw he was armed, though whether it was a knife or a gun in his right hand, I could not tell.

Then he stopped.

He had just seen the dim and ghostly shapes around him. That will do it, I thought—frighten him out. But it didn't. Quick as a cat, and with a sort of hissing sound, he whirled completely around, sur-

veying the whole enclosure. Nothing stirred. Curiosity became greater than fear. He moved swiftly to one of the figures.

His hands seemed busy for an instant, and then there was a curse. He moved to the next one; he ripped something away, cursed again—went down the line in swift and calculated examination of each grisly shape. He drew back then, moving now as agile as a fencer, as a matador, and pivoted as he had done before. I saw then it was a gun he had. As its barrel swung in a compass arc of the room, he rasped:

"Some wise guy around here is going to get killed! Well, step out and get it!"

He was, I began to see now, beneath his clownish exterior, a very capable and deadly little man. He threw his challenge to the dark, and his gun waggled invitingly.

I was not making any sound now, and I thought Moonrake had better not, either. I thought Moonrake had better just let him back out of the room, as he was now starting to do, while he, Moonrake, took to a window.

But just then, from a pile of bales, a smaller bale came sailing out. Ahrens sidestepped, ducked it, and the gun spat wickedly. The bale had missed him. But the next one did not. It bowled him over, and his second shot hit the ceiling. And then a huge shape was leaping through the air. Ahrens let out one shrill cry, and the big shape was on him—and it was over. The cat had the mouse, and be he ever so bold a mouse. . . .

I had a final glimpse of that dark, crouching shape on the floor, above something that wriggled, and if you know the way of a cat with a mouse you don't need to have it described. Then I was beating my heels against the floor and trying to yell and make every sort of noise I could. No smart—but I had just seen a man strangled.

Then Moonrake was coming for me, as I knew he would, and still voiceless (he had not uttered a sound), he grabbed me up by the collar of my coat and dragged me across the room.

Just then there came a pound of feet on the stairs at the back, and my heart gave a jump of hope. But Moonrake appeared not to notice. We had reached a door near the front of the building, now, and he hauled me through it and locked it behind him. He twisted the thongs off my bound ankles

then, jerked me upright, and pushed me ahead of him down a flight of dark stairs.

We came into a lower storeroom, from which a door led into an adjoining building—vacant—and presently we stepped out into a side street. Meanwhile there was plenty of pounding and yelling behind us, but you could see that Moonrake had charted his getaway long ago. Now he shoved me toward and old jalopy waiting at the curb, pushed me in and onto the floor of the back, and got in behind the wheel. He drove away with a leisurely air.

Out in the suburbs he picked up speed and swung onto a deserted-looking road that curled up around one of the bare, wind-bitten hills that wall the town. I might have tried something, but my hands were still tied, and his cold eye in the rear-view mirror discouraged me.

Presently he pulled off amid the cactus, stopped, and said: "Well, here we are, Horace."

I was glad to note that his madness had not robbed him of speech completely. It made things a little more bearable. I crawled out, and he came around and took my arm and marched me up the hill.

What now? I thought. *Some sacrifice to the moon goddess?* But I was feeling better. I was out in the open with my lungs full of good air, putting my brain to work even if my hands were tied. If he had a mania, it was my cue to play up to it, and try to get him off guard. He stopped presently and removed my gag, and that helped, too.

Well, there was a big moon coming up all right, breaking over the Franklin peaks across the river, dusting a gold-red powder into the air and making the kinks in the Rio shine like copper wire.

"Pretty moon," I remarked.

"Yes," said Moonrake. "No wonder men have always worshipped her. Bearer of the immortal ichor of the nightborn, shepherds of wolves, of owls, of bats and cats and all the free of heart! I shall have a lot of time to worship her from now on, I imagine." He laughed. "Moonrake! It is no accident I chose that name, Moonrake, the heath-born, the spawn of witches!"

THAT kind of talk suited me fine. He was warming up swell—and I wanted him gibbering. What I really hated was the

cold efficiency of the way he had dealt with me and Ahrens.

We had reached a little promontory now, craggy, and with fallen flat slabs lying about like altars.

I said: "One can almost imagine that the sacrificial victim felt that moon-spell themselves and were willing—"

"Oh, always!" Moonrake said. "Didn't you know that? The victims *had* to be willing; it was a necessary part of the ritual."

We were just standing there. I said: "By the way, I never had a chance to give you that can of opium. Would you like—"

"No," he said. "Thanks, Horace. All that is over. I have found a more powerful stimulant than opium."

"Oh," I said, not much encouraged by that.

"Sit down, Horace," Moonrake invited, nodding toward a slab.

"Don't mind if I do," I said, but I moved over to a slab that was a little higher and leaned against it.

"You're a good boy, Horace," Moonrake told me, "and I hate to have to do what I am going to do to you."

I cleared my throat.

"I mean," Moonrake went on, "beat you out of that big reward. But you see, I really must go away. I have thought it over, and I really must."

I took a deep breath. "Don't apologize at all," I said. "It's what I would advise. And—" I glanced toward the twinkling lights of town—"I should say the sooner the better."

"Not before I explain things," said Moonrake, and he sat down, too. "You made a grave mistake in your glandular diagnosis, Horace—"

"I see that now."

"Quite. You were right about thymus. So many people, criminal and non-criminal, have thymus trouble. But you said the crimes were not pituitary crimes, and that is exactly what they were. It was the hyperthyroid business that led you astray. You misread the crimes, because there was a preponderance of women killed, but you were on the wrong track. . . .

"They were crimes of pure expediency—planned crimes, brainy crimes, passionless crimes, motivated by money. And wherever you see money shining in a crime pat-

tern, plus careful, cerebral planning, you are up against a pituitary crime—the hardest of all to crack, because a good, sound brain is being used to further warped desires. You also said the crimes were done by a big man—”

My brain was reeling at the sudden change in his manner. I croaked: “Well, that much was obvious.”

“Obvious,” said Moonrake, “and hence false. The crimes were done by a *pituitary*—but by a small-sized one. You were only half right about the size characteristic of pituitaries. They run to unusually big men—and *unusually small ones*. And you were also half right about the killer’s reason for being on his knees so much. An unusually *small* man is just as conspicuous as an unusually *large* one, so it would be to his advantage, also, not to be seen standing upright. But the really important reason was the particular weapon our strangler was using. . . .”

“A weapon? But I thought—”

“You thought hands—big hands, as your smart pituitary wanted you to think. But the Benito police always said there was a weapon, so I began working on that angle—studying it. And I came across the ‘Apache Scarf.’

“Indian, you mean?”

“No, Parisian Apache. The technique of those French killers is neat and simple. The assassin takes the victim off guard, loops a scarf around his throat from behind, then, stooping, bends the victim down helplessly across his back.”

“And the killer would kneel. . . . But those finger prints?”

“On the throat, yes. To me they were a dead giveaway. They were much too

regular and invariable in their pattern you see . . .”

“You mean a belt—like the one I had, with the bosses?”

“No, not a belt. I confess I did not quite guess that until I examined that scarf your friend Ahrens wore around his throat. Inside its folds there was a stout strip of canvas, and sewed into the canvas—at regular intervals, to match the tips of fingers—were some ordinary agate marbles. The pressure of those marbles caused the bruises.”

“Well, holy smoke!” I jumped to my feet.

The man whose real name was C. C. Shannon came around, chuckling, and untied my hands. “Don’t guess you’ll give me any trouble now. There isn’t much more, Horace. I am a man who failed in trying to rear an orphaned niece properly. . . .”

“You mean—?”

“I mean,” he said sadly, “that my niece, Ora Shannon, got in bad company—went with other misguided kids to reefer parties in Benito. Or rather, she met them there—others like her, but not previously acquainted. That, of course, was why the police could trace no connection between the victims. They concealed it. And mostly they died without telling. And you know, of course, that there are rings that deliberately go out of their way to lure such youths to dope.”

I nodded. “I guess Ahrens ran one.”

“**H**E DID. Not that Ora told. I learned she was using marihuana, but not where, or from whom she got it. I tried to cure her, and even induced her to bring a few of her friends to talk to me. But they

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were hard nuts to crack. And meanwhile—”

“Meanwhile,” I said, “Ahrens was getting worried about those kids cracking and giving his game away.”

“O course. But Ahrens, as we’ve said, was a pituitary—and a business man, and would not kill just for the fun of it. I imagine the adrenal youth, Wickard, must have got wild and given him trouble. Ahrens had to kill him. I think the others knew, but Ahrens frightened them into keeping the secret. I got hints from Ora, but only hints.”

“You didn’t tell the police?”

“There was little I could tell. Those kids would not give me their names. I could have done nothing but smirch the name of a dead girl who was, after all, my own dead brother’s child.”

“So you decided to find the killer yourself?”

“I was driven to do so,” he said. “My conscience nearly drove me mad after Ora was killed. Then the others began to be found, one by one. . . . It was awful. I took a leave of absence and came to Benito determined to run the killer down.

“One thing at least I had. I knew the killer must be a dope pedler. So, at the risk of becoming an addict myself, I began to try to contact every dope peddler in Benito. I think,” he laughed, “I almost did. I had spotted Ahrens, too, but he was sly and eluded me. He suspected me of being a detective, I think.

“I was following you two tonight, though not so conspicuously as the glass-faced Benito detective. And I frightened Ahrens badly when, making his escape from that dive, he ran into me in the back corridor. That, plus the detective at the bar, must have made him so panicky that when he found the girl outside—without perhaps *knowing* that she had warned you—he killed her on the spot, guessing that she had come there to warn you of him.”

“And so he fell into your trap.”

“Yes, the trap was well planned, I think. The figures were of course dummies, made up to resemble his victims. . . .”

“And you used the old psychology on him, figuring to lure him there and scare him into confessing?”

“Good heavens, no!” Moonrake laughed.

“I knew I was dealing with a pituitary—they don’t go to pieces that way. It wasn’t fright that got him—it was the curiosity of his clever brain. Imagine how he felt when he found those dummies laid out there just like his victims. He knew then that somebody was onto his game. But he had to know *how much they knew*. Then, when he saw a scarf around each dummy’s throat, he knew that his murder method had been guessed. He snatched the scarfs off—and whirled around and threw his challenge into the darkness.”

“Did you,” I asked, “just stun him?”

“Horace,” said Moonrake, “I killed him. I killed him as dead as a snake hung on a fence. And I’m glad I did it.”

I thought it over a minute, and then I went over and shook his hand. “I wasn’t all wrong,” I said. “You are a pituitary.”

“Yes,” said Moonrake. “And they can do what they please about it, because I am not even going back to explain.”

“But—”

He shrugged. “You tell them. If the cops search Ahrens headquarters, they will be sure to find Wickard’s body. When they do, they can prove Ahrens killed all of them. Just tell them I killed Ahrens, and be damned to them.”

“But your job, your professorship?”

“The hell with that, too,” said Moonrake. “If I was any good as a psychologist, why couldn’t I save my niece? And will I go back now and drag her through the mud, explaining it all to them? I will not. I’ve got a little money and I always wanted to be a vagabond. I always wanted to see those ruined cities down in Guatemala.”

He got up and stretched his arms. His big hulk loomed against the moon’s rising disc, and there was something free, ecstatic, almost ritualistic about his stance.

He turned, grinning. “Take it easy, Horace,” he said. “The cops will beat you out of the reward, but you’re young. If the grind gets too tough, come down and look me up sometime—around Tikal or Palenque.”

“Fellow,” I said, “I could sure use you in my business.”

“I got business of my own,” he said, and just kept on walking—right into the moon, it seemed.

I like to remember him like that.

CRIME ON MY HANDS

By **KEN GREENE**



"This is it,"
I said softly.

When the high-voltage brunette latched onto me, I figured she was a cutie with a corpse on her conscience.

Steve's Story:

THIS exotic brunette hitched herself on the red leather stool next to me. She looked elegant in high-necked, sheeny black. Her split skirt revealed nylon-clad legs.

The Bear's Club was not crowded this October Wednesday night. There was the crash of scattering pins in the bowling alleys, and some couple were wrestling on the tiny dance space to a nickel's worth of

noise. On the wall facing me was a bit of barroom philosophy that read: *It's Nice To Be Nice.*

The brunette caught my eye and said: "Do they sell cigarettes in this club?" She had a throaty voice that went in my ears, traveled down to my heart, and then exploded like an atomic bomb. With difficulty, I restrained myself from telling her to take my pack and hold my seat while I ran and got her a carton. Ten out of ten guys had probably done just that for her on that bait line.

I wrinkled my brow thoughtfully as I helped myself to my full pack of cigarettes on the bar, lit one, and blew out the match. "Yes," I said. "Right over there."

There was a flash of gray flame in those big eyes. The fire held while she threw me a dazzling smile that packed a romantic punch as terrific as her costly, elusive perfume. I watched her swish arrogantly over to the cigarette-vending machine. It was good watching.

When she remounted the stool, looking slightly burned, she lit a smoke expertly and ordered a red wine, which she paid for. Two guys next to me were discussing the Camelot kill heatedly.

A middle-aged stock broker by the name of Frank Camelot had won fifty gees Monday night at Jack Potter's Casino, a few miles south of town. It hadn't done him any good. Soon after he'd left the Casino he'd been found dead in his sedan at city limits, without the dough and with two .25-caliber automatic slugs in him.

The brunette, overhearing their conversation, blew a cloud of smoke my way and said, "That was clever, wasn't it?"

"It was brutal," I said, looking her straight in the eye.

She didn't say anything. But she had been there the night that Camelot got his. I remembered seeing her there. She hadn't been playing much. She'd been mostly watching the others, like I had. I know she was still there when I went into the wash room, right after Camelot had won his fifty grand. That was the last I had seen of her, until now.

"The name's Steele," I said. "Steve Steele. Furnace salesman. Hot air, that is."

"That I can believe," she said coolly.

I wasn't a furnace salesman, but in my

business deception is best; and the fewer people that knew what I did, the better I liked it.

She slid her wine goblet toward the barkeep for a refill. He gave her fast, smiling service and made change out of the dollar I shoved toward him.

"Thanks," she said huskily.

"My birthday," I gravely announced. "I'll take a raincheck on the birthday kiss."

A faint glitter of amusement in those gray eyes. "Okay. Carol's the name, Mister. Carol Williams."

"Miss Carol Williams?"

She nodded. "Hairdresser and orphan."

I said, watching her closely: "Got any ideas who bumped that guy Camelot?"

Her delicate hand trembled a little as she crushed her cigarette in the glass ash tray. Her wide eyes avoided mine. "No." Silence. Then, almost too casually, she asked: "Are you a detective?"

My laugh was a little louder than I had intended it to be. "Do I look like a detective?" I countered.

Her nostrils flared as her eyes roved over my red hair, my pug nose, my big chin, and my brown eyes. The eyes that I'd almost lost in an explosion on Okinawa. Luckily, the medics had saved them and my vision was good. Good enough to tell me that this Carol Williams was a lot of woman. I felt myself sailing for her, and somehow I was vaguely uneasy. She might just possibly be in with the opposition.

Nevertheless, when one pleasant hour later Carol said she'd be leaving, I said I had the same idea. Could I drop her somewhere? I could run her home, she said. The Pontiac and I did that.

She lived in the northeast section on the second floor rear of the Coldren Building. While I stood in the corridor, she fished a key out of her gigantic black purse. I hoped she'd ask me to come in for a last cigarette.

Instead, she graciously showed me her white, even teeth and said: "Thanks for the lift."

With four more whiskies and sodas in me than I had when I first saw her, Carol looked even better now. A dream in black, her blue-black hair tumbled softly to her proudly-held shoulders and her gray eyes were as big as saucers.

My heart skipped two beats. I reached out and grabbed her. I could feel her

warmth as I drew her close. Her mouth was red and moist and her perfume made me dizzy. I tried to kiss her—but she wrenched her head aside.

Frowning, she wriggled out of my hands. "That doesn't come with it," she huskily intoned. She keyed open the door. As she slipped inside I had a glimpse of a tastefully furnished apartment. Then she said, "Good night, Steve," gently, and closed the door in my face. I heard the key turn in the lock. "See you at the Bear's Club again sometime."

I came out of my coma burning. "Million dollar lipstick?" I taunted.

"No," she softly replied. "Million dollar lips."

CAROL wasn't at the Bear's Club Thursday night, but Friday she showed. I saw her come gracefully in the basement and hitch herself on a bar stool down the line. I figured that she must have seen me when she passed me and that she was playing hard to get.

I decided to be indifferent and make her come after me. It was rough, because my heart was playing leapfrog every time I stole a glance at her in the bar mirror. She was wearing a wine-colored frock that counterpointed her blue-black hair and made her look like something you'd like to find under the tree on Christmas morning.

There wasn't much sense behind my delaying action, but my pride kept me sitting on my stool. Once in a while, I'd catch her looking up my way and flushing slightly. We kept up this peek-a-boo business for an hour and a half. Several wolves tried to move in on her from time to time, but she didn't encourage them and they soon retreated.

The place was more crowded tonight. There was bowling in all the alleys, and music was contributed by a four-piece skeleton crew of the regular orchestra that played upstairs Saturdays and Sundays.

Jack Potter had come in with a male companion and had joined Potter's wife, Lana, at a table. The same Jack Potter whose Casino was temporarily closed by the law during the current police investigation into who had killed Frank Camelo. Camelo being, of course, the fifty-one-year-old stock broker who had taken fifty gees from Potter's roulette game.

But he hadn't taken it far. An hour after he left the Casino, a state cop found him down the road with two .25-caliber automatic slugs in him, as he slumped at the wheel of his sleek Oldsmobile. He was as dead as you can get—and just that broke. His fifty grand had been lifted.

Now, in the bar mirror, I saw Lana Potter take her mixed drink and strut over to the battery of money machines between the tables and the bowling alleys. She studied the fruit, as if deciding whether she wanted to give it a play. She didn't know me from Adam, so far as I knew.

I got two bucks worth of dimes and started playing the dime machine. With mild interest, Lana Potter watched me try my luck. Feeding the bandit, I said, without looking at her: "Peanuts, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?" she asked politely. She had a lot of blonde hair piled on top of her head.

"Jackpot fifteen bucks. That's peanuts compared with fifty grand." I hit cherries for the second time. A few coins spilled into the tray. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her green eyes widen.

"Why fifty grand?"

I fed in five useless dimes. "That was the take from Frank Camelo."

The bodice of her yellow strapless gown rose. "If this is a pickup," she said, "lay off. My husband is here."

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm playing this sucker game. So he won't get wise that I came over to talk to you." She sure made that yellow gown look like an imported model. She looked like a model herself, but I'd heard that she'd learned that walk in burlesque.

"I don't know you," Lana Potter said. "What's your point?"

On my second last dime I hit the oranges. Coins spurted into the tray and I had a new start. "You disliked Camelo," I flatly stated. Her sister, Gloria, had married Frank Camelo. When he started running around with cuties, she couldn't take it and committed suicide.

"I hated his guts!" Lana hissed.

"Homicide liked your alibi, I understand." I grinned sourly as I damn near hit the jackpot. Two bars, with the third bar stopping just a space too high.

"Why shouldn't they? I *did* retire a half hour before he left."

I watched a bowler make a strike. "There's a back stairway at the Casino."

"So what?"

"So you could have gone down the back stairway, crouched on the rear floor of his car, and given it to him somewhere on the road."

Lana Potter's green eyes flashed. "I didn't," she said. "You think I killed him?"

"I think nothing. The police found motive."

"But not evidence," she pointed out, as I spent my last dime futilely. "You were there yourself."

My face must have registered surprise. "How did you know?"

"You aren't hard to look at," the blonde said. "A girl notices you."

"Thanks." I handed her a quarter.

She flipped it in the quarter machine and yanked the metal lever. The cylinders spun and settled: bell, bell, bell, and a flood of quarters spewed into the tray. Without flicking an eyelash, she took the winner off, made two even piles, gave me one and dropped the other in her fat yellow purse.

"While we're on the subject of alibis, what's yours?"

"I don't need any," I said, smiling. "I had no motive."

"Fifty thousand is motive enough for anybody." Then she went on hurriedly, "Look, I think my husband's coming over—and he's a jealous man. Will you do me a favor? I gotta talk to someone and you look okay. See me tomorrow at two. Eight-oh-four Pine Street."

BEFORE I could reply, Jack Potter had hurried up. He snarled: "Making a play for my wife, Guy?" The husky-bodied owner of the Casino was tense, and his blue eyes were ugly. At his gambling establishment, he'd seemed suave in that hand-tailored, neat, pin-stripe suit, but I could see he was half lit tonight. His silver-touched, wavy black hair seemed to bristle with anger.

"No," I said softly.

From the corner of my eye I saw Carol Williams sweep her cigarettes and change into her handbag and leave the room.

"He wasn't bothering me, Jack," Lana said. Spots of color had appeared in her cheeks.

Potter glared at her. "You shut up. It would be just like you to look for a man as soon as my back was turned."

"You're mistaken, Potter," I said, controlling my temper with difficulty.

"Like hell I am." He weaved a little. "You two looked good to each other."

Saving my breath, I turned and walked away. His hand on my shoulders spun me around. His hard right just missed my chin. My punch didn't miss. It caught him flush on the button. He crumpled to the floor. He might have friends in here. I didn't. So I beat it, walking away fast.

Carol Williams was just getting into a cab. Golly, didn't she have the leg though. I decided this was no time for pride. I piled in the rear beside her.

"Five bucks if you get away from here without a tail," I said to the driver.

"Can do, Boss," he said, flashing a rather toothless smile. He gunned off like he was in an auto race and meant to win.

"What's the big idea, Mister?" Carol demanded. The exotic brunette's gray eyes were blazing.

"Steve's the name, remember?"

"That isn't explaining why you have to barge in on me suddenly, after ignoring me all evening."

"That's a matter of opinion, who was ignoring whom. Let's skip it. Fact is, Potter thought I was making a play for his wife."

"And weren't you?" she asked coolly.

I grinned. "With you around, Baby? Don't be silly. Anyhow, I poked him so I had to leave fast. I didn't want to meet any of his boys."

Glancing out of the rear window, I saw we weren't being tailed. I put a five spot in the hand the skinny driver was significantly holding up. After a further pay-off at Carol's place, I trotted along upstairs with her. I made up my mind I wasn't going to plead with her to come in. So I stood there as if I were just a mechanical man dutifully escorting her home, and all the time I was eating my heart out while she keyed open the door.

"Wanna come in a minute?"

She looked super in a quarter-sleeved, wine-colored frock, and her perfume was bewitching. There was a sprinkling of freckles on her upturned nose. Her flawless complexion made a lovely background for

that wide red mouth. That was the picture that dazzled my eyes, and she asked me did I want to come in. What did she think I had in my veins, embalming fluid?

Eagerness can be disastrous with dolls the same as at poker, so, swallowing, I said: "I don't know. It's late."

The corners of her mouth drooped a little. "It's up to you." She deliberately straightened the nylon seam in her left leg. Her legs were nice and she knew it. "Well," she said, turning, "be seeing you."

"Got any whiskey?" I asked casually.

She nodded, so I said I'd come in for one shot. She smiled triumphantly. Her parlor was tastefully furnished, including the red sofa we sat on. The whiskey was excellent. We talked, I don't know about what. All I could think of was her closeness, her femininity, her perfume, and that red mouth of hers. A warning bell tinkled in my mind. It told me that something was wrong with the set-up. I had a vague feeling that she wasn't being completely honest with me. Something about her spelled trouble.

Then she was in my arms and I kissed her hard. Her shoulders were soft. She was high voltage. It was wonderful. Heaven could wait. In the meantime, Carol Williams would do very satisfactorily.

She pushed me away. "Well!" she said breathlessly. I saw a look in her burning gray eyes that told me she was in love with me. Smiling, she politely but firmly chased me out.

"You're right," I said from the corridor. "They are million dollar lips."

That bought me a sizzling kiss good night.

WHEN I got to the large third floor room and bath I call home, I saw that I had company. Two beefy lads. The taller one was sitting ominously by my desk. The baldheaded one closed the door for me and said: "We been waiting for you."

"Midnight is a little late for visiting," I said, while a chill ran down my spine. I'd seen these monkeys at the Casino, and knew that they did Potter's dirty work. "How'd you get in?"

Baldy smiled nastily and said through tight lips, "We got keys that let us in lots of places, don't we, Dooley?"

"Shut up, Kane." Scowling at me,

Dooley snarled: "Know why we're here?"

I shook my head. I knew I wasn't known personally by Potter and wondered how he had found out my name and address. Then I realized it would be simple. My name, at least, was known by several people who had been in the Bear's Club. With that lead, Potter could easily learn where I lived from the membership list.

Dooley said: "The boss doesn't like guys hanging around his wife, see? If he did—" he broke off and glared at me.

"—she wouldn't pick you," I said. Only my voice wasn't so steady.

Dooley got up. My legs turned rubbery. He towered over me as he stuck a hard forefinger into my chest. "You're a good-lookin' guy, Steele," he said, "but if you mess around Lana Potter, you won't be. Understand?"

I didn't like the mean look in his black eyes. A drop of sweat rolled down my chest. I swallowed the lump in my throat and said I understood.

Suddenly, grabbing me from behind, Kane's sinewy arms pinned mine to my sides, as Dooley's fist hooked viciously into my mouth. It hurt plenty. I tried uselessly to break loose. Kane's arms held me securely as Dooley's punch hammered to my jaw. I fell to the floor, pain shooting through me. I was kicked hard in the ribs and in the side of the head. I nearly passed out.

Through the dark haze that enveloped me, a voice came to my ears, as if from far away: "That's just to help you remember. Next time you won't get off so easy." I heard a door slam.

Groaning, I slowly made it to my feet. In the bathroom I fixed myself up, then undressed and went to bed.

* * *

Promptly at two that afternoon, I called at 804 Pine Street. It was a respectable-looking, three-story red brick rooming house. On one of the mailboxes in the vestibule there was a new white card on which had been typed:

Mrs. Lana Potter
Room 3

The inside door was unlocked. I knocked at Room three, which was on the second floor, front. Lana Potter, blonde and tall, favored me with a nice smile when she opened up.

"Come right in," she said, and closed the door after me. I was in a large room with three windows giving eastern exposure. A single bed, a bureau, a wash basin and several landscapes on the wall. It was clean but hardly up to the scale she must have been living by since she married Jack Potter.

"The best I could get," Lana Potter said apologetically, as if she'd been reading my mind. "No apartments available."

"You mean you've left your husband?" I sat down on a straight chair and she helped herself to the blue club chair.

"That's right." The blonde wore a white sweater attractively. The hem of her orange skirt nearly covered the knees of her slim white legs. "Jack and I had a quarrel. Say, do you realize I don't know your name?"

"Steele. Just make it Steve."

"Sorry I can't offer you a drink, Steve."

"I'll try to bear up." Her red-nailed fingers took the cigarette I offered. As I gave her a light, I caught a whiff of a heady perfume. I lit my cigarette and said, "Why'd you ask me here?"

HER eyes became slits of green flame. "I think Jack killed Frank Camelo," she said excitedly, leaning forward. "He's been acting so strangely ever since that night. I won't live with a murderer. That's why I left him." She rose and paced the floor. There didn't seem to be any vitamin deficiency in her diet, the way she filled out that fuzzy sweater. She was automatically using that strut she'd learned in burlesque. She was quite an eyeful.

I rose and grabbed her wrist. "You separate from your husband," I said. "You're afraid that he killed Camelo, and you won't put up with a killer. A nice righteous attitude to parade at headquarters in case they should show further interest in you."

She wrenched herself loose, her eyes blazing green fire. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Could be an act," I said softly. "A blind to throw the cops off your trail."

"You fool," she hissed. "Why do you suppose I asked you here?"

"So you'd have a witness to back up that story, if you told it. I'm not forgetting that Camelo was killed with a twenty-

five automatic. And that's usually a woman's gun."

Lana's hand smacked against my face, stinging my cheek and bringing tears to my eyes. I saw husky Jack Potter standing in the doorway.

"You again." In flawless, pin-stripe tailoring, the Casino owner came scowling toward me.

"It's all yours. I was just leaving." I attempted to pass him. He blocked my path.

"Not so fast," Potter sneered. "I thought I warned you to stay away from my wife."

"I must have forgotten. Out of my way."

He didn't budge. "Stick around," he said quietly, "while I get the score. I don't like the looks of this. Not even a little."

"Neither do I. That's why I'm leaving."

He shook his dark curly head. Almost apologetically, he said, "I'm afraid my boys will have to pay you another visit."

"That won't be necessary. There's nothing between your wife and me. There never was."

"Oh, yeah? You were just making a pass at her."

"A pass?" I was incredulous.

"Sure. I caught her slapping your face."

"Uh-huh, but not for a pass." I shoved Potter aside so I could leave. He wouldn't let it go at that. He clipped me with a hard left and I sat down. A crimson haze came before my eyes.

I sprang up and sank a left in his stomach. Then we mixed it up good. The guy could fight. He put me on the floor again with a terrific left. I shook my head to clear it. I came back at him. We exchanged a lot of punches. Lana huddled by the bed, her green eyes wide.

Finally I saw the opening I had been waiting for. I crashed a driving right into his jaw. He folded. He sat on the floor holding his chin. He made no attempt to get up. One eye was partly closed. He was bleeding at the nose and mouth.

I grabbed him by his silver-streaked black hair and jerked his head back so that I could look into his hard, dark eyes. "Don't send your boys around," I said softly, "or I'll really do a job on you." I flung him away and his head whacked against the wall. I didn't look at the blonde. Wheeling, I left.

After two beers in the corner cafe, I went home—to find Carol Williams there! I caught her rummaging through my desk. That made me unhappy. “Seems like everybody has a key to my room,” I said quietly. “Remind me to have the lock changed.”

Carol looked excitingly exotic in a quarter-sleeved powder-blue frock. The brunette tried a smile that didn't quite come off. Shakily, she said, “Hello, Steve.”

“Hello, yourself,” I said. “You should have let me know you were coming,” I reproved her, “and I would have prepared a snack.”

Carol said nothing. Her powder-blue bodice lifted. Her gray eyes were wide. She seemed to shrink away from me. I closed the door behind me. Slowly I turned the key in the lock.

“But that would have spoiled it, wouldn't it?” I taunted. “My presence would have kinda crabbed your act, huh? You preferred to have a look around when I was out. What are you looking for—a diary or something? Wanted to find out how much I knew, huh? Afraid you weren't safe?”

“You know the answers,” she said in a throaty whisper.

I felt myself burning up inside with resentment. “I fell for you like a ton of bricks,” I said. “Even though, from the first, I had a notion you were on the other side.”

“You had lots of notions,” she said, look-

ing at me. As I felt my ears getting warmer, she said simply, “Don't apologize. I fell too.”

“So what do we do?” I said bitterly. “Just pretend it didn't happen? Just pretend that Camelo isn't dead? Pretend that one of us didn't kill him?” I looked at her. “You know we can't do that.”

“If only there was a way out,” Carol said. Pain clouded her gray eyes. Her perfume got into me and made it worse.

“THERE isn't,” I stated flatly. “Know who I've just come from? Lana Potter. She's got a room on Pine Street. Left her husband because she thought he had killed Camelo. Just because he was acting strangely. Hell, who wouldn't act strangely if he'd just lost fifty grand!”

“You don't mind if I have a cigarette?” she asked, and helped herself from her blue purse when I shook my head. I didn't light it for her. The time for cordial relations between us was past. Once I had thought she was the one I'd been waiting for. Now that had been shattered. Because I knew she had to die. A stock broker named Frank Camelo had been killed, and because of that she had to die.

Carol's red mouth parted in a bitter smile. “Why'd you bother seeing Lana, Steve, when you knew she hadn't killed him?”

“Because I wanted to find out what she



THE CASE OF THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

Mortimer Jones never expected his circulating-library knowledge of Freud would lead to murder. But gumshoes rush in where angels—or policemen—fear to tread, so when he learned that the fiery Patricia had a strange set of motivations and owned half the mint to boot, Jones decided to jump into the psychiatric puddle with a vengeance. Most of the soul-doctors, he'd discovered, were blind leading the blind anyway, so why shouldn't a private eye focus on the murder mélange? It's WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT at his best in this new Mortimer Jones murder-go-round.

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knew." My heart turned over looking at Carol's moist red mouth, that million-dollar mouth, but I went on relentlessly. "You had me fooled up till now, Baby. I should have figured it out, but I guess my heart got in front of my brain. You were there when Camelo won his roll. I should have known you might be mixed up in it. Guess I just refused to believe that you could be on the other side."

A muscle moved in Carol's cheek. "Now you know." Her voice trembled. She tamped her cigarette in a tray on my desk, watching me all the while.

I walked over to the head of the bed and reached under the mattress. She sat there at the desk with her slim legs crossed. Golly, wasn't she a gorgeous hunk of woman though! I saw fear come into her eyes. My hand came up holding a gun.

I remembered the night we had met, the way that split black skirt had showed her legs, and how her voice had got inside of me and grabbed my heart. And how burned I'd been that first night when I tried to kiss her and she squirmed out of my arms and said: "That doesn't go with it." I thought of how fate had pushed me in her cab last night, the smell of her perfume, and the warning bell that I'd ignored. And that sunk look in her eyes when I kissed her and she chased me out. I remembered all that and a lot more and I despised myself for what I had to do to her now.

I swallowed the knot in my throat. "This is it," I said softly. There was an electrical tension in the room.

She looked at the gun and I guess she knew she was licked. Up till now, I think, she figured she had a chance of talking her way out of it. But when she saw the gun she knew it was a showdown. I could read that in her big gray eyes.

Her powder-blue bodice rose. "This is how we met, Steve. Over a cigarette." Her throaty voice trembled. "And over a cigarette we part." Her eyes were moist. She tried a brave smile that didn't quite come off, as she reached in her handbag.

I thought: *Enjoy that cigarette, Kid. It'll be your last!*

Her gun roared twice. I stared at her in unbelief as the slugs tore into me, and the pistol fell out of my hand. She sat very still and there was horror in her eyes, and

smoke curled up from the muzzle of the gun she held.

"Carol!" I gasped. The floor came up and smacked me.

"Sorry, Steve." Her shaky voice came from so far away. . . .

Carol's Story:

Some part of me seemed to die when he died. If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the look in his eyes when I shot him. There were voices in the hall. Like in a nightmare, I unlocked the door. Two men and a woman screamed questions at me. I didn't answer them. I showed them my identification, that was all. I walked down to the ground floor and dialed headquarters from a phone under the stairway. I recognized the gruff voice at the other end of the line.

"Joe," I said dully, "Carol. Send the—the meat wagon to 445 Lanthrop Street. I just killed Steele. He's the guy that bumped Camelo. . . . No, I haven't located the dough yet. Must be stashed here someplace. . . . Yes, he pulled a twenty-five pistol on me. A test will prove it's the murder weapon. It was either he or I. I had to let him have it. . . . Uh-huh, the Chief put me on the case Wednesday. . . . What made me suspect him? Well, right after Camelo won this dough I saw Steele go into the wash room. I didn't see him come out. That's why the doorman didn't turn in his description among those of the others who left around then. Steele never went out the door. He must have slipped through the washroom window and ducked into Camelo's car, see?"

I cradled the receiver. My heart was a cold lump of lead. I dabbed at my eyes with my handkerchief. Memories flooded my mind. I could see myself again hitching myself on the red leather stool, next to this clean-cut guy. I knew I looked elegant in sheeny black. My split skirt gave him an eyeful of my nylon hose.

The Bear's Club wasn't too crowded this October Wednesday night. From the bowling alleys came the noise of falling pins. A bleached blonde and a skinny guy were dancing close to juke box music. And on the wall I faced was one of those tavern signs. This one said: *It's Nice To Be Nice. . . .*

THRILL

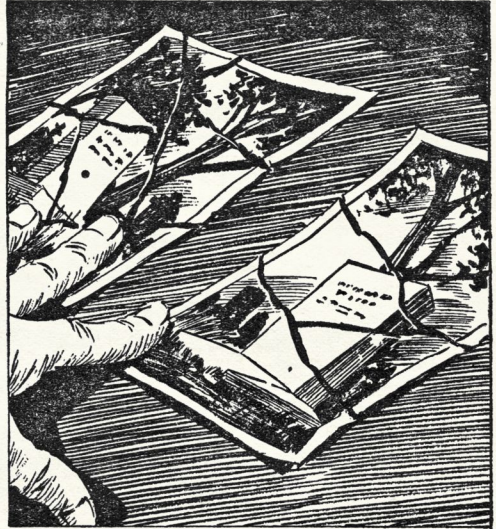
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH ELYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



Walter Preston of Headliner Files was nursing a double-scotch when he overheard Press Agent Hester Troy shout angrily into the bistro telephone: "You just lay off that buttery double-talk, Sweetheart, and listen to baby. You're makin' a fatal mistake—brushin' me off like this. . . ."



Hester got panicky when she saw Preston, whose business was to dig up the dirt, data and details on celebrities. She desperately tried to destroy two photographs. When Preston pieced them together they pictured the cemetery headstones of two defunct dames.



Thackeray Hackett, Headliner Files' cynical investigator, horned into the puzzle and invited Eve Archer to the office. Eve wielded the deadliest poison pen in the gossip column business. She came to the office—with an ice-pick in her lovely back.



Hackett suddenly cornered a strange girl who had followed them from the murder scene. The girl laughingly mocked Hackett: "Okay, you've got me—what comes next?" . . . The complete story will be told in Frederick C. Davis' mystery novel—"Open the Morgue, Richard."—in December DIME DETECTIVE.

MY MISSION

Silently, relentlessly, Jan Dalquist stalked his human quarry to a dim New Orleans cafe — where he must play for one last time his grim role of judge, jury . . . and executioner.

ON THE way to the hotel he sat in the back of the taxi, a broad, sullen-looking man, searching deep inside of himself for the sense of satisfaction that should be his. There was nothing there but weariness—a dejection compounded of the solid year of search. From the beginning he had known he would win, one day. The perennial cliché of the ever-narrowing world drifted through his mind, and he smiled tightly. No, there is no haven in this world for a man who is hunted.

Once upon a time there had been hiding places. The Foreign Legion, the lonely cattle camps along the Amazon, the fields north of Kimberley. But this is a day of fingerprints, forms, visas, permits, regulations—statistical control of population. “And what is your reason for desiring entrance to this country, Monsieur?” “How long do you intend to stay, Sahib?” “How do you intend to support yourself, Señor?”

Of course, there is always the secret landing by night from a small boat. But then the multitudinous wheels of bureaucracy grind out the little pink and green forms—work permits, income taxes, census—and it is as though your coming and your forced departure and your name and your secret were written across the sky for all to see.

Even so, it is easier to hide from a government than it is to hide from a man.

Jan Dalquist, riding placidly up Canal Street in the back seat of the taxi, recognized this fact. Particularly if the hunter is provided with adequate funds. The hunter doesn't have to be clever. Jan Dalquist knew his own faults. He wasn't clever. He was dogged, painstaking, stubborn, silent and grim. Not clever. Not clever at all.

But he was an excellent hunter of men.

The huge net of the justice that the

Democracies dropped over France and Germany after the war was a net of compromise. The diameter of the mesh had to be small enough to entrap the major and intermediate beasts who walked like men. But it could not be so small that it would sein in millions who, by burdening the mechanism of justice, would make fair trial impossible. As a consequence, thousands of vicious little men had slipped through the meshes and scattered across the world.

Jan Dalquist had been after one of these men for a year.

He was not employed by any government. He was paid by a small group of French industrialists: men who had been beaten to the earth by the German occupation, men who had not known how to compromise, men who thirsted for revenge in the calm, unemotional manner of a banker collecting a debt. They paid for the hunting of other Frenchmen. They were well satisfied with Jan Dalquist. They paid well for the service of a reliable assassin.

Jan Dalquist was after a Jean Charlebois. The facts were very simple. At the time of the Allied invasion, a large band of Maquis were wiped out by German troops. A betrayal was suspected. Only three of the Maquis escaped. Later, after the town was captured, German records indicated that the betrayal had been engineered by one Jean Charlebois, one of the three who had escaped. The son of one of the industrialists who financed Dalquist had been killed in the raid. Thus the assignment to find and kill Charlebois.

The industrialists had little patience with the slow machinery of government. So Jan Dalquist, who had lived in France before the war, and who had gone back during the war as an operative—air dropped—was

By **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

IS MURDER

"Mademoiselle, this is most regrettable, but this man—"



contacted and hired as a trustworthy killer.

Had they asked him a bit earlier, or a bit later, he would have refused—for he recognized that he was a man with a profound distaste for taking the tools of justice in his own hands, for acting as judge, jury and executioner. But the offer was made while Dalquist was still in an army hospital where a clever surgeon was attempting to make the ragged flesh and shattered bones of his hands resemble fingers, trying to cover the bone-deep burns on the soles of his feet

with skin grafts from the insides of his thighs.

The memory of the basement room in Gestapo Headquarters was too vivid. And so Dalquist had said yes. And having once agreed, it was not in a man to back out until the job had been completed.

They gave him three names. Dalquist had found the first traitor in Brazil after nine months of search. He still awakened in the middle of the night, seeing again the death of the first. He remembered the man's hand most of all. It had happened in a field outside of Belem. Long after the man had appeared dead, the hand scrabbled at the white dust.

He had found the second one in Montreal after another seven months. The ice was thin on the river. Almost transparent. After he had shoved the body down through the hole he had stamped through the ice, he saw it being borne away by the current, turning lazily so that once the misty face was turned toward him, the eye sockets dark under the film of ice.

And he often dreamed of this, too.

The taxi arrived at the hotel and he registered and followed the boy up to his room. He tipped the boy, locked the door and stood for a long time at the window, his mutilated hands shoved deep inside his side pockets, staring down fourteen stories at the busy New Orleans streets. A square, quiet man with a grave face which held a look of suffering. He looked across the gilded channel of Canal Street, looked into the narrow streets of the French Quarter. Jean Charlebois might yet be there. If so, it was the end of the third search, the end of the mission. But he wouldn't permit himself to think of what he would do once Charlebois had been found and punished. Such thoughts would dilute resolve.

He unlocked his bag, took out the small black notebook. He sat on the edge of the bed and examined, with little interest, the record of the search for Charlebois. The man had escaped the consequence of his treachery for two and a half years. There was very little writing on the sheet.

Jean Charlebois left France on foot, crossing into Spain. He remained in Barcelona for three months, perfecting his Spanish and obtaining a passport as a Spanish citizen. He took the name of Ramon Francisco. With a Portuguese visa, he went to Lisbon. He remained there four months, and booked illegal passage on a Portuguese freighter, debarking in Guatemala. He dropped out of sight, reappearing in Mexico City. During the time he was out of sight he assumed the name, Pierre Duval. Crossed the Mexican Border into Texas illegally.

Was unable to locate him until I intercepted a letter he wrote to a Mexican girl in Mexico City. Letter stated that he was

working as waiter in a cafe called the Ancient Door on Burgundy Street in French Quarter of New Orleans. Have arrived in New Orleans twenty-four days after the letter was written. Believe that he is still in the city.

Jan Dalquist slapped the book shut and put it back in the suitcase.

He sat, studying his hands, rubbing the numb tips of his fingers together, looking at the places where there should have been fingernails. There was no sense of accomplishment in him. Only fear. And not of Charlebois. It was an odd fear. It was as though, three years before, in a basement room in Gestapo Headquarters, he had ceased to exist. He had become a machine, dedicated to the wishes of a small group of bitter men.

This was the last case. After it was over, he would have to find himself again. There would always be men who would pay him to hunt other men. But that wasn't the answer. He knew that the two and a half years of constant search, of sudden violence, had deadened him, soured him. No, that wasn't the answer. He began to think of himself working with moist earth and growing things, with placid acres on which the sun beat and the rains fell. He could almost smell the rich loam.

AFTER his shower, he strapped on the shoulder holster, checked the clip on the thirty-two automatic and snapped it into place. It made no visible bulge under the dull gray suit. He sighed heavily, and left the hotel, walking toward Burgundy Street. As he walked, he carried in his mind the accurate picture of Jean Charlebois.

Five foot nine. One hundred and thirty-five pounds. Dark, thinning hair. Sallow complexion. Heavy eyebrows. Gold cap on right eye tooth. Nervous, agile, quick. High voice. Neat and clean. A chaser of women. Likes jewelry. May have small mustache. Weak eyes, but unlikely to wear glasses.

The late sun was gone and the lights were beginning to click on. Jan Dalquist walked through the dusk, feeling at each step the little bite of pain at the soles of his feet—the pain that would be with him until he died. And, in his heart, he carried another type of pain—the pain of an intelligent and civilized man, a man of intuitive delicacy, who has been thrown up against the most brutal and animal aspects of war; who, hav-

ing discovered that the battle must be fought on the brute level, has made the tools of violence his own, has learned to use them with incredible efficiency, mostly because they are foreign to his essential nature.

He walked, and his mind was like a closed fist; the muscles tensed, the kinetic force poised, the entire organism aimed at the careful destruction of Jean Charlebois.

It had to be a delicate destruction. You cannot shoot a man down in the street and walk away. The circumstance must be right. It must be planned like a successful civil murder. Not like military justice.

The trapper baits and sets his trap, and then backs off, removing sign and scent of his passage. He stands for a moment and tries to look at his trap with the eyes of the animal which he wishes to catch. What are the possibilities of escape?

In that way, Jan Dalquist looked at the Ancient Door. It was in a building set flush with the sidewalk, with buildings tight against it on either side. Two rooms opened onto the street. One was a small bar, dim, unclean; with rough wood walls, old flags and swords on the wall. The other room was a dining room with a small raised platform at the far end. Between the bar and the dining room was a big, ornate iron gate with a sign on it which said, *Meals served in the Court*. He noticed, then, an open door in the back wall of the bar.

He ordered a drink at the bar, picked it up and walked casually back. There was a small court there, open to the sky, with an asthmatic fountain bubbling in the center of it. A few tables were covered with soiled, checked clothes. Another sign said, *Dance by Candlelight Under the Stars*.

There were only two doors leading from the court, the door through the bar and one into the kitchen. Except for one old man who sat at the bar, staring moodily down into his drink, Dalquist was the only customer. Through the open grillwork of the iron gate, he saw the entrance to a stairway that went up to the rooms overhead. That would bear investigation.

He selected a position at the bar which gave him the widest view of the dining room and sipped his drink patiently. Jan Dalquist had a great deal of patience. As he waited, he went over the several plans which he had devised to accomplish the

destruction of Jean Charlebois, alias Ramon Francesco, alias Pierre Duval, ex-Maquis, ex-employee of the Gestapo, ex-Frenchman, ex-human.

Two noisy couples had a drink at the bar, and then went into the dining room. Jan Dalquist watched carefully without giving the impression of watching. He relaxed internally when their order was taken by a doughy man who could not conceivably be Charlebois.

A pretty girl, her hair a close-fitting cap of blonde curls, walked into the bar from the street and sat two stools from Dalquist. She had a rather wide face, with something secretive and sensitive about the mouth. He glanced at her hands and liked their square, competent look. It suddenly occurred to him that a couple would be far less likely to arouse the Charlebois' suspicions than a single man.

He watched her carefully, saw her look at her own image in the rounded, polished surface of a silver decanter that stood, out of place, on the back bar. He saw the little wrinkle of laughter as she saw her distorted image.

"Not very flattering, is it?" he said quietly.

She turned toward him quickly, startled by the way his words had spoken her thoughts. He saw the flicker of analysis, the debate with self whether to ignore the comment. He knew that his grave, impassive face would weigh in his favor, that she would not rule against him because of his appearance.

She didn't. She smiled and said: "Keep a woman away from anything in which she can see her face."

"Men are just as vain, you know. Before you came in, I was staring at that thing and imagining what it would be like to go through life with the face I saw in there. It made me feel happy about the face I have. That is a pleasure seldom experienced."

She cocked her head to one side and inspected him gravely, a glint of humor in her eyes. "Why seldom? You've got a very good face. Solid and dependable looking. Nice eyes."

He bowed and said: "Thank you, Friend. And what else do you see about me?"

She pursed her lips for a moment and then said: "Let me see. About thirty-six."

Scandinavian ancestry. By the way you speak, you've been well educated. Your suit is well cut. There's something sad about your face. As though you've had a great deal of trouble. I'd guess that you're some sort of professional man. Maybe an engineer."

He laughed. "You're observant. However, I'm thirty-two. And I've had an average share of trouble. I have a small job to complete and then I'll be unemployed. How did you learn to use your eyes so well?"

"I'm down here trying to paint. Let me see your hands. I can tell a great deal from hands."

"I'd rather not."

"What do you mean?"

"They're not pleasant. They were injured a few years ago."

He saw the quick compassion. He said: "I'd very much appreciate it if you'd have dinner with me. That is, if you haven't other plans. . . ."

Her smile became wooden. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that—"

"I know. You're not accustomed to meeting men in bars and being taken to dinner. But I'm perfectly harmless and I'm a bit lonely. I have no ulterior motives whatsoever. Please don't disappoint me."

She looked down at her cocktail for long seconds and then smiled over at him. "Okay. I'm Jerry Ellis."

"How do you do, Jerry. Jan Dalquist. Now I'll have to give you a second chance to refuse. I told you that my hands aren't pretty. They're insensitive to the extent that I can't wear gloves over them while I eat. For that reason, I haven't had dinner with a woman in a long time." He put his right hand, fingers spread, on the top of the bar. He looked closely at her face, saw her eyes flick down and then back to his eyes, saw the minute tightening of her lips.

She said: "Sit over here, Jan." He moved over and sat on the intervening stool. She put her warm fingers on the back of his hand and said: "I'd be delighted to have dinner with you. And you're a very silly man. Very silly."

SOMETHING about the way she said it made him want to throw his money on the bar and walk out. No ulterior mo-

tive! She was far too trusting to be dragged into what might turn out to be a rather nasty mess. She seemed to be a very nice person indeed.

She said: "Charles, the bartender, is going to be quite astonished. I drop in here several times a week, and at least once each week he has to tell some ardent gentleman that I prefer not to be annoyed. I brush the others off myself. He's going to look at you and wonder why I have dinner with you."

Jan grinned and said: "Being a bartender, he can see that I'm a harmless type. Besides, I played on your sympathies." As he spoke, he saw a man in the white coat of a waiter walk through the dining room. Some small gear clicked in his mind. Jean Charlebois.

The hunter raises one hand and cautiously spreads the brush that impedes his view. The cold blue barrel of the rifle points toward the clearing. The buck stands, nostrils quivering, head turning slowly in all directions. The hunter cradles his cheek against the smooth stock. He takes a deep breath and lets half of it out. His right hand tightens slowly, the trigger pressing against the pad of his right index finger. The sight bead is centered on a spot just behind the flat bone of the right shoulder of the buck. The right hand tightens . . .

"What on earth were you looking at then?" Jerry asked. "You looked quite frightening for a minute. Like a man looking at old ghosts."

He glanced quickly at her, annoyed that he should have changed expression on seeing Charlebois. It was important to distract her attention.

He said: "That transparent? I was wondering about you. You seem like a person it would be easy to hurt. Obviously then, you have been. You could never grow to be as wise as you are without having been hurt. I was wondering what sort of person would do that to you."

Emotionally, she withdrew. She was a girl, sitting beside him, sipping a cocktail. Physically she was there. But her mind had gone back into the past, and the look of sensitivity about her mouth twisted into something scornful and not fitting to her.

She said: "You sound like you wanted to know. It's all a bit dull. I may tell you some time, and watch you trying not to

yawn. Maybe there's no one on this earth who is the least bit interested except me. And I'm only interested now because the net result of being hurt is that I'm down here alone, trying to do work I'm not suited for, trying to think of what I should do next—trying to make a plan for my life that'll make sense. I don't make sense to myself these days." She turned toward him and grinned. "Do all the people you meet start weeping on your shoulder?"

For a moment he dropped the pretense. He said: "Maybe we're both at some sort of crossroads. I'm doing work I'm not suited for, and I don't know why I continue. It'll soon be over and I have no plans."

They were both silent for a few moments. He said suddenly: "Before this turns into a wake, we better have another drink."

So they talked of New Orleans, of the tourist-consciousness of the French Quarter, of the proper Vermont for Martinis—discovered a mutual liking for frog's legs, hot weather, Mozart and Duke Ellington. They were gay, and surprisingly young, and some of the ghosts left his eyes and the basement room took another backward step into the past.

But while they were talking, Charlebois crossed beyond the grillwork door a dozen times, and the man's habitual way of walking, the angle of his head, the slope of his shoulders were all indexed, recorded—filed in a compartment of Jan's mind which was as still and cold as a starlit night on the steppes. And he discovered which set of tables were served by Jean Charlebois.

He offered her another drink and she said: "Just one more. That'll finish me. Then you can lead me into a table."

"The blind leading the blind, Jerry."

The Ancient Door had filled up, and it was difficult for Jan Dalquist to estimate the proper interval which would give him assurance of getting one of Charlebois' tables. He managed it. The headwaiter held the door open with a flourish, and Dalquist followed Jerry Ellis into the dining room, unobtrusively guiding her over to a table served by Charlebois.

When Charlebois came with the menus, Dalquist glanced up at him and said casually, in clipped Parisian: "I assume that you speak French?"

"Yes, Monsieur," Charlebois said. "Monsieur speaks very well."

Dalquist glanced at Jerry Ellis, ascertaining from her puzzled expression that she didn't speak the language. He said rapidly: "It is very crowded in here, and the young lady has no French. Have you not a quiet place where we might eat alone? With you to serve us?"

"One moment, Monsieur." Charlebois hurried off.

Jan turned to Jerry and said: "I'm sorry, but I just happened to think of it when the waiter came to the table. I asked him if there was a place where we could dine alone. I always feel conspicuous when the tables are so close and people can see my hands. I forgot that you might consider such a suggestion a little bold."

"Don't be silly," she said quickly. "I'd love it. I hate being nudged by the elbows of the people at the next table."

Charlebois was back in a few moments. He nodded to Dalquist and said: "One of the private rooms has not been reserved, Monsieur. And I can serve you if you wish. Please follow me."

THEY followed him through the curtains and up the narrow stairway to the second floor. With a flourish, he opened the door to a small room. It overlooked the courtyard. The moon—newly risen—shone through the open French doors and silvered a table for two set just inside the room. An ornate balcony overhung the court. When they were both in the room, Charlebois shut the door, hurried over to the table and lighted the two tall white candles. He held the chair for Jerry and leered at Jan in a most respectful manner.

Jan said: "May I order for you?"

"Please do."

Charlebois departed with the order, and as soon as he had shut the door silently behind him, Jerry began to laugh. She said: "Look at this den of wickedness! I had no idea they had these rooms up here. Moonlight. Candlelight. Huge divan. Draperies. It looks like a set I've seen in about six movies. My husband, if I had a husband, breaks in while we're drinking a toast in champagne to the evening. I scream and you leap off the balcony. Or you shoot him. Or I shoot him. Or you shoot the waiter by mistake and I jump off the balcony. Why is it that there is so much less drama in real life?"

Dalquist was acutely conscious of the weight of the gun in the shoulder holster. He said: "As a matter of fact, I did order champagne. Now accuse me of having delusions of drama."

"I accuse you of being a man who never did a dramatic thing in his life, Jan. That's why I like you. I'm desperately tired of dramatic people."

Due to Charlebois' downstairs responsibilities, the service was slow, but neither of them minded it. The candles flickered in the warm, fresh breeze. They talked of her painting, and she told him her only talent was good draughtsmanship, that she couldn't translate her emotions onto the canvas. At best, she could become only an adequate illustrator.

Jan told her of his life in pre-war Paris, of the great automotive plant in which he had been a very junior engineer. How, somehow, the war, the destruction of men and machines through the application of very expert and very deadly mechanical engineering techniques, had soured him on his chosen profession.

When she asked him what he was doing, he said: "I'm an investigator for French capitalists who wish to build up foreign investments. I'm down here bloodhounding a deal for them. When it's over, I'll be through."

"Then what?"

He shrugged. "Probably become a bloodhound for somebody else. I don't know. I daydream a bit now and then. Always seem to picture myself as some sort of farmer. Green stuff growing all around me. Silly idea. Never tried to grow anything in my life."

"I'm a farm gal," she said. "Take me along with you to pick out the land, and I'll give you a short course."

She said it lightly, but their eyes met as she said it and something passed between the two of them—something almost frightening in its momentary intensity.

At that instant, Charlebois knocked on the door and entered on command.

Dalquist said rapidly, in French: "Bring us some brandy. Good brandy. And I suspect that the lady will leave me for a few moments. When she does, I wish to speak with you privately."

"Oui, Monsieur." He brought back a tray with two glasses and a dusty, unopened

bottle. He showed Dalquist the label, opened the bottle and poured the two glasses.

Jerry said: "Would you excuse me, please?"

Charlebois held the door for her and then came back into the room. He stood by the table and said: "Monsieur?"

Dalquist noticed the man staring at his hands. He moved them below the table level. "You have been very helpful. What is your name?"

"Pierre Duval, Monsieur."

"The young lady and I are very pleased. You impress me as being a man of tact and intelligence." Charlebois made a small, self-effacing gesture. "I am unacquainted in New Orleans, Duval, and I desire to visit many interesting places with the young lady. You are doubtless well acquainted with the French Quarter. The young lady is a new acquaintance. You understand how such things are." Dalquist chuckled in a man to man fashion. Charlebois laughed dutifully.

Dalquist continued: "At what time are you off duty here?"

"In two hours, Monsieur. Eleven thirty. Rather late, possibly."

"If I were to come for you at that time, Duval, would you consent to guide us to some interesting places?" As Charlebois hesitated, Dalquist added: "I will pay you well."

"If Monsieur will come to the top of these stairs, to the first room on the left in the outside hallway any time after eleven thirty, I will be ready." At that moment a sudden gust of wind blew out one of the candles. Charlebois hastened around the table to relight it. He stumbled on the rug and had to place his hand against Dalquist's chest to keep from falling upon him. He backed off and apologized profusely. There was something in his eyes that vaguely alarmed Dalquist. He relighted the candle as Jerry Ellis came back into the room.

They lingered a half hour over the brandy, and at last Jan paid the check, leaving a liberal tip for Charlebois. They walked down the stairs and out onto the street, with Dalquist fighting against the spell of the night, the warmth of her laughter, the faint, clean scent of her hair. And that odd look in Charlebois' eyes troubled him.

They went to three different places, listening to the music, the poor, present-day ghost of the New Orleans jazz heritage. Dalquist arranged it so that they entered the third place a little after eleven. He also made certain that it was only a few hundred feet from the Ancient Door.

They sat, side by side, on a low bench along one wall of a large room. With practised stealth, he unclasped her purse and dropped his silver lighter into it, forcing it down into a corner. At twenty-five after eleven he began to slap at his pockets and look worried.

Jerry said: "What's the matter, Jan?"

"My lighter. Seems to be gone. I bet you I left it at that last place. If I go back right now, I may stand a chance of getting it back. You don't mind waiting for me do you—it's only two blocks. If it isn't there, I'll try the first place. Just sit tight and order me a drink."

The hunter acquires the habit of melting into the terrain, of blending himself with the brush and the movement of his passage is as unnoticeable as the stirring of a light breeze. His every step is sure, his movements deft. He is gone before you become conscious of his presence.

So it was with Dalquist. One couple sat in a far corner of the dining room of the Ancient Door. No waiter was about. He crossed the floor in his dull gray suit, with his noiseless tread. They didn't look up. He went up the stairs and knocked at the first door on the left of the passageway.

"Duval?" he called.

"Come in, Monsieur."

DALQUIST walked into the room. Charlebois stood on the far side of the room. It was a small room, obviously used as a dressing room by the help. A row of hooks held wrinkled uniforms. Dalquist's automatic was equipped with what is called a one-shot silencer, a small cartridge of metal containing compressed sponge rubber. It was screwed onto the threaded end of the barrel. Such a device is only effective for the first shot, muting to about the decibel rating of a loud cough.

With the sixth sense of the hunter, Dalquist, as his hand flashed up toward the shoulder, felt the presence of someone close behind him. He tried to dodge and turn, but as his fingertips touched the rough

grip of the automatic, a stunning blow hit him just under the ear, dropping him heavily to his hands and knees. He shook his head and tried to fight away as he felt a hand slipping under his coat, snatching away the automatic. In a fog of semi-consciousness, he cursed himself for not entering with the weapon in his hand.

He was kicked heavily in the side and he fell over onto the floor, gasping for breath. The room swam around him as he sat up, narrowing his eyes to hasten focus. The door was kicked shut. A stranger, a bandy-legged man with a pot belly, small eyes and cropped black hair stood grinning down at Dalquist, covering him with his own weapon.

Charlebois stood slightly behind him, also smiling, a slim knife in his right hand. He held it in the traditional knife-fighter's manner, the end of the handle against the heel of his hand, his thumb resting lightly on the cutting edge.

Charlebois said: "Crawl slowly over to that chair, Monsieur, and sit. Cross your arms tightly and keep them crossed. René, lock the door."

Dalquist did as he was told. He had learned, in the most difficult conceivable manner, that it is best not to speak when at a disadvantage.

After Dalquist was in the chair and René had locked the door, Charlebois said: "René, this is the cow I spoke about. An ex-member of the Gestapo. A man who betrayed hundreds of the brave patriots of France. It is up to us to kill him in the name of France."

René's stupid face twisted with hate. He said thickly: "My brother was one of those betrayed by such a man!"

Dalquist weighed the chances. He said quickly: "René, you are listening to one who is a traitor himself. Look at my hands. Would the Gestapo torture one of their own? Would any group other than the Gestapo do such a thing?"

He extended his hands, ignoring the hoarse exclamation of Charlebois. As René stared at the mutilated fingers, Dalquist said quickly: "And the man behind you is an infamous one named Jean Charlebois who betrayed the Maquis. I was hired by the patriots of France to track him down."

As René, confused, turned toward Charlebois, the traitor said: "Do not be-

lieve this pig, René! He is lying—”

“I want to know why this man you call a member of the Gestapo should come here for you, Duval,” René said heavily.

Dalquist felt his heart leap as he read the indecision in René’s face. The small eyes looked swiftly toward Dalquist’s hands and then into Dalquist’s eyes.

There was a sudden loud banging at the door. Charlebois hissed: “Shoot him quickly, fool!”

Wheeling ponderously, René said: “Maybe it is you that I should—”

With a grunting curse, Jean Charlebois took a quick step toward René and drove the ready knife into the man’s body. René staggered with the force of the blow and the gun hand sagged. As he tried to lift the gun, Charlebois chopped down with the edge of his hand on René’s wrist, snatching up the gun as it fell to the floor.

René did not fall. He hugged his belly and moaned hoarsely. His eyes were shut with the pain in his body. The flat metal handle of the knife glinted, protruding from between his hands. Dalquist sank back into the chair under the threat of the muzzle of his own gun, pointed at him once more.

With another curse, Charlebois snatched the handle of the knife and yanked it out of René’s middle. René’s life seemed to flow out with the blood that made a widening splotch on his clothes. He dropped to his knees, chin on chest, and then went over onto his face with a damp noise in his throat that sickened Dalquist.

The pounding at the door continued. Charlebois called out, in accented English: “One moment, please.” The pounding ceased.

Charlebois said quickly: “Monsieur, you are of a stupidity most amazing. True, you were clever to find me, but before I left Mexico City, I told Pepita that she should unseal each letter from me with great care. I told her that she would find, stuck under the flap, a short single bit of my hair. If it were missing, she should tell me by telegraph immediately. It was missing on the last letter. The letter had been unsealed and read. Thus I knew someone was coming for me.

“I have used great care. You are the first one to have paid any attention to me. I saw your hands, Monsieur. I am familiar with the work of the Gestapo. I stumbled

against you, Monsieur, and felt the bulk of your gun under my palm. You asked me to go out into the night with you, Monsieur.

“It is indeed regrettable that you plunged a knife into René. He is indeed dead. I will open the door now, and your gun will be in this pocket. Do not speak.”

Charlebois held the knife delicately and rubbed the thin metal handle against the side of his trousers, careful not to spot himself with the blood that colored the blade. He stepped closer to Dalquist and flicked a few drops of blood from the wet blade. They splattered on the dull gray fabric of Dalquist’s suit.

He stepped to the door, unlocked it and swung it open. Jerry Ellis walked hesitantly in, her eyes wide, her underlip caught behind her teeth. Charlebois took a quick look into the hall and shut the door again.

He bowed to Jerry and said: “Mademoiselle, this is most regrettable, but this man—who was here with you earlier tonight—appears to be quite mad. That knife on the floor. With it he . . .” Charlebois waved a nervous hand toward the body of René.

Dalquist knew he could quickly protest his innocence to Jerry, and Charlebois would not dare use the gun. He needed Dalquist, alive, on whom he could pin the suspicions of the police so as to provide him sufficient time to get back across the border into Mexico before Dalquist could make his credentials known. It was a clever and daring plan. But some perverse instinct in Dalquist made him keep silent. He stared woodenly at Jerry, saw her features pale, saw her take a step backward away from the silent body.

Charlebois said quickly: “Mademoiselle, I have a gun in my pocket and I shall watch this murderer. Will you please go downstairs and phone the police.”

She looked at Jan Dalquist, hurt and questioning in her eyes. He stared at her without expression. Charlebois opened the door and Dalquist heard the quick tapping of her feet as she went down the stairs.

Dalquist said: “You won’t get away with this, Jean Charlebois.” But even as he said it, he knew the scheme would work—that by the time he could divert the attention of the police away from himself, Charlebois would be out of reach. He felt ill as he

thought of the additional weary months of search that would be necessary.

He said: "And even if this does work long enough for you to get away, Charlebois, I will soon be after you again." It was not said with defiance. It was said with a tired resignation. It expressed the soul-sickness of him, the cumulative exhaustion of killing and seeing death, the internal, pervading nausea that had been with him for two and a half years.

Charlebois said: "You forget, Monsieur. I know you now. I know your face. You will never kill me. Even if you find me, it is you who will die. In this game, once the hunter is known, the advantage is with the hunted. I will seek a place where you cannot approach me without my knowledge. And there I will kill you."

THERE was a quiet confidence in the ring of his words. To Dalquist, it was like a sentence of death. Somehow, he knew that it would end in precisely that way. For he was too weary with the game to continue much longer. He would walk blindly into a death that would be but a continuation of his present, purposeless existence.

Charlebois chuckled. He said: "I did not believe that the young lady was in league with you. Had her reactions been different, I would have killed the both of you and escaped immediately. In a way you are lucky. But it will be more pleasant to deal with you at some future time in circumstances that are more to my liking."

"You are an egocentric animal, Jean Charlebois."

"Possibly, Monsieur, but of an effectiveness truly surprising."

Dalquist heard the heavy steps on the stairs and tensed himself to spring as Charlebois glanced toward the door. But the slim man looked back too quickly.

They walked in the door, with Jerry Ellis following them, two lean uniformed men. One crossed over and knelt by René's body. He stood up and shrugged.

The other said: "While we wait for Homicide, suppose you give me a quick reading." He stepped over to Charlebois and held out his hand. Charlebois laid the automatic carefully in the outstretched hand.

"Sir, the dead man is my employer and the manager of the Ancient Door, René

Despard. That man in the chair came in here earlier in the evening and we made arrangements for me to be his guide starting at eleven-thirty. He was with that young lady who called you. At eleven-thirty, René and I were in this room. That gentleman came in, quite drunk, and began to call up both foul names. René tried to quiet him. The gentleman pulled out that gun I just gave you and threatened us.

"I circled him and struck him behind the ear. You will find the mark. He fell and dropped the gun. René took out that knife you see on the floor. As I picked up the gun, the gentleman jumped up and rushed at René, striking him violently on the arm. René dropped the knife. The man picked it up and drove it into René Despard.

"The violence of his act seemed to sober him. I threatened him with the gun and he sat in that chair where he now is. You can see the marks of blood on his trousers. The woman came and knocked at the door. I admitted her and told her to call the police. Truly, it seems to me the act of a madman." His voice broke. "René was—was my friend. A harmless man and a good man."

The first policeman said: "Made him drop the knife, picked it up and killed him with it." He glanced at Dalquist.

Dalquist said: "This is a fabric of lies. That man killed René. I saw him."

Charlebois grunted contemptuously. "Kill a man who was my friend and my employer? Any other employee will testify as to our great friendship."

The policeman turned to Dalquist and said: "Mister, you just keep your mouth shut. We're damn tired of people getting crazy drunk in this town."

Dalquist knew that it would be that way. Charlebois was too convincing, too sincere in his expressions of bewilderment and sorrow. He avoided the pitfalls of retelling his story, of showing too much emotion or giving too much detail.

Dalquist was surprised to see, out of the corner of his eye, that Jerry was moving closer to his chair. The room was very silent. One policeman leaned against the door frame and picked his teeth with a fragment of match stick. Charlebois stared numbly at the floor. Dalquist pleaded with the Fates for a man of perception among those they were awaiting.

They all started when Jerry said loudly:

"You say that the dead man dropped the knife and Mr. Dalquist picked it up off the floor?"

The policeman by the door said: "Stay out of this, Lady. We'll ask any questions that need to be asked."

She fumbled with her purse, and her very thin cigarette case dropped to the floor. It landed by Dalquist's feet. Instinctively he bent over for it.

As he fumbled at it, he heard Jerry say loudly: "You're fools to listen to that waiter! Look at this man! Do you believe he could pick a knife that thin off the floor when he can't even pick up my cigarette case which is twice as thick as the knife? Look at his hands!"

It was true. With the numb ends of his manufactured fingers, with the absence of fingernails, Jan Dalquist could only fumble at the case. He couldn't get a grasp on it. The policeman by the door stepped over. Dalquist straightened up and held out his hands. The policeman's mouth twisted as he looked at them.

There was a flash of movement and the other policeman yelled: "Hey! Stop, you!" Charlebois had melted out of the room. Dalquist heard his feet pounding along the corridor. It was obvious that it had been Charlebois' only possible move. Once Jerry had cast sufficient doubt on Charlebois' story so as to make it essential to hold him, he couldn't risk staying.

Dalquist said: "Stay in this room!" as he ran out into the corridor. He realized that Charlebois hadn't wanted to take the risk of running into the men who would soon be coming up the stairs. He would duck in somewhere.

A gun boomed in the corridor. The policeman disappeared into the small room where they had had dinner. Dalquist followed them. He found them leaning out from the balcony, looking up. One said: "Went up the face of the building on those vines. The leaves are shaking. . . . There he is. Wing him, Joe!"

The shot cracked more flatly in the open air. The policeman said: "Got him. Look out!"

They ducked back away from the railing as a screaming figure fell down through the night. It struck the iron balcony railing, and as it clanged like a bell in a minor key, the scream stopped abruptly. There was

a noise in the court a second later. A noise that might be made by a soaked rag slammed down onto a basement floor. A woman in the court screamed. A man cursed softly and fluently. The policeman who had fired the shot said, "Al, I feel kinda sick."

She was waiting in the shadow of the building when he walked out of Police Headquarters with orders to return and sign statements at ten the following morning.

He glanced at his watch as he walked up to her. Three fifteen in the morning.

She said: "Mister, where were we when we were so rudely interrupted? I know a place where you can buy a short girl a small beer."

She began to walk and he fell in step beside her, grinning. Somehow a weight had been lifted off his heart.

He asked: "Why did you follow me?"

She said: "Lipstick is a fine thing. Just as you left I looked in my purse for mine and found your lighter. At first I thought I had picked it up by accident. Then I realized that you must have put it there for a reason. I hurried after you, not certain of what to do. I saw you turn in here. You weren't in the bar or in the dining room. I tried upstairs and heard some sort of thumping behind that first door. I listened and couldn't hear you. Maybe the brandy got me. After a while I started to kick the door. You know the rest."

"I suppose you've got a million questions to ask me?"

"Have I asked you any?"

"Not a one."

"Jan, two people have to have some sort of a code. Let's make ours a code of no questions. When either of us want the other to know something, we'll tell it without waiting for questions. Okay?"

She put her hand on his arm, stopped him. She held her hand out. "Shake on it, Mister."

He took her hand quickly. Her clasp was firm and warm.

"No questions?" she asked.

"No questions," he said, smiling down at her.

"And no regrets?"

"No regrets, Jerry," he said.

"Mister, right there is where you buy me that beer."

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

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

Faculty Frame

Dear Sir:

Earlier in my long career as a public school teacher I was asked to take a position on a certain faculty. I was told that I might have my choice of two positions. One paid more than the other and I chose that position.

All went well for a month. When my warrant came in, it was for the lower salary.

I went to the principal with my complaint. After I had told him how I understood it, he said:

"You are right, but I'll never admit it."

I refused for three months to accept the smaller salary. Then the chairman of the county board told my husband, that it would be better if I would accept that and they would see what could be done about it.

I accepted it, expecting my salary to be raised to what I had been promised, but I had to keep on accepting it until the end of the term.

Later I found out that they figured the high cost of running the school; and after the amount for the year had been deposited with the banker (who was chairman of the county board), they employed teachers at the lowest possible salary and kept the difference for a local school fund.

Mrs. Lucy Ethel Link
Okeechobee, Fla.

Dog-Catching Deluxe

Dear Sir:

I would like to tell you about a man picked up recently by the police. His racket was an old one and probably known to a lot of victims.

The idea of his game was simple. He would get in his car and drive out to a pretty well-to-do section of town. He would cruise around out there until he would spot a couple of dogs. When he did, he would stop the car and get out, first making sure no one was watching him. He would then go over to the dog with something tempting and coax him to the car.

When he had himself one or two dogs, he would go home and wait. As he figured, the next night or so he would read the description of one or both of the dogs in the paper and also a reward for their return. He then would hurry to the address and explain how he found the dog wandering through the streets and, being a lover of dogs, took him in and fed him.

The owners would be so taken in by his line that they would offer him the reward. He would refuse at first, saying he just couldn't, but would

accept it finally "to pay for the food that he gave the dog."

Each night he would try a different section. If no reward appeared for the dog in four days, he would then let him go.

After he was picked up, it was learned that he would average a hundred dollars a week on these rewards. His one mistake was trying the same section of town too many times.

Sincerely yours,
F. M.
Springfield, Mass.

A Bill in the Till . . .

Dear Sir:

Two fellows went into a partnership to work a little racket of their own. It went like this:

Dinner time in any small-town restaurant finds the place pretty busy. First, one of the men would go in, and about ten minutes later his partner would follow. The latter would sit next to his accomplice. After giving his order to the waitress, he would take out a ten-dollar bill and lay it on the counter. The waitress, of course, wouldn't take the money until she had at least served the order.

Just before the meal was brought in, this man would switch the big bill for a one, which was folded so it value wasn't visible. There was an eighty-twenty chance that the waitress had noticed the big bill on the counter and being busy, would take the one-dollar bill and ring it up thinking it was a ten.

If she did come back with change for only a one, the man would say: "I'm sorry, Ma'am, but that was a ten I gave you."

The girl, of course, would look in the one-dollar compartment in the till, and not finding a ten-dollar bill, would say: "I'm sorry, but there's no ten in the one compartment."

The man would then turn to his accomplice and say: "Did you see the bill I had lying on the counter?" and his accomplice would back him up that it was a ten.

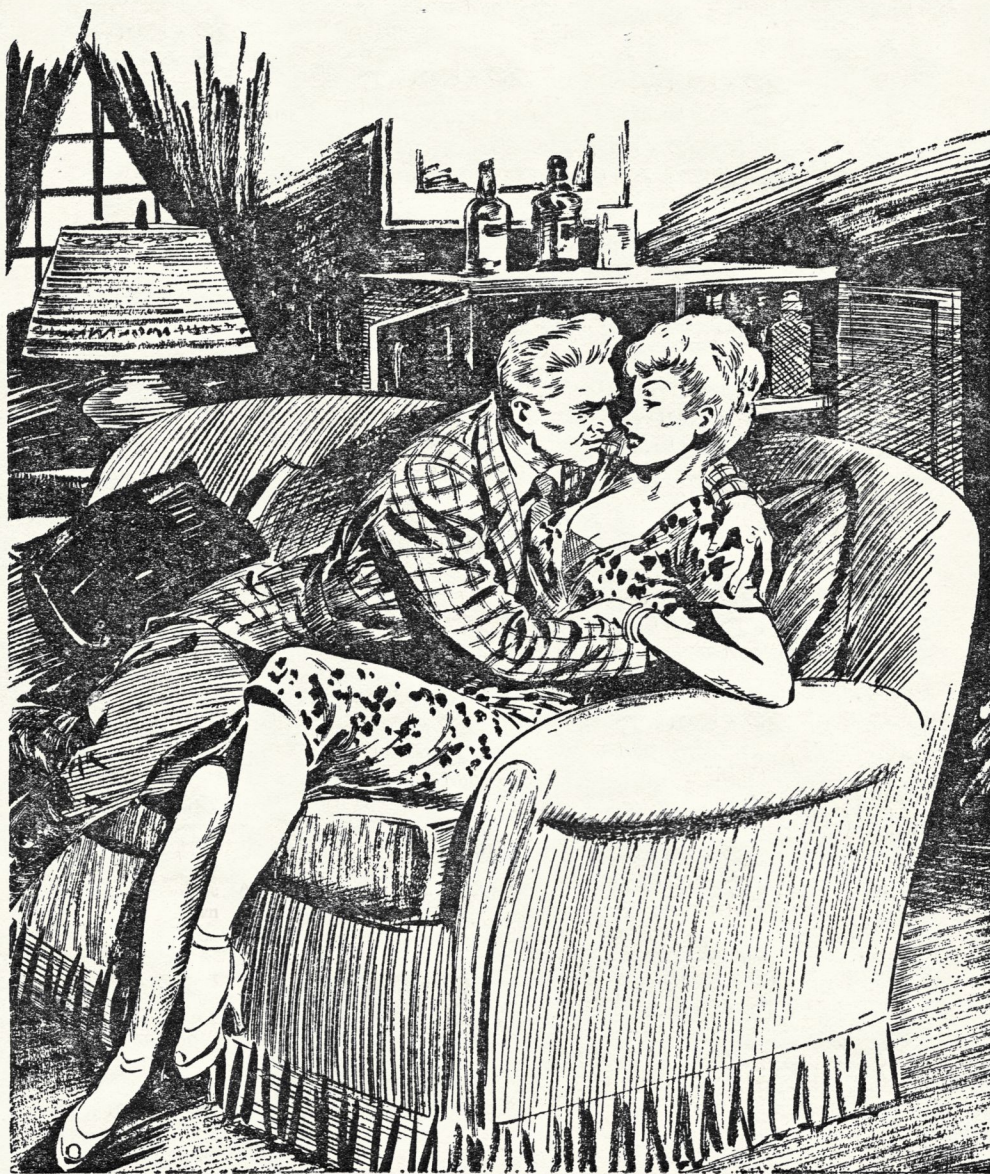
Rather than cause a lot of disturbance, the manager would give the man the change to the big bill.

Traveling from town to town and hitting three of four restaurants a day proved very profitable to these boys.

Yours truly,
Arthur F. Now
Antigo, Wis.

KILLERS PREFER

Relative-tormenting D'Arcy had a gripe against the world — which became Mike Donlan's personal, private, and penniless headache.

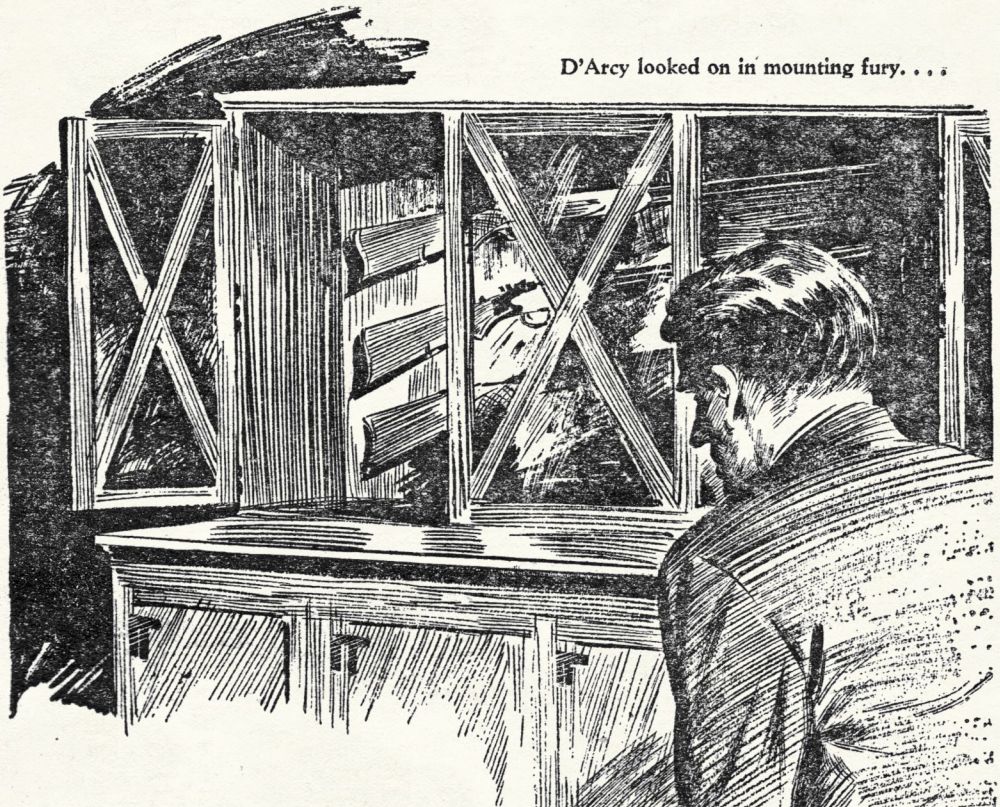


BLONDES

Stirring Detective-Murder Novelette

By JOHN WHITING

D'Arcy looked on in mounting fury. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Slumming With Murder

MIKE DONLAN replaced the telephone in its cradle on his desk and frowned thoughtfully at his wife. He rubbed the bridge of his short, lopsided nose with his thumb.

"No Waikiki Beach this afternoon, Kid," he told her. "That was Adams. He's out at the D'Arcy place in Nuuanu Valley. Somebody blasted Donald D'Arcy with a shotgun, and Moki and all his cops are swarming like bees. Moki's been giving a Major Maples, one of the neighbors, a bad time. Adams suggested that I come out."

Jane Donlan opened her handbag. She extracted a mirror and inspected her face. Tucking a lock of sun-bleached hair into place, she replaced the mirror; then studied her slim, tanned legs with apparent absorption.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" she asked. "Let's go out and look the D'Arcys over."

"Not on your life," Mike stated, circling his desk and ignoring his wife's appealing glance. "This is murder, Honey. I'll put you in a taxi, and—"

"—and promptly forget about me for about twenty-four hours while you and Adams play cops and robbers around the D'Arcy homestead," Jane finished for him. "Nothing doing, Brother. I'm going along."

Mike was still waging a losing battle as he turned his station wagon into the block-long drive into the D'Arcy estate. He parked behind a black police sedan near an old-fashioned porte-cochere.

Fifty years before, the D'Arcy home was one of the show places of Honolulu. The original plan was that of a Louisiana plantation house, but additions and repairs had left its present style definitely in a class by itself.

A Portugese policeman in the olive-drab uniform of the Honolulu Police greeted Donlan, eyed Jane appreciatively, and opened the door for them, jerking his head towards the left of the entrance hall. Ceiling-high sliding doors, one of them ajar, opened into a large living room.

"There's Adams," Jane said, waving to him.

The crime reporter of the Honolulu *Telegraph* came to meet them. He winked at Jane, took their arms, and led them out of earshot of the policeman at the door of the living room. "They got every cop in town out here," Adams complained.

"What's up?" Mike asked, studying Adams' lean, cynical face.

"That's a good question," the reporter replied in a stage whisper. "Moki's in the library with the body. He's talked to a few of 'em, but he isn't satisfied. He's going to have another session as soon as Doc Partain finishes scowling at the body."

"It couldn't have been an accident?" Mike queried.

"Let's not be naive," Adams interrupted.

"It's murder. D'Arcy's got a hole in his chest you could roll an orange through. The shotgun was a good five paces from where he fell, and he didn't do much traveling around with that hole in him."

Jane shuddered, and Mike patted her arm. "You should have gone home and darned sox," he told her; then moved to a point from which he could see into the living room.

Three men and two women were scattered about the large room. Except for the couple on one of two davenports flanking a set of French windows, each was completely absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Are those the candidates?"

Adams nodded. "All present except Regina Wister, D'Arcy's sister-in-law. She's lying down in her room. They're all family—except the pair on the davenport. The stocky guy with the salt-and-pepper hair is Major Roger Maples, your client. Miss Wister accused him, then Ann Pyun, the gal sitting beside him, of polishing off Donald. The Major's motive would be the gal; Ann Pyun's would be the 'no, no, a thousand times no' theme."

The reporter caught Maples' eyes and beckoned to him to join them in the hall. He nodded, said a few words to the slender woman beside him, then crossed to them with a quick, soldierly stride.

As Adams introduced them, Mike looked him over.

MAJOR ROGER MAPLES had professional soldier in every line of his stocky body. He was in his early forties, Donlan judged, discounting the graying of his hair. He was dressed in a fancy shooting coat, riding breeches, and short lace boots.

"I'm certainly glad you could come out, Donlan," Maples said, shaking the private detective's hand and bowing to Jane. "The police seem determined to involve me in this affair. You see, D'Arcy and I had a few words shortly before he was killed. In fact, I punched him in the eye."

"As he told Mike," Adams said with a grimace. "Then Miss Wister threw a little more coal on the fire by saying she overheard them quarreling."

"She did, all right," Major Maples agreed. "After I hit him, I stepped out of one of the French windows into the garden,

and I damn near stepped on her—eaves-dropping.”

“How long before the shot was this?” Donlan asked. “If she saw you leave before the shooting, it looks to me like you have a pretty good out.”

“Five or ten minutes,” Maples said, blinking his eyes rapidly. “The trouble is that the house was open, and everyone was wandering around. I could have walked around the house, entered by the front door or the French windows in the living room or the study, and returned to the library. As a matter of fact, I did walk around the house and into the study through the window, but I stayed there.”

“Alone?”

Maples nodded. He didn't look worried. He was satisfied, apparently, to leave that to Donlan. Looking over his shoulder into the living room, he caught the eyes of Ann Pyun. He smiled reassuringly at her.

“What's your idea about this business?” Donlan asked.

The Major shook his head. “I wouldn't care to accuse anyone,” he said, blinking his eyes again, “and I wouldn't care to guess. I'm not particularly interested in turning up D'Arcy's murderer. I think he should be given a vote of thanks. All I want you to do is to see that Ann and I are protected. Anything else?”

“Not right now,” Mike said.

He watched Major Maples return to the davenport, then he looked inquiringly at the police reporter of the Honolulu *Telegraph*. “What's the setup, Adams?” he asked. Adams was a walking *Who's Who in Hawaii*.

Adams' eyes followed Donlan's. “Ann Pyun, the slick chick with the blonde hair wound around her head, was Donald's secretary. She's a widow—and kept well occupied, with the major on the inside track. But she isn't doing so well with the female of the species. Just before Miss Wister hit the smelling salts, she accused the lovely secretary of trying to get the old man to cut her into his will.

“The bald character with Buffalo Bill's mustache is William K. D'Arcy, the old man's half-brother. Donald let him be second vice-president of a few of his companies, but he kept his eye on him. Will isn't too sharp.

The gal with the sulky expression and the

legs is Will's daughter Thessalie, and the boy is his son Phillip.

“That's the whole menage, except for Miss Wister,” Adams added. “She's got a room on this floor. Everybody else is upstairs. What do you say we drop in and see how she's making out? You better come along, Jane, and hold the smelling salts.”

“Is this Miss Wister the housekeeper?” Donlan asked, following Adams and Jane down the hall.

“Something of the sort,” Adams agreed. “As I said before, she's a sister-in-law too. Have you heard of the D'Arcy scandal, some thirty-five years back?”

“That was considerably before our time,” Jane laughed. “Give us the lowdown.”

“Donald D'Arcy was a young buck in them days and considered the catch of the town. He fell for Regina Wister, who came here from the mainland, and they became engaged. Regina had a younger sister named Diana traveling with her, for beautiful young ladies didn't bat around by themselves in those days. According to the bar-room version of the story, Donald was playing around with Diana on the side, and Regina got wise. She held a shotgun on Donald, and he married Diana after one of the shortest engagements on record. Diana died during childbirth—and you can imagine the whispering that caused . . . thirty-five years ago.”

“And Regina Wister has been here ever since?”

“Right,” Adams said. “That isn't the end of the story. I dug this out of the morgue before I came out this afternoon. Shortly after the funeral, Regina took a nose dive down the stairs and broke her leg. She was all packed to go at the time.

“Then Donald made the headlines again, less than a month after his wife's death, by marrying a local belle named Esther Phelps. Ester lasted about six months, when she cashed in her chips. I guess Donald got discouraged, for he never married again. I gathered from hints in the newspapers that there was something funny about Esther's death, but Donald had enough influence to put the lid on an investigation.”

“Maybe she's a Lucretia Borgia,” Jane suggested eagerly.

“Let's take a look at the lady before we sell her down the river,” Mike grinned. “Would Moki mind?”

"When did that start making a difference?" Adams retorted, leading the way down the hall. He rapped quietly on the door next to the library.

REGINA WISTER looked very much like everybody's maiden aunt. She was a slight woman of about sixty, with abundant white hair, a small, unlined face, and observant blue eyes. She wore a pince-nez, and was propped up by half-a-dozen pillows in a huge canopied bed set between a pair of French windows.

As Adams explained the reason for their call, Donlan looked about the room. Nothing in it was newer than the turn of the century. It was overly furnished, with each piece protected and brightened by a cretonne cover.

Miss Wister studied Mike and Jane minutely and boldly.

"The police are stupid," she said, looking sharply at Mike as if she thought he might take issue with her remark. A quiet, shrewd smile played about her lips. "I haven't told them everything."

Jane sat down on the edge of the bed and took the little woman's hand. She patted it reassuringly and smiled at her. "But you want to tell us, don't you, Dear?"

Miss Wister nodded. Her voice was guarded, but eager. "I was the first to arrive at the scene of the crime," she said, looking up at Mike again. "That's what you say, isn't it?"

Donlan nodded, thinking that she was surprisingly cool. She must have been a beauty as a young woman. Even at sixty, she looked like an ingenue playing the part of an old woman and feeling a little ridiculous in the role.

"I was weeding the dahlias when I heard the shot. It came from the library, where Phillip had left his shotgun when he returned from hunting. I thought someone might have stumbled over it. Boys are so careless. I hurried through the French window and found Donald lying on the Navajo rug in front of his desk, bleeding. I screamed. Just as I was going to run for help, his lips moved, and he groaned."

"Did he say anything?" Donlan asked.

"I didn't tell the police."

"But you want to tell us," Jane coaxed.

Miss Wister nodded. "I was going to anyway," she said. "Donald was such a

handsome man when Diana and I came to Honolulu. William looked almost exactly like him, but he lacked Donald's fire—"

"Just what did Donald say?" Donlan interrupted.

"He said, 'Will,'" Miss Wister said, annoyed at having her reminiscences cut short.

"Will?"

She nodded her head. "William has been carrying on with Ann. Donald didn't like that. Thessalie will try to make you believe that Donald was interested in Ann, too."

"Ann gets around," Adams commented.

"Did Donald call his brother 'Will'?" Mike asked.

"They all do, even the children," Miss Wister replied, her tone indicating her disapproval of this modern practice.

"Did anyone enter or leave the library by the French windows while you were working in the garden?"

"Just Major Maples and Phillip," Miss Wister replied. "They quarreled with Donald this afternoon, after they returned from hunting, about Ann. Major Maples struck Donald. He looked very angry when he left the library. If it isn't the major chasing that woman, it is William or Phillip. But you mustn't blame Phillip. He's just a boy. It's that woman. She's been after Donald to change his will."

"Did he give her any encouragement?" Adams asked.

Miss Wister's lips started to tremble. She covered her mouth with both hands and shut her eyes.

Jane located the smelling salts, then scowled at Adams and her husband. "You two clear out," she ordered. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

In the corridor, Adams looked inquiringly at Mike. "Little man, what now?" he asked.

Mike looked down at the reporter from a superior height of some six inches and grinned. "Let's go see how Moki is making out."

"You carry the ball this time," Adams suggested. "I'll go put the evil eye on the suspects in the living room."

Mike found Lieutenant Moki Kau, the huge Hawaiian head of the Honolulu detective bureau, finishing the examination of the room in which Donald had died. As Donlan hesitated in the doorway, Moki looked around momentarily, then continued speak-

ing in a low voice to the fingerprint expert. The expert's small assistant was gathering together their equipment in a black, oblong suitcase. Two attendants from the coroner's office were transferring D'Arcy's white-sheeted body from the floor to a litter.

Mike raised the sheet, then wished he hadn't. D'Arcy was not looking his best. A bloodstained hand clutched his soiled shirt just below the point at which the shotgun pellets had entered—as if he had attempted to staunch the flow of blood. The right eye was swollen and turning black, undoubtedly from the blow delivered by Major Maples. Like his brother Will's, his bald head was circled by a fringe of white hair.

"Seen enough?" one of the attendants asked, shuffling his feet impatiently.

Mike dropped the sheet, aware that he had been staring at D'Arcy's face as if he were trying to memorize it, feature for feature.

"What you doin' here, Donlan?" Moki asked gruffly.

"Slumming," Donlan answered. "Major Maples didn't like the way things were shaping up. What's the idea of concentrating on him? He seems to tell a straight story."

"Cool head, Donlan," Moki said placidly. "Maybe he tell a straight story, maybe he don't. If you want to look around, I guess it is all right with me. I have trouble with these people, I think. They look at big kanaka policeman like they say to themselves, 'More better you stick to the beach-boys who get drunk and beat each other up.'"

"The hoi polloi," Donlan agreed. "What now, Moki?"

Moki led the way into the hall. He halted at the door to the living room, indicating the suspects with a broad sweep of his large hand.

"Now we figure out which one of these *haoles* make work for me," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Word of the Dead

AS DONLAN took a seat beside Adams, the reporter whispered to him, "They're all watching each other on the sly. Except for young D'Arcy, they're all as frosty as a cold beer."

Major Maples sat with Ann Pyun on one of the davenport. He fondled something in the pocket of his shooting jacket with one hand, while the other rested lightly upon Ann Pyun's arm. Phil D'Arcy, a boy of about twenty, handsome in a round-faced way, watched the Major's casual caress with a scowl.

Thessalie D'Arcy eyed her brother with a slight smile. She was about twenty-three, Donlan figured, a tall, dark girl with a mouth a little wide for beauty, cynical gray eyes, and long legs, which she displayed rather carelessly. William D'Arcy aimlessly traced with one hand the floral design in the nap of his velour chair.

Moki started his questions about the events leading up to the shooting. Each one answered his questions in as few words as possible, obviously on the defensive. The police stenographer sat in a straight chair near the door, balancing a notebook on one knee. He chewed gum and took down the rapid questions and answers without a change of expression.

Major Maples, Moki brought out, had been retired from the army for disability. He had a tic in one eye and a nervous habit of hitching his heavy shoulders back, Donlan noticed. He lived in a cottage on the corner of the next property. His sole interest in life, according to his story, was in enjoying himself. He played golf every day, went hunting occasionally, saw as much of Ann Pyun as she would allow, and as little of Donald D'Arcy as possible.

The major, Will D'Arcy and his son Phil had gone pheasant hunting that morning on a sugar plantation the D'Arcys owned. Upon returning to the house, they split up. Phillip, carrying his own and his father's gun, had gone into the library, to the gun cabinet, for cleaning material for the weapons. Will went to the kitchen first, then to the second floor to change his clothes.

Major Maples had gone directly to the study. Phil had appeared there a few minutes later, saying that the gun cabinet was locked and that he had left the guns in the library. Phil then wandered off in search of Regina, found her in the side garden, and got her keys. Back at the study, he mixed a drink for the major and himself. When Thessalie and Ann joined them some minutes later, he mixed one for them.

Soon Major Maples and Ann withdrew to one corner. This, Thessalie said, had annoyed Phil, and he glared at the major and left by one of the French windows. Thessalie herself picked up a golf club and went to the backyard to practice putting, noticing as she passed the garage that Phil was sulking there.

Shortly thereafter, Donald D'Arcy interrupted the love scene between the major and Ann. D'Arcy had looked on in mounting fury—then he commanded the major to report to the library, which the major had done. There, D'Arcy had become insulting, and Maples punched him in the eye and left angrily through the window.

Meanwhile, Will D'Arcy, after changing his clothes, had returned to the study, found it empty, and wandered around rather aimlessly for a few minutes. Remembering a business problem which he wanted to discuss with Donald, he had started for the library. The library door was slightly ajar, and Will heard the major and his brother quarreling, so he went into the living room. The noise in the library subsided after a while, although Maples didn't emerge from the room, the door of which Will watched from the living room.

Then Phil had rapped on the library door and entered. Again Will heard angry voices from the library and saw his son leaving the house the same way he had entered. Will was afraid to approach Donald after the two other stormy scenes, and he was still sitting in the living room when the shot was fired.

When Moki pressed Phil for details of his quarrel with his uncle, the boy took refuge in a sullen silence, saying it was a personal matter. Thessalie spoke for him, saying that Phil's personal problems were always the same—money.

"Uncle Donald expected every one of his dollars to work overtime for him and produce plenty of offsprings," Thessalie said. "He had all of us on allowances, my father included. About eight months ago, Phil rebelled and hit out on his own, but he didn't have enough backbone to stay away. When he returned, dear Uncle Donald cut his allowance in half, and Phil's been after him ever since to restore it. Recently Phil became more insistent because he had designs on Ann."

Phil, Maples and Ann all glared at her. She smoothly added, "It's no use looking

at me as if I just crawled out from under a slimy rock. It's no secret, you know."

Thessalie crossed her shapely legs and smiled into her brother's sullen face. "A dime will get you a dollar that that's what Phil and Uncle Donald were bandying words over," she said complacently.

"Is that right?" Moki asked.

Phil said nothing. He fixed his eyes on the center of the carpet, looking like a small boy who was going to punish everyone by being virtuously misunderstood.

THESSALIE threw a lock of hair out of these eyes and stood up. "We all hated Uncle Donald—except possibly Regina. He's been pushing her around so long that it doesn't matter any more. The rest of you can wear a hair shirt and look swollen-eyed if you want, but you know you're a bunch of hypocrites.

"Uncle Donald was a nasty little man with money, and any one of us, given the necessary courage, might have killed him. I've had the impulse at least once a day since I was ten years old. He saw to it that we had just enough to get along on—and was an absolute tyrant. Now, Will, you can go into the usual song and dance about his being a wealthy eccentric."

Will cleared his throat and gazed reproachfully at his daughter. His ears reddened. "Really, Thessalie, that was hardly necessary," he said weakly. "One shouldn't speak ill of the dead."

"So I've heard, but nobody ever gave me a good reason why not."

"Waste time," Moki said. He looked across the room to Mike Donlan. "You want to ask any questions, Donlan?"

Mike pushed his two hundred pounds of well knit body from the divan and rose lightly to his feet. He looked about at the friendly group for a moment.

"Let's see if I have everything straight," he said. "When the shot was fired, Will D'Arcy was sitting in this room watching the library door. Miss Wister was weeding dahlias just outside of the library windows. Major Maples was by himself in the study, at the rear of the house. Thessalie was practicing golf shots in the backyard. Everyone seems to have located himself—except Ann Pyun and Phil."

"No one asked me," Ann answered, with her nose a little higher in the air than Mike

liked. She arched her throat and gazed blandly at the private detective. "I was in my room on the second floor."

"How about you Phil?"

Phil wet his lips and glanced about the room quickly. As he hesitated, the silence became so acute that the scuff of approaching footsteps on the carpet of the hall was clearly audible. Miss Wister entered the room. Jane Donlan was just behind her.

"Well, Phil?" Donlan insisted.

Phil looked about wildly. His eyes fastened upon the small, erect figure of Miss Wister, who went quickly to his side and put her arm about his shoulders.

Despite the slightness of her body and her evident fatigue, there was a warning sharpness in her eyes behind her pince-nez. Nor did an informal housecoat detract from her dignity. With Donald D'Arcy's death, Miss Wister was assuming command of the household, and it was obvious that Phil's position was enhanced under the new order.

"Do I understand, young man, that you are accusing Phillip of murdering his uncle?" she demanded, tightening her arm about the boy's shoulder.

Donlan sighed. "No, Miss Wister," he said patiently, "I'm merely trying to find out where he was when the shot was fired."

Phil dropped his head into his hands. "Stop pestering me, will you?" he cried hysterically. "All right, I killed him. Is that what you all want to hear?"

Everyone in the room was on his feet, staring at Phillip D'Arcy. The stolid police stenographer suspended his gum chewing and stared at the young man with open mouth.

"Cool head," Moki's deep voice boomed over the excited chatter. "Everybody sit down and keep quiet."

Everyone except Miss Wister followed Moki's instructions. The little woman seemed unimpressed by the big Hawaiian's fierce stare. "It's ridiculous," she stated flatly, standing behind Phil's chair and returning Moki's hot glance. "Phillip left the room minutes before the shot was fired."

Moki signaled to the police stenographer. "You want to make a confession that you murder Donald D'Arcy?" he asked.

"Don't be a fool, Phil," Thessalie warned him.

Phil raised his head from his hands. The wildness had left his face, but he looked

beaten. "I killed him—I mean, he wouldn't be dead if I hadn't left the shotguns in the library and—"

"He blames himself for leaving the weapons where the murderer could use them," Miss Wister finished for him. "If you knew Phillip, you'd know that he couldn't murder his uncle, nor do I see how he can blame himself in any way. Just put it out of your mind, Dear."

"Here we go again," Adams said in disgust. He put his memo book back in his pocket and lit a cigarette. "I knew it was too easy."

MAJOR MAPLES' trick eye started to blink nervously. He cleared his throat and stood up. "I beg your pardon, Lieutenant," he said, looking towards Moki, who was holding one hand against his forehead in bewilderment, "but may I say a word?"

"Yeah, yeah, everybody talk-talk," Moki answered.

"We used my car for the hunting trip," Maples explained, reaching into one of the pockets in his shooting jacket and extracting a handful of shotgun shells. "When we loaded up to come back, Phil and Will went in to say good-by to the plantation manager, and I unloaded their guns while they were gone. I didn't care to have loaded guns in my car.

"I meant to tell them about it and return their shells, but it slipped by mind until now. So, unless Will reloaded his gun while we were returning to town, I don't see how the twelve-gauge could have been loaded when Phil left it in the library."

"Of course I didn't reload it. Why should I?" Will interposed.

"Somebody did," Adams said.

"I don't get this gun business," Donlan said. "How do you know D'Arcy was killed with Will's gun, Major?"

Major Maples smiled. "That's not difficult. He was shot with a twelve-gauge. Phil and I were using twenty-gauges. I may be leading with my chin again, but I'd like to point out that Will went to his room immediately after we reached the house.

"He certainly didn't switch the shotgun shells from his hunting outfit to his other clothes. I don't think he even knew the guns were unloaded—and he didn't know Phil had left them in the library. I was the

only one carrying twelve-gauge shells around. I don't see how Phil, or anyone else, could have shot Donald—unless Donald conveniently opened the gun cabinet and reloaded the gun for his murderer."

"You certainly have a helpful client," Adams commented. "He's putting another knot in a rope collar for himself."

"Are you confessin'?" Moki demanded.

"Lord, no," Maples answered, laughing nervously. "I just want to keep things straight."

"There's something else," Donlan said slowly, looking towards Miss Wister still standing guard over Phil's chair. "Miss Wister told me earlier that before passing away Donald muttered, 'Will.' He could have been accusing his brother Will, I suppose. Or he might have been referring to his last will and testament. Just what *does* his will provide?"

Will D'Arcy flushed, looked accusingly at Miss Wister, then bit at the ends of his mustache. "I cannot swear to it, for I haven't seen it of course. But it is my understanding that Donald made a new will about six months ago leaving his property to Regina, the two children, and me, share and share alike."

Miss Wister emerged from behind Phil's chair and confronted Will. "I don't believe it," she said sharply. "Had he changed his will, he would have told me. The way he felt about keeping the family fortune intact, I doubt very much whether he as much as considered it."

Mike was beginning to understand Moki's confusion. "Just a minute, Miss Wister," he said to her. "Let's take it easy, and one thing at a time. What did this old will you referred to provide?"

Miss Wister pressed her hand to her heart. "I'm sorry. I'm unstrung today," she apologized. "The only will that Donald has ever made, to my knowledge, provided that all of his property should be held in trust by the D'Arcy Savings and Trust Company. The income from it was to be paid in specified monthly sums to the members of the family and to me."

Thessalie broke in. "Dear Uncle Donald, even in death, wanted to keep us on an allowance." She exchanged glances with her father. "However, I think Will is right. Uncle Donald did make a new will about six months ago."

"I don't believe it," Miss Wister stated emphatically.

Major Maples suddenly rose. He cleared his throat and batted his eyes, looking inquiringly at Lieutenant Kau.

"Would I be out of order if I asked to be allowed to go? I haven't been home since early morning, and I'd like to change."

The big Hawaiian detective ran his hand through his grizzled hair and nodded his head. "You want to ask any more questions, Donlan?"

"I'd still like to know where Phil was when the shot was fired," Donlan answered.

Miss Wister bridled. "I'm sure," she said, looking over her shoulder at the boy, "that I saw him out behind the house then."

Phil had recovered considerably, but he was still looking upset and a little dazed. He nodded his head without looking up at Miss Wister. "Yes," he said, "I was somewhere around the back, I guess. I wasn't paying much attention to where I was going, just sort of wandering around."

"Did any of you notice the order in which everyone arrived in the library after the shot was fired?"

Major Maples stopped a low-voiced conversation with Ann to say: "When I arrived, I found Will, Regina, and Phil gathered around the body. The two girls came in a few minutes later."

None of the first three arrivals had noticed the sequence of events. All they had seen was Donald D'Arcy's bleeding body. Donlan threw up his hands in disgust. Lieutenant Kau adjourned the assembly with a terse, "That's all for now," and left the room, with the police stenographer at his heels.

CHAPTER THREE

From Brandy to Brimstone

WITH the ordeal over for the time being, everyone seemed to wilt. Major Maples drew Ann to the French window, said a few words to her, then both stepped outside. Miss Wister's strength deserted her completely, and she left the room on the arms of Thessalie and Jane, Jane calling over her shoulder, "I'll be right back, Mike."

Will D'Arcy left the room deep in thought, his hands clasped behind his back.

Adams muttered something about looking over the scene of the crime, and Mike was left with Phil in the large room.

"Well, Phil," Donlan said, lighting a cigarette and blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, "we seem to be deserted. Who do you think murdered your uncle?"

Phil sprang to his feet, his round face twisted in an angry scowl. "Damn you," he shouted, "can't you leave me in peace for a moment? I don't know anything, I tell you." He went through the doorway at a run. Donlan heard him going up the stairs, two steps at a time. A moment later, a door slammed with a resounding bang.

Mike walked to the French window. He saw the major and Ann strolling about fifty yards from the house. Stepping outside he started towards the garage where Thessalie had said she saw Phil sulking. It appeared to be a converted stable.

As he drew nearer, he caught the pleasantly acrid odor of horses. Apparently the building was still serving a dual purpose. There were half-a-dozen cars in the garage. In spite of Thessalie's indictment of her uncle for his purse-string hold upon the family, he seemed to have kept them well supplied with non-essentials.

The large open tract behind the house was probably the scene of the girl's golf practice, Mike thought. He rounded the back of the house and walked along a gravel drive which fanned out at the kitchen door. A hedge, considerably higher than Donlan's six-feet-three, screened the kitchen door and a small vegetable garden, then continued on an extension of the back wall of the house towards the boundary of the estate.

At the front of the house, near a set of French windows opening into the library, was a dahlia bed. Halting beside it, he turned and glanced back towards the rear. The high hedge effectively cut off a view of the ground to the rear. He scratched his head reflectively, sighed, and stepped through a French window into the library.

Mike halted, and an involuntary exclamation of surprise escaped him. Adams was stretched out on the floor in the same spot where D'Arcy's body had fallen. As Mike knelt beside him, the reporter opened his eyes, groaned, and felt his head. His fingers pushed aside his thin, brown hair and ex-

plored the area just above his right ear with rueful care.

"What happened?" Mike demanded.

Adams pushed himself to a sitting position, blinked, then pulled himself to his feet by grasping the edge of the desk. "Gathering the wages of a snooper," he said. He felt his head again. "The way this bump is rising, he must have hit me with a ton of yeast cakes."

"Who hit you?"

"Somebody slugged me," Adams said, looking around. He walked behind the desk and picked up a desk set with a heavy onyx base. As he straightened up, he groaned. "With this chunk of granite. I was wandering around looking the place over when I heard someone come to the door. I was curious, so I slipped behind one of those curtains."

He pointed to the heavy drapes which were drawn back from the French window, through which Mike had entered the room. "The door opened. I could hear it squeak—as if somebody was opening it carefully and taking a look inside. He crossed the room and came towards me. I thought he'd spotted me and I was just about to step out and hand him a sheepish grin, when I heard a drawer being opened and closed."

Mike's eyes swept over the desk. There was only one drawer. Opening it, he glanced inside. "Who was it?" he asked.

Adams joined him behind the desk. "That's the question that led to the bump on my head," Adams said, grinning wryly. "He must have seen the drape moving, for the next thing I knew I was floating through a planetarium complete with comets and several solar systems."

He picked up a folded paper resting upon a neat pile of letter-size stationery. He unfolded it, then whistled through his teeth. Passing the paper to Mike he said, "That wasn't here when I looked a few minutes ago. It's the new will they were talking about."

Mike scanned the paper rapidly. It was a will on the standard form, dated less than six months before. It bequeathed all of Donald D'Arcy's property, real and personal, to William K. D'Arcy, Thessalie L. D'Arcy, Phillip K. D'Arcy, and Regina Maria Wister, share and share alike. The body of the will contained only one short paragraph. It was signed by Donald D'Arcy

and witnessed by David Suga and Tomiji Ishida.

"I know Dave Suga," Adams said. "He's a practitioner in the district court. Funny D'Arcy would go to him to have a will drawn."

"That isn't all that's funny. It's funny the way it got in the drawer. The guy who slugged you had to put it there. Moki wouldn't have missed it when he searched the room, and—"

Mike stopped talking so abruptly that Adams looked up curiously from a second reading of the document.

DONLAN tapped the will with his index finger. "This is the nicest little motive you could ask for," he said, frowning and biting his lower lip. "It fits in nicely with a couple of other things I've noticed. I think we'd better get Moki back out."

"Strange as it may seem," Adams said, winking slyly, "I got an idea, too. Do you think this will might be a phony?"

"It's possible. What's on your mind?"

Adams folded the will and stuck it in his breast pocket. "I want to have a photostat made for the paper," he explained. "There's a dodge that's as old as the Statute of Wills—and some wise guy thinks of it every once in a while, figuring he's got an original idea. All it requires is a good forger, and he doesn't have to be too good because the scheme is so simple."

Mike nodded. "Could be," he agreed.

"I'll drop by the D'Arcy Bank and have the cashier look at this signature. Then I'll locate Dave Suga and bring him back with me. Do you want me to pick up Moki too?"

Donlan nodded. There was a faraway look in his gray eyes, and his forehead was wrinkled with thought. "Yeah, do that," he said, "and tell him to bring out D'Arcy's keys."

"Keys?" Adams asked. "What have they got to do with it?"

Donlan crossed the room and twisted the handle of the gun cabinet. It was locked. "I want to get in this, for one thing, and I have another idea I want to try," he said, grinning at the reporter's puzzled expression. "I think we have different suspects in mind."

"You wouldn't want to put a three-course dinner on your suspect, would you?"

Adams asked confidently, his thin face twisting in a cynical grin.

"That's a bet."

* * *

Mike Donlan locked the liquor cabinet in the study, then handed the keys to Lieutenant Kau. He winked at the big Hawaiian.

"There," he said. "The trap's baited. All we have to do now is to get the mouse to nibble."

"The rat, you mean," Jane corrected him. "Let's see if I have my part straight. When you say, 'Are you feeling all right, Jane?,' I'm supposed to look peaked. Is that right?"

"Perfect," Mike said, taking her arm. He considered Moki's doubtful face with misgiving. "You understand, Moki, that this has got to go off without a hitch. If he gets suspicious, we're sunk, for there isn't enough evidence to make the charge stick. You need a confession."

The big Hawaiian nodded his grizzled head. He seemed convinced, but unhappy. "Yeah, yeah," he agreed without enthusiasm, "but I don't like this funny business."

"If he was a mug you could take him down to the station and sweat him," Mike said, "but since he isn't, you'd better string along with me."

"Okey-dokey," Moki said. "More better we get this thing started. Sergeant Akiona's got everybody in the library."

There was a silent tenseness in the library. The room was filled with cigarette smoke and the creaking of rattan chairs. And there was a definite cleavage between the family and the visitors. Ann Pyun, Major Roger Maples, Lincoln Adams, and a wiry young man with an olive complexion, large freckles, and prominent teeth, sat facing the family. Standing between the two groups was Sergeant Akiona.

As Donlan entered the room behind Lieutenant Kau and Jane, Akiona scowled at him. It was evident that he didn't like the situation, particularly with Mike Donlan staging it.

"Do you want to tell us what you found out about the will, Adams?" Donlan asked, while Moki found a chair large enough to support his weight.

"I'll let Dave Suga tell you his part first," the reporter said, without rising. "Go ahead, Dave."

The olive-skinned young man rose to his feet, ducked his head at the audience, and displayed his teeth in an embarrassed grin. "I remember very well the day Mr. D'Arcy came to the office to have the will made," he said, haltingly at first, but gaining confidence as he went along. "Mr. Smith was very excited, hoping that Mr. D'Arcy would bring him more of his business. I was reading law in Mr. Smith's office at the time, and he asked me to witness the will. It is the one Mr. Lincoln Adams showed to me a short time ago."

"Did either you or Smith know Donald D'Arcy?" Adams asked.

"Just by reputation."

Will D'Arcy cleared his throat. The top of his bald head flushed with color. "This is preposterous," he said, sputtering.

"Now, Dave, take a look at Will D'Arcy, the man who just spoke. Tell me if he was the one who made that will," Adams said, leaning forward in his chair.

Will D'Arcy jumped to his feet before Suga could reply. "This is the most ridiculous charge I ever heard," he said angrily, his mustache bristling.

"Objection overruled," Adams said calmly. "Sit down, Will, and keep your shirt on. You ain't heard nothin' yet. How about it, Dave?"

Suga shifted his feet. "The gentleman who made the will was clean-shaven," he said. "Without the mustache, it could have been this gentleman, but—but I wouldn't swear to it."

"Thanks, Dave," Adams said, rising slowly to his feet. He walked into the middle of the room, put his hands in his pockets, and bounced on his toes, like a lawyer in the justice court. He looked at Will D'Arcy out of the corner of his eyes. "How long have you had that mustache, Will, about six months?"

"He's always had a mustache," Thessalie said quickly.

"Will shaved off his mustache for about a week six months ago," Ann Pyun injected. She seemed unperturbed by the hostile glances from the D'Arcy side of the room. Major Maples moved his chair a little closer to hers.

"THANKS, Ann," Adams said. Then he winked at Mike Donlan and slapped his stomach. "It doesn't make much

difference anyway. The will is merely a motive for the murder. You see, I took it to Donald's bank. The cashier examined the signature very carefully. He's prepared to testify that it's phony, although he said it was so good that he would have cashed a check with that signature on it, thinking it Donald's.

"Now, Will D'Arcy admits that he was in the living room watching the library door. According to his own story, nobody came out after the shot was fired. Miss Wister was weeding dahlias just outside the library windows. Nobody came out of them following the shot. One of them must have done the dirty work, and I'm putting my money on Will."

As Adams finished speaking, he looked from Lieutenant Kau to Will, as if to say, "There's your case, and there's your murderer." He looked surprised when neither of them moved. But Will D'Arcy appeared to be even more surprised than Adams. His lips parted, tried to frame a retort, then gave up the effort.

Thessalie rose from her chair and went to her father. She sat on the arm of his chair, putting an arm around his short, flushed neck. "It looks to me like it's about time to clear up a few things," she said, throwing a lock of long dark hair aside with a jerk of her head.

"What you say about the will is true. Father did go to the lawyer's office and make it, but it was my idea. I didn't see why we should struggle along on a miserable allowance after Uncle Donald's death. He had a weak heart, you know, and might have popped off at any moment. It wasn't his money anyway. Grandfather made most of it. But that's as far as it goes. Father had no more to do with Uncle Donald's murder than—"

"—any of the rest of you?" Adams filled in. He smiled cynically. "A very touching appeal, Sister, but it won't wash. Somebody killed Uncle Donald, you know. Do you think Miss Wister did it?"

Thessalie looked at Miss Wister. Her face softened. "No," she admitted. "I don't know who did it."

"I'm afraid she's right, Adams," Donlan said.

Adams turned to face this new attack upon his theory. "It's got to be one or the other," he said hotly. "Thessalie didn't

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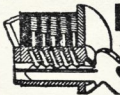
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kill him by remote control from the backyard. Major Maples didn't kill him from the study. Nobody left the room after the shot was fired, according to both Will and Miss Wister, and they covered the only exits. It has to be one of them."

"You're leaving out a couple of things," Donlan suggested. "We know the shot-guns—" He interrupted himself to stare at his wife. "Aren't you feeling well, Jane?"

Jane picked up her cue. During the course of Adams' story she had removed most of the makeup from her face. At her husband's question, her body seemed to melt into the chair. She passed her hand slowly across her forehead.

"I'm going to faint," she murmured.

"Would somebody get some brandy?" Donlan flung back over his shoulder as he stooped over her.

Major Maples left the room hurriedly. The rest of the company gathered about Jane. Miss Wister ordered them back and put her hand upon Jane's forehead. Major Maples came back into the room without the brandy.

"The cabinet is locked," he said.

"Phillip, hurry and get some brandy," Miss Wister ordered.

Phil did hurry. He handed a large brandy glass to Donlan, who held it to his wife's lips. Jane made a rapid recovery and was soon able to take the glass from Mike's hands. He patted her head and went to the middle of the room.

"Please resume your seats," he requested. He addressed Moki, the only person in the room who had kept his seat during the diversion. "Did you find two shotguns in the room after the murder, Moki?"

"One only," Moki said. He pointed to the gun cabinet at the extreme end of the library. "I find three-four more in the closet, but only one in the room."

"Was the cabinet locked or unlocked?"

"Unlocked."

Donlan faced towards the D'Arcy family group. "Didn't I understand, Phil, that when you returned from hunting you came in here to get cleaning material for the guns, that you found the cabinet locked and left the guns here?"

"I could have been mistaken," Phil answered, his round face resuming its sullen expression.

Killers Prefer Blondes

"I THINK you were," Donlan said grimly, "but not about that. What Adams hasn't considered in his ingenious theory is that the shotgun which killed Donald D'Arcy wasn't loaded when Phil left it in the library.

"But Will went to his room and took off his hunting clothes. Assuming that he planned to murder his brother, he didn't know that the gun was unloaded, so he had no reason to bring shells downstairs when he returned. Also, he didn't know Phil had left the guns in the library.

"This wasn't a planned crime. It happened on the spur of the moment. The murderer loaded the twelve-gauge and shot Donald. In order to do that, he had to get shells from the gun cabinet—unless the murderer was Major Maples, who had some in his pocket. Still, it couldn't have been Major Maples because both exits from the library were under observation."

As Donlan paused, a dead silence fell upon the room. From the doorway, Sergeant Akiona cleared his throat.

"I learned early this afternoon that Donald kept everything under lock and key," Mike continued. "Phil probably told the truth when he said that the gun cabinet was locked when he brought the guns into the library. Donald would have noticed that they hadn't been cleaned, and, during the short time he was in the room, he was in no frame of mind to be thinking about putting things away. He spent most of the time he was in the library quarreling with Major Maples and Phil. It's logical to assume that the murderer opened the gun cabinet, and, in order to do so, he had to have keys. However, only Donald and Miss Wister had keys."

There was no comment from anybody. Mike singled out Miss Wister and repeated the observation as a question.

"That is correct," the little woman answered. In the bright eyes behind her pince-nez, Mike read that she was considerably ahead of his story.

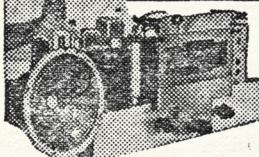
Everyone in the room was watching her, and everyone, with few exceptions, was picturing her confronting Donald D'Arcy with a shotgun in her slender white hands.

Thessalie ran a hand through her hair, disarranging it without a thought for her appearance. She shook her head. "I simply

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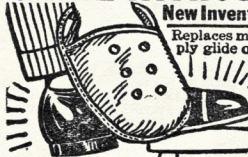
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John Whiting

won't believe it," she said. "You've made a mistake, Mr. Donlan. I think Regina has always loved Uncle Donald, strange as that may seem, and she wouldn't have killed him—under any circumstances."

"She loved several other people too," Donlan said gently, noting the resignation in Miss Wister's face. He was glad that she had given up the struggle. It would make it much easier. "She loves you and your brother. She's brought you up, hasn't she?"

Thessalie nodded, puzzled by the direction of the question.

"However, she didn't kill Donald," Donlan said, "but she has been shielding his murderer. She tried to give him an alibi, but she didn't do it very well."

"You mean somebody came out of the library through the window—after the shot, and she didn't mention it?" Adams asked.

"Either that, or the murderer never left the library," Donlan answered. "Miss Wister told us that Phil had entered the library by the French window. Later, she said that he had been at the rear of the house at the time of the shot. That last is impossible.

"From the garden, where she was working on the dahlias and watching the library, you can't see the rear of the house because of the hedge. It's about seven feet high. Will D'Arcy told us that Phil entered the library by the door and left the same way.

"You can see, therefore, that Phil was in the library twice, not once. He had a key to the gun cabinet, we know, for he got Miss Wister's keys before to open the liquor cabinet. He still has them. He opened the liquor cabinet again this evening to get some brandy for Jane."

Mike paused to stare with odd gentleness at Phil. "Phil made a second trip to the library, entering through the window, to try again to talk his uncle into increasing his allowance. He was interested in Ann, and he felt that his lack of money caused his lack of success with Ann. He opened the gun cabinet to put away the guns, using that as an excuse for coming back. Any hunter will empty a gun before he puts it away, and Phil discovered that the guns were already unloaded.

"He started to argue with his uncle, and Uncle Donald was in an ugly mood. Phil became enraged. There was a gun in his

Killers Prefer Blondes

hand and shells in the open cabinet. He loaded the gun, walked across the room to his uncle, and fired. I guess Miss Wister found him in that position when she came running into the room. And, if Donald D'Arcy said anything before he died, I imagine he said 'Phil', not 'Will'."

There was no need to ask more questions. The answers were written on both Miss Wister's and Phil's faces.

"He even tried to confess this afternoon, but Miss Wister wouldn't let him," Donlan said. He turned towards Jane. "Jane, are you all right?"

Jane's forehead was beaded with perspiration. She brushed her hand across it and looked forlornly at her husband. "I'm going to be sick, Mike," she wailed. "I can't stand brandy on an empty stomach."

THE END

(Continued from page 39)

were all talk and confusion. All that Scott could think about was that Billie had won, after all. This would finish off Lila. And perhaps him, too. Even if he could prove to the police that Billie's getting shot was an accident, that she had pulled the trigger on herself while they were struggling for the gun, it would not help much.

A detective sergeant and several plain-clothesmen clustered around Billie. They were bending over her and they were all very quiet. One of them half turned and said: "Shh!" to the others in the room. Scott heard, faintly, Billie's voice.

He pushed his way through the group of detectives, looked down upon Billie. Blood was ribboning from one side of her mouth, twisting through the powder on her cheeks.



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Robert Turner

Her peculiar blue eyes were open and they turned toward him. In that moment he saw once again, the same tender, longing expression that had visited Billie's face, earlier that evening, upstairs.

Weakly, she whispered: "Make the police listen closely, Scott. I—I've got something to say."

Her features showed strain as she began to speak once more: "Lila Manning didn't kill Kay Grant," she whispered. "Allan Grant is the murderer. Allan and Kay had a terrific fight about an affair he was having with another woman. I saw him hit Lila over the head and frame her for it.

"When Allan discovered that I'd witnessed the frame, he ran away, figuring I would tell on him, I guess, and that the frame he'd created wouldn't be any good. But I—I never said anything. I wanted Lila to run away, too, and leave me a clear field with Scott. I thought that was the best way, the only way for me to get him. But now I—"

Her eyes came open once more and there was a strange shine in them, but she didn't say anything more. She didn't even say good-by. Her mouth and her eyes stayed open and she just stopped breathing.

It was several months later that they found Allan Grant hiding out under an assumed name, out West. On the way back East, he tried to escape but didn't make it. There was never any trial.

Scott and Lila Manning and their baby didn't know about that part for quite awhile afterward. They were up in the mountains where there were no newspapers, no radios and where nobody knew them. They were making up for a lot of lost time.

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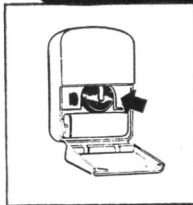
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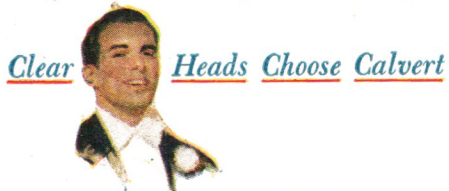
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