

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



JAN.

15¢ DIME DETECTIVE

COMBINED WITH

FICTION



CASE OF THE CARELESS CARESS

by ROBERT MARTIN

— AND —

A DOC PIERCE STORY

by RICHARD DERMODY

CHAMPION · BALLARD
AND OTHERS



For once they actually agree!

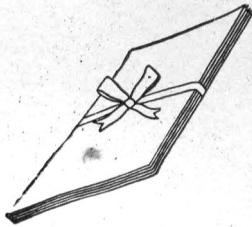
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HE'S FOULED THE LINE AROUND YOUR MOTOR. WE'D BETTER TOW YOU IN

THAT'S OUR PIER

HOW'S MY FISH?

RESTING QUIETLY SHE'S A KNOCKOUT

PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"

WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A MONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE

LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

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15 DIME
DETECTIVE
 MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES
 COMPLETE



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

Vol. 56

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Cover Painted by Norman Saunders.

The February issue will be out January 2nd.

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Private Detective Cash Wale and Sailor Duffy, fugitives from the sizzle-seat, knew that the roadside corpse was a frame on Don Clawson; for they had been with Clawson at the time his father was murdered. But Cash and Sailor, now using phony names, couldn't testify to save Don.



Don's inflammable wife Mona figured she was too good for a poorly paid jerk like Don. . . . When Cash Wale heard her drunkenly plead with her sugar-daddy, town-boss Thrasher, not to send her back to her husband, Cash decided it would be exciting to take a trigger job with Thrasher.



Cash told Yates, Don Clawson's lawyer: "I can't go to Court and alibi Don—but I'll turn up the actual killer for you." Then Yates, not knowing he was talking to the hottest private-eye out of New York, laughed at the thought of Cash playing detective. Cash grabbed Yates' shirt. . . .



The cops got Sailor Duffy—and Cash went on the rampage. At gun-point he made artist Zello talk about the "sigh of Death" he had heard when old Clawson was murdered. . . . The complete story will be told in Peter Paige's novel—"Cash Wale's Brazen Ghost"—in February DIME DETECTIVE . . . published Jan. 2nd.

I got a glimpse of wicked
yellow eyes focused on
my throat. . . .

CASE OF THE CARELESS CARESS

**Dramatic
Detective-Action Novel**

By ROBERT MARTIN

CHAPTER ONE

Frightened Romeo

ROGER GARRIT stumbled into my apartment and threw himself into a chair. His eyes were wild, and his long black hair was looped damply over his white forehead. He was a big, thick man, beginning to get fat, with a pale, handsome face and a strong chin. He was wearing a hundred-dollar gray cashmere jacket and fifty-dollar gray flannel slacks. His white silk shirt was open at the neck, and a bow tie hung open on his chest. Both knees of his slacks were stained a soggy red.

He lit a cigarette with hands that shook and looked at me. "Lee, I'm in a jam."

I glanced at the clock over the mantel.



★ *Private Detective Lee Fiske usually got a bang out of helping fouled-up Casanovas—but not when playboy Roger Garrit kept a love-nest tryst . . . with a cute but chilly corpse.* ★



Twelve minutes of two in the morning. I yawned. "Again?" I asked.

He nodded grimly, and pulled deeply on his cigarette. "This is a bad one, Lee. We've been pretty good friends, and I didn't know who to go to. . . ." His big shoulders shivered a little.

"Is that blood on your pants?" I asked.

He looked down at the knees of his slacks, and he seemed to shrivel inside his clothes.

I yawned again. I was sleepy, and Roger Garrit was always in a jam. He was a big, handsome man, with a nice wife and a fancy job as vice-president of his father-in-law's refrigerator factory—and a roving eye. I knew him well. We had gone to the same public school, dated the same girls, and did all the things that kids do together. He wasn't very bright, but his charm carried him over the rough spots. Almost everyone liked him—except the people who worked for him, and to them I had heard he was an arrogant tyrant.

He had wooed and married Helen Conners, daughter of Jesse L. Conners, the richest man in town, and owner of half a dozen refrigerator plants. I didn't blame Roger for marrying Helen Conners—it's just as easy to fall in love with a rich girl as with a poor one. But there was a time when I had thought of marrying Helen myself. Anyhow, he got her, and he had an air-conditioned office and a five figure income, while I was just a private detective with a hole-in-the-wall office and a part-time secretary. But I was friendly with the Garrits, and I was occasionally invited to their home for dinner, or to one of Roger's elaborate stag parties.

"What's her name?" I asked him.

He crushed out his cigarette and stared dully at the dying smoke. "I—I don't know, Lee."

"How much does she want?"

"It's not that this time. Lee, she's—she's dead."

I stopped yawning and sat up. The clock on the mantel went *bong, bong*, and the room was quiet again.

"Where is she?" I asked then.

"In a hotel room—over in East Grange. Her—her throat is cut. I—Lee. . . ." He fumbled in his pocket for another cigarette and there was terror in his eyes.

"That blood—on your pants," I said.

He straightened his legs out and looked at the damp flannel. "There—there was a lot of blood on the floor. I—I knelt beside her. . . ."

I got up and started to get dressed.

"What are you going to do, Lee?"

"Go over to East Grange. You're going along. We've got maybe a couple of hours before the cops have to be told. You can tell me about it on the way."

"Lee, I can't go back there. I can't look at her again." He clasped his hands and stared at the floor. "This will ruin me. You've got to help. I'll pay you—"

"Dammit," I said. "Maybe this'll cure you. I'll take a look—because of Helen—but you'll get a bill for plenty. I hope you're around to pay it."

Suddenly he laughed, and I turned to stare at him. He was really laughing, and he was running a pocket comb through his long black hair. "I knew I could count on you, Lee."

"For what?" I said. "You're in for a tough time, no matter how you figure it. All I'm going to do is take a look. The cops have a nasty habit of wanting to know about such things."

He stopped laughing. "Lee, do you think that I—?"

"Shut up," I snapped.

I finished dressing, and we went down to the street. Roger Garrit's gray convertible was parked at the curb. He started to get in, but I stopped him.

"Leave it. We'll go in mine."

As we headed out of town in my car, I said: "Give me the story. All of it."

He settled back in the seat beside me and inhaled cigarette smoke. "The same old thing, Lee. A couple of weeks ago I pulled into a hamburger drive-in along the lake on my way home from Cleveland. This girl came out in white shorts and a silk blouse—you know how they dress—and she was cute, really cute, Lee, with a little round shape, and yellow hair, and, well, Helen wasn't looking for me home until the next day, and I made a date with the blonde for after she got through working. I picked her up, and I had a bottle, and we drove around, and, well, we ended up at this hotel in East Grange.

"I saw her once after that, and tonight I picked her up again and we went to the hotel. But she wasn't the same. She acted

worried, and she was quiet. Around one o'clock she said she was hungry and I went out to get some sandwiches, and when I came back, she was—she was dead, on the floor. . . .”

“Anybody see you go in or come out?”

“Just an old pappy on the desk when we registered. He was asleep when I went out, came back, and when I left.”

“What do you know about the girl?”

He shrugged his big shoulders. “Her name was Melissa. That’s all I know. I called her Lissy. She—she was kind of nice. She told me that she was married to a steel worker in Columbus. But he got drunk and beat her up, and she left him.”

“Don’t know her last name?” I asked him. “Or where she lived?”

He shook his head. “She never told me, and we always went to the hotel. . . .”

East Grange was about thirty miles from Toledo, a farmer’s town in the middle of the corn belt. It was going on to three in the morning when I headed down the darkened main street.

“What hotel?” I asked Garrit.

“Keep going. It’s at the end of this street, close to the edge of town. It’s called the Avalon.”

THE AVALON was a two-story brick building flush with the sidewalk, with a neon sign which said: *Rooms, by Day or Week*. I parked down the street a little way and we walked back. We went into the dinky lobby.

There was an old man with pepper-and-salt hair snoring on a tilted chair behind a high desk with mail slots in the wall behind him. His mouth was open, and his head was sagged sideways. I saw that in the place where his left ear should have been there was a shapeless lump of puckered flesh.

I followed Roger Garrit up a stairway to our right. We went down a red-carpeted hall past six doors and Garrit stopped in front of the last one. The number was 219. Garrit unlocked the door. I followed him inside and waited for him to turn on the lights. The room was hot and it smelled of perfume and whiskey, and something else. Fresh blood, maybe, I thought grimly, and I tried to remember how fresh blood smelled.

Roger Garrit closed the door softly be-

hind me. I tried to see in the dark, but all I could make out was the white blurr of a bed and faint rectangles of light leaking in around the drawn blinds of the two windows facing the street. Behind me I heard Garrit flick the light switch. Three weak bulbs in a dirty brass chandelier cast a sickly glow over the room. I saw the girl’s body, then, and I moved forward.

Roger Garrit’s voice said harshly: “Good Lord—she’s moved!”

She lay on the bed, with the sheet pulled up to her chin. All I could see of her was her head and her bare arms and her hands folded demurely on top of the sheet. There was a small bunch of fresh violets in her hands. Her yellow hair was fanned out on the pillow, and her eyes were a clear pale blue, with the pupils slightly off center. The upper half of the sheet, the pillow, and the ends of her hair were soaked with blood. I didn’t touch the sheet—the blood and the angle of her head on the pillow told me all that I needed to know.

I felt Roger Garrit’s breath on the back of my neck. “She was on the floor—when I left her.”

I turned, and he pointed to a wide stain in the carpet across the room. There was a dribble of blood from the stain to the bed.

“You’re sure she was dead—when you left?”

He swallowed and nodded, his eyes avoiding the body on the bed. “Yes, yes, Lee. Her throat was cut, wide open.” There was sweat on his forehead, and his face was gray. “I—I think I’m going to be sick. . . .” He started for a wash bowl fastened against the wall. Halfway there he stopped, changed his course, and moved to a dresser. He picked up a half-full bottle of whiskey and tilted it to his lips. He choked a little, and handed the bottle to me. It was bourbon, and I took a swallow and looked around the room. I spotted a black leather purse lying on a chair near the door.

I moved over to the chair, picked up the purse, and looked inside. The usual woman’s junk and a little heart-shaped gold locket with *Melissa* engraved on one side, and *Tony* on the other. I opened the locket with a thumb nail, and looked at a tiny photo inside. It was of a dark, black-haired man with a broad face and heavy black

brows. I dropped the locket back into the purse and turned back to the bed.

Roger Garrit sat in a chair drinking from the bottle. He didn't look at what lay on the bed. I put my hand to the dead girl's cheek. It was cool, but not cold, and I figured that she had been dead about as long as Garrit had said she had.

"Anything of yours lying around here?"

He lowered the bottle, peered carefully around the room, felt in his pockets and shook his head.

"There'll be fingerprints all over," I told him, "but we can't worry about that now. All you can do is keep your fingers crossed and get the hell out."

He looked at me blankly. "But the body. Can't we—?"

"Look," I said. "Friendship is swell. I love my friends, but I'm not hiding a body for anybody. She stays here—until they find her. If the old guy downstairs knows who you really are, it'll be bad. Did you always come to this hotel with your, ah, girl friends?"

He nodded gloomily.

"Did the guy on the desk ever ask any questions, or get nose?"

"No. I paid in advance, and I gave him a boñus. I always registered as A. J. Holman, from Detroit."

"Did you come straight to my place after you found her on the floor?"

He said, "That's right," and drank some more bourbon.

"All right," I said. "While you were out buying sandwiches, somebody came up here and killed her. And after that, after you left, somebody laid her out like that. Somebody who probably followed you and knew she was here. That makes it bad."

HE WAS getting a little drunk. He waved the bottle. "Old Lee can fix it. Lee Fiske, the celebrated criminal investigator. I'll pay you five thousand, ten thousand—"

"Shut up," I said. "And quit throwing your wife's money around. Your little backstairs romance back-fired, and you come crawling to me with offers of money to get you out. As far as I'm concerned you can damn well face the music. I'm in this deeper now than I like to be, and I'm pulling out—now. You can come along if you want to, or you can stay here with your

unlucky girl friend until the cops come."

"Damn you, Lee," he said. "Since when did you get so pious? You and Helen are two of a kind. You would have made a good husband for her."

"Shut up," I said harshly. I wanted to hit him.

"Don't get sore, Lee," he said. "But this thing, if it gets out, will wash me up with Helen, with J.L.—everybody. It'll—"

"You should have thought of that," I broke in.

"I'm just a guy," he said. "Just a guy who likes to have a little fun. A guy has to cut loose once in a while, or he'll go nuts. Some guys drink, some gamble, some—well, where's the harm? This girl liked me, and I liked her, and I made it worth her while. She had nothing to lose."

"Nothing but her life," I said. I was getting a little weary of Roger Garrit. "Come on, Casanova." I moved to the door. I didn't want to be caught in a room with a dead blonde.

He tilted the bottle high and got unsteadily to his feet.

Somebody pounded on the door.

I looked at Roger Garrit. He began to tremble, and his eyes darted around the room looking for a way out. There wasn't any, except the windows, and they were two stories above the bricks. I jerked my head at the bed, and silently formed words with my lips. "Cover her up."

He got it, jumped across the room and flung a knitted spread over the girl's body. I motioned him towards the door, and I flattened myself against the wall. He opened the door about two inches, and peeked out. There was sweat on his temples.

I heard a thin, high voice say: "I was making my rounds, and I saw your light. Is there anything wrong, Mr. Holman?"

I gave Garrit credit. His voice was steady. "Thanks, Pop. My wife has a little headache, that's all."

"Didn't sound like your voice in there just now, Mr. Holman."

Garrit laughed. "Get that good ear of yours tested, Pop. Good night." He made a move to close the door, but I saw the scuffed toe of a brown shoe protruding into the room.

"As long as you're up, Mr. Holman," the voice in the hall said, "I may as well fix that leaky faucet in there."

Garrit forced a laugh. "Tomorrow, Pop."

The toe of the shoe stayed in the room, and the thin voice complained. "I go off duty at eight, and if I don't fix it now, I'll have to do it tomorrow night."

I could see the sweat running down behind Garrit's ears. He held the door with one hand, and reached into his pant's pocket with the other. His hand came out with a five-dollar bill in it and he shoved it out the door. "Tomorrow, Pop," he said, and he tried to laugh, but his voice was more of a croak than a laugh.

The shoe withdrew slowly. "Well . . . thanks, Mr. Holman. I hope your missus feels better."

Roger Garrit didn't say anything. He just nodded his head and closed the door. He leaned against it, his head down, breathing hard.

"Come on," I said. "Maybe we can make it before he gets back down to the desk." I opened the door cautiously and looked out. The old guy was not in sight, but I heard water running in a room at the end of the hall. I stepped back into the room, found a *Do Not Disturb* sign in the dresser drawer, and hung it on the door's outside knob. Garrit locked the door, and we went down the stairs to the little lobby. He started to toss the key on the desk, but I said, "Keep it," and we hit the street.

We didn't talk as we drove through the cool night back to my place in Toledo. I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw the lights of a car following us from East Grange. The sky was beginning to turn gray, with a faint red tinge on the horizon, although it was still dark in the street, as I pulled up behind Garrit's convertible and shut off the motor.

Garrit was still a little drunk. He said softly: "'Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky in morning, sailors take warning.'"

"Yeah," I said wearily. "Remember that. Go home, shave, take a cold shower, drink a gallon of black coffee, and be at your desk at the usual time. From here out you're on your own."

"My pal," he jeered.

He got out of my car with an angry flourish, stalked to his car, got in, slammed the door, and headed west with a deep-throated roar of tortured gears. I sighed, locked the Ford, and went up to my apartment.

My door was standing open, and there was a light inside. I slowed down and thought it over. Then I walked on in.

CHAPTER TWO

Casanova at Half Mast

HELEN GARRIT sat stiffly in my old leather chair, facing the door. She didn't have a drink in her hand, or a magazine, or a purse, or anything. She was just sitting, with her hands folded quietly in her lap. She had the appearance of a person who has waited a long time, and was prepared to wait longer.

She smiled at me. "Hello, Lee. The night boy let me in."

I tried to act casual, but I could feel a tightening in my throat. "He's a good boy, Helen. He knows who to let in, and who to keep out." I took a long time in taking off my hat and hanging it in a closet. I turned back to her and smiled. "I must have forgotten that we had an early breakfast date this morning."

She was easy to smile at. A rather tall girl, with long brown hair, parted on the side and combed smoothly across her forehead. She had high cheek bones and wide-set gray eyes, a straight nose with sensitive nostrils, and a well-shaped mouth which was neither thin nor full. Her mouth was painted red, but not too red, and there was a little pile of red-stained cigarette stubs in an ash tray on the table beside her.

"There's not much point in parrying, Lee," she said. "Do you know where Roger is?"

I coughed and lit a cigarette. I remembered just in time that his convertible had been sitting down in front for the last two hours. Helen Garrit could hardly have missed it. Pure male instinct prompted me to try and cover up for him.

"We got into a little poker game, Helen. Roger left his car here, and we went up town in mine. I just left him downstairs. He's on his way home."

She shook her head slowly. "Lee, Lee—and I thought you were a friend of mine."

"I am, Helen." I meant it. She was a nice girl—with or without her money. I had kissed her once, years ago, behind the high school at a lawn fete. It hadn't been a very good kiss, from a technical stand-

point, but I had thought about the velvet coolness of her lips for days.

"You don't have to lie for him," she said quietly. "He was supposed to be in Detroit—at the Book-Cadillac. I called for him there, and they said he wasn't registered, hadn't been registered. I called every hotel in Detroit, but I couldn't find him." She hesitated, and looked down at her hands.

"We've been married for seven years. I—I love him, Lee, I guess. But lately—well, I had to find out. I don't want to be the suspicious wife—I'm not the type. But this afternoon I got this in the mail." She reached into her topcoat pocket, took out a small envelope and handed it to me.

IT WAS a cheap envelope, addressed in pencil to Mrs. Roger Garrit at the correct address, and I saw that it was post-marked at East Grange, Ohio, at 3:30 p.m. the day before. I took out a sheet of ruled paper and read the penciled handwriting:

Dear Mrs. Garrit, Your husband is carrying on with Another Woman and my heart bleeds for you. If you desire more detailed information meet me in front of the Zion drug store in East Grange at eleven tomorrow night (May 24) and I will tell All. I will wear a bunch of violets in my coat lapell so you will no me.

A Friend

P.S. Bring One Hundred Dollars in cash. This has been going on for some time.

I handed the letter back to her. "Did you go?"

"Certainly not," she said. "But maybe I should have. I was ashamed of myself for calling Detroit, but I just wanted to hear his voice. After that, when I knew he had lied to me, I went quietly crazy. I couldn't stand it in the house any longer, and so I went out and drove around. When I went past your place, I saw Roger's car. I came up—and here I am."

I made my voice sound hearty. "Well, he's home now, and all your worries are for nothing. That letter is obviously from some screwball."

She stood up and buttoned her coat. "Sure, Lee," she said. "Sure." She moved to the door. "Come out for dinner when you get a chance."

"How about coffee—or a high-ball?"

She smiled faintly. "No, thanks, Lee. Did you win or lose at poker tonight?"

"I lost," I said. "I usually do."

"Unlucky at cards," she said lightly, "lucky in love."

"Sure, Helen."

"Why didn't you ever get married, Lee?"

"You turned me down in our sophomore year. Remember? Nobody else ever suited me."

She laughed softly. "Maybe I *should* stay for that highball."

"I'll put out my Sunday liquor—for you."

She reached out and patted my cheek. "Good night, Lee. And thanks for listening to my troubles." She went out.

I went to bed, but I didn't sleep much. I thought about a blood-soaked sheet and the body of a small blonde girl lying all alone on a bed in a cheap hotel with a bunch of violets in her hands. I thought about Roger Garrit, a woman chaser with a swell wife, and I thought about the note Helen Garrit had received, and I began to sweat. I remembered the lights of the car following us from East Grange, and I remembered the hardness in Helen Garrit's eyes.

I thought about a lot of things, and maybe I slept a little, and then the clock on the mantel bonged six times. I couldn't sleep, and so I got up and dressed and made myself some breakfast. I was on my third cup of black coffee when the telephone rang.

It was Helen Garrit.

"Lee, I'm sorry to bother you so. But Roger isn't home. Had he been drinking much?"

"No. Did you call his office?"

"Yes, but I didn't get an answer."

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "I'll stop at the plant on my way down town, and call you."

"Would you, Lee? I'm really rather worried."

"Sure. Sit tight." I hung up.

I didn't finish my third cup of coffee. I drove out to the plant of the Conners Electric Company. It was brick and glass and steel, and it covered six acres of ground on the south side of the city. At the main entrance, a uniformed guard came out of a white-painted shanty, and I told him I

would like to see Vice-President Garrit.

The guard was a skinny little man with a banana nose and steel-rimmed glasses. "You're about three hours early, Mister," he said. "Come back around nine-thirty—you *might* catch him then."

I teetered on my heels and looked around. There was a lot of green lawn and bright flower beds and shrubbery. A cool breeze was blowing across the city from the lake, and it felt good on my face. I jingled some silver in my pocket and tried to decide what to do next.

The guard said: "His car's back behind, but he ain't. But once in while he leaves it here, and rides home with his daddy-in-law."

I turned quickly. "Then he's inside—in his office."

He shook his head. "Naw. I looked. He ain't no place around." He grinned slyly. "I made it a point to find out—he don't like us guards to smoke on the job."

I leaned against the shanty and looked up at the blue May sky. I saw the high boiler stack, black-tipped, rising from behind the plant, and my gaze idly followed the outline of the roof of the big sprawling building. I saw the silver ball on the tip of a flagpole. There wasn't any flag on the pole, and my eyes followed down it—and they stopped.

Halfway up the tall pole was something which swayed gently in the breeze. I stood up straight and brushed a hand over my eyes. It was still there, very clear against the bright blue sky. The body of a man, with his head tilted forward at an awkward angle; a man dressed in a gray jacket and gray slacks.

I GLANCED at the guard. His mouth was open and he was looking at the flagpole. He gulped and looked at me, his eyes big behind his glasses.

"Yipe!" he said.

He started to run across the gravel to the base of the flagpole. I followed him, but I knew there was no point in hurrying. The guard began to unwind a rope on a metal hook at the base of the pole.

I put a hand on his arm. "Leave it alone."

He looked at me blankly, and then threw back his head and gazed upward. "Criminee!" he breathed.

Roger Garrit was hanging about fifty feet over our heads. His hands were tied behind him, and his ankles were bound together. There was a big knot of rope at the base of his skull, and the rope was looped through a pulley at the top of the steel pole. I could see the chipped spots in the bright aluminum paint on a level with Garrit's heels where he had kicked against it while his life was being chocked out of him.

The guard stuttered. "He—must have been a-hanging there all the time—when the men was coming in to work. I never saw him—nobody looked up. And he was a-hanging there all the time. . . ." He started for the guardhouse. "I gotta call the cops—or somebody. . . ."

I grabbed his arm. "How long you been on duty?"

"Since eleven last night. One of the other boys is sick, and I'm working a double shift."

"Hear or see anything unusual around here last night?"

"Naw. I had to make the rounds and watch the main gate, too. I can't be two places at once—and I'm only one man, Mister."

"How long did you leave this gate unguarded—and when?"

He shook off my arm. "Look, Mister, there's a man a-hanging dead up there. I gotta—"

A green Chrysler whispered to a stop in the parking space beside the guard house and a tall gray man stepped out—gray hair, gray hat, severe gray suit, a thin gray face. He looked coldly at the guard, and the guard ran forward.

"Mr. Conners—an awful thing." He turned and pointed at the flagpole. "It's Mr. Garrit—that's him a-hanging up there, and he's dead. I was just going to call you, Mr. Conners. We just found him—"

The gray man had eyes a little darker than a raw oyster. They looked at the body on the flagpole, and they stayed there maybe half a minute. The guard closed his mouth, stopped pointing, and shuffled his feet in the gravel.

"I didn't hear nothing, Mr. Conners," he whined. "I didn't see nothing. I'm working a double shift, and I tried to make my rounds on time. I didn't even know Mr. Garrit was out here. I—"

"Shut up," the gray man snapped. He moved forward a little, his gaze still on the flagpole. His razor-edged jaw trembled a little. Then his cold eyes bored into the guard.

"Get him down, you fool."

"I started to, Mr. Conners, but this fella . . ."

Jesse L. Conners turned his eyes toward me. His narrow head was moving from side to side in tiny jerking movements.

"He's dead," I said. "It's a job for the police."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Fiske—Lee Fiske. I came out here to see Mr. Garrit on business."

"What kind of business?"

"I'm a private detective, Mr. Conners."

The gray man swayed a little, and he ran a thin mottled hand over his eyes. He stumbled forward, and I caught him in my arms before he hit the gravel. His body was thin and frail. The guard helped me carry him down a sidewalk and into a bronze and glass doorway.

"His office is right here," the guard panted. "There's a couch in there."

We went up some steps with our burden, through a paneled reception room, down a marble corridor to a door labeled: *Jesse L. Conners, President*. The guard kicked open the door, and we carried Conners inside and laid him on a leather couch along a wall.

"Call a doctor—and the police," I said to the guard. He nodded and ducked out.

While I was loosening Conners' stiff white collar he opened his eyes. He was breathing hard and there was sweat on his lean face.

"Right—coat—pocket," he gasped.

I felt in his coat pocket and I found a small glass vial filled with little round black pills the size of buckshot. I unscrewed the cap and shook a couple of the pellets out into my hand. Conners opened his mouth wide, and I saw the fake pink of his upper plate. I tossed in two of the pills, and he swallowed convulsively.

Then he stretched out with a deep sigh and closed his eyes. After a minute he said weakly: "Thank you, young man." His face looked grayer than ever, but his eyes were clear.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

He shook his head slightly. "It's my

heart. I get these spells every once in a while. I'm afraid the sight of poor Roger—out there. . . ."

I nodded silently. From somewhere outside the office I could hear the faint rumble of machinery.

Conners said: "How—why—?"

The banana-nosed guard poked his head in the door. "The police are outside taking Mr. Garrit down, and Doc Eaton is on his way out."

I moved to the door and said to the guard in a low voice: "Stay with him."

Conners heard me. "No—I'm all right now," he said.

The guard said: "The cops want me. You, too, Mister." He left.

I glanced at the man on the couch as I went out. His eyes were closed. I followed the guard.

As I crossed the reception room I met a girl coming in. She had her head down and she was walking fast. She bumped into me, and her head came up. She had dark brown eyes, a clear tanned skin, and tawny hair with streaks of lighter tan in it. There was a pinched look around the corners of her full-lipped red mouth. She mumbled something and stepped around me, but she stumbled over my feet and started to fall. She flung out an arm and supported herself against the wall.

"Sorry," I said.

She looked at me blankly. "What?"

"I'm sorry—for getting in your way."

She brushed a strand of hair away from her face with a strong brown hand. "Did you see—what's out there?"

I nodded slowly.

"They've got him on a canvas stretcher," she said. "His eyes are open, and his tongue is sticking out. . . ." She shivered.

"Death is always ugly," I said.

She turned quickly and walked swiftly down the corridor. Her high heels made sharp clicking sounds on the marble. She was a tall girl, husky, with long strong legs and square shoulders. She entered an office and closed the door. I strolled down and took a look at the frosted glass.

The printing on it read: *R. V. Garrit, Vice-President. Private.*

THE day's production at the Conners Electric Company was shot to hell. Every man and woman in the place was

standing outside the plant or leaning out the windows. They were all watching two cops shove a covered stretcher into a hearse. There was a squad car parked beside the hearse, and two other cops were trying without much success to keep the mob away.

The little guard was talking to a tall, slender man in plain clothes. I elbowed my way through the crowd. The slender man nodded at me and said: "Hello, Lee. You in on this?"

Lieutenant John Dagget was a friendly, quiet man. I sometimes had a beer with him in a bar close to headquarters. "Just by accident, John," I said, and I went through the routine and answered the usual questions. I didn't tell him any more than I had to. When I finally got loose, I wheeled my car for Roger Garrit's home. Somebody had to tell Helen Garrit—her dad wasn't in shape to do much of anything.

I found her in the back yard of the big house on the east side of town. She was in brown gabardine slacks, brown moccasins and a tight fitting cream-colored sweater. Her brown hair hung in a long wave across one side of her face as she dug in a flower bed with a trowel. She looked like a photo from a slick-paged home and garden magazine.

She heard my step on the flagstone walk and smiled. I remembered again that night when I had kissed her at the high school lawn fete.

She stood up and faced me. "Hello, Lee. Did you find Roger?"

"Yes, Helen. I found him."

She tossed the trowel into the flower bed and took a cigarette from a package in her slacks pocket. I struck a match and held it while she inhaled. My hand shook a little. She moved an inch closer to me, and the sun glinted on her hair. I got a faint clean odor of soap, and the burned smell of exhaled cigarette smoke. She flung her hair back from her forehead and smiled up at me.

I stepped back a little and took a deep breath. Helen Garrit was the kind of a girl I figured I would like to marry—if I ever got married. And suddenly a small voice in the back of my brain blurted out: *Why not, you dope? Her husband's dead. She isn't married any more.*

I heard her voice say to me: "Does he feel badly? I mean, after slaving over a hot poker table half the night?"

I reached out and put my hands on her shoulders. Her skin felt warm beneath the fine wool of the sweater. She didn't move. I could see little cloudy flecks in her gray eyes. Her up-tilted head was just below my chin, and her half-parted lips were blood-red against her white teeth.

I tried to keep my voice steady. "This is going to be tough, Helen."

Still she didn't move. "Tell me, Lee."

I gripped her shoulders tighter. "He's—dead."

I felt her body sway a little under my hands. Then she said one word. "How?"

I led her into the house. She moved silently, like a girl walking in her sleep. We entered a long living room and she sank down on a divan. I sat down beside her and I told her as quickly as possible. She sat very still and the cigarette in her hand burned close to her fingers. I reached out and took the burning stub from her hand and crushed it out in a glass ash tray on the low leather-embossed table beside the divan. She didn't move.

From somewhere in the house door chimes tinkled gently. I got up and moved across the thick rug to the bare polished floor of the hallway. Lieutenant Dagget stood beyond the double screens of the wide front door.

He peered through the screen at me. "You get around fast, don't you, Lee?" he said.

"She's a friend of mine," I said. "Somebody had to tell her."

"How good a friend?" he asked softly.

I shrugged. "I suppose you have to see her?"

He nodded silently, and I opened the screen for him. He stepped inside and followed me into the living room.

I said: "Helen, this is Lieutenant Dagget. He wants to talk to you. I'm leaving now. . . . Call me if you want me."

She smiled faintly. "Thanks, Lee."

I went out. The lieutenant didn't stop me, and I was glad of that.

It was nine-fifteen in the morning when I entered my office down town. Ann Connelly was pounding away on the typewriter getting out routine reports for some of the boys in the Association. She stopped typ-

ing and said: "Morning, Lee. There's a number on your desk to call."

I picked up the phone and called a number written on a slip of paper. A girl's voice answered: "Yes?"

"This is Lee Fiske."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Fiske. Mr. Conners would like to see you. Can you come over right away?"

"Just a minute." I palmed the mouth-piece and said to Ann Connelly: "Can I go out to see Mr. J. L. Conners, of the Conners Electric Company?"

"If it means money—yes. You haven't even had a divorce job this week. Why don't you go into the insurance racket, Mr. Fiske?"

I said into the phone: "Who's calling?"

Her voice got cold. "Mr. Conners' secretary."

"Formerly the late Mr. Garrit's secretary? You got promoted fast."

The voice dripped ice water now. "Mr. Conners will expect you." She hung up.

CHAPTER THREE

Wilted Violets

THE same guard was on duty, and there was a flag on the flagpole instead of a corpse, and the plant seemed to be humming along at normal rate. I said to the guard: "Conners sent for me."

"Yeah. They called from the switch-board. Go on in."

There was a redhead behind the desk in the reception room. I gave her my name, and she tossed me a nice smile and told me to go in. "Mr. Conners is expecting you."

"Too bad about Mr. Garrit," I said.

"Wasn't that simply shuddering?" Her eyes sparkled.

"Who's Mr. Conners' secretary?" I asked.

She looked over her shoulder into the corridor beyond her desk before she answered. "Rebecca Foster," she said. "Miss Foster. But we call her Becky the Brute."

"Now, is that nice?"

The red-head lifted her slim shoulders. "She's the athletic type. Bowling, golf, tennis—the works. And she's good at all of them."

"Oh, I see. Jealous."

She wrinkled her short nose at me. "There's other things in life besides golf and tennis—a lot of other things."

I leaned on her desk. "Like what?"

The telephone beside her tinkled and she lifted it to her ear. She made a face at me, and I moved out into the corridor. I knocked briefly on Jesse L. Conners' door before I walked in.

He was sitting behind his desk. The husky, tawny-haired girl sat in a chair beside him with a note book across her knees. Her long sturdy legs were crossed, and she kept her eyes on the note book.

"Feeling better, Mr. Conners?" I asked.

He waved a thin hand impatiently. "Yes, yes, young man. Sit down. This is my secretary, Miss Foster."

She raised cool brown eyes to mine, nodded slightly, bit at her plump lower lip, and lowered her gaze to her note book again.

"We've met," I said, and sat down.

Conners placed his thin hands on the desk in front of him and bored his oyster-colored eyes into mine. "I'll be brief, young man. Roger Garrit, my son-in-law, is dead. Somebody killed him. The police, as usual, are just milling around. You're a private detective, and from what I understand, a good one. I've checked on you. I want you to find Roger's killer and bring him to justice. I don't care what it costs." He opened a desk drawer, took a check book, and lifted a pen from a gold holder. "What are your rates?"

I gave him my Class A price. "Fifty a day, plus expenses."

He didn't even blink. He began to write. He tore out a check and tossed it across the desk. It was for five hundred dollars, and it was payable to me.

"When you need more," Conners said, "let me know. When will you start?"

"I'm working for you now," I said.

Conners said: "Good. Ask me anything you need to."

"I know enough to start on," I said.

"Indeed?" The old man's eyebrows went up. He turned to the girl. "That'll be all, Miss Foster. Get that notice on all bulletin boards, and wire all the branches."

"Yes, Mr. Conners," she said quietly. She went out of the office with a brisk stride.

I said: "Mr. Conners, I like to earn my money. Just how deep do you want me to go into this thing?"

"As deep as necessary."

"That may be pretty deep, Sir. Shall I be frank?"

"By all means, Mr. Fiske."

I told him about the blonde with the cut throat in the hotel room in East Grange—all about it. He listened gravely, his gray brows knotted over his deep-set eyes. When I finished, he sighed deeply and clasped his hands in front of him.

"That's a shocking story, young man," he said. "Shocking. But nothing can hurt Roger now. I'm—I'm thinking about my daughter. Is there any chance of Roger being connected with this girl's death?"

I shrugged. "You never know. If it comes out, it would be nasty for Mrs. Garrit."

"You know my daughter?"

"Yes."

He sighed again, and clenched his thin hands. "I knew that Roger wasn't—wasn't all that he should be. I have heard rumors about his—ah—infidelities, but I had hoped that he would get over it. Helen is my only child, and her mother and I have tried to protect her from the unpleasant things in life. I thought that Roger would make a good husband for her. . . ."

"I'll say this—Roger worked hard, and he did me a good job, from management's standpoint. When I learned about this weak streak of his, I talked to him, and we had some words over it. But I've tried to keep it from Helen. . . ." He lowered his head. "I should be with her now, but I can't face her. Parents try to do the right thing. . . ."

I squirmed in my chair. "I saw her, Sir, and I told her."

He looked across the desk at me. "That was kind of you. My daughter means a lot to me." He hesitated, then he said: "Do you think that Roger killed this—this girl?"

"No," I said.

He straightened up in his chair. "All right," he said briskly. "Let the chips fall. But let me know what you learn before you inform the police."

"Of course," I said, and I stood up. He was staring blankly at the wall as I went

out. I felt a little sorry for him—as sorry as a private dick can feel for anybody.

I DROVE over to East Grange, parked the Ford, and entered the Avalon Hotel. There was a young kid with a butter-bowl hair cut on the desk. I bought a package of cigarettes, discussed the corn prospects and the local softball team, said, "I want to see a fellow upstairs," and climbed the stairway to the second floor.

The *Do Not Disturb* sign was still on the door. I went back down stairs, nodded at the kid, and moved out to the street. A man man moved past me into the Avalon. It was the old pappy who had been on the desk the night before. I touched his arm, and he turned. There was a wilted bunch of violets in his coat lapel.

I flicked the violets with a finger. "Did she meet you in front of the Zion Drug Store last night?" I asked him.

His mouth flopped open, and his eyes popped wide. He turned suddenly and made a dive for the hotel door. I grabbed his arm, and he turned slowly.

"I asked you a question, Pop."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't get you a-tall."

I patted my breast pocket. "State police. Mrs. Roger Garrit has filed a warrant against you for extortion. She paid you a hundred dollars, and you told her that her husband had been seeing a woman in this hotel."

He backed away from me a little. All he could say was: "I—I—"

I lit a cigarette. "Take it easy, Pop. What did she do when you told her?"

He looked quickly up and down the street. "She—she got in her car and drove away."

"Was this woman the only one her husband ever brought to the hotel?"

He leaned towards me. "Heck, no. He had a string of 'em. You gonna run me in?"

"Stick to the facts, and I'll see."

His bright little eyes darted up and down the street. "I don't want no trouble. . . . This one is a blonde, but he had all kinds. First, there was a skinny black-haired one, and then a kind of a brindle-haired one, and a little chunky one with a mole on her chin, and a mixed blonde one—even a gray-haired one with a young shape. He

always signed the register Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Holman."

"What was your cut?"

"Ten dollars—each time. I always work the night shift."

"How come you finally double-crossed him?"

He looked down at the sidewalk, and shuffled his feet. "I kind of hated to do it. But last week I recognized him from a picture in a Toledo paper, and—and they're closing the hotel in a couple of weeks. A new outfit bought it, and I'll be out of a job and—"

"Thought you'd make a killing while you could?"

He squinted up at me and a sly grin wrinkled his lips. "I ain't as young as I used to be, and jobs are scarce."

"You got that hundred yet?"

His mouth snapped shut, and he backed away. "You ain't no cop."

"Don't make me prove it, Pop."

"Cops have badges."

"I left mine in my other suit. You keep the hundred, and I'll buy a drink."

"Just a sociable drink?"

I nodded, and followed him down the street to a place called *The Farmer's Home*. We sat in back in a booth. The old guy ordered a double rye and a bottle of beer. I told the bartender to bring me a bourbon and soda, and my companion's lip curled in contempt. When the drinks came, he poured his whiskey into the beer glass, filled the glass with beer, and took a long swallow.

"What did she do last night after you told her that her husband was in the hotel with another woman?" I asked.

"I told you what—she got in her car and drove away."

"What kind of a car?"

He didn't hesitate. "Forty-seven Mercury coupe. Blue."

Helen Garrit's car, I knew that. "All right. Is this man still in the hotel?"

He finished his whiskey-and-beer highball and made himself another. He started to chuckle. "Well, I'll tell you. When I went off duty this morning the *Do Not Disturb* sign was still hanging on the door. Hee, hee." He downed his second drink in two swallows, licked his lips and looked at my untouched drink.

I nodded my head at the bartender. He

brought us another tray of the same, and the old guy drank long and deeply. When he put his glass down his eyes had a shine to them.

I reached across the table and touched the violets in his coat. "Where did you get the posies?"

He waved a thin hand. "They grow in back of the hotel—acres of 'em, this time of year. Smell nice. Roses are red, violets—"

"What's your name, Pop?" I slid one of my drinks across the table to him.

He looked at the pale amber mixture with a lone ice cube floating in it. "Slop," he said. "For babies—and women." He lifted the glass and when he put it down the ice clinked in the bottom. "Cornelius Bryan Hogmyer." His little glittering eyes were on the remaining drink in my hand.

I shoved the glass across to him and stood up. "Don't leave town, Cornelius. We may want to see you again."

"Cop," he sneered up at me. "She got her money's worth, didn't she? I told her the truth. Go over to 219 and find out."

"Sure," I said wearily. I tossed some money on the bar and went out.

FIVE long miles disappeared before my better nature got the upper hand. I pulled into a cross-road gas station and I called the East Grange police department.

I said to the cop who answered: "There's a girl in room 219 of the Avalon Hotel. She's dead, and it's a hot day. You better get her out." I hung up.

After that I headed east on the main highway. My mileage gauge told me that I was sixteen and four tenths miles from East Grange when I saw the place up ahead of me. It was a low chromium and glass building surrounded by half an acre of black-top parking space. A big sign told me that it was *The Ranch House, Hamburgers of Distinction, Curb Service*. I didn't see any curb, but I wheeled into the parking space and stopped beside the building. Another sign directly in front of me said: "*Blow Your Horn—If at Night, Blink Your Lights*."

I didn't have to blow my horn. A tall girl in a long-sleeved red silk blouse, scanty fringed white silk shorts, short cowboy boots and an imitation white ten-gallon hat came out of the building and jounced to-

wards me. She had reddish hair, worn long over her shoulders, a face which could have been pretty, and too much lipstick. She rested her booted foot on my running board.

"What'll it be, Partner?"

"One hamburger with everything, and a cup of coffee—black."

She said, "Yes, Sir," and sauntered into the building. I got a ring-side view of a pair of long legs and rippling, silk-clad hips.

She came back with an aluminum tray and hooked it over the door of my car. I handed her a dollar bill and told her to keep it.

She said: "Thank you, Partner. Will there be anything else?"

I thought that over for a couple of seconds. Then I said, "Where's Melissa today?"

"Oh," she said. "You like blondes." She tilted the sombrero to the back of her head, took a sack of tobacco and a cigarette paper from her blouse pocket, and rolled a cigarette. Then she flicked a match with a thumb nail, held the flame to the cigarette, inhaled, and flipped the match over her shoulder.

"That's a cute trick," I said.

"A trucker from Texas taught me. I get three bucks more a week for it. The boss says it gives the place atmosphere. . . . Do you really want to know about Melissa?"

"No hurry," I said. "Maybe we better take a ride and talk it over."

"The boss fired Melissa this morning—but I get off at six."

"Was she here today?"

"No. That's the trouble. She's missed too many morning lately. Shows up at noon with bags under her eyes and butterflies in her stomach. The boss said once more—" She made a clucking sound out of the corner of her mouth and drew a forefinger across her throat. "But she didn't show up at all today. She don't work here no more."

I chewed thoughtfully on the hamburger. "Tough," I said.

I finished the sandwich and drank the coffee. It was cold. She unhooked the tray from the door, and I took a five-dollar bill from my pocket and snapped it briskly. She rested the tray on her knee and looked

interested. She clucked her tongue.

"Do you know her address?" I asked.

She took the five, fished a small pad and pencil from her blouse pocket and began to write. She tore off a slip of paper and handed it to me. She sighed. "That's the address she gave the boss."

I put the paper in my coat pocket. "Thanks. What's your name?"

"Nanette."

She looked over her shoulder, and I followed her glance. A big man in a white apron was glaring at us through the lunch-room window.

"Oh, oh," the girl said in an undertone. "See you again, Partner." She moved swiftly away.

I backed up the Ford and drove out of there. A mile down the road I stopped and looked at the slip of paper she had given me. It read: *Melissa Kovak, 1428 Puxatawny Drive, Columbus, Ohio.* Columbus was a good eighty miles away, but I had a check in my pocket for five hundred dollars, and I had a job to do. I swung the Ford south.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bereaved and Beautiful

IT WAS a small, dirty frame house on a long, narrow street lined with dirty frame houses. There was no grass in the small front yard—just bare yellow clay. I went up three rotting steps and rapped on the edge of the rusty screen door. A card from a gas company was sticking out from under the screen. I leaned down and looked at it. It was addressed to Anthony Kovak. I stood up and pounded on the door again. Nothing happened. I opened the screen and tried the brass knob of a blistered door. It swung open, squeaking a little. I poked my head inside and yelled: "Hey!"

I waited maybe a minute before I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. I was in a small room, filled with cheap and worn furniture. In the middle of the floor was a neat little pile of articles—a neatly folded black lace nightgown with holes in it, a small pair of scuffed saddle oxfords, a little bundle of letters tied with a frayed brown shoe lace, a dusty paper gardenia with a red ribbon on it, and a photo of a

girl in a chipped gild frame. The girl's face smiled up at me, and I leaned close. It was the face of the blonde in room 219 of the Avalon Hotel.

I stood up and looked around the room. Along one wall was a cardboard suitcase with the price tag dangling from the handle. I moved across the room and lifted the suitcase. It was heavy.

There was a door opening into a dark hall, littered with junk. I picked my way silently through the junk and entered the kitchen.

I had time to see a table littered with dirty dishes and the chipped enamel of an ancient refrigerator before a bright light exploded behind my eyes and the greasy linoleum smacked me in the face.

I wasn't out very long—maybe five minutes. I rolled over on my back and opened my eyes. There were cobwebs in a corner of the kitchen ceiling. I pushed myself to a sitting position and put a hand to the back of my head. It felt pulpy and wet. I got to my feet, staggered over to the sink and turned on the cold water. I held my head under the tap and the water ran red into the sink. After a while I turned off the water and dried myself as best I could with a handkerchief. Then I lurched back down the hall.

"Come on out, you," I said loudly. "Let's see you try that again." My voice sounded hoarse and strange to my ears.

I reached the front room and stood swaying in the doorway. The suitcase was gone, and so was the pile of stuff which had been lying in the middle of the floor. I looked out of the dirty window, saw that my Ford was still parked at the curb, and went back to the kitchen.

I splashed more water on my face, and combed my hair, and put on my hat. I tilted it well forward, away from the tender lump behind my left ear. Then I went out, got into the Ford, and drove away. The street seemed to be bobbing up and down in front of me.

I stopped at a roadside tavern near Worthington and had three fast drinks of bourbon. After that, I felt a little better. At my apartment I had a shower, a change of clothes, and two more drinks of bourbon. Then I drove over to Helen Garrit's house. It was a hot afternoon, but it seemed cool on the wide green lawn, and a gentle breeze

blew in off the Maumee. The whole place looked quiet and peaceful. I pressed the bell, and from far away I heard the faint tinkle of chimes.

An elderly woman—stout, red-faced and gray-haired—came to the door and peered out at me. It was Helen Garrit's mother. She remembered me from the old days.

"Hello, Lee," she said, and she unhooked the screen door. "Mr. Connors told me about—about what you are trying to do for us. I haven't seen you lately, but Helen has spoken of you often."

I stepped inside, my hat in my hand. I mumbled through my teeth so that Mrs. Connors wouldn't get a whiff of my whiskey breath. "Could I see Helen for a few minutes?"

"Of course," she said. She leaned forward and spoke in a lowered voice: "Just between us, Lee, it's a blessing. What that poor girl has been through with that man! Look for a husband, Lee—a jealous husband. For seven long years I've stood aside and let Roger ruin that child's life. But there's one thing I'm thankful for—they have no children."

I mumbled something and moved to the archway leading into the living room. Mrs. Connors patted my arm, smiled knowingly, and went up the stairs.

HELEN GARRIT was sitting in a corner of the big coffee-colored divan, her legs doubled under her, her head resting against the back, her eyes closed. She was wearing a simple black linen dress with a square low-cut neckline. The skin of her throat and face looked very white in the dim coolness of the room. A half inch of cigarette burned on the edge of a blue-tinted glass ash tray, and a tiny ivory radio emitted muted dance music. I leaned down and snuffed out the burning cigarette stub.

She opened her eyes and said: "Thanks, Lee."

I sat down beside her.

"There's whiskey in the cabinet," she said.

"I don't like to drink alone, Helen."

"Of course you don't, Lee." She closed her eyes again.

I got up, crossed to the liquor cabinet, and opened it. There was everything inside, from rye to sherry. I poured about two inches of rye in each of the glasses

and held one of the glasses out to her.

She didn't move. I said: "Drink?"

She opened her eyes, gave me a faint smile, and took the glass from my hand. She began to sip at it. "Lee, I heard part of what Mother said—out in the hall. She never liked Roger."

I didn't say anything.

She said: "Do you remember that night, at the lawn fete, when you kissed me—and asked me to marry you?"

"That was twelve years ago." My voice was a little unsteady.

"Is twelve years so long, Lee?"

I took a long swallow of the rye. "A hell of a long time."

She swung her long legs to the floor and held her glass with both hands. "But Father liked Roger. He said you were reckless, and wild—no prospects. And then you went away, and I—I married Roger."

She reached for a cigarette in a bronze box on the low table. Her brown hair was close to my cheek, and I could smell the cleanness of it, and I could see the soft curve of her cheek and the full contour of her lips. She didn't have any make-up on, but she was still the prettiest girl I knew.

I took a deep breath and struck a match for Helen Garrit's cigarette.

She looked at me over the flame. "Who killed him, Lee—like that—such a horrible way?"

I drained my glass and poured some more.

"Let's go somewhere, Lee. Let's get in a car and drive and drive. I can't stand sitting around here any more. Tomorrow relatives will be here, and I'll have to be the bereaved widow. . . ."

I looked into the amber depths of my glass. "Why did you live with him so long?"

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Why? Because there was nothing else to do. I just lived from day to day, going through the motions of being a happy wife. I've known about Roger for a long time, but I didn't particularly care—except maybe my pride. He was like a little boy stealing jam. Maybe I was fond of him. I don't know. But I don't feel anything now. I—"

The dance music had stopped and a voice was coming out of the radio:

"The body was found by East Grange police after an anonymous phone call. She was on a bed in a room of the Avalon Hotel with a sheet over her and a bunch of violets in her hands. Police are searching for the woman's estranged husband, Anthony Kovak, of Columbus, and a mysterious man who registered at the hotel with her as A. J. Holman, of Detroit around midnight last night. Cornelius Hogmyer, night clerk at the hotel, testified that Holman was still in the room at three o'clock this morning. . . ."

Helen Garrit reached out and snapped off the radio.

I swirled the rye around in my glass and looked at the tips of my shoes. Helen Garrit smoked silently and stared up at the ceiling.

I said: "Today I talked to a one-eared man with violets in his coat lapel."

She sat very quietly for about three seconds. Then she leaned forward and flicked ashes into the tray on the table. "All right, Lee. I lied to you. Pride, I guess. Of course I went to East Grange after I received that note."



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I waited. A small cold feeling started at the base of my skull.

She crushed out her cigarette, clasped her hands over her knees, and closed her eyes. "I saw her, Lee—that girl." She took a deep shuddering breath. "I'll see her until I die."

I took a big swallow of the rye. "Your father hired me to find out who killed Roger."

"I know. Mother told me. I didn't know he was that fond of Roger." Her lips twisted a little.

"Tell me about it," I said. "All of it."

She leaned back against the divan and began to talk in a dead voice. "I told you that I've known about Roger—for a long time. He wasn't very subtle about it. And then yesterday I received that note."

"I went to East Grange last night, and I met this man. He told me about the series of women, and about this present one, the blonde, and he told me that Roger was in the hotel with her. I paid him, and I drove away. I drove around a long time, thinking things over. Then I went back and parked behind the hotel. I found a back door, and I went up to the room. I—I wanted to get it over with. The door was not locked, and I went in, and—and I—I found her—on the floor. . . ." She stopped talking, and her shoulders quivered.

I sat silently, my glass cupped in my hands. When Helen Garrit spoke again, her voice was steady.

"Roger wasn't there. I left, and I came back to town. I drove around, trying to decide what to do. I went past your place, and I saw Roger's car, and went up because I thought—"

"All right," I said. "All right, Helen. I saw her, too. Roger took me to the hotel last night."

She looked quickly at me. "Lee, do you think that Roger—?"

"Killed her?" I shook my head. "Not Roger."

She averted her eyes and lifted her glass to her lips with an unsteady hand. "But who would—do that—to Roger?"

I STOOD up. My head ached and the rye was already dying in me. I felt old and tired and beat up and sick at heart. "I don't know, Helen. I'm going to try

and find out. I hope they don't connect Roger with that girl. It'll be tough then, on you, if they learn that you were in that hotel room last night."

"Nobody saw me," she said quickly.

"Did Lieutenant Dagget bother you much?" I asked her.

She shook her head slowly. "No. He was very considerate. He just asked a few questions—about when I saw Roger last, if he had any known enemies, things like that."

I picked up my hat and moved to the door. Her voice followed me: "Will I see you again, Lee?"

"Sure," I said. "You'll see me again." I went out. I didn't look back.

I went down to police headquarters, and I had a talk with Lieutenant John Dagget. He told me that Jesse Conners had told him about hiring me, and he wished me luck. I asked him what the medical examiner had found.

"Death—by hanging," he said. "Garrit had a bruise on his head, but it didn't kill him. Somebody knocked him out; and then strung him up. He died on the flagpole. . . . That information will cost you a beer."

We went next door and had a beer.

Dagget said wryly: "There are only about eight hundred suspects, Lee."

I nodded. "I figured that Roger wasn't too popular with the help. He got his money too fast."

He drained his glass and held up two fingers to the bartender. "From what I can find out, Lee, every worker in the place had it in for him. Being the big boss' son-in-law, he swung his weight around a hell of a lot—from the top office on down. Since this morning I've talked to a lot of the employees of the Conners Electric Company, and not one had had a good word for Garrit. 'Slave-driver,' 'stuck up,' 'stuffed shirt,' are a few of the milder names they called him. And that in spite of the fact that he was dead, and any one of them might be suspect for the killing.

"Somewhere in that factory is a man who hated Garrit enough to string him up to that flagpole—a man with a perverted sense of justice, and a real or imagined grievance. That's the man I've got to find."

As I drove toward the office, I wondered how long it would be before Lieutenant

Dagget would begin to connect a dead blonde named Melissa Kovak with the killing of Roger Garrit. Not long, I decided, and I began to sweat.

As I entered the office, Ann Connelly said, "Here he is now, Sir," and she handed the telephone to me.

It was Jesse L. Conners. In his cold, clipped voice, he said: "Anything to report, Fiske? The place is in an uproar, and I want this thing settled quick. The police are disrupting our whole production schedule—snooping around the plant asking questions. Find the demented fool who did that thing to poor Roger, and get it over with. That's what I'm paying you for."

"Mr. Conners," I said, "the person who had nerve enough to kill him, and display him in that fashion, certainly has sense enough to cover his tracks. It'll take a little time."

"You can't find a murderer sitting at a desk in an office, Fiske," he snapped. "I want action." The click of his receiver made my ear jump.

I picked up the phone again, called the Conners Electric Company, and asked for Miss Foster.

Her voice was crisp and business-like. "Mr. Conners' office."

"Miss Foster, this is Fiske. As you know, Mr. Conners employed me this morning for a special job. He's been crowding me for action, and I think you can help me. How about having dinner with me?"

"I have a dinner engagement, Mr. Fiske. I'm sorry."

"How about cocktails before? I'll pick you up at five? Okay?"

She hesitated. Then: "Well . . . all right." She hung up.

I put on my hat and went out. It was five minutes after five when I stopped by the main gate of the Conners Electric Company. Rebecca Foster was waiting, and I thought that for a big girl she wore her clothes well. She had on a pale green, short-sleeved dress which displayed her strong tanned arms. The afternoon sun glinted on her tawny hair as she ducked her head to get in beside me. She had a ruddy, outdoors look, and I thought of the red-headed receptionist's description of her. Becky the Brute. I would never have called her that. She was big, all right, but all of

her was in the right places, and she had everything a girl should have, only more of it.

As I drove away, I said: "Where's your favorite drinking place?"

"I don't drink, Mr. Fiske. But if you'd care to take me home, we can talk there. My engagement isn't until six."

She lived in an apartment house out along the river toward Perrysburg. We climbed a flight of steps and moved down a cool carpeted hall. She unlocked a door, and stepped into a big room. I followed her. I had a chance to see that the apartment was big and sunny before I saw the dog.

He was a big gray and black German Shepherd, and he was coming for me like a ball from a bat. He raced across the room silently, his yellow eyes glued to a spot just below my chin.

I pivoted, and ran for the hall.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Hello, Tony"

BEHIND me, I heard Rebecca Foster snap: "George!" I heard a scratching sound as the dog skidded to a stop. I turned slowly. He was crouched down three feet away from me, and his eyes were still focused on my throat. His jaws were closed, but a low rumbling sound came out of his chest, and the hair over his powerful shoulders was standing up straight.

Rebecca Foster laughed. "You're strange to him," she said.

I wiped my forehead with a damp palm. "Maybe you better introduce us."

She laughed again, and pointed a finger. "George, lie down."

The dog backed away, still crouching. When his rear quarters hit the wall, he sank down, his big head on his front paws. He continued to growl, deep in his chest, and his yellow wolf's eyes never wavered.

"His full name is George Bismarck Von Tonder the Third," Rebecca Foster said. "He's just a puppy."

"Playful," I said. "I can see that."

"Will you have a drink, Mr. Fiske?"

"I'm in dire need of one."

"Will a Martini be all right? I think I have some gin."

"A Martini will be lovely. Skip the olive."

She left the room, and I heard the clink of ice and the rattle of bottles. George and I silently eyed each other. I lit a cigarette and tried to ignore him. He continued to make low ominous sounds.

I was glad when Rebecca Foster came back with my drink. It was a good Martini—cold and dry. She picked up a tall glass of orange-colored juice and sat down in a deep tomato-red chair opposite me.

I looked around the room. It was tastefully furnished, with a flair for color. Book shelves filled one wall, and there was a fancy combination phonograph and radio in one corner. On the mantel over a sandstone fireplace was an array of glittering trophies.

I nodded at them. "All yours?"

"Yes," she said carelessly. "Mostly golf and tennis." She sipped at her drink.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding at the glass in her hand.

"Carrot juice."

I suppressed a shudder and poured more Martini into my glass. George made deep throaty sounds.

I got brisk. "Now, Miss Foster, can you tell me anything which might help to find Mr. Garrit's murderer? Anything at all? Did he have any enemies? I mean, anyone in particular?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid I can't be much help. Mr. Garrit and Mr. Conners did not always agree on policy regarding treatment of the employees, but as for anyone wanting to—"

"How was he to work for? As far as you personally are concerned?"

She lifted her husky shoulders. "All right, I guess. He was a little exacting and demanding—but I got along with him."

"Did he receive any threatening notes, or telephone calls?"

She shook her head. "None in particular."

"The police think it was someone within the organization. Do you agree?"

"It's possible. When you have eight hundred persons concentrated in one spot there are bound to be some—well, crackpots."

"I see you have been talking to Lieutenant Dagget."

She smiled faintly. "Perhaps."

I gulped the rest of my Martini and stood up. "Thank you, Miss Foster."

She nodded politely and sipped at her carrot juice. George Bismarck Von Tonder the Third growled a good-by to me as I went out the door.

I was tired, and my head hurt, and I suddenly realized that I hadn't eaten anything since the hamburger at the drive-in. I had a steak in a grille down town, and then I went home with the intention of going to bed early. I decided that I had given Jesse L. Conners enough action for one day.

At twenty-five minutes after ten I was reading in bed, and just about ready to turn off the light when the telephone rang. I reached out, picked the instrument off a table beside my bed, and said: "Yes?"

A deep male voice asked: "Mr. Fiske?"

"That's right."

He said four words, and the receiver clicked in my ear. The four words were: "Lovers' Lane at eleven."

I pronged the phone and stared up at the ceiling. After a while I got up and put on some clothes. I put my .38 in its shoulder clip and went out.

Lovers' Lane, like all lovers' lanes, from Bar Harbor to Catalina, was a deserted spot at the edge of town with a lot of trees and underbrush. A seldom-used wagon road wound through it from the highway to the lake, and ended on a rocky beach. When I was a kid we had held numerous weiner roasts there, and later it was a favorite spooning spot for our high school crowd:

It was a twenty-minute drive from my apartment. After I turned off the highway, I parked the Ford in a clump of fir trees and walked down a rutted dirt road. It was a dark night, and there was a strong wind off Lake Erie. I moved along the ridge, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. Every few feet I stopped and listened, but I couldn't hear anything but the wind and the sound of the waves. I climbed a huge slanting rock and held my hat against the wind. There were several wind-gnarled trees here, and I stood beside one of them and looked back the way I had come. From over on the highway I could hear the far-away hum of cars streaking for Toledo and Detroit. The wind moaned around me, and I shivered a little. I felt

very lonely, and suddenly I wanted to get away from there.

I turned my head to look once more at the lake, and in that instant I heard a sharp twanging sound, and something slammed out of the darkness and thudded into the tree beside my head.

I SWUNG my head around, and my cheek struck a long smooth object which was quivering like a jew's harp. I dropped to the rock then, and I got my .38 in my hand. I heard the twanging sound again, and the thudding sound in the tree just above me. I shot one quick glance upward, and I saw the outline of something long and slender sticking in the tree. They were getting the range, and I didn't hesitate. I rolled heels over appetite over the crest of the ridge and dug in among the rocks.

I waited maybe a minute before I lifted my head. I caught a shadowy movement in the trees along the edge of the narrow road, and I let loose with my .38. The wind whipped powder smoke past my eyes, and I held my fire. I rolled ten feet beyond the spot where I had rolled over the crest of the ridge.

Then I stood up, scrambled over the rocks, and ran for the wagon road. I didn't see anything to shoot at, and kept on running. But just as I reached my Ford, I heard the roar of a motor off to my right as a car swung on to the highway. I saw its lights mingle with the streaming traffic.

I walked back to the ridge and stopped by the tree where I had been standing. I didn't need a light to see what had been aimed at me. Arrows, two of them, long, slender, polished, with feathered ends. From the length of the protruding shafts I knew they were buried deeply in the tree—and when I attempted to pull them free I knew how deeply. It wasn't hard to realize what they would do to a man's body if they found their mark.

I carried them back to the car and drove back to town. As I went up the steps of my apartment building, a man came out of the swinging glass doors above me. He was a tall, lean, gray man with a sharp chin.

"Good evening, Mr. Connors," I said.

He stopped three steps above me. "Fiske," he said bitterly, "I've been calling you for an hour." His head was jerking

back and forth in tiny quick movements. "Dammit, Fiske, I'm paying you to do a job, and I expect to get my money's worth."

"You're getting it," I said. I was thinking of the murderous missiles on the floor of my car. "What's the trouble?"

"It's Helen—she's gone."

"How long?"

"Since about ten o'clock. Her mother and I have been staying with her since—since Roger died, and she told us that she was going for a few minute's drive. She didn't come back. I thought you might have seen her. Her mother is worried, and well, dammit, she shouldn't be galavanting around, right at this time—with poor Roger. . . ."

"This afternoon you seemed to be more worried about the production of refrigerators than poor Roger," I said.

His head began to jerk more rapidly. He said harshly: "Production must go on. It has nothing to do with my feeling for Roger. He . . ."

"Yes?"

"Roger was—well, weak. I know that. But my daughter loved him, and I did everything I could for him while he lived, and I'm doing everything I can now—for Helen's sake. After all, Roger was only human, like all of us." His head was still jerking, and he blinked his eyes rapidly.

"Sure," I said. "Can I drive you home?"

He moved down the steps and tapped my chest with a long forefinger. "I'm capable of driving myself, young man. You find Helen."

"Yes, Sir."

He moved carefully across the walk, very tall and straight, and got into his car.

I stood on the steps a minute, thinking about my waiting bed upstairs. Then I sighed, got back into my Ford, re-filled the cylinder of the .38 from a box in the glove compartment, and wheeled away east.

It was a little after midnight when I stopped in front of the Avalon Hotel in East Grange. Cornelius Hogmyer was behind the desk reading a newspaper.

I leaned on the desk and looked at him. I didn't speak. After a while he became aware of me and turned his head. The front legs of his chair hit the floor.

"Go away," he said.

"How much did it cost her this time?"

He waved his hands. "All I've had all day is cops, cops, cops. And now you. I don't know nothing about nothing."

"How much did she give you to keep her husband's name out of it?"

He stood up and began to pace around in a circle behind his small desk. "I didn't tell the cops. As far as I know, he was A. J. Holman, from Detroit. If he cut that blonde's wind-pipe, he's still A. J. Holman, from Detroit. That's what I told the cops after they found her, and that's what I told her I told them. She didn't have to pay to keep me quiet, but she wanted to. What do you want to stick your nose into it for?"

"Where is she?" I asked.

He stopped his pacing and leaned wearily on the desk. "Go away," he said in a tired voice.

"I could turn you in," I said. "But this is quicker. I fished a ten-dollar bill from my wallet and laid it on the desk in front of him. He picked it up, folded it into a neat square, and put it in his pant's pocket. Then he sat down in his chair and picked up his newspaper.

"The Farmer's Home," he said. "That's where I left her."

I went out, walked down the street and entered the little bar. Helen Garrit was sitting in a back booth, facing the door. Except for a big bartender with a broken nose, she was the only person in the place. She saw me coming, and for a second I thought she was going to make a run for it—not because of any movement she made, but because of the fleeting expression of panic in her eyes. She managed a smile when I sat down facing her across the narrow table.

"It's a small world, Lee," she said. She was drinking a Manhattan, and there was a little pile of cigarette stubs in the ash tray beside her glass.

I said: "Worried about what One-Ear might spill to the police?"

She lowered her eyes, and fingered the stem of her cocktail glass. She nodded her head slightly without speaking.

"You think Roger killed her?" I asked her.

She lifted her shoulders lightly, still not looking at me. "I hope not, Lee. I hope that he—wasn't capable of that. But those things happen. . . ."

"To a lot of people," I said.

Still she didn't look up. "I—I thought—if I could save his memory that much. . . ."

"Your husband is dead," I said, and my voice sounded harsh in my ears. "Nothing can hurt him now. . . . How much did it cost you?"

"Five hundred, Lee. He promised he wouldn't tell. . . ."

"Cheap," I said. "I hope you got your money's worth."

She looked at me then, and her eyes were wet. "Lee, what's the matter?"

"Did Roger mean so much to you?"

She twisted her glass slowly in her fingers. "Maybe I'm a little selfish, too. It wouldn't be nice to live the rest of your life with people saying that your husband was a—murderer."

"When the five hundred is gone, One-Ear will want more."

Her chin came up a little. "All right. I'll give it to him."

I stood up. "Come on. You Dad's looking for you."

She started to get out of the booth, but I put a hand on her shoulder. "Wait."

WHILE we had been talking, a man had entered the place. He sat at the bar drinking beer. He was wearing a dirty gray felt hat and a gray work shirt. He was a dark man, with thick brows and heavy shoulders. I remembered a picture inside a tiny gold locket, and I moved up beside him.

"Hello, Tony," I said.

He turned his head slowly, looking at me out of the corners of his eyes. His hands stayed on the bar. His left was relaxed, lying loosely; his right was clasped around the glass of beer. The skin over the knuckles of this hand tightened a little. He looked at me slantwise.

"You've made a mistake, Brother," he said.

"What did you hit me with, Tony—a crowbar?"

White teeth showed at the corner of his mouth. "Scram."

I leaned on the bar and looked at him. "Let's talk a little, Tony."

He caught the bartender's eye and jerked his head at me. "What's he been drinking, Mac—panther milk?"

The bartender didn't answer him.

The dark man laughed shortly, took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and placed it between his thin hard lips. His left hand started for his hip pocket. I stepped swiftly behind him and grabbed his wrist. He wiggled like a snake and twisted himself from my grasp. And then he whirled to face me, and there was a short-bladed knife in his hand. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder, saw that his pathway to the door was clear. He was panting a little, and his dark eyes glittered.

"Stay away, Copper," he said to me.

I made a move toward him. He backed up a little, holding the knife in front of him. He held it like a sword, with the blade sticking out past his thumb. I moved closer, and his eyes darted from left to right.

"Stay away," he said, and he backed closer to the door.

I kept on moving. Suddenly he lunged for me. I kicked hard with my right foot, and he stumbled sideways. Then he turned, and scrambled for the door. I had plenty of time to clear my .38 and put a bullet through the back of his left leg, above the knee. He stumbled forward, and I jumped for him. I twisted his knife arm behind him, and he let out a hoarse cry of pain. The knife hit the floor, and I kicked it clear.

I thought I had him then, but I was wrong. He lurched up from the floor, and his fist smacked me beneath the chin. My teeth clicked shut, and I staggered backwards. The room went around in big looping circles. I hit a bar stool and hung on. It whirled like a merry-go-round, and smacked me against the bar.

I hung on, my head down, and I saw the floor very clearly with its litter of ashes, cigarette butts and burned matches. I hung on to the stool and waited for the room to stop looping.

When I looked up, the dark man was still on the floor. There was blood leaking out from under him. The big bartender stood by the screen door with an axe handle in his hand.

"Nobody pulls a knife in my joint," he said.

I heard a woman's voice behind me, and I looked around. Helen Garrit was speaking into a phone at the end of the bar.

"I told her to call the cops," the bar-

tender said, his voice harsh with anger.

The man on the floor stirred a little and opened his eyes. He looked up at me. The bartender lifted the axe handle, but I held up a hand just in time.

The dark man's eyes had a wild glitter to them. He said in a soft voice: "I knew you was a cop when you snuck into my house this morning. I was getting ready to lam—I knew they would try and pin it on me. She—she didn't leave much of hers in the house when she left me, but I wanted to take it with me. It—it was all of her I had any more.

"I been following her lately, trying to get her to come back to me. She—she wasn't no good, but she was all I ever had. When I see this guy leave the hotel last night, I think it's my chance to talk to her. I go up to her room, and—I find her—like she was. . . ." He closed his eyes.

"Go on, Tony," I said.

"I can't bear to see her like that, and I go down and pick some violets I see behind the joint. She always liked flowers. I put some in her hands—after—after I lay her out. . . . It's the only funeral she'll ever get. . . ."

I said: "Then what?"

He twisted his lips. "I hunt—for him. . . ."

"Did you find him?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Not yet." He paused, and turned his face to the floor. "My leg hurts," he said in a muffled voice.

I heard a step, and I looked around. Helen Garrit was behind me, staring down at the man on the floor. She said: "Lee, did he—kill—Roger?"

A car stopped out in front and two policemen came in. One of them was a little man with a short flat nose and a cap which was too big for his narrow head. I saw the Chief's insignia on the shield pinned to his blue blouse. He looked down at the man on the floor, at the bartender, and at me.

"Name of Anthony Kovak," I said. "Want him?"

"My gawd," he said. "Kovak? We got a drag net over six states for him."

"There he is," I said. "Better get him to a hospital before he bleeds to death. He's got a slung in his leg."

The other cop was fat and sleepy-looking. He stepped around the man on the

floor and peered down at him. "It's him, Chief," he drawled. That's the guy. Cut that dame's throat."

"Call an ambulance, Virgil," the Chief snapped. "We don't want him to cash in before we get credit for him."

The fat cop lumbered toward the telephone.

CHAPTER SIX

Vitamins—and Blood

I FOLLOWED Helen Garrit's blue Mercury back to town. She drove fast. When we reached her house I parked the Ford along the curb and waited while she drove into the garage. When she came out, I walked across the lawn with her to the front door of the house.

"Will you come in for a drink, Lee?"

"No, thanks."

She was standing close to me. The wind stirred the trees around us, and threw dark shadows of moving leaves on her up-turned face. She moved a little closer. "Sure, Lee?"

I put my left arm around her shoulders, and my right around her waist. I pulled her in to me, and I kissed her. I realized that I had been wanting to do it for a long time. She didn't stop me. I kissed her twice before I let her go.

She laughed a little, and stepped back. Her hands fluttered to her hair. "Twelve years is a long time, Lee," she said. "Change your mind about that drink?"

It was a warm soft night, but I felt a cold feeling start at the base of my spine. "Ask me after your husband is buried," I said.

She lowered her head and turned slowly away from me. I still had the cold feeling, but I didn't want her to go.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She turned and patted my cheek. "It's all right, Lee. I guess I forgot that you are a detective. The funeral is Thursday—will I see you before?"

"After," I said.

She stared at me silently for maybe half a second. In the darkness her eyes looked big and dark. "I hope so, Lee," she said, and she went quickly inside and closed the door.

There was a bottle in the car, and I had

two lonely drinks before I drove away from there.

It was going on to three o'clock in the morning when I reached my rooms. As I entered, I saw a slip of paper beneath the door. It was a note from the switchboard operator down in front. It read: *Mr. Fiske: Miss Rebecca Foster requests you to telephone her no matter what time you get home.* The last six words were underlined, and a telephone number was written beneath the message.

I called her, and she answered immediately. Her voice was hurried and breathless. "Mr. Fiske, I'm awfully sorry to bother you at this hour of the morning, but I'm worried—and a little scared. After you left this afternoon—could you come over for a few minutes? I hate to call Mr. Connors, or the police. . . ."

"What's the matter?"

She hesitated. "Mr. Fiske, I don't want to sound dramatic, but I really wish you'd come—now. It's about Mr. Garrit."

"All right. But tie up that bloodhound."

As I backed the Ford out, I saw Jesse Connors. I swung in, cut my motor, got out and walked back.

"Looking for me, Mr. Connors?" I said.

He turned and came back down the steps to the sidewalk. His head was vibrating with tiny sidewise jerks. "I've been trying to call you, Fiske. Where have you been?"

"Out working for you."

"Well, you can stop."

"You don't want to find the murderer of Roger?"

"Dammit, I didn't say that, Fiske. I just want you to stop *your* investigations. You can keep the five hundred dollars, but I want you to forget the whole thing. Understand?"

"Mr. Connors, when I start a job, I like to finish it."

His face got red, and his eyes shifted to a spot beyond me. "Do I have to explain, Fiske? My daughter told me about what happened tonight, and she suggested that I take you off the case. In view of the circumstances, I must admit that I agree with her. It is only fair to the memory of poor Roger. I trust that you haven't—ah—reported any of your findings to the police. . . .?"

I shook my head slowly. "Not yet, Mr. Connors."

"Do you intend to?"

"Probably."

"I wouldn't do that," he said harshly. "Isn't the five hundred enough?" His cold gray eyes shifted to my necktie.

"Aren't we a little confused, Mr. Conners? I regard the five hundred as payment for services rendered—and not as a bribe to withhold evidence from the police. Apparently, you and your daughter have come to the conclusion that Roger killed that girl after all."

"All right," he said. "I'm trying to protect my daughter from unpleasant publicity. Roger's dead, and the girl's dead. Nothing can matter to either of them now. It's Helen I'm thinking of."

"I'm not the only one who knows that Roger was with that girl last night," I said.

"Helen took care of him," he snapped. "She told me."

"For the present," I told him. "But he'll want more—and more—to keep a secret like that."

He moved across the sidewalk and opened the door of his car. "I can handle him," he said. "I'll put a check in the mail tomorrow for you—five hundred more."

"Don't bother," I said.

"A thousand."

I shook my head slowly.

"Damn you," he said. "Five thousand."

"You think a lot of your daughter, don't you?"

His whole body began to shake. "I think enough of her to try and keep her name from being dragged through the mud because of a cheap, fortune-hunting, woman-chasing excuse for a man like Roger Garrit. A miserable stuffed shirt who grew fat

on my money and turned my employees against me, a—" He sagged back against the car, his head down.

I jumped to his side, and put an arm around his shoulders. There was sweat on his face, and his breath whistled from his throat. "Take it easy," I said.

He pushed me violently away. I was surprised at the strength in his thin arms. "Five thousand, Fiske," he said thickly. "You better take it." He crawled into his car, the motor roared to life, and he drove away.

I watched him until he turned left at the next block. Then I got into my Ford and headed east, along the river.

THERE was light leaking under the door of Rebecca Foster's apartment, and she answered the bell immediately. For an outdoor girl she looked very feminine in a transparent, pale blue silk robe over darker blue pajamas. Her tawny hair, streaked with lighter sun-bleached lanes, hung in shining folds over her shoulders. The silk robe hung open, and the pajamas were tailored to fit her big form. She was a lot of girl—but all of it was nice. I didn't see anything of George Bismarck Von Tonder the Third, and I was glad of that.

She locked the door behind me, and turned to face me. There were tiny beads of perspiration on her upper lip, and there was a smoky look to her gray eyes. She motioned me to a chair, and it was then that I saw she was trembling a little.

I put a hand on her shoulder. Her skin felt hot beneath the silk. "Relax," I said.

She lowered her head and began to tremble more violently. She stood about a foot away from me, and I could see the

Edward Mann*

has switched to Calvert because
Calvert makes a lighter highball

*of 1522 Kelton Ave., W. Los Angeles, Calif.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain
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clean white of her scalp where she had parted the honey-and-cream streaked hair.

We were standing close to the fireplace. I raised my eyes to the mantel behind her, and I saw again the glittering row of trophies—golf, tennis, swimming, archery, bowling, skeet, and some I didn't recognize. Probably soccer and wrestling, I thought grimly.

She stopped trembling and looked up at me. "I thought I was tough," she said. "I thought I was above female weaknesses and fears. But tonight. . . ." She twisted her firm shoulder from beneath my hand and moved away from me. "Maybe I better make a drink first—before I tell you what happened tonight. Will scotch be all right?"

"Fine," I said.

She left the room, the blue robe billowing behind her. I sat down in a big brocaded chair and looked at the trophies on the mantel. I was still staring at them when Rebecca Foster came back in and handed me a tall tinkling glass. Her glass was filled with a thick red fluid.

"What's that?" I asked her. "Blood?"

She laughed, and a little of the red fluid splashed to the floor. "Tomato juice," she said in an unsteady voice. "Lots and lots of vitamins." Her voice was flushed, and a long loop of yellow hair hung down over her left eye.

"It could be blood," I said. "You killed Melissa Kovak, and you killed Roger Garrit, and tonight you tried to kill me."

She swayed a little, and she gripped her glass with both hands. Then she flung her hair back from her face with a defiant gesture, and her eyes looked hot and shining.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, yes, yes."

"Two out of three is a pretty good score," I said.

"Three out of three, Mr. Fiske." She was still whispering.

"Louder," I said. "And funnier."

She leaned toward me. "George is out there, Mr. Fiske." She was no longer whispering, but her voice was low and intense. "He is crouching just inside the kitchen door—waiting. I told him to wait. When I tell him, he'll come in here. And that will make three.

"Then I'll start screaming, and when they come they'll find George crouching over something which once was a private

detective named Lee Fiske. George is a watchdog—everyone in the building knows that—and you broke into my apartment at three in the morning and attacked me. George was only defending his mistress."

I could feel the sweat dripping down my ribs. I took a long drink of the scotch. "Before you sic George on me," I said, "tell me how you killed Roger Garrit."

She laughed suddenly. It was kind of a crazy laugh. "Oh, yes, poor Roger. He had a lot of women before he had me. I knew that, but I told him that I was to be the last—or I'd kill him. I told him that. His wife didn't count. He married her for Jesse Connors' money. . . . But that blonde, Melissa Kovak—that poor, miserable, puny creature."

Her lips curled. "I became suspicious of Roger, and last night I followed him—to that hotel in East Grange, and I waited. I saw Roger come out. He didn't take his car, so I knew he was going back. I went up the back stairway to the room—and I killed her.

"She didn't say anything. She looked at me in a dumb way, like a pig waiting for the butcher's knife. It was easy. Then I went down and sat in my car and waited for Roger to find her. I didn't want to miss that.

"I saw him go back into the hotel, and I saw him come running out. I followed him to your place, and I followed him out to the plant. He didn't go home. The guard wasn't around, and I hit Roger with the jack handle from my car. Then I tied him up and strung him to the flagpole.

"He started to jerk before I left him, and I talked to him while he died. I let him hang where everyone could see him. I was glad. It wasn't only because of that sickly little blonde, but because I knew there would be others after her. I couldn't stand that. I warned him, but he just laughed—and he took that miserable little wench to that cheap hotel."

From the dark doorway leading into the kitchen there came a deep, throaty growl.

REBECCA FOSTER took a sip of her tomato juice. "George is getting impatient," she said. "I suppose the arrows gave me away? But they were silent, and I didn't think I would miss, and I planned to pull them out of you and take them with

me. But that damn wind out there—it was stronger than I thought, even if I did use a bow with a sixty-pound pull.

"I didn't want you snooping around. I knew this morning that I would have to kill you."

"And so you lure me over here tonight?" I said.

She laughed gaily. "Of course. An evil trap. When you were here this afternoon I was sure that you had noticed my archery trophy, so. . . ."

The scotch was all gone, and I was sorry. I looked at the bottom of my empty glass, and said: "It wasn't the archery trophy. I didn't notice it until a little bit ago. And I remember now that the old guy on the desk of the Avalon told me that one of Roger's women was a mixed blonde."

She ran a hand through her streaked hair. "If I were a cat, they'd call me calico. The sun does it." She looked toward the kitchen door, and there was an expectant, eager expression on her face."

I felt like a man having a fantastic dream—the kind you remember right after you wake up, and then forget. Only I couldn't forget about George Bismarck Van Tonder the Third crouching in the darkness.

"A man called me up tonight and gave me that Lovers' Lane routine," I said. "A pal of yours?"

She smiled pleasantly. "I couldn't call you, Mr. Fiske. I couldn't take a chance on having you recognize my voice. So I went downtown to a hotel and I paid a bell hop five dollars to call you for me. Clever of me, wasn't it? Do you have a gun?"

I nodded. "Looks like I'll need it." I felt mean as hell. I wanted to slug somebody, smash something. I thought of Melissa, the little car-hop, butchered like a pig in a packing house, and I thought of Roger Garrit, and of his wife, Helen, and I thought of the arrows slamming out of the night at me, and I remembered the blind misery in Tony Kovaks's eyes. The more I remembered the meaner I felt—and now she was going to sic a killer dog on me. I could feel my .38 in its clip beneath my left arm, and it gave me a savage satisfaction.

Rebecca Foster shook her head slowly. There was a smile on her lips. "Your gun won't help—not with George. He's too

fast, and he's been trained to deal with guns."

"I can damn well shoot you first," I said. The idea was suddenly very attractive.

She laughed her gay laugh. "You frighten me, Mr. Fiske." She held her left hand over her chest and lifted her right hand high. "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head, but spare my faithful dog, she said." It really doesn't matter, you know. . . ." She swung away from me suddenly, and covered her face with her hands. She began to sob wildly.

"George!" she screamed. "Kill him!"

He leaped instantly from the dark kitchen doorway, and I got a glimpse of a mass of gray and black fur and a wicked pair of yellow eyes focused on my throat. I backed up a little, and I slipped the .38 from its clip.

The dog was coming fast, but it seemed to me that I had all the time in the world. I felt cold and calm and a little indifferent. The .38 was a pleasant weight in my hand, and the pull of the trigger was a lovely sensation.

The walls rocked with the blast of the gun, and one of the dog's baleful yellow eyes was suddenly a red hole. He slid forward on his forefeet, snapping and growling. I laughed silently to myself, and squeezed the trigger again—just to convince myself that it hadn't been a lucky shot. The other eye spurted blood, and the dog collapsed and lay still.

I laughed out loud then. I felt good.

A billowing blue cloud enveloped me, and sharp fingernails dug into my face. I felt silk and warm flesh beneath my hands. I jumped clear of Rebecca Foster, and I whipped the .38 around in a short arc. There was a kind of a soft thudding sound, and she hit the floor without a murmur. She lay on her back at my feet, with the blue silk robe fanned out beneath her, and a little blood oozed out of her lips.

I stepped over her, and over the body of the dog. The telephone was on a small table along the wall. Lieutenant Dagget wasn't in, but the cop on the phone assured me that somebody would be out. I went into the kitchen, humming a little tune to myself. The scotch was on the sink.

By the time the cops got there I was feeling fine.

DOC PIERCE'S DOUBLE-XMAS



I've cooled out many
a chump in my day. . . .

By **RICHARD
DERMODY**

*Doc Pierce and I always figure what is
sauce for the gander is wadding for
our wallets, especially when we can
inveigle a Western sucker into playing
Santa Claus to a merry widow—and us.*

IT IS a mild winter in the state of Arkansas. The air is crisp, the road is smooth, the heap is purring and we are on our way to a score, we hope. I slow for a crossing and grin at the Doc.

"Jingle Bells," I tell him. "This caper sounds like a real Christmas present to me. Does Santa Claus own the outfit?"

The Doc grins back at me. "I trust the good saint will smile on us," he says. "I like to be prosperous during the Yuletide season."

Well, the Doc is always in season when it comes to trimming a sucker but he hasn't

given me the details on this particular caper. He gets upset when I ask too many questions so I just hand-ride the heap and wait. Finally he chuckles.

"Santa Claus is not the proprietor of the Jingle Bells Novelty Company," he says. "Mr. Herman Chunker, president of the company, passed away recently. His widow, Mrs. Isophene Chunker, is now the sole owner."

I don't feel so good when I hear this. "Look, Doc," I tell him. "No dames. Every time we cut into a caper with a dame in it we run a bad second. Especially when the dame is a widow."

The Doc chuckles again. "Do not be alarmed, Pony Boy," he says. "We will not take a profit from Mrs. Isophene Chunker, except indirectly. In fact she will benefit from the little plan I have in mind. The important target in this operation will be our friend Mister Jasper Slummit of Cowflat, Texas."

I am feeling better. We meet Mr. Jasper Slummit a few weeks before this and of all the prime chumps I ever encounter, Mr. Jasper Slummit is the juiciest and the ripest.

Mr. Jasper Slummit is a bulky, loud party who spends his early years pestering cattle and riding around in one of these armchairs they use for saddles in Texas. A few years back Mr. Jasper Slummit falls out of his armchair into an oil well and comes up dripping with dollars.

Of course this gives Mr. Jasper Slummit the idea that he is a smart business operator and it also gives him an appetite for more dollars. At the time we meet him he is itching for action, but the Doc does not have a little plan on tap so we file him for future reference.

"I am in favor of a green Christmas financed by Mr. Jasper Slummit," I tell the Doc. "How do we hook him into this Jingle Bells Novelty Company?"

"It will be a simple operation," he tells me. "The Jingle Bells Novelty Company manufactures toys, cheap jewelry and such matters, including Christmas tree decorations. At this time of year the business will be booming and Mrs. Isophene Chunker will have many problems. I think she will jump at the chance to sell out to Mr. Jasper Slummit at a high price."

I think this over. I know better than to ask him how he figures on getting Mr.

Jasper Slummit to jump at the chance to purchase this Jingle Bells outfit. The Doc has many ways of encouraging chumps to jump at chances.

"How do we score?" I ask him. "Do we collect a commission?"

"That's right," the Doc says. "I expect to collect two commissions, as a matter of fact." He gets out a map and looks at it. "The Jingle Bells Novelty Company is located in the thriving hamlet of Cliffjump, about twenty miles from here," he says. He thinks for a minute. "I shall ask Wall-Street Walter to join us," he says finally. "This deal will appeal to him."

I feel much better when I hear this. Wall-Street Walter is a top operator and he is also expensive. The Doc never calls him in unless he expects a big score.

THIS town of Cliffjump is a small burg hidden up in the woods. The Jingle Bells Novelty Company is in a brick building on the edge of town and looks neat and tidy. We check in at the local fleabag and the Doc gets out his typewriter and starts in putting the bait together for Mr. Jasper Slummit. He tells me what to say and I mope down to the station and send off telegrams to Mr. Jasper Slummit and Wall-Street Walter.

When I get back the Doc tells me he has talked to Mrs. Isophene Chunker on the telephone and we have a date to see her at eight o'clock. We put on the feed bag and dust off our working clothes, and at exactly eight o'clock I punch the bell at the Chunker residence.

A blonde dame opens the door. She is a few years younger than me, maybe twenty-three or four, and after I take a careful look at her I figure this Cliffjump is not such a dull burg, at that. She gives us a big smile.

"I suppose you are Doctor Pierce and Mr. Allan," she says. The Doc sweeps off his black skimmer and I take off my own hat. She lets the smile out a couple more notches. "Mother is in the living room," she says. She leads us through a wide hall into a long room with a heap of logs burning in a big fireplace.

Mrs. Isophene Chunker is parked in front of the fire. She is a tall dame and by no means a bad job for her age. In fact Isophene is still shaped like a dame and not like a sack of something. I notice the Doc looks

her over carefully and I figure we better get this caper over with as soon as possible.

The Doc opens his swayback coat so Isophene can get a good gander at his fresh white vest. He walks over to her and holds out his mitt.

"This is a pleasure I have long anticipated," he says. His voice gets low and solemn. "Although I hoped to meet you under happier circumstances." He shakes his head. "Dear old Herman often spoke to me of your beauty and charm."

Isophene stares at him. "You knew my late husband?"

The Doc nods. "Yes," he says. "Dear old Herman."

Well, I have a hard time keeping my face straight while I am being put away with Isophene. The Doc is closer right now to dear old Herman than he ever gets in his life. We all park in a row around the fire and Isophene and the blonde pay close attention to the Doc.

"My meetings with your late husband were strictly business," the Doc says. "But I grew to love him and to respect his fine business judgment."

Isophene frowns. "I'm sorry," she says. "But I don't think my husband ever mentioned you."

The Doc looks sad. "That is easily understood," he says. "Herman wished to spare you the knowledge of his business troubles."

Isophene sits up straight when she hears this. "Business difficulties? I'm afraid I don't understand. The company was in excellent shape when Herman passed on."

The Doc looks sadder. "I am afraid I must take all the blame for that. I did my best to cover up the results of Herman's enthusiastic and over-ambitious errors. You see, Herman incurred certain obligations that do not appear on the books."

Isophene lets out a gasp. I take a look at the blonde. She is leaning forward and her blue eyes are bugged out. I can see it is time to sink the hook.

Isophene takes another gulp at the bait. "Do you mean that my husband owed you money?"

The Doc shakes his head and smiles. "Let us forget the past," he says. "We must keep our gaze fixed on the future." He leans forward and looks Isophene in the eye.

"Dear lady," he says, "you must not be distressed. I am sure everything can be arranged in a satisfactory manner. In fact, I have wonderful news for you."

Isophene is losing ground every minute and I have to admit I am several lengths behind the Doc myself. The blonde is breathing heavy.

"News," she says. "What news?"

The Doc looks at her and smiles.

"I am prepared to offer your mother one hundred and eighty thousand dollars in cash for the Jingle Bells Novelty Company," he says.

There is a dead silence in the room. Then the blonde jumps to her feet and runs across to Isophene.

"We'll never have such a chance again, Mother," she says. "You must accept it."

Isophene's face is dead white. She grabs the blonde by the elbow and shakes her head. "I can't believe it, Nanette." She looks at the Doc. "It isn't worth that much."

The Doc chuckles. "Not to the average buyer," he says. "But I have a special client who is willing to pay that much. Dear old Herman was ready to close this deal just before his untimely demise. I have refrained from discussing this with you until after the first shock of your loss had been softened by time."

Isophene and Nanette look at each other and then they both break out in big smiles. Nanette walks over and gives the Doc a big kiss on the brow.

"Your name is not Pierce," she says. "It is Saint Nicholas." She smiles at me. "Are you sure you haven't got eight tiny reindeer parked outside, Mr. Allan?"

"Well," I tell her, "we've got eight tiny cylinders, when they're all working."

Nanette laughs and turns back to her old lady. "Now we can get out of this awful town and go to Miami for the rest of the winter."

Isophene nods her head. "Yes. We will leave right away." She looks at the Doc. "How soon do you expect to close the deal?"

"**I**MMEDIATELY," the Doc says. His big red face sobers. "I must tell you that there are one or two minor conditions of sale." He waves his mitt at me. "Mr. Allan and myself have put in a lot of time

and effort on this sale. We feel that we deserve a small commission, say ten per cent."

Isophene frowns. "Ten per cent," she says. "Why, that would be eighteen thousand dollars."

The Doc chuckles. "I forgot to mention that my client is prepared to pay you two hundred thousand in cash. We expect you to hand us twenty thousand as our commission. That will leave you one hundred and eighty thousand dollars net."

Isophene cheers up again when she hears this. She lets out a big sigh of relief and smiles.

"You frightened me for a moment, Doctor," she says. "I think ten per cent is a most reasonable commission under the circumstances. In fact, you are being most generous. I think you know that we would have sold for a much smaller amount."

The Doc smiles back at her. "I could not take advantage of dear old Herman's widow and orphan child," he says.

Nanette looks at the Doc and her face is puzzled.

"That is a lovely sentiment," she says. "But Mr. Chunker was not my father. Mother was married before she met Mr. Chunker."

The Doc looks surprised. "I did not know that," he says. "Herman always spoke of you as his own dear child."

Isophene is a little pink in the face now. "My first husband was named Pilkins," she says. "Wellington Pilkins."

"Pilkins," the Doc says. "I once knew some people of that name."

Isophene shakes her head. "I doubt if you knew my first husband," she says. "We lived in Tatertown, Virginia. He was a banker there and he disappeared under most tragic circumstances."

Well, the last thing I wish to hear about is these tragic circumstances but the Doc is the kind of party that looks under every flat stone he sees.

"That sounds interesting," he tells Isophene.

Isophene takes out a handkerchief and takes a dab at her eyes. I can see she is all set to enjoy herself.

"My husband was cashier of the Tatertown Trust Company. One night Toodles—I always called him Toodles, it was a little pet name—worked late at the bank. The next morning he was gone, the bank vault

was found open, and one hundred and forty thousand dollars was missing."

Nanette leans forward. "Of course a lot of people said that father had stolen the money," she said. "But we know he couldn't do such a thing. I was twelve years old at the time and I simply worshipped him. He had the cutest little mustache and beard."

Isophene takes another dab at her eyes and butts in:

"Yes," she says. "Toodles was a very handsome man. The bank officers agreed with us that the bank had been robbed and the robbers murdered Toodles and concealed his body."

The Doc nods. "I suppose he was legally declared dead after seven years had elapsed."

"That's right," Isophene says. "I married Mr. Chunker five years ago."

The Doc looks sad. "You have had more than your share of hardship," he says. "But there are brighter days ahead." He gets to his feet. "To return to business. My client will be here in Cliffjump tomorrow with the cash. I suggest that you swear your attorney to secrecy and have him draw up the papers for an immediate sale."

Isophene frowns. "Secrecy? Why?" "That is another of the little conditions I mentioned," the Doc tells her. "My client insists that this sale be kept secret until he is ready to announce the change of ownership. You must not discuss the sale or the terms with anyone but your lawyer."

Isophene thinks it over and then nods her head.

"I see," she says. "Secrecy is sometimes necessary in big business." She smiles. "The money is the important thing. I have implicit confidence in your judgment. Doctor Pierce. I shall do exactly as you say."

Well, I am not surprised when Isophene says this. The Doc learns how to make people trust him years ago when he peddles snake oil around the carnival circuit, and he makes a good living out of it ever since. He pats Mrs. Isophene Chunker on the shoulder.

"Fine." He bows at the two dames and sucks in his haybelly. "With your permission we will retire to our hotel. When my client arrives, I will bring him to your office at the factory."

Isophene and Nanette follow us to the door and when this moonlight hits Nanette's

blonde hair I suddenly start working out a little plan of my own. I don't mention this plan to the Doc as I am sure he will not be sympathetic. Especially after the remarks I make to him about deals with dames in them.

WE ARE stowing away the last of the ham and eggs the next morning when Mr. Jasper Slummit walks into the dining room. He is even bigger and louder than I remember him and he is rubbing his hands together. He is wearing a big hat and a pair of these high-heeled Texas boots and he has a fat briefcase tucked under his wing.

He winks at the Doc and pats the briefcase before he shakes us by the hand. I figure I will rather shake him by the briefcase but I know that comes later. We get him up to the room and the Doc loses no time in going to work on him.

"I trust you have brought the sum of money I suggested," he says.

Mr. Jasper Slummit winks again and slaps the briefcase.

"That's correct, Partner," he says. "I forked a plane this morning as soon as the bank opened. I've got two hundred and fifty-thousand-dollar bills right here. I'm all ready to double it the way you promised in your telegram."

The Doc smiles. "You'll double it," he says. "We will all make a tidy profit." He hands a letter to Mr. Jasper Slummit.

I watch Mr. Jasper Slummit while he reads this letter. Of course the letter is creased and grimy like it has a lot of age, although the Doc writes it just the night before.

Mr. Jasper Slummit looks up. "This letter is an offer to buy the Jingle Bells Novelty Company from Mr. Herman Chunker," he says. "It was written two months ago and the price named is five hundred thousand. Where do I come in on this?"

The Doc smiles. "That is an intelligent question, Mr. Slummit. You have a keen and alert mind." He takes the letter and slips it back in his pocket. "You will notice that it is signed by Mr. Elander Throggle, the owner of the big chain of drug stores."

Mr. Jasper Slummit nods. "Yes, I have heard of Throggle. He is a big operator."

The Doc leans forward and speaks slowly. "Elander Throggle is due here in Cliff-jump on the evening train," he says. "He is

ready to write a check for five hundred thousand for the Jingle Bells Company. Mr. Herman Chunker is dead. Before he died, he asked me to look into this matter for him. I have kept all knowledge of this deal from Mr. Chunker's heirs, his wife and daughter."

Mr. Jasper Slummit thinks it over. I notice this look come over his face, the same look I see on a thousand suckers in my time. Mr. Jasper Slummit sees a chance to get the best of it.

"I take it you have advised this widow to sell the business for two hundred and fifty thousand," he says. "Is that the deal?"

"Something like that," the Doc says. "Mr. Allan and I had a long talk with Mrs. Chunker and her daughter last night. After a great deal of discussion, we persuaded them to accept the paltry sum of two hundred thousand for the business. Their lawyer is preparing the papers right now."

"Two hundred thousand?" Mr. Jasper Slummit says. "But you said you needed two hundred and fifty."

The Doc smiles. "The extra fifty thousand is for Mr. Allan and myself. I insisted on cash for that reason. Mrs. Chunker will receive two hundred thousand in cash. Tonight you will receive a check from Mr. Elander Throggle for five hundred thousand dollars. You will then pay us fifty thousand commission."

Mr. Jasper Slummit smiles back at him. "That's a fine deal, Partner." He slaps his leg. "You sure know how to work on a widow, Doc." He laughs out loud. "The widow gets two hundred thousand, you get fifty, and I get a profit of two hundred and fifty. That's a fine deal." He opens the briefcase. I never see a prettier sight in my life than all that lettuce tumbling on the bed.

The Doc looks at the money and his fingers curl a little at the ends. "We must work fast," he says. "We must have everything sewed up before Mr. Elander Throggle arrives."

Mr. Jasper Slummit nods his head. He separates the lettuce into two piles and waves the smallest stack at the Doc.

"I will place this in your hand the moment I get a check for half a million dollars from Elander Throggle," he says. "Now let us go and take the widow's business away from her."

THE office at the Jingle Bells Company is a small room with a desk, three chairs and a big safe in the corner. The Doc and Mr. Jasper Slummit are both two hundred pounders and by the time I squeeze in with them the joint is packed so tight you can hardly breathe.

Isophene and Nanette are on deck and a party with whiskers is sitting behind the desk. Isophene puts him away as this appleknocker attorney and says he has the papers all set. I give Nanette a wink and jerk my head at the door. She squeezes past her old lady and joins me outside. By the time the Doc and Mr. Jasper Slummit come out of the office I am doing all right.

The Doc gives me a dirty look when he sees me in the corner with Nanette but he can't say anything because he has Mr. Jasper Slummit in tow. We go back to the hotel and park in our room until it is time for the evening train to arrive with Mr. Elander Throggle.

I am pleased when it comes time to meet the train as I am getting weary of Mr. Jasper Slummit's adventures among the cattle and oil wells. The way Mr. Jasper Slummit tells it he never meets a cow in his life that is half as smart as he is.

I am a little nervous while I wait for the train to come in. I am always nervous when a caper gets to the pay-off, but I feel much better when Wall-Street Walter climbs off the train and mitts me.

Wall-Street Walter is around the Doc's age, maybe fifty, and he looks more like a big somebody than any big somebody I ever see. He is a handsome gent with wavy gray hair and a ruddy face and he looks like he is on his way to clip a flock of coupons or maybe sell a million shares of

something or other at a tremendous profit.

Walter is not surprised when I tell him he is now Mr. Elander Throggle, the owner of a large chain of drug stores. I give him the history of this caper up to date and by the time we get to the hotel Walter is ready to take over the play.

I tell him about the fifty G's we are to take from Mr. Jasper Slummit and he agrees to accept ten thousand as his cut. Of course I do not mention the twenty thousand we will also collect from Mrs. Isophene Chunker that evening.

The Doc and Mr. Jasper Slummit are sitting over a fresh jug of bourbon the Doc breaks out. He pours a dose for Wall-Street Walter and informs him that Mr. Jasper Slummit is the new owner of the Jingle Bells Novelty Company and is ready to do business.

Walter scowls at the Doc. "I can't say I approve of this, Pierce," he says in a sharp voice. "You assured me that I would have first chance to do business with Mrs. Chunker."

The Doc shrugs. "I tried to persuade Mrs. Chunker to wait until you arrived. But Mr. Slummit is a shrewd man. He also has a way with the ladies. Mrs. Chunker was just putty in his hands."

Wall-Street Walter scowls again. "I will not trust you in the future," he says. He turns to Mr. Jasper Slummit. "Well, Sir, what is your price?"

The Doc butts in: "Just a moment, Mr. Throggle," he says to Walter. "I resent your suggestion that I have conspired with Mr. Slummit against you. Mr. Slummit was able to purchase the company for a sum slightly less than the amount you offered the late Mr. Chunker. Mr. Slummit has



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agreed to take a small profit and sell to you for the same price, five hundred thousand dollars."

Walter smiles when the Doc says this. "Well, in that case I shall not criticise you, Doctor Pierce." He reaches into his pocket. "I am prepared to write a check for that sum."

Mr. Jasper Slummit twiddles his fingers and gets a smart look on his face. "Let us not be too hasty," he says. "I am not sure I care to sell for that price."

Well, I can see everything is going fine. I get up and walk over to the Doc.

"Mrs. Chunker and her daughter are packing to leave for Miami in the morning," I tell him. "I promised that I would stop by and see them this evening." I lower my voice. "The oughday?"

The Doc nods. "Yes," he says. "Give them my regards and say farewell for me. I think we will be ready to leave in the morning ourselves." Of course the Doc is telling me to go ahead and collect our commission from Isophene.

I go down to the garage and get the heap. On my way through the lobby I hear music and I notice a dance is going on in the hotel dining room. I figure out a little plan.

ISOPHENE and Nanette are strapping up a couple of big suitcases in the living room and I can see they are set to take off for the beach. I put the bite on Isophene for the twenty grand commission right away. She goes over to a safe on the wall and hauls it out. I notice a big stock of lettuce in the safe and I figure she has the whole take right there handy.

Isophene breaks out a bottle of champagne and we have a few doses. Finally I mention this dance at the hotel. Isophene pats her hands together.

"That is a splendid idea," she says. "We will have a little celebration. Perhaps Doctor Pierce will join us. I will take a few bottles of our champagne along."

Well, this is not exactly what I have in mind, but there isn't much I can do about it. I remember that we have a small jug of brandy in the glove box in the heap. I figure that I can boost this champagne along a little and maybe Isophene will pass out on the way home and I will have a chance at Nanette and this moonlight.

I manage to slid the brandy into my

pants pocket on the way to the hotel. We get a table in the middle of the room and I start operations. About an hour later I am doing fine. Mrs. Isophene Chunker has lapped up four boosted glasses of champagne and Nanette is giving me plenty of grip while we are dancing.

The music slows down and I take Nanette back to the table so I can boost Isophene's next glass of champagne. We are just about to sit down when I notice a movement at the doorway. The Doc, Mr. Jasper Slummit and Wall-Street Walter walk in.

They are all smiling and I can see a bulge in the Doc's coat pocket so I know the deal is made and the commission is safe. I start to wave my hand when I hear a scream beside me. I look around.

Isophene's face is dead white.

"Toodles," she yells. "Oh, Toodles."

She slides to the floor and passes out.

Well, this is quicker than I expect. I lean over her and then look up at Nanette. Only Nanette is not there. In fact she is now across the room with her arms around Wall-Street Walter.

"Daddy darling," Nanette is saying. "You have come back to us at last."

Well, this is a fine scene. It is easy to figure that Wall-Street Walter is also Mr Wellington Pilkins of Tatertown, Virginia. I figure it is a dirty trick for Walter to be related to these dames at this time. However, I don't discuss it with him.

I leave Isophene on the floor and hustle over to Mr. Jasper Slummit. I can see that Mr. Jasper Slummit is confused by this scene and is about to ask questions.

The Doc has Mr. Jasper Slummit by the wing. I also put the arm on him and we rush him up to the room. We get the door closed and then we turn him loose. The Doc sits on the bed and mops his brow.

"That was an affecting meeting," he says. "I did my best to prevent it." He gives me a dirty look. I can tell the Doc intends to criticize me.

I pat my coat pocket. The Doc looks a little better. The Doc always feels better when he realizes he is near fresh money.

Mr. Jasper Slummit is still on his feet. He has a big scowl on his face.

"What is this Toodles business?" he asks the Doc. "Why did that young lady call Mr. Elander Throggle daddy?"

The Doc sighs. "It is a long, sad story," he says. "The scene you just witnessed is the reason poor old Herman Chunker did not tell his wife that he was selling the Jingle Bells Novelty Company to Elander Throggle. He knew she hated Elander Throggle and would object violently."

Well, this is fairly good for a quick speil, but I can see that Mr. Jasper Slummit is not too fond of it. He scowls again.

"Do you mean that Elander Throggle is that young lady's father?"

The Doc nods. "It is a long story."

MR. JASPER SLUMMIT is looking good and nasty now. "I do not have time for a long story," he says. "In fact I think there is something fishy about this." He starts across the room for the telephone. "I think I will call the police."

The Doc gets to his feet and sighs. "I detest violence," he says.

Of course I know what he means. I speak sharply to Mr. Jasper Slummit.

"Just a minute, Brother," I say.

Mr. Jasper Slummit turns around.

Well, I have cooled out many a chump in my day but I have to admit that few of them come as tough as Mr. Jasper Slummit. I lay three big right hands on his chin and a couple of left hooks before he relaxes.

He has a big bandana in his pocket and we tie his hands and feet together with it. I donate a pair of clean socks and we stuff one in his mouth and wrap the other one around his jaw. By the time I have him tucked under the bed the Doc has the keisters packed.

He makes several nasty remarks about parties who get mixed up with dames during a caper and I have to hold still for it. He pays the bill at the desk and I hustle the bags out to the heap. I take a look in the back seat. I am still standing there with my mouth open when the Doc arrives.

Wall-Street Walter is in the middle with Isophene and Nanette beside him. Walter gives Isophene a squeeze and us a smile.

"I have been suffering from amnesia all these years," he tells us. "Those bank robbers abducted me and struck me on the skull with a blunt instrument. It all came back to me when I saw Isophene and Nanette there in the dining room."

Well, I figure Wall-Street Walter is

telling a big lie but it is none of my business. I am quite nervous as it is better than a hundred miles to the state line.

The Doc speaks to Isophene:

"Did you deposit that one hundred and eighty thousand dollars in the bank?"

Wall-Street Walter speaks up. "No," he says. "Isophene has told me everything. She has the money at her home in the safe. I have suggested that we all go to Miami together. It will be a pleasant holiday and we will be glad to have you with us." He hesitates for a minute, then he says: "I have told Isophene that we should take the one hundred and eighty thousand along."

The Doc grins. "That is an excellent program," he says. He climbs into the heap. "On to Miami, Pony Boy," he says.

We stop by the Chunker residence and pick up the luggage and the bankroll. When we start out again I have no trouble shifting Nanette into the front seat with me. Naturally the Doc wishes to sit in the back with Isophene and Wall-Street Walter and Isophene's handbag.

We cross the state line about midnight. Nanette is taking a little nap on my shoulder. I let my breath out and slow the heap down a little. She wakes up and stretches.

Nanette smiles at me. "We are so grateful to you and Doctor Pierce," she says. "You have made this a lovely Christmas. You brought daddy back and you sold the factory to that horrid man."

The Doc chuckles. "Nanette is right. Mister Jasper Slummit is a horrid man. I do not approve of parties who are willing to take advantage of a poor widow woman, especially at Christmas time. Mister Jasper Slummit does not have the true Yuletide spirit in his heart."

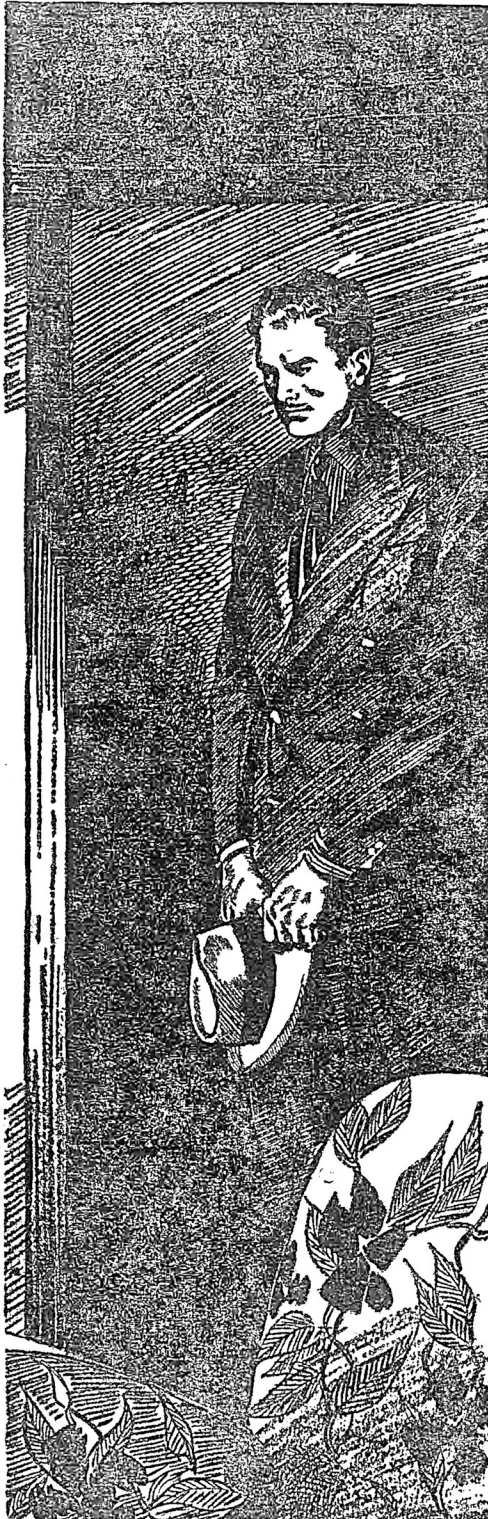
"Well," I tell him. "I don't know about the spirit, but I would say that Mister Jasper Slummit got a first-class trimming."

The Doc chuckles again. He pats the fifty grand in his coat pocket and then reaches over and pats the handbag on Isophene's lap. I touch the twenty G's in my own pocket and look down at Nanette.

"I shall always think of Mr. Jasper Slummit kindly," I say. "In fact, Mr. Jasper Slummit is the closest thing to Santa Claus I ever run into. He has set us up for a real merry Christmas, and a good start on a prosperous New Year."

A CORPSE IS A CROWD





**Thrilling
Crime-Adventure
Novelette**

By H. Q. MASUR

● ●

My admiring interest in feminine architecture gave the blonde beauty a few more precious hours of life—and made me first choice for the Sing Sing sizzle-seat.

CHAPTER ONE

Blonde Bombshell

I WAS driving up Madison Avenue against a thin drizzle when I first saw the blonde. She was an eyecatcher, tall and sylphine, with a wonderfully bunched figure in a tailored suit, with cascading shoulder length hair the color of pale sauterne against bar lights, with long legs in dark nylons and ankle-strap shoes built on high platforms.

It was my intense appreciation of feminine architecture that probably saved her life. She was standing on a corner in front of a milling group, waving her hand in a vain effort to flag a cab. I let my eyes swivel around to keep her in sight, wondering whether to give her a lift, when something happened that put an end to all that.

With no warning whatever, she suddenly lunged off the curb directly into the path of my 1936 Lincoln convertible. Had my attention not been focused on her, had I been watching the road as I should have been, my bumper would have sent her sailing like a ball clouted over the right field bleachers. For a moment there I was busier than a split atom.

Luckily my reflexes are good. I wrestled

● ●

Her laugh was high pitched, almost hysterical. "Neil," she said. "It's you. Come on in. . . ."

the wheel hard to port and applied both sets of brakes, hand and foot, literally standing that car up on its hind wheels and taking inches of my screeching tires.

Even so I nicked her with my right front fender, and she spilled over backward in a flying swirl of custom-designed legs.

The old Lincoln jarred to a stop. I jumped out and elbowed through a quickly collecting throng, wondering why people always have to hang their noses over an accident. The pale blonde was sitting up, dazed, her claret mouth twisted with a grimace of pain.

I gathered her in my arms. About one hundred and twenty pounds, soft and unresisting. I said crisply: "One side, Folks," and I carried her back to the car and deposited her carefully on the front seat. Then I scrambled around to the other side and hopped in beside her.

A policeman's whistle shrilled. But I didn't wait. The engine was still running, and I put it in gear and swung west on the traffic light. The girl was silent. I glanced at her and found her staring dully ahead.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Not too bad. Where are you taking me?"

"St. John's Hospital," I said.

The idea did not seem to appeal to her. She promptly vetoed it, shaking her head. "No, I'd rather not," she said. "Please take me home."

"But you may be hurt," I protested. "Contusion, lacerations, and perhaps a few X-rays will show some internal injuries that—"

"My!" she said. "You're a cheerful one. It's nothing, really; only a glancing blow." She reached down and pulled her skirt about twelve inches above her left knee, letting me see the gartered rim of her dark hose and a length of round white thigh that was discolored by a small but nasty-looking blue bruise.

"Painful?" I asked.

"A little, but I hardly think it calls for a doctor."

"All right," I said, "though I really owe it to my insurance company to—"

She looked annoyed. "Don't worry. I shan't sue."

Considering how the accident had happened I should have laughed at that, but I didn't. I said: "Where's home?"

She gave me an address on Riverside Drive in the Eighties. As I guided the car uptown I took additional stock out of the tail of my eye. She was nervous and on edge. She really had the jumps, and she kept glancing backward over her shoulder as if she was afraid someone was following us. The pupils of her eyes were dark, unstill, and her teeth made small white marks in the full, rather sultry underlip.

"What made you do it?" I asked suddenly.

She glanced at me, puzzled. "Do what?"

"Jump in front of my car."

"Jump!" she exclaimed. "That's ridiculous. I didn't jump. I was—"

And then she stopped and stared straight ahead, sitting uncompromisingly erect, with her lips firmly compressed. There was a stubborn set to her small jaw and a pallor under the artfully applied makeup.

"I get it," I said ingenuously. "You were pushed."

She did not answer. She made her mouth very small.

"You should have yelled," I said. "Maybe we could have caught the guy."

She ignored the bait. I shrugged and continued driving along the river. Under a hard bright sun it had a leaden shine, and a few cruisers rode at anchor as solidly as if they had been cemented into the water.

THE Riverside Drive address turned out to be one of those remodeled jobs that had once been a private residence; four stories of white limestone, with large curved windows and a tiny self-service elevator, all nice and private. She did not wait for me to open the door and was climbing out the moment we stopped. Then she turned and squeezed out a small strained smile and thanked me for the lift.

"Think nothing of it," I said.

She hesitated. "Would you like a drink?"

I accepted with alacrity. In the space of a splintered second, I was out of the car and had my arm linked in hers. She was tall and she was blonde and she had her own apartment, and I practically towed her through the door, giving her no chance to change her mind.

On the top floor we went into the long cool sweep of a cozy living room with egg-shell broadloom and deep wooly furniture and soft lights and a small but efficient

blond-wood bar containing a large collection of bottles, long and squat, round and square. A highly inviting atmosphere.

She sat down on the sofa and gestured at the bar. "Help yourself," she said.

I went over and poured some Scotch into a thin glass and put a squirt of soda on top of it and drank appreciatively. I felt better. Then I turned to the blonde and grew even more appreciative.

She was reclining languidly on the sofa, one leg drawn up under her, gingerly testing the bruise on her thigh with a long forefinger.

"It'll go away after a while," I said.

She dropped the skirt and regarded me coolly. She didn't seem nervous now. "Pour me a drink," she said. "Rye, please."

I made it a double shot and gave her the glass. She put it down with a snap of her head as if it were a dose of cough medicine. Color seeped into her face.

"Well," I said, standing in front of her. "It seems like you're in trouble."

Her eyes were distant. "It's my trouble," she said flatly. "I can take care of it."

"Maybe," I said. "And then again, maybe not. Just look at it. Somebody shoved you in front of my car. That was pretty risky in front of all those people, and it proves how important your death is to him. One failure won't discourage him. He'll be around for another try."

"Your concern is very touching," she said off-handedly. "And yet I don't see how you could be of any help."

I produced a card and dropped it into her lap.

She glanced at it. "Steven Caro. Private Investigator." She looked up, frowning. "I don't believe I've ever heard of you."

"That's possible. I'm not the Pinkertons and I don't get as much publicity as the FBI. My clients often want their troubles kept under wraps."

She tapped the card against her teeth. Then she shook her head. "Really, I don't need any help."

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "You're an amateur playing with a potential killer, and this sort of thing happens to be my business. However, it's your life. And if the guy succeeds, I'll never be able to say I told you so."

That reached her and she didn't like it. Not a bit. She shivered and took a long

trembling breath. Then she put a knuckle between her teeth and gnawed at it. Fear crept into her eyes. "Yes," she said finally, in a subdued voice, "you're right, of course. But I must have time to think it over. Can you come back here this evening?"

"Sure," I said. "Supper at seven-thirty?"

She nodded and built a one-sided smile that seemed to require a painful effort.

"Fine," I said. "Keep the door bolted and the windows locked. Take no chances."

I was only kidding, but my words touched off an explosive reaction. She stiffened like an arch-backed cat.

"Listen," she said harshly from between locked jaws. "Listen and get this clear: If anything happens to me, anything at all, if I'm found dead, you have a job. Pin it on Charles Ormond. Understand? Charles Ormond. See that he pays. He'd like to kill me. Don't let him get away with it. Make sure that he's caught. Don't ever rest until he's convicted and strapped into the electric chair. And burned black."

She was warming up and the last few words were spat out viciously. Her face, too, had grown white, as if the large valves in her heart had choked off the blood.

I stood there and blinked at her.

I asked: "Do you, by any chance, mean Charles Ormond, the well-known building contractor?"

"I do," she said icily.

I looked the room over. "And just what is Charles Ormond to you?"

"Only my ex-employer," she said. "And not what your evil mind is thinking."

"Well!" I said. "Charles Ormond, builder of skyscrapers, subways and city airports. Millionaire, and big time operator, as the boys say. That calls for another drink." I went back to the bar and depleted the Scotch bottle. Then I turned and confronted her again. "Motive, please?"

"What?"

"His motive. If Ormond is going to kill you, he must have a motive."

She got her mouth open with reluctance. "Just check the books of his firm and the contents of his safe deposit box. It's the Times Square branch of the Commercial Trust." She averted her eyes and pressed her lips firmly. "You needn't ask any more questions. I've said more than I intended to."

She stopped and turned pale as the door-bell rang. Her chin jerked up like the head of a deer frightened at a water-hole. A sudden shudder ripped through her body.

I reached under my arm and took out my gun. A 9 mm. Mauser.

The muscles in her throat were rigid. The bell convulsed again.

"Answer it," I said.

SHE got up. Her eyes were pinpricks of restlessness. I waved the gun. She moved jerkily. There was a booby trap at every step. I thought she was going to cave at the knees. I went along and stood against the wall so that I would be hidden by the door when it opened. She reached for the knob, stiff-fingered, as if it were a high tension wire. She got it twisted and the door swung inward.

Her laugh was high-pitched, almost hysterical.

"Neil!" she said. "It's you. Come on in."

"What's wrong, Baby?" he asked. "You look as if you'd just seen Old Nick himself."

He came in behind her, a handsome specimen with a dashine mustache and thin expressive eyebrows and a high brown forehead under tight dark hair. He was wearing a gray suit and a confident smile. He advanced into the living room, and then he heard my step behind him. He turned around and the easy smile dropped like a ballast sack. His eyes stuck out at the gun. He looked unhappy. His jaw dropped.

"Don't get excited," I said sociably. "It isn't a holdup. I was just showing this Mauser to our friend here. I took it away from a German colonel in Normandy. It's a nice gun. Not quite as good as the Luger, though, and I think our own army .45 has it beat all hollow."

He exhaled slowly and managed a grin. "Would you mind," he asked, "pointing it elsewhere?"

I did better than that. I put it away.

The blonde was still shaky, but she got through with the usual amenities. The guy's name was Neil Hollister, and he had a firm handclasp and an easy laugh.

"Didn't know you had company, Hazel," he said apologetically, "or I wouldn't have come barging in here like this."

"I was on the point of leaving anyway,"

I said, still innocently affable to him.

We had another handshake. I had a final drink and then I smiled reassuringly at the girl and went out backwards, closing the door behind me. I paused to inspect the nameplate. It read: *Hazel Varney*.

The little elevator dropped me to the street. I was thinking that it might not be easy to keep my mind on business in this case. There were elements here. A tall blonde with curves and a well-stocked bar and secrets and at least one enemy.

I drove back to the office.

The rest of the afternoon was just routine. I spent half an hour arguing with some joker who wanted to frame his wife in a divorce proceeding, but I finally managed to ease him out. Mostly I was marking time until my date. At six I went to a barber and relaxed while he gave me the works.

Promptly at seven-thirty I was standing at Hazel Varney's door with my finger on the button. I was wearing gray flannels, two-toned sport shoes, a fresh shave and an air of great expectancy.

It took three rings to get the door opened, and then the small pale face of a strange girl looked out at me through large white-rimmed eyes, and a tremulous voice inquired: "Yes?"

"Hazel Varney, please," I said.

"She—she isn't home."

"She will be," I said, smiling broadly. "We have a date. May I wait inside?"

She looked at me and swallowed painfully. There was a sort of glassy stiffness in her face. She said in a taut and faltering voice: "No—you can't. I—I don't think Hazel will be back at all tonight."

She moved quickly. And she almost made it. I caught the door with my toe just before it smacked my nose. Then I leaned my shoulder against it, gently but firmly, sliding her backward into the apartment. I closed the door behind me and crossed over and got myself deposited in a huge club chair and crossed my knees and looked smug.

She ran around and stood in front of me with her fingers clasped tightly in a supplicating gesture. She was a small woman with an hourglass figure in a tight silk dress, V-cut halfway down to a broad leather belt studded with large brass nail-heads. She had a long curved throat and

sable-black hair parted down the center and pulled into twin buns over ears. Two jade earring glistened on the lobes. She stared at me out of dark contracted pupils like a wounded canary watching an alley cat.

"Please," she said, her voice squeaked, "you don't understand. Hazel went away and she won't be home."

"I'll wait," I said.

Her eyes did it. They got down on their hands and knees. They threw the whole picture out of focus. "Go away!" she wailed.

I got up slowly and prowled across the room and fingered the knob of the bedroom door. I heard a choked sob and I turned. The brunette was crouching against the sofa, watching me with a sort of fascinated horror. She was shivering. I went into the bedroom.

Hazel Varney was propped up on the satin cover of the oval bed, grinning at me.

CHAPTER TWO

What, No Alibi?

SHE WAS wearing a flowered wrap-around. The grin was mask-like, frozen. She hadn't bled very much. She had been shot twice. Both bullet wounds were spaced less than an inch apart on her breast. Her eyes were open and sightless. The rigor of death had flattened and shrunk the muscles in her face.

I didn't move. I stood there, impaled, and stared at her. I had feelings, and anger was one of them.

Death was nothing new to me. I had seen the massed graves and the rotting corpses at Buchenwald; I had seen the

charred piles outside the huge Nazi crematoriums. But Hazel was something else. She was a girl I had spoken to only a few hours back. She had been beautiful and exciting, but in the last instant she had seen what was coming. She had looked at the gun and she had known, and her face had registered appalled shock, and then the bullet had printed that expression like a photographic plate in a camera.

I turned away and went back to the living room, walking on knee joints that fit badly. It took several seconds to realize that something was wrong.

The brunette was gone and I was alone. She had bolted.

I whirled and raced into the hall. It was empty. I heard the mechanical whirr of the descending elevator and I punched the button and then realized the futility of trying to catch her. By the time I reached the street, she would be in a cab, blocks away.

I went back to the apartment. I closed the door and looked around. The first time I missed it, but on the return trip I saw the alligator purse lying on the coffee table. In her frantic departure the brunette had evidently forgotten it.

I went over and picked it up and snapped open the amber catch and turned it upside down. A gun fell out.

It was a small gun. A .32 caliber Colt automatic, a Banker's Special, with a stub barrel; the kind of gun a man can wear in his hip pocket without tearing the lining. Fired at close range it would pack the wallop of a howitzer.

I broke out the clip. Two shells were missing. I held the barrel against my nose and sniffed. A faint acrid odor told the



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story. I wiped the gun and dropped it back into the purse and examined the other items.

A small leather folder held a driver's license. It was made out to Mrs. Alma Ormond of the Parkhurst Arms. I stared at it and remembered Hazel's words. She had said that if anything happened to her I was to pin it on Charles Ormond.

Something had happened all right. The one irrevocable act. The thing that can never be undone. The final, the ultimate cruelty that one human being can exercise against another.

I considered the alternatives. Call the cops and wait, or call the cops anonymously and beat it. The first did not appeal to me. A lot of machinery moves in with the cops and I'd be on the carpet all night answering questions. After all, the purse was here and its contents were practically a blueprint.

I was still weighing it when the doorbell rang. I whirled and took off through the kitchen like a grayhound after a mechanical rabbit. I tore out the back door and went tumbling down the service stairs three at a time. I almost made it without mishap too. Turning at the last landing, I collided with someone on his way up. He fell backward with a crash of bottles. Some gangling kid had been making a delivery of ginger ale. We both went over in a tangle of arms and legs and I righted myself and kept going.

In the street I found a drug store and went into a phone booth and dialed police headquarters.

"There's a dead girl in Apartment 4-E," I said to the voice that answered. "Shot twice through the heart. Better hurry." And I gave the address.

"Who's talking?" asked the switchboard cop.

"Clarence Darrow," I said and hung up.

That should do it. Whoever had been ringing Hazel's bell would receive no answer and go away. The police would arrive and find Mrs. Ormond's purse. That was their lead and a little competent digging would give them what I already knew.

By and large, it was really none of my affair. Hazel Varney was practically a stranger. Nobody was paying me any fee. Nobody had called me in. The people pay the police to do this kind of work and they

elect public defenders to protect their interests.

So I went home.

IT WAS not easy forgetting what had happened. But half a bottle of Irish helped. By ten o'clock I had settled down with a pipe and German book entitled *Pistolen und Revolverscheissen*. I cannot read German but the pictures were good. Especially a series of plates on the assembling of Mausers.

I was engrossed in this when someone fingered the door-bell. I got up and opened it and looked at a slender, dark-complexioned man with deep eyes and a brooding expression. I knew him. John Nola, detective-lieutenant, homicide bureau.

"Hello, John," I said.

He eyed me carefully, then pushed past into the room, crossed over and leaned against the wall and prowled with his eyes. After a moment he produced a thin cigar and got it burning with a kitchen match that he snapped into flame with his thumbnail. He did not look like a cop. He wore a neat dark business suit and a high polish on his narrow black shoes. But he was a good cop, intelligent, fair and so far as I knew, quite incorruptible.

"Drink?" I asked.

"No," he said. He stood silent, watching me with a level stare. After a while it began to prickle under my skin. I went over and put a forefinger against his chest.

"All right, John," I said. "What's on your mind?"

He emptied his mouth of smoke. "How you doing with the ladies these days, Caro?"

Nola and I have been friends for ten years. His calling me by my last name was a bad sign.

"That's not what you came up for," I said. "Just what do you want?"

"Information," he said.

"About what?"

"Not what—who. A certain blonde."

"I know several of them. Which one?"

"A squab named Hazel Varney. Know her?"

"Slightly," I said.

He examined the cigar. "Well," he said, "a thing happened to her, a very bad thing. She's dead. Two bullets through the heart."

I lifted one eyebrow, keeping the rest of

my face under control. "What's that got to do with me?"

"It's like this, Caro. We got a phone tip. We went up there and found her with a pair of punctures. Either one of those shots were enough to kill her, which rules out suicide, even if we had found her with a gun in her hand, which we didn't."

"Me," I said quietly. "Where do I fit?"

He looked at me soberly. "We searched the place, naturally. And in her dresser we found one of your cards."

I uncovered a smile. "Listen, John, the print order called for a thousand cards. I distribute them widely, even prodigally. It doesn't mean a thing."

"There was a highball glass on the bar," he said, his face deadpan, "with a nice set of latents. We have your prints on file downtown. We compare. They check. Deduction: Caro, you were in Hazel Varney's apartment some time today."

I smiled stiffly. "Admitted," I said. "The point is, what time was she chilled?"

"The medical examiner says between seven and eight."

"There you are," I said triumphantly. "That does it. That clears me. I was there early in the afternoon but I left around three o'clock."

He shook his head without smiling.

"Now, look," I said. "I have a witness."

He bent forward a little at the waist and stubbed out his cigar. "So you left," he said. "But you came back. We have a witness to that."

I looked at him and didn't say anything. I just waited.

He said: "Somebody in the building ordered a couple of bottles of ginger ale from the corner drug store. The boy was making the delivery when some guy came hightailing it down the stairs and knocked him kicking. He gave us a description. It tallies with you, Caro."

I didn't like the way it was going. I shifted uneasily. "Is this a pinch?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not exactly. Just taking you in on suspicion."

I said earnestly: "Hold on. How about the purse with the gun in it?"

His eyes flickered and showed interest. "What gun?"

"The .32 automatic, a Colt Banker's Special."

"That's right," he said very softly. "She

was killed with a .32; we found the shells in the bedroom. But we found no purse, nor any gun for that matter."

THAT jolted me. I had been counting on the cops finding the gun and tying it up with Mrs. Ormond. I rumbled my hair nervously and tried to get organized. How had the purse disappeared? It had been there in Hazel's apartment when I had left. Then I remembered the doorbell. Perhaps, after all, Alma Ormond had returned. I paced around the room.

"Talk," Nola said.

So I told him the story. I told him about the accident and how I had met Hazel Varney, and about her nervousness, and how I'd come back at seven-thirty and found her dead.

He was watching me, squint-eyed. He asked: "How about the purse and the gun?"

I shook my head. I didn't think I could make him swallow that part of it just yet.

He sighed heavily. "All right, Caro, get dressed. We're going downtown."

I didn't want to. They've got a room downtown. A room with hard lights and men who know how to ask questions. No rough stuff, no rubber hoses, no lighted matches against your toes, nothing like that. This wasn't the Spanish Inquisition.

But there were other ways. They could keep you awake all night and the next day and maybe the night after that, too, while they handled it in shifts. Questions until a guy's head is ringing like a struck anvil and he's ready to sign papers all over the lot just for a cigarette and a chance to be left alone.

I knew some lawyers but I didn't think any of them were sharp enough to spring me on a writ with what Nola already had on me. All a habeas corpus does is hail you up before a Supreme Court judge who decides whether there is enough evidence to hold a man. They had proof that I'd been with Hazel Varney during the hour established for her murder and that I'd been seen fleeing the premises. That was enough.

"Okay," I said. "I'll get dressed."

I went into the bedroom. I knew what I had to do. I knew and I didn't like it because he trusted me.

I jumped into some clothes, stepped silently over the window sill and went scrambling down the steel rungs of the fire

escape to the street. A cab was passing and I caught it on the run.

The Parkhurst Arms was a thirty-story monolith overlooking the East River, with its tower in the clouds, and its rents there, too. With a black marble lobby and bleached oak furniture, it was an arrogant building for people in the upper brackets. A paneled elevator scaled me up to the fifteenth floor and discharged me onto a strip of broadloom as soft as winter's first snow.

I went down the hall and found Charles Ormond's door and touched off some chimes.

Ormond was a rich man. If he or his wife was in a jam, he could hire a battery of legal sharpshooters capable of some fine forensic doubletalk that would snarl the facts and confuse a jury. Leads in a murder case cool fast. The time to strike was now, at once.

The door opened. For the second time that night Alma Ormond saw me and turned pale and tried to hammer my nose into my face as hard as she could drive it with the door. And also for the second time I sent her skidding backwards into the apartment. Down two steps into a dropped living room.

She had company. A huge bear of a man hoisted himself off the sofa and bent his brows together in a scow at my forcible entry.

"What's the meaning of this?" he rumbled.

I locked my brakes. I inhaled deeply and blinked at him. I said: "How do you do, Mr. Dineen."

He eyed me over with a puzzled expression.

"The name is Caro," I said. "Steven Caro." I gave him a calling card.

Burt Dineen was a power down at the Hall, a man who controlled the votes in half a dozen districts and was now serving his third term as a city councilman. Under smooth, cement-colored hair, his broad face had the fevered pinkness of a prime cut of beef.

Alma Ormond went up on tiptoes and whispered against his ear. Dineen listened and I saw the muscles flatten along his jowls and his eyes grow stony.

I looked at the woman. "Well, Mrs. Ormond, do we talk in private or in front

of your pal, the esteemed councilman?"

"Talk?" she said blankly.

"About Hazel Varney," I said. "And her sudden departure from this world. Using your gun as a passport. Please, no fencing. The girl is dead. You were in her apartment in possession of the murder weapon. The police may be along at any moment but I don't think Mr. Dineen will be able to pull any strings. Not in a murder case."

Wooden-faced, Dineen asked: "Just what are you after, Caro?"

"A confession," I said blandly.

ALMA ORMOND made a small, distressed sound and sank down onto the sofa. She stuffed knuckles into her mouth, watching me with strained eyes.

Dineen shook his head and made a negligent gesture. "You don't actually think she had anything to do with the murder?"

"Ah, but I do," I said. "I most certainly do. She was there with the dead girl and she had the gun."

His manner became frank and confidential. "Looks are deceiving, Caro. The fact is that Mrs. Ormond went there and found the girl like that, already dead."

I took a chance. I pitched a wild one. I said: "Then she's trying to protect her husband."

My pitch crossed the plate. Mrs. Ormond shuddered and moaned. "Please don't say that. Charles had nothing to do with it."

"Of course," I said sarcastically. "Nobody had anything to do with it. The gun went off by itself."

She started to wring her hands. Dineen said in a warning tone: "Careful, Alma."

I turned on him. "Don't be a fool, Dineen. If she's innocent she'd better talk, because if I go to the police with my story she stands better than an even chance of warming the Ossining armchair for it."

A muscle lumped along the side of his jaw. He considered it with a rocky expression on his face. Then he nodded slowly and said: "It's no use, Alma. You'd better tell him."

A few tears had left her face streaked. "Charles didn't do it," she repeated dully.

"Suppose you tell me about the gun," I said.

She looked up. "I found it in the apart-

ment when I got up there. On the floor."

"Why did you visit Hazel?"

"To talk to her about Charles. I found out that he had been giving her large sums of money." Mrs. Ormond's lips quivered. "I thought that—well, I thought maybe he was infatuated with her. I was going to ask her to give him up. But she was already dead."

"How did you get into the apartment?"

"The door was not locked."

"About the gun," I said.

"It looked like Charles' gun. I didn't want to leave it there and I picked it up and put it into my purse."

"Why did you open the door when I rang?"

She dropped her eyes.

"You were expecting someone," I said.

"Who was it?"

Her lips formed a thin stubborn line.

"All right," I said. "Let it go. Why did you run away?"

"Because I became panicky when you went into the bedroom."

"Where is your husband now?"

She squirmed and switched her gaze pleadingly to Dineen.

I said grimly: "Mrs. Ormond, it's imperative that I see him. Tell me where he is or I'll give the whole story to the police."

She caught her breath and spoke with great reluctance. "Charles is working late at his office."

I nodded at them and went out and down to the street. A phone directory told me that Ormond had an office in a building on Lexington Avenue.

I signed in which the night man and went up and found the outer door open. Past the receptionist's gate and at the end of a long corridor, I saw a light glowing behind a pebbled glass door. I approached it, opened the door and stepped in.

The man behind the oversized desk looked up with an annoyed expression and said crisply: "What is it?"

I let him have a fleeting glimpse at my buzzer. "Caro," I said. "Headquarters. A few questions, Mr. Ormond."

He made deep folds in his brow. He was a lean man with stony eyes over a high nose in a hard, smooth-jawed face. He had dark hair peppered with salt at the temples and a chin you could use for a shovel, providing he let you. He sat silent and waited for me

to talk, carefully watching my face.

"How long have you been here in the office?" I asked, dropping into a leather chair across the desk from him.

"Since the staff left at six," he said.

"Alone?"

"Alone," he said evenly and I could detect no sign of apprehension in his face.

"Have you an alibi for the hour between seven and eight o'clock?"

"Alibi?" His eyes eyed me searchingly. "What would I need one for?"

"To save you from short circuiting about two thousand volts of electricity as a penalty for the murder of Hazel Varney."

CHAPTER THREE

All in the Books

ALL THINGS considered Ormond gave an excellent performance. He could not have done better even if he had been rehearsed by the Moscow Art Theatre. My words touched off his fuse. He came out of the chair like a catapult with his back arched and his teeth exposed and his face long and stiff as a board. His eyes batted down on mine for a long moment while a blue vein throbbled in his neck, and then he lowered himself slowly and carefully back into his chair.

He said: "Let me see that badge again."

"So it's not official," I confessed, shrugging. "I'm a private operator."

"Get out!"

"That's the wrong attitude, Ormond."

"Out!" His finger aimed at the door.

I sighed. I reached in and produced the Mauser and let him look down the barrel. I do not like pulling a gun, but in my business when you can't reason with a man you can sometimes scare him into a little conversation. Ormond's reaction was normal. He looked at the gun without pleasure and licked his lips.

"The name," I said, "is Steven Caro. For the time being my authority rests in the fully loaded clip of this weapon. You will please answer my questions. First, you have a gun of your own, specifically a .32 Banker's Special."

He nodded.

"At about seven o'clock you left this office without being seen, descended the fire stairs, went to Hazel's apartment and cut

her down with two bullets from that gun."

"No," he said heavily. "I did not leave this office. And I never owned any bullets for that gun. So far as I know it's still in a bureau drawer at my home. Besides, why would I kill the girl?"

"Because she once worked for you."

"As a bookkeeper, yes, but I'm not in the habit of going around and shooting all my ex-employees."

"Only this one," I said. "Because as a bookkeeper she had a fine opportunity to pry into your fiscal affairs. She learned that you were keeping two sets of books, that you were cheating the government on your income tax."

That was the only conclusion I could draw from what Hazel had told me. The worry lines that were deeply etched across his forehead and around his mouth attested to its accuracy.

"Hazel," I went on, "was using this information to blackmail you. Here was a girl with no visible means of support, no job, living expensively, and it must have been at your expense. You'd be willing to pay, and pay generously, to keep such information away from the Bureau of Internal Revenue."

A muscle rippled along his jaw. "You're guessing, Caro."

"I have the facts directly from Hazel," I said.

"But she's no longer available."

"Ah, but your safe deposit box at the Commercial Trust is. And loaded, I understand, with evidence. How much, Ormond? A half a million? A million? The Treasury Department would be interested in knowing where it came from and they certainly have the authority to inquire."

There was bright glitter in his eyes. "All right," he said gruffly, "so I filed fraudulent returns. But they'd have one hell of a time proving it. And I only did what every other business man in the country is doing."

"Don't rationalize," I said.

"It's true," he said stubbornly.

"So we're a nation of crooks and liars, but not cold-blooded murderers."

His face tightened. He shook his head. "I did not kill Hazel Varney."

"Tell it to the jury," I said.

"Heavens, man! I could afford to pay her any sum she wanted."

"It was more than that," I said. "It

was the constant threat hanging over your head. You couldn't stand it. A girl who could blast you right out of your smug world into prison. Tell me, Ormond, were her demands getting too big? Was she raising the ante? She'd be a hard girl to satisfy. Like filling a basket without a bottom. Sure, I understand, it was an intolerable situation with only one way out, only one exit, a deep grave and a gumwood kimono for Hazel Varney."

He was listening to each word like they were nails being hammered into his skull, wincing as I spoke, his nostrils flared wide. And he was realizing how it would sound to a jury.

"You're crazy!" he whispered.

"Don't take it so hard," I said. "You have the stuff that talks. Spread it around. There's corruption everywhere."

His eyes got speculative.

I said: "Something else happened, too, Ormond. I got involved in this case, at the wrong end, and I don't like it. And because the victim was a beautiful girl it would be easy for the D. A. to cook up a motive and get the Grand Jury to pump an indictment at me. All right, maybe it wouldn't hold up in court, I don't know; but that sort of thing isn't good for a guy's business. It may even get his license revoked. And that's not going to happen, Ormond. I'm not going to let it happen."

He leaned forward. "They could never convict you, Caro."

"I don't even want them to try," I said.

His eyes were steady, boring. "How much will you take, Caro?"

"For what?"

"To keep the blackmail angle under your hat."

"One million bucks," I said.

"Nonsense." A nerve was twitching in his check.

"You heard me," I said. "One million dollars. I'm no piker. Two serious raps are involved here, Ormond—tax evasion and murder. You can't expect cut prices on a thing that."

He muttered in a surly tone: "I haven't got that kind of money."

"Exactly."

He made triangular designs with his eyebrows. He was still trying. "You've got to believe me, Caro," he said earnestly. "I did not kill the girl. I admit the other

rap and I'm ready to pay fifty thousand dollars to keep it quiet."

"That's nice," I said. "With fifty grand I could buy some real estate and sit back and collect rents and not have to stick my nose in anybody's dirty laundry. I'd like that fine, but I don't think it would work. I'd still know too much about you and maybe some night in a dark alley. . . . No, thanks. Save your money for some legal talent who may be able to get you off with a light sentence, say fifty years to life."

Drops of perspiration stood out on his face like marbles. He shook his head and I saw his eyes go past me with a flicker, but I kept watching him. It was an old gag and I didn't fall for it. I had started to smile when I heard the sound, a vague shuffling whisper, and I started to turn but it was too late. The blow caught me along the side of the head.

Intense pain. A blinding flash. The long whirling fall into darkness. . . .

WHEN I came to there was a dry powdery taste of lint from the rug on my tongue. I sat up. The floor rolled in at me like surf. I touched my head and found a pulpy knob with wicked, stabbing fingers of pain. I floundered upright and braced myself against Ormond's desk. The walls wavered like tissue paper.

I sat down and after a while got the room back into focus. I was alone. Charles Ormond was gone. I spoke words that would have broken up a Salvation Army meeting. I rifled the blueprints on Ormond's desk. A small piece of white paper caught my attention. It turned out to be an inter-office telephone message. It read: *Mr. Hollister cannot see you until 10:30 tonight.*

A glance at my strap watch showed it to be 10:45. I drew conclusions again. Hollister was the man who had slugged me. And the man I'd met in Hazel Varney's apartment was also named Hollister.

I took liberties with Ormond's telephone book and learned that Neil Hollister was a Certified Public Accountant. Assuming the contractor was one of his clients, then Hollister was probably responsible for all the fancy bookkeeping that had resulted in gyping the government. I noted the address and departed.

At the first bar encountered I stuck a foot on the rail and ordered a whiskey, straight.

When the barman set it down I poured some into my palm and patted it gently against the wound on my head. It burned like a cauterizing needle. The barman watched me, fish-eyed, and backed away with a look on his face usually reserved for madmen and imbeciles.

I drank the remainder of the whiskey, leered at him, and went out.

At the Hotel Marvin I collared a bellhop and extracted the number of Neil Hollister's room. I rode up and found the door and knocked. It opened wide enough for a moist red eye to give me an inspection.

I wasted no time. I moved fast and I moved hard. I hit the door with my shoulder and tumbled in after Hollister, who had been knocked backward to the edge of his bed. He wore peppermint-striped pajamas, wool-lined slippers and a towel around his throat like a scarf.

He blinked at me. "Say, aren't you the man I met this afternoon at Hazel's?"

"Correct," I said.

He shook his head, puzzled. "Why the forcible entry?"

I ignored his question and asked one of my own. "Where is Charles Ormond?"

"Ormond?" he asked with a rising inflection. "Why, I haven't—" He stopped to hunch up his shoulders and produce a sneeze so violent it shook him to his toenails. He took out a handkerchief and used it emphatically on his nose. Then he continued: "I haven't seen Ormond since eight o'clock."

I felt like administering a fistful of knuckles to his handsome chin, in payment for the lump on my head, but I didn't trust myself to use moderation and I was afraid of salting him away.

"Don't lie," I said warningly. "I'm in an ugly mood. Less than half an hour ago you went to Ormond's office, heard him arguing with me, sneaked up and slugged me, but good."

His eyes widened and blinked. "You're looney, Caro. I haven't been out of this room in over two hours."

I produced the telephone memo and let him read it. I was watching his reaction closely.

"Oh, this," he said, glancing up. "I can explain this. I picked up a cold this afternoon and it kept getting worse and I decided to come home and go to bed. At about

eight o'clock I was near Ormond's office and I stopped in for a chat and to tell him that I wouldn't be able to keep the later appointment."

I lifted my eyebrows skeptically.

"I can prove it," he said vehemently. "The house doctor was up here. Call him if you don't believe me."

I reached for the phone and applied the handset to my ear and told the switchboard girl to get me the house doctor. Presently the receiver emitted a crisp voice:

"Dr. Dolman speaking."

"Sorry to disturb you, Doctor," I said, "but I'm a friend of Neil Hollister. I was just up to see him and I'm a bit concerned. What was your diagnosis?"

"Nothing to worry about," he assured me confidently. "Just a touch of the grippe, slight temperature. I told him to stay in bed. He'll be all right in a couple of days."

"When did you last see him, Doctor?"

"About half an hour ago."

"Thanks very much."

"That's quite all right, Sir."

CHAPTER FOUR

All Aboard for Murder

I LOOKED at Hollister and scratched the back of my neck and surveyed the situation dispassionately. He wasn't Houdini. He couldn't be in two places at once. If he had been here in bed thirty minutes ago, he certainly could not have been in Ormond's office. From his general manner I concluded that he had not yet heard about Hazel Varney's death or was being very cagey about it.

"Where were you between seven and eight?" I asked.

"Having dinner with a client," he answered without hesitation.

I took it for granted that he could prove that and I didn't squeeze it. The frown between his eyebrows deepened and he made small nervous gestures with his hands.

"Just what is this all about, Caro?"

"In a moment," I told him. "Why did you have such a late appointment with Ormond tonight?"

He turned his head a little and slanted a covert look at me. His eyes were uneasy. "We had to check some accounts."

"On which set of books?" I asked. "The private set or the ones open to the Treasury Department?"

He stiffened perceptibly and his face became guarded. He took a brief moment before answering. "Eh?" he said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I shook my head. "It's too late, Hollister. The cat is out. The story is ready to break. You've been juggling figures for Ormond and fixing it for him to save a pile of money on his income tax. How did he compensate you? With a percentage of the amount you save him? That ought to keep you from an old age in the poor house."

He seemed to shrivel and get smaller. "How—how did you know?"

"Hazel told me and Ormond admitted it."

"Hazel told you?" he said dully.

"Yes, Hollister. When is your next date with her?"

"Tomorrow, but I—"

"Make other plans," I said flatly. "She's dead." That was a brutal way of giving it to him but I wanted to catch his reaction.

He looked like he was going to keel over. He teetered on his heels and looked sick. "Dead!" he whispered. "Hazel dead!"

"Murdered," I said. "Shot twice with Charles Ormond's gun."

He stood there, looking dazed and licking on his parched lips. Then he took a breath and said: "Ormond killed her."

"Ormond denies it," I said, leaning forward. "How about you, Hollister? You had a motive."

"Me?" he squawked. He fell back a step and his face muscles jerked erratically.

"Yes," I said, "a very good motive. You knew she was black-mailing Ormond and you were afraid that Ormond was beginning to balk. You were afraid that she'd spill the beans and that would mean the end of your professional career, plus a nice term in the Federal penitentiary."

For a guy supposedly in the clear, he was finding his surroundings mighty uncomfortable. His face had a wet shine, and he turned suddenly and went over to a closet door and pulled it open and stuck his hand into the pocket of a coat hanging there. I got ready to alert the Mauser in case he was entertaining any wild notions. But he wasn't. Even if he'd come up with a gun, his hand was shaking so badly I didn't think

he'd be able to hit any of the walls. It wasn't a gun. It was a pint bottle of bourbon and he really needed a pull at it.

"Drink?" he asked.

I shook my head.

He found a glass, poured himself a choke and tossed it off in a single gulp. Color seeped back into his face. His eyes were watering and his hands were still shaking. He said shakily:

"Listen, Caro, I—I was very fond of Hazel. I wouldn't kill her. I wanted to marry her."

"Why? To keep her from testifying against you?"

"No, that never entered my mind. I was in love with her."

"Look, Hollister," I said earnestly, "level with me and I may be able to do you some good."

He didn't waste any time thinking about it. He began to sing like a Wagnerian soprano. He disgorged information with a sort of fevered eagerness.

"Yes, we were cheating the government," he said. "Profits during the past few years were astronomical and the savings of course were enormous. Hazel got onto it and that gave her a ticket to Easy Street. But it wasn't all profit. Ormond had to pay a lot of graft. He had many city contracts, paving, subways, airports. Some of the work fell below standard and he used Dineen to fix it with the inspectors."

"Dineen was a good friend of Charles Ormond?"

"Not at first. Dineen knew Ormond's wife before she was married. He used to be one of her suitors. They became friendly after she married his rival. Lately Dineen had—"

HE COUGHED and a worried expression crossed his face. He held up the glass from which he had just drunk the bourbon and looked at it. Suddenly things happened to him. He dropped the glass and began to shake with uncontrollable spasms. He reached up with both hands and grabbed at his throat.

I didn't move. I felt rooted to the floor. I stood there and watched him, wall-eyed.

His face got twisted out of shape and darkened and turned a cyanotic blue. His eyes struck out. Froth bubbled at his mouth. He staggered toward me gropingly.

"The bourbon!" I croaked. "Where did you get it?"

His lips formed a name. "Ormond!" he gasped, and then his muscles went flabby and he crashed over to the floor with a heavy thud. His breathing was uneven and labored and horrible. Suddenly his legs kicked out and his throat rattled and he lay motionless, with his face distorted and his lips peeled back.

The room was silent. A breeze ruffled the curtains. I had a cold, sucking sensation in the pit of my stomach. I felt empty and gutted.

I looked down at Hollister and knew that it would be useless to call for an ambulance. He didn't need a doctor. What he needed was a resurrectionist. I glanced at the pint of bourbon and wondered if he had committed suicide, and dismissed the idea as soon as it hit me. I doubted if a man intending to drink poison would contaminate a whole bottle of liquor. Rather would he pour a dose into a glass. And besides had he not gasped out with his last mortal breath that he'd received the bourbon from Ormond?



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I took a slow turn around the room. Then I picked up the phone and dialed Lt. Nola's home number. "John," I said when he answered, "Steve Caro."

"Listen, Caro," he said tightly, "take a tip from me and get your hide down to headquarters inside of—"

"Wait, John," I broke in. "I have some news. The Varney case is ripe. How soon can you meet me in the lobby of the Parkhurst Arms?"

He must have detected the note of urgency in my voice because he said promptly and seriously: "In ten minutes, Steve."

I hung up, and I was smiling at the sudden use of my first name.

We went up to Ormond's apartment together. They seemed to be expecting us. Charles and Alma Ormond sat on the sofa, holding hands. Her face was listless and his was bleak. Councilman Burt Dineen stood leaning against the piano. His big red face was unreadable.

Lt. Nola sat on the edge of a chair, put his elbow on his knees and rested his chin on his closed fist. He looked at me and nodded.

"A question first," I said, turning to Charles Ormond. "What is your favorite drink?"

He looked surprised. "Bourbon."

I crossed my fingers. "I spoke to Neil Hollister a short while ago. He claimed he stopped by your office about eight o'clock to break an appointment. He'd caught a bad cold and he said you gave him a pint of bourbon to cure it."

"Why, yes," Ormond admitted.

"Where did you get that bottle?" I asked.

"From Mr. Dineen," he said, glancing at the councilman.

That confirmed. That put meat on the bones. I confronted Dineen and pointed a finger at him. "I give you," I accused, "a double murderer. Councilman Burt Dineen, politician, grafter—and killer."

Dineen was good. He didn't even flinch. He just stood there and stared at me and waited. His big red face had a grained, mottled look.

Alma Ormond was the first to speak. In a small stifled voice she cried: "Oh, no! He didn't!"

"Oh, yes," I said. "He shot Hazel Varney and he poisoned Neil Hollister. The

first was deliberate. The second was a mistake. Hollister was not supposed to get the poison. It was earmarked in a bottle of bourbon for Charles Ormond."

"Explain, please," Nola muttered.

"Hollister," I told him, "was Ormond's accountant."

"And he's dead?"

"Very dead."

Nola scowled. "Business is picking up. Where is he?"

"On the floor in his room at the Hotel Marvin."

"This had better be good."

"It is," I assured him. "It's good and even a bit diabolical. Let us go back a little. Dineen used to be in love with Alma Ormond. He is still in love with her. After she got married he made friends with her husband in order to be near her. He used his political influence to throw city work to Ormond. But not out of friendship. His palm was open and quite a bit of money stuck to it."

Nola snorted. Dineen kept watching me, his mouth hard.

I SAID: "Dineen learned that Ormond's bookkeeper, Hazel Varney, was black-mailing him. It worried him. One peep out of the girl would start an investigation and it might leak out where some of the money had gone to. He probably knew that Ormond was getting balky at paying out and so the girl had to go. He knew, too, that Ormond would never kill her. So he took the job on himself. He followed her along the street this afternoon and pushed her in front of a passing car. She escaped because it happened to be my car and I have good brakes."

Dineen shifted his feet and lowered his chin. I didn't like his eyes. I didn't like what showed behind the film under his narrowed lids. I resumed.

"After that he developed a better idea. Shoot the girl and frame Ormond. He stole the gun from this apartment, picked a time when Ormond was working alone in his office and had no witnesses, and then he went to Hazel's and put two bullets into her and left the gun and went away. It was easy. The cops would trace the gun, learn about the money Ormond had been giving her, call it a love-nest killing, and wind it up."

Nola sat erect. "Neat. Ormond gets the chair and Dineen gets the widow."

"Not quite," I said. "Dineen didn't want to risk a trial. For one thing it might open the firm's books to an official investigation. For another, Ormond might not get the chair. And he wanted Ormond dead. He had a bottle of poisoned bourbon ready, and when he left Hazel's apartment he went to Ormond's office and gave it to him. Ormond would drink it and check out. There was something solid for the cops. Something they could understand. Murder, remorse, suicide."

"Clever," said Nola.

"You bet," I said. "Only his scheme began to leave the tracks when Mrs. Ormond showed up at Hazel's apartment and found the body and her husband's gun."

A slow flush crawled up out of Dineen's thick neck and darkened his complexion.

"Fill it out," Nola said.

I spread my feet. "Picture it," I said. "Mrs. Ormond alone with the murdered girl, thinking her husband was guilty and wanting to clean up the evidence against him. She didn't trust herself so she phoned her old friend, Burt Dineen. He wasn't home yet but she left a message for him. When I found her in Hazel's apartment I knew she was waiting for someone. When I asked her about it she clammed up."

Mrs. Ormond made a whining noise, like a small cat on a cold night.

I said: "Dineen must have sweated plenty, returning to the scene of his crime. But he had no other choice. He had to go back. He was in love with Mrs. Ormond and she might get herself involved. But when he got there she was gone. I heard his ring and bolted. He came in, sized it up, grabbed the purse and beat it."

Dineen said harshly: "Words. All words and no proof."

I uncovered some teeth.

"Listen, only two people knew I was headed toward Ormond's office tonight. You and the lady. One of you followed me there. It figures for you, Dineen. You couldn't sit back and wait. You had the needles. Your wind was up. Too many questions were whirling around in that lopsided brain of yours. Had Ormond swallowed the poison? Was he dead? Shouldn't you be there to tip off the cops? So you

left here and split for the office, and when you got there what did you find?"

"What did he find?" asked Nola.

"He found Ormond alive and arguing with me and spouting denials. That was bad. Too much talk is always bad. So he knocked me out and let Ormond escape. And do you know why?"

"Why?" repeated Nola, parrot-like.

"Because tonight was the night. He wanted to get him alone. He was going to kill him and make it look like suicide."

Nola stood up. "The D.A.," he said. "What have you got for the D.A.?"

"This. Ormond claims he never had any bullets for the murder gun. Hence, Dineen had to buy some. You can find the dealer who sold him a box of .32 caliber shells. Also, I will make you a wager that he hasn't yet ditched the gun, intending to use it tonight on Ormond and leaving it beside the body to prove Ormond killed Hazel."

Dineen made an abrupt movement. Considering his training and background it wasn't a bad draw. The Banker's Special appeared lost in his big hand. His eyes were vicious. He began to lift the gun, but he wasn't fast enough. Not nearly. Lt. Nola was much better at that sort of thing.

I hadn't seen Nola move, but his gun coughed violently. The Banker's Special flew out of Dineen's fingers and skidded along the floor. Dineen stood there and stared at his empty hand and at the crimson that was squirming from his wrist.

"Bleed," I told him. "Go ahead and bleed."

Mrs. Ormond uttered a moaning sob and bent forward out of the sofa and melted liquidly to the floor. Her husband knelt at her side and began rubbing her face.

I retrieved the Banker's Special, picking it up by its trigger guard to preserve prints, and laid it carefully on a table. Nola went over and applied the manacles to Dineen. Then he rubbed his lean jaw.

"Tie that," he said, "A city councilman."

I shrugged. "What can you expect when a bunch of large stomachs get together in a smoke-filled room and handpick the candidates for public office? Here are a couple of crooks, they tell the citizens. Go ahead and take your choice."

Councilman Burt Dineen called me a dirty name.

THE END

TARNISHED COPPER

By D. L.
CHAMPION

I wanted to see him face to
face. . . .



*When the greedy swindler of overseas
GIs was landslided onto a morgue slab,
Franklin—ex-GI, ex-cop, ex-man—was
unanimously nominated fall guy.*

THE jangle of a street car bell awakened me. I opened my aching eyes to the hot sunlight which streamed through the window. I blinked, turned my head and surveyed the room. It was a small place, sparsely furnished. In the center of the frayed carpet were the clothes I had dropped there the night before. My brush, comb, shaving gear and two drained pint bottles were strewn carelessly on the bureau top.

I shuddered, swung my legs to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. The sheets were gray and the pillow wet with sweat.

My head felt like Gene Krupa's drum during a performance and my mouth tasted as if I had dined heartily on glue and old fish the night before.

I tottered over to the basin, drank a glass of brackish water and looked at myself in the warped mirror on the wall.

The reflection was not edifying. I didn't know when I had last shaved but the glass assured me it had not been recently. My eyes were bloodshot and my face drawn.

My immediate impulse was to toss on some clothes, dash down the dark stairway for three fast eye-openers. I glanced again at my reflection and a swift shiver of horror coursed through me. I reconsidered. It took an hour's meditation and all the guts I had to decide against the eye-openers; to resolve that the new leaf must be turned over with a steadfast hand as of this instant. It was all Weyburn's fault—but I was punishing myself. The hell with Weyburn. I would drink a pint of strong black coffee, clean myself up, don my best suit and go downtown and get my old job back.

At eleven o'clock I still felt terrible but looked pretty good. My face was clean shaved. My mouth had been thoroughly washed out. I was choking for a drink but I passed every saloon between my furnished room and Police Headquarters without weakening.

At eleven forty-five I sat in a hard wooden chair with a wide paper-strewn desk between myself and the Commissioner.

He was a man of about fifty with gray, thin hair and shrewd blue eyes. His name was Grandley. He had been appointed some two years ago while I was living on Army rations in Germany.

On the desk before him was a cardboard folder with my name on it. He looked at me oddly and said, "Well, Franklin?"

"Sir," I said, "I am applying for reinstatement."

There was a pause. His blue eyes bored into mine and I felt vaguely uncomfortable. He said quietly, "I regret that I will not be able to recommend that, Franklin."

I stared at him. This was something I hadn't expected. "Why not?" I said. "I was on the force seven years before I enlisted. Two years as a detective, second-grade. I have a fair police record and a good military one."

Grandley nodded. "Right," he said.

"Police and army records excellent. It's your civilian record I don't care for."

I had no idea what he meant by that and I said so. I added, "I'm a tough guy. I know how to handle crooks."

"I don't doubt it. But only a small percentage of this city are crooks. Do you know how to handle, how to inspire confidence in the law-abiding citizens?"

That bewildered me. I said indignantly, "What do coppers have to do with law-abiding citizens?"

He sighed. He said patiently, "The hard-boiled copper is old fashioned. Handling crooks is important but there's more to it than that. We guard payrolls. We have a Police Athletic League and sponsor several other organizations for kids. A copper must inspire confidence in decent people. He must be above suspicion. Under my administration there'll be no more drunken gun shooting in barrooms. No more consorting with the underworld socially."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Your civilian record is dead against you. Ever since you got out of the service you've been trying to drink the town dry. You've been hanging around the lowliest saloons mixing with the worst elements in town. Gamblers, con men and worse."

I shifted uneasily in my chair. I couldn't honestly deny those charges. I said, defensively, "Maybe I had a personal reason for drinking all that whiskey."

"I know you did. I even know what it was. But that doesn't excuse it to me in my official capacity. I'm sorry, Franklin."

I stood up. I said angrily, "Does this mean I'm absolutely through?"

"That's up to you. Change your ways. Let me see that you're a guy with real character. Then I'll be glad to recommend your reinstatement."

I walked out into the street. There were eight barrooms between Headquarters and my room. I knew because on this trip I investigated each one of them personally.

BY six o'clock I was very drunk. That wasn't unusual. For the past couple of months I was always drunk at six o'clock. I sat alone at a table in the Moosehead Inn, a tavern frequented by the people Grandley had accused me of consorting with. A juke box howled into my ears and there was a brooding anger within me.

A hand tapped my shoulder. I looked up into the thin features of Larsen, a small time gambler.

"Howsa boy?" he said.

"Lousy."

He paused for a moment, then said, "You been looking for this lawyer, Weyburn, haven't you?"

This morning I had decided that I wasn't looking for Weyburn any more. But now I suddenly wanted to see him face to face, to feel my fist knock out a few of his teeth.

Larsen said, "He's back in town. Got in this morning."

"Where is he?"

Larsen shrugged his bony shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe at his office."

I stood up. Interviewing Weyburn was going to mean trouble but in my present mood, drunk and still sore at Grandley, trouble was exactly what I sought.

I went out into the street and hailed a cab.

Twenty minutes later I stood outside an office door which announced in brave gold leaf that this was the sanctum of William Weyburn, attorney-at-law. I turned the knob and went in.

A boy sat at a table in the outer office licking stamps without enthusiasm. He looked at me. He said, "Everyone's gone home. I got to get the mail out."

I said, "I understand Mr. Weyburn is back in town."

"Yep. Got in this morning."

"Where is he now?"

The boy spread his palms and made no answer.

"Will he be home?"

"Nope. Not till late anyway."

"Then where is he?"

"I don't know."

I looked at him steadily. I withdrew my wallet. I took out one of the three ten dollar bills I had left in all the world. I said, "If you know he won't be home until late, you probably know where he is."

I put the bill on the edge of the table and waited. The boy frowned and stared at the money. He picked it up, folded it deliberately into four pieces and put it in his pocket.

He said, "He's taken room four-one-four at the Latham Hotel. He often does private business there after office hours. His secretary made the reservation this afternoon."

It was now a quarter to seven. I went back into the street. I headed in the general direction of the Latham Hotel, attending to my taproom research as I went. It took me three hours and nine saloons to reach the hotel lobby.

The Latham was closer to being the worst hotel in town than the best. Its lobby was faded and dreary. The potted palms which dotted its imitation marble floor looked like an oasis which was fast drying up. I made my way to the elevator and went up to the fourth floor.

After a false start down the corridor I found a door with 414 painted on it. I lifted my knuckles to knock when I heard a faint drone of voices within the room. I lowered my hand. The business I had with Weyburn called for privacy. I had never met him, but unless he was far more eloquent than any living man had a right to be he was going to get the beating of his life. Witnesses were hardly desirable.

I moved a short way down the corridor, leaned against some dilapidated wallpaper and took a slug from the pint bottle I had foresightedly brought along with me. I waited for Weyburn's visitor to leave. I waited a long time. The alcohol in my brain was making me drowsy. It was an effort to keep my eyes open.

Then, as I glanced around the hall I noted that the door of the room next to Weyburn's was ajar. I peered around the jamb. I saw a disarrayed chamber with the bed unmade, the ashtrays unemptied. Doubtless, some late checkout had forgotten to lock the door behind him. I decided it would be infinitely more comfortable to wait for Weyburn's guest to leave in a reclining, rather than an upright position.

Entering the room, I closed the door behind me and relaxed on the unmade bed. I glanced out the window. The view was limited to the garage roof next door and the top of its fire escape. Through the wall which kept me from Weyburn I still heard the drone of voices.

I was in a hazy state, no more than one-third awake, when one of the voices lifted itself to a shout. I heard it clearly and distinctly through my alcoholic fog. It said, "No man can say that to me and live. Damn you, I'll kill you!"

I essayed to open my eyes and sit up. The liquor and lassitude were too much for

me. I relaxed comfortably and passed out cold.

A ROUGH hand shook my shoulder. A vaguely familiar voice said, "My Lord, it's Franklin. Hey, wake up!"

I woke up. I blinked at the light of the chandelier directly above me. Then I saw the face of Lonny Matthews, Homicide Squad lieutenant. I said, "What's the matter?"

Matthews regarded me curiously. "I think you can tell me more than I can tell you. Come here."

With some effort I got off the bed, followed him into the hall and through the open door of room 414. There were half-a-dozen live coppers standing around and in the middle of the room one dead and prostrate civilian.

He was a man of medium size, clad in an excellently tailored suit. He lay on his back and his eyes stared at a ceiling he didn't see. His coat was open, revealing a white silk shirt with a wide red stain over his heart. I didn't need the M. E. to tell me he had been stabbed.

I said, "What's it all about? Who is this guy?"

Matthews said, "His name is Weyburn. Remember? You've been looking for him for a couple of months. I guess you found him."

I was suddenly sober as a ten-year-old choir boy. I took a deep breath and said, "What happened?"

Matthews raised his eyebrows. "You used to be a copper. You know better than to ask me questions. I'm asking you."

He was right. I'd been a copper and long enough to know that whatever I had to say would be better said at Headquarters than here. I said, "Let's go. I suppose you're going to book me."

Matthews nodded.

* * *

At eight in the morning I was back in Grandley's office. He had a sheet of typewritten paper in his hand. His manner was crisp and unfriendly.

"All right, Franklin," he said. "This is what we've got. You came back here from the army to find out that Weyburn had swindled you out of all your money. For

two months Weyburn has been out of town. You've been drinking and looking for him, waiting for him to return. Before a score of witnesses you've sworn to get even with him. Now, he's found stabbed to death in a hotel room and you're found asleep in the room next door. What do you have to say?"

After listening to what he had to say what I had to say didn't sound too good.

"Before I enlisted," I said, "I gave every cent I'd saved to my own lawyer, Bretton. I also gave him power of attorney. He was to invest it for me while I was away. Bretton died a year ago. He handed his business, including my power of attorney, over to Weyburn whom I'm never met. Weyburn sold me down the river when I was overseas. Oh, I found out it was all perfectly legal. I couldn't lay a finger on him—except physically. I got sore and bitter. I waited for him to get back to town."

"You waited in saloons and honky-tonks," snapped Grandley.

"I was bitter and angry. I tried to drown it. Then yesterday I decided I was being a fool. I made up my mind to quit being a bum, to forget Weyburn and come back to work. But you wouldn't give me back my job so I went out and got drunk again, drunk enough to go looking for Weyburn when I heard he was back."

Grandley grunted. "What's your story about last night at the hotel?"

I told him exactly what had happened. I told him of the threatening voice I'd heard through the wall. I concluded by saying, "There was someone in that room with Weyburn, someone who threatened to kill him. Get that guy and you've got the killer."

"We've got that guy," said Grandley.

I stared at him in surprise. "Then what are you holding me for?"

Grandley said, "Would you recognize that voice you overheard if you heard it again?"

"Of course."

He nodded and picked up a telephone. He said into the mouthpiece, "Send in Sloppy Joe Marsden."

Sloppy Joe Marsden was a character in town. I had never met him but I'd seen him around more than once. He was a professional money lender whose office was in his shapeless hat. He was reputed to be

one of the wealthiest men in town. Not that he was ever ostentatious about it. There was nothing ironical about his nickname. The door of Grandley's office opened and Marsden came in. He was a pudgy man with a moon face and a shock of hair which was uncombed. He wore a coat several sizes too big for him and a pair of knee-bagging trousers of a different color than the coat. His shirt was the hue of factory smoke.

Grandley said to him: "Did you threaten to kill Weyburn while you were in his room last night?"

Sloppy Joe Marsden looked shocked. "Me? Good Lord, no. I am not a violent man."

Grandley turned to me and said, "Well?"

I felt a little weak in the knees at that moment. Sloppy Joe's voice was a high pitched falsetto. The voice I had heard last night was bass and resonant.

I shook my head. I said, "No. That's not the voice I heard."

"Okay," said Grandley to the copper, "take him back to his cell."

They left the room and I frantically racked my brain for an out. I found a negative one.

"You surely can't believe," I said, "that I stabbed Weyburn to death, then calmly went to sleep in the next room? Besides what about the knife? Have you found the knife?"

"No, we haven't found the knife." He looked at me steadily and for no reason which I could fathom he seemed rather more friendly than before. "I'll tell you this much, Franklin. Weyburn was a crook. We know but can't prove he was dealing in blackmail. He used that room at the Latham to conduct his more private and less legitimate enterprises."

"You mean that perhaps he was blackmailing Marsden and Marsden killed him?"

"That's what we thought at first. But you say Marsden's voice was not the one you heard, and Marsden has an alibi of sorts."

"An alibi?"

Grandley nodded. "He left Weyburn's room at ten minutes past twelve. The desk clerk was dozing at the switchboard. Marsden woke him by poking him with his cane and asking him for a match. About ten minutes after Marsden left, Weyburn's phone buzzed at the board and Weyburn

yelled for help. He was dead when the clerk got upstairs."

"You mean someone else got to Weyburn after Marsden left?"

"Franklin, I mean nothing. Both you and Marsden are under suspicion—strong suspicion. I haven't enough, under the circumstances to hold either of you. But I'm keeping an eye on both of you." He glared at me, then said more quietly, "You can go now."

When I got to the door he spoke again. "If you ever want to be a copper again, Franklin, you can do two things. First, clear yourself. Second, bring me in the killer."

I WENT back to my room to wash up. I did not take a drink on the way.

Upon examination I found I was scared and sore. Scared because I was very close to a murder rap. Sore because I felt that if Grandley had given me back my job when I'd asked him I wouldn't have begun drinking again and I wouldn't have gone looking for Weyburn.

I paced up and down the little room and called Grandley every name I could think of. I worked the same process on Weyburn. Then I sat down on the edge of the bed and told myself I was seven kinds of a fool.

I'd argued with Grandley that I was a first class copper. Well, there would never be another time as opportune as this to prove it. I drank a glass of water. I lit a cigarette and I began to think.

After a solid hour of it I discovered that a single thought persisted in recurring. Sloppy Joe Marsden, who had the taste of a Kentucky hillbilly in clothes, had been carrying a cane. That was several hundred miles out of character. I lit another cigarette, went over all the known facts again in my mind and came upon one which was half hunch, half reason.

I went downstairs to the phone in the hall. I got Matthews on the wire. I said, "Do me a favor, Matt. Tell me, is Marsden still in the clink?"

"Yeah. Grandley's having some breakfast. He's going to talk to Marsden afterwards."

I thanked him, hung up and returned to my room. There, I opened, with some difficulty, an old suitcase which had been in

storage during my army tenure. In the pocket of its lid I found a bunch of keys.

They were the finest keys a copper—or for that matter a crook—could own. I had collected them over a period of years. They were guaranteed to open anything except safes. I put them in my pocket, looked up Marsden's address in the telephone book and went out of the house.

Marsden's apartment was situated in a quiet residential area. I opened the door on the third try and entered a well furnished foyer. I proceeded to go through the place with a fine toothed comb. I found the stick in a closet in his bedroom, high on a shelf.

It was of dark polished wood. Its handle was curved and tipped with silver. It looked nothing like any accessory that Sloppy Joe Marsden would own. I tucked it dapperly under my arm and left the apartment, locking the door carefully behind me.

In the corner drugstore I resorted to the telephone book again. This time I got Weyburn's home number. I went into a booth and called his widow. I got no answer.

That wasn't surprising. It was quite likely she was being questioned by the police. Perhaps, too, she had sought solace at the home of some relative or friend. But I *had* to see her. I called her every half hour.

The day went past. My throat was as dry as a skeleton in Death Valley. My entire nervous system was begging to be bathed in alcohol. I desperately fought off the urge. This was a day to use my brain cells, not to pickle them.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when Mrs. Weyburn finally lifted the receiver and said, "Hello," in a thin, tired voice. I drew a deep breath and became more vocally persuasive than I had ever been before. When I finished talking, she said, "Very well. Come over to the house. I'll expect you in half an hour."

I left Weyburn's widow at eleven-thirty and rang the bell of Marsden's apartment at exactly midnight. He opened the door and regarded me with some surprise.

"Franklin," he said. "Come on in."

I followed him through the foyer to the living room, the furnishings of which were in marked contrast to Marsden's attire. He wore the same unpressed pants he had had on at Headquarters. He had removed his coat and donned a woolen vest which bore

several polka dots of soup stain upon its front. He was still unshaven and his collar was a crumpled mound of dirty snow.

He waved me to a chair, sat down facing me with the unlighted end of a good cigar in his mouth. He said, "I suppose you want to talk about Weyburn."

I nodded.

"Since we're both under suspicion," said Marsden, "I suppose it'd be a good idea if we found out who killed him."

I crossed my legs, met his gaze squarely and said, "I know who killed him."

Marsden's eyebrows lifted two millimeters. In reply to his unasked question I said, "You did."

Marsden took the cigar from his mouth with dirty but steady fingers. He said, "The Commissioner couldn't prove that this morning."

"I can prove it now."

Marsden grunted. He stood up, went to the sideboard where five decanters were arrayed. He poured a stiff drink, looked inquiringly at me. I licked my lips, said, "No thanks," with a great deal of effort.

He sat down again, balanced the glass on his chubby knee and said, "Go ahead. Speak your piece."

"Marsden," I said, "they don't call you Sloppy Joe for nothing. You dress like a careless tramp. So what in Heaven's name would you be doing with a walking stick?"

He lifted the glass and his little eyes glittered over its rim. He said, "I take it the question is rhetorical. Go on."

"Rhetorical or not, it's the first question I asked myself when I heard you'd left the Latham with a cane in your hand. It was incredible that you'd carry one. It's incredible that you'd even own one. On the other hand to judge by Weyburn's outfit when I saw his body he was quite a dapper dresser. I guessed that cane was his. I established it positively."

"How?"

"I broke in here this afternoon and swiped it. I showed it to Weyburn's widow. She identified it."

There was a long silence. Marsden said at last, "I admit nothing. But stealing a stick is one charge, murder's another."

"Not necessarily. I know why you stole the stick."

I waited while he poured another drink. It was a big one.

"THERE is a garage next to the Latham," I said. "It's roof is almost level with the fourth floor of the hotel. There is a gap of barely three feet between the buildings. There is a fire-escape as well. The telephone in Weyburn's room is on a table flush against window sill."

Marsden said, "Keep talking," very quietly.

"With the aid of a walking stick a man could easily reach out from the garage roof and unhook the receiver of the phone in room four-fourteen. In a disguised voice he could yell for help. With his mouth that distance from the telephone the clerk couldn't tell one voice from another."

"And then?"

"And then you had your alibi. It was easily established that you had left the hotel before Weyburn apparently howled for help over the phone. Actually Weyburn was dead when you left his room."

Marsden grunted. He emptied his glass. He said slowly, as if choosing his words, "But what about the voice *you* heard? The one that threatened Weyburn with death. You've already conceded it wasn't mine."

I nodded. "That took some heavy thinking. But I figured it out. That was Weyburn's voice I heard."

"Weyburn's? You mean he was threatening himself?"

"No. He was threatening you. He was blackmailing you. You said something which enraged him. He threatened to kill you. But you killed *him* first."

"It's a nice theory. But you can't prove it was Weyburn's voice. Weyburn's dead."

"I have proved it. I've been to Weyburn's office with Mrs. Weyburn. He used a dictaphone. I listened to a record. It was Weyburn's voice, all right."

Marsden put his empty glass down on the polished surface of a table. There was a silence.

"Franklin," he finally said, with a great show of candor, "we're in this together. Between us, I'll admit I killed that rat. He was a blackmailing scum and he deserved what he got. Now you have a walking stick and a theory. As I see it you've not got better than an even money chance of convicting me. I can always say I twisted my ankle and borrowed the cane from Weyburn. Moreover, if I'm acquitted, your name will be lousy in this town. They'll

say you tried to frame me to clear yourself. You surely can see that?"

I could see it all right. What a jury would do with the evidence I could present was any man's guess. It would be my theory against Marsden's stout denial. And I was under suspicion myself. If Sloppy Joe beat the rap I wasn't going to be a popular guy.

"Listen," he said, "to save trouble for us both I'll make you a proposition."

"Make it."

"Five grand cash and a job. A good paying job. If you keep your mouth shut."

I lit a cigarette and didn't answer.

Marsden leaned forward in his chair. "I know you were turned down on reinstatement. You don't owe the law anything."

Five grand was a lot of dough and the sort of job Marsden would give me would require little effort for good wages. I thought it over, then shook my head.

"I've got no badge," I said. "But there's still too much copper in me to take you up."

"What are you going to do?"

"Turn in what evidence I have. After that it's up to someone else to see what they can do with it. That's all a copper can ever do."

"You're a fool," said Marsden. "You've just as much chance of getting yourself in trouble as me." He paused and added, "That job I'm offering is worth a yard and a half a week. Go home and think it over."

I went home and got into bed. I didn't sleep. I did a great deal of thinking. Marsden had offered me cash and a job. Grandley had offered me a short moral lecture and nothing else. It was obvious that the dice were heavily loaded in Sloppy Joe's favor. But I had been a copper for seven years. It was deep in my system. My corpuscles were saturated with it.

* * *

I got up at eight o'clock in the morning, dressed and did what I had to do.

I wrapped up Weyburn's walking stick in newspaper and went down to Headquarters. At nine-fifteen I was in Grandley's office.

I laid the cane on his desk and told him precisely what I knew and how. I omitted nothing save the matter of Marsden's financial offer. I concluded by saying, "Marsden thinks he has an even money chance of beat-

ing the case, Sir. I think he's right but that's up to the D. A."

Grandley looked at me across the desk top. There was a warm blue gleam in his eyes. "He won't beat it. He's been in jail for five hours, charged with murder in the first degree. He'll be indicted tomorrow."

I blinked at him. The case didn't seem that tight to me. I supposed, however, that the D. A. had more law than I had.

Grandley grinned at me. He said, "Franklin, if you'll fill out that application for reinstatement I'll be glad to okay it."

My pulse picked up a beat. I said, "Thanks." I could not forbear to add, "I told you I was a good copper, Sir."

He nodded. "You did well enough. But it isn't because of your police work that you're getting your job back."

"No?"

"No. You're getting it for two reasons. First, even before you knew of the walking stick alibi you refused to identify Marsden's voice as the one you heard in the hotel room. You were under suspicion yourself and you could have eased that suspicion somewhat by swearing it was Marsden you'd heard threaten Weyburn. Second, you flatly turned down Marsden's bribe. I want coppers with character. You'll do."

I glowed a little, then something occurred to me. "But how do you know Marsden tried to bribe me?"

Grandley chuckled. "Well," he said, "we

didn't have enough to hold either you or Marsden. But I was morally certain that one of you had something to do with it. While you two were down here yesterday morning I planted a couple of men in the basement of your rooming house and Marsden's apartment house."

"Men in the basement?" I frowned for a moment, then got it. "A dictaphone?"

"A dictaphone, Franklin. Two good witnesses heard Marsden tell you he killed Weyburn. That's our case."

I grinned. I said, "Thank you, Sir," and went toward the door.

Grandley's voice stopped me on the threshold. "I think you should know, Franklin, that my mother was a lady."

I stared at him blankly.

He said, "From some remarks you made at ten-eighteen this morning, I infer that you are of a contrary opinion."

I felt color flowing into my cheeks. I remembered half the names I had called Grandley this morning. That and the half I couldn't recall had trickled through the earpieces of his planted dictaphone. I began to stammer like a schoolboy.

"Don't apologize," said Grandley. "Get out and fill in those papers."

I gulped and closed the door behind me. On the way to the Civil Service Bureau I passed four saloons. I found myself wondering how on earth people could take a drink before lunch time.



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His words were rough: "Don't tell me you're sorry. . . ."

CHAPTER ONE

Little Miss Poison

**By W. T.
BALLARD**

MONTE FRENCH stood watching the crowd surging around the gambling tables. The room was very full. There were so many players that he could not even see the black and red of the roulette layouts, or the hollow crap tables. It was the biggest night they'd had since he had come to town—the biggest night all over Vegas, from all reports.

No one spoke to him. He leaned against the wall, close to the bank of slot machines, his eyes on the crowd. The gambling tables

were set in a square, the two roulette layouts at the upper end. Below them was a twenty-one table on each side, and below these the four crap tables.

Insides the hollow square stood the floor men, walking about from table to table, their sharp eyes on everything that happened.

He wore a khaki shirt and trousers, a Sam Brown belt and gun and a small metal badge which read Special Deputy. He was hired by the hotel along with four others to keep order. He was, in fact, little more than a watchman.

His humorous mouth twisted slightly with self-derision. This was something, a special officer at seventy-five a week. Two months ago he had been Hollywood's leading private detective with a yearly income that ran well up into five figures.

Strange, he thought, how the breaks fell, like the dice rolling on the green table. No one knew when they would turn up with a natural or a crap. Well, he'd thrown snake eyes, and there wasn't any need to cry about it. He'd been lucky to catch on, here at the hotel. He'd been dead broke when everything was straightened out, and his license was gone. His partner had ducked the rap and let him take it all by himself. Well, that was the way things went, and all because of a girl.

Monte French didn't hate her. He didn't think she was worth hating. He didn't even blame her. She'd fought to get where she was in the picture business. She'd come to him when they started to blackmail her and he'd rigged a payoff. He'd had a D.A.'s man in the next room, and he'd paid off with marked money, and the cops had picked up Little Joe Forbes and Jack Frost as they left his office.

Everything was set—all Ellen had to do was to go before the court and tell how they had blackmailed her. But at the last minute she'd changed her testimony. She'd pulled a switch. She'd sworn that Monte French had forced her to act as his pigeon, that in reality he'd been trying to blackmail Forbes.

The D.A. had been sore, naturally. He thought that French had tried to use him. He'd had French's license revoked. He'd threatened to send him to San Quentin.

Well, that was that. French had come over here with his last dollar. He'd seen

Hurst, the manager. He'd spent enough dough at this hotel when he was in the chips so that they owed him something.

Hurst had been apologetic. He'd said: "I'm sorry, Monte. It isn't much of a job I'm offering you, but it's all I have. Just coffee and cakes. Maybe later I can do better. If you were only a trained dealer. . . ."

He wasn't a trained gambling dealer. He'd spent his time on the wrong side of the tables, losing the big money that he'd earned for five years. He'd been a prize fool. He knew it now. Most people figured out their mistakes after it was too late.

He'd have to stop thinking, stop remembering back when he had been a guest, not an employee in this very room. And then he stiffened, for Ellen had appeared in the door which led to the lobby.

She looked the same: the long blonde bob, the blue-gray eyes and the blue suit which almost matched her eyes. She looked, as she always did, as if she had stepped directly from a fashion magazine. It was a shock seeing her, but he should have expected it. He knew that she came over here often. Why then hadn't he foreseen that they would meet?

Her eyes swept the room, missing him. That was like her. He wore a uniform now. He was nothing more than a piece of furniture. He wondered, grimly, how long it would be before she actually did see him, and what she would do when she did. Would she ignore him, or would she speak and be sweet and pretend that nothing had happened?

He watched her as she moved forward, nodding to one of the dealers at the first roulette table. Then he frowned. Joe Forbes and Jack Frost had appeared in the doorway.

His mouth thinned and he watched the two men with careful attention. Forbes was supposed to be an investment broker in Los Angeles, Frost in the real estate business, but their activities ran back into black market dealings and before that to questionable stock promotions.

Frost was reputed to have started as a bootlegger in Detroit, but that was only hearsay, and now both men had money and power enough to have caused him to lose his license.

He looked again at the girl. She had

been a model before going into pictures. Her story had been that she had once worked in a night club in which Frost had an interest, that a man had been killed in the club and that she had been tried as an accessory. She'd claimed to have been acquitted, but she said that the publicity would ruin her picture career and that Frost and Forbes had been taking a part of her earnings in return for their silence.

He'd fallen for the story hook, line and sinker—because he had fallen for the girl. His partner had tried to warn him that he should investigate, but he'd been certain of himself.

And now she was here, Ellen Hoyle, the newest of the screen darlings, and with her the two men who she had sworn were blackmailing her. It simply made no sense.

He told himself he didn't care. He turned away, but he hadn't turned quickly enough. The girl had seen him, and her face had turned to chalk.

“**M**ONTE.” She was standing at his side. “Monte. What are you doing here?”

He indicated his costume with a little gesture. “Trying to make an honest buck, Sweetheart. It's about all you left me.”

She winced as if he had struck her. “Monte, please. . . .”

“Sure,” he said, “I shouldn't whine. I played the sucker with my eyes open. I know girls can change their minds. It's a privilege they've born with.”

“You don't understand.” She turned, saw that Forbes and Frost were bearing down on them and let her words die.

She looked almost as if she wished to run, but there was nowhere to run. Monte French stood in front of her, Forbes and Frost behind.

Forbes said in his heavy voice: “Well look who's here.” He sounded almost jovial. He was a big man, and he liked to appear good humored. He wasn't. “Look, Jack, the boy scout who tried to shake us down, and hiding behind a tin shield, too!”

Frost was small. His dark hair grew down to a widow's peak, and he would have been good looking had his mouth been fuller and his eyes not quite so close together. His skin was ivory despite a sun tan which lay over it as if it had been painted on. He failed to answer Forbes's smile. He

took the girl's arm, steering her away. “Come on.” It was an order, and she obeyed, not even looking back.

Forbes said mockingly: “Why do you hang around, French? You're all washed up. I'll see Hurst and you won't have a job. I don't like smart punks who hang around.”

French hit him then. He'd been wanting to hit Forbes for a long time. His anger, both at the man and at himself, had been eating into him like acid. He struck, and felt his knuckles dig deep into the flabby flesh protecting the man's jaw.

Forbes fell as if he'd been struck by an ax. A woman screamed. The crowd turned, a floor man pushed the alarm and the red light above the center table glowed. All play ceased while two other special policemen ran across the room.

The first was tall and lanky and sandy haired, a ranch kid, young and rough, but a good hand. “What's the matter, Monte?” He had his gun out.

“Nothing,” said French. He was breathing a little heavily. He'd fixed things for himself again. Hurst couldn't keep him now. Guards didn't go around hitting customers and hold their jobs.

French said: “Take care of it, will you, Luke?”

The boy said, “Sure.” He liked Monte French. Monte had been a big detective in Los Angeles, but he didn't act that way; he acted like a regular guy all the time.

Monte threaded his way through the surging crowd and into the lobby. The clerk looked at him as he passed the desk. “Trouble in there?”

“No trouble,” he said, and went into Hurst's office.

The hotel manager looked up from his desk. “What happened out there? The alarm bell just rang.”

“I lost my head and socked Forbes in the jaw.” He didn't look at Hurst. He felt pretty bad. Not for hitting Forbes—the big jerk had that coming—but for letting Hurst down, for causing a disturbance when he had been hired to keep order. He took off his badge and laid it on the desk and started to unfasten his gun belt.

Hurst said: “Hey, what's the idea?” He stood up. He was about average height with dark curly hair, a straight nose and black eyes. French judged the man to be at least forty. He didn't know anything about

him except that he was manager of the hotel, and that he'd given French a job when he needed one bad.

"I'm quitting," said French, "to save you the necessity of firing me."

"I'm not going to fire you."

French stared at the hotel manager. He wasn't used to people giving him a break. He'd fought for everything he'd ever gotten, fought hard.

"Look," said Hurst. "I back up my men. You shouldn't have hit him, but after what you told me happened in Los Angeles I can't say I really blame you."

French didn't answer. This was so unexpected that it left him breathless.

Hurst went on: "He'll be sore as hell, of course. I can't put you back into the gambling rooms until he goes, but we have a ground patrol, too. You can go on that as long as he's here. After he leaves I'll bring you back inside."

He caught French's expression and added: "I'm not doing this because I'm soft hearted, French. I need a trained man to run things on the special officer squad. When you learn the ropes, the job is yours if a hundred and half interests you."

Still Monte French didn't speak. You never knew where kindness would come from. He answered by picking up his badge and pinning it back into place on his shirt.

PATROLLING the hotel grounds wasn't bad. The air felt cool and sweet after the heat of the desert day. The sprinklers, running in a dozen places on the big spreading lawns, made a faint hissing sound as if from a far distant waterfall. The job was simple. There were a hundred cottages, flanking the curving graveled drives. He had to see that all the lights were burning and that nothing suspicious transpired on the grounds.

There were eight acres in the grounds and it took him some twenty minutes to make his circuit. He timed himself since he had little else to do. Cars arrived, others departed. Bell boys, riding scooter bikes with a square box fastened on in front, conducted late arrivals to their cottages.

At midnight he went in through a kitchen door, got himself a cup of coffee and called the night clerk on the phone for the list of vacancies. There were only four. Business seemed to be good.

He must have been in the kitchen for half an hour. He stepped back into the night and made another circuit. As he came up the curving drive directly behind the hotel, he saw a woman open a car door and start to climb in. Then she stopped, backed out and screamed. It was a low scream, a kind of gasping sound, breathless with startled fear.

He was already running, loosening the gun at his hip as he ran. The scream had not been repeated. She stood, one hand pressed against her mouth. It was the hand which kept him from recognizing her until he'd almost reached her. Then he realized it was Ellen, and called her name.

She spun at the sound of his voice and without thought took three steps toward him. She would have fallen had not his arms gone wide and caught her.

"Ellen, what's the matter?"

"In the car. It's Forbes."

He let her go then, stepping quickly forward, using the small flash which was clipped to his belt.

Joe Forbes lay on the floor of the big car. He lay on his side, his big body huddled as if someone had put it forcibly into the too-small space. His head was twisted forward so that it was difficult to make out his beefy face.

French bent closer. He saw the blood then, where the knife had been driven into the man's side, just under his left armpit. He stared at it, at the haft pointing downward, and he had a thought he did not like. Ellen was left handed. Supposing she had been standing beside the car, supposing Forbes had tried to kiss her. Supposing she had had the knife.

He tried to put the thought away from him, but it wouldn't go away. He looked at the heavy body. Could she have managed to stuff it onto the car floor alone? It hardly seemed possible, yet if the car door had been open, if Forbes had fallen backward, she might have been able to lift his feet and turn him completely over.

That could explain the cramped position in which the man lay. But French had seen her opening the car door—or had he? He tried desperately to remember.

He turned to look at her. Even in the uncertain light from the yard lamps she was beautiful. It was no wonder that his heart turned over every time he saw her, that

he'd let her make a fool of him as he had never let any one else.

Well, he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

His voice was very hard and careful and contained as he said, "Well, Ellen, what happened?"

She'd been watching him, silent, still pressing the hand against her mouth. She seemed calm, but the calm broke now. "Oh, Monte, it was terrible!"

"What was?" He was as unyielding as a granite post.

"Finding Forbes that way. I came for my scarf. I opened the door and reached in before I realized he was there. Is he— is he dead?"

"As a mackerel," said French. "Someone put a knife in his armpit."

The girl shivered at the brutality of his words.

"Don't tell me you're sorry." His words were still rough. "First you call him a blackmailer, then you switch, then you show up here with him. Next you'll say that you loved him dearly."

"I hated him." She put more feeling into the words than he thought possible. "Do you understand, I hated him!"

He didn't understand, but he said sharply: "No matter how you felt, keep it to yourself. This is going to be bad, Ellen, very bad indeed."

She had recovered her composure. "Couldn't we—couldn't we simply close the car door and go away? Let someone else find him later?"

He was tempted. He'd have liked to do more than that—slip into the big car, drive somewhere far out onto the desert, and lose the body. Forbes wouldn't care. He was just a body now, and a body never cares. . . .

He crowded the thought down. He said to the girl: "Go into the kitchen and call the office. Have Hurst come out here and tell him to bring Luke Carson. Don't go into the gambling rooms or lobby yourself. I don't want anyone else showing up here until I've talked to Hurst."

He shut the car door against the eyes of the casual guest and waited as she hurried along the driveway toward the hotel kitchen.

This wasn't just bad for Ellen—it was bad for him, too.

CHAPTER TWO

Hideout

THE police lieutenant was short and squat and looked something like a barrel. He had a square-jawed face and cold eyes. He pulled up in his black and white car with two uniformed men and stepped out to meet Hurst and the others beside the murder sedan. His name was Strongberg, and French thought that he fancied himself an investigator.

"Okay, who found the body?"

French stepped forward, but before he could say anything Ellen Hoyle had turned her smile on the police official. "We did." She pulled French forward.

Strongberg looked surprised. His eyes ranged from the girl to French's uniform, and it was obvious that he had little use for special officers. "How come?"

She said: "I came out to get my scarf from the car. Monte was making his rounds. I opened the door and saw Mr. Forbes and screamed, and Monte joined me."

Listening, French thought: *She's too clever for you, Boy. She's put you right in the middle of the jackpot and given herself an alibi by dragging you in. Now the whole story will come out, and you'll be resting right behind the eight ball.*

He was right. It happened fast. Jack Frost had been summoned from the gambling room. He gave Strongberg the whole story: how French had tried to frame them on a blackmail charge, how French had lost his license and had been kicked out of Los Angeles.

Frost turned his cool eyes on Monte. "And then we came up here," he said, "and French attacked Joe Forbes in the gambling rooms. A hundred people saw him do it. He'd have killed him then if the crowd hadn't stopped him."

French looked at Hurst. The hotel manager's face was bleak and unreadable. He looked at the girl. All she needed to say was: "You're wrong. I was at the car first. Monte couldn't possibly have done it. He was on the other side of the lawn."

But Ellen did not speak. She just stood there, waiting.

Strongberg turned to Hurst. His voice changed a little when he addressed the hotel

manager. "What about it? If they had trouble, why didn't you fire this jerk?"

Hurst's face looked pained. He opened his mouth, started to speak; then he looked at French, shrugged and spread his hands. "I felt sorry for him. I still think he got a rough deal in Los Angeles."

"But you think he knifed Forbes?"

Again the hotel manager shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I wouldn't blame him much if he had."

"I guess," said Strongberg, "that does it. Come on, you. Let's have the gun."

The lieutenant was careless there. He should have had his men up behind French. But the country made him careless. The desert stretched for miles in all directions. No one could escape this town; no one would face the dry, waterless miles.

But something in Monte French's head snapped. He reached down as if to unbuckle his gun belt, and suddenly the police special was in his hand, its nose covering them all.

"Don't move," he said. "None of you move if you want to live."

Strongberg swore. "You fool! You can't get away. You're only making it tougher on yourself."

"How tougher?" said Monte French. He was almost shaking with rage, but his mind was cool and detached. "Nothing can be tougher than a murder-rape, and you've got me all buttoned up for that. Haven't you, wise guy?"

Strongberg's face had gone a dirty bluish red. "We'll get you," he promised. "And when we do, you'll wish you'd never seen this country."

"Sure." French jerked his head toward the police car. "Get in. Under the wheel." He looked at the two uniformed men. "If you want to see your boss again, you'll just sit tight and do nothing for the next ten minutes."

They stared at him unblinkingly. Strongberg hesitated for an instant, then slid under the wheel. "I suppose you realize you're laying yourself open for a kidnap rape also?"

"You're making me cry," said French. "Get going."

THE policeman ground the starter into life. The car surged ahead. "Take the rear drive," French told him. They swung left where the drives divided and pulled

around the row of closely built cottages.

They were hardly out of sight of the men clustered around the murder car when French ordered Strongberg to stop. The police lieutenant stared at him in surprise. "What now?"

French leaned forward and cut the switch. As he did so, he struck with his other hand, using the leather sap from his pocket. Strongberg went forward against the wheel.

French worked fast. He had the door open almost before the car ceased rolling, and he dragged the unconscious man out. He couldn't have the man with him. He meant to take off, straight across the desert as far as the police car would go. He turned back to it and heard someone call his name.

He swung around quickly, the gun almost leaping into his hand, and then he saw the long frame of Luke Carson round the drive from the other way.

"Hey, Monte, wait." The boy was breathless. "I saw you drive out and ran toward the other gate." He was panting. "I'm going with you. You need someone who knows the country."

"You're nuts!" It must be a trap. This bean-pole kid couldn't be that simple.

Luke pulled up at his side. "Where's the cop?"

French jerked his thumb toward the bushes.

Luke chuckled, then sobered. "You won't get a mile in that car. I know, run it in that garage." He jerked his head toward an empty garage between two cottages. "They may not find it for hours."

"And what'll I do, hoof across the desert on foot?"

"My car's in the main parking lot—the old Ford, last one on this side. Get in, down on the floor. I'm off duty in a couple of hours. I'll drive you home to my place. Get going—I'll take care of this." He was already moving around the police car.

Monte French hesitated for a moment, then he shrugged. "Why not? If the kid were on the level, it was a chance. If not, he was probably better off in jail than out on the desert. His raging anger had cooled enough to make him realize how much of a fool he had been to ever try to get away.

He slipped between the close-built cottages, made the parking lot unseen and slid

in onto the floor of Luke Carson's old car.

He lay there, silent, waiting. He heard the sirens as more police cars arrived. He heard the excited voices when Strongberg came to and finally staggered in to the hotel. But evidently they had not found the police car, for the search went away from the hotel.

It seemed hours before he felt the Ford sway as Luke opened the front door and climbed in. The boy took an old blanket from the back of the front seat and spread it over French. He did not speak as he turned the car out of the parking space and into the road. He did not speak during the ten minutes it took him to drive home. Not until he had pulled into his shed garage did he turn and lift the shielding blanket.

"Okay, Monte."

French climbed stiffly from the car. His muscles were so cramped that it was hard for him to walk. He saw the boy grin in the half light from the window of the house and said, "Thanks."

"Forget it. You always treated me okay."

French looked back at the three days he had been at the hotel, trying to recall anything he might have done for this kid. He could think of nothing. He'd been pleasant, sure, but that was all.

He said again: "Thanks. If you'll tell me which way to get out of town, I'll start moving."

A shadow touched the boy's face. "Don't be foolish, Monte. They've got all the state cops out and all the sheriff's men. You wouldn't get anywhere at all."

"So?" French hesitated.

"So, come on in. You can stay here at least until things blow down."

French said: "Have you thought about what would happen to you if they found me here?"

The boy was embarrassed. He scuffed at the dirt floor with the toe of his shoe. "They won't find you."

French tried again. "How do you know I didn't kill that guy? I did hit him."

Luke Carson's faith refused to be shaken. "Hitting a guy and sticking him with a knife are two different things. You aren't that kind of a guy, that's all."

FRENCH looked at the big, gangling kid. He thought: *If I ever get out of this mess this punk can have anything I can*

give him. "Okay," he said, "but you gotta promise me one thing. If they find me, I threatened you, see. I put a gun on you and threatened you and you were afraid to talk. It will make you out a coward, but they won't be able to do much to you."

Carson had a prominent Adam's apple. He swallowed a couple of times unwillingly, but he finally promised and they went into the house.

The girl who met them in the kitchen was very young. At first French thought she must be Carson's sister. She didn't seem old enough to be anyone's wife. If he'd known that the boy was married he'd never have come.

Ann Carson smiled. She had a nice smile. He started to apologize but she wouldn't listen. "If Luke says it's okay," she told him, "it is." Her pride and faith in her husband were obvious.

"He's been talking about you for three days," she added. "He thinks you're a great man."

French's mouth was a bitter line. He started to say that he was a great fool, probably the greatest yet unchanged; then he shut up. It was bad enough for them to have him here without him griping.

He said: "You kids don't realize what you're up against. I'll have to lay over here today, but as soon as it's dark again, I'll scam. There's no use waiting around."

"Why not?" said Luke. "You're a detective, aren't you? All we have to do is to discover who killed that Forbes guy and clear you."

Monte French looked at him. He couldn't believe that the kid was as dumb as he sounded.

They ate at the kitchen table with the blinds pulled down. Luke said: "I'll do the leg work, but you'll have to furnish the brains. I'm a little new at this detective business."

French tried to make his words light. "If brains were a dime a dozen, I'd be the poorest guy in the country. I let a girl make a sucker out of me."

"That Miss Hoyle, she's beautiful."

"So's deadly nightshade. I've had nothing but trouble since the first time I saw her."

"Think she killed Forbes?"

French shrugged tiredly. "I don't know. She had plenty to gain. He'd been black-

mailing her about an old killing in a Detroit night club, and I guess he really had something on her. . . ."

"That's one," said Carson, holding up a bony finger. "What about this Jack Frost character? He struck me as the type who would stick a knife into his best friend if it would pay off."

French nodded. "You can have Frost, too."

"Anyone else?"

"There might be a hundred," said French. "Forbes is the kind of a bird who people could easily take a violent dislike to."

Luke Carson nodded his head slowly. "Anyone in town you can trust?"

"The only one would be Hurst," French said, then shook his head. Why should the hotel manager do anything for him? He had already put himself out on a limb, trying to help.

"I tell you what you do. If you can manage to send a wire to the Detroit police and find out about the night club killing Ellen Hoyle was mixed up in, it might help. Trouble is, the local law will wonder why you're asking questions."

"Don't worry about that," Carson told him. "I've got a friend who works in the telegraph office. He can handle it for me."

CHAPTER THREE

Two Fugitives Meet

MONTE FRENCH slept most of the day. It wasn't a restful sleep. He dreamed that he was in an old mine shaft and that Strongberg and the rest of the cops were closing in. He awoke in a cold sweat to find that it was dark outside the window.

He rose, doused his head with cold water and went down stairs. Ann Carson was just setting the dinner table. She gave him a little smile and handed him the folded newspaper.

He said: "Why'd you let me sleep so long?"

The girl shook her head. "Luke said to. He said there wasn't anything you could do and you were better off asleep."

French nodded and sat down in the rocker in the corner and opened the paper. His name leaped at him in black type. He read the story twice. They'd found the police

car hidden in the garage between the cottages. The police theory was that someone at the hotel must have helped him escape. It was intimated that the help must have come from one of the guests, since many of them were also from California.

He breathed easier after that. Apparently, no one had yet suspected Luke Carson. With luck he'd be away after dark. Maybe the girl could drive him out one of the desert roads. With water and a little food, traveling at night, there was a chance that he might make the Mexican border.

He froze suddenly, his hand going to the gun at his side. There was noise on the porch. Then the door opened and Luke Carson came in. He looked very tired.

"Any luck?" He asked it, not because he expected any, but to be polite.

Carson sank into a chair. He drew a telegram from his pocket and passed it over. It was from the Detroit police department, addressed to Luke Carson, Special Officer, and read:

ELLEN HOYLE ACQUITTED IN MURDER OF MIKE SIMMONS STOP BROTHER SENT TO PEN ONE TO TEN RELEASED LAST WEEK STOP NO KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WHEREABOUTS STOP SIMMONS KILLED IN CLUB OPERATED BY JACK FROST AND JOE FORBES.

French looked up. Both the kids were watching him. Carson said: "Does that help?"

"Maybe." He wasn't certain that it did.

"Would it help if I told you that someone is hiding in Miss Hoyle's cottage over at the hotel?"

He came alert then. "What are you trying to tell me?"

The boy shrugged. "Nothing, maybe. I was off duty this afternoon, but I hung around the hotel grounds, watching her cottage. One of the maids told me there was a man there. I checked. He isn't registered."

"Was it Frost?"

The boy shook his head. "No, I saw Frost a dozen times."

French stood up. "All right. I've got to get over to the hotel."

"You're crazy. Let me do it."

"What I have to do," he said, "can't be done by anyone else. I'll be all right. They won't be looking for me around town."

He had his way. He borrowed an old

hat and a white shirt from Luke. The boy's pants were much too long, but the hat and shirt changed his appearance. He was tanned. That was good. In this country everyone was tanned.

He said: "Drive me out to the hotel when you go back to work. If I have to, I'll hide in the car as I did last night. Oh, and one other thing. Can you get me a pass key?"

"Sure, but—"

"What's the matter?"

"You—you aren't going to hurt her?"

French had a sudden desire to laugh. Luke was afraid he meant to kill Ellen Hoyle. French hoped he could convince the actress of the same thing. He wanted a showdown.

"I won't hurt her," he said, "but I'm going to throw a scare into her that she won't forget for awhile."

He stuffed his gun into his hip pocket and followed Luke out to the car. Ann Carson came out with them into the darkness. He turned and took both her hands.

"You're swell," he told her. "Luke doesn't know how lucky he is. If I'd had someone like you around, I might not have made so many mistakes." He turned, then, and got in and sat on the floor of the rear seat.

At the hotel Luke parked the car and went away. He came back in ten minutes and gave French the pass key.

"I swiped it from the kitchen," he said. "I don't think they'll miss it."

FRENCH let him go. He waited ten minutes more; then he peered out. No one was even close to the car. He left it on the far side and faded into the bushes which were planted thickly against the edge of the cottages. Luke had told him Ellen's cabin was at the far end of the grounds. He started in that direction, moving along the outmost drive. Twice he passed guests but they paid no attention, apparently taking him for one of the workmen who tended the sprinklers.

Beyond the fence was the raw desert, making a sharp contrast with the hotel's carefully tended lawns. He stayed close to the fence, meaning to go over it if he met one of the yard watchmen or a policeman.

But he failed to meet one as he gained the shadow of the girl's cottage. There were

lights on inside, but the venetian blinds were closed so that he could see nothing. He eased his way around onto the porch and worked the key soundlessly into the lock. Then, with his gun held ready, he pushed the door gently open.

The room was big. The twin beds hardly noticeable because of the size. There were three easy chairs, a bureau, a desk and a desk chair.

The girl sat on the edge of a twin bed, her back to the door. A man sat in one of the easy chairs, facing her, the cone of light from the floor lamp shining directly down on his dark head. Monte French had never seen him before. He stared at the skin, showing white under the lamp light; then he slid through and closed the door.

The man was saying: "I've got to get out of here. Every minute I stay it gets more dangerous. I tell you, that maid saw me this morning."

"You can't go now," said Ellen Hoyle. "The roads are hot. They're watching for Monte French. Wait a couple of days until things quiet down; then I'll get you on a plane."

"Wonder where that guy French is?"

"He'll get clear. Monte can take care of himself."

"Well, thanks," said Monte French.

They both jumped at the sound of his voice. The girl came off the bed as if it were hot. The man tried to rise from his chair.

"Sit still," said French, and there was that in his voice which made the other freeze.

"Monte, what are you doing here? Where have you been?"

"Around." His mouth was bitter. "Not that you'd care."

"Monte, stop it. Don't talk that way."

"Save the act for the cameras, Sweet-heart."

The man said: "Don't talk to her that way."

French's ready anger was riding up in him again. "Look, Squirt, I've had about enough from your lovely sister. I can't hit her, but I sure as hell wouldn't mind bending this gun barrel across your head. Keep the mouth closed or you'll be choking on loose teeth."

Ellen Hoyle caught her breath. "You know who he is?"

"Sure," French said and found no satis-

faction in the words. "He's your brother, just out of stir in Michigan. He hopped himself out here and knocked over Joe Forbes with a knife. I should thank him for that, but I don't like to be put in the grease for another man's kill."

"He didn't, Monte. He didn't kill Joe, I swear it!"

"You're good at swearing to things," his voice was grim. "First you sold me a bill of goods that Forbes and Frost were blackmailing you, then you double-crossed me and swore that I was pulling a fast one. You put me behind the eight ball all right."

"I couldn't help it." She was almost crying. "I meant to make it up to you, Monte, but you walked out before I could see you. I didn't know where you were."

"Save it."

Anger glinted in her eyes. "Look, I'll admit that I handed you a rough deal, but my hands were tied. I couldn't help myself. I had to do what I did. But I meant to pay you. . . ."

"Pay me?" He almost spat the words at her. "What kind of money do you think you have, Miss Hoyle, that would pay a man for the loss of a business he'd spent seven years building? For his self respect and—"

"Monte." Her anger was gone. "I'm sorry. . . ."

"Forget it." He was already cursing himself for letting go. "That's water over the dam. But this Forbes kill isn't—this is new and fresh and raw. It's my neck if they catch me, unless I can pin it on the one who swung that knife."

Her face was bloodless. "What do you mean?"

"Your brother," he said. "Your brother went up for a night club killing in Detroit. He got out; he came here and settled with Forbes."

"No." She took a step toward him.

He said: "Stay where you are, Beautiful. I won't shoot you, but I sure as hell will bounce a bullet off your brother's wishbone."

She believed him. She stayed where she was, motionless, her eyes looking enormous in her white face. "You don't believe Eddie killed him."

"Why shouldn't I? Isn't that the way it happened?"

"No—no!"

"Then you knifed him."

There was a growl from the man in the chair. "Keep her out of this!"

"I can't. She keeps crowding in."

Eddie started to rise, thought better of it and settled back. "She had nothing to do with any of it, understand? If you'd let me tell you about it—"

"I'll tell it," said the girl. "I should have told you everything in the first place. . . . Six years ago, I was singing in a club in Detroit. Eddie," she indicated her brother with a jerk of her head, "was the bartender. Forbes and Frost were customers at the club. Rumor had it that they'd been bootleggers and that they'd put up the money for the place. It was run by a man named Simmons. And Simmons kept making passes in my direction.

"Anyhow, there was a row one night and Eddie cracked Simmons with a bottle. I didn't see it, but Simmons is supposed to have pulled a gun. Eddie tried to take it away from him. It went off and Simmons was killed. That's the story Forbes told in court. Afterwards he came to me and said that that wasn't the true story at all. He said that Simmons left the room, that Eddie got a gun and went after Simmons, that it was premeditated murder instead of manslaughter. He said that he'd testified as he had because he liked me. . . . Then Hurst sent for me to come to Los Angeles."

"Hurst?" Monte French started. "You mean the Hurst that's manager of this hotel?"

THAT'S right. He'd been the manager of the club in Detroit until Simmons got killed, then he came to the coast. He had a spot for me, singing in his club. I took it and a producer saw me one night and offered me a screen test. I thought I was sitting on top of the world—and then Forbes and Jack Frost showed up.

"Forbes started to shake me down. It took everything I made to satisfy them. But I didn't dare squawk. And then it came time for Eddie to get out of prison on good behavior. I thought they couldn't do anything more to him then, and I met you. I told you about the blackmailing and you fixed it to catch them. But after they'd been arrested, Forbes sent for me. He said that if I didn't get them off, he'd tell what had happened back in Michigan. He said they could retry Eddie and send him back

to prison for life. So I switched on you. . . ."

Monte French didn't know whether to believe her or not. It sounded like a straight story, but everything else she'd told had been convincing. He said harshly: "What's he doing here?" and pointed at Eddie Hoyle.

"Hurst offered him a job. He wrote to him while he was still in prison. Eddie wrote and asked me. I told him to take it. Hurst is one person you can depend upon."

Monte French said: "If all that's true, what are you doing up here with Forbes and Frost?"

She flared. "I didn't come up with them. I just happened to walk into that gambling room at the same time they did. I didn't know they were here."

French considered. The story was convincing—almost too convincing. And there was one hole in the pattern. What were Forbes and Frost doing here? Was it merely coincidence that they and the girl should show up on the same night?

He said: "One more thing—how did Forbes and Frost get along? Could Frost be our man?"

Brother and sister stared at each other. Eddie Hoyle said slowly: "It could be. Frost is a cold-blooded fish. I always figured he was the brain, that he used Forbes as the front. If he thought it would be to his advantage to get rid of the fat man, he'd do it as quickly as he'd step on a spider. But he'd have an alibi, and he'd have a fall guy to take the rap."

"I don't know about the alibi," said French, "but he had a perfect fall guy after I socked Forbes in the gambling rooms. I might as well have tied a card around my neck marked *murderer*."

"But what are we going to do?" It was the girl.

"We're going to get Frost over here and face him," French said. "I need your help, both of you."

The girl shook her head quickly. "Not Eddie. Don't drag him into this."

"What about me?"

She turned to look at French. Before she could speak, her brother cut in.

"Look, French has had a rough ride. Let's stop thinking about us for a minute and think about him."

The girl said: "Oh, Eddie, I—Monte. . . ." She turned and came swiftly

across the room. Monte didn't know what she was going to do. You never knew with Ellen Hoyle. She came up on tip-toe, ignoring the gun which he still held, and kissed him full on the lips.

"I've been a fool," she said, "a terrible fool. But all my life I've been trying to take care of Eddie. I—"

Monte French was terribly embarrassed. He wanted to put his arms around her and tell her that it was all right, that everything was all right. But it wasn't, not quite. He wondered if he would ever thoroughly trust her again.

He made his voice hard. "Forget that now. We've got something important to do."

She pulled back as if he had slapped her. She said quietly: "What is it you want me to do?"

"Call the hotel. Get hold of Frost and tell him to come over here at once."

"He'll be suspicious. I haven't been exactly friendly."

Monte French thought for a long moment. "Call Hurst then. Tell him you have evidence against Frost and want him to get the man out here without letting the cops know." He waited until the girl had made the call, then he said:

"Both of you follow my lead. No matter what I do or say, play it straight. Remember, we haven't any evidence. We're going to have to out-think a gambler."

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown Play

MONTE FRENCH stood inside the bathroom. The light at his back was off and the door open a crack so that he could see the room.

Eddie Hoyle was in the closet. The girl stood alone beside one of the windows. If she were nervous, she concealed it well. There was a noise at the door and she called, "Come in."

The door was thrust open and Jack Frost stepped through. He was followed a moment later by Hurst. The two men looked at the girl, puzzled.

Hurst said: "Here he is. He didn't want to come, but I told him he'd better or I'd phone the police."

Frost's tone was a bluster. "Look, Sis-

ter, you haven't got a thing on me. I didn't knife Joe Forbes. For my dough, *you're* the little girl who pulled the trick."

Hurst was startled. "How do you make that out?"

Frost turned cold eyes on the hotel manager. "This little girl reverses herself but plenty," he said. "You can't tell where she stands. She tied up with that Los Angeles dick to get us, then when Joe pressured her, she switched and threw him to the wolves."

Hurst's teeth gleamed again. "And you think she switched back and helped him kill Forbes?"

"That's right," said Frost.

"Don't bet on it." Monte French stepped into the room, his gun hanging loosely in his hand.

Both men swung to stare at him. Jack Frost uttered a cry deep in his throat. Hurst, recovering, grinned.

"So this is where you've been hiding."

Monte French didn't answer that one.

Frost said: "So it's a showdown." He sounded almost glad.

"A showdown," said French.

"You're wise. You haven't got a chance to get out of town. Strongberg has this place sewed up like a tent."

"That's fine," said French. His eyes were very watchful. "Only you've got the wrong angle, Frost. I don't take the rap for this one. I didn't knife Forbes."

The man laughed, a mocking, hollow sound. "Remember what happened to you in Los Angeles?"

French ignored him. "Tell me, Pal, how did you and your fat playmate happen to come to Vegas at this time? Did you just feel lucky, or did you have a reason?"

"What's it to you?"

French sighed. "That's the trouble with you guys, always suspicious. Someone marked you for death, Bud, you and your partner, and now you're trying to cover for him."

"Marked us?" Jack Frost turned his cold eyes toward Hurst for a long moment. "What are you talking about, French?"

Monte French had seen the look. He suddenly had a feeling of exultation. He said: "Who sent for you, Pal? Hurst?"

"Well, yes, but—"

French grinned at the hotel manager. Hurst's face was blank, without expression.

French said: "Hurst fixed this very nice-

ly. He planned to kill Forbes, and maybe you, and he planned to tie the crime to me. It was very simple. I came up here and told him my troubles, and at once he saw a chance to get Forbes and make me the fall guy. That's why he gave me a job. The only thing I haven't got is the motive."

Hurst's face went grim. "This is the thanks I get for trying to help you!"

"Good old Hurst," said French. "Old helping hand himself. He doesn't care who hangs for his murders."

The girl had made a tiny cry of protest. Hurst laughed suddenly.

"A pipe dream, French. You haven't a thing to go on."

"Nothing but a witness," said French. "Come out of the closet, Eddie, and tell Mr. Hurst how you saw him stab Forbes."

Eddie Hoyle pushed open the closet door.

French had a momentary fear that the boy would not be able to go through with his part of the act. But the shock of seeing Eddie Hoyle step into the room was more convincing than any words.

HURST reacted. He reacted so rapidly that he caught French unprepared. He jumped sideways, caught the girl around the waist and pulled her in front of him as a shield with one hand while he jerked a gun free with the other.

He laughed then, without mirth. "Smart guy," he said. "Had to go in for heroics. Well, French, that little surprise act you put on will cost your life." He deliberately brought up his gun.

The window pane shattered behind him. A gun roared, and for an instant French thought he'd been hit. Then he saw Hurst's arm slide from around the girl's waist, saw him slip to the floor, and raising his eyes, saw Luke Carson grinning at him through the broken window.

"You shouldn't have shot!" French gasped. "You might have hit Ellen."

"Shucks," said Carson. "That wasn't nothing. I can shoot out a buzzard's eye at a hundred feet."

* * *

Strongberg wasn't very happy about the whole thing. He said: "Frost finally talked. He and Forbes and Hurst were in the original kill together. They framed Eddie Hoyle for it and then blackmailed his sister. But Forbes got hungry. Hurst had pulled the

The Dead Don't Care

trigger when Simmons was murdered, and Forbes put the bite on him.

"But Hurst got a bright idea. Eddie Hoyle was coming out of prison. He'd send for Eddie and give him a job, then he'd get Forbes up here, murder the man and frame Eddie. But Eddie hesitated. He wrote to his sister first. She was busy then, trying to shake off Forbes' blackmail herself, and she didn't answer at once.

"Then French came up here, told Hurst his sad story and asked for a job. Hurst saw a chance to go ahead with his murder plans, using French instead of Eddie Hoyle. He hired French and told Forbes and Frost to hurry up here for a new deal.

"In the meantime, Ellen Hoyle came up on the same plane to meet her brother, who had sneaked into town without telling Hurst. Does that cover it?"

The girl said: "I still can't believe it. Hurst was so good to me."

"And took most of your salary through Forbes and his blackmail," French reminded her.

She nodded. "I guess so. I—I've been a fool."

French laughed. "What about me?"

The girl was very serious. "No, Monte. Not after what I did. I should be horse-whipped for switching my testimony in Los Angeles. But I'm a coward, Monte."

"A darn pretty one," he said.

Strongberg coughed. "Break it up." He turned to the silent Luke Carson. "How'd you happen to be outside that window?"

The boy said promptly: "I was working for French."

"Oh, you were. I'll bet you hid him out last night. I should run you in."

"Nuts," said Luke Carson. "Do that and I'll tell the newspapers how you almost railroaded the wrong guy."

Strongberg swore. "Don't get cute, Kid, or I'll have that special officer's badge."

"Have it," said Luke and spat between the policeman's feet. "Me and Monte are going back to L.A. We're partners, aren't we, Monte?"

"You said it," said French, and grinned. "Anyone who can shoot out a buzzard's eye at a hundred feet is the kind of guy I need around, all the time."

He reached out and they silently shook hands.

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

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

Big-Hearted Burglars

Dear Sir:

One of the sweetest little rackets ever to hit mankind was uncovered some time ago in New York City, but it will probably continue to catch many a couple if they're not careful.

Two thieves thought up the idea of sending an anonymous gift to newlyweds. Their gift was a secure investment for them—until caught.

The thieves would send a newly married couple a few reserved tickets for a popular New York stage play. The reserved tickets, naturally, would specifically designate the exact date and time of the performance of the show for which they were good.

Leaving all their marriage gifts at home, the couple would go to the show—and the generous thieves would know exactly when and how long their apartment would be vacant. The rest was easy.

S. B. Kampf
Bloomington, Ind.

Plight of the Plaintiff

Dear Sir:

It seems that all the suckers aren't in the river by all means, and when Barnum said that "there is one born every minute," he sure knew what he was talking about. Take, for instance, this new racket that has sprung up around traffic courts.

Mr. S.—for sucker—has had an automobile accident. It was the other fellow's fault, so Mr. S. is suing for maybe a thousand or two and hoping to collect at least five hundred.

The con men listen in on the first day of the trial, get all the details and then buttonhole the plaintiff and go to work on him with their smooth line of talk. They tell Mr. S. that he is really a sucker (what a laugh!) for only suing for the thousand—why, they can get him ten or fifteen grand! After they have Mr. S. well in hand, they tell him that it will cost a few dollars—say a couple of hundred or so—to get things fixed up.

Needless to say, Mr. S. never sees the ten or fifteen thousand—or the couple of hundred he paid to help the deal along.

George E. Messner
Royal Oak, Mich.

HOMICIDAL HOLIDAY

He lifted the hammer....



A CROSS the table Grace had finished methodically buttering a thin strip of toast and was thumbing through her engagement book in her ever-efficient manner. As he watched her, it came to him that he never would be able to remember exactly when he had decided that he was going to commit a murder. But he knew the exact day that he had selected his wife as the logical victim.

The obsession had grown gradually as he read books and listened to radio plays which stated that it was impossible to commit murder and escape punishment. He had

By
**PHILIP
CYRUS
GUNION**

*Moffett killed — but he
couldn't prove it.*

shrugged off his first impulse to prove this thesis ridiculous and childish. But finally it had overwhelmed him and become a basic need.

"You have plans for the day?" he said casually to Grace as she closed the red leather book firmly. "Yes," she said wearily. "Hairdresser's at ten. Report luncheon of the Mercy Hospital campaign at one. I'm speaking to the Christian Service league at three-thirty. And you?"

His clear blue eyes welled up a little with his inner mirth. "Yes, Grace, I've a plan. A marvelous plan I've been working on for more than a year now."

He pounded his right fist slowly on the table to emphasize his statement. "But you see, Dear, the success of my plan depends on my telling absolutely no one anything about it."

She assumed that slightly skeptical look that was her greatest inheritance from her mother, and buttered another of her neat slices of toast.

When they had been newly married, Thomas Moffett had invented a textile process that brought him a measure of fame; fame that had dwindled and vanished as he failed to live up to the promise. The process still supplied sufficient royalties to provide them with more than comfortable existence and the money had enabled Grace to become such a doer-of-good that she was far better known than her husband.

But, as he watched her crunching the toast, he convinced himself that he bore her no malice. In his plan, she was merely a puppet. A very necessary figure. She had what might be called the second lead in his little drama.

"The way your plans drag out. Darling," she said, "I'm afraid I shan't be here to see it through."

"I'd be rather surprised if you were, you know," he said, savouring the joy of being able to hold the strings of her destiny just out of her narrow field of vision.

He didn't hate her, he reflected, nor did he dislike her. When she was out of the house he missed her as he would have missed a piece of the furniture. This morning he would need her for the first time in years.

The doorbell disrupted his thinking, but it didn't matter. The time for thinking was past. He walked to the door while Grace

started carrying dishes from the breakfast nook to the electric sink.

At the door was a tired slattern of a type he had seen and despised as he walked around the city. He could just imagine the cheap, filthy apartments they holed up in when they weren't parading their poverty before decent people.

"Yes?" he said sharply.

"Mrs. Moffet told me that I might stop by," the woman said, drawing herself in from the rough edge of his voice.

With no trace of hospitality, he opened the door wider and motioned her in. Grace's good deeds that he resented were the ones that caused these little intrusions upon his privacy.

"It's a friend of yours, Grace," he said sarcastically.

Grace immediately turned from the sink where she was putting garbage into the grinding unit which minced it and flushed it away. "It's Mrs. Meaching, isn't it? For the dresses?"

"Yes'm," the woman said, obviously glad to be in more friendly hands.

"You'll find them in a bundle at the head of the front stairs," Grace said. "You can get them and let yourself out the front way, if you will. I'm rather rushed."

"Yes'm, and thank you, Ma'am."

When the door had closed behind Mrs. Meaching and they could hear her laboring up the stairway, Grace frowned. "Tom, I don't think you should embarrass people like that."

"She's not a friend?"

"She's a woman who approached me at the Home Aid Center the other day and told me she needed some clothing. I have some old dresses here and I thought she might as well have them."

"Really, Grace, you show an extraordinary faith in human nature, letting a stranger wander about in the house alone like that."

AS AN answer Grace turned on the sink again and ground more garbage. She had expressed a great deal of pleasure when he had installed the sink six months ago. He had modernized the entire kitchen, fitting it out with everything that a housewife could ask for in the way of labor-saving devices. The modernization had been no whim; you couldn't call one of the prime

elements of his master plan a whim. It had made possible the discharge of the cook and it was destined for an even bigger part in his scheme.

When the decision to commit a successful murder had clamped like a vise upon his mind, he had been tormented by doubts that he was completely sane. However, an article in a news-magazine, dealing with psychopathic murder, had convinced him that he was not insane. A psychopath murdered blindly, uncleverly, the article stated, and the victim was apt to be wife, sweetheart or mother merely because these persons were readily available for slaughter.

Surely the interlocking, perfectly matching elements of his projected crime were the work of a rational mind. The insane murderer seldom fears detection, he had read, seldom attempts to cover his bloody tracks. Some were compelled to boast of their murders. How different from his own shrewd, methodical plotting!

Dimly he heard the front door close as Mrs. Meaching departed with the unwanted clothing. Grace had loaded the dishwasher and was filling the little cup with washing powder. In a moment she would start upstairs to dress. In a moment his year's planning would bear beautiful solid fruit.

He took the hammer with the broad, flat head from his tool drawer and stood near the doorway leading to the cellar.

He stood a moment too long and Grace swept past him and up the stairs. It made things a bit more difficult. But all he had to do was call her down on some pretext and the gears of the plan would mesh once again as perfectly as before.

She cried out above, a tiny cry of feminine dismay, and then she came down the stairs again on her own accord. "That woman," she said. "She's taken my pocket-book."

It was perfect. Grace looked out the window and up the empty street as if searching for the vanished thief. He lifted the hammer and brought it down satisfyingly on the back of her skull. It was amazingly like hitting a coconut, he decided, as she slumped to the floor at his feet. He struck her several more blows on the left temple to complete the job and then looked approvingly at his work. There was very little blood. It would take just a minute to remove it from the waxed floor.

"Don't worry about your bag, Grace," he said, as if she were still standing with her lips tightly pressed together. "I dare say there wasn't much in it."

For a moment he was overcome with the simplicity of his act. He had been fully prepared for a little difficulty of one sort or another. After all, he was a novice at the game with no idea of just how hard the head must be hit before consciousness was driven through the other side of the skull.

After he had cleaned the floor and replaced the hammer, after inspecting it for bits of hair and skin, he returned to the hallway and stripped, dropping his clothes on the floor beside Grace's body. He put on the tight rubber bathing cap from the closet and carried her to the cellar.

Putting a copper clothes boiler half-filled with water on the basement stove, he hoisted the body into the oversized set-tubs. It came to him that it was the first time he had carried his wife in his arms since a picnic they had taken on the Cape ten years ago.

It was most convenient that Grace had insisted on the cellar stove for clothes boiling, he thought, as he opened a cabinet and took out his collection of finely ground cutting tools. While the water was coming to a boil, he put into practice the dismembering techniques he had spent so many hours acquiring from medical texts.

The cold water he kept running into the tub as he worked to flush away the blood. He cut, hacked and sawed for two weary hours. Carefully, methodically. No panic-ridden haste that might leave clues to throw the intricate machine from its tracks.

When, at last, he was through he started the boiling that would soften the bones and flesh and went upstairs to the kitchen and dressed. The exertion had awakened his appetite and he fixed himself eggs, bacon, toast and coffee. He hadn't been hungry earlier when Grace was eating. Beside, he must rest and avoid taxing his bad heart.

IT WASN'T until he was almost through with the meal that he noticed the other cup of coffee. Some automatic reflex within his brain had directed him to set two places at the table and to pour two cups of coffee. It was odd because his brain was working smoothly. He could feel its convolutions fat and silky within his skull.

He drank the second cup of coffee and then carried the dishes to the sink. The dishwasher had long since completed its task and had popped open. He took the dry dishes and placed them in the cupboard before washing the second lot.

He prided himself on how ordinary all his actions and reactions had been since the murder had become an accomplished fact. The rest of the process was merely disposing of the evidence. He had carried out the first major part of his program.

He sat down and waited until the dishwasher finished with his dishes, then he put them away. The kitchen must be in perfect order when he started bringing it up. During the bloody process in the cellar Grace had ceased to be "she" and had become "it."

Boiling in small lots took the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon. Three times, the telephone rang, and he told Grace's friends that she had gone out. "To Pawtucket on one of her endless errands of mercy," he said to the last caller, and smiled as he replaced the telephone. No jigsaw puzzle was more painstakingly cut than the little details of his plan.

It was late in the day when he was ready for the final step in the disposal of the body and he was almost exhausted from the physical and mental strain. It was at this point that murderers, ordinary murderers, must break down, he decided, congratulating himself that despite fatigue, his hands were steady and his emotions no less firm.

He stood for a moment on the top cellar stair, recapturing the keen edge of his excitement. The edge as keen as the knives, saws and cleavers he had carefully purchased on a trip to California. Several thousand miles were between the shops from which they came and any possible investigation which might develop.

It had been in California that he bought his medical books. How cleverly he had woven each thread into the gorgeous pattern. Yet there were those who scoffed at his ability! Some who whispered that his one great invention years before had been a freak.

He had even stopped attending the bi-monthly sessions at the Engineering Club. Those fools looked upon him as a fellow of no consequence. His opinions were brushed aside as lightly as those of a movie critic.

A wave of rage curled over him and he

pounded his right fist against the hard plaster of the wall until his knuckles were bloody and his hand sore and ringing with pain. If they but knew the courage and cunning beneath what Grace had once called his "whipped-cream" face.

An inner finger prodded him abruptly on the chest. This was no time to stop and meditate. He was upsetting the precise mathematical time calculations he had worked out.

It took roughly two hours to bring the parts of his wife's body up from the cellar, a few at a time, and to run them through the garbage-grinding sink which minced them, flushed them into the sewer system of the city and removed the last of what the newspapers were fond of erroneously calling the "corpus delicti."

He made a final trip to the cellar and spent an hour carefully washing the entire area in which he had operated. Then he washed all the cutting tools, dried them with extreme care, and packed them once again in the cabinet.

Next he got the old-fashioned fireplace bellows he had acquired and prepared by filling it with dust. He blew a film over the tools and closed the door. He devoted a full fifteen minutes to a trip of inspection.

At last he went upstairs and took a shower, spending a great deal of time scrubbing his fingernails and shampooing his thinning hair. When he was again dressed, he removed a folded sheet of paper from a locked drawer of his desk and took it to the front hallway where he placed it on the umbrella stand. It was just another touch, but one of which he was proud.

It was a note from Grace informing him that she would be gone all day and that he was to look after his own meals. Not a line of the message betrayed the fact that he had thoughtfully saved the note for three months.

As he stood in the hall admiring the completeness of his protracted thinking a sudden thump against the front door all but paralyzed the muscles of his over-worked heart. The darkening walls fuzzed before his eyes until his brain told him sharply that it was only the evening paper.

HE OPENED the door as any honest householder might and calmly pulled the news of the day to his straining bosom.

As he carried it to the kitchen a playful fantasy ran through him. Somehow his murder had, as the trite, untrue saying had it, come out. His picture would be on page one; his name would run blackly through the story written in crisp newspaper language and topping it all would be a large headline.

"No fool, this man," readers would be saying across dinner tables to their fat, complacent wives who had spent the day playing conversational bridge.

"Here's a man who thinks things through," perhaps a city councilman might say to the mayor over a steak in a downtown restaurant.

"I know him well," the mayor would probably say with justifiable pride, "although I must admit I stupidly overlooked his abilities until now."

The bubble burst as he spread the paper on the breakfast nook table and glanced at its front page. A rooming house fire in Pawtucket which had taken six lives occupied the space in which his achievement might have been glorified—if it wasn't so diabolically clever.

That was the very point, he came to realize as he sat holding the paper tightly in his clenched hands. His plan was so smoothly thought out and it had been executed so well that no one would ever know that he had done it. He would never receive the slightest credit for his act.

It was twenty minutes later when he lifted his head from the table, the first page of the paper wet with his frustrated tears. He shook off the feeling of failure and thought about supper.

A bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich was just the thing.

As he munched it, a continuation of his plan came to him. It was the final touch of perfection that brought back the full surge of pleasure he had felt that morning.

He would wait through the weeks until Grace had been written off as another of the hundreds of persons who have apparently vanished from the earth, leaving nothing pointing to the direction in which they have traveled. Then, when the case was closed in the files of the missing persons bureau, he would expose himself. Re-enact the crime, explain it, and reap his reward.

He would still be the winner. There was no capital punishment in the State and even

a life sentence could mean only a few years and his cell would be warm as he basked in the glory of his perfect crime. The doctor had been emphatic about the uneven chances of his heart carrying him through many more years. And even if the doctor was the same young fool who had seriously advised him to consult a psychiatrist, he was reputed to be the best heart man in the city.

He had finished his sandwich and a glass of milk when he noticed the second sandwich and glass of milk standing on the table. Tears leaked again from his eyes. What was the matter with him? Grace was dead, damn it! He strode angrily to the cellar to prove it to himself. But there was no proof.

He laughed. No proof. He had been too clever for that. Clever in every single detail. He returned to the first floor and dialed the number he had carried in his mind for months. The police switchboard sorted his call, gave him missing persons.

"It's my wife," he said with a nervous little deprecatory laugh. "She should have been home hours ago. There's probably nothing wrong, nothing at all, but I am getting a bit worried. Quarrel?" He laughed again, and continued playing the part of the anxious husband.

The last act started, he got his hat and left the house for a walk. He could say later that he had been out searching for Grace. The dishes he left on the table. Even the uneaten sandwich would appear the work of a man who was distracted.

Two hours later, he appeared at the neighborhood drug store just before closing time and accepted the five cigars the clerk automatically held out to him. "This is the night you get the candy for Mrs. Moffett, isn't it?" the clerk said pleasantly.

"Why yes, it is," he said. "And I'll get it, even if I am a bit put out with her. She went to Pawtucket today for some sort of charity and she hadn't got back when I left the house." He selected the same two pound package he had been taking home every other week for years.

He walked into the quiet house and stood for a moment in the hallway listening. "Oh, Grace!" he called suddenly, "I brought you some candy!"

Goose pimples grew on his arms and legs in spite of the warmth of the evening. Why had he done it? Was it part of his

superb acting? He knew she was dead, didn't he? Certainly. He was the only one who did, but he knew it with every strained nerve in his body. He fought off a return attack of the inexplicable tears and went upstairs to the bedroom.

Before he pulled down the covers, he called the police again on the upstairs extension, then retired and slept as he hadn't for many years. It had been an exhausting day.

IN THE morning, he avoided his usual meticulous washing. The sleep-stained face would collaborate with the lights he had left on throughout the house to make it appear as if he had spent a sleepless night.

He likewise omitted breakfast so that the kitchen would appear as it had after he had fixed the sandwiches. He sat in the study at the front of the house and nervously twisted his hands together, a detached portion of himself standing to one side applauding his performance.

He was still there when the doorbell rang. He let it ring a second time before he answered it.

"Mr. Moffett?"

The fact that the man was so obviously a detective took his breath for a moment.

"I'd like to talk to you. I'm Burton, missing persons."

"She's still gone," he said sadly, as he ushered the detective into the study and pointed out a chair to him. He sat on the love seat, working his nervous fingers.

"Excuse me if I am a bit blunt," Burton said. He lapsed into a silence that was almost unbearable for what seemed minutes. How did they start these investigations? How long would it continue?

"Your wife is dead," Burton coughed as if it embarrassed him to say it.

What sort of madness was this? How had his careful plan gone wrong? He realized that he must fence for time.

Burton might be the only one who knew and if so he must die himself to keep the secret. "Dead?" he repeated. "What are you driving at? How do you know?" He could feel the terrible throbbing in his chest and wondered if it was visible.

"Where did your wife go yesterday?"

"To Pawtucket," he snapped. "She left a note which is in the hall."

Burton nodded slowly. "She was burned to death in that rooming house fire."

"What makes you so sure it was my wife?" he snarled.

"The identification was made through her purse and the cleaner's marks in the dress she was wearing. The body was so badly burned we couldn't have told any other way. We had to be sure, so we didn't tell you last night. But I guess that note she left clinches it."

That stupid, thieving woman who had come for his wife's old dresses! That woman, what was her name? Meaching! That ineffectual parasite attempting to come between him and—

His head went back and he began to laugh. It was a low, mocking sound at first but it grew in pitch and intensity until it echoed through the house. Until it must be reaching every part of the house, even to the far reaches of the cellar. The gasps for breath seemed to keep pace with the pounding of his heart which was growing until it took up every inch of space in his chest.

Through his tears, he saw Burton sitting with a blurry look of official sympathy on his homely face. The dolt was just another fool who didn't realize the furious power in the brain of Thomas Moffett.

A sharp pain brought his laughter to a horrible, gasping strangulation. "I know my wife is dead," he choked out. "I killed her. Do you hear me?"

He didn't feel the rug-covered floor as it came up, suddenly striking him sharply in the face. He lay where he had fallen, his face purple, his chest no longer heaving.

Burton was used to death. He knew that even though he would call the doctor, it was useless. He wet the stub of a pencil before making a note for his report.

"Before he died," he wrote in a plain, third-grade Palmer method script, "the dead woman's husband exhibited the usual signs of extreme grief and seemed to feel that by letting her go to Pawtucket, he was responsible for her death."

He put a careful period after the sentence and strolled out to the hall to look for the telephone he knew the house must contain. People like the Moffetts had everything in their houses. All sorts of gadgets to make life easy.

CHAPTER ONE

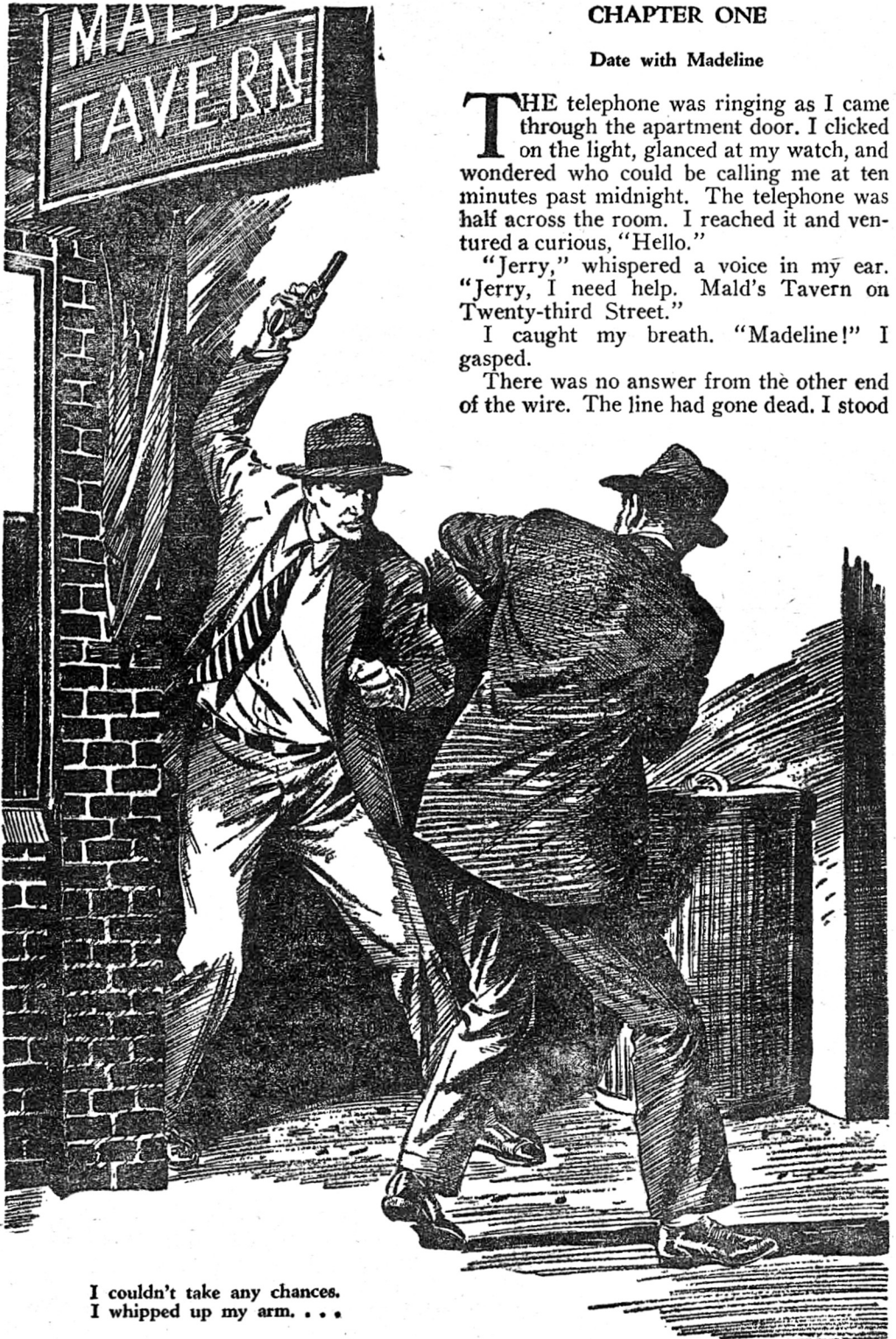
Date with Madeline

THE telephone was ringing as I came through the apartment door. I clicked on the light, glanced at my watch, and wondered who could be calling me at ten minutes past midnight. The telephone was half across the room. I reached it and ventured a curious, "Hello."

"Jerry," whispered a voice in my ear. "Jerry, I need help. Mald's Tavern on Twenty-third Street."

I caught my breath. "Madeline!" I gasped.

There was no answer from the other end of the wire. The line had gone dead. I stood



I couldn't take any chances.
I whipped up my arm. . . .

The S. O. S. from Madeline could mean only one thing: the little French cutie was up to her old tricks—displaying her astonishing . . .

TALENT FOR TROUBLE

there for a minute, the echo of Madeline's voice still in my ears. Madeline's faint, funny accent was unmistakable. No one in the world could say my name in quite the way she did.

The shock of her message reached me suddenly. I pronged down the telephone, lifted it again and started to dial the police. I didn't complete the call. Madeline hadn't asked for the police. She had called me. There were a dozen reasons why I shouldn't call the police, one of them being the fact that Madeline was the daughter of John Macomber, of Southwest Steel, and prominent lately in a reform movement in the city

**Exciting
Murder-Mystery
Novelette**

**By PHILIP
KETCHUM**



politics. It would be a juicy morsel to the police to find John Macomber's daughter in some kind of trouble at a shady joint like Mald's Tavern.

I hurried outside and piled into my car. Madeline had been reared in France. She had served in the French Underground during the Nazi occupation. She was no fragile daughter of society—but I was still more worried than I was willing to admit. Mald's Tavern wasn't in a very nice part of town.

I broke a dozen speed records across town and slammed to a stop at the curb half a block from the Mald's Tavern. As a private detective, I have a permit to carry a gun, and the feel of it in my shoulder holster was comforting as I headed for the red neon sign up the street.

A juke box was grinding out a horrible tune as I pushed open the door and stepped inside. Mald's Tavern wasn't a big place. There was a long bar on the right, booths on the left. Three men and a woman sat on stools at the bar. The woman was about Madeline's size and had dark hair. She looked around at me. Her face was lumpy, old. She seemed half drunk.

I walked toward the back of the room, glancing in the booths as I passed them. Several were occupied but I didn't see Madeline. The woman at the bar got into an argument with the bartender. I could hear her thick, heavy voice even above the sound of the music. I bought a pack of cigarettes from a machine and moved up to the bar. The thin-faced man who seemed to be running the joint came back to take my order.

"Make it bourbon and water," I ordered. "And easy on the water."

The bartender grunted. He went easy on the water. He went easy on the bourbon, too.

The woman at the bar left her place and came back to where I was standing. She put an arm around my shoulders. "Here's a man who'll buy me a drink," she said thickly. "Sure you will, won't you, Jerry?"

I caught my breath at the way she said my name. It wasn't possible. This couldn't be Madeline, but it was. She had done something to her face, something which distorted it terribly, but for an instant her eyes looked clearly into mine, seeming to flash a warning.

"Look here, Sister," growled the bartender. "I told you no more drinks. Get out of here before I call the cops."

A sneer warped across Madeline's face. "Shuddup," she yelled. "Jerry's buyin' me a drink, ain't you, Jerry?"

"Give her a drink," I said to the bartender.

"She'll fall flat on her face if I do."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Then it'll be easy to drag her out."

The bartender fixed Madeline a drink. It was mostly ginger ale. He gave both of us a frosty look as he took my money.

Madeline leaned against the bar. She wasn't drunk, I was sure of that. She wasn't drunk and this wasn't just a stunt.

Her head dropped lower. "Jerry," I heard her whisper. "The man at the end of the bar will follow me when I leave. When I get outside, I will turn left. Take care of him for me."

I worked on my drink. I didn't glance toward the end of the bar. After a moment I turned away.

"Hey, Jerry!" Madeline called. "Come back here! Where you goin'?"

I winked at the man standing at the end of the bar. He was a thin, hard-faced guy with cold eyes. I said, "You take her."

The guy didn't even smile. He looked at me as though I weren't there.

I kept on to the door, stepped outside and turned left. A service alley ran along the left side of the saloon. I moved into its deep shadows and waited. A minute passed and then another. A police car rolled down the street but didn't stop. A man and woman who had been in one of the booths came out and stood in front of the door, quarreling. They were still quarreling when they passed the alley.

THE minutes piled up. I began to get worried. I was thinking of going back when I heard the door open and the sound of someone approaching the alley.

Madeline crossed it without a glance in my direction. She moved on down the street. The man who had been at the end of the bar followed her from the doorway of Mald's Tavern. Madeline tried to help me by keeping the man's attention on her. She raised her dress above her knees and started to run. I drew my gun.

The hard-faced man started across the

alley, fast. I moved quickly behind him. I meant to shove my gun against his ribs and talk to him but I didn't have a chance. He must have heard me. He stopped. He jerked around, one hand sliding up under his coat. I couldn't take any chances. I whipped up my arm and socked him over the head with the barrel of my .45.

A hoarse, gasping cry broke from the man's throat. His knees folded and he went down.

Madeline was suddenly at my side. She was leaning over, feeling in the man's inside coat pocket. I caught her by the arm and pulled her to her feet, but not before she had found his wallet.

"You are hurting my arm, Jerry," she complained. "Do you have to squeeze so hard?"

I glared at her. The thick tone was gone from her voice. "What's the idea?" I grated. "Who is he? What do you want with that wallet?"

"Do you not think it would be a good plan to get away from here, Jerry?" she asked. "Someone might come."

A car was turning the corner. It occurred to me that it might be the police car. The man on the ground rolled over on his face. He was groaning. He was trying to get up. I decided it was a wonderful notion to get away.

I started for my car, still holding Madeline's arm, half dragging her. I shoved her inside and slid under the wheel. I started the motor and headed up Twenty-third toward Mission.

"Turn right at the next corner, Jerry," Madeline said.

I was still scowling. "Why?" I asked gruffly.

"I want you to see her."

"You want me to see whom?"

"Turn here, Jerry."

I turned and parked and then twisted in the seat to face Madeline Macomber. She had done something to her face. She looked much more like the girl I knew—the one I could never get tired of looking at.

"I want you to see Mrs. Grabowski," she said slowly. "Jerry, she is dead. There is a suicide note but I do not think she killed herself. I think she was murdered."

I stared wide-eyed. This was much too fast for me.

"Do not look at me like that, Jerry,"

Madeline was saying. "I need help. Badly."

"Who was the man who was following you?" I demanded.

"I do not know. That is why I telephoned you. I could have escaped from him, but I wanted to know who he was and why he was following me. He has followed me from the time I left Mrs. Grabowski's."

"And who is Mrs. Grabowski?"

"She was a cleaning woman who worked for us. Jerry, she did not kill herself. I know she did not. And if she did, what happened to Joan?"

"Who is Joan?"

"Her grand-daughter, a girl of five. Joan lived with Mrs. Grabowski. She is a cute little girl, Jerry. Mrs. Grabowski used to bring her to our house when she worked for us."

I nodded my head, trying to line all this up into some kind of pattern. "Is this it?" I asked. "You went to see Mrs. Grabowski. She was dead when you got there, and Joan was gone. There was a suicide note. When you left Mrs. Grabowski's you were followed, so you telephoned me."

"That is right, Jerry."

"Where did you get the old clothes and the funny face?"

"Mrs. Grabowski was in trouble; she wanted to get away. I had offered to loan her money. She would not take it. This morning she telephoned me and asked me to mail her the money. I decided to take it to her, instead. I fixed up like this because I did not know what I was walking into. A little wax in the cheeks and nose and coloring under the eyes change a face a great deal."

It was dark and quiet there on the side street. I got a cigarette out of my pack and offered one to Madeline. She shook her head.

"What was this trouble Mrs. Grabowski was in?" I asked.

"I can tell you later, Jerry," Madeline answered. "Let us go there first. I want you to see what I saw."

Maybe that made sense or maybe it didn't. I asked where Mrs. Grabowski lived. Madeline gave me the address. It was three blocks up this street and to the left.

We parked in front of the flat in which Mrs. Grabowski lived. But we didn't get out. A police car screamed around the corner and pulled up right behind us. Two men

from the police car headed for Mrs. Grabowski's flat. Two more came up on either side of us. A flash light stabbed its beam into my face and then in Madeline's.

"You folks live here," asked the man behind the flashlight.

I shook my head. "We just parked here, Officer."

"Yeah?"

I nodded. I was thinking of only one thing. I had to get Madeline away from here before she was identified.

"What's your name?" asked the officer. "Let's see your driver's license."

I showed him my license and he copied down my name and address.

"Who's the lady?" he insisted.

"Susie Moore," said Madeline, "and I am no lady."

She giggled as she said that. The officer scowled. He looked disgusted. He stepped back. He said:

"All right, Fellow, move on. Find some other dark street to park on if you think it's worth it."

I didn't wait for another invitation. I started the car and we got away from there in a hurry.

CHAPTER TWO

The Goons Step In

MADELINE made coffee and scrambled eggs and I worked the toaster. This was in the Macomber kitchen. We tried not to make too much noise and wake Madeline's father.

Over a second cup of coffee I scowled at John Macomber's daughter. She was still wearing an ill-fitting skirt and an old blouse but her face was her own again. It wasn't an easy face to scowl at. Madeline probably wasn't the most beautiful girl on the West Coast, but she was attractive enough to do things to a guy's blood pressure—mine in particular.

I scowled harder. I said: "All right, Madeline, start talking. I want the whole story and I don't want to have to drag it out of you."

Madeline made a face at me. "That might be fun."

I wouldn't play. "Let's have it, Madeline," I said again.

"There is not much I can tell you, Jerry.

These are the few things I know. Mrs. Grabowski's daughter, Linda Sobel, is dead. She was married to a man named Dan Sobel who was sent to prison several years ago for embezzlement. He took quite a lot of money from the bank where he worked. Mrs. Grabowski said he took the money to help his wife, who was alive then. She said there were others in on it with him. She never identified these others—she seemed to be afraid of them. I think she was mainly afraid because of Joan, their daughter. She seemed to think that something might happen to Joan if she did not get her away.

"Joan is gone," Madeline went on. "There are no other relatives, Jerry, to whom she could have been sent. We must find her. We must find out who the men were whom Mrs. Grabowski feared."

I had looked in the wallet Madeline had taken from the man who had followed her from Mald's Tavern. A driver's license identified the man as Harry Durango. The name meant nothing to me. Neither did the name Dan Sobel.

"Madeline," I asked, "why are you sure Mrs. Grabowski didn't kill herself?"

"Because of Joan," Madeline answered promptly. "She would never have left the child alone that way."

I nodded. I leaned across the table. I said: "Madeline, if I get busy on this will you be a good girl and stay home here and behave yourself?"

"No."

"Then I'll not touch it."

"But you have to, Jerry. Mrs. Grabowski is not an important person. The police will not worry about her at all. They will just call it a suicide."

I shook my head. "I still won't touch it unless you promise to stay home and behave."

Madeline frowned. "I cannot make a promise, Jerry, but if you work hard and fast I will try to stay home and behave."

And that was as far as I got.

The story of the prison break was in the newspapers the next morning. The details weren't reported clearly, but three convicts, it seemed, had managed to get away and were still at large. One of the men who had escaped was Dan Sobel.

There was a brief review of the charge against him. A teller at the Farmer's Savings and Trust Company, he had managed

to get away with close to three hundred thousand dollars. A third of this had been taken over a period of six months. Almost two hundred thousand in cash and negotiable bonds had disappeared the day of his arrest. It was presumed that most of this money was hidden somewhere. Dan Sobel, throughout his trial, had refused to say a word in his defense.

I headed for the office, wondering if Dan Sobel's escape, the death of his mother-in-law, and the disappearance of his daughter, Joan, could be a coincidence. I was a little late and Miss Pomfret, my secretary, wasn't alone in the office when I entered. T. D. Paul was with her.

T. D. PAUL is a headquarters detective assigned to homicide. He is short, stocky, bald, and wears thick glasses. He always has a smile on his face. He looks like an inoffensive business man, genial and friendly. Actually, he's cold as ice and as deadly as a rattlesnake.

Miss Pomfret stopped smiling when I came in. Miss Pomfret is forty-seven. She has been good all of her life. She disapproves of almost everything I do.

T. D. Paul beamed at me. He stood up and shook hands. He told me I looked fine, and he followed me into my private office as though he were an old friend.

I looked at him from behind my desk. "A call this early," I guessed, "isn't just an accident. What have I done now?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders. "Don't be like that, Jerry," he insisted. "This is routine. Merely routine."

"All right," I said. "Out with it—what haven't I done?"

"There's a woman named Elsie Grabowski," T. D. Paul said quietly. "You wouldn't know her, would you, Jerry?"

I tried to look puzzled. I shook my head.

"She killed herself last night," the detective continued. "At least that's what it looks like. This morning at a little after one, you were parked out in front of her flat. There was a girl in the car with you."

"You wouldn't expect me to be alone at that hour, would you?" I asked flippantly.

"So it just happened, huh?"

I lit a cigarette. As nearly as possible I try to play fair with the police. The only thing I wanted to do, in this instance, was keep Madeline out of the picture. I was

ready to tell what I knew but not how I knew it.

"It just happens," I said, frowning, "that I've heard of a woman named Grabowski. Her daughter's little girl named Joan lived with her."

T. D. Paul rubbed his hands together. "The little girl was sent to relatives."

"Mrs. Grabowski," I said, had no relatives excepting a son-in-law named Dan Sobel."

The detective blinked. I was ahead of him, I knew. His smile grew broader.

"How did Mrs. Grabowski kill herself?" I asked.

T. D. Paul drew his finger across his throat. He made a face.

"I hear that Joan Sobel was a cute little girl," I went on. "If she wasn't sent to relatives I wonder where she is. Funny, isn't it, about her father breaking out of prison, just last night?"

T. D. Paul was blinking owlishly. "I wonder about a few things, too," he almost whispered. "I wonder how a guy named Jerry Duhan happens to know so much. Up until now this Jerry Duhan has had a pretty clean record."

"It's still clean," I answered.

"Is it?"

I grinned at the detective. "I do it with mirrors," I told him. "Some day I'll let you in on the secret."

"Any more mirrors this morning?" T. D. Paul asked.

I said: "No more."

T. D. Paul got to his feet. He turned to the door and from the door looked back. "I know a few mirror tricks myself," he said smiling.

I went to the Public Library right after T. D. Paul left. In the file copies of the newspapers for six years before, I found the story of Dan Sobel's arrest and conviction. The only sensational feature of the case was the amount of money involved. There was no "other woman." Sobel hadn't been playing the stock market or the races. In fact, throughout the entire trial he had offered no defense and had given no excuses.

The story just didn't make sense. Sobel was pictured as devoted to his wife, who was suffering from tuberculosis—but with all that money he had done nothing for her, even though he had been taking money six months before he was caught.

ON MY way back to the office I made a couple of calls in the hope of getting a line on Harry Durango, the man who had been following Madeline. At the second place I stopped, a cigar store fronting for a bookie shop, I struck pay-dirt. The fellow who ran the place knew Durango.

"He's a leg-man for Mike Stanford," he told me. "Steer clear of him, Jerry, if you can."

That really gave me something to get my teeth into. Mike Stanford was supposed to be old-time underworld, a specialist in various types of racketeering, dope smuggling, and things on that order. In some quarters he was referred to as a gambling czar. The police, in spite of all these rumors, didn't have much on him. How bad he really was I didn't know. I had once met him. He was a man close to fifty, not tall, not short, not too heavy. He looked rather mild. He had quiet, gray eyes and a thoughtful smile.

Miss Pomfret frowned at me when I came in. "You have had several calls," she told me. "They were all from some woman. She wouldn't leave her name."

"A woman?" I asked, grinning. "Not a lady?"

Miss Pomfret's lips were like two gray knives. "A woman," she said distinctly.

I moved on into my office and on a sudden hunch telephoned Madeline. Mr. Macomber's housekeeper answered my call. She told me that Madeline had left for the city an hour before. That worried me. I was scowling when I hung up the telephone.

Miss Pomfret came in, the disapproving look still on her face. "Two men are here to see you," she reported.

Miss Pomfret always classified people for me. She had two classifications. Those of whom she approved were gentlemen or ladies. Those who did not pass whatever tests she applied were men or women. Miss Pomfret apparently did not think much of the possible clients waiting in the outer office.

"Send them in," I told her.

This was one time when Miss Pomfret's judgment had been good. Harry Durango was one of the two men to enter my office. The other was Sid Tarboe, a huge, broad-shouldered gorilla with a police record as

ugly as his face. Durango's hand was in his coat pocket. He might have been holding a gun. As a matter of fact he was. He drew it out and covered me as Tarboe kicked the door shut. There was a tight, menacing look on his face.

"Fan him, Sid," Durango ordered.

Sid Tarboe moved around behind me and went over me. "He's clean," Tarboe grunted.

I was standing at my desk. There was a gun in the top drawer but I didn't think I'd have much of a chance to get it. I sat down and stared at Durango.

"Get up," Durango ordered.

I got up.

"Who was she?" Durango asked suddenly.

I shook my head. "I don't get it," I answered. "What do you mean?"

"Bop him, Sid," Durango grated.

Sid Tarboe was standing a little behind me. His arm whipped up and down. I caught a glimpse of the sap in his hand. I tried to duck but I wasn't in time. The sap caught me above the ear. I don't remember falling to the floor.

When I came out of it my face and the front of my shirt was wet with water from the cooler. Tarboe was lifting me up. He propped me in my chair. Pain was hammering through my head. There seemed to be two Harry Durango's facing me. I closed my eyes against a nauseating dizziness.

"You've got another chance, Fella," Durango was saying. "It's all you get. Who was she?"

I managed a grin. It was probably a sickly grin. I said: "Lena, that's who it was. Lena the Hyena."

Durango was standing quite close to me. He raised his gun meaning to swing it down across my skull. He didn't make it. I came out of that chair with all the drive my legs could give me. One arm blocked away the gun. My fist caught Durango solidly under the chin. It lifted him to his toes. I jerked around to face Tarboe but once more I wasn't in time, Tarboe's sap again caught me across the temple and blanked out everything.

When I woke up Miss Pomfret was bending over me. She was bathing my face with a wet towel. She was making little moaning noises and there was a look of real con-

cern on her face. I think that look of hers did more than anything else to snap me out of it. I sat up and stared at her, wide-eyed.

I said: "Why Miss Pomfret. You're crying."

Miss Pomfret straightened. She got to her feet. She daubed at her eyes, then turned suddenly and ran for the door.

My head felt twice its normal size. I was sick at the stomach. I looked around the room. Durango and his pal Sid Tarboe, of course were gone. After a time I stood up and headed for my desk. A slug of raw whiskey didn't help much.

The telephone started ringing and I answered it. Madeline's voice came to me over the wire. She sounded excited.

"Jerry!" she said. "Jerry! I think I know where she is."

"Where who is?" I asked a little thickly.

"Joan, of course. Jerry, is there anything wrong with you?"

My head was growing clearer. I scowled at the telephone. "You promised me to keep out of this," I said sharply.

"I know I did, Jerry," Madeline answered, "and I tried to keep out of it. Honestly I did. I just made one little slip."

"What little slip?"

"I went to see a man, Jerry. That's all. I just went to see a man. He wasn't home."

"Who wasn't home?"

"Jerry, can you meet me at about nine tonight at the Palace Bar?"

"Who did you go to see?" I insisted.

"That is fine, Jerry," Madeline's voice said in my ear. "Nine tonight at the Palace."

She was laughing. The line clicked dead. I slammed the receiver down. What did a guy do about a girl like Madeline?

CHAPTER THREE

"You've Lived Too Long"

THE Palace Bar is always crowded. I couldn't find Madeline among the people jammed against it. I didn't see her at any of the tables in the wide room. I had a drink and started watching the clock. At nine thirty she came in with her father.

John Macomber is a short, stocky man of about fifty. He sports a toothbrush mustache. He's energetic, able, one of the up-

percrust and solid enough socially to be pretty decent toward me.

"Here she is, Duhan," he said pleasantly. "I'd like to join you but I've another engagement. Don't let her keep you up too late."

I said I wouldn't. Madeline said I would. We all laughed. John Macomber stayed with us long enough for one drink and then left.

After he was gone I quit smiling and asked Madeline what this was all about. Madeline laughed at me, then grew serious.

"Jerry, I know the whole story," she said slowly. "That is, I think I do. I was in the library right after you were. I read those old newspapers. Did you know that?"

I shook my head.

"There was a case like this in France before the war," she continued. "A man named Jacques Duvall was arrested for absconding with a great deal of money. How he had used it could not be learned. He was devoted to his wife, who was very ill. He was a quiet, unassuming young man. He was convicted and sentenced to Devil's Island. Within a year he escaped. He made his way back to France and killed his former employer. He was arrested and tried again, this time for murder, and this time he talked.

"Jacques Duvall had not taken the money. His employer had taken it. Jacques Duvall was persuaded to take the blame with the understanding that his employer would provide the money necessary for the long and expensive medical attention his wife needed."

"He trusted his boss," I said, "and his boss didn't live up to the bargain. Was that it?"

"That was it, so Duvall escaped and came back and killed him. Duvall was released. He worked in the Underground—I got to know him well."

"You think this case is the same?"

Madeline nodded. "I think that Arthur Kauffman, the president of the bank where Dan Sobel worked, took the money himself. When he knew he faced discovery, I think he had a talk with Dan Sobel. Dan's wife was dying of tuberculosis. Dan was in love with her. The only chance his wife had was to enter an expensive sanatorium in the desert country. If Dan took Kauffman up, he could save the woman he loved. His moth-

er-in-law would care for his daughter. All it would cost him was a few years in prison."

I finished my cigarette. It was possible, I knew, that Madeline had the answer.

"Let us go out there, Jerry," Madeline suggested.

"Out where?" I asked.

"Out to see Arthur Kauffman. He has Joan. I am sure of it."

I shook my head. "Why would he have Joan?"

"As protection against her father, of course. He did not take care of Dan Sobel's wife, as he promised. If he holds Joan, Dan cannot touch him."

I considered that for a moment, not so sure, the more I thought of it, that Madeline was right.

Madeline got to her feet. She was frowning. She said: "All right, Jerry Duhan, be as stubborn as you please. I will go there alone."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I answered. "I'll go—and before I go I'll take you home."

Madeline wrinkled her nose at me. "That is what you think. My car is parked across the street. Are you coming with me?"

I stood up and nodded. This wasn't the place for an argument.

MADELINE'S car wasn't the place for an argument, either, as it turned out. Madeline was going with me or on her own. I didn't want her barging in there alone, so we went together.

San Francisco is a town of flats. There aren't many houses but there are a few on Pacific avenue. Arthur Kauffman lived in one of them.

We parked at the curb and walked up to the door. I rang the bell and when the porch light came on, glanced at Madeline. Her dark eyes were sparkling with excitement.

The door was opened by Arthur Kauffman himself. He was a tall, thin, gray-haired man of about sixty. He gave us an inquiring, uncertain look.

"Mr. Kauffman?" Madeline asked.

Kauffman nodded.

"I am Miss Macomber," said Madeline, "the daughter of John Macomber. I am sure you know him. This is Gerald Duhan. We would like to speak to you for a mo-

ment about an extremely important matter."

The name of Madeline's father did the trick. Kauffman still seemed a little uncertain but he backed away and let us in.

Madeline took a chair, refused a cigarette, and looking up at Kauffman with the most innocent expression in the world, said: "Mrs. Grabowski used to work for us, Mr. Kauffman."

The name registered with Kauffman. There was no question of that. He stiffened. His eyes narrowed.

"She was Dan Sobel's mother-in-law, you know," Madeline continued. "She was taking care of Dan's daughter."

"I don't think I quite understand," Kauffman said uneasily.

Madeline was still smiling. "I think you do, Mr. Kauffman," she contradicted. "You failed to take care of Dan's wife, as you promised. Dan has escaped from prison. He is on his way here. Where is Joan?"

I will swear there was a guilty, frightened look on Kauffman's face but he shook his head. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you and your friend to leave, Miss Macomber. I really have no time for a talk like this."

Madeline didn't move from her chair. She wasn't smiling now as she looked at Kauffman.

"I was here this afternoon, Mr. Kauffman," she said clearly. "You were not home and the maid would not let me in, but as I stood in the doorway I distinctly heard a child crying."

"My wife is fond of cats," said Mr. Kauffman. "You heard two of them fighting."

"I heard a child's voice," Madeline insisted.

"You did not," Kauffman snapped. "Will you and your friend please leave my home?"

"I will not leave until I have searched it," Madeline said stubbornly. "Joan may not be here now but she was here, and I intend to look around."

It was about time, I decided, to take a hand in this myself. I doubted that Joan was here now, even if she had been here this afternoon, but regardless of that I wanted to do a little probing at Kauffman's relationship to Dan Sobel.

"Go ahead, Madeline," I said bluntly. "Have a look. I'll take care of Kauffman."

Madeline nodded. She got to her feet and

headed for the hall. Kauffman made no effort to stop her. He turned and glared at me.

"The police will hear about this," he promised.

"Of course they will," I agreed. "The police will hear a lot in the next few days. They'll probably be out here to talk to you as soon as Dan Sobel spills what he knows. Maybe you'll be alive to talk to them."

"What do you mean?" Kauffman growled.

"Dan's wife didn't ever get to the sanatorium," I answered. "She died. You didn't keep your bargain."

Kauffman didn't fall into the trap. "I had no bargain with Dan Sobel," he snapped. "I think you're crazy, both you and that girl."

"Think about Dan for a while," I answered. "He's free. He's armed. The police haven't caught him. Do you think maybe he'll show up here?"

THAT reached him. Kauffman bit his lips. He took a nervous look over his shoulder. There was a sound in the hall. His body jerked. He caught his breath.

"Maybe Dan's wife was awfully sick," I suggested. "Maybe she didn't have a chance to get well. Maybe you meant to help her, but couldn't. The trouble is, Dan doesn't know that. He's got a gun, Kauffman. I'd really hate to be in your shoes."

The banker was staring at me, then suddenly his eyes jerked past me toward the hall. I turned and took a look. It hadn't been Madeline who had made that noise in the hall a moment before. Harry Durango and Sid Tarboe were just inside the room. Durango was holding a gun. There was an ugly grin on his face.

"Hi, Pal," he said dryly. "Imagine finding you here."

I made no answer. I had a gun in my shoulder holster but it wasn't going to do me any good.

"Is your name Kauffman?" Durango asked the banker.

Tarboe came deeper into the room. He looked closely at Kauffman. "This is him, Harry," he said flatly. "I've seen the guy's picture in the paper."

Kauffman backed away. "What do you want of me?"

"A friend of ours wants to talk to you,"

Durango answered. "Fan him, Sid. See if he's got a gun. Maybe you'd better go over Duhan first."

Tarboe moved around behind me. He lifted my gun, then searched Kauffman. The banker wasn't armed.

"What do we do with Duhan?" Tarboe asked. "Bop him?"

Durango shook his head. "We take him along. Maybe we bop him later. We take both of 'em."

"You take us where?" I asked bluntly.

Durango's gun centered on my stomach. "Do you want to come along, smart guy, or would you rather stay here with .45 slug in your guts?"

I managed a grin. "I don't believe you could hit me," I answered, "but I'm interested in meeting the man behind you. I'll go along."

Durango laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. "Get 'em started, Tarboe," he ordered.

There had been no sign of Madeline. She was apparently still searching the house. I was praying that she wouldn't show up as we turned toward the door. She didn't.

We went outside. A low-slung car was parked at the curb in front of Madeline's car. A thin-faced driver was at the wheel. We got in, Kauffman and I taking the jump seat, Tarboe and Durango behind us. As we pulled away I glanced back. There was still no sign of Madeline.

We didn't drive far. We stayed on Pacific. Four blocks up the avenue we turned in a driveway and pulled up at the side of a large house. The driver stepped to the ground and opened the car door.

"Here we are," Durango growled. "Climb out and don't try anything funny."

He nudged me with his gun. I climbed out. Kauffman followed me. Kauffman was breathing heavily. I paid hardly any attention to him. I stared at the house. It was the home of Mike Stanford.

The front door was opened by a man who apparently had been on watch. We were ushered inside to the room Stanford probably referred to as his library. Stanford was waiting there. He nodded briefly to Kauffman, ignoring Kauffman's almost hysterical demand for an explanation. He looked thoughtfully at me.

"This guy was at Kauffman's when we got there," Durango reported. "He's the

shamus who picked up the girl the other night."

Stanford's eyes narrowed. There was no smile on his face. He smoothed back what was left of his hair.

"Duhan?" he said slowly. "That's your name, isn't it? Gerald Duhan?"

I nodded, wondering what was coming.

"Occasionally," Stanford continued, "I require the services of an investigator. I have had good reports of your work."

"From Harry Durango?" I asked dryly.

A smile showed momentarily on Stanford's lips. "Suppose we talk later."

Stanford rubbed his hands together. He said: "Durango, take Duhan to the back room. Make sure he stays there."

Durango came up behind me and jabbed me with his gun. "Come on, smart guy," he snarled. "I'm gonna like this."

We went through a door and down a narrow hall. Tarboe was trailing along, just in case Durango needed any help.

"The next door," Durango ordered.

I stopped at the next door. I started to say something but didn't get to finish it. Pain exploded in my skull. A thousand bright lights danced in front of my eyes and then were lost in the thick darkness which swept over me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Underground vs. Underworld

MADLINE was shaking me. "Wake up, Jerry," she was whispering in my ear. "Wake up. She is here. We must get her away."

I blinked open my eyes. I was lying on the floor in a small bedroom, probably a maid's room. Madeline was kneeling beside me. There was a worried look on her face.

My head had taken about all the battering it would stand. I groaned and sat up, closing my eyes against a momentary dizziness. When I opened them again I saw the body lying near the door.

"Who's that?" I gasped.

"A man who came in here just after I did," Madeline answered. "I did not hit him very hard. At least I do not think I hit him very hard."

I half crawled to where the man was lying. It was Sid Tarboe. He had a beautiful swelling on the temple.

Madeline showed me a gun. "It was in the glove compartment of my car," she answered. "I brought it with me when I came in—and used it."

"You followed us here?"

"Of course, Jerry."

"And just walked in, I suppose."

"I came in the back door."

She didn't say whether the back door had been locked or not, but I remembered how fast Madeline was on locks.

"I went upstairs first," she told me. "The two men in the hall were talking. They mentioned Joan. Dan Sobel is up there."

I took Tarboe's necktie off and bound his hands. I used his belt on his legs. He had a gun in his pocket. I took the gun.

"If Dan Sobel is here," I said slowly, "it probably means that Mike Stanford engineered his escape."

"Stanford?" said Madeline. "Who is this Stanford?"

"He's what you would call a fascist," I answered. "He believes in force. He lives behind the guns of the men he hires."

A throbbing pain still hammered against my skull. I got to my feet and moved around Tarboe's body to the door. Madeline joined me there.

"There is a back stairway to the floor above," she whispered.

I nodded. I reached for the door knob, turned it carefully and pulled the door open a crack. Someone was coming up the hall. I could hear the sound of footsteps. There was no opportunity to close the door. I reached for Tarboe's gun and stood there, rigid, hoping that Madeline had heard the man in the hall.

The man reached the door. He passed it without a glance and continued on up the narrow hall. He was a tall man, a little stooped. I caught a side glimpse of his face but didn't recognize him.

"We can go now," Madeline whispered.

"We're going the front way," I answered under my breath. "I want to see what's happening in that front room."

A door at the front of the hall opened and closed. I pulled the door to this room wider and stepped in to the hall. Madeline followed me. We moved forward. I might have made some noise but Madeline moved like a shadow. She didn't make a sound. We reached the door which opened into what I had called Stanford's library.

Talent for Trouble

SHE opened the door. She opened it as quietly as a breeze might have opened it. I stared into the room. The man who had just come down the hall had his back to us. Stanford was to the left in front of the fireplace. Durango half faced us from far across the room. Kauffman sat on the edge of a chair in front of him, staring at the man on the davenport, a man with black, unruly hair.

Kauffman was perspiring. He started to get up just as Madeline opened the door. Durango shoved him back on the chair. No one in the room noticed the open door. The man with the black hair was speaking.

"I said let me at him!" he growled. "Let me get my hands on his throat. Then I'll tell you where the money is."

The man with black hair was Dan Sobel. I was positive of it. I stood in the hall, waiting.

"Talk, damn you!" Stanford said sharply. "Talk and you can have him. Your daughter, too."

I had heard all that I needed to know. Tarboe's gun was in my hand. I leveled it, pushed the door wide open and stepped into the room. Madeline was right behind me. She moved a little to one side. The gun she was holding was as steady as mine.

I didn't say anything right away. It wasn't necessary. Durango went rigid. He lifted his hands shoulder high. Stanford jerked around. The man whose back was toward us turned. His hands went up.

"Suppose we take over, Stanford," I said quietly. "Get your hands up."

Stanford raised his hands. He shook his head. "You're being very foolish, Duhan. I've a dozen men in this house. At the first sign of trouble they'll be in here."

There was a chance of that, I knew, but this wasn't the time to worry about it.

"Do you want to know what happened to that money?" I asked. "It's like this. Kauffman took all of it. He got Dan Sobel to take the rap on the promise of caring for Dan's wife. He didn't take care of her. That's why Dan is so anxious to get his hands on Kauffman's neck."

Stanford looked soberly at Kauffman. His lips tightened.

"How about it, Kauffman?" I asked bluntly.

Kauffman shook his head. He stood up

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again and this time Durango didn't push him back into his chair.

"Where's the money, Kauffman?" I insisted.

"I don't know," Kauffman said hoarsely. "I—let me out of here."

He turned toward the door. He started running. Dan Sobel jerked to his feet. Sobel's arms were tied but his legs weren't. He started after Kauffman. For a moment he was between me and Durango, and Durango took a slim chance.

I shouted a warning to Madeline but the warning wasn't necessary. Madeline could see Durango quite clearly. The gun in her hand steadied. She squeezed the trigger. Durango had his gun but he couldn't seem to hold it up. A sudden, high, shrill scream broke from his throat. Blood streamed down his arm from a shattered elbow. His gun slid from his hand.

I was only vaguely aware of this. The man facing us was clawing at his pocket. Stanford had dived for the protection of the davenport where Sobel had been sitting. A man had appeared in an open doorway to our right.

The man just in front of us had his gun out. I snapped a shot at him and another at the man in the doorway. Madeline was on her knees. She was aiming at someone across the room. She fired her gun and then looked over at me, and I will swear she was grinning.

"Watch the back hall, Jerry!" she called.

The man in front of us was down. The man in the doorway had backed out of sight. Two had shown up in the front hall entrance and had been driven back, I learned later, by Madeline. For a moment there wasn't anyone to shot at—or any place to go.

There was a thumping sound across the room. I risked a look in that direction. Sobel had reached Kauffman and managed to get him down. Even as I looked, however, Kauffman rolled away, got to his feet and raced for the front hall. Shots blasted him and he fell, twisting sideways.

"Toss in your guns, Duhan," Stanford called from the shelter of the davenport. "You haven't got a chance."

"Maybe you are the one who doesn't have a chance."

"Don't be a fool, Duhan."

Talent for Trouble

I glanced at Madeline, wondering how to get her out of here. Right now we were doing all right but we were boxed. There was no way out.

Dan Sobel had come to his feet. His arms were still bound. He started lumbering straight toward Stanford.

I heard the roar of Stanford's gun and saw Dan stumble. A shot screamed at me from the side doorway. I answered it. Madeline was firing toward the front hall. She had pulled a heavy chair on its side and was lying behind it. She glanced in my direction and she was still grinning.

Outside, police sirens had been screaming. The blast of gunfire in the hall was deafening. Abruptly it ended. Cops poured into the room. Leading them was T. D. Paul and for once the detective didn't look like a genial Rotarian. With a Tommy gun in his hand he was a pretty grim character.

THE prisoners were huddled on one side of the room. There were only four of them, including Mike Stanford. An ambulance had carted two of Mike's men to the hospital. Another ambulance had headed for a hospital with Arthur Kauffman and Dan Sobel. I had made a statement. Madeline had made a statement.

Stanford was improving on the lies he had already told. "Someone in stir must have convinced Dan Sobel that I would be an easy touch," he insisted. "He must have been sure of it when he learned that I had given his daughter a home. The shamus and the girl were figuring a black-mail touch. That's the straight of it, Paul."

Madeline pulled at my sleeve. "I have seen him before," she said, indicating Stanford. "He was in a car which was parked across the street from Mrs. Grabowski's the other night."

I nodded. That would explain why Madeline had been followed.

T. D. Paul was smiling at Stanford, "A poor story," he commented. "Just how poor I'll let you discover after you talk to your attorney and learn what Sobel said and what Kauffman told me."

T. D. Paul turned to face Madeline and me. His smile wasn't so genial. "Where would we be," he growled, "if I hadn't had a man tailing you, Jerry? And where would

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Philip Ketchum

you two be? How long do you think you could have held out?"

"We did not do so poorly," said Madeline.

T. D. Paul blinked. He looked at me. "What that girl needs," he declared, "is a good spanking. What does she think this was? A party?"

I did not try to explain Madeline. I said: "What did you learn from Kauffman?"

"He figured he was dying," T. D. Paul said. "He told me that he took the money—and lost it in the market. He promised to look after Dan Sobel's wife if Sobel would shoulder the guilt. He said he meant to keep his promise but Mrs. Sobel died before he could help her. That may be true."

"And Sobel?" I asked.

"Sobel got to brooding in prison about his wife's death. He got word out to Stanford that if Stanford would help him escape he would split the money he was supposed to have hidden. All he wanted to do was to get to Kauffman. Stanford brought him here and demanded the money. Sobel wouldn't talk until he'd seen Kauffman."

"Is he badly hurt?" Madeline asked.

"Sobel? No. By the time he's well he'll probably be free."

"Until then," said Madeline, "I will take care of Joan."

T. D. Paul smiled. He looked at me. He said, "Jerry, maybe she's all right."

Madeline drove me home. We parked for a while in front of the apartment. I scowled at Madeline.

"How often," I asked, "are you going to mess into my life?"

"Whenever I have to, Jerry."

"Maybe I ought to marry you."

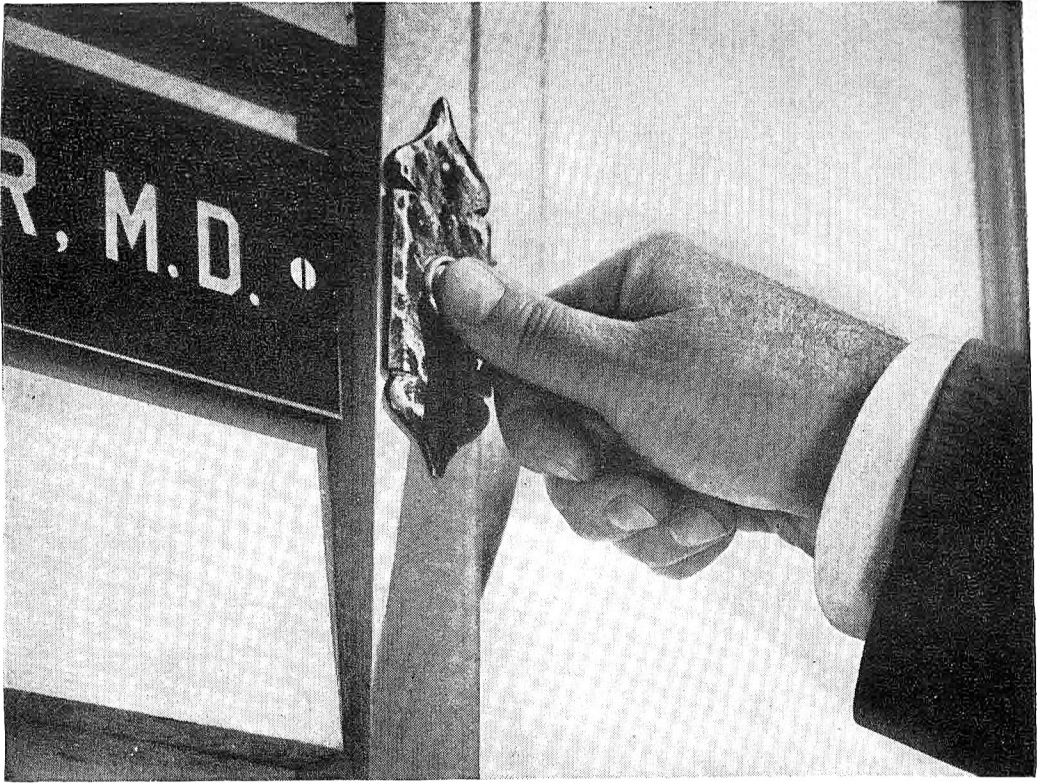
Madeline smiled, "That might be nice."

I went on scowling. Somewhere a cat started screaming. The noise was much like a child's cry. I chuckled and said, "Hear it, Madeline? There's Joan, back in the alley."

Madeline stiffened. "I think I shall not marry you after all, Jerry Duhan. At times you are a very unpleasant character. Will you get out of my car so that I can go home?"

I got out of the car but I kissed her first. It was very nice.

THE END



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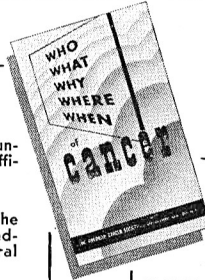
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3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart, mole or birthmark.
4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
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