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DETECTIVE
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**WITH
SOUL
SO DEAD**
by JOHN D.
MacDONALD

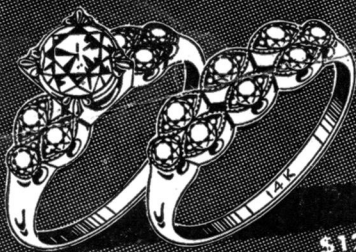
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UP!**

by FREDERICK
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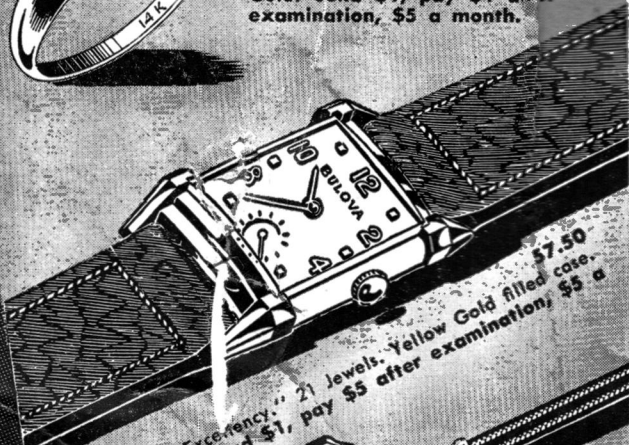
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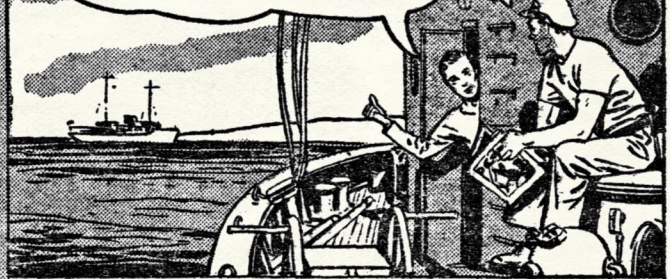
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CHIEF DIVER BILL ROBB, EX-NAVY SALVAGE OFFICER, IS RESTING BETWEEN DIVES TO A SUNKEN SHIP IN HOLLISTER BAY WHEN ...

I HATE TO ASK THIS, ROBB, BUT MY NIECE LOST HER PURSE AND SOME VALUABLE JEWELRY OVERBOARD

I'LL HAVE A GO AT IT, MR. BAKER



WHAT LUCK! I'VE FOUND IT



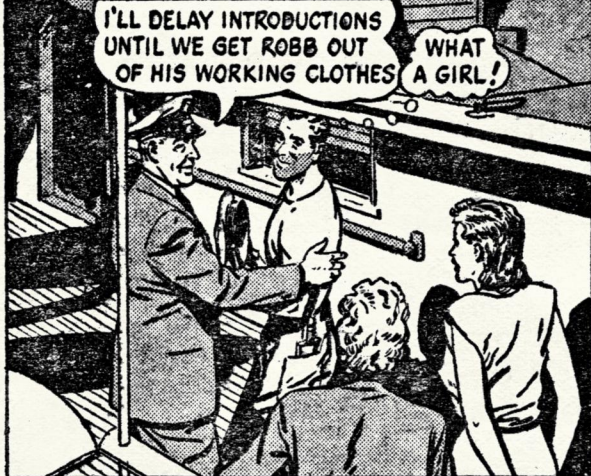
NICE WORK, ROBB. COME ABOARD, I'D LIKE TO TALK OVER THAT "AURORA" JOB WITH YOU

AND ME WITH TWO DAYS' WHISKERS



I'LL DELAY INTRODUCTIONS UNTIL WE GET ROBB OUT OF HIS WORKING CLOTHES

WHAT A GIRL!



HERE'S SHAVING TACKLE AND SOME CLEAN WHITES

THANK YOU, SIR



WHAT A SLICK-SHAVING BLADE! SOMETHING SPECIAL, SIR?

WELL, YOU COULD SAY SO... THIN GILLETTES ARE EXTRA KEEN AND LONG-LASTING



I HANDLED A SIMILAR SALVAGE JOB IN NAPLES AND IT WORKED PERFECTLY

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

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The April issue will be out March 5th.

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A Department

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Washout

Dear Sir:

If they catch him, residents of Odessa, Texas, plan on stringing up a migrant painter who painted their town red so to speak.

According to the deputy sheriff, the boomer painter contracted to paint several houses. He did nice work. He did it in a hurry.

After he'd gone, householders began missing things—mainly radios.

The upshot was that they trooped to the sheriff's office and filed complaints.

While this was taking place, the town enjoyed a hard rain.

This added to their hurt feelings. It washed all the paint off the houses.

The painter had used whitewash.

See what I mean when I say those people are plenty mad at the guy?

Sincerely
C. C. Springfield
Huntsville, Texas

Never Be Nice to a Salesman

Dear Sir:

One afternoon a young man came to the house. He showed me a fountain pen which he would sell for one dollar, and in addition, he included a certain household magazine.

I refused his offer, but he became insistent. To be courteous I took the pen from him, and while I examined it, he asked if I had a five-dollar bill to exchange for coin. Carrying the pen with me, I went for the money. When I handed over the currency he dropped four silver dollars into my outstretched hand. When I mentioned his mistake he said:

"Oh, no. I kept the dollar in payment for the fountain pen. Here is your receipt."

He dropped the small bit of paper into my hand and quickly walked away. I could only stare at the swindler's receding back.

In vain I waited for the first copy of the magazine to appear; later I learned of its discontinued publication several months earlier. The receipt bore the name of the nonexistent magazine, but the racketeer's name was lacking. The pen was worthless.

T. S. Root
Lewiston, Idaho

Pottery in a Poke

Dear Sir:

While I was visiting my sister in Los Angeles recently, I read an advertisement of a pottery sale in a neighborhood paper. The place of business turned out to be an open air stand, but that did not make me suspicious as these are common in Southern California.

There were two sets of dishes on display at different prices: the less expensive were marked "seconds." When I inquired, the salesman told me the unmarked sets were made up of "selected seconds." As the colors were pretty, the shape pleasing, and the imperfections scarcely noticeable, I decided to buy the better grade. He handed me a box already packed.

When I got home and examined my purchase, I found that my dishes had little resemblance to the ones on display. The colors didn't match; there were serious flaws in the glaze, the bowls had such lumps on the bottom they could hardly stand. They had been "selected" all right, but they were a lot closer to "fourths" than to "seconds."

Naturally I went back to protest. When I pointed out that the samples on display were good and that he had sold me pieces that were greatly inferior, the salesman refused to comment. He simply told me that the firm allowed no refunds or exchanges.

Of course, I could have reported the swindle to the Better Business Bureau, but since the amount of money involved was small, I didn't do it. These fly-by-night operators apparently count on the customers not bothering to report them. From now on I'll examine the merchandise instead of trusting the honest-looking face of a young salesman.

W. L.
San Francisco, Cal.

Old College Try

Dear Sir:

With college T-shirts available in stores in all towns where colleges are located, it is no wonder that a smooth young man managed to work his racket so easily in Fairfield, where Parsons college is located.

He was nice looking, and apparently a GI

(Please continue on page 97)

*they can't stop
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WITH SOUL SO DEAD



**Dramatic Novel of a
Fugitive's Private
Hell**

**By JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

CHAPTER ONE

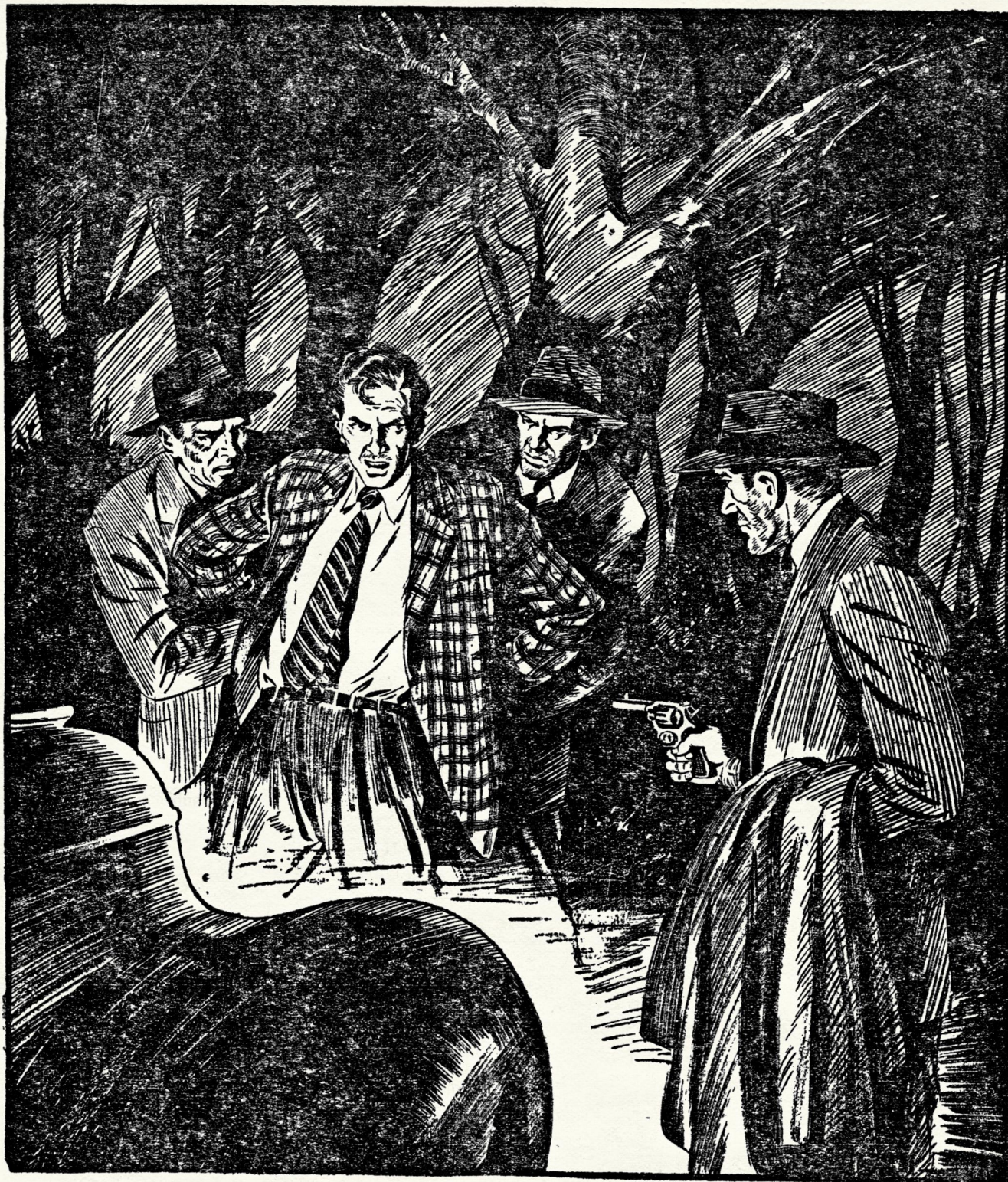
A Gentleman and a Traitor

I WAS gay as a lark and twice as stupid when, after dinner on the night of October 10th, I bounded up the flight of stairs to my two room apartment, with fifteen minutes to shower, change and drive down to the apartment building where Marian lived. Lived is a dull word to apply. She does something special to the whole operation.

Yes, I was gay and happy. Washington was having a crisp and wonderful Fall, and the name of Bailey Regan was beginning to mean just a little bit around the hush-hush office where I was employed checking over the plans of production facilities that had a very hush-hush connection with the production of Uranium.

Animal spirits are a wonderful thing I suppose.

I know for certain the same spirits don't make you very cautious. I unlocked the door and whistled on in.



He held it on me while his pals grabbed my arms. . . .

*How's it feel to be kidnapped and shot and left in a ditch—
and learn the whole country is screaming for your blood? Just
ask me—Bailey Regan. Because the frame had worked, and I
was wanted—for treason!*

The ceiling dropped solidly onto my head and I went right on down into the pile of the carpet, which strangely turned out to be a long, echoing tunnel, pitch black.

I wandered around in the tunnel for a few eons and suddenly realized that something was jiggling my head, painfully and, I believed, unnecessarily.

I opened my eyes. Through the windshield ahead I saw a straight narrow road ripping back under the wheels with great speed. The car seemed familiar but the road wasn't. A man sat alone in the front seat. His silhouette was impressively large. My head hurt. Somebody had removed half the skull and replaced it with broken pieces of apple crate. Nailed down.

I lurched as the brakes went on. Somebody said, "Wake him up."

A large hand came out of nowhere and slapped against my face. I mumbled and managed to say, "Fellas! I'm awake."

The big driver said, "Fix it outside. Make it the same place."

I realized as they shoved me through the front door that it was my club coupe. I wanted to comment on that detail, but I was being rushed along. I was weak. My knees felt as though they had been filled with junket. They pulled me to a quick stop out in the glare of the headlights and one man fumbled with something in his pocket.

"No powder burns!" the other one said sharply.

The man with his hand in his pocket ran back to the car and came back with my car robe. He took a gun out of his pocket and held it on me while his pals grabbed my arms. The first guy wrapped the gun in a fold of the robe and pressed it against my right arm. Something coughed and a blinding pain turned the night to a magnesium day. I sat down hard on the street, fumbling with my left hand to see if I could grab the pain and hold it away somehow.

I got up just in time to see the big driver climbing out of my car. They yanked me out of the way as my car went by, all by itself, picking up speed on the grade. I stared after the twin tail lights, saw them leap happily into the air and disappear over the edge of a drop. The thick, metallic sound of the crash shattered the stillness.

Somebody said: "He would've got a little banged in that."

"I see what you mean," another said.

Another car crept down the road behind us as they hurried me to the edge of the drop where my little black buggy had gone over. Before I could say a word, they spun me around, smashed something against my face and I went backwards over the edge. I was back in that familiar tunnel.

Hours later I was on my back licking rain water off my lips, saying to myself, "Bailey Regan, the roof leaks. You're in your own bed. It's just that the roof leaks. And nobody is leaning an air hammer against your arm. That's silly!"

Something was just above my face. I touched it. A hard metal thing. Cold. I got my left hand on it and pulled myself up into a sitting position. I touched my face, found a thick welt across my forehead.

I said aloud, "This is silly. The roof is leaking and you fell out of bed. Nobody shot you and ran your car over a cliff."

I said that several times, but each time it grew feebler. Above me, on the road, a car roared by, the tires making a wet, ripping noise on the wet asphalt, diminishing into the distance. I leaned back against the metal thing and found out that it was my own rear bumper. Above my right shoulder I could just make out the familiar numbers of my D.C. plate. Somebody had been playing rough.

I pulled myself up and went right over onto my face. I got up again and leaned against the back end of the car. I lost lunch and dinner and other meals that I couldn't remember. I slid slowly down the car with my fanny in the mud again.

My right sleeve was sodden with very sticky blood. I guessed that my arm was still bleeding. It had ceased to hurt in any specific spot. It hurt from my right ear down to my right ankle. A very large arm, and for all the good it was, it belonged to several other people. Strange stubborn people.

The strange thing about the way I felt was that I was the maddest about my car robe. I was fond of that robe. I had spread it on the damp ground with some of the nicest people in Washington and Virginia. I resented having holes shot in it.

Having decided that standing up was poor policy, I crawled around to the front of the car and got my flashlight out of the glove compartment. The seat felt so good that I fell asleep in it, even though the motor

had been pushed back so far that there wasn't much leg room. When I awakened, there was a lot of gray in the East and my right sleeve was no longer sticky. It was caked.

I got the razor blade for the windshield scraper out of the glove compartment and clumsily slashed open my right sleeve. About four inches up the inside of my wrist was a small black hole. There was no corresponding hole on the other side. High up on the outside of my upper arm was a very painful lump. That answered the question.

A quick survey in the mirror showed me that I could be pegged out to scare away goblins. It didn't help much to keep repeating to myself that it was all a big, big mistake.

It took the best part of half an hour to get the keys out of the lock, get the back end open, take out the box and get my new clean overcoat out of it. I made a crude sling out of a hunk of rope in the back end, swabbed my face off in a puddle of rain water, combed my hair over the lump in back with my fingers and shrugged my way into the overcoat, buttoning it around the bad arm.

By that time I had enough dawn so that I could put the flashlight away. By grabbing at some rugged little bushes with my left hand, I pulled my way up out of the ditch, gully, or what have you, and stood weak and wavering on the shoulder.

WITH the alert steps of a marathon dance winner, I headed in what seemed to be the promising direction, the direction from which my lusty friends had brought me. A telephone seemed like a healthy idea.

Big, black, fur wheels were going around in my head and the road was wiggling like a Coney Island fun house, when the car pulled up beside me. A green coupe. The radio was giving out with morning cheer and a big man with a broad white face and hairy hands on the wheel said, "Need a lift?"

I managed to nod. He opened the door and I climbed in. "Have trouble?" he yelled, over the radio.

"Accident."

His mouth made a surprised O. "Never had one myself. Been selling fountain pens on the road for fourteen years and never had a dented fender. You need a doctor?"

I nodded. He put on a little speed. He got it up to thirty. I began to see why he had the safety record.

The good cheer went off the radio and the morning news came on. Somebody extolled a mouth wash and then an urgent, flossy baritone said:

"Extra! This fine misty morning, we have a case of treason in our midst. Police of the capitol city, plus the F.B.I., plus every decent American, are looking for Bailey Regan, Civil Service employee of the War Department, who last night disappeared with secret data regarding the production of atomic bombs. He exchanged shots with an alert guard and escaped, but the guard, Henry Ervan, states that at least one of his shots struck Regan's right arm.

"Regan was a trusted employee who had been given all types of security checks and was believed to be loyal. It is not yet known which foreign power employed Regan, but it is expected that when he is located a tense international situation may develop.

"Every citizen is urged to be on the lookout for Regan. He is driving a '41 club coupe, license CL883. He is described as being of taller than average height, slim, with black hair, blue eyes and very white teeth. He is probably wearing a tan tweed suit and he usually goes hatless. Be careful. This man is dangerous. Contact the police if you see him or his car.

"And now for the rest of the Capitol news. . . ."

The pen salesman reached over a large, hairy hand and turned off the radio. He pulled off into the shoulder and turned in his seat, his smile gone and his big fists clenched.

"Mister," he said, "you jumped whenever that guy said Regan. You got on a tan tweed suit. You got your right arm in a sling. You got blue eyes, black hair and pretty teeth. You better start telling me who you are."

I smiled and it was a sickly effort. "Oh, I'm Regan okay. But it's all a big mistake and I want to—"

He smiled and licked his lips. "Regan, hey! Well what you want to do is no damn business of mine. I'm taking you in, son, and you won't be as pretty when you get there as you are right now."

He took the keys out of the ignition, climbed out his side, went around the car

and yanked open the door on my side. As he pulled me out, he said, "I've always wanted a couple of cracks at an article like you."

He kicked the door shut and shoved me back against the side of the green coupe. He had a lot of hair on his hands. A big, white fist clonked me under the left ear and I went down hard.

As he lifted me up again, I got my left hand on the flashlight. I yanked it out and swung it against his skull. His hands slipped off my shoulders and he went down on both knees. He was looking up at me, his face twisted with effort as I hit him again. He fell toward me and his face bounced off the running board.

Dropping the flashlight, I got the keys out of his pocket. If the shoulder hadn't sloped down, I wouldn't have been able to move him. As it was, I got him rolling and he rolled over about five times, gathering momentum until he banged into a little tree. The tall grass hid him.

Driving was a problem. I had to wedge the wheel steady with my knee while I reached the left hand across the shift. I had no idea about the roads, but after ten miles a sign post told me that I was four miles from the Lee Highway. I got onto it and made as much speed as I dared, wanting to get into Washington before the morning rush and before I passed out.

I got across the Key Bridge. There were cars on the other side, parked. Cars with official plates. The cops were checking all outbound cars. Something told me that it would be a hell of a lot more difficult for Regan to get out of Washington than it was for him to get in.

I drove over M and turned left up Georgia. There are quicker ways, but I wanted to avoid corners where somebody might see me having difficulty.

I left the car a block from her apartment and walked, as steady as I could manage, up to her bell and pushed it. After a long time, the front door buzzed and I got into the self-service elevator finding the button for the fifth floor.

She opened the door when I knocked, and her face went white as death. Marian Kail, her name is, and she works in the War Department two offices from me. Five foot five. Quick and soft and gentle and proud. A singing flame of a girl. Round

dark eyes with heavy black brows and hair the color of three-to-one Martinis.

"Bailey!" she gasped, pulling me in and shutting the door. "You can't stay here! They've been here and they're coming back."

I managed to find a grin from someplace and touched her hair with my left hand. "You'd help an enemy of the State?"

"But you didn't do it!" she flared. "You—you couldn't."

"But I've got a bullet in my arm, darling," I said softly.

Her face turned whiter and she winced with shared pain. "Bailey Regan, I know you like I know the inside of my own heart. You couldn't do a thing like that. The bullet means nothing to me except that you're hurt."

I staggered back against the door frame and caught myself with my left hand. I guess the grin faded more than a little.

"If I didn't do it, why don't you want them to find me?"

"Because they'll shoot you on sight or do something awful to you. They're so positive it was you. They got me out of bed at three. I waited until midnight for you to come and pick me up." She looked shy. "I was very angry."

"But I want to go to the cops and give myself up and tell them what happened."

"Wait for a bit," she said. "Wait until they cool off a little. Besides, we should find a lawyer to go in with you."

"But where can I go?"

SHE hurried over to her bureau and came back with a key. She opened the door cautiously, looked out and then beckoned to me. I followed her and we went down the hall. She unlocked the door and I went in. It was a darkened one-room apartment, the same size as hers.

She said, "I didn't tell them about this. They don't know I have the key. It belongs to a girl friend. Betty Shannon. She just started on a late vacation, She left me the key because I'm supposed to feed and water that parrot of hers."

I could see it. Green and crimson, sitting dejectedly on a perch in a big cage. It looked as though Miss Shannon had used it to dust out corners with.

My knees gave out and I managed to get to the couch before the mists rolled in from

the sea. I fought them back and saw that Marian was kneeling beside me, her fingers gentle on my swollen arm.

"I don't think it's too bad," she said, in a half whisper.

I wanted to object. It was very bad. It was my arm and there was a hole in it. Holes in your arm are bad form. She was gone.

Suddenly she was there again, and she said, "Can you make it into the bathroom?"

By letting her haul me to my feet and by leaning a lot of weight on her, I got into the Shannon bathroom. The overcoat was easy to get off, but the suit coat was tougher. Each movement of the right arm was like playing with a red hot knife with burrs on the blade.

Maybe she was standing still. She wavered around as though I was looking at her under water. After a few cutting noises, she dropped my shirt sleeve on the floor. My naked arm looked as though some joker had tied a red airport wind sock to my shoulder.

She got a stool from the kitchenette and I sat down heavily, slumped over the sink. I mumbled something about how she happened to think she knew what she was doing, and from a few hundred yards away she said, "Because once upon a time I tried to be a nurse. I flunked the course."

She had a bottle of something, and she poured it in and around the hole on the inside of my wrist. I shut my teeth down over a groan when she touched the lump on the outside of my upper arm. I noticed the brand of razor blade that she had. I've always felt that they were made out of discarded tin shingles. I was right.

She washed it in alcohol that smelled nauseatingly of lavender, and dabbed some on my arm. After the quick, keen bite of the blade, after she pressed her thumbs against the sore flesh of my arm, a dirty little wad of lead thunked onto the floor. She put some stuff along the slit where the bullet had come from, and when she gasped with pain, I realized that I had hold of her arm with my left hand. She pried my fingers off.

She washed my whole arm with the alcohol, and made two bandages. One around the upper arm, and one where the slug had gone in.

"Shut your teeth and don't yell," she said.

Her hard little fingers dug into the flesh of my arm between the two bandages and she manipulated my arm. I felt the sweat running down my face.

"Take it easy!" I managed to say.

A very crisp professional tone. "I believe it missed the bone, and since you've been moving it, the nerves haven't been severed. Apparently the bullet hit at an angle and ranged up through your arm. This will do for now, but if there is any hint of infection, you're going to a hospital."

I don't remember how I got back into the front room onto the couch. She was bending over me, and her fair hair touched my cheek as her lips left a cool print on my forehead.

"I'm going to lock you in, Bailey. Be a mouse. No noise. Don't go near the windows."

I was sinking into wonderful sleep. I fought my way back up out of it and mumbled, "Keys. Left overcoat pocket. Green coupe. A block down the street. Other side. Better move it someplace. Be careful. Fingerprints."

That was all I had time for. I didn't even have time to hear her answer. The little men with the wet sand stuck my head down into it. Firmly. . . .

A Washington type was in the room. He woke me up. He was being loud and positive—and talking about high level operations. "Implement the overall picture. Dynamic society. Referendum. Policy directive. Implement the overall picture."

The sun was out and hitting flat against the pale, drawn shades. I sat up, weak, dizzy and empty. The dusty little bird looked at me sadly. He said sharply, "Policy directive!"

A sad and dusty little Washington type. Worn out with the big, long words.

It took a long and gradual unfolding process to be able to stand up with any safety. After I found the kitchenette, I drank a gallon of water and sloshed back to the couch. The big, wonderful, soft couch.

At one end of the couch was a small bookcase, and on the middle shelf was a little radio. I worked my way over to it and turned it on, my finger on the volume to prevent any sudden squeals. I looked at

my wristwatch. Two-thirty in the afternoon.

The little ivory job hummed as it warmed up and I cut it back to where I could hear voices. I put my ear close to it. A baritone voice like liquid honey:

"Mary, my darling, you know that we can't go on this way. It's—it's impossible."

"Reorganization. Raise our sights," the parrot yelled.

I pulled the light blanket over me again and stared at the ceiling. I knew that I should be doing some thinking about what had happened. Maybe it was the after effect of shock. I couldn't think constructively.

In my mind, it all seemed like some sort of mad game which was being played on me as some sort of a test. It didn't seem possible that I couldn't go home, get fresh clothes and go to the office. With a small shock, I realized that I hadn't applied for sick leave. That was silly.

"Truman Doctrine," the parrot said.

The news came on. "Police have not yet found Bailey Regan, wounded traitor, who last night shot his way out of the Pentagon Building and made his escape with important plans for atomic energy production facilities. However, an arrest is expected at any time. Just after dawn this morning, Joseph Sheigal, salesman for a prominent fountain pen company, staggered to a farmhouse on a side road which leads south off the Lee Highway and stated that he had picked up a young man with his right arm in a crude rope sling. The young man admitted he was Bailey Regan. He forced Sheigal out of his car, beat him brutally about the head with a flashlight and made off in the car.

"Police report that the fingerprints on the flashlight match the fingerprints of Regan on file with the F.B.I. Sheigal's car was found near the corner of Third Street and Maryland Avenue. Mr. Sheigal, suffering from a mild concussion and lacerations, stated that Regan showed him no mercy.

"Regan's car was also found, near where Sheigal picked Regan up. In the car were found traces of human blood and some crumpled papers taken from War Department files. Experts stated that these papers were of no importance.

"It is almost certain that Regan is in Washington. All exits have been sealed and

police are rounding up government workers who may have been in the vicinity of Third and Maryland at the time the car was abandoned. One thousand dollars reward for information leading to the arrest of Bailey Regan has been offered. Remember, this man is dangerous. Take no chances. He is described as—"

I clicked the dial and the darkened room was silent.

"Dynamic society," the parrot said.

I went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Mr. James O'Hara

I WOKE up and her hand was cool and soothing on my forehead. I moved over, hooked my good arm around her waist and pulled her down so that she sat beside me.

"I can't stay," she whispered. "I'll fix you some soup and bring it in. Are you hungry?"

"Famished," I whispered.

"You haven't got a fever?"

"Not until the last few seconds," I said, grinning at her.

Her lips were soft on mine. I tried to use my good arm, but she pulled away too quickly. "Have to get shot oftener," I said.

"Hush. Bailey, it's awful! The way they're talking about you. People in the office were running around like chickens. And the F.B.I. was there. They talked to me for an hour this afternoon. How many dates had I had with you. What sort of a person you were. Darling, they talked about you as though you had been killed. I don't think they suspected. Some of the people said you ought to be lynched."

I tried to sink down into the pillow out of sight. Her words had made it come alive for me. I licked my lips and whispered, "What now?"

"At lunch time I went to a pay phone and called a lawyer I know."

"Not—"

"Yes. Howard."

It made me feel funny. Howard Craymo, the sleek article Marian used to go with before I stepped into her life. A solid young man with sleepy gray eyes, a pipe in his mouth and a year-round tan. Works for the S.E.C. in some capacity.

"What does he know about criminal law? I asked, too loudly.

She shook all over as the knock came on the door. She stood up quickly and pulled at me. I understood what she meant. I let myself thump down onto the floor and slid under the couch. There was just space to squeeze in.

I heard her slow steps go toward the door, but before she got there, the door slammed back against the wall and a voice from the hall said, "Come on out, Regan."

In a high, vacant tone, Marian said, "What are you talking about?"

"Sister, I happen to know this apartment is empty for two weeks and I heard a man's voice in there and somebody whispering. You're Kail, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Get over against the wall, lady—out of the line of fire. Come on out, Regan. I know you're there. I've been tailing your girl friend."

My mouth was dry. I stopped breathing. Marian said, "Don't be such a fool! I'm taking care of Betty Shannon's parrot while she's away. You heard the parrot."

"Get over against that wall!"

I crossed my fingers and projected a fifty-carat thought-beam at the dusty little bird.

"Referendum!" the parrot yelled. "Implement coordination!"

Heavier footsteps came into the room. A sound of heavy disgust.

Marian said, "I told you but you wouldn't listen! You have to wave guns at me! I'm definitely going to make a report of this."

"Why were you whispering?"

"To keep the damn parrot from yelling. He gets on my nerves. I want this Regan person found just as much or more than you do. I resent your attitude and I resent you, and I don't like being pushed around. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to phone the police." The door shut.

I dimly heard him saying, "Now wait a minute, Miss. I didn't—"

"Capitol Hill sources," the parrot screamed.

"I love you dearly," I whispered. . . .

She was back hours later with a thick cheese on rye and a bowl of hot soup. She didn't stay with me while I ate it. She put them down, said, "Howard'll be here after dark," and left. . . .

The room was dark. I tensed as I heard a key turned slowly and carefully in the lock. I didn't hear the door open, but I felt the breeze that touched my face. The breeze stopped. There was a tiny click and the key turned slowly again. No footsteps. A hoarse whisper said, "Regan!"

I didn't answer.

"Regan, this is Craymo. Are you asleep?"

"No. Over here."

His hand touched my shoulder and the couch creaked as he sat on the edge.

"Thanks for coming," I said.

"You can thank Marian. And keep your voice lower. I'm all through if anybody finds you while I'm here."

"That's too damn bad," I said nastily.

He sighed. "Take it easy, Regan. I know you're in a tough spot. And it's not you I'm worried about. It's Marian. It's tough to have her believing in you."

"And you don't?"

"I'm not judging you, Regan. I'm trying to help you. Run through your story for me."

I gave him every bit that I could remember, right from the time I unlocked my door and walked in until I fell asleep after Marian had fixed the clock of the cop who had thought I was in the room.

WE SAT in thick silence after I was through. He sighed. "And not only do you have no description of these men you claim kidnapped you, but you don't know how many there were?"

"At least four. One guy to drive my car. One for the other car, and two in the back of my car with me."

"Could you remember their voices?"

"They were just voices. Men's voices. The guy who drove my car was big and his ears stuck out a little, I think."

"Shiegal's statement was damaging. Did you have to slug him?"

"I slugged him in self defence. Should I have stood there and let him batter my face in?"

"His story doesn't go that way."

"He's lying!"

"Keep whispering, Regan! What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to get it through your thick skull that I've been framed! Can't you hire a detective or something to go out and look

over the scene of that crash and where I was shot?"

"There was a heavy rain, Regan. There'd be nothing left to go on. What was the other car like?"

"I think it was black. And fairly new. A medium-sized crate."

He sighed again.

"You certainly are building up my morale," I said.

"Shut up and let me think."

I let him think. My arm ached. The side of my head was sore where Sheigal had teed off on me.

"Regan, it's no good with what we've got. That guard, Ervan, was a new man at the Pentagon. He used to work over at the War College. He gave a good description of you. He'll identify you. Sheigal will identify you. They found your fingerprints on the flashlight and some of the papers in your car. They've typed those blood stains they found on the front seat. When they get you, they'll take a blood sample. It's too tight, Regan. I'm assuming that you've told me the whole truth."

"Maybe somebody saw them take me out of my apartment."

"If they did, they probably figured it was just another Washington drunk. They wouldn't think twice about it."

"If I took the papers, where the hell are they, Craymo?"

"They'll say you turned them over to your superiors. They'll say that's why you headed back to Washington. With the papers out of the way, they'll say you got orders to give yourself up. They'll say that you plan a stretch and then come out of pokey and collect the payoff. A hundred thousand would be peanuts for those papers, so they tell me. It's too pat, Regan."

"Hinge pin of democracy!" the parrot yelled.

Craymo jumped violently. "What the hell's that!" he hissed.

"A dusty little bird who's spent too much time reading the Congressional Record."

"Parrot?"

"Yeah. What's the matter with your memory? I told you how the parrot saved me once today."

I heard him scratch his head. The couch creaked again as he stood up. Seconds later I saw his wide shoulders silhouetted

against the drawn shades which were faintly glowing from the street lights outside. He turned and came back, sat down again.

"Can't you see it, Craymo?" I asked. "I'm a red herring. Those guys could have killed me and then the authorities, finding nothing on me, would have started looking for other people. They wanted me to escape. They wanted the police to find me on the move and waste time trying to sweat out of me where I'd cached the papers. I don't think they figured on me being able to hide out. But this way, maybe it's even better for them. They get a good long start while the authorities paw their way all over the city hunting for me."

"Sure. Sure," he said.

"I don't like your tone, Craymo," I said.

"Then get yourself a lawyer with a tone you like."

"Don't rub it in. You're supposed to be helping, remember?"

"I'm helping because Marian is too good a kid to get mixed up in a mess like this. For my money, you better turn yourself in. That's my advice."

"And what'll they do?"

"Make you keep giving a statement over and over again for a few days, hoping they can cross you up."

"And they won't look for anybody else in the deal?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Then I say to hell with it!"

"Don't be a fool, Regan! What's your reason?"

"Very simple. If I stay under cover, they'll think I've had some help. So, in trying to find out who was helping me, maybe they'll latch onto the right guys."

"I can't let you do this thing to Marian. The strain's too rough on her."

"Why don't you let her be the judge of that, Craymo?"

"What's to prevent me from going to the nearest phone and telling the cops where they can find you?"

I thought quickly. I smiled, knowing he couldn't see my face. "Sure, Howard. Sure. You do that. Go phone them. And when they pick me up, I'll give them chapter and verse about how you planned it, promised to pay me for it, and took the papers when the job was done. I'll give a complete confession naming you as mastermind, and you'll talk for a thousand years

before you talk yourself out of that one. How'd you like to be worked over a little by the law?"

He grunted as though I had hit him in the pit of the stomach. "You wouldn't do that!"

"The easiest way to find out is to go make that call, Mr. Attorney. You're a hell of a fine lawyer. You want to throw the client to the lions. Okay. Go ahead and throw. Pack a few good books so that you'll have something to do while they aren't asking questions."

"I believe you'd do it!" he whispered.

It didn't deserve an answer. I waited a moment and then said, "You know, that might be a good idea even if they don't get the report from you. If out of their own cleverness they happen to find me, I can still haul you in."

"Why?"

"Oh, I feel that you haven't been energetic enough. If I think you haven't had the interests of your client at heart. I think maybe I better give a few instructions to my attorney."

"Why did I get into this mess!" he whispered.

"Because you're in love with my girl. Leave it at that. Now then. Tomorrow you buy me a dark blue suit, size 41 extra long and have the pants fixed with a 34 inch inseam. A conservative number. Also six white shirts, 15½, 35. Underwear, handkerchiefs. A few ties. All conservative. A gray felt hat, 7¼. Black shoes, 11½ B. Some dark blue socks—size twelve—about six pair. A dark topcoat.

"Let me see, now. Oh, sure. This may be a toughy while there's a manhunt on. But I'd like some horn-rimmed glasses with clear glass. Get a small dark suitcase, medium quality to put my stuff in. Shaving equipment and a toothbrush.

"Get some calling cards. Any name. Something like O'Hara, I guess, to go with this Irish puss. Better put down in the corner Omega Equipment Corporation, Great Bend, Iowa or something like that. Also, pick up some strong hair bleach, with instructions. Not cheap stuff. Get the best. And some cotton. And a carton of cigarettes."

I made him repeat the list twice until he had all the items and sizes. He asked what he was supposed to use for money and

I told him he could either try to cash one of my personal checks, or he could use his own. He decided that maybe he'd rather use his own.

AT MIDNIGHT Marian brought me a small and wonderful steak which was a little chilled because she had thought that someone was in the hall and she had waited a long time to make certain. Again I was disappointed because she didn't dare stay with me for more than a few minutes. She asked me how much help Howard had been, and I told her that he had done fine, but I didn't tell her why. I held her hand for a few seconds and she kissed me, and I told her again that it was a fine thing to be shot once in a while and accused of horrible things because then you found out that maybe your girl really loved you. And she said that maybe I was right but that it needed more discussion at a better time and place when the pressure was off.

She brought some breakfast in at six in the morning and left some stuff for lunch. The swelling was down and I could bend my arm. I practiced in front of the Shannon mirror until I could bend it naturally without screwing my face all up with the pain. She changed the bandages when she came back at five. The puckered edges of the entrance and the mean slit of the exit both seemed to be healing.

"You're a tough kid," she said softly.

"Tough like Cream of Wheat, honey. Like mud pies. What you see before you is the hulk of what was once a symbol of gayety—of the light approach. Now I've got a head full of black pebbles. They rattle."

The goods arrived at ten. I made Craymo wait while I changed. He had done some thinking and brought pajamas. I gave them back to him, along with the dirty, wrinkled discarded stuff. Pajamas are a symbol of decadence. I couldn't tell how I looked, but the clothes felt good—felt as though they fitted.

When I handed him back the wrappings along with the old clothes, he acted as though I had handed him a bomb with an activated fuse. I pushed him toward the door with my good arm and he left, mumbling to himself.

When Marian came in with some food at midnight, I told her the plan to leave. She

made odd little noises and when I touched her cheeks, they were wet with new tears.

"It isn't that bad," I whispered.

"I'm so afraid," she said.

"I'll be good and I'll be careful, honey. If I get in any kind of a jam, you'll hear first. So don't worry."

She came into my arms and I managed to get even the bad arm around her as I tasted the salt on her lips.

In the morning, after a half hour of forcing myself to use the arm. I dressed completely and took a look. A very conservative type. I noticed that there were brand new hollows in my cheeks, a lot deeper than the old ones.

I stripped down, went into the bathroom and became a blonde. Hacking off the thick growth of whiskers was tough. And even after I was through, I had to smear the bleach along my jawbone until at last it lightened the little ends of bristle that the razor couldn't dig out.

Two things were tough. Getting the eyebrows without getting the stuff in my eyes, and getting all the hair on the back of my neck. When I was through, something was still wrong. Something about the eyes. The black eyelashes. I couldn't risk the bleach so close to my eyes. I was licked until I found the Shannon tweezers.

Ever pull out all your eyelashes? When you're through, it feels as though the red ants had been at you.

But the end result was fine. I brushed the locks and looked into the mirror, and a stranger faced me.

He was a sallow looking job, with pale hair and eyebrows and a curious naked look around his watery pale blue eyes. After he had stuffed a couple of hunks of cotton behind his teeth to fill out those hollows, and put on the glasses, he looked smug, placid and very sleepy. He looked out at me almost as though he wanted to say, "What the hell is there to get excited about?"

I checked the cards and said, "Nothing, Mr. James O'Hara. Nothing at all. Everything is fine."

"All you got to do is relax," he said quietly.

A half hour late, with my bag packed, my topcoat over my bad arm, my keepsake bullet in my pocket, the bag in my left hand, I made a quick inspection and unlocked the door.

The parrot said, "Necessity for reform." I said, "Referendum."

"Implement the directive," said he.

I locked the door behind me, slipped the key under Marian's door and walked down to the elevator. I had to do it that way. The cables whirred and the little elevator stopped at the floor. I opened the doors, stepped in, and stood quietly as it descended to the small lobby.

The go-to-work crowd was long gone and the street was quiet. A laundry truck was parked on the other side. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk and glanced down the street. A man pushed himself away from the side of a building and came toward me, his head at a slight angle, like a curious puppy.

When he was close I said casually, "Good morning. Nice day, isn't it."

"Mister, I didn't see you go in there."

I frowned at him. "What on earth is the matter with everybody? First there was a man in the back. Now you. All I want to do is look at heating plants."

His gray eyes were keen in a lined, angular face. I met his glance. He said, "Don't you read the papers?"

"Of course."

"The name Regan mean anything to you?"

"Oh! The killer! Did he live here? Are you expecting him? Is this one of those drag nets? Has anybody seen him around here?"

He grinned, spat on the sidewalk and said, "Keep right on reading those papers, bud." He turned and walked slowly back to his post. A gun made an awkward bulge in the fall of his coat.

I walked down to the corner, turned left and caught a cab two blocks further along. I had him take me to the station. At the station I went into the phone booth handiest and called the Hotel Garver.

I explained that I was Mr. Hoxie and that one of the factory men from Omega Equipment was coming in and that he had forgotten to make reservations and that the hotel who usually handled their business had refused to accommodate the unexpected arrival. If the Garver could take care of their Mr. O'Hara, I'd switch all future business to the Garver, which was something to think of for the lean days when it would again be possible to find empty rooms

in all kinds of hotels in Washington, D. C.

They chewed it over for a while and then told me to send Mr. O'Hara over and they'd be able to fix him up with a room.

CHAPTER THREE

Spy and Counter-Spy

SIGNING the register was acute agony, and in the effort to make my hand hold the pen and go through the necessary motions, I felt the sweat pop out all over my face. I followed the hop up, tipped him a buck and told him to go buy me a bottle of bourbon and bring up ice and soda.

I gave him a ten, and as soon as he'd left, I checked the wallet. Three lonesome tens left. Plus two ones and a little change. Not much operating capital. But it would either be enough, or a million bucks wouldn't help. One way or the other.

I read the paper while I forced myself to eat a leisurely lunch in the grill room of the Garver. I was still on page one, in a fat box in the lower left-hand corner. With a picture. The blonde, sleepy-looking man with the curiously naked-looking eyes sat at the lunch table and stared at the picture of the lean dark guy. Two different fellows absolutely—I hoped.

Back in the room I took the phone book and made a little list of myself. It wasn't a hard list to make. Wallace Erton, the head of my section. Jane Mace and Rita Dereen, the two secretaries. Hal Wanderer, the guy with the same job as mine.

Hal Wanderer, Wallace Erton and myself were entrusted with the combination of the safe. According to the news reports, it had been opened with the combination, not forced. I had happened to be the last one in the office. The safe was shut when I left. Then either Hal and Wallace were in on the frame, or one of us had been careless enough with the combination so that either Jane Mace or Rita Dereen had gotten wise.

Four people to work on. Four people to go see, all of whom were probably very interesting to the police and the F. B. I. and numerous other agencies such as the Secret Service and Counter Intelligence. Not to forget G-2. Or the Intelligence Division of the State Department. Or the amateurs who might have been reading

books and wanted either the thousand, to be a hero, or both.

They'd all be working. I'd have to wait. As I waited I went over the factor that made me certain one of them had to be in on it.

It was done at a time when nobody was doing night work in the office. Only they could be certain the office would be empty. Someone had known the guard system and been able to avoid it. Someone had known my description and either found or made up a guy to look like me. Last, but not by any means least, whoever it was had had explicit directions as to how to find our office in the silent deserted caverns of the Pentagon.

That was office stuff. All four of them knew my address. That was necessary. And they probably knew my plans for the evening. They might have known which car was mine. It was all too smooth to be accidental. It couldn't have been accidental. Wallace or Hal or Jane or Rita.

I walked over to the window and looked down at the teeming traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, at the people on the sidewalks—moving dots—each one happy to get the thousand bucks by putting the finger on me. Bailey Regan. Beg your pardon—James O'Hara. Residing at the Garver.

I thought of the four of them. They all seemed to be good joes. Wallace Erton, a Civil Servant in every sense of the word. A big, placid, gray-haired man with a soft tongue and an infinite understanding for the little vagaries of red tape and procedure.

Hal Wanderer. A quiet kid with flaming red hair and a tremendous amount of drive. Silent, stubborn ambition. A good engineer and a good guy to have a beer with when he didn't feel too guilty about wasting the time.

Rita Dereen, a plump little woman grown gray in the service of her country—or more specifically, in the service of a hundred Wallace Ertons, a million buck slips and a score of typewriters.

Jane Mace. A war import who stayed. She had made it tough for me to keep to my rigid plan of never taking out one of the office girls. A tallish dark girl with a body so fine that it is just barely believable and with an air of great and careful restraint, a terrific reserve, punctured only by a small quick way of looking at you—a way that

makes you feel as if they'd let you look through one of those quartz peepholes into an electric furnace.

Yes, I wanted to see each one of the four and I didn't have the vaguest idea of what I'd say to them. I didn't have what you call an outside chance of getting away with it. But what else has one of the unemployed to do with his time?

It was five thirty when I got to the red brick house in Georgetown. Mrs. Erton, a tall leathery woman who looked as though she should smell of horses, let me into the quiet living room, accepted calmly the fiction that I had something personal to talk over with Wallace, had the maid bring me a Martini and left me to my own devices. She told me that Wallace was stopping for cocktails at one of the hotels and should be home about six.

He was.

He came in, carrying his briefcase and his "very busy" expression, and smelling of the very best bourbon. I watched the slow double take as he looked beyond my blonde locks and my plumpness of jowls.

As I had been sitting over my Martini, I had gotten the ghost of an idea. The briefcase thumped to the floor and Wallace Erton grabbed himself under the heart and backed up until he felt the edge of a chair against the backs of his knees. He sat heavily. His face was the becoming color of buttered spaghetti.

He reached behind him and slammed the living room door. He whispered, "Bailey Regan! What do you want?"

"Look Wallace, I'm not some kind of a beetle. Don't look at me like that! I was framed and I've got a pretty fair idea who was in back of it."

"Framed!" he said hoarsely, goggling at me.

"Yes. Somebody knew the whole layout, and knew enough to use a guy of my description to get in there and open the safe and take the stuff. They knew the schedule and they knew where I lived, and even before they got the stuff, they conked me on the head and took me riding in my own car. You know what all that means? About knowing the combination and everything?"

Even the tip of his tongue looked pale as he licked his lips. "Somebody—somebody in the office?"

"What do you think, Wallace? Doesn't it look that way to you?"

A LITTLE color had begun to come back. He said briskly, "I don't want to think. I'm not getting paid to think about this sort of thing. All I can think about is that I'm ruined. You understand? Ruined!"

"You don't know this miserable town. You don't know how dangerous it is to have your name associated with a—mess like this one. I'm through. Wallace Erton? Oh, yes. He was the man who ran that office that they took the papers out of. In a month they'll transfer me and regrade me. Six months from now I'll be drawing half my present pay. Why, before that happens, in pure self defense, mind you, I'll have to request retirement for health reasons. Either that or stand by and see my 'degree of supervision' sink right down to zero. Absolute zero!"

He was nearly frothing at the mouth.

"Well, don't blame me," I said quickly. I didn't dream it up. But you can see how you could wipe out that stain if you help me latch onto whoever did it. And I'm going to need your help."

He got gray again. "This is a dangerous business, Bailey. I'm not—well, a heroic type, you know."

"All I want you to do is meet me tomorrow at five o'clock and I'll give you some more information. I'll tell you then how you can help me. Is it a deal?"

"I don't think I want to get into—."

"Don't be silly! You're already in it, right up to your pink little ears."

"Look here, I'd rather not—."

"You meet me tomorrow at five o'clock at Marian Kail's room," I said, standing up. I gave him the address and told him that Marian knew nothing about it, but that it just seemed like a fair place to meet.

His objections had grown feebler and, as walked me to the door, I managed to get a weak agreement out of him. He could see his Civil Service rating getting shot full of holes, and the guy would have been willing to roll a peanut the length of Pennsylvania Avenue with his nose if by doing so he could get two more people in his section and a little boost in his C. A. F. rating.

I walked around the corner and climbed into my cab, wondering whether Erton would play it safe and call the cops or

whether he'd be afraid of hitting the newspapers, giving some of the smart boys the idea that maybe he'd been in on it. I figured that Wallace's style would be maybe an anonymous phone call telling the authorities about my new type of American beauty. One thing I was positive of, old C. A. F. 11 Erton was on the milk-toast side. . . .

Miss Rita Dereen lived in a weathered old boarding house with an iron fence around the tired little patch of grass in the front yard. Because I had been in the first flush of adventure when I had gone to the hotel and to Erton's place, the nervous excitement had kept me almost gay. But the tiredness that went right on through to the bone had climbed aboard, and I sagged at all hinges.

Dinner was going on, and the maid showed me into a fat little parlor where the antimacassars were brave banners on the silent gray chairs. Rita came in, dabbing at her lips with a napkin, and I was suddenly struck by the pointlessness and loneliness of her life. She was a warm little person who had somehow managed to carry with her through over thirty years of government offices a warm and human look in her eye. Such an accomplishment is akin to wading across the crater of an active volcano carrying an undamaged vanilla cone.

I stood up and she walked over to me, switched the big napkin to her left hand, took my right hand in hers and said, "Hello there, Bailey."

She didn't say it in surprise and she didn't say it loudly. It was like when the kids say to the man in the Santa suit, "Hello, Daddy."

Erton had been refreshingly confused, but little Rita Dereen was alarmingly sure of herself. I said, "Was it that easy?"

"It wouldn't have been, but when I heard they hadn't grabbed you yet, I thought you might come to see me."

"You like spies in your parlor?"

"Don't be an ass, Bailey. I've watched you for a year. I've watched thousands of people in offices. If you took anything you shouldn't have, then I'm running dope into Virginia on weekends."

"Thanks, Rita."

"Don't thank me. Thank your parents. That's where delinquency starts—in the home. . . . What do you think I can do for you? If it doesn't involve packing a rod, maybe I can oblige."

"I want you to meet me at five o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Meet me at Wallace Erton's house." I gave her the address. She didn't ask any questions and she didn't flutter. But as I moved toward the door, she said:

"You think I ought to bring a notebook and some pencils?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You must be on the trail of whoever framed you, Bailey. And it's a cinch that both you and I know whoever it is pretty well. I thought I could put my only skill to work."

"Who did frame me, Rita?"

She bit her lip. "I haven't enough to go on, Bailey. I won't take that kind of responsibility."

"Fair enough."

I walked down the street and climbed into my cab. A circle of little girls stopped their hopscotch game and gawped at me. Rita had taken a hunk out of my morale.

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I was certain that every one of those little girls knew that they had just been privileged to see Bailey Regan, Noted Traitor. I huddled in the corner of the cab and shivered.

The apartment house could have been a duplicate of mine, and it could have been my own door that I rapped on.

He opened the door. He had a shaving brush in his other hand and lather on one half of his face. His red hair was bright in contrast with the white lather.

"Hi, Hal!" I said brightly and walked in.

He backed up slowly and said, "Lord!"

I shut the door behind me. He stood there in a fog, the lather drying on his face. "The voice did it," he said.

"You give me new hope, friend. Go wipe off your face and bring a drink when you come."

HE BACKED to the door of the bathroom, turned and went in. He yelled, "Help yourself. Bottle in the cabinet under the sink. Glasses on the side shelf. Soda in the icebox."

I made two stiff ones and carried them back into the living room as he came out of the bathroom. I was relieved to note that he had actually shaved. Good nerves. He locked the door, took the drink and sat down.

"You're a pretty popular guy, Bailey. And you don't know how bad I need a thousand bucks."

"You don't need it that bad."

"What the hell happened? Did they tell you they'd toss acid in your gal friend's face unless you snatched the papers?"

"I ought to take offense. To coin a phrase, I've been framed. In other words, it weren't me."

"And who is going to believe that except you, said girl and a few people like me who figure that you don't have the necessary mental equipment to open a door with a sledge hammer, much less remember how to open the safe."

"Professional jealousy, Hal. You see me as one of your future serfs in the office after you get Wallace's job."

"Could be. Could be." He sipped his drink, held it away and looked at it with mistrust. "If merit means anything, I will become a large gun while you maybe

will become a Congressman or some such."

The fingers of my right hand weren't working properly. I switched the glass to my left hand, glanced up and saw his keen blue eyes narrow.

"What's the matter with the arm, Bailey?"

"It had a bullet in it. But that's part of a long, long story. I dropped around to see if you'd help a fellow worker. I've got a good chance to find out who framed me, and you can help. In fact, I need your help. How about dropping around at five tomorrow to Rita Dereen's place, the boarding house where she lives?"

"To do what?"

"Just to be there. I may need a witness, and on the other hand, I may want you to punch somebody in the nose. You figure you're man enough?"

He grinned, but there was something tight and strained about the grin. "Five tomorrow. Sure thing."

He stood up, set his glass on a small table and strolled over to a box on a table near me. He was very casual. He said, "You want a cigarette?"

"Sure," I said softly. The hair on the back of my neck bristled. Something about the way he talked. The left fist was bunched. That wasn't right. I knew somehow that when he got within range, he was going to jump me. And I had one good arm to work with. A half inch at a time I leaned away from the back of the deep chair I was in.

He reached his right hand out for the box, whirled and threw that hand at me. It had suddenly become a fist and he threw it with the same form used by the champion hurler of the female softball league.

I got my head out of the way and his knuckles whistled close to my nose as he, off balance, fell onto me. I hit him with a short left as he fell. He landed across my lap and I went face first out of the chair, landing with him on the bottom. His head smacked the floor hard and he lay still, blood on his lower lip.

I backed off as he stirred and sat up. He touched his lip and said, "I did real good, didn't I?"

"That thousand bucks get you, Hal?"

"Hell no! I was going to refuse to take it. I just wanted the satisfaction of turning a miserable creep like you over to the cops."

Hal Wanderer's blue eyes flared hate at me.

"In other words I'm guilty until proven innocent and this is a fascist state?"

"Not at all. You've got a wound in your arm. You knew the combination. The guard described you. It's good enough for me."

I picked a glass ashtray off the table with my left hand. His eyes narrowed as he saw the way I held it.

"I'm not going to bash you one. I just want to get close enough to you to make this stick. Listen, Hal. I didn't take the papers. I was grabbed in my room, taken out into the country in my car and held while they shot me in the arm. They wanted it to stick, the frame they were cooking up, and they wanted me picked up alive so that the authorities would waste a lot of time asking me questions.

"I've managed to cross them up by staying out of the hands of the law so far. All the time I'm still at large, the guy the guard shot might be having a tough time hiding. He must look like me and he's got a hole in his arm. Maybe they'll pick him up while they're looking for me. That doesn't matter as much as finding out who in our office arranged it all. That's my job.

"I'm an easy-going guy. I take the light approach. What happens? I get beat up and shot and hunted like a damn rabbit by every dopey cop in town. You think I like that? I'm damn well sick of it and I'm sore. I'm madder than I've ever been before. Somebody sat me firmly on the spot and I resent it. Now, will you play or won't you?"

He looked at the blood on his fingers from where he had touched his lip, and he investigated the split with the tip of his tongue. He looked up at me and smiled. "Okay, Bailey. I was being a boy scout. I was wrong. I'll play along with you. But I think you ought to let the cops handle it."

"It's too late now, friend. Even as small an item as my blonde locks would raise an awful lot of questions."

I got a new cab, and as I gave the address and settled back in the seat, I realized that my shirt was sopping wet, plastered to my ribs and back. I rolled the window down and the breeze helped a little.

The Jane Mace apartment seemed to be in a better building than good little government girls ought to be able to afford. I tried

the buttons near hers and finally got a soft burp from the door mechanism. The lobby smelled of pine and the rug looked as though underneath it there might be a rug pad of twenty dollar bills carefully clipped together with little gold staples. The little elevator was as well finished as a mobster's coffin, and just as quiet inside.

I knocked at her door, waited and knocked again. I thought I heard voices coming from inside the room and I stepped a bit to the side of the door as it opened. There she was, and looking a good deal more edible than she looked in the office. A long dress with some sort of a band arrangement that cut diagonally across the upper half leaving one shoulder bare and seeming to promise at any moment to provide further areas for inspection. Through the door I saw a pair of masculine feet and a hand with a glass in it.

She stood with that peculiar stillness that is so characteristic of her, and when I said softly, "Don't let the blonde locks fool you, Jane," she didn't even quiver.

"I'm afraid you must have the wrong apartment," she said loudly. As she spoke, she rapidly spread the fingers of her right hand three times in front of her where her guest couldn't see it.

"Sorry," I said, and turned away as the door closed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Ladies

THE STREET had become such an unfriendly place, so full of eyes that I didn't want to go back down. The city had become nightmarish—so that each little bit of sidewalk I walked on became a vast, flat expanse. I guess everybody has those dreams at one time or another, where you're out in public at high noon wearing something that no amount of pulling and tugging will arrange to cover your nakedness. My feeble disguise was a little box of sand and I was an ostrich with my head in it, and a big sign fastened to the other end reading: *Bailey Regan—Come and Get Him.*

So I found a fire door, walked up a flight of stairs and sat on the concrete, congratulating myself because I managed to light my cigarette at the first try. It was a case of holding the cigarette steady and waiting

patiently for the match flame to go by.

I had a pretty little mental picture of my situation. It was as though, when my playmates took me for the ride, they had placed me in a barrel and started it down hill. At the bottom of the hill was a jumbled pile of rocks labeled, *Guilty*. The barrel was picking up speed and all my lovely little talks with the office people were just as useful as reaching one hand out the end of the barrel and trying to stop it by digging my fingernails in the ground. The Bailey Regan gay spirits were floating along like a concrete balloon.

I waited until my watch said twenty minutes had passed, and then I went back down to the Mace apartment, found the door open a few inches.

I tapped on it and heard Jane say, "Come on in and shut it behind you."

She was sitting on a wide, deep sand-colored couch, with a drink in her hand. At her right elbow was the only lighted lamp, a gadget with a thick burlap shade and a jade green base. The light fell across her fine shoulder, but left her face in shadow.

"Sit down, Regan. My playmate has gone in a huff. Remember that you owe me a good dinner and an evening of dancing. That is, if you aren't ninety when they let you out."

I sat down opposite her. She said, "That drink beside you is yours."

"What did you tell him?" I said, picking it up. It was nice mellow Scotch.

"Is that idle curiosity, or have you got a reason for asking?"

"Idle curiosity."

"Then let's skip it, Regan. He's gone. Drink your drink. My evening's shot to hell. Wait till I climb out of this little number and get domestic."

She moved nicely across the room—but slowly, making me remember that I had never seen her make a hurried or ungraceful movement. She had a quality of unreality and made me feel as though the two of us were playing to a large and silent audience over there behind the footlights.

My drink was gone when she came back in a black terrycloth robe with a wide white belt and big white pockets.

"Why come to me?" she asked, as she sat down. "You never picked up your chances to play footie when you gave me dictation in the office. I thought that little

Marian Kail creature had you all nailed."

"I want your help, Jane."

She smiled slowly. "I'll help you, Regan—if the price is right . . . and provided I'm not implicated. I don't think I'd like being on the inside looking out. But I do like money, and from what I've heard and what I've guessed, even ten percent of what you're being paid for this little job ought to keep me very happy for a very long time."

"What's under all that beautiful control of yours, Jane?"

She was very still. "Bring me one of your cigarettes," she said softly. I walked over with the pack. She selected one and lifted it slowly to her lips, bent her head a fraction of an inch as I held the flame. With a long slow gesture she took it away from her lips, leaned her head back and huffed the smoke up at me. There were tiny bits of flame in her dark eyes.

"Under this control? Absolutely nothing, Regan. I'm a rough kid and I play rough. I'm twenty-eight. I've been walked on a few times. Not recently. And not ever again. I'm after the dough because I'm sick of working. Does that answer your question?"

"Not quite." I sat beside her, reached across her and tilted the lamp shade a bit so that the light hit her face. "There's more than that to you, Jane."

"Oh, Lord, here we go! Little girl, under that cold exterior is the warm heart of a tender woman. Stow it, sailor. Get to the point."

"You want money for helping me?"

"That's what they call that green stuff, Regan."

"And suppose I tell you that this is a frame and I haven't got any money or any prospect of getting any. I'm innocent and I came to you for help because I figured that you're pretty much on the level and pretty excitable. Does that change your answer?"

She slowly stubbed out the cigarette in a green ashtray near the base of the lamp. Her lips were pursed.

"I didn't figure it that way, frankly, Regan. I'm supposed to help you as a friendly gesture—is that right?"

"Yes."

"Janey doesn't make friendly gestures. Janey used to make friendly gestures.

Janey found out that there's no future in it."

I stood up. "Is that final?"

She smiled. "As final as doom, my dear."

"If you change your mind, meet me tomorrow at five at Hal Wanderer's apartment. You know where it is?"

"I've been there, but I won't be there at five tomorrow." She yawned. "You're taking quite a chance though, aren't you? Maybe I'll tell the police and collect my thousand after they pick you up."

"You talk pretty big, Jane."

She looked up at me blankly. "Indeed?"

"And most of it is just talk. You won't turn me in."

"I haven't decided yet," she said, but I had the satisfaction of seeing a faint blush color her face.

She saw me to the door and took a quick look down the hall before letting me out.

I paused and said, "Somewhere you've gone off the track, Jane."

"Is this going to be philosophy or psychiatry? I'm just a gal who likes to be paid."

"There's a name for that."

"And a hell of a lot of competition in the field. Good night, Regan."

IN THE drug store were booths and cheap writing paper, envelopes and a stamp machine. I made no attempt to disguise my writing.

To the Officer in Charge of the Regan Case:

You either have received or will receive an anonymous tip as to where you can pick me up tomorrow at five o'clock. I was framed, and somebody in my section must have helped whoever took the papers. I've been trying to find out who helped to frame me.

If you get a tip to pick me up at Miss Kail's, you can investigate Wallace Erton. If you get a tip to pick me up at Erton's, then Rita Dereen is the one. If the tip says Dereen's, then pick up Wanderer, and if it says to get me at Wanderer's, then Miss Mace is your meat.

If you promise to pick up the person indicated, I'll give myself up. The signal will be a light burning in my office after dark tomorrow. I understand that you could leave such a light even if you get no data on where to pick me up. But since I am sending this same data to a reporter friend of mine tomorrow, less public censure will result from your playing fair with me, because good police work will eventually disprove any connection between me and the theft of the papers.

Bailey Regan. Fugitive.

I dropped it in the nearest box and headed back to the Garver. I had a hunch that nature had probably put a new bluish tinge along my jawline, and that wouldn't look right on a guy with my new coloring. Not right at all.

Woodsmen tell of stopping short in the woods and carefully circling a log to shoot the rattler waiting on the far side—the snake they hadn't seen, heard or smelled. It is probably the end product of some vestigial sense that is nowadays too dim to be even identified, but which, back in the days of caves, kept some of our hairy ancestors alive to swing the stone axe another day.

A block from the hotel, for no coherent reason, I stopped in another drug store, phoned the hotel and asked for Mr. James O'Hara. The room phone rang three times and a guarded male voice said, "Hello?"

In a shocked voice that was nearly a whisper I asked, "Is this O'Hara?"

"Yeah. Who're you?"

I replaced the phone gently on the hook and walked out.

No place to go. I didn't want to risk going back to Marian—and I couldn't afford to upset my scheme by going to any one of the four I had seen. The hotel was out—the cops had tumbled. Probably they had checked on all new hotel guests who answered the height and weight description of Bailey Regan. I remembered my own fingers on the metal doorknob as I had locked the room. The prints would be clear. As good as a photograph. A quick check with the desk would give them my new description. It would be very bad if I were to be picked up before my letter arrived.

Suddenly my entire scheme seemed childish and vague. I was dealing with smart operators. That had been proven. It didn't seem likely that they'd be sucked into a silly little plot. And what if there were two of them in on it? They'd compare notes and figure out what I was trying to do.

The October night was turning colder and a light rain began to fall. People hurried for shelter. I walked for a time, feeling my clothes get damper. White lights shone ahead. I sat at the counter of a little aluminum and enamel short order joint and had two sawdust hamburgs and a cup of nitric acid. The food was like a stone in my stomach. And no lodging for a night. . . .

Suddenly I knew how I could get a room. No questions asked. I walked faster, feeling anger at my own exhaustion, my own lack of resource. Fifteen more blocks to go. Cabs were out. Even those Washington monsters they call streetcars were out. All my boldness was gone. I wanted to go underground like a mole.

I found it, and after I took a quick look along the bar I knew it was the place. It had to be the place. My clothes felt as if they were steaming in the heat. I ordered a beer and sat in the corner where I could see the door.

Couples mostly. A few men. A few women. The first one was out. Her clothes were too good. She was sleek and slightly drunk. Out for the laughs. Couldn't risk it.

The second one looked too cheap and too old and too frowsy.

Number Three had to be it. She sat at a table near the bar. Blonde hair that was acid with the dye. Pale face that spoke of anemia and wore the brave cosmetic colors. Eyes that told of youth in a face that was worn with too many things that had come along too fast. Thin hands with slightly dirty knuckles clenched tightly around the beer glass. A little smile in the corners of the mouth, but fear in the eyes. Fear of what might come and what might not come.

I downed the beer and signaled a waiter. I pointed with my thumb toward the girl and said, "Alone?"

"Far as I know, sir."

"Serve my drink at her table and bring one for her."

"Thank you, sir."

Her wrists were thin, the bone jutting starkly against the gray-white flesh. She looked up, startled, the eyes still afraid as the lips smiled and said, "Hello, there."

"Hello there, yourself. Waiting for someone?"

"I was but guess the guy stood me up."

"He must be soft in the head." The same old gambit. We both knew there was no guy who had stood her up and she had been expecting no guy at all because she was too thin and too afraid and the lines of her mouth weren't pretty.

She made the conversation until at last, after a few more beers, I said: "Let's move along."

She stood up quickly, the smile affixed with crimson paint, framing the gray teeth.

Her room was perfectly square, with one door, one closet, one bed, one window, one bureau, one lamp, one ashtray, one glass and two straight chairs. The whole layout looked dingily antiseptic, like a charity hospital room.

She let me in, shut the door, clicked on the light. The eyes were no longer afraid, only dull; dull like gray glass that had been etched with acid.

I said, "Lock the door, Mary."

"Nobody comes up here, Mr. O'Hara," she said, but she locked the door anyway.

The fear was back in her eyes. She pulled her coat off and hung it on a hook on the inside of the closet door. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Everything's fine. Here, have a cigarette." She took one and I held the match up, wincing with the pain in my arm.

"You're hurt!" she gasped.

"Yeah. I'm hurt and I want a place to stay the night. That's all I want."

"Police after you?"

"They could be. Don't ask questions because it might be better if you didn't have the answers. I'm sick and I'm exhausted. I'll give you twenty bucks to let me stay here."

She backed away a bit. She turned and slid open the bureau drawer. She was so quick that I had no chance to get to her. She wheeled and the gun in her hand was pointed at my chest. She took three steps toward me.

SHE HELD the gun out and said, "You need this? A—a friend left it with me a long time ago. I think it's loaded. He said it was. He said I ought to have it. . . ."

The fear was gone and the blankness was gone and there was something in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. Maybe when a dog that has been run over takes that last look, he sees an expression like that in someone's eyes.

I pulled her down, kissed her on the forehead and said, "Thanks, Mary. But I don't need it."

She was putting it back in the bureau drawer when I stretched out on the bed. I shut my eyes. Just as I was falling off, I felt her unlacing my shoes, pulling them off.

In the morning she went down and bought a razor, shaving cream and blades. I used two blades peeling the whiskers down below skin level.

When I said I was going, she said, "But they'll be looking for you out there! You can stay here a while."

I grinned. "Can't afford it."

I shouldn't have said it. She looked as though I had hit her full in the mouth. "I don't—want the money."

I couldn't help thinking of the difference between her and Jane Mace. I took her hand and said, "I don't want to get you in trouble, Mary."

Her grin was crooked. "I've been in trouble before. You can't go out now. Wait until dark anyway."

I agreed. She said she was leaving to get some breakfast for me and that she'd be a long time, because she didn't want to take the risk of going to a place close by. She said that if anyone knocked at the door I was to make like a mouse and they'd go away.

After the door shut behind her, I sat on the bed and smoked for a few minutes. Most of the utter weariness was gone. I thought about Mary and wondered. With a feeling of guilt, I opened the top bureau drawer, found a small sheaf of papers under some stockings.

It was very simple. Some letters from a little coal town in Pennsylvania addressed to Mrs. Mary Kolczak, General Delivery, Washington, D. C.

One of them said that she better damn well start sending back some money. There was a War Department telegram, very frayed, one of those "regret to inform you" jobs, talking about a Sergeant Stanley Kolczak. An official letter from the Veterans' Administration said that Sgt. Kolczak's insurance had been made out to his mother. There was also one of Mary's letters, returned unopened by a Mrs. Peter Kolczak. I also found an application form for a job that she hadn't sent in. Skills—none. Past experience—none. Under present occupation, she had written in a cramped hand—widow.

I walked back across the room and sat on the bed. Maybe the human spirit thrives on a form of selfishness—that when you find someone who is a lot worse off than you are, it makes you feel better about your

own position. I felt better reflecting on the kind of dirty deal Mary had.

I tried to joke with her as I ate my breakfast, but she sat huddled in one of the straight chairs and looked through me.

When I was through, she said, "You're Regan, aren't you?"

I was jolted. "What makes you think that?"

"I read what it said in the morning paper. It said that you'd dyed your hair blond and you were wearing a dark suit, gray hat. And last night when you tried to light my cigarette, your right arm hurt."

"I'm Bailey Regan. But it would have been better for you not to know."

"Then you better leave," she said tonelessly. "I thought it was just cop trouble. This is different. I don't want you around."

"You mean you won't shield a traitor?"

"Put it that way if you want to. I don't want you around. I nearly brought a cop back with me. You fooled me. I thought you were nice."

"A patriot, hey! What did your country ever do for you, angel? That is, besides killing off your husband and giving the insurance dough to your mother-in-law. And never giving you any kind of a skill you could use to earn your living."

She wouldn't look at me. She stared at the wall. "You should have kept your nose out of my business, Mr. Regan. Suppose you shove off."

"Suppose I say you talked me into staying and that I like it here?"

"I suppose you can keep me from leaving and getting a cop. But you can't make me talk to you or look at you."

And that's the way it was. She spent all day looking at the wall, smoking countless cigarettes. Her face was a gray mask on which the makeup stood out, livid and brittle. I made no attempt to bring her around to my point of view. I was sick of explaining myself, and too proud to beg for her smile, to beg that look back into her eyes. I told myself that it didn't matter a damn one way or the other—but of course it did.

In the afternoon I wrote a note to Charles Zargo, my friend on the Post. I gave him the pitch from beginning to end, using up all the rest of the slim packet of cheap paper. I left the room at seven thirty. She didn't answer me when I said good-by.

CHAPTER FIVE

Traitor's End

I WALKED out into the night, walked all the way to the Jefferson Memorial and looked across the river at the Pentagon. The window was lighted. Back on 14th Street, I located a prowler car waiting for a light. I stepped up to the driver's window and said:

"I'm Bailey Regan. I'd like to—"

That's as far as I got. The man beside me stuck a cannon in my face and ordered me into the back end. I climbed in, and they braceleted my right wrist to an iron ring set in the back of the front seat. With the siren screaming, we began skipping gaily through the evening traffic.

But we didn't go to Headquarters. We went to what seemed to be a private home. The two cops had an air of great importance. They drove under an arch at the side of the house, unhooked me, refastened the bracelet to the wrist of the biggest cop and took me to the side door, pushed the bell with respect and waited.

The door opened almost immediately. To the quiet man with gray hair, the cop said, "Bailey Regan, sir."

"Bring him in."

They walked me back into a library. "Take that thing off his wrist." I was unhooked. "You men can leave."

"Yes, sir."

The library door was shut. The man with the gray hair looked closely at me. He had a keen, executive face, lined heavily by the years. He had the shoulders of an ex-athlete.

He said, "Very good dye job, Regan. My name is Potter. I won't introduce these other people here. The police, the F.B.I., the War Department, the State Department and the Executive Branch are represented."

I took a quick look around at the faces half hidden in the gloom. One big lamp with a green shade stood on a library table. It was the only light in the room. Potter said, "Sit in that chair, Regan. Thank you."

He walked around to the other side of the table and sat down. From a far corner I heard the familiar slow, clack-clack of a stenotype. For the record.

"Your letter was received this morning and read with much interest, Regan. You

state that you were framed. There is no point in wasting the time of this group arguing the details. All of the damaging evidence against you is either real or faked. To give you a chance to talk, we will assume that all of the evidence against you is faked. The desk clerk at the Garver said that you had difficulty with your right arm in signing the register. Give me a quick explanation of that."

"I was taken out to where my car was found and shot. They held me and shot me through my car robe. Here's the slug. I dug it out of my arm up above the elbow. They shot me on the inside of the wrist."

I tossed the slug on the table top. Potter picked it up, looked quickly at it, hefted it and put it down.

A heavy voice said from the darkness, "How about the papers in the car?"

"I'm asking the questions," Potter said crisply. "Now then, Regan. Why do you assume that someone in your section had something to do with the theft of the papers?"

I quickly outlined my reasons.

"That sounds plausible. Particularly since we did receive an anonymous tip telling us where to pick you up at five."

"Where? Who called in?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm still asking the questions. All the four persons you mentioned have been brought in. We were told to pick you up at Mr. Wanderer's house."

"Jane Mace!" I gasped.

"Mr. Regan, please go over to that far corner. Jordan, show him where the chair is. You'll be concealed there. Don't speak."

I found the chair. Potter said to someone near the door, "Bring Miss Mace in here."

She came in, and she was bland, self-assured and dignified.

She sat beside the table and said, "I really must insist that you let me go."

"In due time, Miss Mace. I want to ask you a few questions."

"But you've already asked them!"

"I know. At first you denied being responsible for the tip which was phoned in in a man's voice. Then I explained to you the trap which Mr. Regan had devised. You then changed your story and said that you had phoned in the tip. Do you still stick to that story?"

"I do. I have a deep voice for a woman.

A mistake is possible. I phoned in the information because I have loyalty to my country. I wanted Mr. Regan captured so that he could do no further damage. Surely you understand that?"

"We understand, Miss Mace. I have information here to indicate that you have no parents, no husband, no source of income beside your position with this government to which you are so loyal. Your salary is thirty-one hundred dollars a year. Yet you manage to pay three hundred dollars a month for rent. I also have here copies of your withholding tax statements and your final statement for last year. You indicate no outside source of income. I believe this merits an explanation."

"What has this got to do with Regan?" she snapped.

"Possibly nothing."

"I want a lawyer before I talk."

"That seems very odd, Miss Mace. Come now, you're a patriot. Can't you see your way clear to help us?"

She licked her underlip. "A friend pays my rent, Mr. Potter."

"He can't be a very good friend. You now owe two months' rent."

The famous Mace control split wide open. Her voice climbed into a higher key. "He'll pay up, all right. I've told him and he knows where his bread's buttered, all right. He has no damn right to inconvenience me this way and I told him last night that he'd have to—"

"Last night, Miss Mace?" Potter said gently.

"That's none of your business," she said sulkily, slumping in her chair.

"I'll be the judge of that. Now then, Miss Mace, would you say that he had

stopped paying your rent because he was tired of you, or because he temporarily was embarrassed for funds?"

She smiled and it wasn't a pretty smile. "He isn't exactly in any position to get tired of me, friend."

"Then he just happens to be out of money. Did you see him after Mr. Regan left you last night?"

"What if I did?"

"Merely this. That, realizing his need of money, you may have urged this man to tip off the police and claim the reward. That would account for the man's voice."

She sat up. "Sure! That's just the way it was. We decided that it would be an easy way to get a thousand and Regan deserved being captured anyway—after what he did."

"Then why didn't you tell me this before, Miss Mace?"

"As I said, I didn't think it was any of your business. I still don't."

POTTER paused and tapped on the top of the table with a pencil. He smiled softly at Jane and said, "Then here's a question you can answer, Miss Mace. If, as you say, you had this friend call up the police so as to earn a thousand dollars, why on earth didn't he give his name so that he'd be able to collect?"

She jumped and opened her mouth, closed it slowly and scowled at Potter. "You're pretty smart, aren't you?"

"Not at all, Miss Mace. Just logical. And anxious to get straight answers. Jordan, take Miss Mace back to Room C and have her held there. We may need her later. Bring in Miss Dereen."

Rita sat on the straight chair and beamed

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at Mr. Potter. He said, "Miss Dereen, I've been very disappointed in you. I would suspect from looking at you that you're a very observant person. Very observant indeed. Yet you have no theories regarding any intrigue within the section in which you work. All you say is that Regan is innocent because he isn't the type of person to do that sort of thing. Surely you must have your own nominee, if you feel Regan isn't the one."

"I'd rather not say, Mr. Potter."

"Miss Dereen, it wouldn't be possible that you're concealing, shall we say, your own lack of insight by pretending to conceal something you in actuality don't know?"

"Mr. Potter, unfortunately I work for a living. In Washington, ratting on the boss is acceptable only when you're in a high bracket. I'm not."

"Then it would be your boss that you'd be—ratting on?"

"I didn't say that."

"You inferred it."

"You can't take any action based on the inferences of a tired old lady."

"Thank you for your help, Miss Dereen. Jordan, she may leave now and you can bring Mr. Erton in."

Wallace Erton sat down in the chair, mopped his face with a big white handkerchief and smiled ruefully about at the vague figures in the darkness.

Potter didn't speak. He looked at Erton and slowly tapped his pencil on the desk top. Erton shifted uncomfortably.

"Mr. Erton, I admire a patriot," Potter said sharply.

Erton jumped. Potter continued, "Yes, and I admire a selfless patriot. I admire you, Mr. Erton."

Wallace beamed at him.

"That is why, Mr. Erton, I'm going to insist that you accept the thousand dollars for reporting to us where we could find Regan."

Erton stopped beaming abruptly and his lower lip hung away from his teeth. "But I didn't—"

"Now. Now. The time for modesty is past, Mr. Erton. We found out from Regan before he died that only Miss Mace and you knew that he was to be at Hal Wanderer's place at five o'clock. Miss Mace didn't—it must have been you. And I per-

sonally want the honor of handing you your check for one thousand dollars."

I had been almost unable to repress a gasp when Potter had so casually written me off the books.

Erton said, "Regan is dead?"

"Unfortunately yes. Shot to death as he attempted to escape. And before we could question him to any great extent."

The handkerchief came out again and the forehead was wiped thoroughly. Erton smiled sheepishly.

Potter pressed him, "So you might as well admit it, Mr. Erton and let us give you the publicity you deserve."

"You win, Mr. Potter. It was my duty and I did it."

Potter frowned. "One little thing baffles me, Mr. Erton. That is your reluctance to admit to phoning in this information. You were in charge of the office from which the files were removed, and a certain amount of censure would naturally come your way. You could have wiped out that censure and gotten even with the board—but you preferred to be anonymous. Furthermore, Miss Mace tells us that you have fallen behind in the payments on her rent and that she is annoyed. You could have used the reward. Yet, in spite of these two good reasons—you preferred to remain anonymous. I don't understand it."

"What—what is this about apartment rent—?"

Potter smirked. "Oh, come now, Mr. Erton! Miss Mace has given us the story."

Erton slumped in the chair and his face was white. "All this will be off the record?" he pleaded.

"Of course. Of course. But you still haven't explained, you know."

"I—I—"

"Could it be that there is no explanation that you can tell us Mr. Erton? Could it be that you were anxious to have Regan picked up because it made you uneasy to have him free? You thought he might stumble across something that would implicate you?"

"I resent—"

"Mr. Erton, you have a choice to make. I believe that I am empowered to offer you a very light sentence. All you have to do is to tell me how you were contacted originally and how much you did for them. You merely gave them the combination of

the safe, didn't you? What do you get? Twenty thousand? If you haven't received it yet, I believe that you can safely assume that you won't get it at all. Those people don't play fair, you know. Now, don't answer too quickly, Mr. Erton. Think it over. We've all got a lot of time, you know."

Potter was silent. Someone coughed. A clock ticked solemnly. Wallace Erton sat with trembling lips, looking through Potter, through the far wall, off into some distant and grim place. He opened his mouth several times as though to speak and then didn't.

AT LAST, in a thin, reedy voice, he said, "I had six thousand dollars saved up. Jane was assigned to the office and once, when we worked late, I took her to dinner. That was the beginning of it. A year later the six thousand was gone. Four months ago I mortgaged my house. That money's gone, too. She's taken every dime and screamed for more. I—I don't know what's wrong with me. I give in to her. She threatens to tell my wife, to make sure it gets in the gossip columns. I can't work." He buried his face in his hands.

Potter prompted, "And so when you were contacted—?"

"A man called me up at home. He said he had to see me. We met on a street corner and went around the block slowly in his car. He told me that I could make fifteen thousand very easily. He said that all I had to do was to tell him when the office would be empty and tell him the combination to the safe file. I refused.

"He called back, and Jane had charged things that I had to pay for and I didn't have the money. I thought I'd go mad. Then I remembered about how several of the physicists had told me that the other countries were about as far along as we are and how it wouldn't do much damage and I agreed. He met me and gave me five thousand dollars.

"That was last month. I bought Jane a bracelet she wanted and I paid off back bills with the rest. The man called me up and I gave him Regan's address. He told me that if I backed out, they'd get Jane and permanently disfigure her. They seemed to know all about Jane. I couldn't stand that. They called me up at home the

night before they took the papers. I told them that it was all set. They said that after they had the papers they'd send me ten thousand in cash disguised to look like one of the book club shipments. I—I haven't gotten it yet."

"Jordan, take Mr. Erton to Room F and have him held there."

When the door shut behind Erton, Potter said, "Regan, come up here again." I sat down opposite him. I felt sick. I had witnessed the collapse of a man whom I had liked.

"Regan, I have some instructions for you. You will be held here and, when the morning papers come out, you'll be released. Those morning papers will carry a story of your having been kidnapped and tied up in Miss Mace's apartment, held there at the instructions of Mr. Erton. We'll intercept your letter to your reporter friend. You can return to your job as soon as you're physically able. You will say nothing about anything you have heard in this room. Nothing at all. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I don't—"

"Please don't interrupt. You caused a minor inconvenience by your childish stunt of hiding from us. And some eager policeman might have killed you for your trouble. If you had actually been implicated, it would have meant that our entire counter-intelligence structure was faulty. You see, the opposition planted Miss Mace in that office and, in order to get a line on her superiors, we gave her a favorable security check.

"By observation of her friend, Mr. Erton, we could guess from his mannerisms just about when the lifting of the papers was due. The guard was instructed to take cover and fire to miss. He disobeyed and wounded the man who rifled the office. We found the thief the next day in a cheap hotel room with a hole in his arm and his skull smashed in. They didn't want to risk getting medical attention for him.

"In the meantime, we permitted the papers access to enough information about you so that they smoke-screened our real efforts. We guessed that Erton was the one who aided them, spurred on indirectly by Miss Mace, their accomplice. Your little scheme helped us a bit in getting a con-

(Please continue on page 96)

MEET ME AT THE MORGUE

By H. Q. MASUR



It was a commando maneuver he had never expected to use outside the army. . . .

Ben Kirk would be guest of honor at the local gas chamber because he crashed his boss's private murder party.

BEN KIRK flattened himself against a tree and squinted across the dark lawn at the back of Roger Henning's unlit house. His eyes were bitter, the line of his jaw grim. He squatted low, his coat collar turned up against a thin drizzle

slanting dimly out of a moonless, indigo sky.

Hatred rankled in his heart. Hatred of Roger Henning, the investment broker, the solid citizen, rich and respected—the man whose testimony before a jury during the next few days would send him to prison. A small muscle bulged whitely at the corners of Kirk's compressed lips.

He left his cover, ducked across the lawn, and crouched low under an open window. He hung there for a moment, tension building up inside him, hoping that Henning would appear at the first sound, and wondering what the man would say.

Kirk moistened his lips. Six years he'd worked for Henning. Six long years. And

for what? Only to be charged now with embezzlement.

He hoisted a foot over the sill. There was no sound from within. His brow ridged uncertainly. He took a breath, pulled the other foot after him and was standing on a soft rug. Kirk knew this room well. To the right was a fireplace, bookshelves on the left, the broad carved desk directly ahead.

"Kirk!" It was a man's softly whispered voice.

An odd sensation scaled the length of his spine. He stood stiffly, waiting. A beam of light stabbed out suddenly. It skewered him against the open window like a great spider. He heard a brief harsh laugh.

Ben Kirk blinked into the bright light, his feet rooted to the floor, his heart hammering.

"Henning?" he asked.

His answer was a dull flat report that fractured the silent night. Red-blue muzzle flame licked wickedly out at him. The flash beam snapped off, plunging the room into darkness. Pain seared Ben Kirk's side, high along the ribs.

He whirled and dove head first through the window. His hands were buried wrist deep in a rain-softened flower bed. He rolled over to his feet and went racing across the lawn, pain stabbing him at each step, his lungs sucking in breath.

Then he heard the grind of an automobile starter. He reached the back fence, clambered over it and ran diagonally across the street, legs pumping hard. At that moment the car careened around the corner, coming from the front of the house. Its headlamps glared at him like the eyes of some malevolent beast. It missed him by inches.

Night and expanding distance swallowed it. But Kirk had seen and recognized the maroon chassis. He was walking rapidly, putting distance between himself and the house. Others must have heard the shot and police cars would be converging there in a matter of minutes.

The wound leaked moistly. He clamped a balled handkerchief against it under his coat, stemming the flow. His knees felt rubbery. He considered returning to his apartment and vetoed the idea at once. If the cops were looking for him they would certainly be staked out there.

He plodded along, lost in thought, his brow damp and lined. He couldn't figure it. He had not expected Henning to ambush him. A scowl curved his mouth downward. What was Henning after? What was he up to? Why had he called earlier that evening?

When the phone rang Kirk had said: "Hello."

"Kirk?" The voice was a furtive whisper. Barely audible.

"Yes."

"Henning. I want to talk to you. On the quiet. Come over to the house at ten. Sneak across the back lawn. I'll leave the study window open. You know which one. Climb in and wait for me."

Then the line had clicked dead.

Kirk hadn't liked the idea. Nevertheless he went, since it might have something to do with his trial. He'd accepted the invitation like a drowning man grabbing an inflated tube only to have it expire at his fingertips. He'd been greeted by a demoniac laugh and a bullet.

His strength was ebbing. His wound needed attention. But he knew that all firearm injuries have to be reported to the police. Hence a hospital was out of the question. So too, for that matter, was a private doctor.

It was then that he remembered Glantz—Dr. Wilfred Glantz. True, the doctor was a very close friend of the Henning family. They had, in fact, introduced him to Kirk. He had seemed like a decent enough fellow and he might be inclined to give Kirk a break.

KIRK flagged a cab and gave the driver the doctor's address. He was conserving his strength. Ten minutes later he was standing at the street entrance. He depressed the bell. After a brief wait, the lock bedded back, the door opened and Glantz squinted out. Surprise widened his eyes and his mouth fell slightly open.

"Kirk!" he exclaimed.

"Let me in, doc." Ben Kirk pushed into the office. He shut the door and leaned heavily against it. His whole face was shining with perspiration.

Glantz eyed him sharply. "You're hurt."

"Accident," Kirk said.

"Here, sit down." A white enameled chair scraped across the floor.

Kirk dropped onto it, shrugged out of his suitcoat and pulled up his shirt, revealing the crimson smear. Glantz scarcely looked at it. His eyebrows were curiously bunched, a frown dug between them.

"You've been shot," he said.

Ben nodded slowly.

"How did it happen?" Glantz demanded, watching him narrowly.

"I was cleaning my gun," Kirk said. "An army souvenir. I didn't know it was loaded."

The doctor's fingers combed nervously through his hair. He inhaled deeply. "You understand, Kirk, I'll have to notify the police." He sounded hostile.

Ben shrugged. "I don't have a permit for the gun."

Glantz shook his head. He was a broad slope-shouldered man with thick wooly hair, a heavy chin, and eyes that were not friendly. He jabbed a thick finger at himself. "Me, you come to me. There are a thousand doctors in the city. Why do you have to come to me, a friend of the Hennings? After you stole his money. You know how close I am to them."

"You're the only doctor I know," Ben Kirk said. "I thought you might give me a break."

Glantz's mouth tightened. "All right, I'll treat your wound. But I don't make the laws and I have no intention of breaking them. I can't jeopardize my position. I don't see why I should."

He bent over and got busy. Antiseptic was like an applied flame. Kirk sat stolidly. Gauze pads were held into position by adhesive tape.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"Just gouged out some meat. A few inches more and you wouldn't need me. You'd need an undertaker." He straightened. His eyes met Kirk's briefly. A scowl tugged at his eyebrows. He went over to his desk and picked up the phone.

Kirk stepped in. He summoned his reserve strength and rabbit-punched Glantz. The doctor pitched forward like a clubbed steer. Ben Kirk exhaled noisily.

"Sorry," he said, and went out into the street.

He found a small bar and wedged himself into a rear booth with a glass of scotch. He banged it down in a single gulp. Then he leaned back, letting the alcohol fire his

blood. Dance music drifted back to him from a small radio behind the bar.

Exhaustion hit him, weighted his muscles. He drooped dispiritedly, putting his face between his fingers. He tried to think. The whole setup was a puzzle with the key pieces missing. The music stopped and he had to listen to a news bulletin. Suddenly his chin came up as the announcer spoke fluidly:

"We return to the local scene. The police tonight have cast a city-wide dragnet to catch Benjamin Kirk, the alleged slayer of Roger Henning, prominent investment broker of this city. Henning was shot to death at his home tonight by an assailant said to be Kirk, who apparently gained access through a library window and put a single bullet into Henning's temple. Bloodstains on the window sill and a discharged automatic in the victim's hand led the police to believe that Henning managed to fire one shot at the killer and wound him before he got away."

Kirk leaned forward, his face strained, the pulse pounding furiously against his throat, his fingers like sticks of ice. The announcer continued:

"At present Kirk is under indictment, charged with embezzling forty thousand dollars from Henning's firm, where he was employed as a cashier. The trial was set for tomorrow, with Kirk out on bail and Henning slated to appear as the principal witness.

"Kirk's fingerprints, on file at police headquarters, were also found on the window sill of the slain man's study. He is said to have been nursing a bitter hatred against his former employer. If Kirk is found suffering from a bullet wound, police claim the case against him will be ironclad.

"Mrs. Ethel Henning, wife of the victim, and Violet Molloy, a maid, were both home at the time, but had retired for the night. Although Mrs. Henning heard the explosions, she thought they came from a car backfiring in the street. Not until later, when her husband failed to appear, did she go down to investigate. Almost hysterical, she notified the police at once—"

The barman changed the program. Kirk sat motionless, his mouth small and very tight. This changed it. If he was in a jam before, he was now caught in a threshing machine. From embezzlement to murder.

From a prison sentence to the gas chamber.
From a wrecked life to no life at all.

The case against him was indeed iron-clad. His fingerprints at the scene of the crime, his footprints in the soft garden earth, his blood on the window sill, the bullet wound in his side. Everything neatly packaged for the District Attorney, including motive.

He rose. He was thinking about a low-slung maroon convertible that had gone racing away from Henning's house directly after the shots had been fired. Ben Kirk had seen that car on several occasions when its owner had appeared at the office to make one of his few legitimate investments.

Hugo Trask was a professional gambler. He'd wager a fortune on the turn of a card of the outcome of a city election. He had half the police department in his hip pocket.

Kirk inhaled through sharpened nostrils. He'd been caught in the glare of Trask's headlamps, fleeing the murder scene. Such eye-witness testimony could clinch a conviction. But Trask hadn't talked. And the reason was obvious. He did not want to place himself at the scene. Why? Was he hiding something? Grim-jawed, Kirk went to the street, hopped aboard a passing cab.

He knew the dangers of a public appearance. But the risk was unavoidable.

ONE mile beyond town, off the main road, stood an old mansion, its white-pillared portico bathed in the flickering green light of a neon sign that advertised its name:

VILLA MADRID

Here, to the music of a soft rhumba band, the town's cafe society collected and danced and carried on their small intrigues. And in a guarded room on the upper floor a man could relax in a poker game. No limit, not a game for small fry or pikers. Hugo Trask was part owner of the club and the second floor was his headquarters.

Behind a car in the parking space, Kirk propped a piece of paper against his knee and wrote: *A maroon convertible was seen leaving Roger Henning's home at the time he was killed. The cops might be interested.*

Then he entered the club, went past the hatcheck girl and ascended the broad stairs. A tall man in a tux was lounging against a door. Kirk approached him and proffered

the note. "For Hugo Trask," he said.

The man disappeared. Presently he emerged, opened the door wide and stepped aside.

Hugo Trask sat behind a small desk. He was a high-shouldered man with an angular jaw and collapsed cheeks and flat eyes. He had a gray face and thin bloodless lips. He glanced at Kirk's note again and his face registered no particular emotion.

"What does this mean?" he asked in a curiously lazy voice.

"Just what it says," replied Kirk.

"Who saw me leaving Henning's house?"

"I did."

A thin smile twitched at Trask's lips. "Nonsense. I've been playing cards all evening. Six witnesses will swear I never left the club."

"They'd be lying," Kirk said evenly. "And a good prosecutor could prove it."

Trask frowned. "What are you driving at?"

Kirk gave it to him as a simple statement of fact. "I think you killed Roger Henning," he said.

Hugo Trask sat erect, still smiling, but his eyes were sharp, guarded. "Me? I killed Roger Henning? And just what would I be using for motive?"

"Revenge," Kirk said. "Henning's firm was going on the rocks. Your investments were being wiped out. You didn't like that. You claimed negligence and you wanted him to make good. He couldn't do it."

"A matter of twenty-five grand. You think I'd risk a murder rap for chicken feed?"

Kirk bent forward. "There's more to it than that. You had your eye on Henning's wife. I saw her here with you several times."

Trask dropped the smile. His tongue rode slowly around the rim of his mouth. His eyelids were hooded. "You take some pretty dangerous chances," he said very softly. "Loose talk can buy you a load of trouble."

"Trouble?" Kirk shrugged. "Brother, I got more troubles now than I can handle."

Suddenly Hugo Trask put his head back and laughed. He was sure of himself. "It's your word against mine. And I have six

witnesses. You haven't got a chance, Kirk. You're a guy wanted for murder. Go ahead and call the cops. There's the phone." He leaned back, relaxed.

It stumped Kirk. He'd been waiting for Trask to make a play. Instead, Trask had returned the ball and told him to go ahead. He tried a bluff. He picked up the phone and said: "Get me police headquarters."

He was watching Trask carefully and he saw the smile waver. The inner corners of his brows peaked together. Then he sighed and pulled open the desk drawer and reached into it.

HIS move was a catalytic agent. Kirk reacted violently. He lunged over the desk, one hand clawing the drawer shut, the other slamming the handset against Trask's ear. He heard the cartilage crack and saw blood appear. Kirk kept the drawer shut, wedging Trask's wrist in a fierce wooden vice. The gambler's features were horribly distorted.

The faces of the two men were inches apart. Kirk's lips were peeled back over clenched teeth. The muscles in his forearm were swollen. Trask stopped trying to free his hand. His face was streaming with sweat. It was bone white and he looked as if he was going to faint. His wrist was turning blue.

Kirk released the drawer enough to permit withdrawal of the hand. The fingers were beginning to fatten like liver sausages. Trask slumped back.

Kirk went around and opened the drawer wide. It held a cigarette case, a lighter, and several oblong slips of paper. No gun was in sight. He felt foolish. He had probably broken Trask's wrist for nothing. He was on the point of speaking when something caught his eye. A familiar scrawled signature on one of the slips of paper. No mistake. He'd seen it often enough. Roger Henning's signature.

He took the slips and his eyes narrowed. I. O. U.'s, three of them, for ten thousand apiece. His eyes met Trask's with an almost physical impact. He gave a short reckless laugh.

"So you wouldn't kill Henning for twenty-five grand. Well, here's thirty thousand more. I don't suppose you'd kill him for that either. But these are gambling debts and that's something else again, isn't

it, Trask? When a man welches on a gambling debt you don't write it off, do you? That would be bad business. That would encourage the lushes to step in over their heads. So the welchers must be taken care of, mustn't they?"

Trask kept watching him, his face stiff and his nostrils pinched.

"Okay," Kirk went on. "Henning was in bad financial shape and he couldn't pay his losses. You kept dunning him. You drove him to the wall. He got desperate and he stole money from his firm and then he tried to frame me for it. But it still wasn't enough. He had to make good his losses and he kept on gambling until he got in so deep he couldn't pull himself out. There was nothing left to steal. He was at the end of his rope and you had to chill him because he couldn't make good on his debts."

"No," Trask said sullenly. "I didn't kill him. He owed me money, but I didn't kill him. A guy like Henning is too prominent. The cops would turn over too many rocks. It would be too dangerous."

"Sure," Kirk said bitterly. "That's why you rigged me for the kill. That's why you cooked up a scheme to get me there and make it look like I killed him."

Trask's face was blank.

"It was a beautiful fix," Kirk said. "Too beautiful. Call Kirk on the phone. Whisper that it's Henning. Get him to sneak in the back way. To leave his fingerprints on the window sill and his footprints in the flower bed. And I fall for it. I fall, hook, line, and sinker. I get myself tailored for the gas chamber."

Trask's brow was deeply pleated. He was thinking, weighing it deliberately. Plainly he didn't like it. Such a story, if proved, would recoil against him. He too had been at the scene of the murder and there was plenty of motive against him.

His eyes met Kirk's eyes. "I'll level with you," he said quietly. "I was at the house, yes. But I never got inside. I was about to ring the bell when I heard the shot. For a moment it froze me. Then I did what anybody would do. I beat it down to my car and got away from there."

Kirk's jaw was stubborn. "But that still doesn't explain why you went there in the first place."

Trask nodded. "I went there to give Henning one last chance. To throw a scare

into him. I knew that he had an insurance policy on his life worth a hundred grand with a heavy cash-in value. I was ready to settle with him if he'd raise some money on it."

Despite himself, Ben Kirk was inclined to believe the story. But it still left him holding the bag. He stood there, rolling it around in his mind, and slowly he was certain of one thing—whatever the truth was it could be found only where the frame had taken place.

He nodded at Trask. The gambler made no move to detain him. He went outside and lurked in the shadows until a cab drew up to discharge some new arrivals. He jumped in before it could take off. "Corner of Woodworth and Clover," he told the driver.

That was two blocks from his destination. He didn't like it but he had no choice. Self-preservation dictated the visit. By now, anyway, the body would have been removed. And the police certainly would not be looking for him at the Henning home.

AFTER the cab discharged him, he walked slowly. Half a block from the house a low white-topped car suddenly crawled around the corner and rolled towards him. A police cruiser. Kirk caught his breath. He was in the dark island between two street lamps when it came abreast and slowed, keeping apace with him.

Apprehension tingled along his spine. The faces of the cops were two pale blobs behind the windshield. He heard the drone of a radio. He forced himself to maintain an even casual step. If he turned and

bolted they would probably tag him with a hail of lead.

The prowler car picked up speed and was on its way. Kirk emptied his lungs. He felt weak. The cops had taken small stock in that old saw about a criminal returning to the scene of his crime.

He wheeled through the gate now, and went along the concrete walk to the front door. Luck was still with him. The knob turned easily under his hand. Someone had bedded the latch in the off position, probably some cop, since there had been so much coming and going, who had then forgotten to release it.

Kirk stepped into the large hall, very quietly, closing the door behind him and standing still. In a case like this, where the police believed the solution a simple one, where they thought they knew both the killer and his motive, they might have neglected Henning's private papers. Kirk wanted a look at them and memory piloted him through the darkness towards the library.

Suddenly he stopped again, his chin lifted. Voices drifted down indistinctly from overhead. He moved towards the stairs. The voices seemed raised in argument. He went up quietly and glided down the hall on thick broadloom that cushioned his steps. A wedge of light slanted across the floor from a door standing slightly ajar. Pressed against a wall he could see into a bedroom.

Mrs. Ethel Henning, a pale blonde with a long supple figure in a green nightgown, sat on the edge of a huge bed. Her cyclamen red mouth was pressed thin in a taut, scraped ivory face. She was staring unhappily at a girl directly in front of her.

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Kirk recognized the dark-haired maid, Violet Molloy. Small but compact, with a broad face, her eyes held a hard calculating expression. She was leaning forward, her neck rigidly out-thrust.

"I don't intend arguing all night," she said in a harsh uncompromising voice. "A chance like this comes only once in a lifetime. Let me have a look at your jewel box. I'll take my choice and get out."

Ethel Henning swallowed. "But there's nothing left, Violet."

"You're lying!" It was a fierce whisper.

"No, Violet, it's the truth. Shall I show you the empty box?"

"Do you take me for a fool?" sneered Violet. "You used to travel around glittering like a Christmas tree. Diamonds, emeralds, rubies—where are they? What have you done with them?"

"Roger sold them. He had all my jewels in his safe deposit box and he sold everything without my knowledge. He needed the money desperately. That's the truth, Violet. I swear it."

The maid flung her hand out vehemently. "How can I be sure? How do I know you're not lying? I don't trust you and I mean to get my hands on something tonight."

Mrs. Henning slumped. "But I haven't anything," she said dismally. "Not a penny."

"You will have though," Violet said. "Two hundred thousand dollars, in cash." Dark eyes glittered avariciously and she took a step forward, her voice shrill. "I want half, do you understand? Half. Not a cent less. And if I don't get it you're going to dance off at the end of a rope. Or is it the gas chamber in this state?"

Kirk saw the gathering intensity of fear in Ethel Henning's dilated pupils. Horror whiplashed across her face. Her voice had a frantic earnestness. "You're talking nonsense, Violet. What a dreadful thing to say. They can't execute any of us and you know it. We didn't kill Roger. We had nothing to do with his death."

Violet's face sharpened. "But they can execute Mr. Kirk," she said biting. "And they will. You'd let them do that, wouldn't you? And that would be murder as sure as if you yourself had put a knife into his heart."

Ethel Henning caught her breath. She

released her lips from between her teeth and leaned forward earnestly. "What do you care, Violet? He's nothing to us. Besides, death isn't so terrible. Everyone has to die sometime."

Violet lifted her shoulders. "Listen, I don't care about Mr. Kirk. All I want is to make sure I get my share."

"Oh, you will, Violet, you will. I promise you that. Just be patient. More money than you ever dreamed of having."

"No tricks?" The maid was still suspicious.

"No tricks, Violet. I swear it. Don't you see? We couldn't possibly doublecross you. If you breathe so much as one single syllable about what happened, they'd track us down and take away every last nickel."

Small square teeth gnawed indecisively in Violet's lips. Her eyes were brooding and restless. "All right," she said finally. "I'll stick with you. I'll have to trust you. Only remember, if you ever try—"

That was the last word Kirk ever heard her say. A terrific blow, dealt to the back of skull, gave him a splintered instant of flashing pain and then he plunged headlong into darkness.

THE blackout interval seemed brief. He floundered out of it slowly, groping his way back to consciousness. His muscles felt sluggish, as if the blow had dulled some central nerve. He was aware that people were looking down at him and he kept his eyes closed.

"Lucky you came," he heard Ethel Henning say. "I don't know how long he'd been standing there or how much he heard."

"What got into Violet anyhow?" It was a man's voice, clipped and precise.

"She was impatient," replied Ethel Henning. "She came here demanding my jewels."

"The fool! The little fool!"

Recognition of the man's voice was dancing on the tip of Kirk's memory. Then it hit him. Glantz—Dr. Wilfred Glantz. The knowledge triggered a charge of blood to his brain. No wonder the doctor had been shocked when he'd turned up at the office to have his wound dressed.

Glantz gave a sardonic laugh. "So Violet wanted jewels, did she? Well, my dear, she won't be wanting anything at all now—or ever, for that matter. Perhaps it's just

as well. I had a feeling she couldn't be trusted."

"What shall we do with her?"

"Do? What does one usually do with a corpse? We'll bury her. Tonight. In the wooded section behind the house. And I think it might be wise to pack her clothes and plant them with her. That way the police will think she ran away. Otherwise they may come poking around after her."

"And Kirk? What about him?"

Glantz said thoughtfully: "I would have preferred to let the state deal with him. Legally executed for Roger's murder, the case would be wound up once and for all."

"Perhaps it still isn't too late," Ethel Henning suggested hopefully.

Ben Kirk did not move while Glantz considered it. He kept his breathing regular.

"We can't chance it," the doctor said deliberately. "Kirk must die." Then he lagged again, quietly, with a sort of contained malevolence. "The police will continue their search. Eventually they'll conclude that he left the country. His disappearance will help to establish his guilt. And all the time he'll be right here, buried with Violet. We'll plant them in a double grave. It will save a bit of digging, eh, my dear?"

"Then do it," Ethel Henning said sharply. "Do it now."

Kirk's heart suffered a violent spasm. He seemed to sense the barrel of a gun yawning down at him.

Glantz chuckled softly. "I better put some papers under him. We can't have bloodstains all over the floor."

"There are newspapers in the next room."

"I'll fetch them," Glantz said. "You get the car out of the garage."

Two pairs of feet left the room. Kirk was alone. Desperation drove him surgingly to his feet. This was his chance. Whatever he was going to do must be done at once, with no margin for error.

His eyes spurted around Ethel Henning's berdoom, searching for a weapon, paused momentarily on Violet Molloy. She lay where she had fallen, at the foot of the bed.

Footsteps bore down the hall, back toward the bedroom. Kirk's temples pounded. His eyes encompassed the room in a frantic encircling glance. The only possible

weapons were the elaborate array of perfume bottles.

Kirk surged against the wall. He stood behind the door, flatfooted, crouching forward, his muscles tense and alert. Glantz entered, advanced a single step and stopped dead, his eyes rooted to the spot where a moment before he had left Kirk prone on the floor. His jaw sagged. Then a guttural noise rumbled deep in his throat. His right hand, holding the gun, jerked up.

Kirk lunged in from behind. He hooked one arm around Glantz's throat and gripped the gun hand, a commando maneuver he had never expected to use outside of the army. The doctor twisted against him with the frenzied violence of a trapped animal.

The two men swayed, locked against each other. Glantz had a great bear strength, but Kirk was fighting for his life. The wound in his side sliced him with pain. Glantz was straining the gun muzzle around toward Kirk, who felt his grip slipping. He put his last ounce of energy against the doctor's throat, pinching off the windpipe.

GLANTZ emitted a racking noise. A bluish hue crept into his face and sweat glistened on his streaming brow. Then, suddenly, he relaxed, sagging heavily against Kirk. He was a dead weight. Kirk released him.

It was pure reflex that sent Glantz's hands under him to break the fall. He fell over on the gun and there was muffled explosion. His whole body jerked spasmodically and then lay quiet.

Kirk stood here, motionless, panting, and after a moment he bent over and made certain that Glantz was dead. He turned and walked stiff-legged into the hall and down the stairs. He heard a car pull up at the front door. He went out into the night.

"Is it done?" Ethel Henning asked.

"Yes," he said. "It's done."

She heard his voice and did not move. She was staring rigidly ahead. Then, very slowly, she turned and saw Kirk, his face dimly bathed in moonlight. A shudder ran through her body. A cry was strangled against her hung jaw, and she shrank back against the seat, her mouth drooling with fear.

"Glantz is dead," Kirk said. "You're the last one left."

She began to shake.

"Move over," Kirk said. "I'll drive."

"Where—where to?"

"Back to town. Police headquarters."

A gasp wrenched out of the downward curved mouth. "Oh, no, Kirk. Don't—don't do this." Her skin was taut over a face bleached deathly white in the darkness.

"There's no other way," he said. "You're going to give yourself up."

"But why?" she whispered. "What have I done?"

"You murdered Violet Molloy."

"No." It was an anguished cry. "Glantz did it. He shot her."

Kirk shrugged. "It's the same thing. As his accomplice you're equally guilty."

Her face came apart. "Oh, Kirk," she whimpered, "have pity."

"Pity?" His voice held contempt. "You ask me to have pity? After you tried to frame me for killing your husband."

"It was Wilfred's idea. Nobody killed him."

"I know," Kirk said harshly. "He committed suicide. He had been gambling heavily. He lost his own money, then he lost money belonging to his clients—so he fixed it to look like I was guilty of embezzlement. But he kept getting in deeper and even selling your jewels wasn't enough. The gamblers were crowding him to the wall. He was scared and beaten and he decided to end it all and he put a bullet through his brain."

She sat there, watching him, transfixed, like a single motion picture frame in a jammed projector. Hands were a bowknot at her throat, lips caught between her teeth, eyes abnormally bright and feverish.

"Glantz was with you when you found

him," Kirk said. "You had to do something and do it fast. Your husband had an insurance policy worth a hundred grand—nullified if he took his own life. So you had to make it look like murder, especially since it provided for double indemnity if he died by violence.

"But you needed a fall guy and I was custom-tailored for the rap. Dr. Glantz phoned me and he asked me to come out to the house. When I stepped through the window he fired a shot to wound me and make the case airtight. Then he replaced the suicide gun with another. Whose idea was it? Yours or Glantz's? It doesn't matter. You were both in on it."

Her face was upraised and streaked. Her breathing came out torn and shredded. She clutched frantically at his sleeve. "Listen to me, Ben, listen—all that money—"

He jerked his arm free. "Nothing doing," he said savagely. "We could never explain it. Too many people are dead. A girl has been killed in cold blood and somebody is going to pay for it. You, baby. You're going to sit in that little room where they drop the capsule that releases the gas and puts an end to all your troubles."

Her chin went amuck, the whole lower part of her face was waltzing crazily. "Don't say that, Ben!" she cried thinly. "Don't say it. There must be some other way."

He laughed mirthlessly. "The only way for you, baby, is down, six feet down."

He opened the door and crowded her away from the wheel. He felt no elation, Ethel Henning had a face and a figure and she might even get off with life. He put the car in gear and released the clutch.

SATAN'S SHADOW

You can't tell the devil by his shadow. Even along Satan's Mile, Chicago, the shadow wasn't recognized on the late summer day in 1896 that marked the laying of the cornerstone of the greatest criminal empire the world has ever known. A robbery case had been brought before Judge James Goggin, who dignified the occasion with one of the strangest judicial decisions in history.

Judge Goggin set the defendants free on the grounds that the victim had asked to be robbed—by visiting Satan's Mile!

A precedent—or a prophecy? Some thirty years later Satan's Mile ran all Chicago—and Al Capone kicked suburban Cicero's mayor down the steps of the latter's own City Hall in broad daylight. Among people who witnessed the incident was a uniformed policeman—who turned his face away.

BETTER OFF BURIED

By **JOHN N.
POLITO**

"You're going to need to
hire me. No kidding."



Johnny was only another dead skid-row drunk — but his hot-dish widow was just too damn sure of herself . . . and me.



A MIDDLE-AGED desk-clerk with pop eyes, a green eye-shade and sleeve garters watched me as I walked carefully through the lobby. I was feverish and jumpy and I didn't want to jar my hangover too much. The climb to the second floor of the hotel sent my pulse rate up a notch, and I still breathed a little

heavily as I entered Room Number 217.

The sharp odor of burning cloth and felt, and something else, still hung heavily in the air of the small room. Some bed clothes in a soaked and dripping heap were flung across the wooden chair near the solitary window. The mattress on the bed was bare to the stained ticking, and half burned away. The inner edge of the burn formed a long "S," as though someone had been

lying there on the bed. Someone had.

A chest of drawers completed the decor. Lieutenant Romano leaned against it as he made notes on the back of an envelope. Giesler, his partner on Homicide, was staring out the window at an apartment across the alley. A gal was just getting up, at two in the afternoon. Giesler turned as I entered the room and sniffed.

"I thought I smelled something. What's on your mind, Norman?"

"Nothing much, Giesler, just curiosity."

"Okay, then turn it around and prowl back out. This is police business."

Romano looked up from his notes and made me a smile. He said to Giesler:

"Take it easy, Joe. Kedzie's a pal; he helps the police out now and then." He lifted a dark eyebrow at me, adding: "Don't you, Mr. Norman."

"Sure, any time. Mind if I look around, Lieutenant?"

"Help yourself, Ked, but don't mess anything up. The boys don't have photographs yet—for the record, you know."

"I thought they found the guy this morning?"

"Check. A drunk went to sleep with a cigarette in his hand, bingo, a stiff. Simple."

I looked at an ash tray on the floor alongside the bed, overflowing. Near that a corked bottle of whiskey, with about two inches of liquor in the bottom. A pair of blue pin-striped trousers on the floor near the foot of the bed. The sodden mattress.

That was it. Lonely, sodden death in a grimy, third-rate hotel on the edge of skid-row. I stooped down to look at the bottle. It was covered with fingerprints.

"Going to check the bottle, Lieutenant?"

"Nope. We've got the whole story, even whose fingerprints might be on it."

Giesler chimed in: "Norman, why don't you go get some air? This case is closed, finished, all over." He made a shooing motion toward the door.

"He's right, Ked. We've got it all tied up. Accident."

I said, "Yeah? Then why are you two guys checking up now?"

Giesler turned to his partner. "Romano, every time this peeper gets near me he louses up a case. Let's toss him out."

He walked over to me, his fat face mottled and ugly.

Romano cut in: "Joe, lay off." He turned to me. "Joe's hot and tired, Kedzie. We spent the whole morning chasing witnesses in a traffic case. We get back to Headquarters and the thing has got itself *nolle prossed*. That's what makes guys hard to live with. That's the reason we're here now. That is just routine stuff; they got all the dope up at headquarters."

"How come you make this routine?"

"Well, we already have statements from everybody, including the guy's wife. His name is John Gates—"

I waved a hand at him. "Yeah, that I know. I knew Johnny a little."

"Okay. So you know Johnny is a bottle jockey. He comes back here last night around midnight, canned to the eyebrows. His wife is along and has a tough time managing him. Has to have help from the night man. We check all this. His wife Dolores leaves ten minutes later." He checked there, then asked, "You knew they were separated?"

"I get around."

"Okay. So about four this morning, someone smells smoke and they follow it to this room. The mattress is smouldering, like they do in these bed fires, the room is full of smoke and Johnny is dead. They give us a quick report from the morgue—no marks, nothing to make it anything but plain accidental death."

"Now, Ugly, how about maybe you powder?" Giesler was at me again.

Sure, maybe I'm ugly. Tall, thin and ugly. I've got black hair, gray eyes, a wide mouth and a blunt nose. Tall, ugly and durable, that's Kedzie Norman, private investigator. What of it? People don't hire me for my beauty.

I said all that to myself, not Giesler. I can't afford to be tough with the police, even when I take a riding, even when it's from a South St. Louis lunkhead like Giesler. Maybe some day I can spot Giesler. I said all that to myself, too.

With a thanks to Romano, I took me, my tan gabardine suit and my hangover out of the Phoenix Hotel and headed for my office.

I HAD hit Harpies Haven a little early that morning. Early for me, that is. Once in a while my judgment about liquor slips a cog, like the night before. I woke

up with a spiky sliver of morning sun planted in each of my eyes. I pulled my head away from it, hit the head of my bed and almost collapsed. So I crawled to Harpies Haven for a cure. After a couple of bottles of beer I began to feel like I might live to walk away from this one.

Caroline, who runs Harpies Haven, brought me another bottle of beer. I was giving it a gloomy look when a blunt, dirty-nailed hand picked it up. I followed the hand up a sweated arm to a dirty collar and a beaten-up face.

I turned to Caroline and ordered. "Another beer, Baby. Finger, the pride of Kingsway Cabs, is with us."

"Thanks, Kedzie," growled Finger in a voice as smooth as a sledge hammer breaking bottles. "I'll buy you a drink some time."

"Sure, when you get to be a zillionaire, I know."

"Zillionaire? Geez, how much dough is that, Kedzie?"

"Skip it, Finger. I'm sick."

"Yeah? Too bad." He rolled his huge head from side to side with enormous pity. "Yeah, that's too bad," he continued, "because maybe I got a job for you. With dough. Folding dough. Guess if you're sick, maybe I better—" He started to get.

I grabbed him. I wasn't that sick.

"Sit down and quit clowning. What goes?"

Finger grinned at me and took a big drag off the bottle of beer. He began:

"You know Johnny Gates?"

"A little."

"Johnny's a right guy, a good head."

"Sure. Me, too."

"I mean it. But Johnny Gates is dead, Kedzie."

"So what?"

"Geez, ain't you got no blood in you?"

I sighed wearily. "Sure, Finger, but dead people are my business. I see lots of them. Besides, for my money maybe all the Johnny Gates are better off dead."

"Sure, I get you. But we don't like the way this adds up, Kedzie."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Me and the boys at Kingsway. Johnny was a pal." At my crooked eyebrow he added, "Oh, sure, he only drove relief, I know. But he was a good guy, a right guy, and he got some lousy breaks."

Caroline was busy at the bar, so I interrupted Finger and sent him over for a couple of replacement beers. He plodded heavily over, a chunky, tough cabbie—but in his own words, a good head. His lopsided cap was pushed back on his head and he tipped it politely to a bedizened old witch as he elbowed his way into the bar. She called him a dirty name and clicked a couple of crooked, jagged teeth at him as she moved over.

Skid-row. Market Street, Sixth Street, the center of downtown St. Louis. Dirty, tough and ugly.

I waited for the beer and tried to remember Johnny Gates. Not much to remember, not anything different from most of the people who haunted this catch-basin of the city's wreckage. A year before his wife had walked out on him for another guy. It happens a thousand times a day, every place in the United States. She wanted a divorce and Johnny wasn't having any. It was a sad story up and down the dives of skid-row that Johnny hoped she would come back if he held out. But they don't come back. Sometimes they try, but they never really come back.

Johnny worked enough each week so he could buy his way into his own private hell with the cheapest stuff that held alcohol—wine, the sweet, cheap wine of the shuffle-gaited old men.

Now and then Johnny would straighten up, get shaved and cleaned up as best he could. After a while everyone knew about that, too. It meant Dolores, his wife, was coming down for a date with Johnny, trying to talk him into that divorce, getting him drunk, playing it every way she could. Johnny held out.

Finger broke into my reverie. "Here's the beer, Ked—I paid for it."

He waited. I waited. He gave up. "Okay, I'll charge it to the boys. . . . So Johnny got the big number last night. Burned to death."

THAT straightened me up. What a way to die, I thought. On second thought, is there a nice way?

Finger went on. "Now, it looks jake, but like I say, we want to check, just in case."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, Johnny has a date last night with

his wife, Dolores. You know Dolores?"

"Just by name. I've never seen her."

"A dish. A free ride in my hack, any time." Finger smacked his lips and went on. "Last they was seen, they go up to Johnny's room with a full jug. Johnny is carrying a load and Dolores has a tough time making the grade. This morning they find Johnny burned to death, like he went to sleep with a cigarette."

"It happens every day, Finger."

"I know. I try to tell the boys that. They say Johnny never set himself on fire before."

"It only happens once." There was nothing in this for me. I swallowed the last of my beer and started to get up.

Finger pushed me back, saying sadly: "I knew it would be like this. Here's a hundred bucks the boys ante up. How about it?"

I sat down and looked at the money. Dirty, grimy bills, wrinkled, bunched up. Lovely money.

"You mean you want me to go on this case for a hundred bucks?"

"Yeah."

"But it already looks too much like an accident. Besides, by now the police have probably got it all tied up."

Finger shook his head. "You know better than that. If a guy dies in skid-row, he dies. Nobody cares too much; there's too many people here already. We would have got the dough together anyway for Johnny's funeral, and we figure we spend it better this way. Just to be sure. Johnny was a right guy, Kedzie."

"You said that. Okay, you bought yourself a boy. Where does Johnny live? I mean—"

"The Phoenix, a dump over on Sixth."

"Tell the boys I'll do my best. So long, Finger."

I walked my head over to the Phoenix Hotel. An unwashed chunk of plate glass was lettered *P en x otel*. I pushed through a blistered varnish door into the gloomy and stale-aired lobby. . . .

My office is high up in the old Ross Building, once the pride of downtown St. Louis, now a shabby has-been like most of its tenants. I have two rooms, a reception room without a receptionist, and the office.

I crossed to my walnut-stained pine desk, and sat in my thirty-dollar chair. I believe

in comfort, when I can afford it. As I tried to cool my fever with a shot from my desk bottle, I surveyed my observations and what Finger had told me before I had looked in at the Phoenix. It didn't add up to much.

There was one way to play a hand like this. I fumbled with the phone book, found my number, and pretty soon a voice gave me a sedate hello.

"Is this Mrs. Gates?"

"Yes, and if you're another reporter I have nothing to say."

"Not me, Dolores." I heard her breath check on that. I continued. "I'd like to talk to you, Dolores. Could you come down to my office?"

"Who are you?" The voice was picking its way carefully.

"Kedzie Norman. Private investigator."

"Sorry, you're about the tenth detective who's called. I don't need one." She snapped that one, sure of herself.

"I'm not looking for a job, Dolores. I've got something to tell you."

"Well, tell it and make it snappy."

"Not on the phone, Baby. This line *could* be tapped." It was a lousy lie, but it kept her on.

"I don't get you. What could you have that I want?"

"Maybe a bottle of whiskey. A full bottle, Dolores."

This was my big card, and it was big enough. After a silence of fifteen seconds she came back, still calm, but wary and a little interested.

"Where is your office?"

"I could come out—"

"I'd rather come to your office."

I gave her the instructions and hung up. So far, so good. But did I have anything for Mrs. Johnny Gates, for the widow of a lush? Just another lush—forgotten and dead and very lonely up there on a cold bed in a cold room. Maybe no more lonely now than in the dives where he bought his black-out ticket every night in the world.

AN HOUR and a half-bottle of rye later, I heard my outer door open and then click shut. Silence. She would be out there straightening the lipstick, giving her hose a twist, pulling down the back of her blouse.

The door opened and she entered. She didn't walk in or stroll or prance. She en-

tered. Somebody had taught her to walk, somebody good. That cross between a strip-tease strut and a school-girl mince that gets to you.

She was small, leggy, blonde. She had green eyes too big for her face and a gaunt look that meant plenty of attention to the bathroom scale. Her hair was pulled tight over her ears and twisted into a heavy golden coil on her neck. Her mouth was straight, and dented at the corners, with only a hint of an arch in the upper lip.

She was sure of herself and the world and me. She sat at my desk while I tried to get my ideas straight. She crossed her knees, giving nothing away, and casually lit a cigarette. She blew the first smoke straight across the desk at me.

"You have something for me?" The voice was tender and cool and low.

"I think so. You're going to need to hire me. No kidding."

"I told you no. I meant no."

"You're too smart to play games with, Mrs. Gates. I don't think Johnny died by accident. I think Johnny was pushed a little. I'm sure that, as his wife, you'd want to know who did a thing like that."

"The police say it was an accident, Mr. Norman. I was the last person to see Johnny alive. It *was* an accident, Mr. Norman."

I sat back, giving it the cool, hardboiled treatment. I gave her an eye-raking and then said:

"You came in that hotel lobby last night with Johnny and he was very drunk. He was carrying a bottle of whiskey, full. When they found Johnny Gates' body this morning, the bottle was almost empty and it was corked."

She wasn't buying it. Not yet. She tried

to jerk a tear at me. She missed, but I felt very sorry for her. She was good. She said, dropping her voice another notch:

"Mr. Norman, we might as well be frank. Everybody knew Johnny drank too much, and too often. It was bound to happen."

"Sure, it was bound to happen. But not because of Johnny's drinking—not that alone."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing, now. Let me tell you some more. Did you ever notice what Johnny drank? Wine, cheap, sweet wine; twenty per cent alcohol at half a buck a fifth."

"He had a little money last night."

"Not that kind of whiskey money, Baby."

I had her now, and the sweet eyes were beginning to get tight at the edges and the pupils were big and black and mean.

I continued: "This I said already. I'll repeat. Johnny was reeling drunk when he came in the hotel with you. Yet the next morning almost all of a full quart of one hundred-proof whiskey is gone. And the bottle is corked." I let it sink in for a minute. "And you were sober when you left the hotel, Baby."

She started to open her mouth then, and I shot the rest at her hard.

"Johnny didn't drink that liquor, Baby, and neither did you. And Johnny didn't cork up that bottle of liquor. I think I could dope out what happened to that liquor and how come Johnny had it in the first place and who put the cork back in the bottle and set it neatly upright alongside the bed."

She was fighting it, and she still had a chance to throw it back at me, but I soft-

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ened up my voice and let her have the big one.

"Now, for a couple of hundred dollars I could represent you, Mrs. Johnny Gates, and *try* to find out who killed your husband."

I paused for a second, and then shot it in slow and easy. "For you, Baby. Two C's to represent *you*."

She bought. She bought fast. I shoved a blank check across to her and helped her make it out to me. Her hand was almost steady.

As she walked out the door I called after her:

"You'll hear from me, Mrs. Gates."

Her trim, narrow hips tick-tocked her answer.

I walked back to my desk, wiped sweat off my face and picked up my phone. I asked for Lieutenant Romano and in a minute he answered. I said:

"Look, I'd like to have you meet me in the lobby of the Liberty National Bank in a few minutes on the Gates case."

He argued, but finally agreed.

I walked over to the bank on Broadway, headed for a teller I knew, and shoved Dolores Gates' check at him. He turned it over a couple of times, then shoved ten lovely twenties at me.

"Hold on to that check for a minute," I told him. "I want a friend of mine to see it."

Before he could answer, Romano and Giesler had spotted me and had crossed over to the window. I curled a finger to get them closer, and then I said to the teller:

"Show these gentlemen the check I just cashed."

He looked doubtful, but Romano laid his buzzer on the line and he held up the check for their inspection. After a good look, Romano said quietly:

"I smell a fast one, Kedzie. Make it simple for me, huh?"

"Sure. That check is a retainer paid me by Mrs. Johnny Gates to investigate the murder of her husband."

"That was an accident," snarled big-faced Giesler. I loved that.

"Sure, sure, and with an official report of accident Mrs. Gates is so stupid she wants to pay me to make it murder? Wake up, Fat-head."

Giesler started for me, but Romano pushed him away.

"Take it easy, Norman, this is no funny game. Talk some more for me."

"Sure. Here's what happened. Dolores Gates buys a bottle of hundred-proof liquor for her husband. They go back to the hotel together. Johnny is out like a light. She tosses him in the hay, pours three-quarters of the whiskey alongside his body to make sure the mattress will burn, tosses a lighted cigarette on it, and leaves. But—she couldn't account for the whiskey being gone and she couldn't account for the bottle being corked again."

I took a breath. "Why murder him? Because she wanted a divorce. Because she's playing in the big league and she couldn't stay tied to a little harmless drunk like Johnny."

"I gave her the same outline I gave you, and she hired me to find out who killed her husband. Now do you see it?"

"So you accepted dough to keep quiet, huh?" Giesler looked happy.

"Don't be a sap. All I told her was what I've told you. And all I promised was that I would 'represent' her. Not that I'd lie to keep her out of the gas chamber, or that I would suppress evidence. In fact, my exact offer was that I would *try* to find out who murdered her husband."

Romano blinked a couple of times, then said:

"Kedzie, that's playing awfully close to extortion, but I guess you do us a big favor anyway."

He turned to his partner.

"Come on, Joe. Maybe we should have a little talk with the lady."

After they walked out of the bank I crossed to a desk, got an envelope, lined out the bank's return address and added mine. I addressed it to Finger at Kingsway Cabs and dropped the tattered hundred bucks inside.

It's not ethical to represent two parties on the same case.



THRILL

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



Private Detective Jim Bennett took on a reverse-Cupid's job for luscious Vivian Prosper—to break up her wild kid sister Linda's romance. Just then Linda cruised in from an all-night drinking spree. Curled up in the trunk of her car was a brand-new beau—quite dead.



While Vivian tried to get the story from her liquored-up sister, Bennett shooed away Linda's curious fiance, Arthur Spotwood—and started to call the cops. His curvaceous client, determined to protect her baby sister, said no—and turned on her devastating charm . . . backing it up with a silver-plated .22.



Checking all leads to save pretty Linda from the chair, Bennett went to the Venice Cafe—and got a jigger of deadly belladonna in his Manhattan. . . . When the doc had fixed him up, Bennett paid a call on Keeler, Vivian's ex-husband. He found the salesman on the floor—knocked cold.



Arthur Spotwood, Linda's fiance and a prime suspect, got sick of Jim Bennett's snooping. The big blond guy waded in, fists pumping. . . . The complete story of vivacious Vivian and her spree-loving sister will be told in Robert Martin's novel—"Pardon My Poison"—in April DIME DETECTIVE . . . out March 5th.

CHAPTER ONE

Baby Lost Her Shoe

WHEN I awoke it was with the growing conviction that I had somehow picked up the worst hang-over in the history of the distilling industry.

I groaned in anguish and managed to drag my eyelids upward over my throbbing eyeballs far enough to peep out. I saw a face, the sweet face of an angel, a green-eyed, red-headed angel, hovering at my side with a soft, warm smile of welcome. As I lay there dreamily admiring her, the halo glimmering above her lovely head changed into a little starched white cap and she took on the form of a nurse. A very classy choice of form it was, too.

With a small groan of gratitude I fumbled for her hand and clasped mine snugly over it. It seemed gently willing to remain there. Wondering if there were any more



"He will never finish that novel now. . . ."

*For the glory of Headliner Files, Thack Hackett and I had
to tease two dozen luscious starlets into removing their shoes
—to put the finger on a murderess with . . .*

NINE TOES UP!

★ **Headliner Files Detective Novelette** ★

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**



of these luscious nurses about, I rolled my punished head to the left and saw, sure enough, another face. This one, however, in spite of its baby-blue eyes, was less attractive. It wore an acrid smile and was male. It reminded me too much of the wry face belonging to a peculiar character I knew by the name of Thackeray Hackett.

I lifted my throbbing head, although it felt as if someone had sunk a harpoon into it from behind, and saw all around me the cold white enamel and glittering surgical steel of an operating room. I was lying on my back on a high narrow table, draped with a blood-spotted sheet. Scared, I squeezed my red-headed nurse's hand more tightly. Then I discovered it wasn't her hand I was holding but Hackett's. With a groan of disgust I dropped it and sank back into dizzy pain.

"That's a good boy," the nurse murmured in a soothing voice. "Just take it easy and we'll let you go home soon."

I didn't want to go home—not without her. In confusion I mumbled the usual question under such circumstances: "Where am I?"

"Emergency, Surgeon's Hospital," the nurse told me brightly. "Where would you rather be?"

I had a definite preference, but before I could tell her about it Hackett annoyed me by asking, "Who was it, Pres?"

"Who was who?"

"Who clipped you?"

"Did somebody clip me?"

"Don't you remember it?"

I remembered that I was C. Walter Preston, the business manager of that unique news service called Headliner Files, Incorporated, specializing in information about famous people. I recalled that my turn had come up again, as it seemed to do too often, to hold down the six-to-midnight trick in our main office. But I couldn't remember the building collapsing on me or any other violence to explain my present predicament.

"When I came in at midnight to relieve you," Hackett said, "I found you lying on the reception room rug looking fairly dead. How did you get there?"

"I can't account for it," I answered, "but it shows we ought to have a nurse like this one in the office all the time, day and night. Especially night."

"You're getting back to normal, I see," Hackett remarked. "There's a place behind your right ear that has been prettied up with a little embroidery. Four stitches." He added with one of his rare fraternal smiles, "You'll be okay. And don't worry about the office. I called in Polly to take over."

Having relieved my mind with this—Polly Digby, our secretary-general, is a very capable girl—Hackett helped me almost tenderly to a sitting position. I continued to hold myself upright while he paid ransom to somebody and got a permit to remove me from the premises. Next Hackett steered me out to a taxi, gave the driver Headliner Files' address and warned him to miss any holes he might find in the street.

"Thack, you have given me a lot of headaches in the past, but this is one I can't blame you for," I said weakly, "and I really am grateful for the way you've taken care of me. But why are you taking me back to the office instead of taking me home and putting me to bed?"

"When you're in the surroundings where it happened to you, you'll probably remember what it was," Hackett answered.

Thackeray Hackett is a tough kid to handle under the best of circumstances, and I felt in no shape to cope with him now. I just shut up.

MY ABUSED head had cleared somewhat when the cab stopped at the neat little building that houses Headliner Files. I went in with Hackett's hand helpfully on my arm. Polly came hustling to help. Hackett assured her I felt fine, although I felt too lousy to tell her myself. Between them I was steered to the swivel chair behind the desk of my so-called private office. Next moment I found in my hand a well-laced drink which Hackett in a compassionate moment had brought from the little bar built into a corner of Clabelle's office. I took a deep pull on it and began to feel less pain.

Hackett was still doggedly determined to find out how come I'd gotten slugged down—it had the same appeal for him that a filet mignon would have for a starving man. He asked, "Is your memory clearing any, Pres?"

"It needs fortifying a little more," I said,

handing the emptied glass back to him.

After I had worked a while on my second dose of pain-reliever I felt strong enough to go on.

"All I remember—and all I'll ever remember, I'm afraid—is answering a ring at the street door."

"Must've been about midnight," Hackett said, eager glints in those baby-blue eyes. "Okay. Who would come ringing our bell at that hour?"

"I don't know who it was because my memory stops right there," I said. "I recall going to the door. I recall opening it, and seeing nobody there. Next I remember poking my head through. And that's all."

"At that point, of course," Hackett said, "somebody clipped you from behind—knocked you cold. While you lay there unconscious this person came in and poked into our files."

"He did?" I blinked at Hackett. "How do you know that?"

"When I came in and found you conked out, several file drawers were left open and the folders messed up. By that time, of course, this guy was gone."

We gazed at the banks of file cabinets in the main section of our office. They stood there in regimental array, crammed with personal information about celebrities—people internationally renowned in show business, in sports, in statecraft, in the professions, in the arts, and even including those who are famous purely from matrimony. Our subscribers, who must show a legitimate need for our brand of information, pay the nominal fee of fifteen dollars per month for it; and in return we undertake to know everything there is to know about everybody who's somebody.

"So our midnight caller was a non-subscriber who waded in here to snoop secretly into our files," Hackett said. "Hadn't you any warning of him, Pres?"

"I remember now—there was a guy in a lather on the phone. He didn't have our password, wouldn't give his name, wouldn't even say what he wanted to find out—just wanted to come in and browse, apparently. I gave him a routine brush-off. When the doorbell rang I'd forgotten him."

Hackett asked Polly, "Judging from the drawers he left open, could you get a line on what interested him?"

"Gee, Mr. Hackett, with sixty-odd thou-

sand folders in the place, it's anybody's guess."

We gazed again at our files packed with minutia. The incident added up to a hellish headache for me, but what else? We wondered blankly, and at that moment a shrill, unexpected sound made me wince—another ring at our doorbell.

Hackett moved toward the entrance holding his cane, a slender, pencil-thin stick of hickory which, since his detective's license and gun permit were taken away, served Hackett as his only—and a very deadly—weapon. He opened the door and lowered his cane.

The man at our door peered at Hackett like a blue-blooded St. Bernard gazing at a disreputable hound pup. "Disreputable" is a mild way of describing Detective Lieutenant Blackley's opinion of Hackett.

He stepped inside, thereby forcing Hackett out of his way. Round as a blimp, Blackley steamed majestically forward with a leather portfolio under one thick arm. With his derby, his long sideburns, his luxurious black mustache and his gold watch-chain festooned across his globular front, he looked like a gentleman officer of the 1890s. His face shone both from soaping and in anticipation of seeing Clarabelle Brown again. Blackley had become a frequent visitor here chiefly because he was sweet on our boss, all 245 pounds of him.

"Good evening, lieutenant," I said. "I'm sorry, but Clarabelle isn't in just now. She's making one of her periodic trips to Hollywood to check up on our branch office there."

Blackley murmured his genuine disappointment, his manner as gracious toward me as it was contemptuous of Hackett. I placed a chair for him. He glimpsed the gauze plastered behind my ear and I explained hastily that it was nothing at all, I'd just had a wart removed. It would be better policy, I thought, to avoid any unnecessary entanglements with the law.

Blackley, having settled his paunch comfortably into his lap, opened his leather case and produced from it a single shoe—a small pump, one of twinkling black patent leather, spike-heeled and open-toed.

"A neat little number, is it not, Mr. Preston?" Blackley said.

"Indeed it is," I agreed, reaching for it. "Really exceptionally neat. I should like to

meet the nifty Cinderella who fits this."

"So would I," Blackley said. "Officially, that is. She is a murderess."

"A H." IT was my turn to be disappointed. "I'm sorry to hear that. Who is she? Who did the little minx kill, and what brings you here about it at this late hour?"

"To answer the last part of your question first—the New York City Police Department is here, as a subscriber to your service, for certain information. The lateness of my visit is occasioned by the fact that the murder was discovered only a short time ago tonight; and I am not one to waste time following down such a leading clue as this one."

"We'll do all we can to help you catch this little murderess, lieutenant," I said, "but not without regrets."

Blackley smiled. "Do not be misled, Mr. Preston. Our killer of the dainty foot showed her victim no mercy. He was a writer named Willis Lyon, of 942 West Fifty-sixth Street. You may or may not have him filed; he was rather obscure. He worked chiefly in the motion picture studios, but currently was attempting a novel."

"He will never finish that novel. He was beaten to death in his apartment, and the weapon was his typewriter. Actually. That is, his heavy typewriter was banged down on his head repeatedly until his skull was a pulp. No doubt a crime of vindictive jealousy."

I looked at that attractive little pump with a shudder.

"Mr. Lyon was soon found in his battered condition by the occupant of the adjacent apartment, a man named Luis Ribéra. Mr. Ribéra runs a cleaning and pressing establishment on the ground floor and also owns the building. You must have noticed the heavy rain we had this evening. A leak developed in Mr. Ribéra's ceiling and his investigation of the condition led him into the next apartment where Mr. Lyon lay violently dead. He immediately notified headquarters. The little murderess was no longer present, of course; she had fled and by that time was well on her way."

"Didn't anybody see her?"

"Yes, Mr. Ribéra happened to see her entering Lyon's apartment a short time earlier. He described her as 'a shapely

blonde who looked just like a movie starlet.' When I asked him, 'Which movie starlet, Mr. Ribéra,' he answered, 'All of them.'" Blackley chuckled deep in his interior. "It does seem to be true that many of the comely young women who pose for the movies' so-called leg art look almost exactly like one another."

"We often can't tell 'em apart," I confessed. "Hollywood is full of such cute little tricks who seem to be all cast from the same mold. It is easy to feel there can't be too many of them."

Blackley said: "But to go on. After entering the apartment the young woman removed her shoes. No doubt because of the drenching rain she had gotten her little feet wet. After murdering Willis Lyon she evidently became so fearful of discovery that she rushed from the apartment without her shoes. I must say her abandoned shoes are as revealing an item of evidence as I could wish for."

Indicating the trim little shoe, Blackley went on, "It is, first, unusually small, a size four-and-a-half A. Second, you'll notice an imprint in gold stamped inside the heel. Unfortunately the name of the shop that sold the shoes has been worn away, but the last word of the imprint remains legible. Hollywood."

"That verifies the description of her as a shapely blonde babe of the prevailing movie-starlet type."

"It does," Blackley agreed while pointedly ignoring Hackett. "But it tells much more than that. In fact, I trust you will dig into your treasury of trivia here and tell me definitely who this little murderess is."

"You mean her name?"

"I do. Take a closer look at that shoe, Mr. Preston. Observe how the wearer's toes have left marks on the inner sole. The large toe is easily distinguishable. The others are also quite plain where they have pressed down. But count them, please."

"Four!" I exclaimed. "This chick's little toe didn't register."

Blackley beamed and brought the mate of the shoe out of his briefcase. "The little toe shows in this, the right one. But not, as you've observed, in the left. Our case, then, has become an extremely simple one because of the fact that our murderess has the small toe missing from her left foot,

because, no doubt, of a maiming accident."

I sat up. "And knowing we have millions of such personal items stored here, you've come to learn which movie starlet is missing her left small toe?"

"Precisely. That information, you see," Blackley pointed out, "will crack the case for me."

CHAPTER TWO

Two Dozen Dream Dolls

I GAZED hopefully at Polly, who had listened to the whole story. An absorbed look had come over her homely face. She was trying to remember. Besides having read and absorbed every piece of publicity material ever printed, Polly possessed a memory so retentive as to make an elephant seem absent-minded by comparison. If Polly had ever heard of a slick chick from Hollywood with a small toe gone from her left foot, she would remember it any moment now.

"We have certain special files here, lieutenant," I explained. "But unfortunately we don't have a file on lost digits. Of course it would take days to sift through the folders of all the starlets in Hollywood, but if you'll just be patient while Polly's memory gets rolling . . ."

We held our silence, watching Polly, until finally she shook her head.

"I'm sorry to say that's that, lieutenant, temporarily. It's a million to one we simply do not have that information in our files. Maybe your murderess is sensitive about her missing toe and hasn't wanted it mentioned publicly. That won't stop us from getting the dope, though. Polly, please keep

on ransacking your memory and at the same time poke into the most likely folders you can think of."

Polly headed foggily into the file section. "Leaving no toe unturned, lieutenant, I'll get in touch with Clarabelle Brown herself in Hollywood as soon as possible. When she understands how importantly her friend Lieutenant Blackley needs that dope she'll hustle it right up. All we need is a little time, lieutenant, and I assure you we'll supply you with that murderous doll's name."

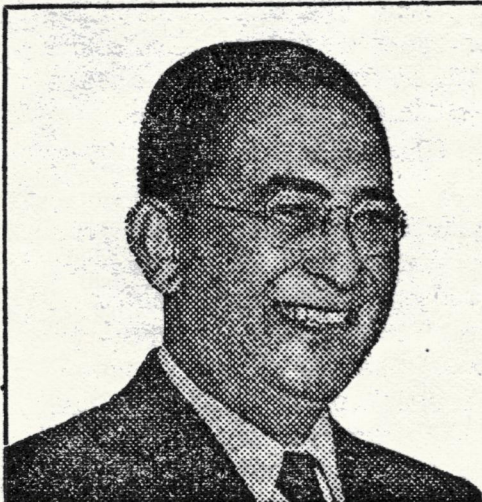
Blackley heaved himself to a standing position—continuing to freeze Hackett out. "Thank you. Please inform me immediately you have it. This is, if I may point it out, quite a telling test of the true usefulness of your service. Unless you're very quick, you may find me arresting the little murderess without your help—for while you're tracing her personally I'll be tracing her shoes through their manufacturer."

"At the risk of sounding too, too cute, lieutenant, let me warn you not to count your nine-toed chicks before they're caught. We're going to get there first. Headliner Files is going to hand you this case all wrapped up in a shoe box."

"Ah? We shall see, Mr. Preston. Good night."

Smiling confidently, Blackley steered back for the door like a frigate under full sail. He gave Hackett no more notice than he would give a passing germ as Hackett let him out, smiling but narrow-eyed.

When Hackett returned I said: "This opportunity is too good to pass up. Blackley has never quite stopped suspecting us of fronting for some new kind of shakedown racket. By cracking this case for him we'll



Arthur Pollard*
has switched to Calvert
because Calvert is milder.

*of 178 Columbia Road, Dorchester, Mass.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain
Neutral Spirits. Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

prove we're strictly on the up-and-up."

Hackett said with an abrasive note in his voice: "Crack it? Why, Pres, it's practically in the bag. Or so you believe, at least. As an easy guess, your first move will be in the direction of the carload of cuties who pulled in from Hollywood aboard the Twentieth Century Limited today—the ones who've come trooping prettily into town to help publicize the big Cancer Fund drive."

Of course Hackett was right. Twenty or more of these babes, the choicest cheese-cake from every major picture studio, were here—with their bathing suits, of course—to tease donations out of the male populace and to decorate the big rally at Madison Square Garden a few nights from now.

"Every single one of those dolls must be wearing shoes bought at various Hollywood shops," I said. "The way it's shaping up—and how could it shape up more nicely?—it's practically a sure thing that our murderess is one of that beauteous bunch."

"I get it," Hackett said cynically. "Some lovely little chick who's fallen hard for Lyon in Hollywood came buzzing too suddenly into his apartment tonight."

"What else? So my play is simply to prowl into the hotel where the whole bevy is staying and snoop around until I find out which one of those perfect physical specimens hides a small defect and rates only ninety per cent on toes."

"Since leaving her shoes behind with her bashed-up boyfriend, she has probably turned plenty cagey, though. You'll need some experienced help there, Pres," Hackett said with a straight face. "So I'll come along—"

"Nix! Your orders are to stay right here, Thack, and hold the phone. This assignment is all mine." In my eager anticipation I'd almost forgotten my cracked skull. "I expect it to be the pleasantest assignment I've ever tackled for dear old Headliner Files—teasing all those honeys into taking their shoes off!"

FIRST thing next morning, feeling not much worse than usual at that hour, I put a call through to the Hotel Princess. There were possibly two or three million guys in Greater New York who would have tried to make the most of the information, which Headliner Files had as a matter

of course, that this was where those two dozen dream dolls from Hollywood were resting their pretty heads. My answer came from one of them in a drowsy drawl.

"Why, darlin', here it is pract'ly the middle of the night, only nine a. m., darlin'. Gee, darlin', you better call back a little later, after the girls are outta bed, maybe around noon, hmmm?"

"I will, darlin'," I promised, although I knew this message was exaggerated. The board of directors of the fund drive were tendering a sort of breakfast for the girls this morning, and the press, including us, had been invited. My intention was to arrive early, ahead of the crowd, and get in a little deft undercover work.

Almost immediately a call buzzed in from Hollywood. It was Clarabelle Brown.

Last night, after Blackley had cruised on his way, I had rung our Hollywood branch and had presented our problem to the dame on duty there, the waspish ex-actress named Kate Hooker. Katie had in turn roused Clarabelle. Neither had been able to tell me offhand of any gal known thereabouts to be a little low on her quota of toes, but both had promised to track her down. This call coming in from Hollywood now indicated that Clarabelle hadn't dallied around.

"Walter, dear, this is a perfectly ghastly time of day for it," she informed me over three thousand-odd miles of wire. "After all, doll, it's still only six in the morning out here. But as I've always said, it pays to have faith in human nature and Clarabelle. I've learned the name of that girl who hasn't any little toe on her left foot."

Small wonder I'm completely devoted to this charming woman of fifty-odd, who is a native of Deaf Smith County, Texas, the descendant of a long line of frontier marshals and four times a widow. Clarabelle may seem flighty at times, but she's always right there at battle stations in a crisis.

"Fast work, Clarabelle," I said. "Who is she?"

"I had a perfectly infuriating time running her down, Walter, doll. It just seemed absolutely nobody in Southern California knew about her, but finally I found an assistant director named Garvey who'd dated her for a beach party at Malibu last year and her shoe flew off while she was running, so she explained how she's got a foot caught in a lawn-mower when a child.

Of course she's just a little contract player at Acme, used just for the smallest parts while they're building her up to bigger things. So I phoned the bungalow court where she lives but she'd gone off—"

"Clarabelle, please," I broke in. "What's her name?"

"Her name? Didn't I mention that, Walter, doll? Why, it's Nora Dennis."

"Nora Dennis. I thank you very much, Clarabelle. Lieutenant Blackley also thanks you. He'll have to admit we deliver the goods fast. I'm going right over to the Hotel Princess and hold Nora Dennis until the lieutenant comes around to collect her on his murder charge."

"But you can't, Walter, doll. I mean Nora Dennis isn't at the Princess there in New York."

"What? She's one of the bunch of starlets who breezed in here yesterday, isn't she?"

"Why, no, Walter, she isn't. Acme wanted to send her, but she begged off because she'd planned a week in the mountains. Her studio tells me she's up in the Sierras this very minute."

"Nora Dennis must be putting over a fast one," I said. "She certainly couldn't be taking a holiday in the Sierras and at the same time cracking a guy's skull here on West Fifty-sixth Street. And assuming she was wearing her own shoes, they show she was here. Clarabelle, we'd both better make a careful double-check. We certainly don't want to fall down on this job for Blackley."

"Just leave it to me on this end, doll. Just keep your faith in human nature and everything will work out fine for us." Then Clarabelle hung up with a yawn.

I sat at my desk, sensing a fancy bit of skulduggery on Nora Dennis's part, while Headliner Files functioned a little more busily than usual because of a demand for information concerning the celebrities taking part in the big Cancer Fund drive. Our phones clamored, there was a constant rumbling like distant thunder as our heavily loaded file drawers were rolled in and out, and our pretty clerks tripped about, catching swarms of questions on the fly. My own happy mission this morning was to hustle over there to the Hotel Princess and somehow get a look at those chicks' cute little feet.

JUST as I rose, smiling to myself and about to set out, I caught a disturbing glimpse of Thackeray Hackett. Until now I had assumed he was where he belonged, helping Polly supervise the files. Instead, he had slipped out. I spied him through my window, just then ducking into a cab.

"Thack!"

Not hearing, or seeming not to hear, he let the taxi whisk him away. This was exactly the upsetting sort of thing I should have expected from this insubordinate ex-shamus. A thousand to one, the scent of murder strong in his nose, he was sneaking off to learn the mystery girl's identity before Blackley or I could get near her.

I hurried out after him. His cab was still in sight, halted for a red light at the far corner. Luckily I found another empty cab cruising by at that moment. I piled into it and instructed its driver to follow Hackett's. In this way I could learn just what his purpose was, pounce on him at the right moment and stop him cold.

Reaching Lexington Avenue, Hackett's cab astonished me by not turning downtown in the direction of the Hotel Princess. Instead, it went straight on westward. Following Hackett farther meant I'd have to delay my visit to the Hollywood honeys, but my most prudent move was to keep Hackett in sight. His taxi crossed Broadway and finally stopped at the address where last night's homicide had occurred.

As Hackett emerged from his cab, I eased from mine and quietly went up behind him. He stood idly swinging his little cane and looking at the building, a narrow one of brick, only two stories high. Through the windows of the cleaning and pressing shop on the ground floor we saw the proprietor, a swarthy, surly-looking middle-aged Latin, waiting on customers. If the murder upstairs had created any excitement in the neighborhood, no sign of it was left.

Hackett startled me by saying, as I stood silently behind him, "The business manager of Headliner Files might remind you that one taxi is cheaper than two, Pres."

Very cute. He'd known all along I'd been tailing him. He gave me a twisted grin and would have started toward the shop entrance if I hadn't grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Thack, I'm handling this," I reminded

him. You've no business here. Blow."

He stood his ground, looking hurt. "Why, Pres, I'm not interfering in your end of the job. I'm concerned for you. I'm interested in the guy who handed you that sneak punch last night."

A tough proposition, knowing just what to make of this Hackett at any given moment.

"Obviously, Pres," he added, "the case involves attempted blackmail also, which would be very bad for Headliner Files to get mixed up in."

"Blackmail? If so, Blackley didn't mention it."

"That's because you didn't tell him about getting slugged. It happened to you because some other guy is also looking for a nine-toed girl—a guy with a heart full of greed."

"You're taking a running broad-jump at that conclusion, aren't you?"

"How else can you explain it, Pres?" Hackett went on patiently, "Suppose a guy found out somehow, even sooner than you and Blackley did, that Lyon was killed by a girl having a certain unique characteristic—namely, a lost toe. Suppose, further, that that's *all* he knows about her for sure. Let's say he never saw her before, doesn't know her name, doesn't know where to find her. But being a smart guy, very quick on the uptake, he thought of a way to find out. Headliner Files."

I hadn't figured this connection before, but it seemed so plain now, the way Hackett told it.

"Being full of mercenary motives—blackmail, to be explicit—this guy had to keep himself covered. First he tried the phone, but got nowhere with you. Then resorting to desperate measures, he came over and conked you out. As to whether he found the desired dope when rifing our files, we can be sure he didn't. So this unscrupulous crook is still trying to find out that girl's identity. See the rest, then?"

"No. What's the rest, then?"

"Whether you've realized it or not, Pres, you're still in danger. That's why I'm worried about you."

THAT stitched-up spot behind my ear was sensitive enough to give me an appreciation of Hackett's warning. Still, I sensed ironic undertones in his protesta-

tions. And besides, he had to be hooked onto a leash now or there could be no telling how far afield he might scout.

"You still haven't explained howcome all this brings you here."

"Blackley hasn't given out any news connecting the killing with a nine-toed girl. It's restricted info. So the would-be blackmailer must have picked it up pretty close to the scene."

"Okay, but it's still no affair of yours. Your solicitude touches me, but I'll try to watch out for myself from now on. You may go back to the office."

Hackett pierced me with a barbed look and went straight to the door of Luis Ribera's shop. The proprietor, just finishing with a customer, asked with an accent what he could do for Hackett.

"Routine checkup," Hackett flashed a card, letting Ribera assume it was a valid credential, although it was probably an expired driver's license. "What time was it when you found Lyons dead?"

Ribera clapped both hands to his head. "*Ai-ai-ai!* More question! All night I get asked question. No sleep I geet, but t'ousand of question. So when I come across a dead man again I keep my beeg mout' shut. *Ai-ai!*"

"But anyway, what time did you find this one?" Hackett insisted.

"Down at headquarters they got it wrote on the record, eleven o'clock, but already twenty different cop ask me. Now you. Please, no more question. Please, I press your pants maybe?"

"Thank you, no," Hackett said, and turned back, leaving the distressed Señor Ribera mopping his sweating face.

I followed Hackett into another door at one side of the shop. A small vestibule contained only two mail-boxes, one labelled *Ribera*, the other *Lyon*.

"Ribera seems too much the emotional type to notice small details in a running girl," I said. "He was being grilled by the dicks at the time I got slugged, so you've eliminated him as the potential blackmailer. So now you head back to the office while I go over to the Hotel Princess."

Instead, Hackett climbed the stairs into a narrow hallway. He knocked at the door near a window overlooking the street. When it opened I decided he wasn't entirely wasting my time after all.

The babe in the doorway was tall, dark, with loose black hair and sultry eyes. Her housecoat was brilliant red to match her mouth. Looking from one to the other of us, she said, "Mmmm!"—not showing any special partiality, but just liking the two of us at a time.

"Excuse me, I seem to have the wrong apartment," Hackett said.

"Why, honey, what's the matter with this one, mmmm?" she purred. "Come on in." As an afterthought she added, "I'm Reva Ribéra." This was obviously all the formality she required in an introduction.

"Ah?" Hackett said. "Then it was your husband who saw a girl running out of Lyon's apartment after the murder last night. Did you see her, too?"

"Oh, ye-es, honey," Reva Ribéra said in that same caressing tone. "Through the window. She was running out into the street in the rain. A taxi happened to be stopping, with a man getting out of it. She hopped right in and rolled away. . . . Anything else you'd like to know, honey?"

Hackett shot me a glittering glance. Here was the explanation of how a potential blackmailer had encountered a beautiful little man-slayer fleeing the scene of her crime. One more thing which Hackett would like to know, of course, was that man's identity. Before he could voice another question, however, loud feet came banging up the stairs.

It was Luis Ribéra. He was mad. In his position, I would have been watchful of Reva, too. At any rate he waved his arms and spluttered: "Always people looking for Lyon come to the front instead of the back. You want the Lyon apartment, *sí?* Back there, then!"

He stormed into his own door, pushing Reva aside and slamming it. While his shop downstairs remained unattended—a distinct business liability, a yummy wife like Reva—he proceeded to give her loud hell.

Hackett shrugged and turned to the gloomy rear of the hallway. There was the dead man's door. I still liked the picture, despite its bloody overtones, of a murderous little minx running out of there in her stocking feet—hustling away on her nine toes while leaving Lyon behind her with all ten of his turned up.

Evidently suspecting a dick was parked

behind that door, Hackett turned away. I trailed him downstairs. He flagged another passing cab and hopped in, leaving me no choice but to scramble in after him. The address he gave the driver was, for my money, the last straw. It convinced me that the only way to hold this guy back was to wind plenty of rope around him.

"Hotel Princess," Hackett said.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Is a Habit

I RODE along in disgusted silence while Hackett thoughtfully nuzzled his cane. Arriving at the Hotel Princess, we found unusual activity. A crowd was pressing into the elevators. When I inquired as to the Hollywood babes' whereabouts we were simply wagged on. The breakfast affair given by the officials of the fund was already under way. I'd missed my chance to sneak up on the dolls early, thanks to Hackett.

The mob pushed out of the elevator, into the third-floor corridor and thence into a green-and-gold dining room. It was a morning equivalent of a cocktail party, unfortunately without the cocktails. Cig smoke rose in clouds; the chatter was deafening. Mingling with the guests were the glamorpusses from filmland, all bright, animated and luscious—and all beyond the reach of my researches at the moment, particularly because all of them were wearing shoes. There were twelve blondes, not to mention three borderline cases.

I tried to get a look at their feet, but far too many feet were milling around. After a few moments, however, I found an especially well-shod pair right in front of us. In this, my moment of need, I discovered this little honey-haired package gazing quizzically up at me.

"Hello," she said.

She had fawn-colored eyes, a perky little mouth and a teasing way about her, half bold, half shy. I wasted no time in deciding on my next move and reaching for her hand.

"Sweetheart, I need you. Come with papa."

I led her out of there and into a small adjoining room. She came willingly, as if anticipating fun. Glancing back, I saw Thackeray Hackett also coming. Resigned

to his infuriating persistent interference by now, I saved my breath for this neat little cupcake I'd snagged onto.

"I'm Walter Preston, of Headliner Files, sweetie-pie. That odd character there is somebody named Hackett, also from Headliner Files, but you may ignore him and bestow all your attention on me."

"Well, let's see how it works out," she said. "I'm Terry Snow."

"We have you filed, Miss Snow. I've admired many delectable photos of you. As one of Supreme Studios' tastiest contract players, you've flitted east with the rest of the girls to put the drive over. First, in order to pave the way for a firmer understanding, would you mind momentarily removing your shoes, please?"

"Not a bit," she said.

While standing there she plucked them off, one then the other, smiling at me. She stood there in her stocking feet while I took a good look at them. No part of them seemed to be absent. She had beautiful eyes, a luscious mouth, a figure to flatter any sweater, slender hips, nice calves—all this and ten toes, too.

I drew her aside and explained quietly while she slipped her shoes back on. "This may sound frivolous but it's really serious, for reasons which you'll learn later. Having travelled across the continent with this contingent of cookies, and living with them now, you've seen them in all conditions of dress and undress. Tell me, have you noticed anything a little peculiar about one of the feet of one of the girls?"

Terry Snow rounded her eyes and mouth and said thoughtfully, "Why, no-o-o."

I cursed silently but went on in an earnest tone, "Terry, will you please help me with this? In strictest confidence, Terry. You'll be serving a high moral purpose, if you're interested in such things. Say absolutely nothing about this to anybody, but just keep an eye on all these girls and find out which has a noticable pedal peculiarity. I won't tell you what I think you'll find, but I'll rely on you to find it."

"Well, why not?" Terry Snow said. "Frankly, I figure it'll be good business, giving you boys a helping hand—or foot." She giggled, wrinkling her nose. "Sure thing, I will."

"Bless your sweet little heart," I said in real gratitude. "I'm counting on you to

flash me the news the minute you pick it up. You really will?"

"Sure 'nough," and Terry raised her right hand as if taking a vow.

There it was, I told myself—all I needed to do was go back to my desk and wait comfortably a short time, whereupon this pretty little spy of mine would pass me the tip that would enable me to crack this murder case wide open.

But that was reckoning without our young Mr. Hackett.

THE rest of that day turned into a nightmare of frustration via telephone.

Not having heard from Terry Snow by lunch time, I phoned the Princess. She had left, along with all the rest of those long-stemmed roses, for a personal appearance at the Paramount Theatre. Phoning the Paramount, I learned they had done their stuff and hustled off to beautify a parade. The parade ended, they scattered all over central Gotham to booths in hotels and terminals, there to receive donations; but nobody at the Fund headquarters could tell me to which post Terry Snow has been assigned. So I continued trailing her by phone far into the afternoon, still lacking that vital news about a certain chick's tootsies.

To add to the telephonic fun, Lieutenant Blackley called in to say, reproachfully, "I had expected to have helpful information from you before this, Mr. Preston." Of course I answered with complete assurance that we would deliver the goods any second now.

Meanwhile I noticed curiously that Hackett was also having trouble in the field of communications. Using first one of our phones, then another, he seemed to be calling a certain number over and over. He would dial it, listen expectantly, get an answer, then immediately disconnect. Once, purposely wandering behind him at the right moment, I heard a male voice rasping in the receiver just before he cut it off. Apparently he was obeying that corny old injunction, "If a man answers, hang up."

Late afternoon rolled around after much wasted time, to find me still trying to connect with Terry Snow and Hackett still dialling the same number and still hanging up on the guy that kept answering.

At last a lull settled inside Headliner Files. Our phones let up their clangor as the business day petered out. Our file girls put on fresh lips, straightened their nylons and hurried off to their dates. Polly would return later for the lobster shift, but at the moment I was left alone here with my lingering headache and Hackett—or so I imagined until I discovered, glancing around, that Hackett had also slipped out, somehow unseen.

A twange of wariness hit me. The quiet, my being entirely alone here—it was like last night, just before the slugging. It was in such solitude and silence that a ring at our street door had presaged my cracked cranium. Even as I realized it, my temperature skidded toward freezing—because at that moment the doorbell trilled again!

I sat still, wishing Hackett had stayed here with that little hickory stick of his, but he was gone. Since he had a key, it must be a stranger at the door. I vividly recalled Hackett's warning that I was still in danger. Then the bell zinged again and I forced myself to get up and march to that door.

"Give the password," I said through the panels.

A breathless voice answered, "Terry—Terry Snow."

That was better, much better. I opened the door quickly and Terry hustled right in, cuter than a kitten, but bothered. Before I could ask her if she had that all-important information for me she broke out a disappointing report.

"I simply haven't found it out because, gee whiz, we've all been on the go every minute all day. But I've picked up something else you may want to know."

"Come right in, sweetheart, and tell me all about it."

I escorted her into my own private office. Just as I was about to start enjoying my pleasantest bit of privacy in weeks, a noise came from the street door—the ripple of a key in the lock. Hackett entered.

I scowled at him, but Hackett wore an equally dark frown, one suggesting that his efforts, whatever they were, had been balked as consistently as mine. He looked stormy, that is, until he glimpsed Terry. Then he brightened and came right in.

"Well," Terry had begun, "it's very

funny about this thing you asked me to do for you. I haven't had a change to tell you until now, but right after you left two different men showed up with our feet on their minds."

Hackett took up my phone without a by-your-leave as I asked Terry, "How do you mean?"

"First one of these men, then the other, stood around staring at all the girls' feet as if wanting to find one with something strange about it, same as you. The first one looked like a bartender in the Gay Nineties."

That would be Lieutenant Detective Blackley, of course, following down the same lead.

Hackett spun the dial of my phone while listening to Terry continuing: "The other was a younger man, dark and good-looking, except that he had a mean mouth and sly eyes. He didn't miss any part of the girl when looking them over, but he did seem most interested in what they had inside their shoes. I didn't speak to him but I know he was looking for a missing toe, just as the other one was, and you too."

Fingering the gauze behind my ear, I asked quickly, "Terry, did you find out his name?"

"Yes. Dudley Victor. They tell me he's an ex-publicity man who's writing a new gossip column for the *Messenger*."

"Dudley Victory! That self-styled smart guy, eh?"

SOMETHING happened at that moment to electrify Hackett. His call was answered by a woman for a change. This time, finally, after trying all day, he had finally gotten to her.

"Mrs. Ribéra?" Hackett quickly identified himself. "I didn't have time this morning to inquire if you recognized the man getting out of the taxi. The taxi which the girl ran to after leaving Lyon's apartment—the man who got out of it just before she hopped in—that one. Did the detectives ask you about him?"

"Ye-es, honey, they did, but my husband kept cutting in and telling them I didn't know anything about anything. Somehow Luis just doesn't seem to realize I wouldn't mind getting my picture in the papers. I'd seen that man before, honey—a friend of Mr. Lyon."

"And could you name him?"

"Why, ye-es, honey. Dudley Victor."

I stared at that uncanny character, Hackett, as he quietly disconnected, with Reva Ribera's voice still purring in the receiver. The picture was complete.

Dudley Victory, coming to drop in on his friend, had stepped from a taxi in the street at just the moment when Lyon's fleeing murderess had badly needed one. An observant news man—"sly-eyed" and "quick on the uptake," as Terry and Hackett had described him—he had noticed that this babe was shoeless. Interested further, he had even caught the detail of that amputated toe. Then, when murder had entered the picture, he had recognized that this doll would most probably feel his silence was well worth buying.

So he had set out to find her. The stitches on the back of my head testified to the earnestness of his efforts. Still trying this morning, he had taken the same lead that had attracted Blackley and me. And recognizing that this lad was no dope, I was startled by the possibility that he might already have learned that elusive miss's identity.

At the same instant Hackett and I both reached for the Manhattan telephone directory. Five seconds after poking into it, I had a firm grip on one of Terry Snow's arms, Hackett had the other, and we were rushing her out.

Taxis were parading past to the night-clubs and points west. We hustled over and caught an empty. Hackett instructed the driver, "735-A East Thirty-Ninth," and we wheeled off toward Dudley Victor's published address.

Tapping his dainty cane, Hackett said, "Terry, suppose, just for the sake of speculation, that you had to scam for a man's apartment late at night, leaving both your shoes behind. Suppose, also, you're staying at a hotel. Well, you might hop in and out of a taxi without a blasé driver's noticing your stocking feet, but how would you get back to your room without attracting a lot of attention along the rest of the way?"

"Well," Terry answered, falling at once into the spirit of the game, "there are several stores, including shoe stores, over in Times Square that never close. If it happened to be raining hard, as it was last

night, I could just send the cab driver in to get me a pair of galoshes. Or, waiting until I reached the hotel, I'd just slip my raincoat down so it hid my feet. Or I might scout around until I found an old pair of shoes in an ash-can and just carry 'em under my arm. Okay?"

Very okay. Smart girl. We told her so as the cab veered to the curb. Dudley Victor's address, in this classy East River section, was a wite-stone dwelling suitable for brokers or similar executives in the higher brackets. For a new gossip columnist, Victor was living well, obviously making surprising dough—legitimately maybe, more probably illegitimately, but making it. The "A" on his address indicated the basement—and added snooty touch, since it featured a private entrance.

Lights shone behind the pink venetian blinds. Hackett rang the bell and we waited. After a moment he tried the knob, found the door unfastened and pushed in. The next moment he had about-faced and was pushing us out again, backward.

He grimaced as he stood there against the closed door. I said, "Don't tell me that little blonde has knocked off another one!"

Hackett said quietly, "Just like Lyon. His head smashed shapeless with his portable typewriter. But this time, so far as a quick look showed me, no dainty shoes left behind."

Then Hackett froze my blood by adding, "You see how Blackley's sure to take this, Pres? He'll feel that if you hadn't been so slow about getting him the name of our little murderess, this second corpse wouldn't have happened."

CHAPTER FOUR

Pedal Peculiarity

HACKETT'S observation felt like a live eel in my stomach, but he was dead right. Blackley might reasonably enough hold Headliner Files responsible for Victor's death—a staggering thought. It made me want to get the hell out of here the fastest way.

Jostling me back toward the curb, where the taxi was waiting, Hackett said loudly, "Well, I guess Dud's not at home—we'd better come back later." This was intended to delude the cab driver, of course. Next moment, fooled or not, he was piloting us

back toward our own Headliner Files.

While Hackett whispered some sort of explanation to Terry, I wondered in a sick way how I could ever justify myself, not only to Blackley, but also to Clarabelle. Out there in Hollywood, Clarabelle had strained every gusset to help us put across an all-important assignment. Now it was exploding under us.

I felt I'd been crossed up by circumstances beyond my control, but still I could find no valid way to deny that in all probability the little nine-toed blonde would have been trapped by now, and Dudley Victor would still be alive, if only I had produced one small piece of information a little sooner.

When the cab stopped at Headliner Files, I pushed in first, feeling that a council of war was imperative and urgent. As Hackett and Terry followed me in, one of our phones began ringing. Hackett reached it before I did.

"Ah, Lieutenant Blackley?" he said, dripping suavity. "Ah, a very, very good evening to you, my *dear* lieutenant."

Well knowing that Blackley deigned to speak to this disgraced ex-shamus only when it was unavoidable, I tried to tug the phone away from him, but he held onto it, murmuring, "Unfortunately Mr. Preston isn't available at the moment, but isn't that lucky for me? Perhaps you would do me the honor of letting me take your message, lieutenant."

It wasn't bad enough that Blackley would soon credit us with precipitating a murder; no, besides that Hackett had to needle him. In a surge of indignation I snapped, "Excuse me a minute, Terry!" and headed for our switchboard. I tipped a cam, cutting in on the line, just in time to head Blackley responding in icy tones;

". . . Inform Mr. Preston that his inexcusable failure may well become the subject of a great deal of unfavorable newspaper comment—at least."

Before I could get a protest in, Hackett asked with a leer in his voice, "Speaking of failure, lieutenant, aren't you wasting valuable time blaming us for yours? Shouldn't you be busy tracing a pair of shoes instead? Such a revealing item of evidence it was, you said, too! Perhaps the fact that it isn't getting you anywhere might become the subject of much un-

favorable newspaper comment, lieutenant."

Too shocked by this insolence to utter a sound, I heard Blackley beginning to rumble, "Lacking the assistance you had assured me—"

Hackett cut in, "Okay, lieutenant, you'll get it now—and right between the eyes. In a hurry for the answer, are you? Well, you really should be. After all, that little doll might murder somebody else."

That one left me gasping on the mat, but Hackett had still more on tap.

"Okay, then, lieutenant—meet us at Lyon's apartment in ten minutes and we'll spell it out for you."

Then, thank God, Hackett disconnected. After another speechless moment, I headed for him in a blistering fury.

"That does it, Thack. That's all we needed, brother. Clarabelle will be mighty surprised when she comes back and finds us sunk out of sight, thanks to the guy she befriended when he was down and out."

Hackett gave me a hard look and swung his little cane. "I'll never let Clarabelle down if I can help it. You can count on that. It's Blackley who's foundering. He needs us to salvage the case for him. That's why he's beefing, of course. So we'll go over and wrap it up for him."

"Dammit, Thack, that promise you just made him is forty or fifty times more rash than the one I made. You'll never make good on it."

Hackett answered softly, "Let's drift over to keep our appointment anyway, and see how we make out."

Again he linked arms with Terry, who had heard all this with a pretty air of puzzlement. He steered her toward the door with a confident manner which I was at a loss to understand. He'd never in this world get us out of this one. I expected, in fact, that his attempt would only make the whole debacle worse, if worse was still possible. In any event it was something I had to see through.

Just as I started after him, another phone rang. I turned back quickly, hoping it was Blackley again, because then I could cancel Hackett's plans. But luck was still running against us. Instead of Blackley's voice on the wire, Clarabelle's musical tones came lilting again from out in Hollywood:

“WALTER, doll, I’ve more news for you,” she began breathlessly. “If Nora Nennis can’t be the girl we want, then I’m sure I’ve got the right one this time.”

“I hope so, Clarabelle,” I said. “Let’s have it.” With an uneasy eye on the door through which Hackett was disappearing with Terry Snow, I added, “And please talk fast.”

“Well, doll, I just couldn’t get anywhere at all by asking more questions, so I took on a little detective work of my own. I realized we know two things definitely about the girl we’re looking for. First, she has kept her missing toe under her hat, so to speak. Second, she has posed for lots of leg art, the chief occupation of all such starlets. Putting the two ideas together, Walter, doll, it just had to follow that this girl is one whose picture is never taken without her shoes on.”

“Sounds reasonable, Clarabelle. But please talk faster.”

“So, with Katie Hooker helping me, I took on the perfectly terrific job of looking through all the recent cheesecake produced by the publicity departments of all the leading studios. And Walter, doll, I’m exhausted. They have mountain after mountain of pictures—girls in swim suits lighting firecrackers for the Fourth of July, girls in swim suits riding reindeer for Christmas, girls in swim suits building log cabins for Lincoln’s birthday, and so on. Well, one of the things these girls often leave off is their shoes, but after endless looking I finally found one girl—besides Nora Dennis—who had never once had her picture taken with both her feet bare. Once she had her right foot bare, but never her left. Isn’t that amazing, Walter?”

I was sitting up now, startled. “Quick, Clarabelle, who is she?”

“And one other thing, doll, very important—she’s one of those starlets who are in New York right now.”

“Clarabelle, please, tell me that girl’s name before I drop dead!”

“Terry Snow.”

I drew a long, slow breath. “Listen to me, Clarabelle. A girl with a missing small toe is a very rare creature. They are so very rare, Clarabelle, that it seems highly unlikely there could be *two* girls with the small toe missing from the left foot—certainly not when both of them are small

blonde movie starlets. The chances against it are astronomical.”

“Doll, sometimes I think you don’t have quite enough faith in human nature,” Clarabelle said. “Because not only are there two blonde starlets in Hollywood with the little toe missing from their left foot—Nora Dennis, who is under contract to Acme, and Terry Snow, who is under contract to Supreme—but both these girls live at the same address. They actually share the same bungalow.”

Any loony thing can happen in Flickerville, but this I just couldn’t accept.

I said, “I can’t take time to straighten you out on it now, Clarabelle, but I have met Terry Snow personally. And Terry has her full complement of toes.”

“Oh,” Clarabelle said, crestfall.

“But stand by, anyway,” I added rapidly. “I’ll have news for you soon. But I’m afraid it won’t be good.”

I hurried out after Hackett and Terry. Cars and taxis were streaming past. This was the hour for a pre-theatre dinner out, so busy that Hackett and Terry had not yet found a cab. I stayed doggedly with them until we captured one. We piled into it and then crept westward to keep our date with disaster.

Absorbed in his thoughts, Hackett tapped the gold head of his cane against his teeth. Terry had become fascinated by him in a wary way. She edged away from him, which brought her snuggling closer to me. This was my most gratifying experience of the past twenty-four hours.

“As soon as I’m able to drop this guy out of my life, sugar,” I said, “I’d like to discuss plans for an enjoyable evening.”

She gave me a warm smile, snuggling a little closer, just as we arrived at the scene of last night’s murder.

The Ribéra cleaning establishment was still open, as busy neighborhood shops often are at this hour, and its proprietor was processing a pile of trousers at the sizzling steam press. A big, black official car, empty at the curb, indicated that Lieutenant Blackley was waiting for us. Hackett headed recklessly right up the stairs. The door of Lyon’s apartment opened as he approached it and Blackley bowed us in, his gracious manner seeming like the deceptive gentleness of a ravenous bear operating a man-trap.

We stepped past Blackley and he shut the door behind us with a nerve-chilling click. There was disruption evident in the bedroom on the right of the vestibule, that being where Lyon had got it. We turned left into a masculine living room, dogged by Blackley. We introduced him to Terry and he responded courteously, but his mood was too glacial to be thawed by a toothsome movie starlet.

"Now, gentlemen," he said in the tones an iceberg would use if it could talk, "please proceed to spell out the answer for me. But before you begin, Mr. Preston, permit me to remind this apprentice of yours to function as a private investigator without a license is a criminal offense, severely punishable under State law."

THAT made it cuter. In order to fill his promise, if he could, Hackett must fracture a statute. Seeming not too disturbed by the dilemma, however, Hackett grinned at Lieutenant Blackley and lightly swung his cane.

"With that understanding, Hackett," Blackley said, making the name sound like a foul word, "you may proceed."

Hackett narrowed those baby-blue eyes of him. "Blackley, you've always treated me with the most scathing contempt. I believe in moral justice at least as strongly as you do, but you've never credited me with a decent motive. So now I'm going to pull a very dirty trick on you. I'm going to put you in my debt and make you feel grateful to me for cracking this case for you."

"Hah!" It was a sound of purest scorn. "Indeed?"

"Certainly," Hackett said. "It'll only take a minute."

He turned to Terry Snow and asked in a casual conversational tone, "When you came in here last night, Terry, did you see any wet footprints outside the door?"

"Why, no, I didn't," she answered. "I was so wet from the rain myself, I couldn't help noticing that nobody else had come in. The floor was perfectly dry all the way up—"

Then, as we all stared at her, she realized what she was saying and caught herself.

"Why, you—you!" she flared up at

Hackett. "You tricked me into admitting that, you—"

It hadn't exactly been a trick, of course. He'd simply asked her in a disarming way and she had answered. Furious at herself too, she flew at Hackett, hotly pushed him away, then wheeled around and started a dash for the door.

Both Blackley and I had been caught flat-footed. Only now was it dawning fully on us that Terry Snow had unwittingly admitted being the girl we had all been searching for. I felt dizzily that it couldn't be possible, but there she was, frantically heading into a getaway.

Hackett sprang and grabbed her from behind in a gentle but inescapable hug. In spite of her furious kicking and scratching, he forced her down to the floor and pinned her there with one knee. I stared speechlessly as he yanked off her left shoe, flicked her garters loose and stripped the stocking from her left leg. Then he held her ankle in one hand. Again I counted rapidly, one-two-three-four-five. Five toes, all right. The small one, however, didn't seem quite the same pink as the others. The next moment I was horrified to see Hackett pulling it off.

In paralyzed stupefaction I actually witnessed Hackett in the act of nipping the small toe off Terry Snow's foot as easily as you would pluck an olive out of a martini.

It caused Terry to subside in her struggles. She went limp on the floor, sobbing, flat on her back with her nine toes pointing at the ceiling. Meanwhile Hackett, eyeing me, held up between thumb and forefinger that separate part of her, her tenth toe.

"You know how Hollywood make-up experts build false noses and chins on actors' faces, Pres—yet you let yourself be fooled by a blob of the same kind of putty on a foot."

Gaping at him, I wondered numbly what had put him wise to her, and as if reading my mind he added, "She saw you staring at all the girls' shoes at the hotel. Of course she knew why. So she picked you up to keep herself posted. She slipped once. You didn't tell her at the hotel just what to look for, but at our office she mentioned a missing toe."

Suddenly I was sick-hearted, feeling that

no matter how many guys she had bashed up, I didn't want to see a sweet chick like Terry go to the chair for murder.

"Thack," I said hoarsely, "I'll never forgive you for this!" At the same time Blackley grumbled, "Well, then, Miss Snow, since your guilt as a murderer is now revealed—" But we both went silent again, staring at Hackett.

What the devil was he standing there wagging his head at us for? It was all over, all clear. Terry was the babe who had killed Lyon in a fit of jealousy, then had killed Dudley Victor too, in order to escape his blackmail demands. But still that diabolical Hackett stood there wagging his head with a cryptic smile.

"Better postpone the arrest for a little, lieutenant. You, Pres, can stop censuring yourself. Catching our little nine-toed blonde earlier wouldn't really have saved any spilled blood. Because, you see, Terry didn't commit these murders."

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Underfoot

THIS murder case was on a roller-coaster that was wheeling through too many dizzy loop-the-loops for me to keep my balance. Blackley also found it more prudent just to hang on and take the bumps as they hit him. Hackett in one of his quick reversals of tactics, was now helping Terry up from the floor. With almost motherly consideration he guided her into a comfortable chair. There she sat, as tasty a dish as I had ever had whisked away from my yearning reach, teary-eyed, curling her nine little toes under her.

Hackett had said she hadn't murdered anybody. I was eager to agree—much more willing, of course, than Blackley, who had judged her guilty from the beginning. And if Terry was innocent, I found myself thinking, then the real culprit must be the other nine-toed blonde starlet—the one named Nora Dennis who, incredibly, according to Clarabelle's report, lived under the same roof as this one, and had committed this murder in New York City while vacationing in the high Sierras. I was vaguely aware that this conclusion as to Nora had bugs in it, but I couldn't do better just now. Otherwise, like Blackley,

I simply watched Hackett, expecting anything.

"Would you back me up in that, Terry?" he asked gently. "I mean my statement that you haven't committed any murders?"

"You bet I will!" she said. "Because I haven't, not one."

"Then," I heard myself asking, "Nora Dennis must have, is that it?"

"Oh, no-o," Terry Snow answered, wide-eyed. "Because I'm Nora Dennis too."

I thought my ears must be playing tricks on me now, so I just stared at her.

"But Nora Dennis isn't the name I was born with, of course," she added. "Neither is Terry Snow, for that matter. My real name is Amy Wicker."

I kept my stunned stare on her, and so did Blackley, as Hackett said, "The boys seem a little confused. Let's get 'em untangled, shall we?"

"Why, it's perfectly simple," she explained rapidly. "You see, I was Amy Wicker back home in Kansas, but when I got a job in the line of the Copacabana, I took the stage name of Terry Snow—and after I went to Hollywood with a contract I kept that name. Then—well—I had so little to do there—just posing for cheese-cake and taking a little training in acting. I wanted to start getting somewhere faster, but the studio wouldn't keep me busy enough. So then my boyfriend at the time, Willie Lyon, had an idea, such a wonderful idea that I just couldn't resist taking a chance on it."

"The wonderful idea being that you would stop being just one little starlet and become two?"

"Um-hmm." Terry hopped out of the chair. "You see, when I wear my hair shoulder-length like this, with this unsophisticated type of mouth, I look like me. But with my hair upswept, and a dramatic mouth and a sun-tan powder, and with my eyes made up with a slight Oriental slant, I look like somebody else—somebody that Willie and I decided to name Nora Dennis."

Demonstrating in front of a mirror, she had piled her hair on the top of her head. Even without the other cosmetical changes she did take on a different look. She was still definitely a blonde movie starlet, but not quite the same one.

"You mean you actually began *being* two

girls at once?" I asked her in amazement.

She nodded. "Just as a stunt at first, then seriously, because it actually worked. It meant I could double my bets everywhere. I could actually push two small careers at the same time."

"And nobody tumbled?"

"Why should they? Hollywood is made up of innumerable cliques and castes that don't mix. Willie got me in at Acme, the studio where he was working at that time, as Nora Dennis—and no one recognized me as some other little nobody simply because the Acme crowd doesn't mix with the crowd at Supreme, where I was known as Terry Snow. It has been a little troublesome at times, particularly as to wolves who do get around, and junkets like now, where one of me has to go into hiding while the other of me struts her stuff. But actually I've been getting away with it slick as anything." She asked plaintively, "You won't spoil it for me, will you?"

"I personally feel you've got enough stuff for two girls," I answered. "But on the other hand both of you will have to fry at once if you can't dodge this murder rap. Are you leading up to that?"

"**Y**ES, because that's why I came here to see Willie last night. Not because I'm in love with him—I never was—but just to tell him what happens to a girl who's practically her own twin. It was his idea to begin with, and eventually he wanted to write a script about it. But when I got here, he—he—" Shuddering with revulsion, she curled up her nine little toes at the memory.

"Lyon had already been murdered at that time, of course," Hackett put in. "As I mentioned before, she didn't kill him. Obviously. Nor did she kill a man named Dudley Victor whose body you'll get around to a little later, lieutenant."

Blackley absorbed this news with a quiver. I echoed:

"Obviously? You've known it all along? You mean that even before you found out who our little blonde fugitive was, it was obvious to you she hadn't done it?"

Hackett smiled a pungent smile at Blackley. "Certainly. Most typewriters weigh up to fifteen pounds or even more, which is heavier than most sledge-hammers. Can you imagine a little slip of a

thing like this swinging such a hefty weapon? For another thing, you heard this cookie say, when I asked her a few minutes ago, that she saw no wet footprints preceding her to this door. If she were actually guilty and looking for a way out, she would have jumped at the chance to claim there were such prints showing that someone had been here just ahead of her. But in her unguarded innocence she reported there were none."

Blackley spoke in authoritative tones. "Very well. That admission shows she alone could have killed Lyon."

"Does it, my fine lieutenant?" Hackett's smile was that of an anaconda about to whip a final coil around its victim. "Please stay right here with your prisoner, then, while I wind up the case elsewhere."

He opened the door and stepped into the hall, lightly swinging his cane. I watched him going down the stairs, taking special pains to be quiet. Immediately he about-faced and came back up, more noisily. He turned next to the door at the front end of the hall and touched the bell-button. At almost the same moment, Reva Ribéra opened the way.

We saw Hackett and Reva smiling at each other. He moved closer, tucking his stick under one arm, then eased in. The door closed.

Whatever fun Hackett was having in there, he was fated not to have it for long. Not half a moment had passed when quick footfalls sounded on the stairs. Reva Ribéra's mercuric husband darted up, gripping in one hand a huge electric iron, professional model. It smoked a little—very hot. Carrying it, Luis Ribéra glided suspiciously to the door of his apartment.

I couldn't help wondering how many times footsteps on the stairs had brought him sneaking up to check on the appetizing Reva exactly as he was doing now. He listened at the panels, nodding, as if saying to himself in a manner of terrible discovery, "Ah-a! *Si!*" A man in there with his wife!

Ribéra straightened, taking a firmer grip on that massive iron in one hand, reaching for the knob with the other, poising to burst in and catch them by surprise. It was Luis Ribéra, however, whom the surprise hit. His fingers had hardly touched the knob when the door snapped open and

Hackett stepped out to confront him.

"I've been expecting you, señor," Hackett said softly. "When was it you finally caught Lyon with the goods, so to speak—meaning the goods you're married to? Only yesterday evening?"

It added up: a hot honey and an ex-Hollywood wolf, alone together on the same floor, plus a husband driven frantic with jealousy. Terry had seen no wet footprints at Lyon's door for the reason that the killer had not come from the rainy outdoors, but from inside.

Ribéra had been driven doubly frantic when Victor, a friend of Lyon, not unaware of the attraction up the hall, had begun putting the bite on him—and an especially ambitious blackmailer Victor had been too, playing the same murder two ways. I recalled how Ribéra in his agitation had guarded Reva's knowledge of Victor from the police; how he had neglected his business all day today in order to stick close to her, with so many investigators snooping about; how Hackett had finally reached her by phone while Ribéra was out; and how soon afterward we had found the would-be blackmailer dead. And it was this explosively violent customer whom Hackett had deliberately lured into challenging him.

"I suppose," Hackett added in the same soft tone, "it's useless to ask you to come along quietly?"

IN A murderous fury Ribéra swung that weighty iron overhead—in just the same way he must have swung a heavy typewriter at Lyon and Victor. But there was one little thing which Luis Ribéra did not take into consideration—Hackett's hickory stick. The moment Hackett unlimbered it, I knew the rest of this would be mercilessly brief.

Hackett brought his cane to a horizontal position just above his forehead—the "on guard" posture. Next he whirled it in the moulinet—spun it so rapidly that it became almost invisible.

Hackett's cane swished out, flicked, slapped. Luis Ribéra staggered backward with a gash spurting blood down one cheek, a section of scalp as big as his palm hanging loose, the iron thumping out of a hand that was suddenly a useless

thing of lacerations and bared tendons.

From the doorway behind Hackett, Reva Ribéra screamed. Terry, at my side, moaned in fright. Blackley began lumbering along the hall, but even then Luis Ribéra, crazed with pain and desperation, was flinging himself at Hackett.

Hackett's response was to hold his cane vertical, gripping it in both hands, tip upward. With the clean, swiftness of a master swordsman he drove the point upward to the soft V of Ribéra's underchin. It pierced upward smoothly. Still bearing upward, Hackett hoisted Ribéra off the floor and sent him flying over his shoulder like a gaffed fish. Ribéra plunged headlong over the railing, crashed to the stairs below, rolled down and came to rest sprawled in the vestibule.

In the moment of silence that followed Hackett turned to Blackley.

"You mentioned something about the legality of my operating without a license, lieutenant?"

Blackley plainly did not feel like mentioning it again. Not just now.

"Anyway, there's your murderer, waiting for you to wrap him up, with the compliments of Headliner Files," Hackett added. "While receiving congratulations on having captured him, please don't forget where you got him."

In the confusion that followed, I found myself thinking over and over, *My Lord, Thack actually did it—he's made Blackley indebted to him for this.* I thought I had even heard Blackley murmur to Hackett, "I thank you."

I found myself striding along the street wearing an idiotically elated grin, with one of the little blonde starlet's arms linked through mine and the other through Hackett's.

"Gee whiz," she said. "Where would I be right now without you boys? Remind me to tell you how grateful I am when I get my breath back."

Smiling, Hackett observed, "Things might have turned out worse for you, Pres. For example, I'm sure you'll soon find Reva Ribéra feeling pretty lonely."

"I have lovelier plans," I said. "I'm going to snaffle me a triple date with three sweet chicks—Amy and Nora and Terry."

They didn't say no.

THE END

THE PHOTOGENIC CORPSE



He hated himself for the picture
he was going to take. . . .

By **CHARLES
INGERMAN**

*Picture-shooter Ed Tinkley knew that
the darkroom would show his ex-wife
in DeCourt's snazzy slaughter chamber.*

ED TINKLEY leaned back in the chair. He blew the rest of the cigarette smoke out of his lungs, said: "You've got the wrong guy, Mr. Larsson. Even the little you've told me, that's a dirty assignment."

Sam Larsson, publisher of *Chronos*, the news weekly, smiled bleakly. "It's not for the magazine, Tinkley. It's a private matter. McKillian said you are discreet—and trustworthy."

"I am," Tinkley answered. "But that doesn't mean I'll go around taking off-color pictures of some babe. I'm a news-photog. I've got some pride."

"But you've *got* to help me, Tinkley," Larsson said urgently. "This is terribly important to me."

"Mr. Larsson," Tinkley replied evenly, "all I really got to do is die—ultimately. I don't have to take pictures like that."

Larsson was no dope. He realized that he'd prodded Tinkley's spirit of independence. "You're right, of course," he said. "I guess I've stated my problem very badly. Let me tell you the whole story, man to man."

"I'll listen," Tinkley agreed.

"I've been a terrible fool," the publisher confessed. "I've been seeing a certain young movie starlet. I was indiscreet enough to write her some letters. Now those letters have come into the possession of a Hollywood character named Quincey DeCourt."

"That louse!" Tinkley grated.

"Exactly. DeCourt is blackmailing me, Tinkley. But plenty. I can't take it forever. I've got to get from under. Those letters can wreck me, and they can pretty much wreck *Chronos*, too."

"You don't need a cameraman," Tinkley offered. "Why not hire a couple of smart hoods to take DeCourt out of the play—for good?"

"Murder's outside my line," Larsson said. It was common knowledge that he was a pillar of his church. "What I need is a weapon with which to counter-attack. Now this DeCourt is a notorious fellow. But he can get away with it as he is married into the Van Slyke family, and as long as his name stays in the Social Register. But you see, if I can get a picture of him off-base—with some babe—I can put the pressure on *him*, and get those damaging letters back."

"I get it," Tinkley said. "It's still a dirty assignment. But I'll do it, Mr. Larsson. I'm your man."

An expression of surprise flashed on Larsson's face. He'd expected more of an argument. He'd handled temperamental photographers before.

What he didn't know was that a cute brunette named Clara—Tinkley's ex-wife—was living in Hollywood. Nor that Tinkley still stayed awake nights carrying the torch for her. Nor that a trip to California on a nice swindle-sheet suited Tinkley right down to the ground. He would have taken an album full of racy pictures for a chance to give Clara another sales-talk.

* * *

Tinkley was sitting in his Los Angeles hotel room, trying to get the air-kinks out

of his stomach. He was also running a fever, battling the hotel telephone operator.

"No, operator," Tinkley explained again, his patience oozing, "my party is not listed in the directory. She's only lived in Los Angeles four months. Be a good girl and find out from Information, huh? The name is Clara Tinkley. The address is number 13, Santa Teresa Road."

"All right!" the operator agreed petulantly. "But if you knew all the things I have to do."

She broke the connection, leaving Tinkley to listen to the hollow humming on the line. A moment later she plugged in again. "I'm ringing the number for you, mister."

Tinkley waited while the wire pulsed. Suddenly a thick voice—very male, very aggressive—barked: "Hello! Perrillo speaking. Whatcha want?"

Tinkley was Irish enough to see red, Scotch enough to hold it in. "I want to speak with Clara Tinkley, please."

"Well, she's not here." The line went dead.

Tinkley could have bitten a piece out of the instrument. He soft-soaped the harried operator into getting the number once more. "Hello," Tinkley began, "don't hang up on me again, you so-and-so!"

"What the hell you want, guy?" the hard voice snarled. "I told you, just my doll and me—"

"I don't want your doll," Tinkley said firmly. "I want to reach Clara Tinkley. When do you expect her back?"

"I don't expect—Hey, Karen! There's a guy here. . . ."

As Tinkley's blood pressure soared there was a clatter at the other end of the wire. A new voice—feminine this time, but not Clara—said: "Hello?"

"Clara Tinkley, please."

"She's gone out for the evening. I'm her roommate, Karen Hartsdale."

"When do you expect her back?"

"I really don't know. Tony, stop! Clara only said she's stepping out in high society tonight." There was a pause, and then, sharply: "Tony Perrillo, stop trying to grab this 'phone! Some fellow's trying to get Clara."

"Would you mind having her call this number?" Tinkley asked. He gave his name and the hotel phone number.

"I'll tell her," the roommate promised.

"Bye," Tinkley answered. He began chewing up the end of a new cigarette. What kind of deal was that, anyway?

MACGRUDER, in charge of *Chronos'* Los Angeles outpost, was in an expansive mood. "Mighty glad to meet you, Tinkley. If there's anything you need, name it. Larsson has teletyped three times to say you're the white-haired boy."

Tinkley mused: *It certainly must be wonderful to make a business like Chronos jump through the hoops for your own personal benefit.* "About this guy, DeCourt," he said to MacGruder. "Keep it under your hat, but he's the ginzo I'm interested in. I want to get some unposed shots of him. Never mind why. What's the current dirt?"

"The usual thing. Behind his front as a pillar of high society, he's feathering his nest by running the biggest blackmail parlor on the West Coast. He looks pretty high-class, tooling that robin's-egg-blue convertible around, but he knows the low-down on things you wouldn't even know the right words for. And he knows how to cash in, too—but plenty."

"How about women?"

"Oh, there are tales, my friend. DeCourt thinks he's God's gift to women. Rumor hath it that he's not above impressing that on some of his blackmailees—if they're young enough and pretty enough.

"But he's wonderfully discreet about it. Has a hideaway lay-out in the Ojai Valley. It would be curtains for DeCourt if his wife ever found out. Her father's a big-shot *politico* and a large part of DeCourt's iron-clad respectability."

"Look," Tinkley said, "find out where his bungalow is, will you? You've got some smart operators in this office. Find out about DeCourt's hide-out and about the latest flame, if any."

"Okay, can do."

"One more little jobbie, please. For my own personal satisfaction, have you any dope on a guy named Tony Perrillo?"

"Oh, I can tell you about Perrillo right now," MacGruder replied. "He's in the papers this morning. One of the drivers of a rival trucking concern—that's Perrillo's legit front—was found bushwhacked at dawn, and the cops want to ask Perrillo some questions."

MacGruder paused. "If you'll take a couple of turns around the block, I'll see what I can do about snagging some of the dope you want on DeCourt from the boys and girls here in the office."

"Okay," Tinkley said. He grabbed his hat, went out of the flossy Los Angeles office of *Chronos*, the Newsmagazine with the Intelligent Bias. It occurred to him that he had already spent quite a gob of swindle-sheet money without getting noticeably closer to the picture of DeCourt which Larsson wanted him to get on film.

He killed some time getting just the kind of toothpaste he wanted in a very elegant apothecary, and he killed some more time standing on a windy street corner watching the pretty girls fight for control over their kiting skirts.

Then he headed back to MacGruder. The big man was pleased to see him. "We've played in luck," he said. "I've got the dope on that tuckaway in the Ojai Valley. Everything but a floor-plan. And I've got a line on the current flame. Not her name. I can't turn that up yet. But she's a cute brunette and lives at number 13 Santa Teresa Road."

Tinkley felt his stomach do a series of violent nip-ups. He swallowed hard, to keep his toast and orange juice off the nice polished top of MacGruder's desk. High society! What in God's name was Clara doing, trysting with a no-good son of a basket-weaver like DeCourt? Of all the slimy heels in the world, why would she have to fall for him? Tinkley felt as if someone had used hobnailed boots to kick him repeatedly in the belly.

"Isn't that pretty swell?" MacGruder asked gleefully. "Did I come up with the dope, old kid?"

"Yeah!" Tinkley admitted, wishing he could sink without trace.

"One more thing," the Los Angeles chief said cheerily. "I just got another teletype from New York. Larsson is on his way out here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. You should. He said he was going to stand by while you broke the story you're working on."

"Oh, my Lord!" Tinkley moaned. Now he'd be getting the needle from Larsson. In his mind's eyes, he saw the picture he was going to take: DeCourt and Clara together,

as nasty a picture as he could get. It would fix Larsson up, but it would fix Tinkley up, too. He knew he'd never get over loving Clara. But he'd never get over that shot, either—not if he lived to be a million. . . .

TINKLEY braked the rented jalopy on a hillside. There was a pigeon farm ahead, with big white birds circling over the lofts. There was a sign saying: TIDWELL, SQUABS.

He opened the road map which MacGruder had marked for him. DeCourt's bungalow was about a quarter of a mile farther down the road. He had to case the joint, because if he was going to take that picture for Larsson, this was the place to snap it. He had to know what he was doing.

He schemed for a couple of minutes, picked up his Zeiss-Ikon with the Tessar lens, slung it over his shoulder. If anybody questioned him, his story was that he was a camera-nut, out getting a lot of scenery for his soul's edification.

He hiked along the roadside, came to an inconspicuous sign: BIDAWE. He noted with grim satisfaction that DeCourt didn't put his own name on the place. He stopped, just to make his act good, and snapped a couple of shots, taking a lot of time with his exposure meter and with all the amateur shenanigans he could think of. If anyone happened to be watching him, his role was clearly that of an over-board camera enthusiast.

Tinkley pushed through the dense shrubbery around the entranceway. The robin's-egg-blue convertible wasn't in sight. That was a help. Moving like a bird crossing a lawn and snagging worms all the way, Tinkley pushed on, snapping pictures like mad: The neat little one-story bungalow, with the beautiful iron balconies and the limpid half-size pool, the clusters of shrubbery and the sweeping beds of brilliantly colored flowers.

While he was going through these antics, he edged up to a window, glimpsed into a Hollywood-style bedroom. The idea of Clara gracing this place with her presence made Tinkley want to upchuck all over again.

Suddenly, a couple of guys were crossing the lawn toward him. Big guys, walking with the determination of men who knew

what they were about. They came up close, standing a little apart. The belligerence in their attitude would have impressed even the most insensitive.

"What's the idea, guy?" the shorter of them, a hardcase with sandy hair and mean eyes, grated. "What's the big idea?"

"Idea?" Tinkley returned, feigning the most profound surprise. "Why, what do you mean?"

"What's the idea of the pictures, huh?"

"Such a beautiful spot," Tinkley sighed. "This is a little oasis. I never would have dreamed it was here. I'm taking a few pictures to record it forever."

"Gimme that camera."

Tinkley hugged the camera to his chest with a protective gesture like that of a mother about to be robbed of a cherished infant. "What—why?"

"Give it here. Nobody takes pictures here, chum. This is private property."

"But surely." Tinkley said, backpedaling shyly, "surely you don't mind sharing this beauty with others? It's a perfect jewel of a place."

"Gimme that camera! I want the film outa it. Then you can scam. But the boss said—"

"Oh, so you're not the owner?" Tinkley exclaimed brightly. "Now, if you'd just let me talk to the owner, I'm sure I could make him see reason."

"Chum," growled the mean-eyed man, "you'd better give me that camera now, before I bust you open!"

Tinkley continued to back away from their determined advance. "I demand to see the owner," he squawled. "I'm sure you men are exceeding your authority with this highhanded behavior."

"Lemme smear him," the bigger man pleaded, speaking for the first time. "Lemme smear him!"

"Don't lay a finger on me," Tinkley howled. "I'll report this to the police. I'll—I'll—!"

"Get him, Hunky!" Mean Eyes ordered.

Hunky, who looked like a football player ten years later, hurled himself through the air, wrapped his bear-like arms around Tinkley, pulled him to the ground in a bone-crushing tackle.

Tinkley curled himself around his camera, hugging it to his belly with both arms, while Mean Eyes systematically applied

himself to kicking in Ed Tinkley's side.

"Let me see the owner!" Tinkley screamed. "You can't do this to me. Let me see the owner."

Suddenly Hunky dragged him to his feet. Between them, they twisted the camera out of his grasp. Mean eyes hurled it against a stone garden bench, smashing it horribly. Then, while Hunky still held Tinkley in a grip of iron, Mean Eyes drove a murderous fist into his face. Tinkley reeled from the blow, and it was no act this time. He felt as if his brains had been scrambled by the jarring impact.

"Now, damn you," Mean Eyes snarled, "that'll teach you to snoop around here. No pictures allowed. You're trespassing. Remember that when you think of police. Now, get the hell away from here before we really get tough!"

Tinkley considered that good advice. He had what he'd come for—the lay-out and the set-up. He figured he'd done all that could reasonably be expected from him in the line of duty. No percentage in getting himself beaten to death. He staggered out to the main road again, his knees rubbery, his brain searing and blood drooling over his chin.

Tinkley reeled drunkenly up the hill toward where he'd parked the Driveyourself. The camera would go on the swindle-sheet and he could make a profit on the deal. But who'd pay for the bust in the snoot and the kicks in the sides? Somebody ought to pay plenty for them!

ED TINKLEY lay on the bed in his hotel room. His nose was a paining agony; his whole face, as a matter of fact, was much the worse for wear. And his body ached unmercifully from the booting Mean Eyes had given him.

He reached out for the telephone on the nightstand beside the bed, asked the hotel operator to get the *Chronos* office on the wire. In a half minute, MacGruder's cheery voice was saying: "Hi, there fella! What can I do for you?"

"Ouch!" Tinkley gasped, easing himself gently off a bruised and lacerated hip. "What?"

"Look, Mac, you got a bright lad who can do a little detective work for me?"

"Sure. What?"

"Send him around to the garage where

DeCourt keeps that swank convertible. When he sees DeCourt leave, have him give me a quick buzz right away, huh? I want to spot him going to Ojai. I'll wait a week if I have to."

"Will do," MacGruder agreed.

"And in the meanwhile," Tinkley went on, "go out and buy me the handsomest and most expensive camera you can find. *Chronos* is paying for it, so money is no object. Okay?"

"Okay."

Tinkley racked the phone, lay back on the bed with a groan. Having taken care of Larsson's business as well as he could for the present, he was free to do a little high-powered worrying on his own hook.

Clara. Why hadn't she called him back? Had she tried? What was she doing with a mugg like DeCourt?

Questions kept flaring in his brain. What could she have done that the notorious blackmailer would have a hold over her? How long had this been going on? What, if anything, could he do about it, short of beefing DeCourt himself?

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, as the picture in his mind focussed and was enlarged, as the details grew sharper and more painful. If there was any hope of reconciliation with Clara—taking this picture would bust the whole thing wide open.

Damn it, why hadn't she called?

Three or four times his hand strayed to the bedside telephone before he finally made up his mind to call. He got her number, heard her soft, sweet voice at the other end of the line. "Who's calling, please?"

It made him sore. "You used to know my voice," he snapped. "Why didn't you call me back?"

"It—it's Ed? Is it really you, darling? I didn't even know you were in town."

"I told your roommate last night."

"She always louses messages up. Or just plain forgets them. Hon, it's wonderful to hear your voice again."

Tinkley didn't know what to believe. Could be it was true. He pulled his horns in. "It's good to talk to you, too, lamb. Know what I'd like to do?"

"I've got a fair idea. I can guess. The answer is no."

"You got me wrong, sweetie. I mean, where are we going tonight?"

Clara's answer was swift. "We're not

going anywhere, Ed. I have another engagement."

Tinkley felt that sour taste rising in his throat again. "Break it, baby," he urged. "It's not every day that your ex-husband is in town to squire you around."

"I can't break it," Clara answered firmly.

"Sure you can. For me."

"It's out of the question, Ed. You can't come breezing into town with no warning whatsoever and expect me to upset my whole life for you. That's all over, remember? I got a paper from the judge saying I can tell you to go fly a kite."

"Lookit, baby," Ed pleaded. "You're being mean to me. You're treating me like dirt. You owe me more than that, for old time's sake."

"I don't owe you a thing," Clara replied sharply. "You've got no option on me, my friend. I've got to hang up now. I haven't much time to bathe and dress and beautify myself for my big date tonight."

"Who?" Tinkley barked.

"You'd die if you knew," Clara laughed. "He's the Lord's gift to lonely grass widows."

Tinkley gagged, tried to think of something cogent and persuasive to say. Nothing came to him. If she was going to do it, there was nothing he could do to stop her, short of killing DeCourt. He hadn't quite got around to that, yet.

"Good-by, Ed," Clara spoke, breaking the silence which had been humming over the wire. "I'll be seeing you."

"Wait!" Tinkley yelled. But there was a click and he knew it was a lost cause.

IT WAS night—a singularly black and ominous night. Tinkley pulled the Drive-yourself way off the side of the road, under the sign saying: TIDWELL: SQUABS. He set the brake, switched off the lights. There was a good breeze, and the night air was colder than comfortable.

"Golly," Tinkley said to himself, sadly. "I'd like to get my hands on the lousy jay who told Larsson I was the boy to do this job. I'd sell the dirty so-and-so to a dog-meat cannery."

His face was still a throbbing wreck. His whole frame felt the effects of the beating he'd taken from DeCourt's thugs during the afternoon. He picked up the neat photographic kit MacGruder had bought with

nice *Chronos* money, and he started feeling his way down the inky road toward DeCourt's bungalow.

According to the lad from MacGruder's office, DeCourt had taken his convertible from the garage at about seven o'clock. The boy had really thrown himself into his detective work. He tailed DeCourt in a taxi, saw him pick up a lady, brunette, very pretty, at Number 13 Santa Teresa Road.

Tinkley cursed at the thought. Why did he have to love Clara so? Why did he have to care, so much that he was weak with anger and pain?

He moved, a shadow among deep shadows, through the entrance of DeCourt's hideaway. He crossed the spot on the lawn where he'd taken his brutal shellacking. He skirted the stone bench on which his favorite camera had been smashed to shards. Fingers of light splayed out from the windows of the house. He avoided them, slunk through the darkness until he was standing under the black window of what he had spotted earlier as the bedroom.

From the murk in which he crouched, he could see the driveway at the front of the bungalow, part of the front lawn. Over his head was the ironwork of the balcony outside the black bedroom window. There was no sign of activity in the house other than the fact that lights burned in some of the rooms.

As Tinkley crouched in the shaded shrubbery beneath the balcony, a blob of movement caught his attention. A man was craftily following the fringe of bushes edging the yard, moving silently and slowly toward the back of the place.

While Tinkley willed himself to look like a shadow, the man moved around the corner of the yard and out of sight. At almost the same moment, twin headlights showed brightly in the driveway and DeCourt's gleaming, robin's-egg-blue convertible nosed toward the house. In the dim light from the tiny porch, Tinkley could see no more than the forms of a man and a woman. They stood by the car and embraced rapturously. He hated himself for the picture he was going to take. Then the couple broke apart and went into the house.

He strained to hear sounds inside. There were none. A few moments passed, then the front door opened and Mean Eyes and Hunky walked to the car. Both got in,

Hunky behind the wheel. The motor roared to life again and the car stabbed its lights out to the main road and away.

Tinkley gnashed his teeth. DeCourt and Clara were alone now. He thought with sour bitterness of his ex-wife inside that house. His right hand pained suddenly, and he realized that he'd been pounding his fist against the rough stucco wall.

A glow of light showed in the window over his head, and by chinning up on the ironwork, Tinkley saw that the door had been opened into the room, letting in a path of light. He saw, too, that it was indeed the most Hollywoodian and luxurious bedroom he had ever seen.

While he clung there, peering through the nearly shut venetian blinds, DeCourt snapped on a low, intimate lamp beside the oversized bed, went out again.

Tinkley lowered himself. He shoved his photographic equipment up onto the ironwork balcony, close to the wall. With infinite care, he clambered up to the balcony himself, plastered his body against the wall, careful that no finger of light could reach out to betray him.

The glow at the front of the house abruptly died. The light behind the venetian blind dimmed. Tinkley leaned far back, risked a glance into the room.

A woman was standing there, with her back to the window, apparently engrossed in a large, colorful painting on the far wall. The light beyond the door vanished, leaving blackness, and DeCourt came in. Tinkley ducked.

He lay there on the grill, with the metal slats cutting into his body, with the chill breeze whipping at him with cold, avid fingers. A few minutes later, the light in the room was snapped off.

Now or never, thought Tinkley. If I'm going to get the picture—and I'd rather be hanged—this is it.

With the black night sky behind him, he was pretty certain he couldn't be seen in the crack of window left open by the venetian blinds. He reared up, camera in hand, flash battery attached and ready, the lens angled in the direction of the bed.

Damn! thought Tinkley. This is a pig in poke. I could use just a little light in that room, to be sure I'm getting a good shot.

As if in answer to a prayer, a thread of light showed from the place where the black

doorway had been. A thread of light and a dull gleam of metal. A flashlight, held in the hand of an unseen person—the skulker he'd seen in the yard, Tinkley guessed quickly.

There was a flurry of movement, only dimly seen in the faint, narrow beam from the flash. A whitish figure darted across the room. Another figure reared up by the bed. A streak of red, accompanied by the rending blast of gunfire, came from beside the hand which held the flashlight.

Tinkley angled the camera into that room, set off his flash bulbs.

For half an instant, nothing happened. Only the crowding of dying light and a pregnant silence. Then there was a man's scream of mortal pain and something hot and angry—a bullet—sprinkled shards of glass into Tinkley's face.

Whoever had the gun was shooting at Tinkley now. And Tinkley was making it far too easy for the gunman. He sprang to his feet, legged over the low balustrade of the balcony, hurled himself out of the line of fire even as another slug came winging in his direction.

He hit the ground, hugging his precious camera, at the end of a cruel power-dive. His shoulder felt as if it were torn apart. He scrambled wildly to his feet, began running with all his might and main.

As he reached the entrance, car lights picked out the roadway, coming toward him. In the nick of time, he rolled into the black shelter of the shrubbery, lay there, gasping for breath, as hot rubber tires rolled past within inches of his knees.

He wormed his way deeper into the prickly hedging, came out on the other side, even as the squeal of tightening brakes rent the inky night. As men piled out of the car, he wormed into the ditch bordering the main road, bent low and began running once more toward where he had parked his jalopy, up the hill.

SAM LARSSON was sitting in the gloomy, night-shrouded Los Angeles office of *Chronos*, the magazine that prints "The News While It's News." He slouched at a borrowed desk, sampling a bottle which he had at his elbow. On the corner of the desk, a portable radio crooned softly to itself. In a corner of the room, a group of teletypes sat humming, as if impatient

to spew more clacking words into the world.

Ed Tinkley sat across the desk from Larsson. Tinkley was still holding the camera in his hands. The camera wobbled, because Tinkley's hands hadn't yet stopped shaking.

"We'll have to go to the police with this, Tinkley," Larsson was saying. "We can't hold out on the police. That's not the way *Chronos* does business. If you've got a shot of the guy who tried to kill DeCourt, you've got to spill."

"Why?" Tinkley growled. "If DeCourt is dead—and I sincerely hope he *is* dead—this picture doesn't mean anything. That car which rolled in as I lit out, that must have been swarming with dicks. They'll have the killer. And with DeCourt dead, you don't need this picture. I can destroy it and retain a little of my self-respect."

"You're a newsman," Larsson said grandly, "and that is a news picture. Think, my friend, maybe you've snapped a murder in the process. It's terrific!"

"Yeah," growled Tinkley. "And how about the woman in the picture? That's terrific, too. *Chronos* is no scandal sheet. Do we have to smear her all over the world?"

"That's her worry," Larsson said coldly. "We don't make the news. We only record it. If she shouldn't have been there, that's her hard luck."

There was a sudden change of pace on the radio and a hard, clipped voice was speaking as Larsson turned up the volume:

"... murder at Ojai. Quincey DeCourt, well-known society man, was shot to death in the bedroom of his bungalow there. The killer escaped, but the police, who were at the scene almost immediately, expect an early arrest. A woman who was on the premises at the time of the murder is being held as a material witness . . ."

"Ed," the publisher of *Chronos* said severely, "this is going to be a sensation. That picture, I mean. It will show the killer, break the case. I'll call the photographic staff in and we'll see what we've got."

Tinkley's brain speeded. "Don't bother," he countered. "I can find my way around a darkroom. I'll develop the damn picture myself."

He could fix Clara's face so that her own mother wouldn't recognize her. Maybe

her name would get into the papers but he could fix the face.

While Larsson sat at the desk, drumming his fingers on the polished top and slowly bringing the level in the bottle down, Tinkley groped through dark hallways until he came to the photographic department.

For a guy who'd been nuts about cameras and pictures and the whole mechanics of his trade since he was twelve years old, Ed Tinkley moved about with a strange and obvious reluctance. He stripped the film from the camera as if it would burn him, put it through the baths of developer and hypo. Then he rinsed the negative off, took it out into the light, squinted through it puzzledly.

Anyone watching him would have thought he had hold of a hot electric wire. He stared, rubbed his eyes, stared again. Then he let out a small warwhoop, dashed back into the darkroom to make a print. When it was finished, he held it close to his face, scrutinizing it.

There in the picture, plain as day, was a hard-faced hood standing in the doorway of the swank bedroom, with the still-smoking gun in his fist. There, sitting by the bed, was Quincey DeCourt, his mouth open for the scream which Tinkley had heard. A little black hole showed in the white silk of his shirt front. And there, in the corner of the room—a beautiful action shot—was a babe running out of the room. But not Clara. Not Clara. Some other, unknown doll!

Tinkley uttered a silent prayer of thanksgiving, started sprinting down the hall, taking the print to Larsson.

A couple of beefy, craggy-faced men were standing in the big teletype room with the publisher. "This is my man Tinkley," Larsson explained. "I called the police in, Tinkley. *Chronos* always plays ball with the law, you know. Show them the picture you took."

Tinkley scowled. Larsson had double-crossed him. If Clara had been the girl. . . .

The two dicks were bent over the glossy print. "Lord, what a picture!" one of them exclaimed. "Look at that frog-faced DeCourt! He must be dead already."

"And look at Tony Perrillo! Boy, would I like to have a shot of every murder as good as this one!"

Larsson had risen from the desk, was

peering at the print with the two detectives. "And look at that girl!" he chortled. "There's a circulation builder if I ever saw one!"

"Sure," the first plainclothesman agreed amiably. "That's that Hartsdale babe we caught when we closed in on the spot at Ojai."

A bell rang in Tinkley's brain. The pieces all fell together for him. Karen Hartsdale, Clara's roommate, was DeCourt's lady friend. Perrillo had found out about the two-timing. With the pressure on him anyway, with the cops only minutes behind him, he'd decided to take DeCourt out of the play. Clara wasn't in the thing at all.

Tinkley dived head over heels for the telephone. . . .

* * *

Larsson had officially turned the print over to the detectives, with great personal satisfaction and a flock of glib explanations. Another copy was being wirephotoed to Editorial, in New York, in time for *Chrono's* weekly closing. Karen was howling her head off in the clink. The dragnet had already snagged Perrillo and he was locked up snug—the first step on his journey to the chair.

"It still was a dirty assignment," Ed Tinkley told Clara. He was sitting in her

apartment. It was two o'clock in the morning. "I feel like a heel."

Clara was wearing a wonderful, slinky, maroon hostess gown. She said: "And you thought I was the one you'd find in that picture?"

"I sure did," Tinkley admitted.

"A fine opinion you must have of me, heel!"

"But look at all the evidence, lamb. I told you—"

"If you loved me, you would never believe it. You'd have faith in me."

"But honey—!"

"You've got a low mind, Ed." She paused. "But you really were worried about me, weren't you?"

"Worried?" Tinkley returned. "I damn near died, Clara!"

"That's nice. I like that."

"I was sick, sweetie. I—I—"

"Sometimes you're sweet, Ed," Clara said. "Sometimes I'm a little sorry I ever divorced—"

"Darling!" He lunged out of the overstuffed chair, landed beside her on the davenport.

"Darling—Clara—do you really mean it? Things could be different now. Larsson gave me a whopping raise and—"

"I don't want things different than now," Clara murmured against his lips. "I like it fine, now." And her free hand reached out to snap off the lamp.



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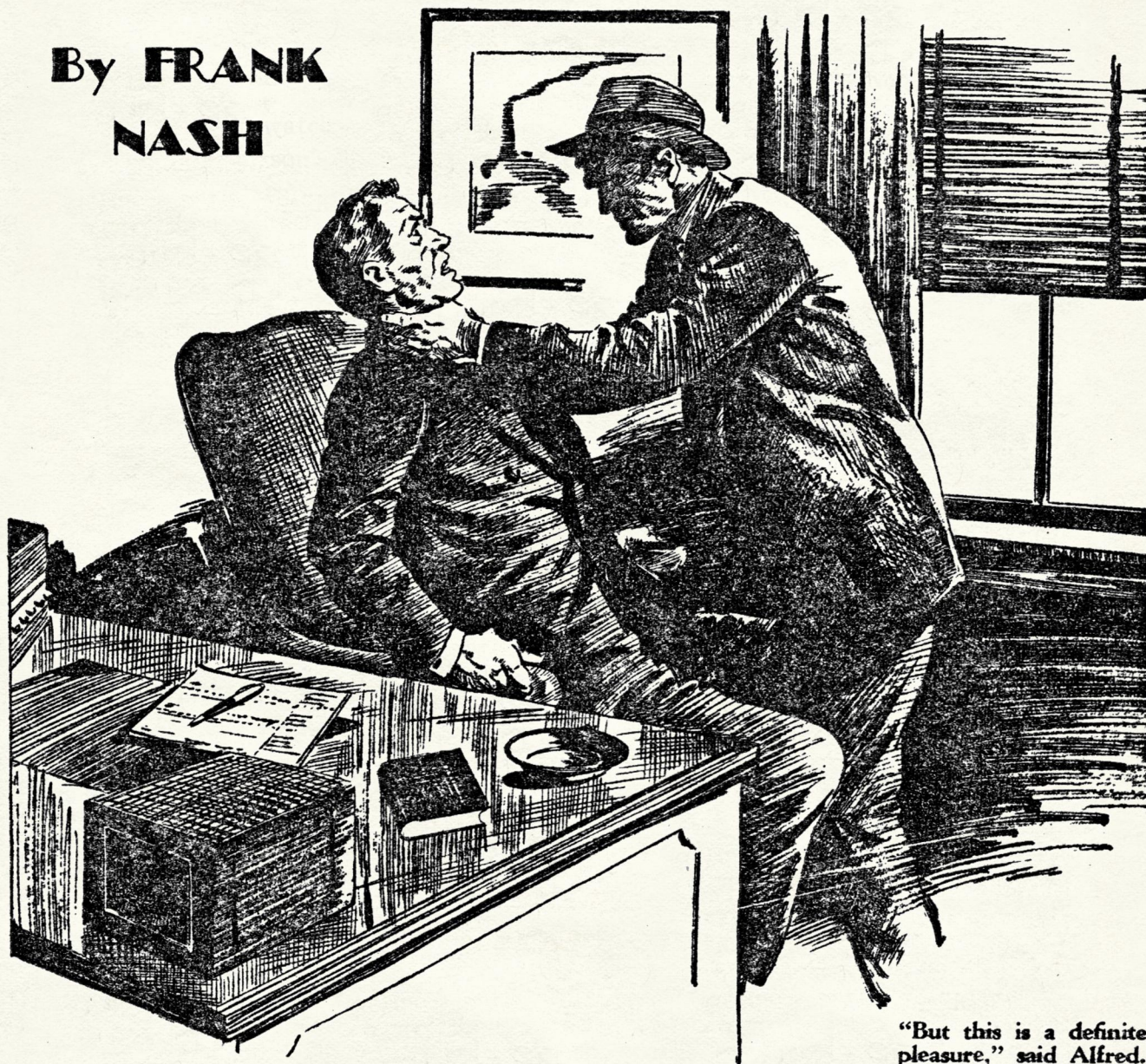
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MURDER STATIC

By **FRANK
NASH**



"But this is a definite pleasure," said Alfred.

Engineer Al Bolling's gruesome gadget would short-circuit his trip to the electric chair . . . and win him a slick-dish gal—he hoped.

ALFRED BOLLING carefully placed his slide rule to one side of his work table and picked up a screwdriver. He inserted it in the small device of wire and spools before him and made a half turn. Settling back in his chair he felt a glow of satisfaction spread through him.

His small eyes gleamed as he relaxed his slight body. He gazed thoughtfully at the mechanism standing before him on the

table. A wire ran between two spools mounted on a narrow metal base. A small removable key on the side of one of the spools wound a watchspring motor.

Methodically, Alfred cleared his table. He placed the tools in a leather case and swept the odd scraps of wire into his cupped hand. These he threw into the wastebasket.

Then he inserted the key into the socket on the side of the spool and wound the spring slowly. He did it as though it were a ritual. With each turn of the key he tightened his grip around Henry Unant's neck.

When he finished winding the spring, he removed the key and carefully placed a

cover over the mechanism. Two wires dangled from it—one black and the other red. Copper lugs were soldered to the ends of the wires. The whole thing was small, about three inches by five, and maybe half an inch thick. It was compact enough to fit into his pocket without causing a suspicious bulge, but it held the answer to his problem.

Ever since he had received the letter from the salesman for Areco Wire Company, he knew that he would have to get rid of Unant. Only a scientific mind like his would have thought of using an old wire recording of Unant's own voice as the means of doing it. A watchspring motor turned the spools. Attached to the correct terminals in a radio it would sound as if Unant were speaking. It would make the perfect alibi.

He wished that he could try it on his radio. No, that might upset the timetable of death. He had already spent more time making the device than he had planned.

He rose and dropped the mechanism into the side pocket of his jacket. Turning to the mirror he saw that the pocket sagged hardly at all. Death made such a small package!

Everything was ready now. He felt a sense of freedom as though, in completing his preparations, he had broken the tension of the last two days. He had done everything now—everything but the final act of killing Unant. He glanced at the radio program for the evening. Station WORP signed off at five o'clock. That fitted in with his plans. Alfred picked up the telephone and dialed a number, "Hello, Diana?"

The blood pounded through the pulse in his temple. His hand trembled. She said "Hello" twice before he realized she was on the other end of the wire.

Then he said, "How about that dinner date—still on? . . . Oh, about five-thirty—I'll be in to see Unant about five and I'll pick you up then . . . Okay?"

He dropped the phone into its cradle and walked out to the kitchen. He mixed himself a highball and sipped it slowly while he read the letter for the last time. It was from Tartuffe, salesman for Areco Wire Company: ". . . it seems that Smith over here caught wise when he checked our inventory. I put him off but they aren't likely to make too much fuss here. I just thought

I'd warn you in case Unant hears about it . . ."

There was more, but Alfred had read enough. He drew the lighter out of his pocket and, holding the letter over the sink, burned it. Unant was probably the only one who wouldn't hush the story. He must be put out of the way.

Alfred smiled crookedly. After tonight there would be no Unant. He clenched his hands in anticipation.

There would be no Unant. There would be no more flaunting of his business success as president of Unant Radio Company. No longer would Al Bolling have to stand for his former classmate's condescending airs. No longer would he have to listen to Diana, who was secretary to Unant, spend half their dates praising her boss.

Henry Unant had given Alfred the job as production engineer in the recording department of Unant Radio Company back in the early days of the war. The company had just obtained the contract for the wire-recording machines used by the Navy to make permanent records of plane-to-ground conversations during combat flying.

Of course Alfred had made a good thing of it. Why shouldn't he? Certainly Unant's bank balance did not become smaller through the war years. Why shouldn't Alfred Bolling also make good use of his opportunities?

Tartuffe of Areco had furnished him with the opportunity. Substitute a slightly cheaper grade of wire—who would ever know?

But now after four years Unant did know. When the young president called Alfred in yesterday, he had pleaded illness, putting off the interview until tonight. For a long while now he had been planning Unant's death. His mind had played with many ingenious devices but he discarded them all because they would cheat him of the satisfaction of killing Unant with his own hands.

LATE last night, tossing in bed, he had hit upon this idea. He patted the small bulge in his jacket pocket. He probably would never have thought of it if he had not run across that old recording of Unant's voice.

It was perfect for his purpose. Unant had addressed the workers telling them

of the new Navy contract. His speech was recorded on the first machine made by their company. Bolling knew the part he wanted; it was right at the beginning of the talk.

He ran it off on one of the large machines in the plant. Unant's voice—then the long pause. Al had not risked playing any more of it. He snipped the wire and wrapped the coil of wire in his handkerchief.

Now it was wound tightly on one of the spools in the gadget. He looked at his watch. Four-thirty. It had taken him longer than he expected; there was no time for a dress rehearsal.

He gloated mentally over the cleverness of his device. Who else could have thought of anything so perfect? He poured himself another drink, a stiff one . . .

* * *

Al Bolling smoothed the bulge in the side pocket of his jacket as he opened the door of the outer office. Diana was sitting at her desk outside Unant's door. She looked up as he entered. He shut the door behind him and stood a moment, letting his eyes run over the trim lines of her figure.

She smiled, "Hello, Al. I thought you'd be here earlier." He returned the smile. This was one night when he would be able to listen to her stories of Unant knowing that the successful president would never stand between them again.

"I have to see Unant. I won't be more than a couple of minutes."

Diana picked up her handbag, "I'll wash up while you're—"

"No!" His vehemence startled her. "No," he repeated, softening his voice. *She must be here when I step out of that office.* A surge of panic choked him. Everything depended on her being there to witness his leaving Unant's office. *Everything depended on that.* "You just wait here—I won't be more than a minute or two."

She slid back into the chair from which she had half risen. "O.K. I'll finish this letter."

Alfred walked past her desk to the door of the inner office with "President" lettered on the frosted-glass panel. He hesitated with his hand on the knob.

"Go right in," Diana said. "He's expecting you."

Unant was speaking over the telephone when Alfred stepped inside the office. He motioned to Alfred to be seated, "All right," he said into the phone, "I'll see you about that the first thing in the morning."

You won't see anybody in the morning. Alfred exulted mentally. He clenched and unclenched his hands under cover of the desk. Unant dropped the phone into the cradle and turned to Alfred. "You know of course why I wanted to see you, Bolling?"

"About the recording tape? The quality of the wire?"

Unant nodded, "Exactly."

Alfred rose from his chair, "But it's just as good as—"

"Damn it, Al, you're too good an engineer to say that. At first, yes—it's all right. But after two or three years, it deteriorates until it's darn near worthless."

Alfred moved closer, his eyes half closed to mask the light he felt gleaming in them. He could feel the pulse pounding in his temple repeating with every beat of his heart: *Kill him. . . . kill him. . . .*

Unant reached for his memo pad. "We can't do anything about the wire now, but there may be other things in the future. I could never trust you again." Hastily, as though the task were distasteful, Unant scribbled something on the memo pad and held it out to Alfred without looking up. He opened the center drawer of his desk and brought out his checkbook, "This isn't pleasant, but—"

"But this is a definite pleasure," said Alfred. His hands closed around Unant's neck. Their pressure tightened. The cry was choked in Unant's throat.

Alfred stepped back; stared at the thing on the floor. He grabbed it by the lapels, lifted it back into the desk chair. Diana was still typing. He touched his forehead; it was dry and hot. But he was cool inside. There were things to do! Diana must not grow impatient and leave to wash up without waiting for him. She must be out there when he left Unant's office. His whole scheme depended on it.

He took the small-metal case out of his pocket and stepped over to the large cabinet radio near the window. A few deft adjustments and it was wired in place inside the radio. Tomorrow, after the excitement

died down, he could slip in here and remove it. Meanwhile it would be safe there. No one would ever look in the radio.

He set the dial for WORP and flicked the switch. The station would start broadcasting in the morning before the body was discovered.

A faint hum came from the warmed-up radio. Al reached behind the cabinet and started the spring motor of his gadget. Then, with one last look at the man sitting behind the desk with his head cocked at an impossible angle, Alfred opened the door.

DIANA had finished the letter when he stepped out of the office. He swung the door slowly shut—he must have it timed right.

He was startled himself when he heard Unant's voice: "We ought to go far with this new idea."

Alfred turned and thrust his head through the half-closed door. "You said it. Good night!"

He shut the door behind him and turned to Diana. The wire recording would run down to the end and then a cleverly made switch would automatically turn the radio back on the broadcast. There would be no sound from the speaker until WORP resumed broadcasting again. When the office workers arrived in the morning they would find Unant dead.

His alibi was perfect. Diana could testify that Unant had been alive after he left the office. And for the rest of the evening he would be at dinner with her and then the theater. Perfect.

He stood with his back to the door, exultation surging through him as he let his eyes linger on Diana's curves. He heard the step of the night watchman as he made his routine rounds in the hall outside.

Diana pulled the cover over her typewriter, "Okay!" She looked curiously at his flushed face, "Al, don't you feel well?"

He held his breath. He must control his

excitement, his desire to rush out now that everything had worked so well. There must not be anything suspicious that she might recall later. . . .

"O sure—sure, I feel fine." He stepped away from the door and seized her in his arms, fiercely, "Sure, nothing wrong with me."

He held her slightly resisting form in his arms. The sound of the watchman's steps became fainter as he walked down the hall.

Al placed his hand behind her head and forced her to look at him. He kissed her slowly, savoring to the full his triumph.

Then he heard it—a low sustained moan that came from Unant's office. *Nerves. He must fight them. This is no time to go haywire.*

He felt Diana stiffen in his arms and then fight herself free of his embrace. Her eyes opened wide in horror as the moan rose to a deafening screech.

Sweat jumped out on his forehead. He heard the watchman's steps as he came running back through the hall. Then the door opened. "What's going on in here?"

Diana seized the knob on the door to Unant's office. Alfred caught her by the shoulders and swung her away from the door. She fell against the desk.

The watchman moved forward, his billy raised threateningly. He yelled: "Here—you can't—"

Alfred rushed. He hit the burly watchman above the knees and sent him sprawling against the wall. As he darted for the open door, the watchman caught his ankle.

He crashed to the floor with his arms over his head in an attempt to ward off the expected rain of blows.

The screaming stopped. The wire had reached the end of the spool. So Unant was right—the cheap wire was faulty after four years!

His arms were heavy and weary. He dropped one. A thousand stars exploded inside his skull as the watchman's billy crashed against his unguarded head.



PLIGHT OF THE PALLBEARER'S HONEY

CHAPTER ONE

Stuck With Five Grand

LIKE I thought it would be, the Brentville was one of those very plush apartment-hotels on Madison up in the middle Eighties. A wide blue canopy shaded the entrance from the early afternoon sun. Long, shiny cars were parked

at the curb. A nasty-looking boxer was sniffing the potted trees on the sidewalk. A doorman, dressed like a Russian colonel, was holding onto the other end of the leash. I walked through the lobby, cleared at the desk and took the elevator up to the ninth floor.

In thin black script, the letters on the door said: "Dr. Carlton G. Kirkland,



I jerked back his head as hard as I could. . . .

Psychiatrist." The reception room was empty of customers. It was simple, but very effective—especially the wicked-looking blonde at the desk. The triangular plaque at her elbow read: "Gladys Bronson." The white nurse's uniform she wore didn't hide her shape at all. I liked the way she used her smile. She had a sweet, torchy voice that wrapped itself right around you.

"You're Mr. Merrick, the private investigator," she said. She made it sound like news.

I said: "In the flesh."

She opened the smile another notch. "The doctor is waiting for you, Mr. Merrick. You can go right in."

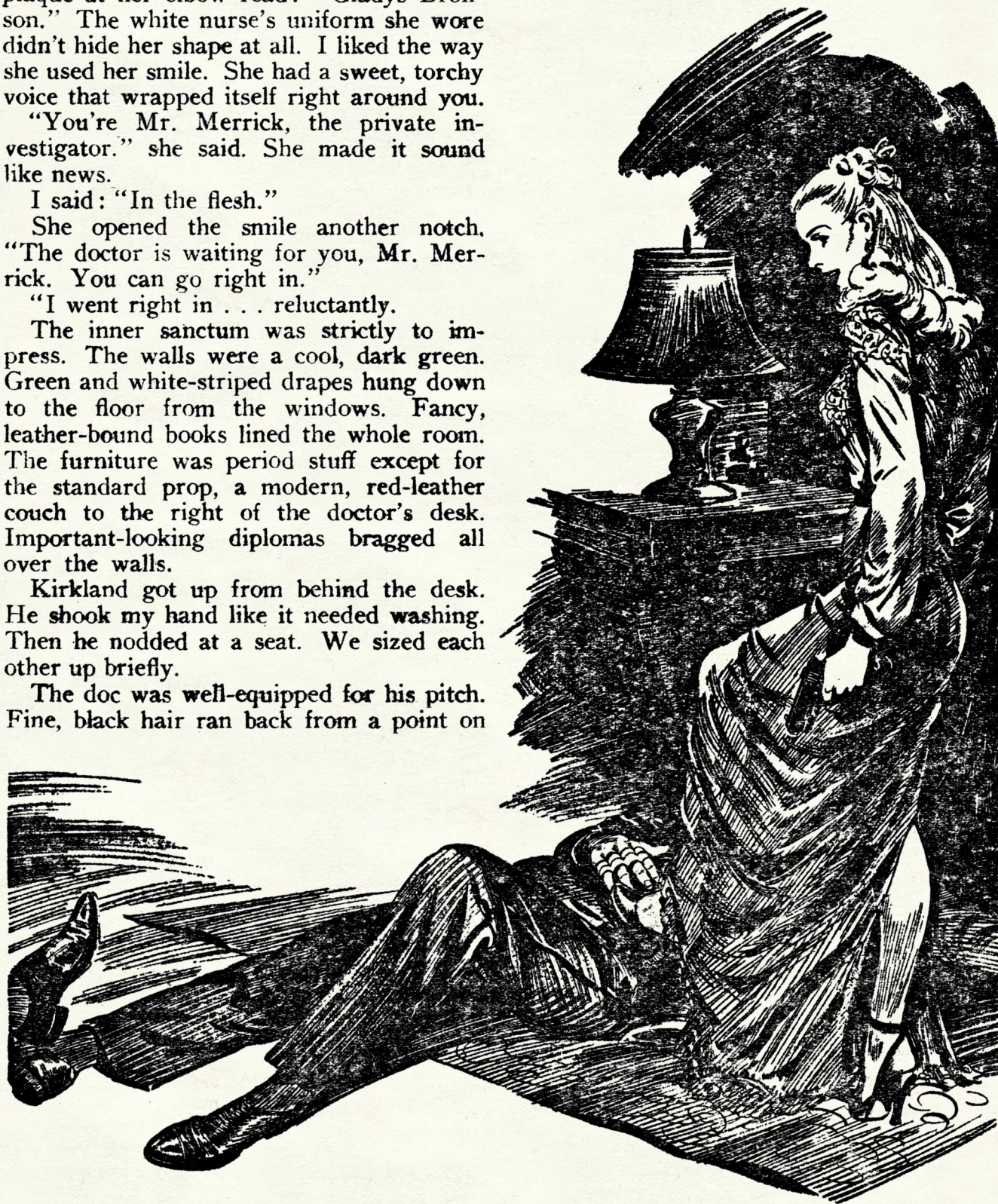
"I went right in . . . reluctantly.

The inner sanctum was strictly to impress. The walls were a cool, dark green. Green and white-striped drapes hung down to the floor from the windows. Fancy, leather-bound books lined the whole room. The furniture was period stuff except for the standard prop, a modern, red-leather couch to the right of the doctor's desk. Important-looking diplomas bragged all over the walls.

Kirkland got up from behind the desk. He shook my hand like it needed washing. Then he nodded at a seat. We sized each other up briefly.

The doc was well-equipped for his pitch. Fine, black hair ran back from a point on

Thrill-Packed Suspense Novelette



By **FRANK HUEPPER**

Two torrid blondes spiced Private-Eye Merrick's interest in a juicy blackmail—but they also spiked his backpedaling from a morgue slab.

his forehead. There was just the right amount of silver-gray over the ears. Deep-set, know-it-all eyes looked out of a smooth, even face. He had a long, straight nose and a good mouth. His starched white jacket squared up a pair of shoulders a yard or so wide. It wasn't hard to picture a queue of neurotic women waiting to spill out their grief on them—even at fifty bucks a lesson.

He picked up a long yellow pencil and started tapping it on the desk. "I've had your references thoroughly checked, Merrick," he said. "They seem to be quite in order."

I said: "I always use people I've got something on." It went over like a lead balloon.

"I assume you have no objection to handling a criminal case?"

"Not if it pays enough."

That drew a tight little smile. He made a tent with his fingers, took a deep slug of air and went right into his song. "As a psychiatrist, Merrick, I'm obliged to probe deeply into the minds of my patients. It's my job to draw out their innermost thoughts in order to weigh and to balance their mental disturbances." He turned up the palms of his long, well-shaped hands and weighed and balanced *his* innermost thoughts.

"Naturally," he went on, "I often hear things of a very intimate nature in my case studies. You can understand about that, can you, Merrick?" He said it like you'd talk to a dull little boy having trouble getting through the fifth grade.

I said: "I'm straining as hard as I can."

"In that case I'll come right to the point," he said curtly. "On the strength of certain disclosures recently made to me in a case study, one of my patients is being blackmailed for five thousand dollars—by an anonymous person."

He waited for me to make a crack. I didn't. It was too obvious. He made it a point to look me right in the eye. "I'm certain there could be no leak from this office," he went on. "However, my patient seems unable to put a finger on anyone else in a position to know of her secret and use it against her."

I looked over my shoulder to the double wood door the blonde had closed after me when I came in. Kirkland shook his head sideways impatiently. "The entire room is

soundproofed for concentration," he said.

"And Gladys, of course, never files anything but her nails."

He shook his head still more impatiently. "I'd hardly be stupid enough to put this sort of information on paper. And, in any case, Miss Bronson has no access whatever to anything confidential. Her purpose here happens to be primarily ornamental."

I couldn't argue with that. He started tapping the pencil again. "You might as well know right now, Merrick. If you take this job you'll have little opportunity to theorize or deduce." The acid in it was heavy. "I don't intend to tell you anything further about the background of the case or the person involved."

"You're throwing the party, doctor," I said. "You can throw it with any kind of music you like."

"As it happened, Merrick," he said dryly. "I'm merely *arranging* the party. You see, in spite of the bad light this thing puts me in, the person involved has had the good sense to trust me implicitly." He frowned momentarily. "To the extent, in fact, that she has turned the blackmail money over to me and asked me to handle the whole dirty business. Perhaps you can see the picture?"

NO DIAGRAM was necessary. By arranging the pay-off through Kirkland who already knew the whole story, the goat wouldn't have to show to a go-between or any other third person. And naturally, from where Kirkland was sitting, it wouldn't be easy for him to shrug his way off the arrangements committee.

"So what it boils down to," I said, "is that right at the minute you're lining up the messenger boy."

"Yes, if you care to put it that way." The acid got heavy again. "However, for any indignities suffered, I'm authorized to pay as much as a hundred dollars, in advance."

I didn't intend to look impressed, but I guess I must have. He got down to details. "According to the instructions received," he said, "an unaccompanied person is to bring the five thousand dollars to the seventh green of the Green Hill Golf Course in Pelham Manor at exactly, nine o'clock this evening. Perhaps you know of the place?"

I told him I knew of the place.

"Whoever is there," he went on. "I feel sure will be careful not to reveal his identity. However, I imagine there *will* be further instructions of some kind. They are to be followed to the letter. The black-mailer seems to be covered from every angle. Naturally, I'd be delighted to find out who he is, but there's too much at stake to risk any slip-up. Do I make myself clear?"

"As far as you've gone."

"It doesn't go any further, Merrick. There might be some other developments later. But right now, as far as you are concerned, that's all there is to the case." He leaned back in his chair. "Naturally, if you take the job I'll expect you to get back here as soon as you can and tell me exactly what happened. I'll be staying in town for the night. In fact, I'll be waiting for you right here at the office from ten o'clock on." He looked at me for an answer.

Ordinarily, on a blackmail job, I would have held out for a whole lot more of a fill-in. I wasn't crazy about the set-up. I don't like to walk into blind alleys. Still, the good doctor had the right reputation with a whole lot of very important people. That I'd already checked. For one night's work, it wasn't bad money, either. And to clinch it, I had a delivery promise on a brand new convertible. Up to now the down payment had somehow eluded me.

* * *

The reception room was still without patients when I came out a little while later. Kirkland had buzzed Gladys to take care of my check. She was standing over by the window pulling up the venetian blind. Her legs were the long, willowy kind you see in the stocking ads. She turned on the smile again. "Congratulations," she said. "It looks like you got on the payroll."

I said: "Maybe you ought to congratulate Kirkland."

She laughed sweet and low down. She lifted her eyes frankly towards mine as she walked past me to the desk. I noticed they were a cool, smoky blue. There seemed to be some kind of an idea dancing around behind them. She took one of those outsized checkbooks out of a drawer. She opened it on the desk and smiled up at me again.

"How would you spell it, Mr. Merrick?"

"With two R's," I said. "*T-e-r-r-i-f-i-c.*"

She didn't stop smiling. I gave her my business card. She filled in the check, tore it out of the book and handed it to me. The telephone buzzed just as she did. I folded the check and put on my hat. She picked up the call with one hand and put the other one on my arm. I didn't exactly shake myself loose.

"One moment, please, Mrs. Moroney," she was saying into the mouthpiece. "I'll put you right on the doctor's wire."

She switched in the call. She hung up. Then she looked over her shoulder towards the doctor's office. When she talked this time she dropped her voice a peg. "Mr. Merrick," she said. "I don't know what this is all about. I'm not supposed to.

"But I've got a pretty good idea *who* it's about and there's something I think you should know." She scribbled something on the back of the card I'd given her. "I hope you won't get the wrong idea if I ask you to call me—some time later tonight." She handed me the card. "I'll be home any time after ten o'clock."

Maybe I've got a dirty mind, but offhand it looked like a little more than coincidence—that fact that she and Kirkland both happened to point up ten o'clock. I found myself toying with the idea that the doctor and Gladys were playing games. I put the card into my pocket and started for the door. I said: "There's just a chance I can crowd you in, honey."

Her smile took a funny, eager little twist. It was sort of exciting to look at. I added: "In fact, I'll be dead or unconscious if I don't." I *thought* I was kidding when I said it.

THE rest of the afternoon I spent playing golf. I didn't have anything better to do, and Green Hill is a public course. It was a great day in the suburbs. There wasn't a spot in the sky. The cool, autumn air floated up pleasantly into my nostrils. The woods were trimmed out like a technicolor set. And my game was lousy.

The seventh hole turned out to be a dog-leg to the right, about two hundred yards off the Shore Road. The green was almost completely circled by heavy woods. I overplayed my approach shot without any trouble at all and followed it into the bushes.

It took me fifteen minutes to find the ball.

I also found a grass-grown road for the power mowers running through the woods about ten yards beyond the green. I followed it out to the Shore Road and back. I let a threesome go through. I cased the spot a little more thoroughly and then played out the rest of the course.

By the time I got back to the clubhouse, the sun was dropping away fast. I changed my clothes in the locker room, taking my good American time. When I finished I coaxed the old ark out along the Post Road to New Rochelle. I found a not-too-greasy bar and grill and settled down. A couple of highballs, a tough steak and a cute waitress pushed the clock around past 8:15.

It was as black as a club flush by the time I got back to Green Hill. There wasn't a soul within a mile. I parked the ark under a tree out of sight. Before I locked it, I took off the money belt I'd been wearing. I took out the fifty hundred dollar bills Kirkland had given me at his office and slid them into an envelope. I sealed it and put it into my inside coat pocket.

Then I took my Army .45 out of the shoe compartment in my golf bag and strapped it around my shoulder. I didn't really expect any trouble. I just thought I might like a little company. The luminous dial on my watch showed just a little bit after 8:45.

I stumbled leisurely along the fairway. I had a flashlight in my back pocket, but I didn't intend to use it. By the time I pulled up on the seventh green, it was nine o'clock on the button. I stood there and keened the wind like a beagle. There was nothing to hear, nothing to see. I walked up to the flag and stood there a few away from it with my ears cocked, waiting.

I didn't have long to wait. Suddenly, without any warning, there was a sound like a dead branch crackling in the woods right next to me on the left. Something flew past my ear and racketed off in the bushes behind me. I made a headlong dive for the sandtrap. Two more shots whistled over my head.

Nothing like this was in the contract. I spit sand out of my mouth, got hold of the .45 and pitched three quick shots where the muzzle flash had been. There was a brief thrashing around in the woods. Then a car door chonked shut. The starter caught

and the engine roared out wide open towards the Shore Road. I emptied the gun blindly after the noise. Then I plowed through the bushes as fast as I could to the grass road. The car was already out of sight.

In the rush, I almost stumbled over a log beside one of the tractor ruts. When I looked a little bit closer, though, it wasn't a log. It was a man lying there with his face in the dirt, a long, thin man well over the six-foot mark. I noticed it even in the dark. I noticed, too, the smell of liquor was heavy on him.

I didn't think I was *this* good. I found out I wasn't when I rolled him over and snapped the light on his face. He wasn't a pretty sight. His sandy blond hair was matted with blood. Little red rivers of it were trickling down his cheeks. I could see two ugly purple welts on his forehead. His nose was twisted around crazily towards his ear. I felt for a pulse, but I knew it was foolish. Whoever sapped this boy was playing for keeps.

Snapping out the light, I listened a minute for sounds. All I could hear was the hum of the cars rushing by on the highway. Nobody seemed to be buying the shots. I suppose they might just as well have been back-fire. I knelt down and went through the man's pockets thoroughly. Whoever had frisked him before me was careless. There was still a slip of white paper folded up in his watch pocket. That was all.

CHAPTER TWO

Meet the Imprudent Missus

I PUT the light on the paper. There was a telephone number and a name printed roughly in pencil. The exchange for the number was Pelham Manor—right here in town. The name was Mrs. Connor Moroney. I'd heard it someplace before, even before Gladys had said it into the telephone at the doctor's office in the afternoon. Somehow I just couldn't place it. But I didn't have to beat my brains out to figure it was probably Mrs. Connor Moroney's five grand that was burning a hole in my pocket.

Not stopping to do any more thinking about it, I got back to the ark and rolled it out onto the Shore Road again. When I did, I couldn't make anything add up at

all. Whoever was using me for a sitting duck could have had the five grand just by asking for it—without even saying please. It didn't make any sense any way that I looked at it. But then, I didn't have very much to look at.

There was always the chance that everything Kirkland told me had been dreamed up as part of some deep-down psychiatric pitch. I worked that around for a while without getting any place. I tried to find a slot for the long, thin man. No dice. I started to think about Gladys.

Up to now I'd been hoping she'd turn out to be just another warm blonde. It began to look like she might have something to tell me at that. For the minute, though, it was just another dead end. I wracked my skull trying to think where I'd heard the name of Moroney before. It was all pretty silly. I just didn't have any grist for the mill.

There was only one thing I did know for sure. I knew I was going to need a lot better story than the one that I had if it got to the point where the cops started ringing my doorbell. I could have walked in and dumped the whole thing in their laps then and there.

But in my business, it isn't that simple. There was always the chance that all of my people burned with a pure white flame. Until I found out otherwise, it was part of my job to keep their names out of the paper if I could. There was only one way to get started without leaning all the way over to Kirkland. I made up mind to a quick little chat with Mrs. Connor Moroney while I was still right here in the neighborhood.

I stopped at the very first drugstore I hit in Pelham. I picked out a phone booth way in the back and closed the door tight. I looked at my watch. It was almost 9:30. On an offhand chance I tried the number Gladys had given me, a Manhattan exchange. It was still too early. Nobody answered.

I dropped in a fresh nickel and read Mrs. Moroney's number off the slip of white paper. She must have been sitting on the phone. There was one short buzz. Then a woman's voice said, "Hello."

"I'd like to talk to Mrs. Moroney," I said.

"This is Mrs. Moroney speaking."

I couldn't hear any trace of nervousness in it. There was just a chance I was up the wrong alley after all. I went all the way overboard anyhow. I said: "Mrs. Moroney, this is the private investigator Doctor Kirkland hired to go to the party for you tonight. The name is John Merrick. Something's come up. I've got to talk to you right away."

There was a whole lot of silence at the other end. I was holding my breath. When she spoke there was still no nervousness in it, but a quick little note of anger instead. "So Kirkland had to get me off his chest," she said frigidly. Then a pause. "Did you deliver the money all right?"

That made me breathe easier. I said: "I don't want to talk on the phone. I'm calling from right here in town. If you tell me the way, I can be there inside of ten minutes."

"That's impossible," she said quickly. "You can't come here."

"Then where can you meet me?"

"I can't leave the house, either," she said pettishly. "Did Kirkland tell you to call me?"

"Kirkland hasn't told me a thing. That's one of the reasons I've got to see you. It's very important. There's been trouble. There's a chance I can still keep you out of it if you have the right answers and stop playing hard to get."

If I could help it, I didn't want to say any more until I could watch her face while I said it. For a minute I thought the wire was dead. Then I heard her say suspiciously: "You wouldn't be trying to make a good thing out of this, would you Merrick?"

That gave me a laugh. I said: "Do you think I'd say yes if I was?"

Another long pause, then there was a sigh. "All right," she said, "but remember, you thought of this all by yourself. You drive north on Soundview as far as it goes. Take a right turn through a big iron gate and keep on going to the house. When you get there, tell the butler you've come to fix the radio. If you've got a tool kit in your car it might help. Is that clear?"

I told her I had it straight and hung up. There was something else I had straight, too. Mrs. Moroney hadn't bothered to tell the "folks" about her little blackmail adventure.

Before I took off, I made one more call. I called the local police desk. A sleepy cop by the name of Murphy answered the phone. I said: "Get a pencil, Murphy, and write it down: There's a body on the tractor road by the seventh green of the Green Hill Golf Course. You better send over a couple of caddies."

Not saying any more, I didn't wait for any reaction. If I couldn't get any place with Mrs. Moroney I wanted to be pretty sure I could read all about the boy with the bashed-in head in the early morning editions.

AFTER you go through the big iron gate you drive about half a mile down a private blue-stone before you hit the Moroney place. It's a hundred yards or so off the Sound, spreading all over the landscape like an institute. To the right of the house is a small cove running in behind a point of rocks.

When I saw it I suddenly got the flash. I remembered a story I'd heard about Westchester County booze-running back in the old Prohibition days. I remembered about the big wheel, a hard-bitten Irishman by the name of Connor Moroney. He ran a high-cover night club now out on the Post Road past Larchmont—not more than ten minutes drive away. It gave me a whole lot of new ideas. And it didn't make me feel any better about the empty .45 I was carrying under my arm. I wasn't dressed for trouble. I'd brought along only the single clip I'd already used.

I braked the ark under the tall white columns of the front porch. I lifted up the front seat and took out the tool kit, feeling a little bit silly about it. Then I walked up the steps and leaned on the buzzer. I thought I might as well try a feeler. I kept the kit out of sight behind me. A puffy old gent in a butler's rig opened the door and looked down his nose at me.

I said: "The name is Merrick—for Mr. Moroney. He's expecting me."

He had a voice like the middle of January. "Mr. Moroney is at the club. He won't be here until after midnight."

I'd hoped as much. It was nice to know. I swung the tool kit out into sight and looked a little bit puzzled. "Well, somebody called about the radio."

He stared at me for a second or two

without saying anything at all. Then he nodded his head and said: "Why didn't you say so, buddy?" He let me in and motioned to follow him.

We walked a couple of blocks through a loud and expensive modern living room. When we got to the far end, he opened a door and cued me into a wide, oak-panelled sitting room. Then he bowed out and shut the door without even saying "boo."

Mrs. Connor Moroney was not exactly the kind of a girl you'd take to a Sunday School picnic. She was the kind of a girl you'd expect to find draped on a chaise lounge in something comfortable with a bottle of scotch at her elbow and a French poodle sprawled in her lap. Only the poodle was missing.

It looked like my day for blondes. She was an expensive platinum job, the kind you really get hungry about. Her face was in the late twenties. It was pretty enough, but it wasn't the main event. She had one of those lithe bodies that makes the tomtoms beat in your ears. In the thing she was wearing you didn't have to strain your imagination, either. I think maybe I might have stared a little bit.

"Do you like what you see?" she said with a bite in it.

I said: "I've done a lot worse—when I've had the time."

She didn't like that at all. "The quicker you make it the better I like it," she said. "You were paid to handle a job, Merrick. Did you deliver the money or didn't you?"

I put the tools on top of the big console radio by the chaise, shoved it out from the wall and sat down in the chair beside it. I kept my eyes right on hers while I talked. I told her exactly what happened without skipping any details. She deadpanned right through it without any comment.

When I finished, she sat up and swung her legs onto the floor. There was a chilly look in her eyes that didn't go with the shape at all. "All right, Merrick," she said, "if that's how it is, I suppose you're entitled to some kind of bonus." There was a nasty inflection on the last word. "I'm warning you, though, don't make your price too high. There's another way I can handle this."

It was really too good for an act. "You've been reading the wrong funny papers, Mrs. Moroney." I said. "I didn't come here to

sell you anything. The way things worked out I wouldn't have to—not with your five grand right here in my pocket.”

“I see. You're pure as Snow White. You just came here to cry on my shoulder. Is that what you want me to think?”

“I'd like it better if you stopped thinking and started talking. When somebody takes a shot at me, I like to find out who it was. I like to find out why it was. Then I like to do something about it—especially if it looks like there might be a whole lot of unpleasant policemen asking me questions sooner or later about the dead people scattered around in the middle.”

There was still a doubtful look on her face. “Yes,” she said sarcastically. “You're scared silly what the cops might do to you. That's why you lifted the paper with my phone number on it. That's why you stuck your neck out further by calling a murder in blind.”

I was beginning to lose my patience a little. “You're so right, sweetheart,” I said. “You're so absolutely right. All I really have to do to get out from under is throw you to the wolves.” I got up and walked to the phone on the table by the chaise. I picked up the receiver. She was out of her seat and on my arm like somebody had jabbed her with a hatpin.

“What are you going to do?” she said almost threateningly.

I lifted her hand off my arm. I took her by the shoulders and shoved her none too gently back down into the chaise. A startled look crossed her face. I said:

“Look, lady, I happen to be a good private cop. A good private cop will always cover a client—up to a certain point. I'll give you one more chance. If you're interested in gettin' your money's worth you better start making the right kind of noises. And, baby, you better start making them fast.”

SHE came down off her high horse in a hurry. “I—I guess you've got an apology coming, Merrick,” she said uneasily. “I'm a little confused, I guess. It just seems like I've been a sucker for everybody who drops his hat. After a while you begin to get a little fed up with the part.”

Raising her eyes, she looked right into mine. “I don't suppose you'll believe me,” she said, “but as far as tonight's concerned,

I don't know any more about what happened than you do.

I didn't press it. I said: “We'll get to that later. For now, let's just take it right from the very first act.”

She hesitated briefly. I gave her a cigarette and lit it for her. “With what I know already,” I said, “I can work out the load you've got on your back all by myself inside of a couple of days. You're just saving me time by telling me now.”

She poured us both a straight shot of scotch. It helped her make up her mind. “What have I got to lose?” she said wearily. She blew out a cloud of smoke and started to talk low and fast. “It was four years ago back in Kansas City. I was a kid on the other side of the tracks playing around with a rich man's son. He took me out on the lake one day in his speed boat. We were all alone. He got a little bit tight and a little bit rough. Except for his money, I guess there wasn't really much that I liked about him. He got tighter and tighter, rougher and rougher. I finally had to hit him on the head with the bottle. He tumbled over the side and drowned.”

She didn't try to dramatize it. She just poured it out the way it came. That way it wasn't too hard to believe.

“It came to trial,” she went on. “The old man was a local power. There were too many women on the jury. I couldn't afford any more than a night-school lawyer. I drew three years on the farm for manslaughter.” She looked at me cynically. “Am I breaking your heart?”

I said: “I'm hard. I never even cry at the movies. I'm believing you, honey. Isn't that enough?”

“I guess it is,” she said. “You've got a whole lot more to swallow, too.” She picked it up again. “For two years I took everything they threw at me. I took it like I was working for a finishing school diploma. It finally got me special privileges. That made it so easy to run out, one day I just couldn't pass up the chance any longer. I found some clothes on somebody's wash line. I made my way East in a couple of days.” She took a long drink. “Never mind asking me how.”

“Let's just say you came on a bicycle.” She smiled appreciatively. “I used to be a brunette,” she said. “I changed my face as much as I could with make-up. Natural-

ly I changed my name, too. It used to be Polly Driscoll."

She paused for a second, liking the sound of it as she said it. I liked the sound of it myself. "I thought I'd better stay out of the city," she went on. "I found Moroney's club out here on the Post Road and got a job as a cigarette girl without too many questions asked. That made everything swell—for a couple of weeks.

"Moroney spread the fatherly interest on with a trowel, but I managed to stay outside of his range. Then, one day, a couple of plain-clothes cops started hanging around the club. I found out later it had nothing to do with me. But I got scared at the time. I got so scared I was sucker enough to spill the whole story to Moroney." She grimaced a little. "He used it to help convince me I ought to marry him."

I looked around at the set-up of the room and then back at her. "There's a chance that I could be wrong, but offhand, it doesn't look like you bought such a very tough package."

POLLY DRISCOLL MORONEY didn't lower her eyes. They were flashing hot sparks. "There's a chance you could be wrong, Merrick. Maybe it's just because you don't know Moroney. Maybe it's because you never shared the same cage with a gorilla." She turned her bare shoulder towards me and rubbed her other hand over it. I could see five unpleasant looking black and blue marks in the shape of an outsized paw.

"Okay, honey, it's not any picnic. But why is it any tougher to crash out of here than it was on the farm—unless there's an angle you haven't mentioned."

"There's an angle I haven't mentioned. I might as well tell you straight. Moroney's not going to live forever. Too many people hate his guts." She paused briefly. I filed that away for the minute. It sounded like it might rate some digging.

"That's the percentage I've been playing," she went on. "With Moroney's money in my name, nobody can push me around. That's what I keep on telling myself, anyhow. I could be all cockeyed, couldn't I, Merrick?"

"Look, honey," I said, "if money is all you're worried about, you don't have to limit your field to Moroney. You can pick

it and choose it with *your* equipment, anytime you're ready to start from scratch. But you'll never get any place on the lam. Right or wrong, the sooner you go back for the cure, the quicker you get what you're looking for. That's not preaching, baby. That's being practical."

"That's easy enough to say when you've never served any time. Kirkland kept on drumming it into me, too. I might even be ready to go along with it. But it isn't that simple any more after what happened to-night."

"Let's wait and see. Let's keep on talking about Kirkland a little while."

"There's not very much to talk about. Things got to the point with Moroney where I was ready to blow my top. Then I read an article about psychiatry in the paper one night. Kirkland's name was mentioned. At first I went mostly just for a chance to get away from the house. Then he actually started to do me some good. I didn't intend to tell the whole story, but somehow it just dropped out again."

"And a little while later you got the blackmail note?"

"About two weeks later. But I'm sure that Kirkland had nothing to do with it."

"That's swell. Can you think of some reasons to back it up?"

"Plenty. In the first place he doesn't need the money. His prices are blackmail enough."

"The motive wouldn't have to be money. Did he ever make any passes at you?"

"No, and he's certainly had plenty of chances. That's another reason I'm pretty sure he's on the level. Besides, as I told you, he's been after me right along to turn myself in. That would hardly jibe with the blackmail, would it?"

"You never can tell. It's just a crazy idea, but a shape like yours means trouble, honey—in any league. The blackmail thing *could* be just the roundabout kind of a way that a guy like Kirkland might dream up—if he wanted to scare you out from under Moroney and back to the farm, if he had things in mind for you himself when you came back out with your skirts clean."

She laughed a little bit unbelievably. "Thanks for the thought, Merrick. But I think you have me a little bit overrated."

I said: "Maybe I have. We'll see. How does Moroney feel about Kirkland? Or

doesn't he know you've been going to him?"

"No, I can't go any place without Moroney knowing it. But he has the wrong idea what it's all about. He doesn't know the difference between a psychiatrist and a veterinary. He thinks that Kirkland is treating me for some kind of organic trouble and it's something he'd rather not talk much about."

I could get the picture. "I said: "Okay, Polly. There's just one more thing about Kirkland for now. Regardless of how much you trusted him, why should you pick him out to handle the pay-off instead of Moroney? Wouldn't it be a little bit more in your husband's line?"

She said, "It certainly would be. That's exactly why I decided to go through Kirkland. I knew if I turned it over to Moroney there'd be trouble, the kind of trouble that happened tonight. So I kept the whole thing from him. I even hocked a ring and a diamond brooch to raise the blackmail money." She paused to work over a thought in her mind, then added: "If there's any way Moroney *could* have found out about what was going on you wouldn't have to look any further for your answers."

"Do you think there *is* any way?"

"I'm afraid there isn't. I burned the blackmail note right after I got it just to make sure. This is the first time I've talked to anyone else but Kirkland about it."

"Just for a check, is there any chance you could find out where Moroney has been all evening?"

"He telephoned me from the club about fifteen minutes before you called. He's there every night. I could probably find out if he left for any length of time." A worried look crossed her face. "While we're talking about it, Merrick," she said, "you'd better not waste too much time around here playing Rover boy. Quayle belongs to Moroney. He's the butler. He doubles as watchdog."

"That's one reason why I didn't want you to come here. Fortunately, I had a good story for him. Moroney has a new band broadcasting from the club tonight. He told me to listen on the radio. I disconnected a wire right after I talked to you and told Quayle I'd called the repairman. If he gets suspicious, though, the climate around here wouldn't be very pleasant for you."

She froze stiff just as she finished saying

it. Out of nowhere I suddenly heard a hard, rasping voice behind me. "That's a fine thing to tell the man, kitten," it was saying. I swung around. There were two large unpleasant looking boys filling up the doorway.

CHAPTER THREE

Blondie's Rover-Boy

IT WASN'T very hard to pick out which of the two should be Moroney. He was built like a bull and just about as goodlooking. His age didn't show on him very much, but if I had to guess I'd put him somewhere in the early forties. He had black pig eyes, a red face and a bullet head with a crop of dirty red hair on top. The coal-heaver with him was exactly right for the act, a dark, shifty boy with a scar on his cheek and too many teeth for his mouth. He was weighing a business-like .38 in the palm of his right hand.

Moroney turned to me with a sour smile. "Actually, pally," he rasped, "I'm a very sociable guy. When I heard we had company, I just hadda come runnin' right over."

Polly got up and came quickly over to Moroney. She sounded like Pocahontas talking for Captain Smith. "Give him a break, will you, Con?" she said urgently. "Give him a break. He's only trying to do me some good."

"Yeah," Moroney said. "I know. Quayle's been listenin' at the door. We been listenin' a little while ourselves. You shut up and sit down, kitten. I'll talk to you later."

I said. "Never mind about me, baby. I can talk out the side of my mouth myself."

Moroney turned his head in my direction. "Shake him and see if he's loaded, Eddie," he said to the coal-heaver. Then he walked over and stretched himself out lazily on the chaise. Eddie was careful. He had me cold. He maneuvered my face into the nearest wall like he'd done the same thing a whole lot of times before. Then he flipped the .45 out from under my arm. I heard him set it down beside Moroney.

"That's a pretty big toy for a small-time punk," Moroney said unpleasantly.

"Maybe it is," I said at the wall, "but I don't need somebody else to shoot it for me."

"He ain't very polite, Eddie," Moroney rasped. "You better teach him a little manners."

That was the last I heard for a little while. Something solid bit into my head over my right ear. The lights flickered and jumped and went out. I took a deep dive way down into a big black hole.

* * *

I couldn't have been away for very much more than five minutes. The first thing that registered was somebody screaming way off in the distance. It came closer and closer. I sneaked open my eyes and took a quick look. Moroney was twisting Polly's arm.

"C'mon, kitten," I heard him saying. "That ain't all you know about it. You'd like it great if somebody could hang this rap on Moroney, wouldn't you? But nobody's gonna, see? Nobody's gonna because you're gonna tell me where it belongs."

I didn't like to do it but, offhand, it looked as though I'd have to write off Moroney for any part in the job.

Polly screamed again. I wasn't enough of a hero to fly at Moroney and take a bite out of his throat. I took the count for a few more seconds till the cobwebs cleared and only the throb was left. Then I got to my knees and shook my head as though I was still hanging way over the edge. I looked up as dizzily as I could make it.

Eddie was standing over me with the .38 in his left hand and a fistful of steel knuckles wrapped around his right. "Here comes the peeper now, Con," he said. "You wanna go over *him* for a while?"

Moroney let go of Polly's arm. He leaned back in the chaise again.

Polly stepped away rubbing her arm. "You fool," she said to him. "He doesn't know any more about it than I do. Quayle only heard half the story before he called you."

Connor Moroney ignored her and turned to me. "Have a nice little nap, pally?" he said. "I hear you're a pretty handy boy with a niblick. Now you're all rested, maybe there's something you'd like to get off your chest?"

I weaved to my feet and leaned against the wall as if I was still sucking plenty of wind. I said, as insultingly as I could make

it, "And maybe you'd like to kiss my foot."

Moroney reacted. "Rake him a little bit, Eddie," he snapped. "He don't seem to catch on so good."

While he still was saying it, I shot out my foot and caught Eddie flat in the stomach. His face went purple with pain. He folded over like a wet newspaper. I lifted my knee into his mouth as he went down. Something cracked pleasantly underneath it. Moroney was doing just what I hoped he would. He grabbed the .45 off the table beside him and leveled it at my head. The black pig eyes bored in and went right through me.

"That was a bad mistake you made, pally," he said. "It's kinda too bad. I like the way you handle yourself. Yeah, it's kinda too bad you hadda have such a big nose." Polly screamed once more.

"Yeah, pally," I said. "And it's kinda too bad you hadda have such an empty gun."

He pulled the trigger three times before he believed it. Then he threw the gun at my head. I came in under it and butted him in the stomach. We both went down and rolled around on the floor. I was giving away about twenty pounds, but Moroney had plenty to learn in the close-ups. I spent the last two years of the war *teaching* it all to the Infantry. What I knew myself, I hadn't exactly picked up out of the book.

I got Moroney's thumb out of my eye and lunged over on top of him. I grabbed a fistful of red hair in my left hand and jerked back his head as hard as I could. Then I chopped the side of my stiff right hand down hard on his Adam's apple. He made a noise like a clogged-up drain. His eyes glazed over. He twitched a little and then went quiet all over. Moroney wasn't going to enjoy his shore dinners for at least another couple of weeks.

WHEN I looked up, the old guy in the monkey suit was standing just inside the door. Polly was standing with one foot on Eddie, and holding Eddie's gun on monkey-suit. It made me feel pretty good. It looked like Polly was ready to play it straight all the way.

"Brother," she said happily, "you really put your heart in your work. I wouldn't believe it unless I saw it happen. After this, I might even be ready to call it square

with Moroney. Money's not everything. At least, I'd have *something* pleasant to think about back in Kansas City."

"Honey," I said. "I'm loving you better every minute, but this doesn't prove a thing. We're still playing golf on the seventh hole. You're as wide open there as you ever were." I rubbed the knot on my head.

She handed me a great big warm smile. "I'm not worried so much about that any more now I'm getting to know you, Merrick." She looked down at Eddie on the floor. "He went over you while you were out. Moroney has the five grand in his pocket. It's legally mine. Why don't you take it and just keep on earning it?"

Kneeling down, I found the envelope in Moroney's coat pocket. I put it back into my own. I said: "I'll keep it in trust for you, honey. You're going to need it. You can buy *me* any time you like with that smile." She bought me.

I looked at my watch. It was a couple of minutes after ten. "You better put on some clothes and pack a bag," I told her. "And don't stop to do your nails. I hate to keep Kirkland waiting a minute longer than necessary."

While she was upstairs, Quayle was very accommodating. He helped me find some nice, cozy closet space for Eddie, Moroney and himself.

I had to open the ark till it rattled, but we made it in on the East River Drive in a little less than a half hour. On the way we hashed the whole mess all over again. I couldn't get much more out of it. Polly thought there might be an outside chance that one of the girls from the farm could have spotted her someplace and rigged the deal. It didn't sound very good that way though. She didn't get around very much and it would have taken a pretty close look.

There was also the angle Moroney had—that some of the people who hated his guts were trying to build a frame around him. But Polly thought that was even less likely. She rarely got out in public with him. And the few times she did, the odds were a thousand to one she'd be recognized by the wrong people. I tried to give her a clearer picture of the long, thin boy on the golf course, but he registered completely negative again.

Anyhow, I still had Kirkland. I still had

Gladys. And whatever she had to tell me was beginning to look more and more important. I still had one other idea, too—an idea that would have to wait till I got to the Brentville. It had to do with the people who lived above or below or on either side of Kirkland's office.

I parked the car outside the Regwood Hotel, a nice, quiet little spot a couple of blocks above the Brentville on Fifth. Polly wanted to come along for the session with Kirkland, but I figured it might be smarter to keep her under wraps until I pried Kirkland open as wide as I could. The clerk at the desk gave me a look, part searching, part envious while she registered. I finally managed to stare him down.

I went along with her up to the room. As soon as the bellhop left I phoned the number Gladys had given me once again. There still wasn't any answer. There was nothing to do but keep it on ice.

When I hung up, Polly was standing up beside the bed unpacking her bag. She stopped and looked over at me thoughtfully. "I've made up my mind, Merrick," she said. "Whatever happens from here on in, I don't want you to cover for me any more—even if you found a way that you could. You're right. Kirkland's right. I want to get clean behind the ears. If I can get out from under what happened tonight, I guess I can stand another year in the laundry all right. No kind of money is worth this kind of a merry-go-round."

As I looked at her now, the glitter seemed gone. An expensive, well-tailored tweed suit took away most of the honky tonk. Behind the make-up and the platinum hair she looked like a really nice kid, a kid you'd give your right arm to take to the senior prom. I wanted to look good. I wanted to pick a miracle out of the air and put it in her lap. But there just wasn't any other answer to this one.

"There's one thing, honey," I said. "Five thousand bucks will buy you a whole lot of lawyer. Sit tight till you hear from me. This part of it shouldn't take very long."

She came over to where I was standing by the door. She took my head in both of her hands, pulled it down and kissed me with everything that she had. You could have charged a battery with it.

"Just for luck—and for anything else

it'll get me," she said. I was crazy to go, but I did. I almost forgot about the bump on the back of my head.

CHAPTER FOUR

This'll Kill You

AT THE Brentville, the same ugly boxer was sniffing the same potted tree on the sidewalk. This time there was a different doorman on the leash. There was also a different clerk on the desk inside. He was a brisk, intelligent-looking kid who probably had the course at Cornell. I gave him my card. He phoned up my name, hung up, and then nodded his head politely.

I had an idea in my head and a five dollar bill in my hand. I laid the bill down on the counter. I said: "I'm not trying to be a big shot, Johnny. I'd like to know awful bad if you have a very tall, very thin customer with sandy hair who likes to take a drink now and then. It would be in a room somewhere near Doctor Kirkland's."

I should have known better. He handed me back the bill very politely. "I'm sorry, sir," he said crisply, "but trouble is not my department. You can talk to the house detective if you like. He should be down in fifteen minutes or so."

"Thanks anyhow," I said. "I'll get to him on the way out." I felt his eyes on me as I walked to the elevator.

I checked the time again as I opened the door to the reception room. It was just about five minutes shy of eleven. I was surprised to see Gladys sitting there with a magazine in her lap. She was dressed in street clothes, the kind you don't usually find in the bargain basements. It looked like I might not be very far wrong with the original idea I had about her and Kirkland. The way she looked now, it was hardly something you'd blame him for, either.

"Hello," I said. "It looks like you stood me up."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Merrick," she smiled. "Something very important came up." She looked towards the double door a little bit anxiously. "I'll explain it all later. You better go right on in. He's been waiting for you quite some time."

She got up and walked after me towards the office. As I opened the door, I sudden-

ly felt something hard in the small of my back. That sweet, husky voice was saying: "It's a gun all right, Merrick. Don't turn around. Just keep going in." There wasn't the slightest change of inflection. She might just as well have been talking about the weather.

In my business you get used to surprises, but this one really rated the cup. I kept walking right in. I heard the doors close behind me. I remembered all of a sudden what Kirkland had said in the afternoon: "It's soundproofed for concentration." Then I saw him. Somebody had really been doing some concentrating.

He was sprawled on his back, half off and half on the leather couch. A dark, wet stain covered the whole front of his gray flannel suit coat. His chin pointed stiffly towards the ceiling. His wide open mouth left a startled expression on his face. The blood had already crusted in one corner of it. It looked like he might have been there for at least a couple of hours. I drew a few hasty conclusions. I felt something tighten up in the pit of my stomach.

"You're crowding your luck, Gladys," I said with my heart in my pocket. "Before you cut loose, I think you'd be smart if you talked this one over."

"There's nothing to talk about now, Merrick," she said, low, calm and throaty. "You're a pretty cool boy. We could have had fun if it worked out a little bit differently—but not any more. You're at the last stop."

I was borrowing time. I was grabbing at straws. "Don't be too eager, Gladys," I said, feeling the cold sweat coming out on my forehead. "I might be a pretty big sucker, but not big enough to bring along your traveling money."

I guess I hit something she hadn't figured on. It stopped her for just a moment. "That won't get you any place, Merrick," she said finally. "I'm not getting close enough to go through your pockets—not until after it's safe."

"That won't get you any place either, Gladys," I said quickly. "I think you've got sense enough to work out a deal. If you have, there's a chance I can get you the money."

She turned that around for a couple of seconds. I thought I was gaining ground, but I wasn't. "I think you're just bluffing,

Merrick," she said. "Let's find out. Sit down on the floor and start taking your clothes off."

Some days you can't make a nickel. I sat down on the floor, half facing her and started to peel off my coat. She was standing over me with the gun pointed at my chest, like a female tiger crouched for the pounce. I said: "This is liable to sully your reputation."

"Make it fast," she snapped. "I've got a whole lot of places to go."

I got both of my arms out of the sleeves of my coat. I could see the envelope with the five grand in it just peeking out of the inside pocket. When you get this close, you might as well take it moving in as going away. I started to put the coat on the floor.

Then, without even looking at her, I whipped it up at her face and wheeled sideways in the same motion. She fired two shots before I got hold of the gun. One of them creased the side of my arm. I could feel the powder burn through the shirt. That was all. I've always been pretty good to my mother.

GLADYS knew right away that the party was over. There wasn't any kicking, biting or scratching. When I let her go, she sat down slowly in a chair by the window. She had a look on her face like a little girl caught with her fist in the cookie jar. Things like this you just don't believe until you find yourself actually playing the hand.

I stood between Gladys and the door. I picked up the phone, dialed central homicide and asked for Lieutenant Mike Doyle. "John Merrick," I said when he answered. "At the Brentville Hotel, Room 903. You better come up and take over." Doyle had passed high on his Captain's exam. All he needed was record and seniority points. If I knew him, he was on the way over before I hung up.

Gladys looked at me and way past me at the same time. She wasn't upset. She didn't sound sorry. We were talking about the weather again. We were passing the time of day. "Anyhow," she said, "it was lots of fun while it lasted. I thought it took guts to kill a man. It's the easiest thing in the world." She wanted to talk about it. She wanted to brag about it. It

gave me a thorough dose of the creeps, but I wasn't the boy to stop her. I don't think I could have if I wanted to.

"Have you got a cigarette handy?" she said. I threw her my deck and the matches. She lit one and spiraled smoke coldly towards Kirkland. "I had to take care of *him*," she said calmly. "He had it coming anyhow—the louse, the way he kept on high hatting me just because I wasn't wrapped up in mink and decked out with rocks like the rest of them." It wasn't going to do him much good, but I offered Kirkland a mental apology.

"He came back from dinner too soon," she went on. "He walked in on us while we were still taking out the dictaphone. Spenser was scared you might start looking for one when you got back here tonight." It was nice to know at least one of my guesses was on the mark. Spenser would have to be the man in the neighboring room, the tall, thin, sandy-haired man who's present address was a slab in a Westchester morgue. She checked it for me the next moment.

"Spenser lived in the room next door," she said. "We just sort of got to know each other. Before he started to ride the bottle he used to be a sound engineer. That's what gave me the whole idea." She looked at me proudly as though I ought to toss a bouquet in her lap.

Maybe I should have at that. It was certainly a sweet little set-up. From where Gladys was sitting, she could tip Spenser off on the most likely prospects. She could tell him exactly when to tune in with the machine. She had all the names and addresses right at her fingertips, too. Polly looked like the first pitch they'd tried, but they probably had a list as long as your arm to work on.

I didn't have to prime her at all. She just kept right on talking. "The trouble with Spenser was he didn't have any more guts than a chicken," she said. "He heard everything Kirkland told you this afternoon. He knew it was safe.

"Still I practically had to drag him out to the golf course tonight. He was scared somebody might break the lock on the door and find Kirkland. He was scared you might spot him or his car. It got worse and worse waiting for you out there in the dark. Finally, about ten minutes before

you came he tried to start the car and run out." She smiled. "I tapped him lightly—just hard enough to stop him."

Gladys lit herself another cigarette from the one she was smoking. I kept my mouth shut and my ears open. "Then I got to thinking about it," she said. "I couldn't see any more reason at all for cutting Spenser in. He saw too much. He knew too much. If I took him with me I figured he'd be too shaky to make it safe. If I left him behind, it was fifty-fifty he'd break down all the way and go to the cops. I needed an overnight start. So I went ahead and finished the job before you came. After all, they hang you just as high for one as for three."

She looked at me for another pat on the back. Then she laughed. "That's partly what put the finger on *you*," she said. "When you got there, Spenser was supposed to be hiding in the bushes. He was supposed to tell you to leave the money there on the grass and go back the way you came. I couldn't do it myself. You would have picked up my voice. I figured the easiest thing to do was to give it to you, too, get the money, and start in traveling. You'd have probably had the cops on my trail pretty soon after you got back here and busted in on Kirkland anyhow."

I said: "I'm glad it was nothing personal. After you missed, what made you so sure I'd come back here and give you another crack at me before I went to the cops myself?"

She laughed again, like I'd just told a parlor story. "That was a chance I had to take. You're supposed to be a good private cop. I ought to know. I checked all your references myself. I figured you'd keep it under cover at least until after you came back for a talk with Kirkland, no matter how sore you got at the shooting. I figured I could take you a whole lot easier at the office, so I just came right back here myself."

WATCHING her as she sat there now, it was almost impossible for me to picture the things she was telling me. But I only had to remember the dead-calm note in her throaty voice when she stuck the gun in my back, the cold, self-assured way that she'd handled me. There was only one thing that I still couldn't figure—the come-

on she'd given me at the office in the afternoon.

I said: "What did you have in mind for me if Kirkland hadn't busted in on you, and everything else went according to schedule?"

She smiled. She said: "I just wanted to make sure you hadn't spotted anything at the golf course. If anything else came up later that Spenser might have missed on the set I wanted to keep track of that, too." She put out her cigarette and showed me some leg. "I figured we might get to know each other well enough to talk about those things after a while."

I put that piece into place and started turning the whole thing around in my mind. I was thinking she couldn't have had any record or Kirkland wouldn't have hired her. I was thinking if there had to be any motive, it was just that Gladys was the kind of a girl who had to live high and fast . . . money . . . excitement and plenty of both.

Then, down on the street, I heard the groan of a siren a couple of blocks away. Gladys heard it too. And all of a sudden the whole thing came clear. A wild, unreasoning look jumped into her smoky blue eyes. Everything was beginning to catch up. The calmness and self-assurance were gone. "They'll burn me for it, won't they Merrick?" she said hoarsely.

"Even with your legs, baby," I said.

"The hell they will," she screamed wildly. I could see what was coming. I might have been able to stop her, but I didn't try. In one low, rushing motion this pallbearer's meal-ticket jumped up and dove for the window. She went out head first—right through the glass. The sirens way down below blended weirdly with the tinkle of glass falling back into the room. I felt a heavy sensation in my stomach when I looked out and saw the crowd starting to gather below. I found a grim little thought running through my mind. I found myself thinking she should have gone to see a psychiatrist.

* * *

The story that ran in the morning paper was a pretty far throw from what actually happened. It was the kind of a story that wasn't going to do Lieutenant Doyle any

Plight of the Pallbearer's Honey

harm at all with the Commissioner. That was my part of the deal. I'd done some favors for Doyle before. He's not a hard guy to get along with.

It was pretty clear—after all, they found the sap in Glady's bag—a neat, ladylike tool covered with brown leather that showed fresh stains. There were plenty of nice clear prints on it, too. The prints on the gun and the slugs they took out of Kirkland all checked out. With that much to work on, it was easy to make "arrangements" as far as the minor details of the case went.

I got a clean bill of health for everything I did or I didn't do up in Pelham. Moroney and Eddie were picked up out at the house and booked for assault and battery and a couple of other assorted counts. I signed the complaints myself. It looks like most of them might stick. Doyle didn't even impound Polly's five grand. As a matter of fact, he even promised he'd do whatever little he could for her out in K.C.

I had a chance for a quick little talk with her when they took me along with them back to the Regwood to pick her up. It was the first time I ever saw anyone grateful for a chance to go back and serve time.

Polly kept thinking up cute little reasons to take the curse off it: "I'll have a chance to grow back my natural hair"—"I'll be setting up residence for a quick divorce"—"I'll spend the time writing you mash notes."

She tried to ram the five grand down my throat again, too. I like money all right, but not that kind. There's a pretty fair chance it might even buy her a brand new trial.

Whether it does buy one or not, she promised me one thing. As soon as she does get the green light, she swears she's jumping the first flier East. She said even if I *was* all tied up with a choir-singing lassie by then I could count on more trouble—and plenty of it. I don't think she'll have to break down my door.

THE END



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John D. MacDonald

(Continued from page 31)

fession from Mr. Erton, but you were foolish to hide out. The slug in your arm was even the wrong calibre."

"But I—"

"Don't interrupt, please. You were a small help and a small hindrance. We know where those papers are and we know into whose hands they're going next. We'll make our series of arrests at the last moment when they are about to be sent out of the country. In the business you don't succeed by knocking off the hirelings. We have to aim for the top men."

"But can't I—"

"Please stop interrupting, Mr. Regan. As I was saying, both Miss Dereen and Mr. Wanderer will be cautioned not to speak to anyone regarding this situation. And Miss Kail will also be warned. I believe that you can take care of that, and I'm trusting you to say no more than is absolutely necessary to satisfy her curiosity. The girl you stayed with last night phoned us just after you left this evening and that's how—"

"Maybe she could be given the reward."

"What's that?"

"She convinced me that I should give myself up. I'll swear to that."

"Jordan, get the name of that girl, interview her and see if the idea is feasible. And please take Mr. Regan to Room G, get a doctor for him and arrange that he be given a sedative, if necessary."

I stood up and said, "But I—"

Jorden took me firmly by the left arm and led me out of the room. . . .

So there it is. That's all I ever found out. The papers the next morning named Erton as the guilty party, along with Mace, and said that they'd held me prisoner and that the papers had been recovered

Two months later the papers did come back into the office and went into the file. Jorden brought them over. He didn't say a word.

Marian and I bought the parrot from Shannon. The damn dusty little bird hangs in our living room and he has stopped speaking Washingtonian. All he'll say now is, "I love you."

That's supposed to be some silly kind of international language, isn't it?

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

vet attending Parsons, for he wore a T-shirt with the college insignia and had a couple of textbooks under his arm. He selected things for his "wife, child, home," etc. always of course getting a large amount of cash in change from the check he cashed. The checks he gave were a "present" from relatives and "sure helped out his subsistence allowance."

Of course when the checks came back marked NG, there was no such man to be found on the college campus. By then reports of a similar racket worked in other college towns nearby were trickling in, too.

Local merchants no longer glance at a T-shirt or sweater for identification, but on the advice of the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, demand driver's license or such substantial identification from all not known to the merchants.

R. M. Conner
Fairfield, Iowa

Trimmed

Dear Sir:

I hired the strange young man at the door to cut my lawn and trim my hedge, never suspecting I was taking the first step toward becoming the victim of a petty swindler.

Fifteen minutes after he began work he called my attention to my lawnmower, saying it needed sharpening. I told him to use the file in the garage. He said a file wouldn't do, because the blades were badly nicked and ought to be machine-ground.

Looking at the blades I saw he was right. The lawnmower looked as though it had been run over a gravel bed, and I made up my mind to scold my kids whom I thought must have been playing with it.

The man offered to take the lawnmower to a machine-shop four blocks away. I gave him a five-dollar bill to cover the cost of having it sharpened. He started to wheel my lawnmower away. That was the last I ever saw of him.

However, I did recover my lawnmower, although not my five dollars. When he failed to return in three hours I became suddenly suspicious. I started toward the machine-shop and found my lawnmower propped up against a tree at the end of the block.

I informed the police, who told me they had already received three similar complaints that day. Later that afternoon, I recounted the incident to a neighbor across the street, who was able to account for my nicked blades. He said he had seen the man pushing the lawnmower back and forth across my gravel driveway.

Well, anyway, I spared the kids a scolding which for once they didn't deserve.

K. S. C. Allen
Remsenberg, L. I., N. Y.

From Vets to Victims

Dear Sir:

Lincoln's Better Business Bureau keeps warn-

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He calls you by name and knows all about how badly you were treated in that filthy Jap mine. You tell him about the poor food and about the time you caught pneumonia and nearly died.

"You have at least \$10,000 coming to you!" he says enthusiastically. "And we're here to see that they pay it!"

"Will your service cost me anything?" you ask.

"Just \$10 now and \$15 when you get your check."

The fee seems reasonable and you know your claim is just, so you sign the papers and give him the \$10.

Several months pass and you fail to hear from the agent, so you take it up with your Veterans Administration.

"No legislation has been passed authorizing any private agency to collect war-prisoner claims from foreign nations," they advise you. "You've simply been swindled out of \$10."

Regretfully yours,

J. D. C.
Lincoln, Nebr.

Don't Talk, Chum

Dear Editor:

I learned to keep my mouth shut while around strangers, but not until it cost me 50 bucks and a new suit.

I had received news that my brother was arriving from Holland on September 12, 1947. As I hadn't seen Victor for over twenty years I was naturally excited, but I had to work on the afternoon he was to arrive. I told my wife, who had never even seen a picture of Vic, to take care of him when he came, leaving \$50 in case he needed some money, and I told her to give Vic whatever he needed.

Then I went to work. I am a chef at a large mid-town club and when I got to work I was still thrilled about Victor's arriving and I just had to tell somebody about it or burst.

We had hired a new dishwasher, and unable to keep quiet, I told him all about Victor and the arrangements at home. At noon the dishwasher became ill and took the afternoon off.

About four hours later my wife called and said that there had been two Victors at the house. The first borrowed the fifty and a suit of clothes and disappeared, and then another Victor arrived.

The second Victor was my brother, the first evidently the dishwasher, who never did come back to work.

So it cost me \$50 and a suit of clothes to learn to keep my mouth shut before strangers.

Cordially,

F. Richard Fritch
Brooklyn, N. Y.

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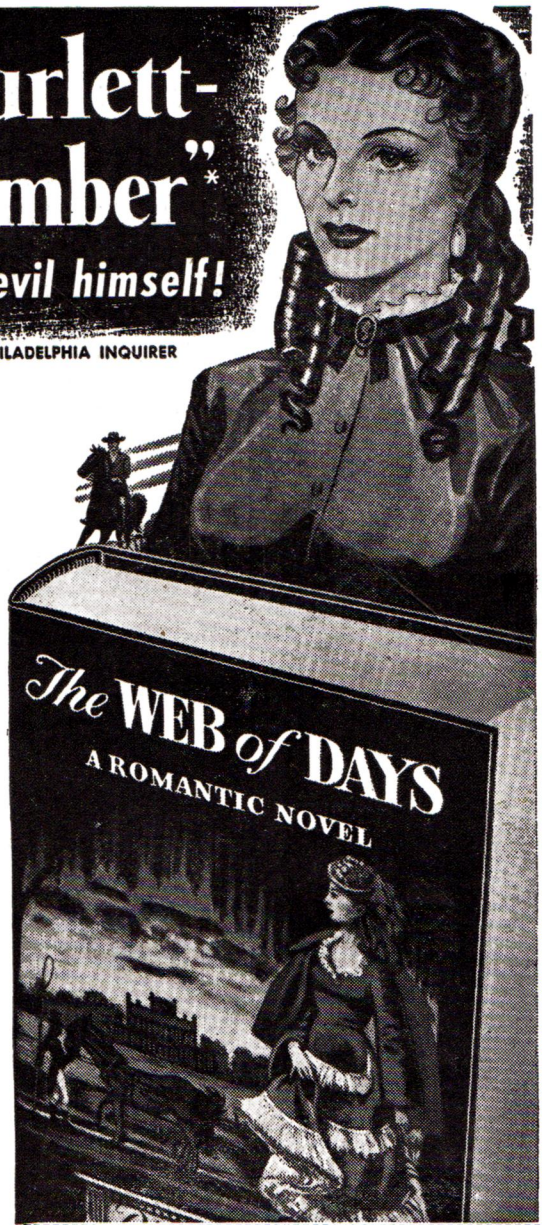
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overseer's house threatened Hester with "conjur." Why did Hester stay? What determined Hester to be mistress of Seven Chimneys—even if it meant bearing St. Clair a son? Why did she remain ever a challenge and a taunt to Roi, even though she gave herself to another man? Read Edna Lee's sensational new novel, "The Web of Days," a historical romance so unusual, with a heroine so new and captivating, that you'll thrill to every page! We'll mail you a copy right away for just a 3c stamp if you accept this offer of FREE membership in the Dollar Book Club.



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