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JUNE

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LAWRENCE**

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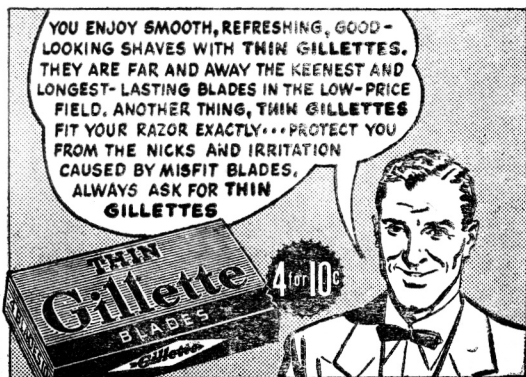
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Vol. 57

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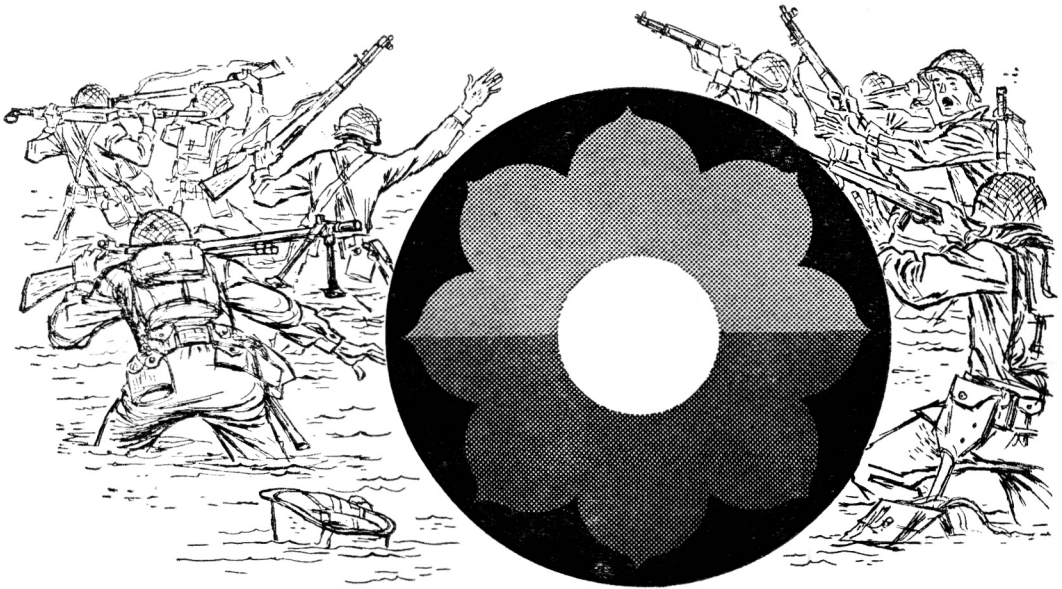
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Cover Painted by Norman Saunders.

The July issue will be out June 2nd

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter August 24, 1944, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Title, Flynn's Detective Fiction, registered in U.S. Patent Office. Single copy, 15 cents. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.80; other countries 50 cents additional. Send subscription to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

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A Sub for San Quentin

By LAURI WIRTA

TRADITIONALLY a newspaper man is not a dollar chaser, but an incorruptible bundle of corruption who will give his all for the commonwealth, regretting only that he has but one liver to lose for his country. Before we go any further let us simply say that Peter Gordon Grimes was different.

A magnificent—some say gorgeous—hunk of manhood, he felt himself miscast in the role of a Pittsburgh newspaper reporter during the first decade of the current century. So Grimes wrote to a wealthy widow in sunny California, moved out there and shortly put himself forever in her debt by secretly hocking her jewels.

This was pretty crude stuff, however, and gave little promise of what he was later to achieve. Its immediate consequence was Grimes's hurried departure for the Orient, with a pack of legal bloodhounds at his heels—a trip from which he returned married to a ship-board acquaintance. The lady, poorer but wiser, left him, shortly after the ship had docked in San Francisco, to his own devices—which consisted of check-kiting up and down the west coast. This pastime promptly landed him in San Quentin, where the facilities for the pursuit of a dollar were strictly limited.

Then an unforeseen thing happened. Unable to go after a dollar, Grimes found a Dollar coming to him. The Dollar's first name was Robert, and he headed a world-renowned shipping line. He also had a philanthropic interest in the rehabilitation of deserving criminals.

Under the stringent San Quentin rules, Grimes found it so easy to prove himself deserving that, within a month, he had been paroled in the magnate's custody and given a job in Shanghai. So overcome was he by gratitude that he almost immediately began to sign his checks with his benefactor's name.

Once more he was forced to take it on the lam. And this brings us directly to the fantastic adventure of Mr. Albert Johansen.

Not a great deal is known of Mr. Johansen beyond the fact that he was a

Swede in Nagasaki and therefore lonely and, on this particular night in 1914, intent upon tying one on. He had already made the rounds when he chanced upon two other occidentals of friendly mien.

Mr. Johansen was persuaded to remake the rounds. It apparently never occurred to him that he had stepped into one of the most diabolical confidence setups ever conceived by a facile brain. Nor did there seem to him to be anything strange about the relationship of his companions who were, in fact, none other than Peter Gordon Grimes and a detective instructed to take the former back—in irons.

Grimes had persuaded the unfortunate cop to permit him one last night of carousal. At one point in the proceedings, the unwary minion of the law passed out. Grimes, with Johansen looking on, solicitously removed the detective's wallet and valuables and then shipped him back to his hotel. Grimes and Johansen then continued their revelry.

Johansen's first intimation that everything was not smorgasbord came when he awoke the next day in the brig of the good ship *Sheridan*, several miles out to sea and bound for San Francisco. Papers upon him, plus an accredited arresting officer's testimony conclusively proved that his real name was Peter Gordon Grimes. . . .

In vain he protested that he had never heard of Grimes, that he hardly spoke English. The captain had been warned not to succumb to the blandishments of one who had acquired a reputation as a conman on two continents. Johansen served several months of Grimes' sentence in San Quentin before the hoax was discovered.

Grimes, mind you, had served only a month before his parole—and was never recalled to finish his term by the embarrassed officials! He later did time in Manila and Folsom for assorted frauds, including amassing a strictly illegal fortune as "Reverend" Peter Gordon Grimes—but when feathers are handed out for dupery, Peter Gordon Grimes' Shanghai gesture will rival any peacock's.



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A FRAME

CHAPTER ONE

Booby Trap

THE cold wave held Broadway in a rigid grip. Thursday was its fifth day. At eleven o'clock at night, it was bitter, piercing, bone-gnawing. Yet slow-moving, noisy crowds blackened the neon-blazing sidewalks, chattering and laughing in the gaudy red, green and yellow glare. The Marquis, head of the



"Put your hands up!"
he choked.

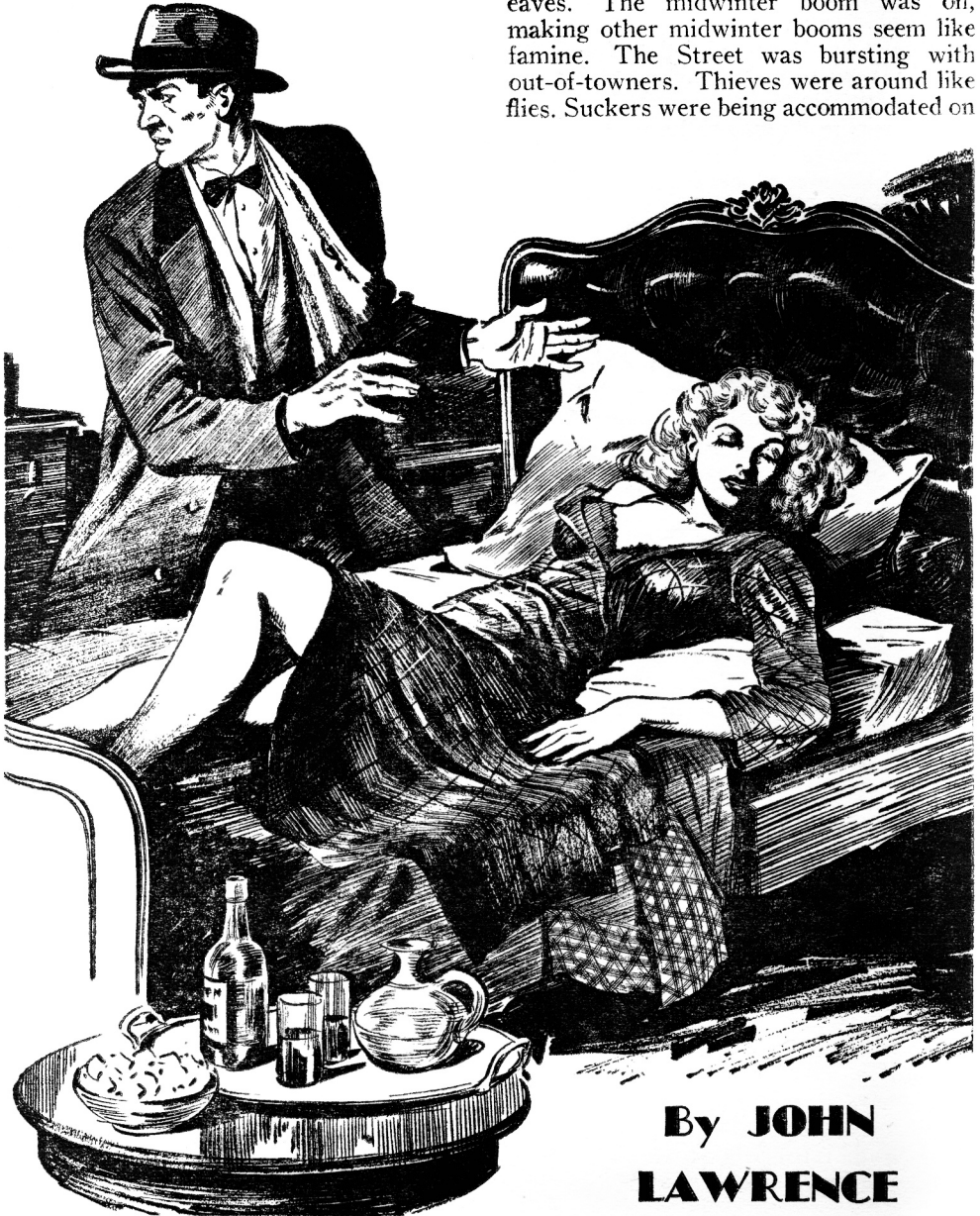
The luscious songstress' plea whirled the salty Broadway Squad onto a murder-go-round of babes and bullets—and spun their dapper lieutenant off into hot-squat row.

for the MARQUIS

Gripping Novel of the Broadway Squad

Broadway Squad, wondered wearily why they didn't go inside somewhere and get warm.

They didn't, as he well knew, because they couldn't. Every bar and night club in the section was already jammed to the eaves. The midwinter boom was on, making other midwinter booms seem like famine. The Street was bursting with out-of-towners. Thieves were around like flies. Suckers were being accommodated on



By JOHN
LAWRENCE

a wholesale basis. Inevitably, cries of pain were piercing the Broadway air, a dozen every hour. And the Marquis' twenty-two men were running around in circles, trying to hold the lid on.

The Marquis himself—Lieutenant Marquis to you—reached the Nestor Hotel around eleven—dapper, shining as ever in meticulous black clothes, sharp welt-brim, tight silk scarf, neat Chesterfield, twinkling small shoes. His short, weathered face was ruddied by the cold, but there were dark patches under his hollow-set China-blue eyes and the cold stung them to tears. As he went up the hotel's side steps, he took the crisp, initialled handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed at them.

He saw Doris Connally through the plate glass of the side door just as he was reaching to palm it open, and he lowered his small, black-gloved hand to his side.

He knew she was waiting for him. She stood—with scores of others—along the wall of the long, softly-lit Peacock Alley inside, squeezing her beige-gauntleted hands. She was bareheaded; her electric black hair rippled to the shoulders of her short, flaring white box-coat.

Most of her appeal was in her large, starry cola-brown eyes and flawless cream skin. She was slender in a smart, throat-high beige woolen frock, and her slender silken legs ended in tiny alligator ties. He winced as he saw the over-brightness in her eyes, the paleness in her soft lips and face.

He racked his brain, vainly, for something helpful to say.

His eyes softened as he pushed on in and went over to her. "Looking for the old Marquis, Doris?"

"Oh, yes, Marty, yes! Isn't there anything—*any* word?"

"Not yet, chicken."

She seized his arms in quivering hands, searched his eyes desperately. "Marty—you're not kidding me? You are looking for him?"

"As hard as ever I can. Every man on my Squad has tapped every wire he owns. Your brother isn't on Broadway. If he were, we'd have known that before this. He doesn't seem to be in Harlem or the Village—we have eyes and ears there, too.

We've just got spots here and there in the rest of the city, but he's bound to go into one of—"

"Go? Go? He won't be *going* anywhere, Marty! He—he's either lost his head and run and hidden, or—or he was *taken away*. Marty—I swear he didn't kill that man—he *didn't!*"

"Of course he didn't. Nobody in their right senses would think he did." He hesitated. "Unfortunately, a certain sub-moron named Sprackling, at the D. A.'s office, grabbed the case. And since it happened down in the Village, I'm on the outside—officially. I—you're sure you haven't thought up anything to help us, chicken? Any enemies he might have had? Or any trouble from that little business you run?"

"No Marty. I know so little about the business, but Mr. Dunbar, our partner, says it couldn't be that. Marty, you've got to find him—find him before the others do! This—this man whose head was beaten in was an out-of-town detective. I know what they do to people who're wanted for killing cops. . . . Marty, it's three days since it happened. If some other cops catch up to him first. . . . He's nobody—it'd be so convenient to throw the blame on him. Nobody cares about us!"

"Hush! Get hold of yourself, chicken. I—we—care about you, plenty. If you don't know that by now—" He checked himself, looking into her torn dark eyes. "I thought the world of your old man. For my money, he was the smoothest, gentlest old flim-flammer who ever parted a fool from his money. For his sake alone, I'd do—am doing—everything possible.

"We're handicapped, as I say, because this Sprackling has charge of the thing. His life's work is hating me and the Squad. And, incidentally, you'd better not be seen around us. He just might hold that against you. . . ."

He steered her gently toward the door. "Just keep your chin up, chicken. I give you my word, we're not missing a trick. Something's bound to break soon. We'll let you know immediately."

She turned around to face him at the door. There were tears in her dark eyes, and her lips quivered. She blurted: "Marty—it doesn't seem possible that

your Squad couldn't have found him in—three days!"

He winced. "Chicken, we're not infallible. Almost—" he tried to coax a smile from her with his wry grimace—"but not quite."

HE WENT on, down the long, warm corridor, a concerned crease in his forehead. He knew that he had not said the right things to the girl, but—what *were* the right things?

The facts were simple—and yet they weren't. On the Tuesday evening preceding, young Gerald (Fingers) Connally had been sitting in Dave's Restaurant, near the window that fronted Broadway. He was well enough known there—his pinched dark face and darting little black eyes, his orange-brown zoot-suit, the coat triangling almost to his knees, chocolate shirt and spurting hand-painted tie. He had had a wide, floppy-brimmed black hat on, but no overcoat. He was jotting down music notes, with a gaudy fat fountain pen—gold, latticed with silver stripes—at about nine o'clock.

He had suddenly peered sharply outside, jumped up, ran out onto Broadway, looked hastily around and jumped into a blue-top cab. He had ordered the hacker to follow a yellow which was just pulling out up ahead, and had suggested that the yellow might head for the St. Elmo hotel.

It had. They had worked up Broadway and across Fifty-Seventh; but, just short of the exclusive hotel's marquee, the yellow cab had swung south, gone back downtown, and they had finally wound up in Greenwich Village. They went round a final corner onto Horatio street and stopped—in time to see the yellow cab's muffled passenger climb out and vanish into an alley adjoining a sagging white stucco blacksmith's establishment.

Furtively, and with exaggerated caution, the little song-hustler had slid into the alley in pursuit.

And almost immediately, a third man—thick-set, in a derby hat and checkered overcoat—had appeared soundlessly beside the hacker and asked if his fare were Fingers Connally. The hacker could not tell him.

This man, catlike in spite of his bulk, had, in turn, eased across and, after care-

ful peeping, been swallowed into the alley's blackness.

The hacker, curiosity piqued, had sat watching—until a derby hat rolled lazily out of the alley and wobbled down to a halt in the gutter. Then he had mustered his courage, taken a flashlight and searched the alley.

He found the man in the checkered coat sprawled on his face, the back of his head smashed and battered into a grisly pulp, blood still pulsing. He raced out and succeeded in flagging down a prowler car.

The prowler car patrolmen had identified the dead man as a Sergeant Dowling, a detective on his annual vacation from Brown City, Colorado.

Beside him had been found the bottom half of Connally's fat gold-and-silver fountain pen. There was no sign of either Connally or the man he had followed up the alley. Since the alley—a rarity in New York—had an exit on the street below, it was assumed that they had departed through that exit and vanished.

That was on Tuesday and the Marquis had—even before the girl's first desperate entreaty reached him—spread the Squad's usually deadly little network of wires for the missing youngster.

Pressure of the overload of work had helped not at all. The Squad could ill-spare even the time to lay out the net. Gerald (Fingers) Connally was about as important to Broadway as dirt on a waiter's thumb. His nickname stemmed from his modest dexterity on the piano. For the adult part of his life, he had existed on occasional jobs of song-plugging and on handouts from Doris, whose fresh attractiveness kept her working regularly in Broadway box-offices.

Within the past year, some angel, whom the Street had decided must be not quite bright, had furnished capital for them to start a minuscule music publishing outfit of their own. The concern still wobbled along obscurely in business.

No one seemed to know exactly what had happened in the Greenwich Village alley—or why. No faintest clue had been found to the identity of the muffled man in the yellow cab—the man whom Fingers had been trailing.

The Marquis shook his head wearily. It was, as the girl had sensed, a not-too-

good sign that the Squad had been able to turn up nothing in three days. . . .

He came out of the corridor and was overlooking the main lobby just as a pompous little man in a huge bearskin coat and black Homburg steered a willowy redhead up the steps.

The Marquis turned swiftly, watched the short man strut across and deposit the bored-looking redhead by the bank of elevators, then turn back and step to the checkroom nearby.

As the other peeled off the coat, the Marquis wandered over. "Oh, Mr. Sprackling. Can I see you for a minute?"

Thick spectacles jerked up to his face. The short man's plum-blue eyes seemed to swell, then sharpen behind the heavy lenses. "Marquis, eh?" His voice was unpleasant and high-pitched. "I'm very sorry. I'm busy."

"About this Connally kid. . . ."

The little man tightened his face, pushing his little wedge-chin up. A strand of his mahogany pompadour broke loose. "I told you, Marquis—the Dowling killing is none of your business. It's outside your territory. My office is handling it exclusively." Color came and went in his bony little face. "Furthermore, holding the opinion I do of you and your wretched Squad, I won't tolerate your interference in any way, shape or form. If I find any of your thugs sticking their noses into it—I'll jail them. We're quite capable of handling it ourselves."

"**A**RE you? You've already boomed the most promising lead—this hacker who drove the yellow cab. With all your threatening in the newspapers, you've scared him into a hole. Nobody ever wins anything in a cop-killing. These hackies figure they can't win anything from cops anyway. The thing to do—"

The other's teeth snapped; his face was crimson. "I'll decide the thing to do. Get your nose out of my business, Marquis."

"Damn it, it's my business, too. Doris Connally is a friend of mine—and so is Fingers."

The other's eyes flashed. "In that case, all doubt is removed. If young Connally is a friend of yours, that brands him positively as the one who killed the officer. Perhaps you know where he is? Perhaps

he fled to you knowing he'd be hidden?"

"Perhaps you'd like a sock in your buck teeth? No, no, I didn't mean that. Look, Sprackling—that poor little jerk wouldn't kill anybody. I know him—a popoff, a loud-mouth, but harmless. Let's be smart, you and I. We've had some—uh—disagreements in the past; but if you'll let bygones be bygones, I'll give you a hand here—"

"A hand! Ha! If there's one thing I don't want from you, it's a hand! Good night!" He turned and strutted over to the redhead.

Fuming, the Marquis went slowly over and leaned a blocky shoulder against a pillar, sourly eyeing the milling swarm in the main lobby, wondering why he had attempted appeasing the little gadfly. . . .

He was against exactly that same pillar, in virtually the same position, at about the same hour two work-crammed, harassing nights later.

Andre, dark, Satan-faced little headwaiter from the mezzanine grill, skittered down to his side.

"Marty—a fellow in the grill ast me to find a Broadway Cop." He hesitated, tugged his collar. "Uh—there's a double-saw in it for me, Marty."

"Tell him to phone the precinct. We're snowed under. . . . Wait a minute. He offered you twenty seeds to find a cop?"

"A Broadway Squad cop."

"Oh, all right." He wearily pocketed the initialled handkerchief. "I'll let you make the twenty."

"Thanks, Marty, thanks!"

They went up the stairs, Andre bustling ahead. "There he is," he whispered, as they reached the top. "Just inside the door—the yellow-eyed gee with the snapper face."

The mellow-tinted grill was a straight-forward dining-room behind low plate-glass windows. An electric, small-boned man with smooth yellow skin and rubby yellow hair sat alone at a table just inside. He was speaking into a plug-in telephone. As the Marquis went past him and in through the door, he heard him say, "Cleetus. Yeah. I got it. Cleetus."

He hung up and a busboy snatched the instrument away.

The seated man raised driving yellow eyes to the Marquis'. He could be twenty-

five or forty-five. He wore a blue silk, knit tie in a stiff white collar, double-breasted blue serge suit—all expensive quality, but vaguely out of place on Broadway. His left hand on the table was short, yellow and meaty.

"This is a Broadway Squad officer, Mr.—" Andre bowed.

"Purvis is my name." He flipped his thumb and a small-folded bill sailed up at Andre. "O. K., captain. Thanks." He turned to the Marquis. "Sit down a minute, mister. I won't bore you—I promise."

"Sorry. I've only got a minute. We're very busy, Mr. Purvis."

"All right." He leaned closer over the table, eyes burning. "All right. Then I'll give it to you raw. You've got two visitors here on Broadway. Shopping."

"Two? We've got thousands."

"These two are a little special. One of them is a Polish officer who fought in Hitler's army. The other is a Hungarian woman who fled from Vienna on VE day. Don't ask me how they got into the country. I—we—don't know. But what makes it interesting is that they're shopping for a crematorium."

"Whaa-at?"

"A crematorium. And they're loaded with money."

"Look, Mr. Purvis—fun's fun, but this is no time for it. . . ."

"You think it's fun?" The driving yellow eyes never moved, while he slipped out a thick wallet and held it between his hands.

LISTEN, Mr. Marquis: You wanted this in a hurry, so you're getting it that way. My fiancée is a Hungarian girl. These people have made some crazy mistake. They think that she—well, that she's someone else. They seem to believe that she's been approached, lined up and briefed, to help them buy this damn thing. She's terrified. She's nearly out of her mind. She's afraid to be seen in public—"

"Now, wait a minute. Who's kidding who, here? If you're leveling, then someone is pulling a terrific practical joke."

"Yes? Then look at this—" He fingered a thick wad of new bills partly out of the wallet. The top few, at least, were thousands. "We're from Michigan,

Mr. Marquis. One hour after we checked in here today—I don't mean this hotel, but another—a package was delivered us by Western Union. The package contained nothing but fifty thousand dollars. Fifty one-thousand dollar bills. Is that a practical joke, too?"

The Marquis squinted. "I simply can't swallow this, Mr. Purvis. Whatever the hell you think you're doing—"

"Will you talk to my fiancée?"

"Well, sure. Bring her to McCreagh's Theater Ticket Agency, just a couple of doors down. It's sort of our hangout. If I'm not there, Sergeant McGuire—"

"She won't go there. She won't go on the street. She—I've got her a certain place, waiting. I can have her here in three minutes." As the Marquis frowned impatiently, he fingered a thousand-dollar bill out and dropped it on the tablecloth. "I'll leave that there, to show I'm not kidding. Three minutes. You'll wait here that long?"

The Marquis shifted uncomfortably. "I—oh, hell, all right. Pick up your money. I'll wait exactly three minutes, no more."

The other swung swiftly to his feet. "Not a second more."

He swung lithely out hurried down the gold-carpeted stairs. . . .

He did not come back.

At the end of five minutes, the Marquis' forehead was maroon. His grim head-jerk brought Andre running. "Where did that clown go? Did he pay his check?"

Andre reached swiftly across the littered table and lifted the crumpled napkin. An oblong tray held bills and change.

"Well, if you see him, tell him that funny gags like that are a good way to lose teeth."

Something bright caught his eye. He moved the tray aside, and looked down at a cheap white envelope, covered with telephone doodles—and the top of a fountain pen.

It was plump, gold, latticed with silver stripes. He bent quickly and read, engraved in a long, smooth space on the back: *Gerald T. Connally*.

He straightened, stared at it with hot eyes. "Phone Asa McGuire," he told Andre abruptly. "Tell him to hop over

here. We've got work to do tonight."

He turned and strode out, went quickly down the stairs.

The blonde girl in the checkroom below told him readily: "Sure. His hat and coat was checked here. He came shooting down the stairs, got his things and walked off down the corridor—towards the side door."

The giant doorman of the side door, Soldier Murphy, nodded. "Sure, I see him, Marty. He comes out a couple minutes ago, walked down the hack line a piece there and started barbering with the jockeys. Finally he drove off with Charlie Untz."

"What drivers did he barber with? Are they still out there?"

"Well, the line's moved. Try them guys down around the alley there."

It took him four more minutes to find a hacker who had spoken to the yellow-eyed man. "Sure, Marty. He ast did I know where some warehouse was. In a place called Miller's Cove. Wait—Gurney's—yeah, that was it. Gurney's warehouse. Nobody but Charlie knew it."

He turned and went back quickly. As he pushed through the side door, he almost collided with a redheaded figure in collegiate pork-pie hat and long belted camel's-hair coat—Sergeant McGuire.

For once, the chubby sergeant with the phenomenal memory did not look boyish. His freckled face was dingy and tired. "Well?" he asked wearily.

"You know a Gurney's warehouse, in a place called Miller's Cove?"

"Well, sure. I know Miller's Cove. It's in Jersey."

"Whereabouts in Jersey? Where's the car?"

"Eh? The car's right over there—across the street. Miller's Cove is a little bay, sort of, just off the Washington Bridge. Maybe twenty minutes, half an hour drive. But—"

"Come on. There's a very interesting gent I'd like to meet there."

"What's he pulled?"

"I can't quite figure. But he had Fingers Connally's fountain pen in his hand."

"Connally? Oh, my Lord—"

"Just shut up and get me there. That's all I want from you."

CHAPTER TWO

Corpse Under Ice

THE long, blue convertible raced them northward. Till they rattled on to the Washington Bridge, the sergeant preserved a glowering silence. Then he pointed to a dark huddle on the shore ahead of them. "There it is."

"No lights?"

"The buildings are all condemned."

They turned left as they poured off the bridge, drove through seven blocks and into the eighth cross street—and were confronted with a white-painted, spiked-iron fence. Through the spikes, they could see sullen water lapping at the shore line where it cut sharply back.

They turned right, and their turning headlights briefly flicked over the little huddle of dilapidated wooden buildings. Their common loading lip was on thirty-foot stilts out over the white ice.

"I used to play around here as a kid," McGuire said. "I never remember it being cold enough to make an ice-shell on the cove before."

"Douse your lights. What's behind the string of buildings?"

"A wide cobble-stoned court. A receiving ledge runs straight along the back of all of them, and a little catwalk at each end goes round to the front."

"Leave the car here," the Marquis whispered as they reached the end of the white spikes. "We'll stroll along the back. I don't know quite what I expect to see. . . ."

They saw nothing as they moved softly to the far end of the row. The Marquis, powerful torch in one gloved hand, hopped up on the ledge and felt his way carefully along the catwalk to the front.

"Watch your step," he warned McGuire. "This damned thing is slippery with spray ice."

If the catwalk were slippery, the narrow front platform was glass. There was no guard-rail of any kind—only wide-spaced pilings for mooring purposes. To make it worse, the narrow ledge canted slightly downwards to the sheer edge. The glow and pinpoint sparkle of New York, across the water, gave no real light.

"Hell—watch it," McGuire whispered

as they eased slowly along the planking, "We'll skid off into the soup below. . . ."

Wind whistled in off the ice. The Marquis' torch beam whisked over sagging board fronts, all markings long since weathered away.

They had covered more than half the row when McGuire said suddenly: "Wait a minute! Isn't that a sign there?"

The Marquis swept light back to center a small black board. It was propped drunkenly against the wide, sliding door, and its faded white paint vaguely read:

Gurney's Sugar

The Marquis' flash beam ran over the door. There was a black, thick crack between door and door jamb. He snapped off the torch.

"Something tells me," he said grimly, "that I've been suckered. Anyway, cover me while I make the play."

He handed the sergeant the torch, took a short automatic pistol from his pocket, and lifted the black sign carefully aside. He crawled gloved fingers into the door's crack and heaved.

The door screened open to a width of four feet. McGuire bathed the aperture in white light.

A human figure, swathed to the waist in ropes, pitched solidly through the light, thudded face downwards and slid halfway across the slippery platform. They both jumped to stop it. Fingers Connally's droopy black hat and orange zoot-suit, were in rags and filth, but unmistakable.

McGuire swore wildly. The Marquis dropped swiftly to the boy's side, yanked him over on his back.

Pinpoint sweat shone on the little song-plugger's face. His eyes were closed. A worm of blood had dried from the corner of his mouth. His arms were clamped across his chest under the cutting ropes. In the left center of his orange-brown coat, two ragged holes were sopping. One of his wrists, snarled in the ropes, was a mash of flesh, bone, and blood.

"He's alive," McGuire gasped. "But he's shot to hell!"

A sharp snap-knife appeared in the Marquis' black-gloved hand, and the blade slid down the tangled ropes. McGuire called sharply into the prone youth's face:

"Fingers! It's the Marquis!" and the prone youth seemed to stir a little as the ropes fell away. The Marquis jerked and tugged to unsnarl the youth's bloody wrist from a rope that seemed to have encircled it.

Blood spurted suddenly in a thin stream. It shot a full four feet, almost splattering in the Marquis' face.

"Holy Cow!" McGuire choked. "His wrist! The bullet went through it! That rope was twisted around it and stopped the—"

The Marquis jerked the monogrammed handkerchief from his breast pocket, whipped one end swiftly up under the boy's forearm. He pawed back the sodden sleeve and knotted the handkerchief tightly round the scrawny forearm. The blood-flow slowed.

"A piece of wood—nail—something," he shot at McGuire, and the redheaded sergeant kicked loose a rusty spike from the icy planking. He jammed it in the open knot between the Marquis' black-gloved fingers, and twisted twice, anchoring the tourniquet. The spurting of the blood ceased.

"How can he be alive?" McGuire whispered hoarsely.

"He's not very alive. Get inside there. If there's a phone, get an ambulance. He's done for, but maybe he can talk."

McGuire slithered into the open maw of the black warehouse and vanished.

IN THE light of his own pencil flash, the Marquis' hand went through the empty pockets of the nearly dead youth. He stood up finally, breathing a little hard.

"There's no damned telephone in here," McGuire's exasperated voice boomed hollowly. "Nor nothing else—" He went abruptly silent. Then: "Marty—hey come here! Is this anything?"

The Marquis shot the pencil beam on the face of the unconscious youth. He seemed now to have ceased breathing entirely. Tight-lipped, the Marquis stepped back and into the warehouse.

McGuire's torch beam was centered on a droopy black object in his hand. It was crumpled and dirt-stained.

"It's a hat," McGuire exclaimed.

The Marquis took it, pulled it into shape. It was a hat, of black felt, but of

some old-fashioned style. The brim was narrow, unbound, the crown—also of soft black felt—no more than three inches high and slightly belled.

McGuire swung the flashbeam to the filthy floor beside an open locker. Smears of brownish-red stains and a wide swath in the floor's dust had vaguely the outline of a human body. "I found it crumpled up there."

The Marquis said, "Fingers must have had—" and his keen ear caught a scratching sound outside.

He turned and jumped to the door, slapped the beam of his pencil flash on the stricken youth. Emptiness stared back. He jerked it sideways quickly—and spotted Connally again, three good yards away.

He had somehow come to his hands and knees. He was swaying a little; his eyes, turned over his shoulder, were glittering, beady, not sane. He tried to lift a hand to shield them from the light—and his propping arm buckled. He flopped down sideways, rolled onto his back—and the planking did not extend that far. His body flipped—and he disappeared in utter silence. The Marquis' sliding dive was a hair's breadth too late.

Hastily clapping an arm around the rounded top of a black iron ladder to save himself, the Marquis whipped the flash beam downward.

For an instant, a black object whirled through the thin beam—and then there was a sharp *crunch* as the youth's body plunged headfirst through the ice.

McGuire came rushing out. "What the—? Hey, where's—?" He choked, dived to the Marquis' side. "Look out, Marty—I'll get him!" He lunged for the iron ladder.

The Marquis' snatching hand jerked him back. "That's really bright," he said through thin lips. "How can you get him? Crawl around under the ice?"

He stood up slowly. The beam of the two flashlights hung unwavering on the sinister, black oily hole below. Minutes passed. The body did not reappear. The Marquis snapped off his flash, dropped it in his pocket.

"That makes him the Harbor Squad's business," he said softly. "This is really something."

They sat in blackness in the convertible. After long minutes, the Marquis said, "Let's get back."

"Do we—report this?"

"I don't know. If we don't and the Harbor boys find him—"

"But if we do and Sprackling—Lord, Sprackling'll find a way to twist it. And ten to one the news-rags will tee off on us again—the old 'outlaw Broadway Squad' routine."

"Get going."

They started back in taut silence.

When they were halfway across the bridge, the Marquis said grimly, "Anyway, it's clear now that when Fingers went into that alley, he was being trapped. The joker is the yellow cab sucked him down there to trap him."

"Hell, yes. And this Colorado copper stuck his nose in, for some reason, at the crucial moment—and got brained. Eh?"

"Conceivably. But that was Tuesday. Why pick Fingers up Tuesday, hold him till tonight and shoot him? He was shot in the past few hours. Picked up Tuesday and shot tonight."

"This yellow-eyed Purvis—he's the one that did it?"

"Who else? He's *our* meat anyway. The minute we get back, burn up the town for him. Put the whole damn squad on it if necessary."

"How about this hat? Apparently Fingers had it rolled up in his hip pocket. You think it's anything?"

"I don't like the hat. The hat doesn't send me. You can give Doris a call and see if it belonged to Fingers—after you've built a fire under this Squad of mine."

"Hell, you can't blame *us*. . . ."

"No? I'm supposed to have twenty-two master detectives working for me. Hand-picked operators. Shrewd types. I set you all up like little feudal czars. Then this little guy walks off into space and in five days, not one of you raises a whisper. Now he turns up murdered."

"Be reasonable. After all, Fingers was just a small-timer and—"

"Small-timer, eh? Who told you that small-timers weren't important in our book? Who do you think our section is run for? The crooks and grifters? The butter-and-egg daddies? The out-of-towners that sail in and get clipped

through their own damned viciousness? No, my friend. It's the poor damned small-timers that live here, beating their brains out, year after year, trying to squeeze out an honest existence. If you jokers are getting headline complexes again—"

THE redhead twitched a tired hand. "All right. Maybe you're right. But cursing us out now isn't helping any. We'll have to jump this thing—but quick—if *you're* going to keep healthy. Before Fingers floats up again."

"You birds didn't turn up anybody at all who had it in for Fingers, eh?"

"No."

"What about his business? No tangles there?"

"Al Hack says no. He's the one that talked to the partner, Dunbar."

They drove quickly back down to Broadway. Both men glanced over at the Schwartz Building as they rattled through Tin Pan Alley—a shabby, drunken old structure squeezed in between a novelty store and a sandwich shop. The third-story window of the Connally Music Company was closed and dark.

"It must be something in their business," the Marquis said. "If it were anything personal, Doris would know about it."

"Say," the redhead said queerly. "It just dawns on me that we haven't heard from Doris lately. She hasn't phoned once today."

The Marquis was silent, his forehead knotted, as they approached McCreagh's Theater Ticket Agency, which the Broadway Squad used as headquarters. "That's kind of funny, at that. Better put somebody behind her and—Al! Al!"

Funeral-faced Al Hack of the Squad was just closing the door of the agency behind him. When he saw the convertible slide into the curb, he quickly re-opened it and called to someone inside: "The boss is here now."

He left the door open, came across the sidewalk. "Phone for you, Marty. It's Soldier Murphy—the side doorman at the Nestor."

"Eh? Well, wait a minute."

He slid out, crossed the sidewalk into the Agency and walked to the desk far

at the rear. He took the cradle set from stringy, English-looking Derosier. "Yes, Soldier?"

"Hey, Marty, Charlie Untz come back to the stand. He's the one was drivin' that yellow-eyed gee, you know? Well, the guy never went to that Jersey spot. When they were a few blocks up, he changed his mind. He had Charlie drive him around the Park while he smoked a cigar, and then got out at the Seventy-second street subway station. I figure you'd like to know."

"Yeah, Soldier, thanks," the Marquis said. "I do like to know."

He stood silent, his forehead creased. Harry Derosier looked up finally. "What gives? Bad news?"

"No. No. Just a guy with gall of a polecat and a diseased imagination." He went silent, tight-lipped.

Finally, he said. "All right. We'll stack a little plain, grubby, routine police work up against his flossy pipe dreaming. Harry, find out for me—fast—who owns Gurney's warehouse. It's in a place called Miller's Cove, just off the bridge in Jersey. I'll phone in later."

When he slid past Hack and back into the convertible, McGuire asked, "What's on the Soldier's mind?"

The Marquis told him. "So it seems all our yellow-eyed friend was doing was deliberately steering me. Rolling out a fancy red carpet for me to follow straight to that warehouse."

"You mean he wanted us to find Fingers? Then all this wild story he spun you—"

"Pure drivel. Just something to let him slide out while I had time to find the pen."

"But why, for the love o' hell? What can he win by that?"

"I'd like to know. Al, this Dunbar—Fingers' and Doris' partner. How does he shape up?"

"Oh, sort of a frantic little Scotsman—boiled face and long white sideburns. He's pretty cut up."

"About Fingers' disappearance?"

"That, and the general decrepitude of the firm."

"You couldn't smell any business troubles? Some squabble with a rival firm?"

"No. Hell, it's a sick outfit. They've

turned out some thirty-odd songs over the past year—every one a dud. The rival music publishing firms don't even know they're alive."

"Were they quarrelling among themselves? Maybe about which one was to blame?"

Hack frowned, rubbed his jaw. "I didn't get that impression."

"You know where Dunbar lives?"

"Yeah. On Tenth Street, between Fifth and Sixth—a whitestone between two brownstones."

"Swell. Thanks, Al. All right, McGuire, let's go. . . ."

He broke off, as the agency door opened and Derosier peered questioningly out. He had a piece of paper in one skinny brown hand. He trudged quickly across the sidewalk and said:

"That warehouse, Marty. It ain't owned by Gurney. It belongs now to an Otis Peabody, residing in Silver Falls, Colorado."

"Colorado!" McGuire blinked startled bright eyes. "Colorado's where that Dowling was from—the cop that got killed!"

"You never were righter," the Marquis murmured. "I wonder if, by any chance, this Mr. Otis Peabody also is visiting our city."

"Whoa! We couldn't have it work out that pat. . . . Hey, where are you going now?"

"To start the ball rolling," the Marquis said, and vanished into the agency.

When he came out, a full four minutes later, his eyes glowed softly.

"Now, look," McGuire said skeptically. "If you say you found him here, I'll call you a—"

"It isn't a 'him,' it's a 'her.' Mr. Peabody has been dead for two years. Mrs. Peabody has her hotel blocking calls. But the switchboard girl fumbled a little—first said she was retired, then changed it to she was out of town. It's a cinch that she's right there. McGuire—you concentrate on getting everybody hot on this Purvis. I'll take a cab to the lady's hotel."

"Where, for the love o' heaven? What hotel?"

"Why, the St. Elmo, little chum. The St. Elmo."

CHAPTER THREE

A Minx and Monoxide

A LITTLE snow was whirling in the air by the time he stood outside the St. Elmo.

It was a quiet, luxury hotel—not ornate, not splashy. Its two entrances opened into a snug, airy, high-ceilinged lobby in cool green. It was one hotel that even the Broadway Squad handled with kid gloves.

He hesitated, peering through the Fifty-seventh Street doors for a long minute. Presumably, if the switchboard girls were lying for Mrs. Peabody, the hotel would shunt away visitors.

He waited till the fat, naked face of the bald-headed Blake, the night manager, appeared briefly behind the desk. The hotel man was studying a list of figures and moving toward the end of the horseshoe desk that concealed his office.

The Marquis hesitated only till bronze grillwork hid the fat man from his line of sight, then went quietly through a wing door, crossed the lobby casually but without sound, and muttered, "Fourteen," as he walked into one of the bronze cages.

"Yes, *sir*." The elevator door slid closed and they shot upwards.

He got off at fourteen, walked to the wide, carpeted staircase and went down one flight—the hotel had no thirteenth floor—to twelve, and stepped hesitantly into the cream-and-maroon corridor while he got his bearings.

Twelve-A turned out to be a little three-room suite. He stood before three solid walnut doors, each of which bore identical, chaste, embossed metal numerals.

There were shallow, wide walnut transoms over each of the three doors. The first two were firmly closed. The third hung open at an angle of forty-five degrees, and he fancied that there was a faint glow of light within.

He stood pulling thoughtfully at his ear for a minute, stepped over to cock his head against the door beneath the open transom, but he could hear nothing. Finally, he tapped gently with a knuckle.

Nothing happened. At a loss, he moved to the center door and, after a long, frowning pause, repeated the process.

A soft giggle jerked his head around

and upwards, to the open transom of the room he had already tried.

A girl's—or woman's—round, peach-bloom face, surmounted by tight, red-golden curls, smiled down at him eagerly from the narrow opening. Her starry, pansy-brown eyes shone unnaturally.

"Hello," she whispered.

"Uh—hello." The Marquis hastily adjusted his voice. "Mrs. Peabody?" He slid the black wallet from his pocket, flopped it open to show the shield inside.

She nodded eagerly, knowingly. "Wha's name?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Uh—Marty. Lieutenant Marquis."

She pressed her forehead closer to the opening. "Oooohh! Marty. Wooz like a drink, Marty?"

The transom revolved slightly, hit her on her tiny nose. "Oooohh!" She put two white arms up, one to her nose, one to push at the transom petulantly. "Poor Letty!" she whimpered.

She disappeared abruptly.

There was a splintering crash inside, followed by silence.

The Marquis tapped. "Mrs. Peabody—are you all right? The door opened under his hand. It immediately struck a yielding obstruction. He pushed harder, squeezed his head inside and saw that his pushing was overbalancing a table—a spindly, gilt job. He slid inside quickly, in time to catch it before it fell. Its mate, a spindly chair with a burst leg, lay beside it.

He saw a soothing bedroom of old-rose and green taffeta. The three-quarter bed was barely rumped. A bridge lamp coned down on a chaise longue between the front windows, and on a tabouret that held whiskey, glasses, and water pitcher.

The girl lay on the floor in a quilted yellow robe, her eyes closed, a vague smile on her scarlet mouth. Her arms were up comfortably behind her head. She was a miniature, exquisite doll, and her curves were breath-taking. The Marquis gulped a little as he knelt beside her.

"Mrs. Peabody!"

She seemed to sigh a little, luxuriously, but her breathing was even and regular. He decided she was faking.

He stooped and lifted her, lowered her gently onto the bed. He tried her with her name twice more, grunted sus-

piciously—and a door across the room whined open behind him.

HE HASTILY jerked erect and turned. A gaunt, fragile old man with white matted hair stood in the open doorway, pointing a blue-steel revolver.

"Put your hands up!" he choked. In pajamas and brown watered-silk dressing-gown, he was thin to the point of emaciation.

"Take it easy," the Marquis growled. "I'm Lieutenant Marquis—police."

"Police!" Fright jumped into the hollow brown eyes. "What has she done now?" His trapped eyes raced from the girl, to the broken chair, the table—and the whiskey on the tabouret. He made a quick stumble towards it, blurting, "Oh, my Lord. where did she get—?" He checked himself, plucked at his collar with a crooked finger, indicated the door behind him. "Please—will you come in here, Mr. Marquis?" he said hoarsely. "I—I'm Wilfred Iselin. I—represent her fully."

"Fair enough." The Marquis walked past him, into a dark room. At the far side, a door stood open, showing a crumpled bed-corner. The old man hastily reached in and switched on lights in the middle room, closed the door as he followed the Marquis.

It was a silver-and-yellow living-room, the furniture delicate Queen Anne, including a gilt piano. A huge pearl-inlaid desk had been moved in and stood loaded with folders and stacks of files. Piles of papers had overflowed into stacks around it, littering the silver rug.

The old man licked his lips. "If—if she's gotten into trouble again, Mr. Marquis, we're only too glad to—to compensate. For any damage—or inconvenience." "Oh?"

"Please, Mr. Marquis—please understand." The old man's voice was desperate. "Mrs. Peabody is a woman of a certain social position. She is extremely well-known, respected, in Silver Springs. Nothing resembling these—these incidents in nightclubs has ever happened before we came to New York. She—she seems to have exploded. I have—have tried to keep liquor from her—have even tried to keep her from leaving the hotel. I—there is a certain background—" He broke off, his

eyes haggard. "If you'll tell me what she's done this time, I'm sure we can arrive at an agreement."

"I want to question her about some property she owns."

"Property?"

"In Jersey. A place known as Gurney's warehouse—in a bay called Miller's cove."

The lawyer's mouth opened. Relief swelled his eyes. "She—she doesn't own that, Mr. Marquis." He groped behind him for the throne-swivel chair. "I assure you, she never heard of it. It—it was part of Mr. Peabody's estate. I am his executor. I give you my word she didn't know the place existed."

"Have you had any trouble with it?"

"N—not in the way you—only in the same way I've had trouble with all the legacies."

"What way is that?"

"The impractical way the bequests were—here, I'll show you." He turned hastily to the folders pawed through them till he got one over in front of him.

The Marquis idly eyed the four neatly-inked names on the outside of the folder:

*M. Leboldus
O. G. Cleetus
Rev. P. Graff
McCormack*

The name Cleetus jolted him instantly. It was a second before he could remember why.

"Wait a minute. Who is this Cleetus?"

"Eh? Oh, Cleetus is the man who got the warehouse."

"Oh," the Marquis said. "Uh—go ahead."

"Yes. This is the bequest verbatim: 'To my good friend Ollie Cleetus, his heirs and assigns forever'—no address, no description, mind you—'wharfage on New York harbor suitable for his boat'."

"Go on. How does that get to be a warehouse?"

"That's all of it. I've been up against that kind of bequests for two years. I've gone nearly crazy trying to settle them."

"Cleetus, I found after a year and a half of search, is a small produce farmer on Long Island. Before the war, he owned a small fishing schooner in Montauk, on which Mr. Peabody had once enjoyed a day's fishing. Exactly why Mr. Peabody decided he needed a wharf, nobody knows.

Mr. Cleetus doesn't want one—never wanted done. In fact, Cleetus could not recall ever having *heard* of Mr. Peabody.

"Moreover, the estate owned no wharf, and Mr. Cleetus no longer had any boat . . . Fortunately, we were able to press that abandoned warehouse on him. But he's interested only in its cash value."

"Hell—are all the bequests like that? The big ones, too?"

"THERE are no big ones, fortunately—except Mrs. Peabody, the residuary legatee. But the others certainly *are* like that. Mr. Peabody was an unlettered man—a prospector who struck it very rich late in life. The only testament which he ever had properly drawn up for him was dated the day after his marriage—twelve years ago.

"Somebody, unfortunately, explained codicils to him. It has taken me a solid two years, Mr. Marquis, to execute all his benign whims. To a will of six short paragraphs, he appended more than thirty pages of codicils—all modest legacies, as I say, but the vagueness—my Lord, the vagueness. . . .

"Here! 'To my good friend, Morrie Leboldus'—Leboldus being another who could not recall having ever seen Mr. Peabody—'enough cash to set him up in his own restaurant in New York City.' How much is that, Mr. Marquis? Five thousand or a hundred thousand? To McCormack, a pigeon fancier—but," he stammered, "I know this is of no interest to you. . . ."

"It could be," the Marquis demurred. "Have you run into any of these names: Doris or Gerald Connally? Or a Mr. Dunbar?"

"No," the other said. "I have never heard of any of them, I'm sure."

"What does this Cleetus look like?"

"Why, he's short, dark, has a handlebar moustache—"

"Have you run into anyone named Purvis? Or anyone who looks like—" he described the yellow-eyed man in detail.

The lawyer's eyes blinked, went wide. "Why—I think. . . . Not in connection with the will, though. The description sounds like a chap named Chalky Wright whom I know. He phoned me three weeks ago. . . ."

"About what?"

"Why, he wanted me to act as his attorney. He's phoned a couple of times since, most insistently."

"Why did he happen to pick on you?"

"Eh? Oh, I've known him for years. Represented him once, for that matter—though I'm not boasting about it."

The Marquis licked his lips. "Tell me all about it."

The old lawyer looked a little puzzled. "Why, he used to work for Mr. Peabody. While I was in practice in Silver Springs, there was a strike at one of the smelters and it came to violence. Chalky was the union organizer, and in the end he was charged with felonious assault and one thing another, and retained me to defend him.

"I was fortunate enough to have him acquitted. A year or two later, Chalky got into fresh trouble—something about funds of which he was custodian, and which another union officer accused him of stealing.

"At any rate, there was a quarrel and the other officer was killed. A manslaughter charge was lodged against Chalky and he became a fugitive from justice. In fact

there was a substantial reward offered for his capture."

"Is it still standing?"

"Why, I don't know. Possibly. Why?"

"Nothing. Only—I think a sharp-eyed Colorado detective got his head bashed in here the other night making a stab for that reward. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"Why, that's all. While he was first in hiding, Chalky did send messages to me to see if I would represent him again, but by then I was handling Mr. Peabody's work exclusively. As I say, that was five years ago. I have not seen nor heard from him since—till just recently."

The Marquis was silent. Finally, he asked: "Do you think he might get in touch with you again?"

The lawyer shook his head. "I doubt it. I was most emphatic. And, now that my work on the will is finally completed, I will be leaving in a day or two. . . ."

"If he does call, would you—" The Marquis paused, seeking the proper words. "Since you knew him, Mr. Iselin, he's become a damned dangerous man. Take my word for it—he's a cold-blooded

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killer who'll stop at nothing at all.

"He's engaged in some deal here right now that I don't yet understand—but two people have been murdered on it so far." He hesitated. "If the chance comes, would you be willing to help me nail him?"

The lawyer's hollow eyes were startled. "Why—why, I don't know." He frowned, fingered his wattled neck.

The Marquis was quickly jotting the agency number on a card. "I'll promise you you'll run no risk. I'll provide absolute protection."

"It—isn't that. After all, he'd—well, in a sense, he probably looks on me as his attorney. No, I—I wouldn't want to commit myself on that till I think about it a little, Mr. Marquis.

The Marquis laid the card on the desk. "All right, Mr. Iselin. A call there will get me any time, day or night."

THE snow had increased to the size of nickels by the time the Marquis let himself out of the fire door at the street level. He emerged from the alley, searched the side street unsuccessfully for a cab, had to go back round onto Fifty-seventh. A yellow taxi was slanted into the curb, almost in front of the hotel, its peak-capped hacker hammering at a rear wheel with a spanner.

He gave a final bang as the Marquis approached, tossed the spanner into the front seat, and opened the door at the Marquis' nod.

The Marquis climbed in. "Fifth Avenue and Tenth Street."

"Right." The hacker slammed the door, mounted his perch and they rattled away. The cab stank a little of burned gasoline.

The Marquis slumped back against the cushions, tried to estimate carefully what the lawyer had told him—and was somewhat shocked to realize that it was really very little. Chalky Wright's name and record. What else? Enough to eliminate worrying about the death of Dowling, once and for all. The killing of the reward-seeking Colorado detective had obviously been incidental—no part of whatever scheme was going forward.

The bare facts still remained: Fingers had been kidnaped Tuesday, held till tonight, and then butchered. And pains had been taken to see that the Marquis dis-

cover his body. Perhaps—for what it was worth—he could add the knowledge that Chalky had been urgently trying to line up a lawyer, some three weeks ago. Add it all up and it was pitifully little.

And yet somehow, somewhere inside his head, obscure thoughts were churning around. For a minute, he seemed to be about to arrive at something—but he could not quite reach it. . . .

They rattled through the night, closed in by the almost solid curtain of whirling white snowflakes outside. His eyes burned, grew heavy as he stared out, trying to orient himself. The scorched gasoline smell made his head ache. He thought of opening a window.

He considered that carefully. To do it, he would have to shift forward in the seat. That required thinking over. He fixed his thick eyes on the handle with which the window was raised or lowered.

There was no such handle. He could see the hole in the upholstery and the ragged metal where it had broken off. His eyes began to throb and jump. Queerer still, the door handle seemed to be missing. . . .

His eyes swept to the other door. It, too, lacked handles. Alarm came to him through a fog, and he pawed for the gun at his hip. His arm and his eyes weighed tons. He tried to focus the illuminated slot from which the driver's photograph stared; it swam and glared weirdly. He struggled to get up, tried to yell at the driver. A sort of wheeze was all that he could manage.

He put one hand out at the picture, now a spinning blot of light. He fell to his knees. His face felt congested, burning, bursting. A gun thundered in the cab; glass in the side door exploded outwards. He pitched down to his face.

The gun banged and roared again. It was his gun, somehow in his hand. It went on firing, the recoil jerking the muzzle around erratically. The cab lurched sideways, its tires screaming as it skidded to a wild stop. Clean, cold air bit like knives into the Marquis' lungs. Some distant part of his consciousness heard the driver's door slam, and footsteps race away.

He sat, ten minutes later, on the running board, his head in his hands, waiting

for his strength to return. His throat was like burnt metal. He was nauseated and trembling.

His head cleared and he stood up. He was at the east end of Washington Square, parked before the deserted University building. The shots seemed to have attracted no attention—blanketed, evidently, by the heavy-falling snow.

He walked round and examined the rubber tube. It had been slipped over the exhaust at one end, then passed through the luggage compartment and a punched-out hole in the metal framework of the rear seat—to give the Marquis a nice dose of monoxide.

He let the luggage lid drop, adjusted his clothes and stared northward. At least, he thought grimly, the cab had brought him to within three blocks of his destination.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hang the Broadway Squad!

THE snow had increased to the size of quarters by the time he turned from Fifth onto the brisk clean darkness of Tenth Street. No pedestrians were abroad, and most of the windows on the street were dark.

He quickened his pace a little, noting idly that another trudging, weary figure had turned in from Sixth Avenue and was approaching on the far side of the street. Spotted the house fronts, he finally spotted the lone whitestone in the row of darker ones.

The trudging little man from the other end reached it while the Marquis was still sixty or seventy yards short. He turned, took a look up and down the street and held his keyring in the light from a nearby street lamp as he went up the steps. The Marquis caught sight of a tomato-red face and white hair under a high-riding sugar-loaf hat.

The Marquis opened his mouth to call to him—and a red searchlight swept round the corner of Sixth. Halfway out into the roadway, the Marquis stepped back into the shelter of a parked car.

With one corner of his eye, he saw the little Scotsman disappear into the whitestone house. He stood, tight-lipped, as

the police car spurred towards him, followed by a limousine.

When the two-car parade finally pulled in in front of the whitestone, he could make out the color of the limousine—maroon, with a silver stripe. But what concerned him more was the spare, ascetic figure in long tubular coat who climbed out of the coupe in front, settling a hard hat on wax-like silver, waving hair. It was impossible to mistake the ramrod-straight Chief Inspector, the Marquis' immediate—and only—boss.

The Marquis stood in concerned indecision, while Sprackling piled out of the limousine with two detectives from the D. A.'s offices, and led the little parade up the brass-railinged steps. A light went on in the windows at the left just as they rang the bell. A minute later the door opened and received the four men, closed again.

The Marquis went hesitantly across. He caught a faint mumble of voices and his eyes narrowed on the window that adjoined the top of the steps. It was open some six inches from the sill, although a cream-colored blind was drawn to the bottom.

He glanced quickly up and down the empty street, mounted the steps and stooped over the handrail.

Quite clearly, he heard Sparkling's shrill little voice. ". . . Received a letter—a most important letter. It convicts you, Dunbar, of withholding vital information from us."

A car drifted past. Hastily, the Marquis turned his back, sat on the brass rail and leaned his head against the white stone beside the window.

He was just in time to hear Sprackling rage: "Paying protection money for your firm to the Broadway Squad—to the tune of eight hundred dollars a month! Weren't you!"

The Marquis' involuntary jerk almost unseated him. He caught himself hastily, pressed closer.

It seemed an interminable time till a frightened, almost whispering voice choked, "Well—well, yeah."

The Marquis froze, fascinated. The Chief Inspector's cultured voice asked quickly, "To whom? Whom did you pay this money to?"

"I—I dunno, Inspector. I gave the cash to Fingers every month. He—he paid it."

"You handed him out eight hundred dollars in cash—and took his word that he was paying it to a Broadway officer?"

"What could I do?" Dunbar said desperately. "I had to go along on his say-so. What do I know about song publishing—or Broadway either? All I did was—was keep the books, sort of."

Sprackling's voice broke in shrilly: "Why did you withhold this information? Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I—I—gosh, Mr. Sprackling—are you kidding? Squeal on the Broadway Squad?"

"NOW, wait just a minute," the Inspector said sharply. "Why were you paying this hush-money? What sort of a racket were you running?"

"R—racket!" the frightened voice gasped. "I—I swear there was no racket! Fingers told me every business had to kick in to the Broadway cops—or they wouldn't be allowed to run. Him being around here all his life, how could I question—"

Sprackling's voice cracked in shrill triumph. "There you are, Inspector! Here's the truth about that venal, dangerous mob of hoodlums you call the Broadway Squad! Don't you see what's happened? This Broadway cop, whoever he is, milked the business dry. When he put on more squeeze, Fingers got desperate—threatened to make a clean breast of everything—and was put out of the way. We know now that Dowling was killed because he stumbled into it—"

The Chief Inspector interrupted irritably. "Just a minute, Mr. Sprackling! Be good enough to let me get a word in edgewise."

"Dunbar, this sounds damned fishy. Do you mean to say that Fingers didn't even tell you—or show you—the man who was taking this money?"

"Oh, yes, he showed him to me once. Only—only I dunno what he looks like."

"What!"

"I—all I know is—I passed Fingers on the street once. He was with a guy. Later, he told me the guy was the Broadway detective we were paying off to. But

I hadn't paid him no mind at the time, and I—I can't remember what he looks like."

"But you'd know him again!" Sprackling burst out. "If we parade the whole Broadway Squad in front of you, you're bound to recognize him!"

"I tell you, I wouldn't."

"How do you know you wouldn't? Damn you, Dunbar—you're not going to shirk your duty! We'll have the whole wretched Squad lined up for you. . . ."

"Will you?" the exasperated Inspector cut in.

"You mean you're not convinced yet? You still think this Marquis—this king of the blackjack and the shakedown—"

"That'll do. You're a long way from proving *that*. Lieutenant Marquis has had similar accusations hurled at him for years. I'm not saying it isn't so. But I am saying that he runs Broadway cleaner than it's ever been run before."

"I know his methods are his own. I know he does have a rather sinister reputation among thieves, that—well, that his men do seem to live extraordinarily well. But until you prove a crime on him, I'd suggest you remember that he's a police officer with a very satisfactory record. As for this man's accusation—I'm not finished with *my* questions yet. Dunbar—you say you kept the books. And you handed Fingers this cash each month."

"Y—yes. That's right, Inspector."

"I wonder what Fingers would say to that, if he were here. Perhaps he'd say that you, yourself, were siphoning off this money. Maybe Fingers caught you at it—and that's why he's missing!"

"But—but—Inspector, it was *my* money! Why would I steal my own money?"

"Your money?"

"Every cent of it. Fingers and his sister didn't have a thin dime. I financed this whole business."

There was an astonished silence.

"Wait a minute," the Inspector said. "Why did you? Why did you bankroll a music publishing business? You say you don't know anything about that racket."

"I—I don't. I'll be frank with you, Inspector. I knew these kids' father. I was—well I owed him for a big favor—from

long ago. So last year I made some good money on real estate, out on the Coast. I came looking for Silver Pete—and found he'd died in prison, leaving his kids with nothing. I looked up the kids to see if I could do anything for them—and Fingers talked me into this song-publishing business. If," he ended bitterly, "you can call pouring money down a rathole a business."

"You're losing money?"

"WE'VE lost it. I put twenty thousand dollars into this thing, Inspector. We had an audit the day Fingers disappeared. We're worth exactly eleven hundred dollars less than nothing."

"Eh?" the Inspector's voice was amazed. "You're bankrupt?"

"I wish you *could* be bankrupt. But this is a partnership, not a corporation. We're strung high and dry on the Law—or I am. Each partner in a partnership is responsible for the debts of the firm—personally—down to his shoe strings. That means nothing to the Connallys, because they've got nothing. But I own a house and lot in Seattle—an automobile—a little outside money. If we fold, I'll have to make good every dollar we owe if it takes my last dime."

"Well, what else can you do?"

"Give the business away, if we can. Assign everything we own to somebody who'll deed us back our personal belongings. We would have done it weeks ago, if it hadn't been for Fingers."

"Eh?"

"I had an ad in the papers a month ago. I had one prospect that said he'd take over, sign back all our outside property and give us a thousand dollars cash. But he wanted action. And at the last minute, Fingers balked—claimed he had some mysterious deal on that would make us flush again. I tried to stall this Wither- spoon—hold onto him till I could talk Fingers round—but I guess he got fed up and went away."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. I only talked to him on the phone."

"Eh? He was willing to buy, sight unseen?"

"Oh, he seemed to know all about us—our affairs, I mean."

"You're sure you didn't put Fingers out of the way so you could get out from under?"

"Oh my Lord, Inspector. I'm not a murderer. And anyway, we can't close any deal—even if we had one—without Fingers' signature."

The snow was flaking down on the Marquis more heavily by the moment. He was so absorbed in the conversation inside that he did not hear the rattle of high heels until the girl was within a few yards of him.

He jerked his head round quickly—and his breath went out softly. He stood up, sliding small hands in his pockets. Behind him, he heard Sprackling screech:

"All right, Dunbar. We'll start out tomorrow morning. I'll take you personally to take a look at every Broadway detective."

The Marquis did not hear the rest. He was going slowly down the steps, his eyes sombre and shadowed on the slender, bare-headed figure approaching.

She was hurrying, glancing back over her shoulder, her electric black hair glinting in the street lamp's rays. She did not see the Marquis till she was almost at the foot of the steps.

She stopped dead, her hand flying to her mouth to stop a little scream.

She froze in that position, unmoving, her eyes white-ringed in the darkness.

"Well, well, Doris," the Marquis said softly. "So you've been writing letters to the D. A.'s office."

She came slowly erect, her chin up. She slid her hands in the pockets of her white coat. Her eyes shone queerly in the darkness, but she did not answer.

The Marquis shook his head incredulously. "Well, don't look now, but aren't you the girl that asked me to look for her brother? She certainly looked like you."

Her eyes were coals, her voice husky. "That was while I was still doped—still hypnotized. How you must have laughed, eh Marty? I didn't know till yesterday what you'd done to us. I thought we were at least holding our heads up in business. I didn't know that you—or your henchmen—had ruined us."

The Marquis' eyes squinted. He cocked his head and swore softly. "Well, blind

hell! I suppose you go for the whole gag—believe we snatched Fingers—killed this Sergeant Dowling in doing it?"

Her eyes were feverish. "I'm not a fool, Marty." Her voice was breathless. "And don't think I don't realize what'll happen to *me*—now. I don't care. I'll go out knowing that I've driven a nail into *your* coffin, anyway—Mr. Marquis of Broadway!"

HE LOOKED incredulously at her. "What do you think we are? Gangsters?"

"I know perfectly well what you are. Heaven knows how I blinded myself—kidded myself—for so long."

He blew out breath through his teeth, shook his head. "This is really wonderful." He hesitated, looking at her tiny feet.

"You can take this or leave it, chicken. The Broadway Squad *has* to have a reputation. Twenty-two of us couldn't fight the ten thousand thieves that drool over the section if we didn't. Sometimes we do make an example—a kind of rough example—of some grifter that's too big for his hat. And I do have to have a pretty rugged collection of guys on my Squad—shrewd birds and tough ones. And once in a while they turn wolf.

"They don't last long when they do, but they sometimes cut an almighty swath till I land on them. I can't swear that one of them *isn't* mixed up in this thing—because I don't know. But I'll swear that *only* one is. And that I'll smoke him out in twenty-four hours. . . . Oh, hell, what's the use. This isn't doing any good, is it?"

"No," she said huskily.

"All right. Will you answer me this—would your brother be having a hat like this—" He described the black one they had picked up in Jersey.

"I wouldn't know," she said with grim disinterest. "He had a trunkful of old ones of Dad's." She shrugged. "Well? Are you going to let me pass? Or are you taking me now?"

The Marquis winced. "Chicken, I had much too soft a spot in my heart for your mellow-tongued old father to do you—or even your pinbrained brother—any harm. Moreover, if you must know, I have a

lot of respect for a girl as pretty as you who thumbs off the Broadway wolves. If I were a little younger—well, to hell with that now. I'd like to paddle you with a hair-brush, but apart from that, you've nothing to fear from me—ever."

For just a moment, as he stepped around her, her eyes were torn and ir-resolute, but she stood tight-lipped. He heard her heels rattle up the steps as he strode on toward Sixth. He went swiftly on to the all-night drug store, half a block down on Sixth.

He phoned the agency, caught McGuire just coming in the door.

"Hey!" the redhead said. "I took that hat down to the X-ray guys at Headquarters. And I put a guy on to monitoring the Harbor Police radio calls, so that if—you know—we'll get a quick flash. How're you doing?"

"All the doing seems to be being done by our friend Sprackling. Get up to my apartment."

"Aw, hell, chief, I was going to turn in for a little. It's near four o'clock. . . ."

"Get up to my apartment. This whole thing has come unbuttoned."

He said, "So this is it, son," an hour later, in his green oak and leather living-room. "We've got just a few hours. Then they pull the chain and we all go down together."

McGuire, elbows on knees, beat his temples with the heels of his hands. "I won't go for it! I won't believe one of our guys is in it—"

"Don't sing me that song," the Marquis said. "You know what I've got on my Squad—the department's mavericks. Fair enough. I need them—but I don't kid myself about them."

"But this yellow-eyed gee?"

"Who says he has to be alone?"

"Then you've absolutely decided that one of the Squad is it?"

"Decided, hell! Don't be an ass. But it adds up—Lord, how it adds up!" He ground a palm over his rubbly black hair, stared at the flickering fire. "Though who it is, I have no idea. I'll gamble on you, and big Johnny, and Kevvelfoot and Al Hack—and Harry Derosier, if there isn't a skirt involved. But any one of the rest—I dunno. And if this Dunbar *does* put the finger on one of us—and then Connally's

corpse crops up with my handkerchief—”

THE redhead groaned. “But who? We’ve got to figure who it is—”

“Figure, be damned! We’re not the Sherlock Holmes type. We don’t sit around and dream out answers. We get out and slug the pavement, go on butting our heads against stone walls till they fall down.”

“Well, what *are* we gonna do?”

“Sprackling will be starting out early this morning, taking Dunbar around to put the eye on our guys. You’ve got to organize so that you and big Johnny keep just ahead of them. That means you’ll have to have somebody right with Sprackling’s party, if possible—anyhow close enough to try and get wise to where they’re going next. Because we’ve *got* to get to this rat first. If he—whoever it is—knows that Dunbar is coming to spot him, he might crack to you first. If he does—well, tell him he’ll just burn. If he holds out and Dunbar tags him—I’ll get to him somehow.”

“My Lord!” McGuire groaned. “What kind of master minding is that?”

“Master minding, hell! There’s nothing in the world to do but hit every possible angle. Sooner or later, something will crack. If it doesn’t, I go down. And if I do, you know damned well it’s the end of you guys on the Squad. The next boss will clean you out like castor oil.”

The telephone rang sharply, insistently.

Scowling, the Marquis stepped over and put the cradle-set to his ear. “Yeah?”

The voice—dull, slaty, tormentingly familiar—said in a perfectly smooth, toneless rush:

“I wasn’t trying to kill you, Marquis—just get you to a spot where we could talk reason. Will you—listen carefully—will you throw in with us for a price? You’re getting in our hair. The price is fifty thousand dollars—cash. Well?”

“You pup, I wouldn’t play with you for fifty—or wait a minute. Did you say—”

“Nuts,” the voice said grimly. “I heard you the first time. Personally I like it that way better—a slug in the middle of your back is a hell of a lot cheaper. I’ll give you one last piece of advice, Marquis—take today off. Get it?”

“You pup—you’ll never make it.” He

groped wildly for something to prolong the conversation—even as McGuire raced for the second phone set in the bedroom to trace the call. “Not after what I learned from Dunbar. No, you’ll never make it—*Chalky*.”

In the split-second’s hesitation, he thought he heard a sharply indrawn breath—and then the phone slammed down in his ear.

“No,” McGuire moaned, coming out of the bedroom. “You didn’t give me enough time.”

The Marquis told him about the call. “It’s just another angle,” he said grimly. “Maybe I pointed him at Dunbar—maybe. But put two men—no three—damn it, four men, on Dunbar. This Chalky is just intrepid enough to come for him if he thinks he’s a danger. And get this—whoever you pick to put on Dunbar—don’t let them get too close to him! Close enough to protect him—but not close enough to pick him off themselves, if we happen to choose the wrong guys.”

“My Lord, what a tangle! Maybe I better cover Doris, too.”

“Yes, yes. Cover everything—and here’s another: Send word round that if the driver of that yellow cab that led off this whole procession wants to come to me—I’ll personally guarantee his—whatever he wants.

“Now, get going. We’ve got just hours, maybe minutes. You’ll have to organize all these things in nothing flat. And report to me here, as often as you can. Damn it,” he broke off, frowning. “I’ve got this thing right in my head here—right on the tip of my mind. . . . Oh, hell, maybe it’d be too late, anyway. Go on; get moving. Something’s got to crack for us—right about now.”

He had hardly locked the door behind McGuire when the phone pealed sharply again. “Yeah? This is Marquis.”

“Bad news, chief,” Al Hack’s glum voice said. “The Harbor Squad just picked up you know what.”

“Ouch,” the Marquis said. “Have they spotted my handkerchief?”

“Not yet. But how much longer can it take?”

The Marquis hesitated. “All right. McGuire’ll be there in a few minutes. I’ll duck down to Otto’s in the Village.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Marquis Cracks Down

HE ATE dexedrine tablets, staved off the weariness that swarmed up like a poison. He paced the upstairs room over Otto's Eighth Street Cocktail Lounge, squeezing his brain.

At nine McGuire called. "Sprackling and his goons have just started out with Dunbar. We're around them like a swarm of bees. They're headed here to the agency first. Will I give them any help? Call in any of the boys—"

"No. Just the opposite. String them out as long as you can. You've got everything else going?"

"Yeah."

At nine, the reports started to trickle in as the raging little Sprackling led the frightened Dunbar from one of the Marquis Squad to another. Half hourly, McGuire rang him. The redhead's surprising gift for organization made itself felt. By eleven, over half the Squad had passed scrutiny; all but two of the men on whom the Marquis' suspicion had lain most heavily had passed muster. When, at twelve, Sprackling's party paused for lunch, the Marquis had milk and sandwiches sent up, ate them without interrupting his pacing.

Through the window he could see—or would have been able to see, had it not been for the steady sifting downfall of heavy snow—buildings on Tenth street close to the little Scotsman's whitestone. As it was, he could see barely anything. The sky was completely overcast; the snow came down ceaselessly, like cotton bolls. It was dark enough out to call for the street lights.

At two-thirty, McGuire rang again, his voice queer with half relief: "They're finished! Dunbar didn't identify anybody! Sprackling's threatened him with hell and damnation! He's pulled his men off him—sent him off home in cab."

"Our guys are still around him?"

"Like glue. I told them like you said—follow him to the door and box the place, but not to brace him."

The Marquis hesitated just a minute. "Well, I'm going to brace him. I'm going over there. Call me there if you want me."

He hung up, shrugged into the Chesterfield and tightened the scarf at his neck. He was snatching up his hat en route for the door when the phone rang again.

It was McGuire again, with curious rising excitement in his voice: "Hey! Ed Leavitt—the hackie you sent over for lush-rolling a couple years ago—is here. He wants to speak to you."

"Marty?" the hacker's husky, worried voice said. "I—I want to give you somethin'. They said I—that you'd take care o' me. I got to be covered, Marty; I can't go in no courts, nor in no police stations neither. If I tell you somethin'—will you forget about me?"

"Yes, yes. What is it, Ed?"

"I was driving that yellow cab Tuesday night. The—the one that dumped the guy down by the blacksmith's shop. I—I didn't know who I was ridin' then, but I do now—from the newspapers."

"Who? Spit it out!"

"This Dunbar. This red-faced little guy with the white side-whiskers. I pick him up just outside Dave's and drop him. . . ."

Through the thick snow he could see two motionless figures propped against the brass handrailings of the whitestone, as he plowed in from Sixth. Not till he was actually going up the steps could he see who they were—big battered Johnny Berthold and the little dried-up apple, Lipschitz.

They got to their feet but said nothing. The Marquis snapped: "He's in there? Pick that lock, Lippy—fast."

"Yeah—yeah, he's there, chief," Johnny said, as the little man whipped out his case of master keys. "Just got in fifteen or twenty minutes ago. Yeah, alone. Nobody's gone in since. Screiber and Al Hack are on the back door."

The door swung open under Lipschitz's expert manipulations. "Stay right here," the Marquis told them, and stepped inside, closing it behind him.

One hand around the gun in his pocket, he walked to the door in the left-hand wall that had Dunbar's card tacked to it—and, with his hand raised, suddenly hesitated.

The hall of the building was cold—almost as cold as it had been outside—and faint white specks of snow were drifting

down the stair well. Somewhere above, a roof or skylight was open.

He put one foot on the stairs, swung back, moved swiftly back to Dunbar's door and knocked—and the door swung inwards.

He jumped inside. One glance showed him the arrangement—one large, high-ceilinged sitting room in front, a short four-foot hall to his right, leading between a tiny bathroom and a large clothes cupboard, to a bedroom. He fumbled on the wall, switched on lights. The living-room was empty. He swung around the closet toward the bedroom—and stopped.

The door of the small bathroom was slightly ajar. In the dimness within he could see a man's sugar-loaf hat on the tiled floor. He yanked the door wide, kicking the hall door closed behind him, reached in to snap on the cheerful bright bathroom light.

The white-headed Dunbar, still in checkered overcoat that shone with pin-points of melted snow, lay on the warped tile floor. His face was no longer scarlet, but leaden. His left temple was crushed, a bone splinter driven down over his eye.

His throat was slashed and hacked, a rough job, but getting every artery.

BLINDING furious rage flared up in the Marquis as he whirled toward the door—and died in the same breath. Slowly and calmly, he faced it: The killer had been waiting *inside* the house when Dunbar had returned from his travels—the one contingency they hadn't provided against.

And the roof door—the means of ingress and escape. . . .

The telephone's ringing almost made him jump. When he located it—on a bureau in the bedroom—his snatch knocked an old-fashioned round, draw-string collar-box to the floor.

McGuire blurted: "Marty—they've tagged your handkerchief. It's all up. Sprackling's just sworn out a warrant for you himself. It's on the teletype now. . . ."

"Warrant," the Marquis voice was a little husky. "What for?"

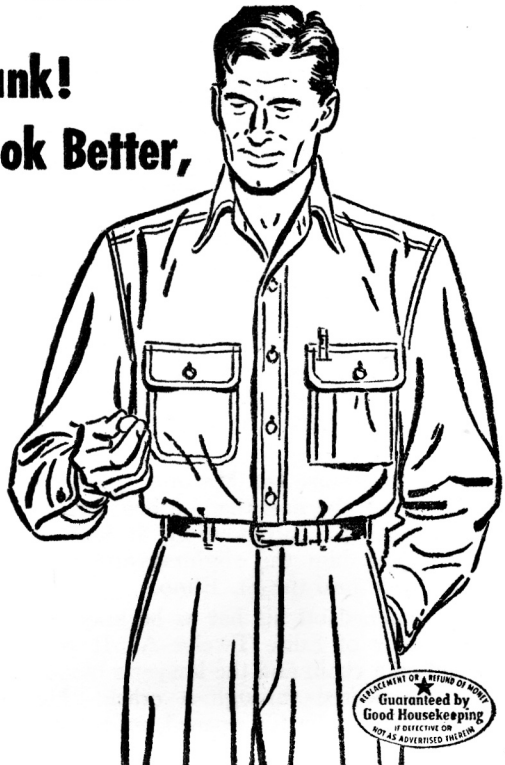
"First-degree murder!"

"He can't do that! I'll—"

The redhead blurted suddenly: "Here they come! Hang up!"

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He hung up, dabbed at his neck with a handkerchief, set his teeth and turned back on the apartment. He surveyed the drawn-out drawers, their contents messed and rumpled. Someone had been through them, but they had not been dumped out by a professional on robbery bent. To his experienced eye, it looked more like a hasty attempt to confuse the issue than a professional turn-off.

He bent to pick up the collar-box he had knocked to the floor. He felt the crackle of papers inside, hastily undid the drawstring and dumped out half a dozen collars.

The papers were receipted laundry bills, nothing more.

Then his eye fell on the collars. They were perfectly round, high strips of starched linen, with buttonholes that overlapped—clergyman's collars.

Slowly, incredulous light came into his eyes. He spread one open. Faintly, in India ink, he could read, *Rev. Artemus Dunbar*.

He spread open another—the same. And another. The fourth one was marked in India ink like the rest, but read: *Rev. Peter Graff*.

There was no groping this time. His mind jumped instantly to the folder back in the St. Elmo hotel—in the distracted old lawyer's suite—the same folder that carried Cleetus' name.

And by the perversity of luck, the phone rang again under his hand. McGuire threw at him: "I'm in the theater lobby next door. They're all around the agency. Listen—that old guy, Iselin, called—wants to contact you. And listen: The fluoroscope guys at headquarters just called. That hat we found—in Jersey. It was a preacher's hat. At one time it had a name in it, in ink. The Reverend Peter Graff. . . ."

Perhaps because the Marquis was prepared to use the gun that he held in his side pocket—for intimidation, at least—nobody paid him the slightest attention as he strode into the St. Elmo.

He snatched off his hat as he knocked at the door of Suite Twelve-A. It was opened on a chain and the lawyer's blood-shot eye peered through a crack. He moaned a little, hastily opened up, and as the Marquis strode in, re-bolted the door.

The Marquis glanced quickly at the door to Mrs. Peabody's room. He started to close it, but the lawyer's husky voice said:

"Never mind. I put her on the train this morning. . . . No, Chalky hasn't called me. But I can call him. I've lied to you, Mr. Marquis. Heaven help me, I've lied to you."

"How? Why?"

"Because I was frightened. Because he—he'd threatened me with death if I didn't." He walked round behind the desk, sick eyes on the blued-steel revolver that lay on top of the folders.

"I—said I hadn't seen him. I have. I said I hadn't heard of this Dunbar and Connally. I have. I gave him advice regarding business he was planning to do with them—though I still can't see anything illegal about!"

"What advice did you give him?"

"The wording of an assignment. Chalky wanted to acquire the Connally Music Company."

"Ha!"

"He wanted to be generous. The concern is worthless, on its face. You see—the Law regarding partnerships is that every last asset, personal or real, of every partner, belongs to the company, unless they are liquid. Chalky wanted to let them retain their personal property and yet protect himself in case they were concealing any hidden assets." He pushed a pencilled sheet across at the Marquis. "This is the form I suggested. I can't for the life of me see. . . ."

The Marquis' eyes raced down the legal wording to the meat of it—the last two paragraphs.

First party does assume hereby all assets and liabilities of the subject company, whether real or contingent, as they stand, as of this date. He does also agree to re-assign to second parties, such personal assets as are and have been in no way connected with the Company's affairs, and which are listed hereunder.

The second parties do assign hereby to first party, all the above mentioned assets and liabilities, and hereby receive back those assets listed below.

Coming to the end of it, the Marquis read aloud, "Those assets listed below." He shook his head wonderingly. "Damn it, that's neat." He folded it quickly,

pocketed it and raised driving eyes to the old man's haggard ones.

"Just one more question: Exactly *what* did the Reverend P. Graff inherit from old Peabody's estate?"

"Eh? Eh? Why a tract of low-priced land in Colorado. . . ."

The door to the right of the seated lawyer opened soundlessly and Chalky Wright stepped through, a pistol in his short hand, his pale eyes hot yellow circles.

"You see what I mean?" he said in an irritated tone. "This monkey's *wise!*" And the pistol roared in his hand.

THE Marquis wrenched around behind the library chair. Flinging away the black hat that had covered his own palmed automatic, he fired. But he had, for some reason, become convinced that the attack would come from the door at his back and so was caught out of position—for which he spent three weeks in a hospital.

He felt the chunk ripped from his side as he went down; his own first shot chipped wood from the door by the gunman's head. His second went through the yellow-eyed man's collarbone, smashing it and slamming him back against the doorjamb. A picture across the room exploded into a million bits.

Wright cursed, tried to make an instant switch of the pistol to his left hand—and the blued revolver that Iselin had snatched over thundered. The gunman jack-knifed over his left ribs, his face torn in agony. He began to crumple.

The Marquis bounced from his knees, hastily shot the blued-steel revolver from Iselin's hand as the lawyer jabbed it point-blank into the falling gunman's face. The revolver sailed up, hit the wall, and dropped down almost beside the crumpled Wright's nicked one. The Marquis kicked both skittering under the piano.

He jumped for Wright, hunkered down and jerked him on his back. The gunman moaned, blood gushing out over the hands clamped to his belly. He was already unconscious.

The old lawyer's eyes were glazed, stunned. He stood clutching his wrist in his left hand, staring at the blood running down his shrunken fingers. He wavered groggy black eyes up at the Marquis.

"Why?" he croaked. "Why did you

turn on *me?* I was helping you."

"You," the Marquis scoffed. "You and your gaudy schemes. Did you really think you could top it off with a double shooting here? Knowing I was of a mind to shoot Chalky on sight, you set me up for him—with you standing by, in case one of us kept living."

The lawyer sank slowly to the edge of the throne chair, his eyes incredulous. "You—what ghastly dream is this?"

"A dream that'll prove up, pop. That's the weakness of your whole idea—all I had to do was *guess* the truth, and the proof would fall into my hand. Hell—you didn't really think I'd swallow the idea of a hard-rock miner, a toughie like Chalky cooking up this delicate letter-of-the-law caper? Nor would he make such a shambles of killing Fingers and Dunbar."

"But you don't think—?"

"—That Dunbar was *your* hired stooge from first to last? That your whole purpose in setting up that business for the Connally kids was an elaborate scheme to suck them into bankruptcy? Or, rather, into a spot where they'd scramble to sign over blindly everything they possessed? Yeah, I'm afraid I do think that."

The lawyer's eyes began to shut. "What are you talking about? The Connallys owned nothing!"

"Come off it. The act has flopped. I know now that the 'Reverend Peter Graff' was the very *ir-reverend* old con man, Silver Pete Connally, under a *nom de flim-flam*. And Doris and Fingers are his heirs and assigns, however you slice it. *They* own old Silver Pete's—or Peter Graff's—legacy! Why old Pete didn't tell them about it, I'll never know. He—"

He broke off suddenly, his mouth open. "Oh, Lord. My shattered nerves! I get it now! Pete didn't tell them—*because he didn't know!* He didn't know he was in the will! He must have been working old Peabody for cash—and the old boy went and stuck in a legacy for Pete without telling anybody! Damn me! It's a classic!"

Light started desperately to re-surge in the lawyer's eyes. "But you don't know what the bequest *is!* Listen, Mr. Marquis—it's not too late! I'm the only living soul who knows what that legacy is! We'll share and share alike!"

The Marquis' mouth quirked faintly.

"Don't you ever give up? You told me what it was—a tract of low-priced Colorado land. So let's see:

"Land. Land. And Chalky worked for Peabody as a hard-rock miner. Oh-oh! Chalky gets into trouble, has to hide out somewhere. He knows about this 'low-price' land—and ducks in there. To pass the time, he noses around, let's say—and stumbles on this whatever-it-is. But being broke, on the lam, and generally snookered as to how to cash in, he goes to you.

"As for you, Mr. Iselin, when you trace down who the owner of the land actually is, you go overboard and dream up your scheme. You hire Dunbar—because he knew Silver Pete and has a reasonable excuse for contacting the kids—and send him to New York. And so on and so forth. Dowling might have been an accident. But why was Fingers killed?"

The whining wail of sirens began to fill the street below.

THE Marquis blinked rapidly. "Well, don't look now, pop—but you're wanted for a cop-killing. Nasty, nasty things happen to cop-killers. If I call one of the precincts and throw you to them, you won't like it, Mr. Iselin.

"On the other hand, if I send you in with my own boys—I might even call my own lawyer and lend him to you—you won't suffer much."

The lawyer's face was twitching.

"All—all right. I'll—do what you say."

The Marquis hastily made the call.

He hung up. "All right. *Why* did Fingers balk at the last minute?"

Without taking his head from his palms, the lawyer turned and looked at the bleeding Chalky. "It was *his* fault. He—he got impatient. He thought I was tricking him. He came here and got hold of Fingers, tried to feel Fingers out about throwing in with him. But he gave too many hints. Fingers got suspicious of Dunbar, started following him around. Before we woke up to it—it was too late; Dunbar had led him *here*.

"We—we tried to reason with Fingers, but he was hopeless. There was nothing to do but—get rid of him and hope that the sister would come to terms. We—we had to have Fingers' death established

first, and—and Chalky went to you. . . ."

The Marquis' forehead knotted. "Chalky! I thought he was against you."

"Not at that point. I—I got in touch with Chalky, convinced him of my good faith. We composed our differences."

"Why did you have to kill Dunbar?"

"There was too much pressure on him. He—was going to run away. . . ."

The Marquis blew out breath. "And what genius thought up the idea of including the Broadway Squad in?"

"Dunbar," the lawyer said bitterly.

"I see," the Marquis said. "And Chalky figured that sucking me in to find the body would tie in nicely with the extortion frame. Lord, what a merry-go-round. Well, it's hung you. What's on this damned property that makes it so valuable?"

The lawyer hesitated, struggling inwardly. It was pain for him to finally say: "Platinum."

As if on cue, heavy knuckles hammered wildly at the door. The shrill voice of Sprackling sounded outside. "Marquis! I've a warrant for your arrest."

Like a streak, Iselin whirled out of the chair, diving for the French windows. The Marquis whipped up file folders in both hands, flung them under his feet. The lawyer trod on the slick paper—and his feet skidded wildly sideways. He slammed his head wickedly into the piano as he crashed down.

"You can't *do* that," the Marquis expostulated. "I need your still small voice raised in my behalf." He snapped the handcuff to the piano leg.

Outside, a girl's voice blurted huskily, "Let—let me talk to him. He'll listen to me. Marty! It's Doris! You—you must surrender. They've got machine guns!"

The Marquis' eyebrows raised. "Well, hello, now. You're not concerned about the old Marquis, Doris? All right. I'm coming out," the Marquis said, "with my hands in the air and a five-dollar bill for you, Doris."

There was a second's silence. "A five—what do you mean?"

"To buy a hairbrush, chicken, to buy—or, wait a minute! By hell, no! Come to think of it—you can afford to buy your own now, so you can."

HOWL IN SILENCE

By **PETER
PAIGE**



A 20-grand bid bought my loyalty to let the drunken killer ease out of the sizzle-seat.

"Mr. Williams had no recollection of driving the Duesenberg over Mr. Luchese. . . ."

"**T**HERE'S Judge Catt," I told my brother-in-law as the famed jurist followed the headwaiter in the direction of our table in Murphy's Steak House. "Last of the great mouth-pieces," I elaborated. "But you must have had dealings with him before you went to Arizona. When you were on the D.A.'s staff, I mean."

My brother-in-law smiled. "I did."
"Appropriate name," I said. "Always landed on his feet. They say in almost a thousand cases he never once received a verdict he did not anticipate. They say no living man has ever gotten the better of him."

"I did." My brother-in-law smiled.
Before I could snort at this, the jurist

was passing our table. A tall man, he wore heavy gray brows over eyes so black they seemed to be solid pupils. He was about to pass when my brother-in-law's smile caught his attention.

For an instant I thought Judge Catt was going to collapse. The color left his face. His eyes became enormous. His knees seemed to become unsteady.

In the next instant his color returned—and with it his poise. "Hello, Ramsey," he addressed my brother-in-law. "I never expected to see you again."

"Just a visit, Catt," Bob Ramsey smiled. He gestured. "Care to join us? This is Edgar, my wife's brother. You remember Mrs. Ramsey, Catt."

My "Pleasedtomeetcha," was lost in Judge Catt's:

"Yes, of course. How is she, Ramsey?"

"Swell. After the operation, Arizona made the difference. How's Buck?"

I thought Judge Catt was going to pull his pale-faced act again, but he controlled it.

"I know nobody named Buck," he stated quietly, then raised a finger toward the headwaiter who had been standing by patiently. "Charles, I just recalled an appointment I had in Luchow's." He extended a bony hand to Bob: "Ramsey." Then to me: "Glad to have met you." He strode out of Murphy's Steak House.

My eyes settled on my brother-in-law's face which was wreathed in silent laughter. "I had the cockeyed idea Judge Catt was scared of you," I said.

This seemed to increase Bob's mirth.

"It's a long time between laughs," I said patiently. "Who's Buck?"

A scowl chased the humor out of Bob's face.

"Big Buck Williams. Mr. Protection—what's left of the racket in New York. Mr. Bookie. Mr. Murder. Any time you bet on a nag or swill a night spot drink or toy with a professional charmer, a fraction of your purchase price finds its way into Mr. Williams' pocket."

"Take the house off my head," I said. "Big Buck Williams. What about him?"

"He thinks Judge Catt and I saved his life."

"Did you?"

"Who knows? You stop a guy in the street for a match. If you hadn't, he

might have stepped into the path of a truck and been killed. How do you know when you're saving anybody's life?"

"That's a hell of an answer to a civil question," I said.

"As a matter of fact," Bob Ramsey said, smiling again, "Catt and Williams saved your sister's life."

"It keeps getting worse," I said. "Catt is scared of you because Big Buck Williams thinks you saved his life, when actually they saved Enid's life."

"In a nutshell," Bob nodded.

"You keep this up and that's where I'll be—in a nutshell," I told him. "Would you feel encouraged if I twisted your arm a little?"

"A martini will suffice."

I ordered two martinis.

* * *

It started the day Doc Hanson shot the works (Bob Ramsey said). I left his office wondering what my next move should be: rob a bank, or cut my throat? Things looked darker than a crow in a coal mine on a rainy night—which was why I was not my usual alert self and failed to notice the limousine tracking me until it had drawn to the curb and deposited a pair of animals who seemed to be between me and the sidewalk ahead, and stubborn about it.

"The Mouth wants to talk to you," one of them said.

"Now," the other one said.

Animals. Their names or descriptions don't matter. Their hands had me bowing toward the open rear door of the limousine before I could yank my mind back from Doc Hanson's office. By the time my mind had caught up with their hands on my elbows, my face was a foot from Judge Catt's face—although he wasn't a judge in those days, just the "Mouth" to the animals and Attorney Abner J. Catt to the public at large.

He was saying: "I would like a few words with you, Ramsey. Before you consider refusing, let me tell you it concerns what Doctor Hanson just told you about your wife. Won't you come in?"

I GOT in. He was a notoriously sharp cookie when it came to criminal law. You said it just now. He always landed on his feet like a cat. It did not behove

an investigator for the District Attorney to be seen in public with Abner J. Catt. But at that moment nothing behooved me but what Doc had told me about Enid—and she seemed to be involved.

The animals sat in front. There was a glass partition between them and us. Catt raised a speaking tube and said: "Central Park, Monk. Keep circling." That kind of limousine. He turned a smile on me. "Anonymity is the rule in Central Park. It will save you embarrassment."

He was pretty much as you just saw him. Prematurely gray. Eyes that snapped at you. You had the feeling every muscle of his face and every shade of tone in his voice was under rigid control.

"You mentioned my wife," I said. "You had a reason to mention my wife?"

"What Doctor Hanson just told you," he said, "was that Mrs. Ramsey will need another operation. This time most of her left lung will have to be removed. After the operation she will have to live in a dry climate for the rest of her life—unless the rest of her life is to be a matter of months."

"That's what he said," I said.

"It went a little further," Catt said. "It is a complicated operation. It will cost, along with hospital expenses, injections, transfusions, oxygen tent and possibly other extras, close to five thousand dollars."

"He told me that just ten minutes ago," I said.

"A man in my position has to be resourceful," Catt said. He did not smile. I would have spread a smile behind his ears. But the man knew people, and I was people, and he said it just right. All I did was say:

"Go on."

"Aside from the operation," he went on, "it will take considerable money for you to move her west and establish yourselves in a home and job. Say another ten thousand, making it fifteen thousand in all—which you haven't got."

"Okay. You're resourceful," I said.

"What you have," he went on, "is a totally mortgaged home in Queens, two thousand, four hundred and thirty-two dollars in additional debts for your wife's medical care up to this point and a balance of seventy-three dollars and sixty-

two cents in the 100th Street branch of the Sixth National Bank. You have exhausted every visible means of raising even another fifteen dollars, let alone fifteen thousand. Your present income amounts to about seventy-one dollars in weekly take home pay. Have I overlooked anything?"

"Nothing that matters."

"Do you want me to have you driven home so that you will not hear what else I have to say and you could forget my little demonstration of clairvoyance? What else I have to say does not concern Mrs. Ramsey directly."

Smart? We both knew that my reply to that would be the payoff; would show him whether I was in the palm of his hand, or whether I had slipped through his fingers. I say we both knew, but I kidded myself that I could take out some mental reservations and listen. I owed that much, I told myself, to Enid.

"I've got time," I said, leaning back and closing my eyes. "Go ahead, Catt. Win me over with your artful ways."

I heard him chuckle, and even that was part of his poise. A chuckle at that point seemed to link our moods.

"There is no question about your intelligence, Ramsey," he said after a pause in which our moods could waltz around a little together. "In appreciation, I am going to climb a limb and give you a further demonstration of my clairvoyance. I am going to show you every one of my cards. And I tell you now that you will have the option of picking up the card worth exactly twenty thousand dollars in small, unidentifiable bills. Have I your attention?"

He had my attention.

"My first card is Mr. Buck Williams," he said. "Mr. Williams seems to have been removed from circulation. A canvas of city precincts, jails and so forth has failed to locate Mr. Williams, making a *habeas corpus* impossible to serve. After seventy-two hours, of course, he will have to be indicted or released—but that is another matter.

"For now it suffices that the police have gone to extraordinary lengths to conceal his whereabouts, a precaution they would hardly take had he neglected to answer a traffic summons. Which indicates Mr.

Williams must be in serious trouble."

"What makes you think it was cops?" I put in. "Some rival mob may have given him cement shoes and dropped him in the river, or one of his own animals could have settled a private argument with Big Buck with an ice pick and a hole in a cellar floor—or he could even be in Bellevue with a high fever and no papers of identification."

"He was removed from a private poker game by two uniformed patrolmen and taken away in a police car," Catt said.

"I just wanted a look at the back of that card," I said.

"Mr. Williams' Duesenberg," Catt said, "is my second card. It has also been removed from circulation, also by the police. I had better fortune tracing the Duesenberg."

"And me," I said.

"And you. I happen to know to which police garage the car has been taken, as well as the fact that police laboratory experts have gone over it. My third card explains the reason for this, as well as for the extraordinary police interest in Mr. Williams.

"My third card is a man named Thomas X. Dugan, who lives in apartment 3A at 12334 Lunt Street, in Brooklyn, who has also vanished from his home and haunts, although—and this much is conjecture—I believe you could tell me that Mr. Dugan's disappearance was voluntary."

"They're your cards," I said.

"**B**UT in the District Attorney's hands." Catt smiled wryly. He shrugged. "Voluntary or no, the crux of the matter is my fourth card, a man named Anothy Luchese, better known as Little Tony Luchese, the 'Little' in his name as well as the 'Big' in Buck Williams' name being ironic reflections on the facts that Little Tony is—or was—a giant of a man and Big Buck is rather Lilliputian.

"I corrected my tense because, as you know, Little Tony was found in the gutter in front of 12334 Lunt Street, Brooklyn, by two patrolmen in a prowler car last Tuesday midnight. He was dead by the apparent fact that an automobile's wheel had passed over his neck as he lay un-

conscious in the gutter. His death at the time was ascribed to the usual 'hit and run' driver. You will at least concede that statement to be correct."

"Since I'm the lad who did the 'ascribing,' I do," I said.

"I was aware of that," Catt said quietly. "It is one of the reasons why my fifth card is the sum of twenty thousand dollars in small, unidentifiable bills."

"The joker," I said.

"A good hole-card to have," he said.

I opened my eyes and watched the Mall slide by, with its tiers of empty benches and the nursemaids guarding their carriages and the kids on skates and bicycles and the other kids playing atom bomb—or whatever they play these days—around the empty bandshell. I shifted my attention to Abner J. Catt, who seemed to be staring earnestly into a world of his own, and decided that listening to him was a lot more sensible than robbing a bank or cutting my throat.

"Cards don't mean much until you know what game you're playing," I finally said.

Those black eyes spent five seconds reading my mind. "You think I'm fishing, Ramsey?" I shrugged my eyebrows.

He smiled. "Frankly, I did not expect you to be this intelligent. Listen—and this is the result of a discussion I had with Thomas X. Dugan a few days ago. He witnessed the death of Little Tony Luchese. Apartment 3A faces the street. Dugan was looking down into the street when two obviously intoxicated men approached from Bedford Avenue Tuesday night.

"They seemed to be arguing, although Dugan couldn't hear their words from his window. But as they came abreast of his window the argument became physical. Surprisingly—to Dugan—the smaller man knocked the larger man into the gutter where he lay unconscious.

"Dugan then saw the smaller man enter a Duesenberg that had been parked before the house. He watched the smaller man take a drink from a bottle, and start the car with an awkward lurch that bounced it over the supine form of the larger man.

"Dugan, to quote him, was 'flabbergasted motionless' as the enormity of what he had witnessed etched itself into his

brain. His first impulse was to phone the police. But certain personal circumstances stifled that impulse. His next was to see if the man in the gutter was dead. To this end he ran downstairs, but by the time he emerged from the building's front door a police prowler car had arrived and the advance guard of the inevitable street-accident crowd was already forming. Dugan joined them—but held his counsel.

"The following morning's papers told him the corpse was Little Tony Luchese, reputedly a lieutenant of Big Buck Williams. A picture of Mr. Williams in the paper turned out to be that of the smaller man who had driven away in the Duesenberg. Did you say something?"

I said, "A missing piece of the picture seems to be how you could get to Dugan to hear this."

"I was getting to that," he smiled. "It started with Mr. Williams' memory of that night. He had been under the influence. His memory was confused on several points. He recalled the argument with Little Tony, but not the subject of the argument. He recalls punching Little Tony, but has no recollection of noticing where the unfortunate Mr. Luchese fell, nor of driving the Duesenberg over him. But on one point Mr. Williams was fairly certain. As he started the Duesenberg, he noticed the curtain of a second-floor window being held aside by a hand.

"Mr. Williams took certain steps. Since early Wednesday morning Thomas X. Dugan has been under the surveillance of at least two of Mr. Williams' friends practically every minute of the time. By Friday, it became evident he had not reported what he had witnessed to the police. It behooved Mr. Williams to learn why. I was called in.

"My interview was necessarily tactful. If Mr. Dugan gained the impression I represented the police, that was by no such direct claim of mine. He spoke to me. People usually tell me even things they intended originally to conceal—and Dugan was no exception. I learned why he had not reported his version of Little Tony's death.

"It seems our Mr. Dugan abandoned a wife and three children in California and then enjoyed briefly a second wife in New Mexico without having divorced the first

spouse. I managed to convey the impression that such a background disqualified him as a witness. He expressed relief. I conveyed further the impression that his marital peccadillos did not interest me. He expressed fervent gratitude. I left him, convinced he constituted no menace to Mr. Williams. But Sunday—yesterday—" Abner J. Catt shook his head sadly.

I said, "Yesterday Williams and Dugan vanished from circulation and the Duesenberg was picked up."

"Precisely."

"I thought Williams' goons were tailing Dugan."

"Lost him in a stampede of subway passengers," Catt shrugged. "Someone fell under the Bronx Express in the Times Square Station. In the confusion he vanished. It was considered an accident at the time. But now it becomes evident Dugan was aware he was being followed and took that opportunity to slip away and contact the police."

"Now what?" I asked.

Catt smiled at me.

I smiled back at him.

"WITHOUT Dugan," he said, "the D. A. couldn't even prove Little Tony Luchese's death had any relation to the Duesenberg."

"Correction. Little Tony had hemophilia. He bled a lot. The Duesenberg makes a second witness."

"Overruled," Catt smiled. "Mr. Williams is partial to clean-looking whitewall tires. Wednesday, he had them washed in a fairly strong lye solution."

"Rubber is porous," I said. "A rolling tire gets hot—and even more porous. You'd be surprised how deeply blood can penetrate a tire under those circumstances—compared to lye water on a tire that isn't heated by use. Besides, a ruptured jugular spurts, and spurting up under a car lurching forward there would be stains on the undercarriage as far back as the exhaust."

Catt regarded me bleakly a few moments as the limousine feathered past the reservoir. "Thank you, Ramsey," he finally said. "I continue to underestimate you."

"Another thing," I said. "In driving away, Williams rode through two red

lights, sideswiped a cab and picked up a ticket for speeding down Brighton Parkway—all in a matter of minutes after Little Tony died—and all in a line leading away from 12334 Lunt Street.”

“I knew about the ticket,” Catt frowned. “The rest of it is news.”

“Even for twenty million dollars I couldn’t steer the D. A. off this case or wrangle a not guilty verdict,” I said.

“I am aware of that,” Catt said quietly. “The point, however, is not to attempt the impossible. The point is to induce the District Attorney to charge Mr. Williams with manslaughter instead of homicide.”

“That’s not a point,” I said, getting into the spirit. “That’s a program.”

“The elimination of Dugan’s testimony would do it,” Catt said. “Mr. Williams would be willing to plead guilty to manslaughter. Without Dugan, the D. A. would have to be content with that. It boils down to the elimination of Dugan.”

“That’s all it would take,” I agreed.

“Twenty thousand dollars worth of taking,” Catt said. “With that as an incentive you should be able to do it. The man is a mouse. Five thousand now—for your wife’s operation—and the balance after the verdict.”

“Suppose I do this?” I asked. “Suppose I take the five thousand—and then Williams gets the chair anyhow?”

“Mr. Williams and his friends would not like it,” Catt said. He said it mildly, but managed to “convey” the impression that I would hardly like it either.

“I used to be an honest man,” I said.

“What I like about that statement,” Abner J. Catt smiled at me as he produced a roll of fifty one-hundred-dollar bills and forced it on me, “is its tense.”

* * *

“Did you ever stop to consider,” Bob Ramsey asked me, “that if they increased the protein content of olives a man could almost live on martinis?”

“I never took you for a crook,” I said coldly.

“Neither did Catt,” Bob agreed amiably. “That’s why he thought it was worth twenty thousand.”

“I remember that trial,” I scowled. “Williams pleaded guilty to manslaughter. He got ten years. Good behavior cut it

down to six. He’s out on parole now. Even if the dough saved Enid, you could have raised it some other way. It wasn’t that impossible.”

“Who said it was?” Bob asked. “It was just easier.”

“How’d you get Dugan not to testify? Bribe him, or ‘finger’ him to one of Williams’ friends?”

“Dugan?” Bob seemed surprised. “Why he was the man who fell—or jumped—in front of the Bronx Express on Sunday. I located his remains in the morgue Monday afternoon.”

“You mean you didn’t have a case against Williams in the first place?”

“Sure we had a case. Passing through two red lights, speeding, side-swiping a cab and leaving the scene of the accident. Sunday night, when Catt was looking for him, they had Williams over at the cabby’s home in the Bronx, waiting for the cabby to come home and identify him. They had the Duesenberg in the police garage to match the dents in its fender to the dents in the cab’s fender.”

“But Catt—”

“Oh, Catt didn’t like it one little bit,” my brother-in-law smiled pleasantly. “He found out about Dugan and the rest of it, and not only wanted to hold out the rest of the twenty thousand—he threatened to turn Big Buck Williams’ animals loose on me. But I changed his mind.”

“How?”

“I pointed out that it was even worse than he suspected—that even after he had talked to me we were unable to build a manslaughter case against Big Buck Williams. Dugan was dead. The lye water had washed every trace of blood off the tire—and there were no stains anywhere on the Duesenberg’s undercarriage. There was absolutely no way in the world to connect Williams with Little Tony’s death—until Williams himself appeared before the judge and pleaded guilty to manslaughter.”

“That should have burned Catt up even more.”

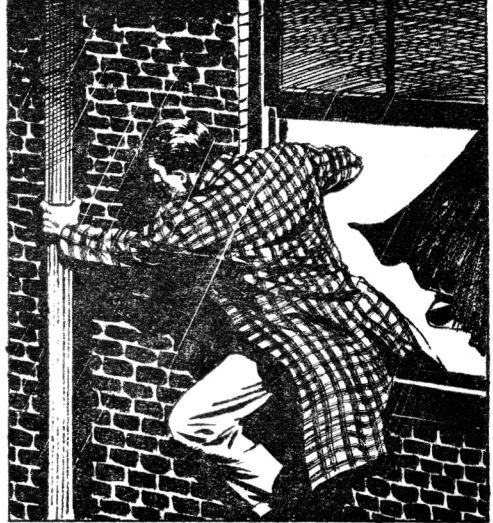
“It did—and he repeated his threats—until I asked him what kind of future he faced if I let Big Buck Williams learn that Catt had paid five thousand dollars to buy Williams into Sing Sing for ten years.”

“What was his answer to that?”

“The other fifteen thousand dollars.”



"Come on, open up. This is the law, buddy." Those startling words came through the locked door to Luke Kelsey. For Kelsey was trapped in this room. He had just regained consciousness with a hangover from doped drinks, his big roll of money stolen—and his companion was a murdered girl.



Jewel Flammine's head had been battered by Kelsey's own gadget invention. Kelsey put on his raincoat, took the damning murder weapon and climbed out on the drain-pipe—just as the door cracked under the cop's weight. . . . Wounded by the cop, Kelsey lost his gadget and had to flee.



Helene Wilmont, rich young madcap, mistook Kelsey for a private dick named Jay Lyle. With the police searching for him, Kelsey carried on with the bluff. Helene was furiously jealous of her own boy-friend's back-street romance—and the girl she wanted Kelsey to investigate was . . . Jewel Flammine.



A blonde cupcake named Skid was wise to Kelsey's bluff—and the murder. And Skid, as cold-blooded as she was cute, decided to wrap up Kelsey for the district attorney. . . . The complete story will be told in Frederick C. Davis' novel—"For Thee I Swing"—in the July issue . . . published June 2nd.

CALL YOUR

When they took pro-football coach Tige Gaynor, shot him and bounced him on concrete, they made just one mistake — they didn't kill that two-fisted, hot-headed All American quite dead enough.



He tilted the automatic. "Now it's too late, muscleman."

CHAPTER ONE

Little White Lie

AS NEAR as I could figure, the slug had gone in at such an angle that my rib had deflected it. It had just torn across the front of my chest, ripping me open. If Bill Garson hadn't been in such a hurry, if Dane Jorgason hadn't tried to help him by swerving the sedan—he would have put it right through my heart.

It wasn't too hard to reconstruct. My

**Hard-Hitting Crime-
Adventure Novelette**

MURDER SIGNALS!



● By **JOHN D. MacDONALD** ●

hands had been tied, and I had been wedged against the door by Bill Garson's shoulder. Where Route 38 widens, Dane had moved over close to the shoulder and speeded up. The spring on Garson's holster had made a little click as he pulled the automatic out. He shifted it to his left hand, reached by me and yanked the door handle down. Dane gunned it and yanked the car to the left as Garson fired. I went out the door.

Without knowing how it happened, I was on my face in the shallow ditch, and my hands were no longer tied. My right arm was twisted under me at a funny angle. I burned in a dozen places. My cheek rested in the puddle, and the rain beat down on me.

The legs were gone, too. Oh, they were there, but they were old stockings filled with sand and putty.

It was the damn puddle that was making all the trouble. The water had been going down the ditch and my legs backed it up. While I was figuring out what had happened, the water rose up my face, clogging one nostril.

I couldn't move. My whole world had been refined and focused right down to that one damn puddle. I couldn't move—and if I didn't move, the water would creep up over my nose and mouth and drown me.

No time to think of Garson. No time to think of Dane. Just concentrate on that silly puddle and figure what to do about it. One eye, my right eye, was under water. I could turn my head, but not far enough. Just a couple of inches. That wouldn't be enough.

The water kept coming up. The rain made little whispering noises. They whispered the headlines to me.

TIGE GAYNOR FOUND DEAD IN DITCH. ONE-TIME ALL-AMERICAN SHOT BY UNKNOWN ASSAILANT. CORONER FINDS WATER IN GAYNOR'S LUNGS. EVIDENTLY SHOT AND HURLED FROM MOVING VEHICLE.

What was I going to do about that damn puddle?

Try something sometime. Scream into a puddle. I screamed. Real loud. Know how it came out? Sort of a little groan and bubbling noise.

Headline from long ago. Gaynor smears fourteen plays in backfield in Texas game. Coach Walker says that the only way to stop Gaynor is with an axe.

We fooled them that time, coach. They didn't use an axe. They used a three-year-old sedan, a hundred feet of concrete, a .32 slug from an automatic and a puddle of cold rainwater.

No axe, coach.

Do something hard, Gaynor. Hell, boy, you've been a hotshot paratrooper dropped out over Holland, and you've transferred to Burma-side and took the long drop near Bahmo. Now do something *really* hard, Gaynor. See if you can roll over.

No response when you try the arm, the leg, Gaynor. Concerted effort. Play games, Gaynor. They got a hole through the line as wide as Sunday morning. The big fullback is coming through like the Scranton freight. Cut him down, Gaynor.

Another small groan, a heave of numb muscles and suddenly I was on my back.

Consciousness was a fading light with the hand of a bulbsnatcher reaching for it. I sucked a little bit of my lower lip between my teeth and chomped on it. Warm salty blood. The light brightened and rain bounced on my face.

Then white lights smashed through the world and were gone, and I knew that a car had passed on the highway. I felt the vibration against my back.

Feeling seemed to stop at the hipjoints. Bring up the knee, Gaynor. Bring it up. If it won't come up, you've got a busted back.

I looked down across my wet cheeks and couldn't see a thing. As far as I knew, I'd given the knee orders to lift. Wait a minute, Gaynor! There's a way to find out. That left arm seems okay. Move it down.

Under my reaching fingers, I felt the numb, hard thighs—and the knees were up! And Gaynor was suddenly a guy on his back in a ditch crying like a little gal who has just been tapped for her favorite sorority.

I ran my left hand along my right arm. There was a right angle corner at the elbow and an extra right angle half-way down to the wrist. Two elbows on one arm.

SLOWLY you're coming back, Gaynor. Take a break. Think of something pretty—think of Ann Lowry.

In Welch Williams' office she can sit—erect, dead and efficient—copper-silk hair pulled back so tightly it nearly shuts her eyes behind the harlequin glasses. But when the day is gone and the soft night rolls across the city, the glasses are gone and the copper hair is a soft shoulder-length cloud and the gray eyes touch your heart.

Too bad Welch was able to look at the office-Ann, and figure the possibilities. Welch who looks like one of those Norse citizens who rode around on the prow of a long ship with oars and shields along the sides.

Welch Williams is a pretty boy with muscles who writes a dainty little daily column which nibbles with icy teeth at the foibles of the four hundred in Port Davis. The guy is rough. He was once a police reporter, and he uses his column to extract hush dollars from the city's gaudier businessmen.

Everything was dandy until Welch began to see possibilities in my Ann. The pro football club, the Port Davis Travelers, had hired me as coach at eighty-five hundred plus a percentage of the net, plus an annual increment based on a percentage of games won.

Ann was halfway talked into marrying me.

I guess Welch didn't care for that angle. If she got married to me, he'd be iced for keeps.

So he arranged to cross me—and Ann helped him. On my back in the ditch, I thought of her slim fingers batting out Welch Williams' column on her typewriter. I wondered if she knew that she was writing an Oakley for death. I wondered what had been in her eyes when she wrote it.

Oh, it was neat, very neat, that column of Welch's. I was eating dinner when I read it. I jumped up, paid Dan, climbed in the car and drove to Ann's place in a hurry.

The boys picked me up just as I hit the front stairs. A quick trip to the ditch, courtesy of Bill Garson and Dane Jorgasen. And Welch Williams.

It was a very innocent little item.

Among us in Port Davis is a rough, loud citizen with muscles, a coach no less. Apparently he isn't satisfied with the money he's making. At the present time he is accumulating facts and figures on the pro pool hereabouts, with the idea of implicating some higher-ups to the extent that they either kick back a percentage on the pool take to our loud friend, or he busts their little game wide open. It seems that higher-ups are in a too, too delicate position.

That was all. It seemed to be enough.

Bill Garson, a guy I had busted off the Travelers for suspicious backfield fluffs in a row, had tapped me at the foot of Ann's stairs.

"It's loaded, Gaynor. Turn around slow and easy."

If I had known what their plans were, I would have jumped them then. Dane Jorgasen stood in the doorway, watching the sidewalk. No matter what play was called, old Dane always shut his eyes and charged straight ahead. He had gotten cancelled out the same time Garson did.

"Okay, Bill," Dane said nervously.

They had me walk, not run, to the sedan. In the front seat Dane tied my hands together while Bill held the gun on me. "This will hurt, but not for long, coachie."

I didn't get it until we crossed the city line at about fifty. When I did get it, the cold sweat popped out all over me.

At the last minute, when I heard the click of the automatic coming out of the clip holster, I said in a clear soprano, "You won't get away with it!"

They didn't bother to answer.

As the slug burned across my chest, Garson bumped me out into the night air.

The rain pelted my face. I looked up, squinting against it, and tried to figure out why, outside of a normal yen for my Ann, Welch should have pulled such a thing. And he must have given Ann quite a fight talk before she typed it up.

Port Davis had suddenly become a very rough place. I began to understand why Garson, in the tailback slot, had pulled those fluffs—the four in a row that cost us a game after a fourteen to nothing lead.

Port Davis had become a very rough place. With my ears under water, I whispered a promise to the rain. I told it that Tige Gaynor was going to be-

come just about three times as rough as Port Davis.

Provided I could ever get out of the ditch.

With my left hand, I straightened out the extra elbow in the right arm. Then I pinched my leg as hard as I could. Somewhere, a hundred miles away, a little warm spot glowed on my leg.

A car went by. The quick flash of headlights gave me a chance to look at the sides of my wet little cradle. The ditch on the road side was a straight four-foot drop. I had as much chance of getting up that as I had of walking up the side of the Queen Mary with a wad of chewing gum on each heel.

The next car that passed showed me a gradual slope on the field side of my snug little ditch. That might be done.

The sixty-four dollar query was whether I could flop across my minor river without drowning in the process.

Maybe old linesmen are all punchy. I went way back to college ball, called some old signals. I called the kicker number and flopped across the stream bed like a gaffed fish. I landed face down driving mud between my teeth.

THE next problem was locomotion. Standing up was as practical as flying, and the right arm made creeping impossible. Pretty soon I figured out a system.

I slid my left arm up under me until my fist was about under my forehead. Then I did an awkward, one-arm pushup and flopped forward again. I made two feet through the line. About seven of my little contortions got me up the slope. I was too far from the edge of the highway for headlights to bear on me.

I lifted my head, blinked the rain out of my eyes and looked around. Two wonderful square golden windows were plainly visible, not more than eight thousand miles away.

After four years of hard labor, the lights looked just as far away as they had in the beginning. Reach, strain up, flop forward, groan. Reach, strain up, flop forward, groan. A nice private little conga rhythm.

Somewhere along the line I shut my eyes. I labored in darkness. I opened them after a long time and the lights were

gone. I started to bawl like a baby.

Sniffing, I turned my head to one side, and there were my wonderful lights. I had gotten off direction and crawled right up even with them.

About fifteen more beats of my conga rhythm, and I could reach the front door of the farmhouse with my fist. Knock, knock—who's there?

The door opened and there was a high gasp to go with a pair of ankles. Then the bulbsnatcher came along and took away the light. . . .

I was on a big bed, and the bed and the room were on top of a phonograph record, a little off center. It felt like the next revolution would sling the whole works off onto the floor.

A big face was over me, and I said to the face: "Just—doctor. Nobody else. Please."

I drifted up out of the blackness and heard a heavy voice say, "Awake, hey? This is going to hurt."

I screamed as fingers prodded the small of my back. I blacked out. . . .

Sunshine in the morning, filling the room. My head felt bigger and softer than the soft pillow it rested on.

I made an inventory. Right arm in a cast. Cast in a sling. Adhesive tape from my armpits to my hips. A hell of a thirst and an empty stomach.

My legs belonged to me again.

To prove it, I swung them out of the bed and sat up, yanking a blanket over me. It was a cheerful room. Rag rug. Early American furniture—authentic. Good taste and a few bucks to kick around.

My left elbow was bandaged, and half my face. I felt my hair and found that a lot of it had been shaved off and replaced with adhesive tape.

"Anybody home?" I yelled.

Somebody with a light step came running up the stairs. A tall girl with black hair, wide blue eyes, a fluffy apron and an outdoor look stood in the doorway.

"Well, Mr. Gaynor! Good afternoon."

When I smiled I found out that I had a smashed lip. "Good afternoon to you, too, whoever you may be."

"I'm Kelly Wharton."

"Kelly? Miss Kelly?"

She stepped over and held the back of

her hand against my forehead. "That makes Dr. Galley wrong on another count. He said you'd have a fever, probably pneumonia."

"Miss Kelly Wharton?"

"He said that no man in your condition could have moved an inch. This morning we found where you crawled out of the ditch and all the way over to the house. He said you wouldn't be able to sit up for a week."

"Miss Wharton?"

"He said you might be out of your head."

"If I hadn't felt you touch my forehead, I might give him that point."

She walked across, sat down in a slipper rocker, folded her hands and said, "Now start talking, bub."

"Why aren't you married?"

"Okay, okay. I'm Miss Kelly Wharton and this is my father's house and I'm an only child. Dad is retired and Mother is dead and we work six acres only and we have an income of enough to get by on and Dad is out in the barn and I'm a good cook and a lousy painter. And I'm not married because the only guy I ever cared for turned out to be an average man—in other words, a rat."

I sighed. "I'll send you a form to fill out in the morning so you can get in line with the rest of the girls. What did you tell the doctor?"

"That you'd gone up on the barn roof to take a shot at a hawk with a rifle. You lost your balance and dropped the gun. It shot you in the chest and you rolled off the roof and fell into a rock pile. He said that you must have bounced considerably, or else spun for several minutes after you landed."

"Does he know my name? It'll be in the papers, I think."

"Dad and I looked in your wallet before he got here. Dad follows silly things like football, and since your last words were sort of a plea for us to keep our mouths shut, we told the doc that your name is Joe Moses and that you were doing chores around here. The doc wanted to know why our hired man was wearing imported Irish tweeds, and Dad told him that the least we could do was to keep up certain standards in the neighborhood."

I grinned at her. "You are nice people, Kelly. If you want to find me those tweeds, I'll get dressed and move along."

She made a low noise in her throat, a husky, liquid chuckle. "Junior, any self respecting dog would demand a thorough drycleaning before accepting those lacy rags as a dog bed. You better put a new outfit on your expense account. Besides, you can't stand up."

"The doctor said that, too?" I wrapped the blanket around me, gave a little push and stood up. She came out of the chair fast and got me before I got set. She tilted me back and I sat down again.

"Now, what happened?" she asked. "According to you, we've been nice people."

CHAPTER TWO

Beat It Out

I DECIDED to tell her. "Okay nice people. One Welch Williams put on a little white lie in his column saying that I was about to shake down some big shot citizens on the basis of my investigations into the football pool racket

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hereabouts. Two of their trusty minions took me for a little ride. That's corny, isn't it? People aren't supposed to be taken for rides any more. Anyway, they shot me and bounced me on the concrete. I would wager that for their money I am one very dead character."

She was suddenly serious. "You should be dead, Benjamin."

"Huh? What's this Benjamin?"

"Your name. We got it off your driver's license. Dad says that you are called Tige. That name sounds as though you ought to be scratched behind the ears. How did you get it?"

"On defensive plays I used to roar when I charged into the backfield. First it was Tiger, and then Tige."

"In this house it will be Benjamin," she said firmly.

"How about being a good girl and buying me some clothes with the dough I hope you found in my pants. Suit is 44 extra long with a 34 inch inseam. Shirt, 16½—"

"Benjamin, if people are anxious to kill you, I think you had better stay right here until you can give them an argument."

I thought it over. "Kelly, I could give a big protest and talk about inconvenience and all that—but since you make the offer, I will not be coy. Thank you, Kelly. I will be happy to stay here—on one condition. As soon as my assailants know where I am, I will leave. You don't want any part of my kind of trouble."

"What would you like for lunch?"

Mr. Wharton came in while I was eating. He was a big, rangy man, half bald, with seamed hollow cheeks and kind eyes. While I ate he told me he had played on the Yale second team in his day. End. He got into the Princeton game. The field was muddy and he tackled the Princeton ball carrier on the five-yard line, and the two of them slid right into the end zone. He nearly wept about it.

After lunch he made me talk about college ball and pro ball until Kelly came in and did everything except grab him by the ear to get him out so I could sleep. As soon as he was gone, she came over to the bed, very maternal-like. She tucked me in, patted me gently on the cheek and said, "Sleep tight, iron man."

By the time I made a small, sleepy grab for her, she was already out of the room and the door was closed. I took a long header into dreamland. . . .

I was up and around, wearing an old robe of Mr. Wharton's, when the doctor came the next day. He looked at me, bug-eyed, checked me over and left, mumbling to himself. My worst shock was looking in a mirror. The smashed lips, shelf over my right eye and nose at a slight increase in its usual angle made me look a punch-drunk bum. I had lost enough hide to cover a fair-sized coffee table.

I rated a headline in the Port Davis Star Courier. "Gaynor Disappears After Williams' Hint. Traveler Coach Missing. Police Suspect Foul Play. League Officials Begin Investigation. Tug Robertson Appointed Coach. Star Back Garson Signed by New Coach. Jorgasen Also Returns to Team. Robertson Hints Gaynor Implicated in Pool Swindle."

That business about Jorgasen and Garson gave me the necessary clues. Kelly and her father and I talked it over. I didn't tell them that Garson and Dane had been the boys what done the dirty deed. Mr. Wharton couldn't get it through his head that any little football pool racket could be worth risking murder.

I told him a few of the facts of life. I told him that probably forty thousand of Port Davis' three hundred and ninety thousand people played the weekly pool. I told him that the take each week during the season was probably around thirty thousand, of which twenty-two thousand would be net. That would bring the pool income to around a hundred thousand a month. Even split up many ways, that kind of money is always an inducement. Particularly when they run the business so that it is tax free.

I told him that a cooperative coach for the Travelers could haul the score in either direction, according to the instructions given. I wasn't one to cooperate. I bounced Garson when he pulled the fluffs in order to feed the game to the opposition and cross up the people who played us to win on the pool.

But I didn't try to tell them how Tug Robinson, Garson, Jorgasen, Welch, Ann

and a few unknowns fitted together. I didn't know.

When I was through, Mr. Wharton said, "What are your plans? I mean, after you're well enough to leave here."

I glanced at my left fist, at the white crisscross of old scars across the dark skin in my knuckles. "I'll just ask a few people a few questions."

Kelly's voice was very soft. "Maybe you ought to leave Port Davis, Benjamin. Maybe you just ought to go away and forget about it."

Before I could answer, she stood up with quick grace and left the room. Mr. Wharton looked at him, grinned and shrugged.

I said: "She doesn't care much for the male half of the race, does she, Mr. Wharton?"

"A week ago I could have given you a definite answer." His smile faded. "It would be a little unfortunate if she—got the wrong impression from you."

I thought of Ann—the girl with the spun copper hair and warm lips.

"She won't get the wrong impression," I said. . . .

At the end of the first week, Mr. Wharton bought the clothes I needed, plus, at my suggestion, some work clothes so I could help him around the place. The doctor came at the end of ten days, took the clamps out of the gash across my chest and cut the adhesive off me. He told me that as both bones in my arm had broken cleanly, another three weeks in the cast ought to fix the arm.

The bandages came off my head and, with much merriment and many suggestions from her father, Kelly worked on my cropped skull with clippers and shears to give me a half human look.

Once she cautiously asked me if there wasn't someone in the wide world who would be worried about me. I thought of Ann and said, "No one, Kelly. Neither kith nor kin." She stood close to me when she asked. I put my left arm around her. She lifted her face, eyes closed. I let go of her suddenly. She turned pale, left the room without another word.

THE news of my disappearance faded back into the paper further and further until finally there was no mention of

it. The Travelers won the fifth, sixth and seventh game of the season and dropped the eighth by a huge score to a far weaker team. Tug Robertson refused to comment to the press. Garson fumbled badly twice and once let the team in for a bad penalty when it was fourth down, one yard to go, with the team on the opponents' seven.

I read the sport news and thought of all the suckers being milked and wondered how many other teams in our little league were infected by the same lice that nibbled at the Travelers.

A week before the cast was supposed to come off, I broke the plaster and peeled it off. My arm was weak. When I got up the next morning, I cautiously tried a few pushups. The arm seemed to hold up okay.

For a full week I worked around the place, picking the toughest jobs I could find. Mr. Wharton gave up trying to tell me to take it easy. Kelly watched me with amusement.

After dinner Kelly and I were playing a fast game of double solitaire and Mr. Wharton was reading a magazine. It was exactly six weeks to the day from the night I had crawled up to their door and hammered on it.

When Kelly won, I leaned back in the chair and said, "You people have been swell. 'I'll never forget it. Tomorrow I'm leaving.'"

Kelly looked at me, her lips pale. "You—you're not well enough!"

"Nonsense! I'm in better shape than I've been in a year. I could fall out of that car tonight and walk away from it whistling."

Mr. Wharton put his magazine aside. "We'll miss you, Ben."

I answered him, but looked directly into Kelly's blue eyes. "I'll miss—being here."

"You'll come back?" she asked.

"After I take care of a few details. I've been branded as a rat throughout organized professional football. When I can hold my head up, I'll come back."

"Don't—don't do anything silly, Benjamin," she said quietly.

"I haven't so far, Kelly."

Her dark lashes touched the warm white skin under her eyes. She didn't answer. Mr. Wharton coughed.

"How about another game, Kelly?" I said cheerfully.

Her hand shook as she laid out the cards. I thought of the feel of Ann's copper-silk hair, the warmth of her arms. . . .

In the morning I wrote a letter. I borrowed Kelly's portable. I named dates, place, names. I sealed it and handed it to her with instructions to get it to the Managing Editor of the *Star Courier* if I didn't come back after it inside of ten days.

At dusk I left the house, walked out to the highway, turned left and headed for the city limits. I had a few little presents for a few people.

* * *

The shadows were thick under the trees across from the old frame house where Ann had a second-floor apartment. I stayed well back in the shadows and cupped my hand around the cigarette so that the glow wouldn't give me away.

Her windows were lighted, and I had seen a man's silhouette. A strange car was parked near the walk. I waited and thought of her gray eyes, and I pinched the butt so tightly between my fingers that I couldn't draw smoke through it. I mashed it roughly against the trunk of a tree.

The juke box in the grill down the street was roaring and thumping. The night was cool but my hands were wet with sweat. No sign of life from Ann's apartment.

Finally a door opened. A man came out on the porch. I heard him run lightly down the steps. His car door chunked shut and he drove away.

I waited ten minutes, then drifted across the street, pushed the front door open and went quietly up the stairs. She opened the door to the apartment a few seconds after I knocked.

As I stepped in, she put her hand on her throat and went back several uncertain steps. "Tige!" she gasped. She put her left hand behind her.

I grabbed her arm, looked at her hand, whistled softly at the big fat blue-white stone in the platinum setting. "Doing nicely, Ann!"

She yanked her hand away, snapped, "Doing better than I would have with you, you cheap—"

"Cheap what? Corpse? I'm supposed to be dead, kid."

She put the back of her hand in her mouth and looked at me with wide eyes. "Dead!"

"That was the general idea. I've had an interesting time thinking about you while getting my health back, Ann. That was a nice cross you pulled."

"Cross? Tige, I don't understand. What do you mean? Tell me!"

I sat on the familiar couch, crossed my legs and lit a cigarette. "Not much to tell. That lying boss of yours put a fake comment in his column and some people shot me because they didn't like what it said. Very simple. Hope you had fun typing it."

Somehow she was in my arms, her shoulders shaking with the strength of her sobs, her face buried in my lapels. Her words were incoherent.

"Oh, Tige, they lied to me about you. I didn't type that for Welch Williams. He put it in the column after I'd typed the final draft. I didn't know anything about it until the paper came out. Then, when you didn't come and explain, when you just disappeared, I knew they'd scared you out of town. I hated you then, Tige. I felt—all cold and hard inside. I didn't care what happened to me anymore."

She squirmed, pulled off the ring and threw it across the room. "Welch gave it to me. He just left a little while ago. I hate him now, Tige. Honest."

THEN I found her lips; they were what I remembered. She was warm against me, and slowly the sobs went away. Pretty soon she sat up and began repairing makeup. She smiled at me through the ghost of tears and said, "What are you going to do?"

"The angle is pretty obvious, honey. I got to find Garson and Jorgasen and beat a confession out of them. They took orders from somebody and I've got to know who. When I find out who, I can beat him up, too. Most people will talk after they take a few smacks around the eyes and nose."

She shuddered. "It sounds so brutal!"

"I wasn't exactly taken out for tea and cakes."

She snuggled close. "It's so nice to have you back."

"It's nice to be back. But there's a little work to do, honey."

She looked up at me, a very interesting glint in her gray eyes. She put her lips near my ear and said, "Take care of that little work tomorrow, darling. You've been away so long."

It wasn't what I'd call easy, but I managed to get off the couch. She pouted at me. "Beast!" she whispered.

"Mr. Beast tonight, my love. See you later." I headed for the door.

As I closed it behind me, I looked back. She was curled on the couch, hugging her knees, still pouting. . . .

I lit a match. My memory was good. A white card tacked under a bell in the dark entryway. *W. F. Garson.*

Somebody upstairs was pounding a piano. They had a good left hand. I tried the door. Locked. I gave it the shoulder gently. Solid. I shoved somebody else's bell for luck. They were probably expecting somebody; the door buzzed.

I opened it and went up the stairs. Second floor rear. 2-F. No light showing over the transom. I synchronized my lunge at the door. It burst open with a sound of rasping wood, breaking metal. The shades were up and I could see. The room was empty, the bed unmade. The room smelled of dirty sweat socks and grubby sheets. The hallway outside was dark.

I left the door open a few inches, lit a cigarette and stood where I could watch the hallway.

It took better than an hour. I recognized the silhouette when he came whistling down the hall. Keys jingled in his hand.

The whistle stopped abruptly as he saw the door was open. During his moment of hesitation, I yanked it open all the way, grabbed the front of his clothes with my left hand and yanked him toward the overhand right I tossed between his eyes.

It made a highly satisfying sound.

The springs creaked as I tossed him on the bed. I kicked the door shut, pulled on the light and rolled him over. He

moaned and moved his arms feebly. The smack on the bridge of the nose hadn't done much for his dark good looks.

In an inside pocket I found a small black notebook. A rubber band fastened five one hundred-dollar bills, folded once, to the inside cover of it. I pocketed both notebook and currency, leaned over the bed and slapped him across the mouth. He wasn't wearing his little gun.

His eyes opened, and he slowly focused on me. His eyes shut quickly, and his mouth looked as though he had suddenly tasted something bitter. He opened his eyes again.

"It's me, Billy boy," I said tightly.

"Gaynor!" he breathed. "But—but I put a slug in your heart!"

"The slug bounced. Now start talking. Who told you to take me out for that little spin?"

His mouth turned stubborn. I lost a little confidence. You watch a guy call for himself on a naked reverse a few times when the ground is frozen, and you know he's got guts of a type.

"The girls like that face, don't they, Billy boy?"

He looked puzzled. I continued, "They won't like it any more." With the back of my clenched hand, like a man using a small sledge, I hit him flush in the mouth. He rolled to the edge of the bed, spat blood onto the bare floor and made a quick grab for my legs.

I lifted a knee sharply and it hit him full in the face with sickening force. It flopped him back onto the bed. His eyes rolled glassily. But when I yanked him up off the bed, he still had enough spunk left to hit me feebly on the side of the neck.

I stood him up, let go of him, and hit him under the heart. An explosive punch. Feet braced; body pivoting; arm, shoulder and back exploding at the point of impact. The punch probably traveled five inches. Bill Garson slammed flat against the far wall, landing on the floor on his hands and knees, shaking his head, his mouth wide open like a man trying to yawn.

The edge of the door hit my shoulder as it burst open. I spun half around just in time to catch Dane Jorgasen's thick shoulder in my kidney. His big arms

hooked around my thighs, and the two of us smashed down onto Garson.

Jorgasen let go of my thighs and, as I twisted out from under him, he slammed me in the throat with his forearm. For seconds I felt as though he had smashed my throat.

The room spun blackly, but I got to my feet and swung weakly at him, missing completely. I got my left arm in the way of a roundhouse right, and bruised my knuckles on his thick skull. He waded in, grunting with each punch, and I took one in the middle. I caught him flush on the jaw with a left and drove him back a few steps. It was my chance. I had to climb him before he could get braced.

I took a step forward and Garson grabbed my ankles. I had forgotten all about Carson. As I fell toward Jorgasen, struggling for balance, his freckled fist loomed up as big as a three-car garage. It detonated the side of my face and when I went down, the floor opened up and let me go spinning down, end over end, into that far place where all the sounds seem to come out of hollow sewer pipes. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Fits Like a Noose

I GROANED, rolled over, and opened both eyes. The cheap carpet was fuzzy against my mouth. Get on your feet, Gaynor, or they'll send in a sub. Your team has called time out. Gaynor injured on the last play.

Suddenly I was on my feet, and it was a small cheap room with a broken door and two people on the floor. I felt a glow of satisfaction. I had flattened Jorgasen on my way down, and Garson had folded from the effect of the punches he had taken.

I staggered a little as I walked over to Garson. I was going to wake him up and get some information out of him. I dropped heavily onto my knees and rolled him over.

He didn't roll right. Too loose. A messy spot over his ear. I didn't remember hitting him over the ear. Stupidly I touched the messy spot with the tips of my fingers. The shattered bones shifted under my fingers. I reeled with nausea.

On my hands and knees I crawled over to Dane Jorgasen. He had the same trouble. Right at the base of the skull.

The notebook! I slapped my pockets. Gone!

The piano rumbled on, the beat shaking the flimsy walls. I looked stupidly at the freckles and coarse red hair on the back of Jorgasen's hand.

Something sour crept into the music. Something alien. Thin and wailing and alien. I listened. Sirens. A moaning in the night.

As I stepped out into the hall, Mr. Piano heard it too. He stopped with a smashing discord.

High whine descending to low growl and stopping in front. Too late to go out the right way. Second floor. I ran back into the room, yanked the window up, looked down. Bricks on the alley floor. Feet out first. Make it look good, Gaynor. I dropped my feet down the side of the building, chinned myself on the rotting sill and reached one hand up long enough to pull the window back down before I dropped.

I landed on my toes and went down so loosely that I smacked my chin on my knee, eating a small hunk out of the side of my tongue. With the blood seeping into my mouth, I straightened my clothes, sauntered down to the alley exit.

A cop flashed a light in my face. "What the hell goes on?" I asked thickly.

"Where'd you come from?"

"I crawled up from between the bricks. Where'd you think I came from?"

"Wise guy," the cop muttered.

"Is this out of bounds for civilians or something?" I asked.

"On your way," he said. "Move along. Don't block the sidewalk."

I sauntered away from him, pausing to take out a cigarette and light it. A good thing that there had been no decent picture of me to print in the papers when I was dropped into the ditch. The pictures they had printed had been the old ones where I was wearing a helmet and looking vicious.

Around a corner, I leaned against a building and caught my breath. Lovely plan all shot to hell. Somebody pretty ruthless behind it all. No place for Gaynor to go. Maybe Kelly had the right

idea. Leave town. Forget it. Become a nice uncomplicated bricklayer or a stevedore.

I walked the aimless streets wondering where to go. The town would now be very warm. Very warm indeed. The big, bloated face of Tug Robertson floated into my mind. One of the best roving guards in the pro game before bourbon, blondes and blubber slowed him down. Maybe he'd have some answers.

I checked Robertson's address in the phone book. Ten blocks to go. Better not risk a cab. I walked with long strides, my heels smacking the sidewalk.

I had been set up for the murder. It would have fitted like a glove if the cops had been five minutes quicker. "Gaynor, Implicated in Pool Swindle Returns, Murders Players. Doublecross Suspected."

Something thumped against my hip as I walked. I reached back, grasped the leather thong and pulled the heavy sap out of my hip pocket. In the cone of radiance from a streetlight, I saw the blackness of drying blood against the greasy leather. That would have made it just dandy.

A big truck rumbled down the street, the upper half of the rear door propped open. The thing was jammed with furniture. Out of town, I hoped. It slowed for a light and, with an underhanded flip, I tossed the sap up into the load. It wedged in the folds of the padding.

Tug Robertson would be a very special case. I realized from what I remembered from the newspaper accounts that it would be an odds on bet that he was dancing around the Maypole with the rest of the melon slicers.

A small frame house set well back from the street, in contrast to the nearby buildings which edged the sidewalk. The dark yard was scruffy with unhealthy grass. A light glowed in the livingroom.

I went up the walk, took a look behind me and then drifted around the dark corner of the house. Tug might have company.

On one slow circle of the house I had them all placed. A tall, rawboned woman with carrot hair working in the kitchen. Mrs. Robertson. A boy about fourteen studying at the diningroom table. Tug

half asleep in the livingroom, his wattled jowls sagging over his collar, his little eyes nearly closed, a newspaper sagging in hand.

The phone was in an alcove between the livingroom and the diningroom. I guessed where the phone wires would have to come out of the house. I peered up into the darkness and saw them. Just out of reach. I remembered the clothes pole in the back, got it, and swung it hard at the wires. They pinged free of the house. No sense in taking chances.

I leaned on the doorbell. Heavy steps sounded in the house. Tug, his paper still in his hand, waddled to the door, hauled it open and stepped back abruptly. His eyes widened as I pushed him back, closed the door behind me. His newspaper made a loose swoop to the floor.

"Gaynor!" he gasped.

"I want to talk to you, Tug. I don't want trouble. I'll follow you into the living room. You sit in the same chair you were in before. Don't say a word."

He looked at me stupidly for a moment, turned and went back into the living room. I stepped to the doorway to the dining room. The kid looked up at me, frowning.

"Business talk, kid," I said, and pulled the sliding doors shut.

Tug sat in the big chair, his fists clenched. "You weren't coming back," he said huskily. "That's what they told me."

"Who is they?"

"The guys appointed me. Paul Jonreis and Jode Waller."

"What did they say?"

"They just said that they heard that you wouldn't be coming back, and they asked me to do the best I can. They didn't say anything about the mistake you made, but I figured I better not pull the same one. Besides, I don't know where they figure in."

"What mistake did I make?"

"You got too big for your pants. Instead of taking a cut, you want more."

"More of what?"

"You ain't that stupid, Gaynor. I take my dough and I keep my mouth shut. So did you, until you got smart."

He sat like a later day Buddha, the fear fading, scorn creeping into his face and his tone.

I said: "Where do you get your orders?"

"Same place you got them until you canned Garson and Jorgasen. Garson tells me what the team has to do and gives me the payoff on Monday."

"He won't be giving you any more orders, Tug. He's dead—and so is Jorgasen. Murdered."

TUG Robertson seemed to shrink in the chair. His fists slowly unclenched. "You did it!" he said thinly.

I sat on a cheap leather hassock and stared at him. I said softly:

"Let's start this over again. I never took a dime for trying to twist the final score. I fired Garson and Jorgasen because they weren't good for the team. Williams put some lies in his column, and the two boys I fired tried to kill me. They didn't quite do it. I've never taken a dirty dollar yet and I never expect to. I never expect you to, either."

His fat lips trembled. "But you—I only did it because I thought that—"

"Never mind what you thought, fatty. Who's behind it all? Who gave the orders to Garson and Jorgasen? Who runs the pool? Who skims the cream and pays you in peanuts?"

"Get out of here, Gaynor. Get out!"

"You used to play a clean game, Tug, before you took on all that fat. Maybe you'll feel better about this whole thing if you help me now. Maybe it'll even up the score your conscience has against you."

"My conscience is okay, Gaynor," he said thickly. "There's two kids upstairs in bed and another one in the dining room. They got to be educated. My conscience tells me to get the dough any way I can to take care of them."

"You won't try to help me?"

"Get out, Gaynor."

I stood up, stepped over to the door to the dining room and slid it open. "Come on in here, kid," I said.

He stood up, puzzled. Then his eyes widened. "Hey, I didn't recognize you before! You're Coach Gaynor!"

"Come on in here. Join our little talk. I think your dad wants to tell you something, kid. Okay, Tug. Tell him what you've been telling me."

At first Tug looked defiant. He blustered. He said, "Don't listen to the bum, Dave. You seen what it said in the papers about him. He was crooked and he got run out."

The kid straightened his shoulders. "Dad, we talked about that before. I told you that Mr. Gaynor isn't any more crooked than—than you are, Dad." He turned to me. "Isn't that right, Mr. Gaynor?"

"I'm not crooked, kid," I said gently, my eyes firm on his.

"I told you so, Dad," he said triumphantly.

Tug lost his bluster. He sank deeper in the chair and his fingers trembled. He looked at me and I saw that if I made him do it, something inside him was going to die. And something inside the kid.

I said quickly, "Kid, I wanted your Dad to tell you himself that we've been talking and now he knows just like you do that I haven't been taking wrong money. Somebody has been lousing up the Travelers, and your Dad wanted to tell you that he's going to help me get to the bottom of it. It might mean losing his job. You're the number two man in the house and you ought to know."

Dave looked at his father. "You couldn't do anything else," he said simply.

"Okay, Dave. Get back to the homework."

Dave grinned at us and slid the doors shut behind him. Tug sat for long moments in the chair, staring at the rug. His eyes lifted to mine. He said, "How does a guy explain how wrong he's been?"

"He doesn't. Let's get to work."

* * *

The headwaiter looked at the bill suspiciously, saw that it said ten on the corner and tucked it into his pocket with lizard-like speed.

"Just tell Mr. Jonreis that it's a matter of great importance. Ask him to leave his party and come across the street to that black coupe there for a few minutes."

The headwaiter turned without a word and Tug and I went back to his car. We watched the lighted entrance. In a few moments Mr. Paul Jonreis came out, glanced over toward the car, waited for a

taxi to pass, and then walked quickly over toward us. He was a man in his late forties with white hair, worn quite long over the ears; a sharp tanned face and an air of vitality.

He recognized Tug behind the wheel and said crisply, "Well, what is it, Robertson?"

Tug opened the door and climbed out. Jonreis peered beyond him and his face changed, his eyes widening and his mouth opening. "Gaynor, I—"

Tug grabbed his shoulder and pulled him into the car. Jonreis struggled a little. I reached over and grabbed his wrist and helped him in. Tug came in after him and shut the door. Jonreis sat between us, very still, staring dead ahead.

"We got a little thing to talk over," Tug said heavily.

"I have nothing to say to either of you. This means that you're through, Robertson. You know that. Gaynor is wanted by the police. I heard it over the radio. Two of the players were killed earlier this evening. I'm selling my half interest in the team and getting out tomorrow. I'll take my loss."

"You ever worked for a living, Mr. Jonreis?" I asked him.

He looked at me, puzzled. "What's that to you, Gaynor? I inherited money."

"I'm trying to figure out how to appeal to you. We want help."

He laughed. "You men have a sharp sense of humor."

Step by step I told him everything that had happened to date. Everything. All the time I talked he stared straight ahead, his sharp tanned face a mask.

I ended up by saying heavily, "So this

is our problem. Either you're a crook and you're cleaning up on this thing, or else you're just an average guy and you haven't watched the team close enough."

"I shouldn't believe you," he said slowly, "but I think I do. You see, I thought that you were the crooked one. I thought when you were run out of town and Robertson came in, our troubles were over."

I said: "If you aren't a crook, Jonreis, you got a choice. You can sell out and take your loss and forget we talked to you. Or you can help us clean the things up."

"The publicity tomorrow isn't going to do me any good, you know," he said.

"Whatever you do, you can't put a halt to that. If you sell out, there'll always be that little suspicion that you were on the sugar end of the stick. Maybe helping us clean it up will make you look better in the papers."

He was silent for the space of four long breaths. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just talk. Your partner is Jode Waller," I said. "What about him? Is he the guy behind it?"

"I don't . . . No. He can't be. Six weeks ago when the papers were full of your trouble, Gaynor, I suspected that Jode might be handling the gambling syndicate on the pro pool. I had him watched for a week. I didn't want to be tied up with that sort of an operation. He didn't meet or talk to anyone suspicious, the agency report said. The people who came to his office were people he would be expected to see in his normal affairs as publisher of the *Star Courier*."

HEADACHE

**UPSET
STOMACH**

**JUMPY
NERVES**



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Tug slumped behind the wheel and rattled his fingers on the horn button. I thumped my fist lightly against the glove compartment door. The knuckles were still sore from contact with Garson's skull.

"You're going to need a lawyer, Gaynor," Jonreis said quietly.

I looked at him and grinned. "Something tells me you might be okay underneath all the fine clothes and charm," I said.

He flushed under his tan. "Here's my card. Take it to Norman Baylis in the Tower Building before the police pick you up. I'll phone him. I must get back to my party."

Tug let him out. Jonreis stood in the street and said firmly, "I shan't sell out tomorrow. And you might as well stay on the job, Robertson."

His back was erect, shoulders squared as he walked back into the plush restaurant.

"I figured you'd lost me my job," Tug said.

"And I figured you'd rather have it clean all the way. Remember what you told your boy?"

"What do we do next?" Tug asked.

I glanced at my watch. "Drop me off and go home and go to bed. I've got a place that ought to be safe for tonight. I'll see Baylis in the morning. I can't buck the police along with these boys that play rough."

He grunted, drove me to the corner I mentioned, and went chugging off into the night, a fat man wedged under the wheel of a small black coupe. A fat man whose world had come dangerously close to falling apart at the seams.

CHAPTER FOUR

Disgusted D. A.

TWELVE fifteen. Her lights were out. I went up the stairway and tapped at her door. Not too loud. Just loud enough. I waited and tapped again.

I heard a click and a thin band of light showed under the door. It opened. Her copper hair fell in a soft cloud to her shoulders. The green robe was belted tightly around her slim waist. Her eyes

were mistily soft and damp with sleep.

"I come seeking refuge," I said. "I'm a wanted man. How about a bunk on your couch?"

She looked uncertain. "Why, yes. I—guess so."

She shut the door behind me, leaned against it for a moment, shaking the stupor of sleep out of her head. "I didn't think you'd come back—tonight, Tige."

"Not so loud, honey," I said in a half whisper.

I reached out, found her wrist and pulled her into my arms. Her lips were warm and soft. She leaned heavily against me.

Her left hand was on my shoulder. Something glinted in the light. I tucked my chin in and glanced down at it. The ring was back on.

I pushed her away. "You sure do hate that guy, don't you? Or is it just the diamond that you're nuts about?"

Her eyes were hot. "What the hell is it to you?" she snapped.

I spun as the door to another room creaked. Welch Williams, classic profile and all, stood with an automatic pointed at my belt buckle and said with a careful smile, "What is it to you indeed, Gaynor?"

He laughed shortly. "You should have been bright enough to stay out of town, Gaynor. There's nothing for you here."

I glanced at Ann. Her mouth was sullen and she stared down at her slippered toes. "How right you are!" I said.

He tilted the automatic. "Now it's too late, muscleman." I noticed that his eyes were soft and brown. "Circle him, Ann, and get on the phone. We'll have him picked up here."

Ann kept a good ten feet from me. She sidled in back of Welch Williams, disappeared into the bedroom. I heard her dial, heard her say, "This is Ann Lowry of 211 Borner Avenue. Apartment 2-A. Tige Gaynor is here. We're holding a gun on him. Hurry!"

She stood behind Williams. I took a slow step toward him. The gun muzzle lifted toward my heart and his finger whitened on the trigger. "Easy does it, Gaynor. I'd get a medal for shooting you."

He was right. I stood stock still. Sud-

denly a lot of random little pieces of information arranged themselves in my mind.

I smiled tightly. "Nice going, Williams. But when they take me in, I'm going to explain how you were the go-between on the pro football pool. Maybe they can cook a motive up out of that."

His lips curled. "Are you mad? Why, I was the one who broke your crooked game wide open! I used my column to expose you."

"You told lies in your column. You wanted me out of the way. I made it too tough to rig the games by firing your boys, and you knew from my record that you couldn't buy me off. You couldn't give Paul Jonreis a good reason for firing me, either—I was winning too many games. You were pretty cute."

"Keep going. This is fun," he said.

"And then you scared hell out of Garson and Jorgasen. You told them that I had enough on both of them to get them long prison terms. They weren't too bright. They did your dirty work for you. Only I lived through it.

"Then I came right back here to Ann. As soon as I left, she called you and told you where I was headed. You sicked Jorgasen on me. Between them they chilled me and you came along and saw a good chance to get right out into the clear. You smashed their heads, called the cops and left me there to take it."

"You must be crazy! A man writing a column hasn't got time to play the kind of games you talk about. And he hasn't got the money to back the pool either."

"You haven't, but Jode Waller does. You could see Waller every day. The star columnist talking to the publisher. Perfectly legitimate. The trouble is that Paul Jonreis has the goods on Waller. He's breaking it in a rival paper in the morning. Waller will pin it on you. You'll be his sucker, just like I've been yours, pretty boy."

It was pure bluff, but it hit home. His pretty eyes narrowed and the arm holding the gun moved a little away from his body.

I said quickly, "And when you go down, little Ann goes right along with you. She works for you. She probably keeps your books on the pool. She'll be

an accessory in the murder of Garson and Jorgasen. She won't get any better looking washing clothes in the prison laundry."

I looked beyond him, saw Ann flatten against the door frame, her mouth thin and ugly. She moved a few inches closer to him.

Out of the corner of his mouth, he said, "Move back into the bedroom, Ann."

She gave me one quick, meaningful look and lunged for his gun arm. I drove low toward his knees. I cut the legs out from under him and piled him into the wall.

I caught a flash of his hand with the gun still in it. Two shots stitched the air as I grabbed the wrist, bent it back until the gun dropped. I kicked it away and let him come up.

I was waiting. He tucked his chin behind his shoulder, stabbed me in the mouth with a surprisingly fast left and belted me in the ear with the right cross. I grinned at him, rushed him into the wall, got my shoulder under his chin and, grunting with each swing, started to take him apart in the middle with my fists.

He unclenched his hands and tried to scratch at my eyes. I backed away to measure him for the overhand right when the little gun smacked again.

Welch Williams, your favorite daily columnist, looked at me and slowly lowered his hands. He was looking right at me. The trouble was that he had three eyes. Two warm brown ones with a puzzled look. One black one just over the bridge of his nose. A drop of blood welled on the lower edge of the black one.

His knees bent and he slid down the wall, sitting for a second on his heels and then toppling over to one side. The air was tense with silence that comes when sirens have suddenly stopped. They echoed in my ears and I hadn't heard them before.

Ann stood with the gun in her hand. Her face was slack. Her full lower lip hung away from even white teeth.

The door smashed open and a burly man in a rumpled brown suit said, "Drop it, lady. Over against the wall, Gaynor." He saw Williams and whistled between his teeth. "Oh, happy little city!" he breathed.

MORNING sun cut through the big dusty windows. The District Attorney, the man from the Mayor's Office, the Homicide captain, Mr. Baylis, Ann and Mr. Jonreis looked as bad as I felt. Not one of us had had any sleep.

Mr. Baylis turned to Paul Jonreis. "What will happen to the ownership interest in the Travelers?"

Jonreis sighed. "Jode and I had partnership insurance. It was nice of him to walk in front of a truck rather than shoot himself. They can't prove suicide, so his policy will give me enough ready cash to buy his half from the estate. The coaching staff will be Gaynor and Robertson."

Ann's face looked as though makeup had been carelessly applied to a plaster of paris. "I want to go home," she said hoarsely.

The District Attorney looked at her with something approaching disgust. "As far as I'm concerned, Bob, she can go. She fulfilled her part of the agreement by giving us all the details of the way the pool was operated. Williams used his column as a cover in delivering the printed pool tickets, picking up the cash, giving instructions to Garson and turning over a percentage of the take to Jode Waller. Thanks to her, we have a complete list of the retail agents of the crooked pool.

"No, the District Attorney's office will not press charges—that is, so long as Mr. Gaynor backs up Miss Lowry's story. Self-defense is clear."

"That's right," I said. "Welch got in a lucky punch that staggered me. He started after the gun saying that he was going to kill both of us. Miss Lowry got to the gun first."

The captain said, "After he was shot, he sure landed a hell of a way from the gun."

The man from the Mayor's office glanced at the captain and then at the District Attorney. Some unheard signal seemed to pass between them.

The District Attorney said soothingly, "I'm certain that the Medical Examiner's report will clear all that up, captain."

"Can I go, too?" I asked. "I can come down and sign those statements late today."

The captain sighed. "Okay, both of you can get the hell out. I don't like any part of this."

We went out together, out through the golden oak hall that smelled of decayed plumbing, cigar smoke and fractured ballots. Ann walked beside me, and a touch of color began to flow back into her cheeks.

Just before we reached the doorway, she stopped and touched my arm. I paused. Her arms went around my neck, her lips close to my ear.

"Oh, darling," she said. "I was so wrong! I was such a fool! I don't care how long it takes for you to forgive me."

Slowly and impersonally I untangled her arms, shoved them down to her sides and stepped back.

Her mouth was an O of surprise. "Why, Tige!"

"You're thinking of somebody else, lady. This isn't Tige. This is a tired old guy named Benjamin. And Benjamin doesn't want a damn thing to do with you."

Her hand flashed up and cracked off my face. I didn't move. She tried it from the other side. I just looked at her.

"Good-by, pal," I said.

"You—you can't do this! I'll change my testimony. I'll get you into trouble."

"Go ahead and change it. You'll burn for shooting Williams when he was out on his feet."

"Where are you going?" she asked plaintively.

"I'm going to see a character named Kelly."

"I don't understand," she said.

The door swung shut behind me. I walked toward a cab. To myself, I mumbled, "I didn't understand for a long time, either. Now I'm beginning to."

I settled back in the seat after giving the driver the directions.

I looked out the cab window at the sunny streets, and I wondered if the mess would ruin the team for what little was left of the season. I wondered how Jonreis would be to work for. I wondered if Tug would cooperate. I wondered if kids inherit blue eyes from their ma. I set my jaw.

"They damn well better," I said.

DEAD-END DUET

The kid had been snatched, the ransom paid. But what can you do with 50 grand—in hell?



Paul growled: "Every cop in the country is looking for us."

By **DON JAMES**

AFTER the all-night storm, Chet Morgan opened the door of the auto-court cabin on the Oregon highway to let morning sunshine warm the chill out of him and to see if Paul Labron's car had returned.

There was the smell of wet country and Douglar fir. The sunshine looked washed and clean. The garage beside Labron's cabin still was empty.

Behind Chet a woman's voice asked,

"Paul hasn't come back yet, has he?"

Chet shook his head without turning. "Not yet."

After a short silence the woman said, "Chet—I'm scared. I think we ought to get out of here."

He turned—a slim, dark-haired man in his twenties—and looked at Stella Denley. His brown eyes slowly absorbed her light hair, blue eyes, the youth of her body in

slacks and sweater. She looked nervous.

At the auto court office they were registered as Mr. and Mrs. Tom Blair. It was part of a plan. There were two bedrooms in the cabin and they each used one.

He said, "We have to wait."

She had come from her room, her hair mussed from sleep.

"Something's happened," she said.

Chet Morgan shrugged and closed the door. He went to the stove and put water on for coffee.

"Maybe the storm," he said. "It's around a hundred miles from Portland. In a storm like we've had, slides happen. Maybe the highways are blocked."

She shook her head and went to the bathroom door, where she looked back at him.

"You're finding excuses," she said. "You know something's happened. I don't care what you do—I'm getting out!"

She went into the bathroom and angrily closed the door behind her. There was the sound of water splashing into a wash basin.

Morgan measured coffee into the cabin's cheap aluminum drip-o-lator and sat at the table. He lit a cigarette and thoughtfully gazed at the closed door.

"Maybe she's right," he told himself. "It isn't like Paul to be late. Not unless they got him—or he's dead."

In the girl's room the baby whimpered. He went in to the crib they'd fashioned from a drawer. The baby stared at him with wide eyes. Chet returned to the kitchen-living room. He opened a can of milk and prepared to heat it.

Stella Denley came out of the bathroom. She looked fresh and clean, but she was frowning.

"He's hungry," Chet said.

"How do you know?"

"The way he cried."

"What do you know about nine-month-old kids? Here—let me fix it."

She took over the task with competent hands. Chet poured boiling water into the drip-o-lator and put a pan on for eggs. While it heated, he set the table with quick, sure movements.

Then he glanced at the girl. "Look—can't we wash and hang some of the diapers out in the sunshine?"

She tested the warmed milk on the back of her hand and looked at him. "That's up to you," she said. "In another hour that's going to be *your* worry—not mine."

He felt the tightness in his body as their eyes met. "It isn't that easy, Stella," he said softly. "You're in too deep."

"Listen," she said. "I'll tell you something. You know where Paul found me? In an L.A. joint. You think Stella Denley is my name. It isn't. Neither of you know anything about me except that Paul made a play for me and I played along, and then this came up and I agreed to take a chance. I haven't been in a deal like this before, but I've been in other kinds—up to my neck. I know what it's like."

"Like what's like?"

"How to get by. I'm one of nine kids. We never had a cent and my old man was a bum. I got some school and managed for a while until I got with the wrong crowd. So I've been around. So I can pull out of this now and no one is going to find me."

"If we don't work together, the cops may—"

"I'll take my chances. I've no police record on file. No fingerprints. Nothing. I've never gotten tagged. There's nothing for them to check with."

Chet forced a smile. "You're singing in the dark. You're scared."

Anger flashed in her eyes. "Yes, I'm scared! I was a fool to get in this. I'm getting out. But quick!"

"Maybe I'll stop you."

"*You?*" Her voice was derisive. "You're only in this for one reason. *Paul has something on you.* I don't know what—but you can't do anything except what he tells you. I'm afraid of Paul, but not of you. *You* won't stop me." She stared at him defiantly, and he knew that she was right.

He shrugged. "And he has something on you," he said flatly. "That's why *you're* here."

She tested the milk again. "That's right," she admitted. "But it doesn't make any difference. That doesn't give us anything in common. You can do what you want about it. Just don't count on me. I want none of you. Nor Paul. I've been a fool."

She walked into the bedroom. Thought-

fully he cracked an egg shell on the edge of the pan and let the contents slide upon the hot metal.

IT STARTED so easily down there in San Francisco, he thought. You came home from a war and things weren't right and you became bitter. Your family was gone—not that it mattered much. Your mother had died years before, and your father had married a woman who kept a bottle in her dresser drawer. The old man died and your stepmother became involved with another man.

You managed three years of high school and then the war came. There was the girl who promised to wait and who married a sailor the second month you were gone.

You returned to a job that paid peanuts and you met tall, thin, middle-aged Paul Labron. You did some drinking together and picked up some girls together, and it became a steady thing. Paul didn't work, but he always had money. You suspected things, but you didn't care. That was part of the bitterness.

Eventually it happened. Paul made a proposition. He needed help. It was a simple job. All you had to do was drive the get-away car.

"A couple of grand for us, Chet—and that guy will never miss it. . . ."

It was a neat job—except that the man in the pawn shop reached for a gun and Paul shot him.

So that made two of you tied to a murder, and that pulled you together for more jobs; and each was easier. Your conscience stopped hurting.

When Paul brought out his big plan, he said that Stella was "in." She owed him a favor.

The big plan was the first thing you'd bucked, and Paul put on the pressure.

"You're in," Paul smiled. "If not, I'll try it alone. If I get caught, it's the big rap. There'll be no point keeping still about the hock-shop job. That means you, too."

So there was no out.

Paul was smart. He planned it carefully, those three weeks in Portland. Watching, timing, checking. It had worked. Now it was as if you stood back and looked at an impersonal report of the completed schedule:

Monday. Chet Morgan and Stella Denley registered as Mr. and Mrs. Tom Blair at the auto court. Stella carried the doll swaddled in blankets so that people would assume it was a baby. Chet asked for two bedrooms and unpacked the jalopy they'd bought in California.

Tuesday. Paul Labron registered at the court. He told the proprietor that he would be working in the neighborhood, vaguely mentioning "collections."

Wednesday. Mrs. Thorndyke Pettlinger, ex-showgirl wife of the heir to a lumber fortune, left her Portland Heights home at 2:00 p.m. for her weekly bridge club session. The baby, Thorndyke Jr., was in the care of Sarah Lannter, 45, nurse. At 5:20 p.m., when Mrs. Pettlinger returned, she found the nurse unconscious and the baby gone from his crib.

An hour before Mrs. Pettlinger frantically called her husband, Chet Morgan and Stella Denley met Labron on an isolated country road 20 miles southwest of Portland.

They gave him the lifesize doll—which he later destroyed—and took the baby. When they later returned to the auto court, to all appearances they had the baby they had taken with them earlier in the day.

There would be no reason for the court proprietor ever to mention the couple and the baby to the police. The baby had been at the court two days *before* the kidnapping.

That night Labron returned to the court and went to bed without glancing at the cabin across the way. Later he got up and had a guarded conversation with the couple.

Thursday afternoon. Labron made contact with the Pettlingers. He called a friend of the family from a pay telephone.

"Tell Pettlinger I want \$50,000 in unmarked, used, out-of-sequence ten and twenty dollar bills in an ordinary black suitcase. If the money is marked, I'll know—I know the tests. He won't get the kid.

"Tonight at nine you answer the pay phone in the Elite Tavern on Northwest Twentieth. Have the money outside in your car. I'll tell you where to drive. When a flashlight signals, stop, dump the suitcase and dough, and get the hell away from there.

"If you're followed, if the cops know, if you try any tricks there'll be a dead baby. After I get the dough, and if everything is okay, Pettlingers will get a call telling them where to find the kid safe and alive. Now repeat it to me—fast."

The close friend of the Pettlingers repeated it fast.

THIS was Friday morning. Paul should have been there hours before. Then they had intended to leave the kid in a Portland park and call the parents.

But Paul hadn't come. They'd waited up most of the night and finally had tried to sleep a little. Now it was almost eight o'clock.

Stella left the bathroom and went into her room. Chet heard her moving around, and in a short while she came out and glanced into his room.

"I'll make your bed," she said dully.

"I'll do it. Something to kill time."

She shrugged and poured coffee for herself. She hooked up a toaster and fixed orange juice.

She ate in silence, hardly glancing at Chet when he sat at the table to eat his egg.

He had no appetite. He put down the fork and lit a cigarette. You could stick up a man, take dough from people, but a kid was something else. It was unclean. It made you feel dirty.

Paul had said, "It isn't as if the kid will be hurt. Stella will take care of him. Probably better than his mother. And the kid won't know what's happening to him. It's just a quick, sure take for us."

But it hasn't changed, Chet thought. You like no part of it. Only, if Paul tried it alone and was caught, he'd spill about the pawn-shop murder and you. A man has to protect himself!

Chet looked across the table into Stella's eyes and was startled by the look in them.

"What's wrong?" he snapped.

"I wish to heaven I'd never seen either of you! That I was a million miles from here." Tears flooded her eyes. "I wish I'd never been born!"

Her voice frightened him. He didn't know what he'd do if she made a scene.

"Stop it," he said. "You hear me? Stop it!"

"I wish I were dead! I wish I'd die right now! I'll never get out of this—"

"You'll get out of it. Take it easy."

"Not inside me, I won't. I keep thinking how I'd feel if some—some *rat* took my kid like that." Her voice broke and became hysterical. "You think I can forget *that*? And always being afraid they're looking for me and—"

He reached across the table and slapped her. She gasped and stared at him numbly. Suddenly she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

He had slapped her in his own panic. He never had slapped a woman before. In the other room the baby started to cry. Blindly, the girl got up and went to him.

Chet viciously smashed out his cigarette in his plate. Wasn't there enough without Stella getting this way?

He looked at his watch and turned on a small radio. He already had picked up two morning newscasts. There had been plenty of news about the kidnaping, but no hint that Paul had contacted the parents.

The newscast came on—and there it was in a bulletin!

Chet listened and a chill settled deep within him.

"The car was found 90 miles southwest of Portland. It had failed to make a sharp turn in last night's storm and crashed 100 yards down the mountainside. The suitcase containing the \$50,000 was so firmly wedged in the smashed car that tools were required to release it.

"Police immediately suspected that it was Pettlinger ransom money. Pettlinger admitted it after bank officials revealed the large withdrawal. A friend, Thomas Warlock, was contacted yesterday and made the payoff last night.

"Apprehensive law enforcement officers are searching the vicinity of the crash, where it is believed the baby may be hidden.

"Police believe that the payoff man was thrown clear in the accident, later abandoning the money because he could not reach the suitcase in the wreck. It was revealed that he stayed at the scene long enough to remove the car's license plates. Another bulletin, just received, identifies the car by its serial number as one recently stolen in California. . . ."

Chet snapped off the radio. Stella rushed from her room.

"He got away," Chet said thinly.

Color had drained from her face. "What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"Wait. We're safe for a while. The guy who runs this place thinks we brought the kid with us last Monday. The cops will look for a baby that has shown up since Wednesday—not Monday."

"Maybe Paul's hurt."

"He got away. He'll try to get here. We have to help him."

"Why? Why can't we—?" Fear was in her voice again.

"Because if they grab him, they'll get us, too."

Chet nervously paced the floor. "We have to appear casual. As if nothing is worrying us. I'm going to the office and buy cigarettes. Chat with the guy. You wash diapers and hang them out. We've nothing to conceal. Remember that. *Nothing to conceal.*"

He slipped into a jacket and went out, whistling as he walked toward the office.

The proprietor was a short, fat man named Jones. He smiled as Chet walked in, and shut off a radio.

"Morning, Mr. Blair! Guess our storm is over."

"I can take some sunshine after that one." Chet grinned. "I need cigarettes, too, and a few candy bars for the wife."

"Pick out what you want, Mr. Blair. Just had the radio on about the kidnaping and—"

"I heard it," Chet said. He let his face darken. "I hope they get him. When I think of someone doing that to us and *our* kid, I'd like to take a crack at that guy myself!"

"You may get a chance," Jones said. "State troopers were here. They want everyone to keep an eye open. Got a gun?"

Chet shook his head. "I wish I did. I'd like just one shot at that guy!" He picked out some candy and smiled ruefully. "I'd better not let the wife know he might be around here. She'd take the baby and hit out for Grandma's place in Iowa. We'd do the rest of our sightseeing there!"

Jones chuckled. "Women sure get nervous," he agreed. He looked out the window and his smile broadened. "Yes, sir! Guess you called that one right on the nose. There she goes!"

Tightness held Chet again. He forced himself to look casually through the window at the jalopy just swinging into the highway.

"I'd better get back. She wanted to drive down to the store. I said I'd be gone only a moment."

He gathered his purchases and paid for them. Jones suggested a short sightseeing trip, if they were interested. Chet thanked him and walked leisurely to the cabin.

He hurried to the girl's bedroom. Her traveling bag was gone. The baby was asleep in the drawer.

"She did it!" he thought angrily. "She pulled out!" She'd left him with the baby and no car and no escape.

Jones would notice if she didn't return. He might mention her disappearance to a state trooper. . . .

If he fled and left the baby, Jones could give an accurate description of him and Stella. Nor could he just walk out with the baby. That would make Jones wonder. Whatever was done, it would have to appear casual. Stopping to pay the bill.

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
* **F-N TEST?**



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3 TUNE IN: 2 NETWORK SHOWS!
"The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sunday evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Saturday afternoons, NBC Network.



No hurry and no fuss—just a couple checking out with their baby.

Only it no longer was a couple. There was a man, and a baby, and maybe another man—if Paul came.

The baby had awakened and was making a cooing noise. Chet had heard it before, but it hadn't meant anything. Stella knew. She fed the baby, bathed it, changed it, and knew what it wanted.

What if the baby got sick? What would he do? How would he know? When did you feed it? How did you stop it from crying?

A perspiration of nervousness broke out on his forehead. *Take it easy, Morgan*, he thought. *Think it through.*

Suddenly he knew what he had to do. He had to get the baby back to its parents. Then he had to get away.

Whatever happened, the baby had to be returned!

He shuddered as he remembered the nationwide waves of revulsion and anger that had accompanied cases when the child had been harmed. He couldn't stand it himself! He had no business in this. He'd been crazy for a while, but now he was sane.

He'd have to take a chance that Jones would not notice Stella's failure to return from the store. If Jones came around, he'd say that Stella said she might drive to the next town to do some shopping. "Making a day of it!"

After dark he could leave with the baby. On the table he'd put money and a note: *Mr. Jones: Mrs. Blair and I decided to go on and are getting an early start. I won't awaken you. I'm leaving money for the cabin. Thanks for a pleasant stay.*

There was a late bus to Portland. It was dangerous—but they wouldn't expect the kidnaper to be returning to Portland by bus with the baby. If he acted his part right, there should be no questions.

He glanced at his watch. It was a long wait to darkness.

He thought about Paul Labron. "It would be better if he doesn't come," he told himself. "I hope he doesn't."

In an hour the sun would set. Somehow he had managed to get through the day. He began to pack his bag.

Jones usually kept a light on in the

office for a short while and then retired early. When he was gone, Chet would take the baby, slip behind the cabins, and make his way to the road. He wanted to catch the bus as far from the court as possible.

There wasn't much to put in the bag. He closed it and snapped the lock.

He heard a car stop in front of the cabin. Apprehension needled along his nerves as he watched the door.

It opened slowly and Stella came in. She closed it behind her and leaned back against it, looking dejected and tired.

"I came back," she said simply.

The relief of not facing a state trooper made Chet take a deep breath. "What happened?" he asked softly.

"Nothing. It was no use. If you're caught, it means they'll catch me, too. I've been seen by too many people with you and Paul. I had to come back to help you. Is Paul here?"

He shook his head.

"Is the baby all right?" she asked.

"I guess so. I've done the best I could. Were you worried about him?"

"It's another reason I came back. I could trust you, but not Paul."

"What do you mean?"

"I did a lot of thinking before I turned back—and afterwards. About that kid, and you, and me—and Paul. Even if it was too late to get away, I—I might still have tried, but the baby made a difference. I couldn't leave him with Paul."

Suddenly Chet understood what she meant. It was a relief to have someone with you who thought as you did. "Maybe you're imagining things about Paul. Maybe he isn't even coming here. He may make a break without us."

"Maybe," she said tonelessly.

"And you can still get away, Stella. I've a plan. If you could let me have the car, then you could get a bus south."

"What kind of a plan?"

"I'm going to get the kid back to its folks. That's all I want now. That and a chance to get away." Briefly he told her about it.

She nodded. "It's too big for you, too."

"Yes."

"Maybe you'll get caught."

He shrugged. "I'll keep my mouth shut."

"I think you would. You could slug a cop, or stick up a bank, maybe, but you couldn't hurt a baby."

"A baby can't fight back."

She went through the dusk to the room with the crib and returned with the baby held close in her arms.

"It's time to go," she said. "We'll tell Jones we've decided to get home a day early and are checking out."

"You can catch a bus, Stella. I'll manage to—"

"I'm going with you."

"But this is your chance!"

"I don't want it, Chet. Maybe I'm crazy, too, but I feel as you do. A baby can't fight back. I've got to clean up my conscience, too."

He had never noticed before how direct her eyes could be. He said quietly, "I know what you mean. I guess I'm glad."

He stepped over to pick up his bag and he heard the door open and Stella's gasp.

He straightened and Paul Labron was in the room. His clothes were torn, his forehead cut, but all his alertness and tall, lean strength was there.

"Pulling out on me?" Paul Labron asked.

When they didn't answer, he smiled crookedly. "You couldn't wait?"

Chet said, "We didn't think you were coming."

"I'm here, Chet. Now we're all going. Three tourists over back roads. They'll be looking for a kid."

"We've got a kid," Chet said.

"We'll get rid of it a few miles from here. I know the place. I've been hiding out there all day. The brush is as thick as hell's half acre."

Stella's arms tightened about the baby. "No, Paul," she whispered. "You can't hurt him. I won't let you."

Paul growled: "Every cop in the country is looking for us. We're not packing along a label. The kid goes. He won't know what hit him."

Chet unclenched his teeth. "Listen, Paul. We have a plan. We want to return the kid. Then we can make our break. If the baby is safe and —"

"You, too?"

"Damn it, Paul! You're not going to hurt that—"

Labron hit him. The room spiraled

crazily, and then the cold linoleum of the floor was against Chet's face.

Paul was talking. "I've a gun that says we do it my way. From start to finish. Now get up, you punk!"

Chet shook the confusion from his mind. He felt strength return, but a trembling started. He fought it away.

It had started so easily down there in California. Only now it wasn't so easy. It is never so easy when you're wrong.

He pushed himself to his knees. Stella watched him with frightened eyes. She held the baby too tightly and the boy began to cry.

"Get up," Paul snapped. He had the gun in his hand and his face was twisted in anger.

Chet got to his feet unsteadily.

"Okay, Paul," he said in a small, hoarse voice.

Labron smiled and lowered the gun a little.

Chet hit him with his whole body. His fingers grabbed at the gun.

Labron's fist pounded into Chet's face. The man swayed. Labron jerked the gun. A shot crashed in the cabin. Stella screamed and the baby began crying in desperate fright.

Chet felt the burn of the bullet across his thigh as the recoil jerked the gun. He butted his head into Labron's face. He felt bone break. Viciously he used his knees.

Labron twisted away, but lost leverage on the gun. Chet felt the steel in his hand. He twisted. The gun turned inward toward Labron's body and cracked sharply. Labron screamed.

He fell forward when Chet released him. He hit solidly and screamed again. His body straightened in a grotesque, twisting motion and he was quiet.

Chet wiped blood from cut lips with the back of a hand. He stared down at the man and said thickly. "I'm not sorry. I'm not a damned bit sorry." He looked up at Stella. "Come on. They'll hear those shots. We've got to get out of here."

Chet found the back roads and they edged north toward Portland, Stella cradling the baby, her lips tight, her eyes on the path of headlight.

Once Chet slowed. "There's a bus line through here, Stella. The sign's on that country store."

She said, "Keep going, Chet."

"I'll get the kid there all right."

"What's the use of being alone? Don't stop."

Twenty miles from Portland a state police car approached them. Chet saw it coming and slowed. The police car went on. Stella had crouched on the floorboards with the baby.

Seven miles from Portland, Chet said, "Listen. If anything happens—if we're separated—don't go south. They'll expect that. Go to Butte. I was there once. A hotel on Broadway called the Rockies. There's a cocktail bar. I'll meet you there some night at seven next week. We'll plan what we're going to do then. Do you have money?"

"Enough. But it won't be that way, Chet. We won't be separated."

"It's just in case."

"Don't talk about it."

"I know a guy who lived in South America. He told me about it. It might not be so bad for us, Stella."

"I didn't tell you before, Chet—I mean the way I like you. . . ."

"I'm that way about you. I didn't know until Paul came in and everything happened."

"I guess we sort of missed the boat, Chet."

"Maybe there's another."

"The baby's asleep."

"Sure! He feels good. He's going home." Chet grinned and slowed as they entered the city.

It was much easier than they thought it would be.

They found a city park near the heights and a large stone fountain that was dry. You could park on a street far above and look down on the fountain. Stella liked that.

Carefully, she arranged blankets and made certain that the baby would be safe before she left. Then she lightly touched her lips to the baby's forehead.

"You're almost home now, little guy," she whispered.

Chet was watching the deserted pathways. Stella left the baby and went to him quickly.

They called Pettlingers from a beer joint and drove up on the high road and

parked. Far away they saw police cars siren to the fountain. A woman ran in headlights from a car and clasped the small bundle to her breast.

Chet eased the car into gear. He didn't say anything to Stella because she was crying softly.

They were still in the heights when prowl car cops spotted the license number at a stop street. Chet saw them turn in mid-street.

He remembered the registered car license at the auto court. The dead man, Paul Labron, in the cabin. The alarm was out.

He stepped hard on the gas, skidded around a corner, jerked to a stop, and slammed the door open. Somehow he shoved the girl from the car—hard, so that she floundered into the hedged entrance to a residence.

Softly he called after her, "Some night within the week at Butte. The Rockies at seven."

Tires shrieked as he fled from the approaching siren. He wasn't sure if the cops stopped a second where he had left Stella.

"She's got to get away," he said aloud. "She's got to!"

The prowl car gained. The cops knew the winding, hilly streets. Chet's eyes narrowed and his mouth became a thin line.

He remembered the blue of Stella's eyes; the way her mouth curved.

"I never kissed her," he murmured threateningly.

He made a turn on two wheels. Shots from the prowl car stabbed the night threateningly.

There was another turn. The car swayed sickeningly, and across the sidewalk he saw the far drop of trees and brush below.

Paul Labron had escaped a crash like that!

The wheel wrenched from his hands. He felt the car hurtle out into the night, and there was enough time for one quick thought: *At seven, Stella . . . some night at seven. . . .*

The resounding crash of the car echoed up through the quiet, residential heights, and here and there a light came on in the houses.

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

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

Mouldy Joke

Dear Editor:

Oh, dear! Hooked again! This time by a charming youth with a prominently displayed discharge button. He rang my doorbell exuberantly and displayed a neat case of tins filled with penicillin salve.

The tins when opened contained a creamish-white mixture with a tendency to syrupiness. The odd rancid odor, he assured me, was due to the health-giving mould that produced penicillin. Here, for the first time, was my chance to use as a home remedy this miracle of the laboratory.

My doctor had given me some such salve when the baby had an infected area on his head. It was not unlike that offered now but I didn't recall the pronounced odor.

It would be convenient to have in the house, but what puzzled me was that such a new and relatively scarce commodity could be sold on a door-to-door basis.

This was answered by the youth's enthusiasm for the program giving the veteran preference on the purchase of all surplus army goods. He and another 'buddy' who had been medical corpsmen had realized the possibilities and bought a large stock. Each night, they and their wives tinned it, and the next day the two men sold the previous evening's work. That it had been hand-packed was obvious by the uneven surface of the salve.

He expressed pleasure that I was so interested in the venture and drew from his shirt pocket crude drafts of the labels they were planning to have printed. These would carry the brand name and the curing ingredients of the salve. Cleverly, he drew me into sharing in his plans and hopes. I bought two tins. . . .

Several days later a sliver left an infected place on my finger. The salve brought no results and I ended up with the usual bread and milk poultice. A day or so later, a neighborhood child developed an infection similar to the one for which my doctor had prescribed penicillin salve originally.

When my medication still failed, I angrily trotted myself to my druggist. He felt of it and sniffed for a second. Then he said the tin had rancid cold cream, probably theatrical cream, in it. Shamefacedly I admitted what had happened.

We figured out that my smart young veteran had picked up the discard from some cosmetic outlet and tinned it at a fraction of a cent. That rancid odor which presumably came from health-saving penicillin mould was mould all right! Each tin was seventy-five cents worth of mould! In fact, the whole deal was a mouldy joke on me!

Sheepishly yours,
Mrs. G. M. Spradlen
Warrenton, Virginia.

Runaway Hot Dog

Dear Sir:

Sometime ago I visited a carnival. On the lower end of midway there was a little eating tent which seemed to be doing a lot of business. Curious, I walked over to see why so many people were congregated around it.

The counter man was a comedian of the first water. He kept up a ringing chant of comedy all the while he served his customers. Another thing I noticed was the price of his hot dogs. They were only ten cents, while other eating places were getting fifteen and twenty cents for them.

Pushing my way to the counter, I purchased one of his special franks. Deftly, he picked up a bun, inserted the dog, and strung the fixtures along over top of it. I saw the whole thing with my own eyes, yet when I bit down on the bun, there was no hot dog.

I protested to the oratorical-minded gent. He made some funny remark which promptly brought a laugh from the crowd, and told me I should be more careful and not drop anything as expensive as meat. I looked down and there, at my feet, lay the hot dog which apparently still had enough life left in it to crawl from between my bun.

I never said anything, but I did a lot of thinking as I meandered over the grounds. My mind told me that I had no frank in the bun when he handed it to me. Finally I could stand it no longer. I went back to the cook tent and watched the smooth-tongued gent serve his customers.

Every third or fourth bun he picked up, instead of inserting the hot dog, he slipped his long finger—the middle finger of his left hand which was stained a dark, reddish brown—inside, holding the bun with the other fingers.

Cushioned on either side by the white bun, it looked alarmingly like a hot dog. Over this finger went "the works;" then, as he handed the delectable dish to a customer, he slid the bun off as one would remove a ring. The dog on the ground was a plant.

I never said anything, because it was too good to spoil, but if you bite down on a hot dog sandwich without the hot dog, remember old Brown Finger.

G. M. O.
Dallas, Texas.

Mopped Up

Dear Sir:

I got taken in recently on as smooth a little racket as I have ever seen. Six of my neighbors bit on the same gyp plan.

I answered my doorbell one forenoon to find a nice looking, well dressed, middle-aged man standing there holding six or eight cloth or rag mops. He smiled and said, "Are you Mrs. Raymond?"

I told him I was. Then he told me that he had the mop my husband had ordered for me. Seeing my look of astonishment, he told me that my husband wanted to surprise me and, of course, had told me nothing about it.

I was still dubious about it, but decided since my husband might have ordered the mop, as the man said, I ought to take it. The cost was two dollars. I thought the price was pretty high but then everything seems to be high these days, so I gave the man the money. Looking the mop over after the man left, I could see the mop was worth about fifty cents.

That evening when my husband came home, I showed him the mop he'd ordered for me, and and kidded him on getting cheated in its value. I discovered he hadn't ordered the mop at all, and that I was the one who'd got gypped.

Within a few days, I found out that the man had used the same plan in gypping six of my neighbors whose husbands were away from home as mine was. I still can't understand, however, how the small racketeer could time his visits so accurately. How did he know he'd find only the wives at home? But work his scheme he did, and quite successfully, too.

Mrs. Carl W. Raymond,
Parkersburg, West Virginia.

Double Duty

Dear Sir:

Am I glad I read your magazine! For although I wasn't swindled, it was a close call.

My landlady has her family still in Russia and often sends packages of clothing, books, etc. I have mailed a lot for her, so when this incident happened I would gladly have paid the duty charge that was claimed but for the racket letter, "Trading on Tragedy," in the September issue.

When my landlady is not at home I answer the bell and take in the mail. She was out when the express man came with a bundle of clothes (at least that's what it looked like) and said it had a back duty charge of seven dollars.

As the receiver had not the money to pay it, it was up to the sender to pay the duty even though the package came back.

I told him I had no money and would tell my landlady to go to the post office when she came back. He said, "Oh, that's all right," and promised to return later in the day. That was the last time I saw him.

When I explained to my landlady what happened, she said it was a good thing I didn't pay, for she had received a letter saying the package had been received overseas.

S. C.
Newark, N. J.

Who's a Soft Touch Now?

Dear Sir:

Clergymen, whose name and home address are to be found on a plaque on their church building, often fall victim to people who are out to get easy money. Being a clergyman's wife, I know this to be true to my sorrow.

My husband has often been taken in by sob stories, and I remonstrated with him.

Recently a young man called at our home and asked if he could see my husband immediately. When I told him my husband was out, he showed great disappointment and said my husband had been helping him to get a job. He had just now received word that he could go to work the following Monday morning if he had a license to drive a truck. To obtain this he needed \$2 before the office closed at one o'clock, and he was sure my husband would lend it to him.

My mind worked rapidly as I considered how I could manage my household needs over the weekend minus that \$2. Then the thought came: "How selfish to let a man lose a job because of \$2." Besides, he had given me his name and address. I quickly gave him the money and he hurried away.

I found out later that my husband had never heard of the young man. The address given proved to be a vacant lot.

Mrs. A.
St. Rose, Quebec, Canada.

Employment Gyp

Dear Sir:

A young man in our city, representing himself to be personnel manager at a chain restaurant about to open in Norfolk, was interviewing prospective employees furnished by a local employment agency. He required cashiers, waitresses, chefs, etc., and asked \$3 for a blood test, to be refunded on the first pay check. He contacted a doctor to do the work.

After several women had paid him, one became suspicious that he had no company connection as he gave no local office location. Next day he was apprehended by the police at the doctor's office, continuing the same practice.

He was sentenced to 60 days on each warrant and his previous probation was revoked.

Mrs. Lelia A. Brazier,
Norfolk, Va.

Peddler's Secret

Dear Sir:

While doing my Christmas shopping last year, I happened to pass one of our busiest street corners. A peddler had set up a small table and piled it high with attractive silk scarfs. Examining them closely, I found them really lovely. As they were selling about one-fourth of what you would have to pay in a department store, I decided to get a few for Christmas gifts.

Picking out four of the prettiest, I handed them to the peddler. He fumbled in a drawer under the table, brought out a sheet of brown paper, wrapped the scarfs in it and handed the package to me. Feeling very pleased with myself, I went home and told my family about my wonderful bargain.

You can imagine my feelings when, upon opening the package, I found four squares of cheap, faded cotton material instead of the silk scarfs I had picked out. Believe me, I was plenty mad! I rewrapped the pieces of material, determined to find that swindler. Needless to say, he was not on the corner.

However, I kept looking for him, and one night luck was with me. There they were—same table, same scarfs, same man. I pressed close to the peddler and watched him very carefully. Suddenly I caught on. The drawer under the table had two compartments; one containing the wrapping paper and the other the pieces of old material. The man was a speed artist. While pretending to fumble with the brown paper, he swiftly wrapped up pieces of old material and hid the good scarfs. You would have to watch from a certain position to see this, and of course most people who buy from peddlers are not watching too closely.

I was alone and had no witness, so I had to go slowly. I selected four scarfs and held on to them. He was quite surprised when I did not want them wrapped, but more surprised when I refused to pay for them. Then I produced my squares of old material.

Of course, he denied the whole thing, but when I started to find an officer, he closed up shop very quickly. I went to the nearest police station, but they could do nothing on just my word. However, they were very grateful and said it was only one of many similar complaints they'd had on all sorts of merchandise.

I hope this little warning will make people examine all merchandise purchased this way before they leave the spot.

Josephine I. Mortimer
New York 17, N. Y.

Renter, Beware!

Dear Sir:

I personally was not a victim of this racket, but it was quite an experience for my brother-in-law.

After five years overseas, my brother-in-law obtained a position in another city. He was anxious to have his family with him and investigated every advertisement of living accommodations. Finally he found a lovely five-room apartment.

The people were a very friendly couple who were going to Chicago to live. They were willing to transfer the lease provided the new tenants would take the furniture as well. They wanted \$2400 for the lot, but as it included everything one could possibly need and my brother-in-law had no home furnishings, that suited him.

Fortunately, he was sensible and took the whole affair to the lawyer for the Department of Veterans' Affairs. They investigated and found that the man's lease had expired and the owner had leased to another party. Further, the furniture had been purchased on time payments, and over \$2400 was still due on it.

F. M. McDowell
Toronto, Ont., Canada

Inside Story

Dear Sir:

About three months ago when I came home from work, my wife said: "Look what I bought—some lovely wall paper for the front room." She told me a man had come to the door saying he had a bargain lot of wall paper. He showed her some at different prices. She picked out a pattern and bought five double rolls for \$5.

When I looked at the paper, I congratulated her on the bargain. It was lovely paper and worth at least double the price she paid.

Last week I thought I'd paper the room, so I started to trim the paper. After cutting down the edge about six feet, I found the rest of the roll was of the cheapest and commonest paper. The first few feet of good paper had been stuck on the cheap stuff. All the rolls were the same and absolutely worthless.

C. L.
Verdun, P. Q., Canada

Fine Wine—by the Drop

Dear Sir:

A few years back when good wine was hard to get, a man stopped at my place of business and told me he was leaving town. He had some very good old wine that he wished to sell, as he had no way of taking it with him. He let me sample it, and it was fine wine. I told him I would take five gallons.

That afternoon he brought the wine and insisted on my sampling it again to see that it was the same.

That night I told my friends about the deal and invited them to have a glass of wine with me. When I went to pour the wine, just a few drops came out. I shook it; it was full but still nothing came out. Thinking something must be stuck in the outlet, I rammed a stick in. It hit something solid but broke through. Then I found out how badly I had been swindled.

The container had been filled to within an inch or so of the top with water. Then a layer of melted paraffin had been poured in and hardened, and the space at the stop filled with the wine.

F. L. Richardson
Denver, Colo.

Laddie was a four-star hit with the ladies—until the cops found his bullet in a blue-blooded corpse and gloatingly ordered . . .

CURTAINS FOR CASANOVA



CHAPTER ONE

Exit Van Dyke

THE white collie put his paws up on the bar and looked at me. He was bored, I guess. I must have looked like just another drunk. He turned his head sidewise and began to lap up the beer I'd spilled on the bar, his long red tongue doing an efficient job.



"Beer hound, huh?" I said brightly. I poured some more beer—just a little—on the bar. The collie went to work on it. Then I said what the hell and poured the whole glass on the bar. Collie lapped and lapped happily. The bartender saw it and yelled:

"Hey, you! What the hell you doing? Trying to get him drunk?"

I shook my head. "I never knowingly contribute to the delinquency of dogs."

A little man with a dark, soft hat and a black van dyke beard was perched on a stool down the bar. He glanced my way and laughed. I gave him an airy salute. He had close-set black eyes and a narrow

Exciting Detective- Action Novelette

By

**ERNEST C.
CLEMENT**



She yelled and shoved her fist into my face,
which made it even.

nose that came to a sharp point. With gray spats and an expensively cut Palm Beach suit, he was out of place in a dive. His expression was sour, and worried.

The bartender didn't think giving the collie a drink was funny. He shot me a dirty look and mopped up the bar. The collie gave him a dirty look and dropped down disconsolately behind the bar.

"Sorry, pal," I murmured and glanced at my watch. Two a. m. I slid off the stool and headed for the phone booth in the back of the tavern. I could still see the front door through the glass. I dropped in a nickel and dialed a Lake Forest number.

Hildie answered the phone. She sounded sleepy.

"Yes?" she said. Her voice was like her—smooth. It made me see her very nice lips turned up a little at the corners.

"Look," I asked reasonably, "why do you say 'yes' only on the phone?"

"Laddie?"

"Your blue-blood hound speaking, lamby-pie," I answered.

"Where are you?"

"Some dump or another. I just called to tell you I am working and I'll have to work late tonight."

"You had any luck?" she asked eagerly.

I was watching the door. A big guy with a soft, wide-brimmed hat pulled down low over a big, hooked nose glanced in at Van Dyke, and then abruptly disappeared.

"From the characters you see in this jernt, I wouldn't know if it's good or bad," I murmured. "Is your father there?"

Hildie sounded worried. "No, he isn't. He had to catch the ten o'clock flight to Washington."

"Just like that? When did he decide to make the trip?"

"He told me about eight, I think. Why?"

"Checking up, baby. Now you lemme alone so I can concentrate on my work."

I hung up and I went back to my place at the bar.

"Give me a whiskey and sweet soda," I said, and laid a five-dollar bill on the bar.

A percentage girl spotted the figures on the green paper and detached herself

from the little man sporting the van dyke and gray spats. She drifted purposefully down my way. I leaned on the bar and tried to look lonesome.

She leaned against me and put her arm over my shoulders.

"Buy a girl a drink, mister?" she breathed at me. Her voice was loaded with promise, garlic and whiskey. Van Dyke gave me a dirty smile and picked up his glass. He kept glancing at the open door, frowning. He looked worried.

I took inventory; there was a wide space between her upper front teeth.

I said: "I hate women who have wide spaces in their front teeth. Makes 'em look like beavers." The bartender put down the whiskey and change. "So shut your mouth," I went on.

The bartender looked back over his shoulder and then turned around deliberately.

"*What did you say?*" he asked slowly, hands on his hips. Big hands.

"So shut my mouth," I said meekly.

"You better act like a gentleman or else," he warned and went back to the cash register. It tinkled impersonally.

"Please—just one drink?" the percentage girl said.

"Shut your mouth!" I said. Only very low and confidentially.

I tossed off the whiskey neat. I wondered if the whiskey was diluted with kerosene. It tasted like it. I turned away.

The girl didn't like that—my turning away. She left me cold to go back to Van Dyke. I smiled sympathetically at him. He shrugged his shoulders, and glanced uneasily at the door. He took out his watch and gave it a quick look.

The bartender stared at me, then turned his back. I didn't care, though. I didn't blame him. I'd turn my back, too, if I had one as big and broad as that. I'd turn my back on anybody.

"Now, look, mister," I addressed myself in the mirror with a good loud tone, "why in hell don't you turn your back on this dump and go home?"

Van Dyke looked up in surprise and took another drink. Bartender's brow was furrowed with care. He came back and leaned on the bar. His big chin stuck out. Everything about him seemed big. But then, from where I sit the world is

generously peopled with big people. "Why *don't* you go home?" he asked.

VAN DYKE slid down off his stool and walked out the doorway into the street. The percentage girl glanced at me, sneered, and went up to the end of the bar to nurse a disappointed frown. The bartender got mad because I wasn't paying any attention.

"I'm talking to you!" he yelled.

"Yes, sir!" I said and got down from the stool. "I heard you, sir," I went on. "I'm going home, sir. Right now, sir!" I walked to the door and turned around. I thumbed my nose at the bartender.

"Yah! Yuh big sissy!" I yelled.

The bartender vaulted over the bar, and I ran like the devil out the door and turned north. Up ahead I could see the soft black hat of Van Dyke moving rapidly through the meandering heads of miscellaneous drunks. One with a huge list to the left side begged somebody—anybody—to straighten him up. Van Dyke took a hurried circuit around the character and went in the Spanish Casino. He looked back over his shoulder.

The drunk was crying. I took him by the back of his neck and the seat of his pants and gave him a nice little twist. Something snapped in his back and he stood up.

"Thanks, mister," he said.

I tipped my hat to him and gave him a buck. Then I headed for the bright arcade of the Spanish Casino. The doorman smiled a welcome and opened the door wide. I started in, but glanced back over my shoulder. The drunk was listing to the starboard now and was begging some-

body—anybody—to please straighten him up.

I went into the gloom and noise and smoke of the Casino.

Patricia was waltzing around the stage in long slinky strides. She saw me and waved. I waved back.

I looked around. Van Dyke wasn't in sight. I glanced at the door with the sign *Him* over it, and signaled to Helen. She's the hostess, and seats patrons up close or far away in proportion to their pocket books. It's an art.

I tossed my hat to the check girl and pocketed the chip. Helen came up and gave me a bright, brittle smile—which shows everybody can make a mistake.

"I have a nice table, Laddie," she said.

I looked at her. "I love you!" I answered. She was wearing a white formal, very décolleté.

She patted my shoulder in an appreciative fashion. "Oh, you!" she quipped brightly.

I tipped her face upward with a forefinger and kissed her lips. She kissed with her eyes shut. I keep mine open. I saw a huge man with nicely padded shoulders come out of *Him* followed by a little guy who looked like an undertaker in a long black coat.

"The characters you get in here," I murmured.

Helen followed my glance and shrugged her shoulders.

"Would you like to buy me a drink?" she asked softly.

Patricia was still dancing. She glared at Helen.

I said to Helen: "I'd like very much to. Bet ten to one your favorite drink is



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plenty expensive. Now isn't it, lovey?"

She laughed. She had teeth. They didn't have gaps. Store teeth rarely do. The things a laugh can tell you!

"You can tell the age of a horse by his teeth," I observed.

"Come," she murmured and took my arm. She led me down to a ringside table, and took the reserved sign off it.

"For us," she murmured.

A tall, hook-nosed gent with a wide brimmed hat disappeared purposefully into *Him*. The Emcee waxed eloquent with corny jokes.

I held the chair for Helen. She sat down, and I turned and bellowed at the top of my lungs:

"Waiter!"

I stood beside Helen's chair. She looked up at me. Everybody else looked at me. The Emcee broke off and stared. The waiter came running.

"Give the little lady a glass of water!" I said loudly, and pointed to Helen. "She's thirsty." I laid a dime on the table. "For you," I said to her. Then I walked toward the door. I gave the check girl a quarter and the chip. She handed me my hat. The Emcee went on, and Helen started for me.

"Listen here—" she started in.

"Helen," I said softly and evenly, "get away from me. Quick!"

She started, then glanced at me, her eyes narrowed angrily. I didn't smile. She hesitated, opened her lips, and then suddenly turned away and headed back toward the bar. I turned to the check girl.

"Beautiful!" I said. I put my hat on her head. "It's just your type!"

Popolytus was watching me, an unpleasant look on his face. He owns the joint.

The check girl started to laugh. I heard a muffled sound that made me glance toward *Him*. It worried me.

"Oh, Mr. Ladd," the check girl gurgled happily.

"Laddie to you, sweetheart," I murmured.

The check girl said softly, "Laddie!"

THE big guy with a big hook nose passed a little guy with a little nose at the door of *Him*. The big guy was coming out. He carried a wide-brimmed hat

in his hand and looked worried. The little guy wore a brown Homburg and looked worried at the sight of the big guy.

"I kind of like you," the check girl murmured.

"I like you, too," I murmured right back. I headed for *Him*.

It was a small place. The little guy with the little nose was hurrying out, more worried than ever. There was no porter on duty to give the customers a single swipe of a whisk broom for which he would extract a buck. There was nobody in the there—nobody that I could see.

I started down the booths. I hit the jackpot on number four. It was locked. I looked under the door. I could see some gray spats. I knocked on the door, but no answer. I shrugged in resignation, and hooked my hands over the top and hoisted myself quickly up and through.

There were too many of us in the cubicle. Van Dyke was wedged against the wall, lolled back.

He was dead. A small clean, well-drilled hole over his left eye showed why. The gun lay on the floor at his feet.

I went through his pockets. Nothing but some miscellaneous change. I opened the door and stepped outside the cubicle. I went down the row—the others were all vacant.

It was hot in the place and it stunk of a cheap disinfectant. My stomach began to play games. I went back to the booth where Van Dyke was camping.

I hated to do it, but I used my handkerchief and picked up the gun. I glanced at the serial number and grunted. I wiped it carefully. Then I placed the gun in the dead man's hand, curling the fingers around it, and pressing the thumb in place. There'd be no doubt about who handled the gun, anyway.

I laid it back down on the floor and stuck my handkerchief in my pocket. I locked the door on the inside and shinned out the way I climbed in, wiped the door knob clean and got out of the place fast, swallowing hard.

I spotted the Greek, Popolytus, standing at the bar down the other end. I went up to him.

He looked at me coldly, his fat face emotionless.

"Laddie," he said softly, "you make too much noise. Why don't you get the hell out of here?"

"Okay," I answered in a gentle voice. "But, Poppy, I think you better get that dead man out of there—" I jerked my thumb—"before another customer finds him."

Poppy looked toward *Him*. "You level-ing?" he asked.

"Go see," I suggested. "Number four."

He waddled fast in that direction. I headed for a phone booth. I closed the door; it was stuffy and smelled of whiskey.

I dialed the Lake Forest number. Hildie answered:

"Yes?"

I recognized her voice. "You playing games with me?" I asked.

"What are you taking about?" Her voice was short.

"The Count is dead."

There was a long pause.

"How did it happen?"

I had the feeling she was afraid of what I was going to say.

"Looks like he did himself in. At the Casino with a .38."

Her voice was faint, but relieved. "All right. I guess that is that."

"You know anything about it?" I asked.

"No. Why? Is there something I should know?"

"I guess not. I'm just a little suspicious, I suppose. Anyway, my job is blown up higher than a kite."

"I'm so sorry." Her voice sounded ironical. "Send me a statement."

"Okay, I'll do it. Get Papa to break out the family mint. You'll need it." I paused. "Your father get off on the plane all right?"

"Yes, I think so. Why?"

"Oh, just wondering. 'By baby," I finished and hung up.

There was something fishy about Hildie's angle. I dropped another nickel in the slot and dialed operator.

"Give me the police and my nickel back," I said.

The coin tinkled into the return, and I pocketed it. A gruff voice came o-

"Police Headquarters."

"Police!" I said excitedly. "You come quick!" I talked in a tenor with squeaking tendencies. "Somebody, he's a dead! Somebody kill himself!"

The cop busted in: "Where are you?"

"This isa Spanish Casino. Come quick! You dumbhead! You talka too much! You come quick and get this dead man outa here! You hear me?"

"Who's talking?"

"You dumb ox! I tolda you! This isa Popolytus! Now you come!" I hung up and got out of the booth fast.

The Greek was emerging from *Him*. I coasted past the check girl, and grabbed my hat. She was still wearing it like a trophy. I skidded out the doorway, down two doors, into the ally, over to Dearborn, and got into my car. I swung around and headed out north.

CHAPTER TWO

Laddie in a Jam

MURDERS give me an appetite. I stopped in a hamburger stand for a cup of coffee and a hamburger with mustard and pickle. It tasted good.

"You make good hamburgers," I told the attendant.

He stared at me out of morose, disillusioned eyes. "So what?" he answered.

"So make me another."

"With or without?"

"Shoot the works."

It tasted good, too. I felt better then, even if I tasted onion.

At the apartment on Lake Shore Drive, I told Jimmy to take the car around to the garage and went inside. Nellie was on duty at the switchboard. She was talking with a boy friend—that's the only thing that could paste that fatuous expression on her mug. I stuck my face into the mouth piece.

"And that ain't all," I said, "you just listen to this!"

I kissed her good and loud on the lips and headed for the elevator.

Nellie squealed and called my name, but the doors clanged shut and I pushed the button for the thirteenth and sailed upward.

At my apartment I opened the door

and stepped inside, my hand feeling for the light switch.

"Hello, Laddie," somebody said. I recognized the deep voice.

I flicked the switch.

Sergeant Edwards of Homicide was sitting in my favorite chair drinking a glass of my best scotch, and smoking one of my Havana cigars.

"Make yourself at home," I murmured, and tossed my hat on the table.

"Good liquor. You live high," Edwards commented. "I often wondered how you come by the money you throw around." He squinted at me and took a drink. "You kill the guy?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Stop clowning," Edwards suggested. "The guy over at the Casino."

"Oh, him? Well, Sergeant, you see it was this way: I'd knocked off eleven today—including two dogs—and I wanted to make it an even dozen."

"Very funny." Edwards got to his feet. He's a big man, with biceps and a couple of cold, blue, law-enforcing eyes. He looked down at me.

"Listen, twerp, you've annoyed me before. Someday I'm going to get sore."

"I'll talk," I said quickly. "I'll talk! Don't hit me!"

"You called Headquarters, didn't you?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"And found the body?"

"Yes, Sergeant. I did that. And told Poppy."

Edwards sat down in my favorite chair again, picked up the cigar and poured himself another drink.

"Okay," he murmured. "That's that."

"Well," I asked, "what now?"

"Laddie, I've watched you operate before. Knocking off a guy scarcely seems to be your speed. But, frankly, it looks like I'm going to have to hang this one on you."

I shrugged. "I'm sure you'll try," I murmured.

Sergeant Edwards grinned. "You're an ornery devil. Do you know who the guy was?"

I nodded. "Count D'Agassiz, refugee."

Edwards whistled. "Important people, huh?"

"Does a title make a man important?"

The sergeant shrugged. "When he's stopped a slug, he's news, anyway." He glanced at me sharply. "How'd you open the door?" he asked suddenly.

"Well, I'll you," I said, "I never did open it. I just looked over the top and the guy looked awfully dead."

"You didn't touch the knob?"

"I never open doors with door knobs. That's only for people who never think of looking over the top."

"You're a liar, Laddie," He heaved himself out of the chair. "But I can't prove it." He laughed shortly. "He must have climbed in himself, to begin with."

"So?"

"So. The guy's prints were on the gun, and nobody else's. But a couple of interesting things, my friend: One, no finger prints on the door knob. Didn't anybody touch that knob tonight? Two, there was no print on the trigger so how do you suppose the Count squeezed it?"

I shook my head. "I'm glad it's your problem, Sergeant. I wouldn't know what to do."

Edwards reached for his hat.

"Okay. But listen, friend, I'm going to get you on something someday. Meanwhile, I'll want to talk to you some more tomorrow."

"Any time, friend," I answered. "Just give me a couple days notice so I can get across the state line."

He grinned. "Okay. Have your fun."

He walked to the door. I sat down and heaved a big sigh. I poured myself a stiff drink of my own scotch.

"Of course, Laddie," Edwards said casually, "you and I know that the man *was* murdered. Not suicide. And apparently you're the man who could have done it."

I raised my eyebrows in the best imitation of surprise I could muster.

"Murdered!" I gasped.

"Cut the dramatics," Edwards grunted. "You know a man can't shoot himself from a distance of about six feet. The lack of powder burns. . . ."

I scratched my head. "Sergeant, you ought to get a raise!"

The detective grinned amiably. "Put in a good word for me, Laddie boy," he said. "And by the way, I was worried about you so I told Chuck Meyer—you remem-

ber Chuck?—to keep an eye on you. So nobody'll bother you. And you'll be handy—if I *have* to pin a murder on somebody quick."

"Thanks, pal," I said.

Edwards started out but I called him back.

I held his glance steady without smiling. "You said you've seen me work. You know I can play rough, and for keeps—if the occasion demands."

Edwards nodded. "I know it, Laddie."

My voice was level. "Don't come in my apartment without a search warrant again," I said flatly.

For a long moment Sergeant Edwards said nothing. A dark flush colored his throat.

"All right, Laddie," he said finally. "I'll remember."

He went out, closing the door behind him carefully.

I POURED myself another drink. This was a fine kettle of fish. I was hoping they'd grab the obvious solution—suicide. But Sergeant Edwards was a bad combination—too smart and conscientious. I wished he hadn't been assigned to the investigation.

I ran over what I knew about the Count. Not much. Hildie Manners—I met her at a cocktail brawl—hired me to tail him. She didn't say why.

And when I told her I didn't take cases like that, she said, "Please!" and smiled. She's got auburn hair and green eyes and a lovely tan. And a nice, promising mouth. I said, "No." She said, "Please!" and touched my cheek. I said absolutely not. She took my hand and murmured a nice, inviting, "Please!" I shook my head. She drew my face down close to her and huskily said, "Please!" "Nope," I said. Her lips were close to mine. She whispered, "Pretty please! For me?" That got me. I never could resist "Pretty please!"

What would you do? I took the case. Anyway, something which could get a girl like Hildie Manners to hire a detective could very likely present possibilities of a little side money. I always like that.

Results to date—a nice promise of a murder rap. I'd never been out to the Manners' place on the North Shore and I'd never met her old man. I just knew

he played games down in the La Salle Street Canyon in the loop—wolves and sheep on the stock market. Her mother had divorced her father years before.

Well, I thought, there's nothing I can do as of now. So I went to bed. . . .

The phone woke me. "Go 'way!" I muttered into it.

"Laddie, this is Edwards."

"Don't you guys ever go to sleep?"

"Somebody's got to protect you while you sleep."

"Not me. Somebody better protect the blonde I was dreaming about."

"What? Listen, friend. That gun was registered in your name."

"So what?" I said crossly. "Don't you suppose I recognized my own gun?"

"Curious, though—it being on the floor by the body. Don't you think so?"

"Pure coincidence," I answered. "Now let me sleep."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to have you brought in, Laddie."

"Okay, but make it in the morning. I was having a lovely dream."

"Better make it now. Chuck will bring you down when you're ready. You do that for me?"

"Okay, you suspicious son!"

"Thanks, Laddie," Edwards broke in and hung up.

I cradled the phone and sat for a moment thinking. That guy Edwards worked too fast. I'd taken it for granted I had until tomorrow morning before they could check the registration of the gun, but the lug must have gotten the registry clerk out of bed.

I calculated the chances. I probably had a couple of days leeway before Edwards caught up with me. As he eventually would. He was going to be awful sore.

I took a shower and shaved. I felt better, then. So I picked out the gray suit rather than the pin stripe because I felt good. I phoned down to have the car brought around. I got a sudden idea, then, and called the airport, just out of curiosity. And I found that no Mr. H. F. Manners had gone anywhere on any plane out of that airport. I hung up and sat a moment thinking. . . .

Chuck was sitting in a window sill at the end of the hall. I waved to him.

"Hey, Chuck, let's go! Edwards wants to talk to me. He thinks I killed a guy."

Chuck is one of the most stubborn of cops. Shaking him was going to take some doing.

"Okay," he said. He eased himself off the sill and stretched his six feet two of muscular cop. He walked slow. He looked slow. But he wasn't

"Let's go," he said.

The car was waiting. We got in and I headed south along the drive. Then I headed over to State Street. At a tavern I braked the car to a stop. "I got to buy some cigarettes," I explained. "You know how the sergeant is about bumming a smoke off him."

"Okay," Chuck murmured after a hesitation. He followed me across the walk, shaking his head remonstratingly.

"You pick terrible places. Don't you know this joint is tough?"

I nodded. "You can wait outside if you wish," I said. Chuck laughed, not very nicely.

I went in. The bar was packed. The register was half way down, and I pushed my way there, using my elbows freely. Chuck followed me.

"Say," a big guy asked, "what the hell are you trying to do?"

"Dry up!" I said. I yelled to the bartender. "Give me a couple packs of cigarettes and make it snappy." I turned sideways, my arm accidentally knocking the glass of beer into the guy's lap.

He reached over and grabbed my coat. "Listen here," he said, "you look what you're doing."

I pushed him off the stool and the same time pasted the next guy in the mouth. Chuck started for me. Somebody figured he was on his way to give me a hand and slugged him in the ear. Chuck turned his head and took a swipe at whoever it was. I drew back my hand in a swing at another guy and caught a percentage girl in the teeth. She yelled and shoved her fist into my face, which made it even.

In fifteen seconds a beautiful brawl was underway. I was sorry to leave. When the view was blocked, I ducked under the hinged door and ran down behind the bar. The bartender tried to grab me, but I tripped him into the sink. His head ducked under the dirty water and I heard

him bubbling. I couldn't wait to see if he could swim, but went under the bar at the end, through the doors of the rest room, out the back windows and down the alley.

I heard Chuck yelling as I left. I'd sure lost a good friend in Chuck. He'd never believe me again.

I grabbed a cab on Dearborn and gave Hildie's address. The cabby squawked about the trip because there's nothing in it for them on long hauls unless the fare is generous. I slipped him a ten and he got under way.

The most obvious thing was that I'd better get some information and quick. I wondered about Hildie's daddy. This looked too much like a conspiracy to suit me. My gun landing there on the floor didn't look like a coincidence. But as far as I knew Hildie was the only one who knew I was following the little Count.

Hildie lived with her father in one of those huge estates which line the North Shore. It's quite a drive, so I snuggled down in the corner and tried to get a little sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Meet a Nice Murderer

AT THE Manners' little hut of forty or so rooms, I paid off the cabby and sent him away. Then I tackled the front bell. After a couple months' waiting, the lights blinked on in the hall and the door opened a little.

"Who is it?" somebody asked in a sleepy, querulous tone.

"I want to see Hildie," I said promptly.

"She's asleep. You can't see her. Go away!"

"Look," I said, "this is important." I peered through the crack to get a good look at the speaker. He was a large-sized baldish man with a hooked nose of the large economy size. The butler probably. He was wearing a bathrobe.

"Haven't we met?" I asked.

"What is the name, sir?"

"Just Laddie. Now suppose you get upstairs and tell Miss Manners I'm here. I want to see her, and quick."

"You come back in the morning." The

voice was a little guttural—a slight accent made the words sound thick.

I leaned against the door quickly and shouldered it open. I grabbed the old gent by the lapel of his robe.

"Get moving, old man!" I said and gave him a little push.

I might as well have pushed a brick wall. He gave me a dirty look and knocked my hands down. Then he marched off up the broad stairs. I wandered into the reception room and sat down to wait.

Hildie was beautiful, even half asleep. Her auburn hair was down her back and long. It framed her sleepy face. She wore a piquant yellow negligee, and her tanned skin was something to behold against the yellow stuff

"Laddie!" she said. "What on earth?"

"Good morning, Hildie," I said. "Let's you and me sit down and have a nice long talk before I go to jail."

"Jail?"

"You know—bars, cockroaches, and the smell of lysol?"

Baldy still hovered in the doorway. I glanced at him. He was wearing a pair of brown pants and tan shoes under the robe. A nice combination, but odd for this time of day.

"How about having your watch dog make up a pot of coffee?"

Hildie gave the man directions, and then she took my hand.

"We'll go into the library," she said, and led the way. Her hand was cool and nice. Under other circumstances I'd paid more attention. Now I was thinking that Baldy didn't look so old after all.

I gave her hand a tentative squeeze, which shows my reflexes were working anyway. She gave a little pressure in return and flashed a smile.

"I know it must important, Laddie, to get you way out here."

She turned on the lamps and sat down on the divan, pulling me down beside her.

"Now, what is it, Laddie?"

I looked her straight in the eye.

"Hildie, I love you very much. But did you arrange to have your Count murdered—with *my* gun?"

Her eyes widened, and she withdrew her hand.

"Murdered?"

"That's right."

"With your gun?"

"That's also right, my little lady. Now, since you knew I was tailing him, could it be you hired me to have a fall guy handy to take the rap?"

One hand went to her throat as she gasped. Her green eyes fixed on mine.

"Laddie, you don't think—?"

"Listen, baby, let's face a fact or so. You hire me to keep an eye on the Count. And I do. Then he is killed with my gun. Now, what would *you* think?"

"I didn't, Laddie!" she breathed.

"Well, you make it sound honest," I decided. "Who did you tell you'd hired me?"

"No one. Not a single soul!"

"Not even your father?"

"Especially not him!"

"When I called you about seven, where were you?"

"Why, here in the library."

She gestured at the desk against the wall. It was a nice walnut desk with a scratch pad and telephone on it. I walked over and glanced down.

"Any extensions of this phone?" I asked.

"Why, yes. One in the kitchen and one in Father's room. Why?"

"What time did your father leave?"

"About eight. His plane was leaving at ten."

"Where was he at seven—do you know?"

"In his room, I think. Anyway, right after you called he told me he was leaving for Washington. . . ."

Her eyes widened as she caught the significance of my questions.

"No, Laddie, you're wrong. Dad couldn't have. . . ."

I took out a pencil and began to lay a film of carbon over the scratch pad very gently.

"Your father never took a plane out of Chicago tonight," I observed. I glanced up. "I checked."

"Laddie," Hildie whispered, "there's some mistake. . . ." She was looking over my shoulder. Some words began to appear.

"What does it look like?" I asked.

"Your name and address. I wrote them

down when you called me here at seven."

I nodded absently. "Like they say in a book, very interesting."

I PONDERED a little, holding the pad in my hand. Baldy came in with a pot of coffee and set it on the coffee table before the divan.

"Shall I pour, Miss?" he asked. He glanced at the pad I held in my hand.

"Never mind, Oscar," Hildie said. "You go on to bed."

"Yes, Miss."

Baldy trundled through the door, closing it behind him.

"Where'd he come from?" I asked.

"Who? Oscar? From an employment agency."

"How long ago?"

"Six months or so. Why?"

I shrugged. "Curiosity," I murmured. Hildie poured a couple cups of coffee, glancing at me questioningly.

"Black," I said. "When did the Count first show up?"

"About the same time." She looked up quickly. "You think there's some connection?"

I spread out my hands. "I don't know, Look. You come clean, now. Why did you want the Count followed?"

Hildie looked down at the cup she held in her hands.

"Laddie," she said, "I expect I have to tell you the truth. There's something about this man I wanted to know. He came here about five months ago—Dad brought him. And he almost took over the place. I never liked him. He had moist hands and he liked to play patty cake in a dark corner."

Her coffee cup shook a little.

"He got rather unpleasant. And what hurt—" she looked up with a suggestion of tears in her eyes—"was that Dad didn't seem to care. When I asked him to get the Count out of the house, he told me he couldn't do that to an old friend—he'd met the Count in Europe before the war."

"Well, I just plain decided Dad was being blackmailed, and that I should take a hand in the deal—find out all I could. So I hired you."

She looked up.

"And I have got you in trouble. But I never told a soul I hired you. . . ."

"How big a man is your father?" I asked irrelevantly.

"He's about your size, only heavier, Laddie. Why?"

"Who are your servants—beside Baldy?"

"Why, there's Mary—she's the cook. And Helen, the upstairs maid and Janet who helps Mary. And outside there's Joseph. And Oscar. That's all."

"They been with you long?"

"Yes. All except Oscar."

I got up and walked softly to the door and yanked it open. Baldy was behind it.

"Yes, Miss. You called?" he said stiffly.

I could tell he didn't like me. I took him by the arm and pulled him into the room.

"You hear anything, friend?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Look, this isn't a game!" I turned to Hildie. "Nice lot of people you harbor out here."

Hildie stared at me in astonishment.

"What do you mean?"

I gestured to a chair. "Sit down, Oscar," I said. "You're a very smart man. But what happened? Did you find out what the Count was doing, and try to muscle in? Or did the phony Count double-cross you?"

Baldy's eyes widened in surprise. He tipped his head forward and peered in pure puzzlement down his long nose at Hildie.

"Miss, what is it this man is talking about?"

"Murder," I answered.

"Laddie!" Hildie gasped, "you don't think that—"

"Yep," I said. "Baldy here sent the Count to his happy hunting ground. My guess is they were in cahoots and were blackmailing your parent, and the Count tried to take a run-out without a split. That right, Baldy?"

The man spread out his hands, and glanced at Hildie again.

"I don't know, Miss, what this man—"

Hildie shook her head. "You're wrong, Laddie. I'm sure you're wrong."

I shrugged. "It must have been you, then, Hildie." I reached in my pocket; one thing I like is a long shot played across the board. I pulled out my safety

deposit box key and held it out to him.

"You lose something, Baldy?" I asked.

Baldy looked at the key in surprise and reached into his pocket quickly. Then the look on his face changed and he stared at me without love. He withdrew his hand, empty.

"Thanks, pal. I wanted to make sure," I said. "And did you think I didn't recognize that big nose of yours at the Casino?"

Baldy got to his feet. He looked as big as a barn door.

"You know too much," he said. He pulled a snub-nosed automatic from the pocket of his robe. He started toward me.

I held up my hand, and took one step toward him.

"Baldy," I remonstrated, "You're forgetting one thing."

"I forget nothing." The look in his eyes wasn't nice, and his intention was clear.

"You have, Baldy. You forget the French."

HE HESITATED a moment, frowning, trying to make head or tails of my words. He was about six feet or so from me. "The French?" he repeated. "I forget the French?"

"Sure. You know the way they box? Like this. . . ."

I kicked high and caught his wrist just back of the gun. The automatic flew from his hand, and crashed against the wall.

Baldy yelled and grabbed his wrist. Then an ugly expression spread over his naturally ugly puss, and he reached for me, one hand outstretched like that of a Japanese wrestler. I ducked under the arm, and caught it with my two hands. I turned and snapped the arm down against my shoulder. Baldy yelled and chopped with his free hand at the back of my neck. I saw celestial bodies floating around where they had no right to be, and a blackness began to close in.

I went to the floor like I'd been pole-axed.

I heard Hildie scream. "Look out, Laddie!" I saw Baldy's heel starting a good swing at my temple. I rolled fast under it, and hit his other leg. He spilled to the floor.

I caught one of his feet and rolled fast, throwing my legs hard. There was a satisfying crunch and Baldy screamed hoarsely.

I came to my knees, ready for the next act, trying to shake the blackness out of my numbed brain. There was a loud crash and pieces of crockery flew all over the place.

Hildie stood holding the top of the table lamp. The base was pretty well shattered. So was Baldy.

Hildie was pale, but resolute. She held the remains of the lamp aloft like she thought—she was the Statue of Liberty, ready for a new swing.

It wasn't necessary. Baldy was out.

I got to my feet. "Thanks, baby," I murmured.

I used my handkerchief to tie his wrists behind him, and then went to the phone. Hildie sat on the edge of the divan, the remains of the lamp in her lap, and shuddered.

"Did I kill him?" she asked.

"No," I comforted her over my shoulder. "Just dented him a little, that's all."

I dialed Police and asked for Sergeant Edwards.

"Say, Eddie, my boy. This is the hour for all good friends."

"Laddie," Sergeant said over the phone, "Chuck and I are sore at you."

"I'm sorry. I owe Chuck a drink. But how about dropping the social amenities? You want to drive out and pick up a nice murderer all packed ready for delivery?"

"You mean yourself, Laddie?"

"Nope."

"All right, who?"

"Guess."

"Cut it out. I'm tired. I want to get some sleep."

"Better come out. The Manners' hut on the North Shore. Know it?"

"Sure. Okay, I'll be out, Laddie. But it better be good."

It took him thirty minutes, which is pretty good driving, even with the siren clearing the way. I let him in at the door.

"Welcome, Policeman," I said, and bowed low.

Edwards' stooge, Chuck, gave me a dirty look.

I lead them into the library, and around

the divan. "I would like to introduce you to a nice murderer. Oscar is his name." I gestured at the reclining butler.

He was waking up. He struggled into a sitting position. Sergeant Edwards looked at him with interest.

"We need evidence, though, Laddie."

"Okay. Very carefully look in the pockets of this gentleman and see if you do not find a safety deposit key. Handle it carefully for its prints will have a pretty story to tell. And the box's contents likewise will tell plenty."

Sergeant Edwards frisked Oscar, who acted like his head ached for some silly reason. The cop pulled out the key and dropped it into his handkerchief.

"All right. Next?"

"Okay. You'll discover the prints of the Count on that key, and you'll find out that it is for a box in the Count's name—or at least the signature will be in his hand writing. Oscar got it from the pants pocket of the Count."

Chuck looked at me curiously. "How'd you know that?"

"Elementary, my dear Chuck," I said. "The door to his booth was locked on the inside. But it was a nice clean hole with no sign of a burn around the wound. So the gun was about five feet away when the shot was fired. Now why would the murderer join the corpse in the cubicle and lock the door behind him unless he wanted to search for something? Then he climbed over the top to get out—like I climbed in—after carefully putting the gun down beside the dead man. Undoubtedly the gun still carried my prints, which are on record with my license."

"They weren't your prints. They were the Count's," Edward objected.

"I did that," I explained. "You'd prove the murder gun was mine. With my prints on it you'd figure a clear-cut case, now wouldn't you? I had hopes of persuading you it was suicide. But you were too smart."

"Thanks, Laddie." Edwards grinned. "Then what?"

WELL, the use of my gun indicated that I was to be the fall guy—but my only association with the Count was through Hildie here hiring me to investigate him. So either she was guilty,

or somebody she told was guilty or somebody had discovered I was tailing him without Hildie telling.

"I came out here tonight just for information—but I recognized Baldy as being down in the Casino and coming out of the men's room. So I knew it had to be him. But proving it was something else again.

"So I played a long shot. I knew he was hunting for something, and probably found it. What would be more reasonable than a safety deposit box key? So I tricked him into proving it for me. I showed him a key, and like a sucker he put his hands in his pockets to see if it was still there. Then he admitted killing the Count by starting for me with a gun.

"Hildie knocked him out cold with the lamp and saved my bacon."

A little man appeared in the doorway. He spotted the cops and turned pale. It was the little guy with the brown Hom-burg.

"Daddy!" Hildie cried and ran across the room to throw her arms around him, "where have you been?"

Papa Manners smiled at his daughter and firmly put her aside. He couldn't see Baldy all trussed up because the divan blocked the view.

"You're fast workers," he said to Edwards. "I didn't think you could trace me so fast."

Edwards' brows went up a couple of notches.

"Yes?" he said, watching closely.

Manners' face showed a growing doubt. "You traced my prints on the gun?"

Sergeant Edwards looked at me unkindly. Then he looked back at Manners. "Your prints were on the gun?" he asked.

Manners nodded. Then his eyes narrowed and he closed his lips. Edwards waited a moment and then gestured toward the divan.

"Take a look over there," he suggested.

Manners walked around the divan, and looked down at the recumbent Baldy. He looked a long moment and then turned to Sergeant Edwards.

"So you got him?" he commented. "I was afraid he'd get away."

Edwards frowned. "Just what do you know about this?"

Manners shrugged. "Very little. I was

hunting for the Count, and followed him into the Casino. I saw him going in to the rest room, and when he didn't come out, I went in. I met Oscar coming out—he didn't recognize me because he was in too much of a hurry to look.

"I saw the gun on the floor half under the door. I picked it up and then looked over the door. I saw the Count dead, and—" Manners hesitated, flushing—"and then I dropped the gun again, pushed it under the door and bolted. I thought you'd traced my prints because they're on file with the FBI—I've recorded both my daughter's and my own."

Edwards grunted and pointed to me.

"He wiped them off."

Manners looked at me questioningly.

"This is Laddie, Father," Hildie introduced us.

"A detective?" Mr. Manners said with that certain inflection.

Edwards turned a little red in the face. After all, they call him a detective, too, on official papers.

"Maybe so, but you can be glad he ran down Oscar, here." Edwards' eyes narrowed. "Just who was this Count?"

Manners glanced briefly at his daughter. "He was blackmailing me," he said. "I made a—a mistake in England, and he threatened to expose me." He smiled at the sergeant. "Nothing illegal," he added.

"Look," I interrupted. "How about getting this over with? Why don't you haul Baldy out to your wagon and get out of here?"

"Okay, Laddie. We'll book him. He'll talk. But you better not leave town."

I looked at Hildie.

"I won't leave town," I said.

Hildie smiled at me, her lips rounded to a little O.

Edwards shrugged his shoulders and grinned cheerfully. "Maybe I'd better leave Chuck. . . ."

"Sure, Sergeant," Chuck agreed. "He won't get away again."

"Please, Sergeant. Laddie won't leave," Hildie said. She walked over to the sergeant. "I promise."

The sergeant shook his head slowly. "I don't believe—"

Hildie took his hand. "Please!"

Edwards rubbed his chin. "I hadn't ought to—"

Hildie put her hand against his cheek. "Pretty please?"

"You can't win, Eddie," I told him.

He laughed and nodded. "Okay." He gestured at Oscar. "Take him away, Chuck."

Then he followed the procession out the door. Hildie shut it behind them and came back into the library. Her lips were still rounded in that O and full of promise.

THE END

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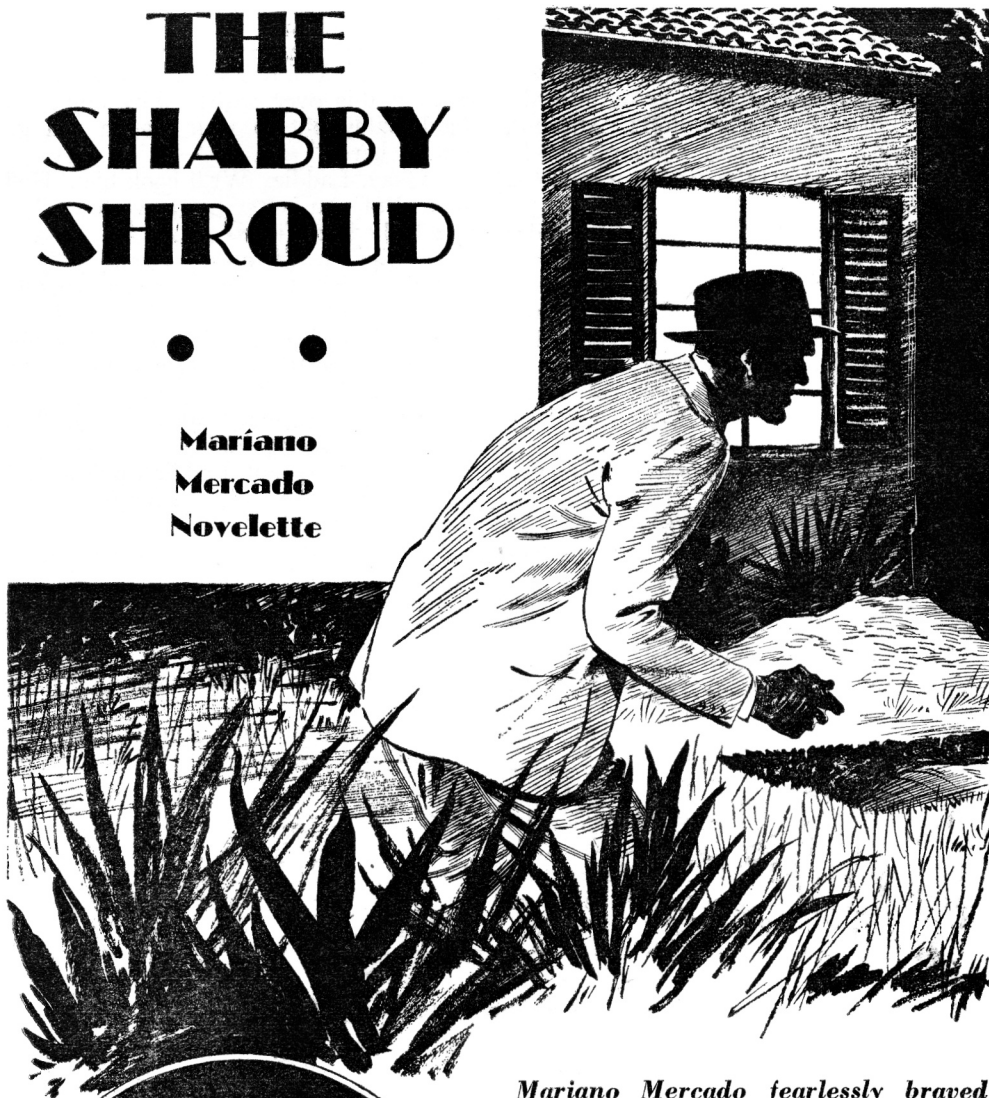
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• •
**Mariano
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*Mariano Mercado fearlessly braved
the germ-cluttered cantinas—and sent
me to the dusty library . . . to hunt
a love-struck murderer.*

• •
**By D. L.
CHAMPION**



CHAPTER ONE

Antiseptic Dick

MEXICO is not the ideal country for a guy who makes an occasional valiant effort to stay on the wagon. There are too many *fiestas*. It was four o'clock in the morning and I was no longer quite sure which patron saint I had been so assiduously honoring. Half-a-dozen tourists from Chicago and a handful of us *rentistas* had made the wavering rounds of every *cantina* east of Chapultepec. We were now engaged in officially burying the night with steak and

"If anyone comes near—I'll cut this man's throat."

glasses of champagne at *La Cucaracha*.

By now there was an apian buzzing in my head and it seemed that my blood stream contained more alcohol than blood. I swallowed a piece of steak with an effort and looked blinkingly around the room which, oddly enough, was tilted at a thirty degree angle. I was thinking it strange that the glittering bottles did not fall from their seesawing shelves when I suddenly caught sight of Juan Cabajal in the midst of a merry group at the bar.

I recalled dimly that I had seen Caba-

jal at least twice before that evening. Now, to see Juan Cabajal in three different bars in the course of one night was not at all unusual. The remarkable aspect was that on each occasion he had appeared to be paying for the drinks. At the moment he was jabbering rapid Spanish and gesticulating wildly with both hands, in one of which he held a bottle of expensive champagne, in the other a fist full of hundred peso notes.

Juan Cabajal was a flashily dressed youth, something under thirty years of age, with a furtive manner and a face the color of muddy coffee. His complexion, however, was by no means as dark as his reputation.

Cabajal was a grade-A murmurer and a first-class hand kisser of my unescorted countrywomen. For him there was money in it. But not enough to warrant his flashing a fat bankroll and buying drinks for the competition in his own racket.

As I pondered this with alcoholic gravity, Cabajal caught my eye. "*Ai!*" he cried. "The *senor* Latham. You must have a drink."

He snatched a glass from the bar and weaved toward me, still clutching the champagne bottle. I eyed him owlishly and said, "Have you inherited a Taxco silver mine?"

"No," he said excitedly. "Something better. A Gringo. A luscious blonde Gringo. We are to elope at any minute. I have a pair of tickets in my pocket."

"Oh," I said, "so you're getting married and you've bought tickets for the honeymoon?"

He looked at me as if I had accused him of knocking his mother's teeth in. "I marry no gringo," he said indignantly. "And *she* bought the tickets."

"Oh," I said again. "You've got a real sucker this time. A recent arrival?"

"She's been here for three or four months. We shall travel for a year or so at her expense. Then I shall return. Without her."

"But with her money?"

He didn't get a chance to answer that. His companions at the bar had become thirsty again, and there was no point in buying their own drinks while Cabajal still held a handful of hundred peso notes. They took him bodily away from me.

I looked over at the bar. It was now tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees. I figured I'd better get to bed before it turned completely over.

IT WAS three o'clock in the afternoon when I awoke. My thirst was the most prodigious thing this side of the Sahara and a diabolical drum was pounding just behind my throbbing temples.

I got out of bed warily, drank a quart of orange juice and a pint of coffee and proceeded to dress. I had a little trouble shaving and fastening the buttons on my shirt. However, by the time I stepped into the street I was sure I felt infinitely better than any of the visiting firemen from Chicago.

I hailed a cab and headed for Mariano Mercado's.

I entered his austere and sanitary apartment which made the average hospital ward resemble a germ trap. The chairs in the living room were of enameled metal. The windows were devoid of curtains and there was not a cushion in sight. The floor was uncarpeted and highly polished.

Mercado sat behind a thoroughly disinfected desk whose top supported a square sheet of virginal blotting paper and a phalanx of bottles. Ten minutes after science discovered a medicine, a sample of it was on Mercado's desk. Drug stores and chemical companies loved him. Indiscriminately he bought everything from snake oil to the latest variation of penicillin.

I greeted him, said, "You should have come along with us last night. It was quite an evening."

He looked at me with a touch of fear in his brown, liquid eyes. "I intended to. But I coughed. At six minutes past seven I coughed. Naturally, I had to look after myself."

He glanced at his watch, snatched up an atomizer and squirted green liquid into his throat. I sighed. If Mariano Mercado had coughed at six minutes past seven last night I was going to have a trying day. For a cough to Mercado was what galloping consumption was to anyone else.

He was a little brown man with a shrewd mind, a great deal of physical courage where bacteria was not con-

cerned; a taste for clothing loud as a thunderbolt, and a fearful hypochondria. He had devoted the thirty-odd years of his life conducting a defensive warfare against germs.

"Latham," he said, leaning over the desk, "have you any idea how many germs lurk in a human thorax during the incubation period of a common cold?"

"Millions," I said hastily. "Have we anything on for today in the matter of private detecting? If not, I—"

"Millions!" he snorted. "Millions, indeed. Latham, do you know what a googol is?"

I didn't know what a googol was but I was very much afraid I was going to find out in several thousand portentous words: The bell saved me.

It rang sharply in the outer wall. Gratefully, I got out of my uncomfortable chair and went down the well scrubbed passageway to meet whatever diversion offered. On the threshold I found the squat, swarthy figure of *El coronel* Gomez of the local *policia*. For once in my life I was glad to see him. Anything was preferable to hearing the thousandth version of Mariano Mercado's alarmed views on bacteria.

I led Gomez along the hall to the living room and waved him to a chair.

Now the affection which existed between Mariano Mercado, *detectivo particular*, and *Coronel* Gomez of the Federal District Police was by no means the affection of Romeo and Juliet. Gomez was principally interested in the financial fortunes of Gomez. Mercado was a rigidly honest man.

Gomez possessed a politician's instinct for nosing out the location of a buck. To him a peso was a peso whether its background was extra-legal or not. He was fat, oily, slow witted and heavy handed. Mercado was none of these things and Gomez resented it. He resented even more the fact that on more than one occasion Mercado had arrested a killer and collected his fee before Gomez had even been apprised of the murder.

Therefore, it rather surprised me when in response to Mercado's cool, "Good day," Gomez beamed, tugged at his moustachios and said with the utmost cordiality, "And how is my *amigo*, today? In

the best of health, I presume. Ah, if you were ill or incapacitated, the law enforcement agencies of the city would suffer a dolorous blow."

Gomez shook his head and sighed mournfully as if the very thought of Mercado's non-existent illness was something too painful to be borne. Mercado blinked suspiciously and lighted a mentholated cigarette.

"I am nothing if not frank," said Gomez, which was as large a lie as I had heard since the demise of Herr Doktor Goebbels. "Therefore, I shall say that I need your help. The city needs your help. The nation needs it. *Two* nations need it."

He stopped short of the universe, took an ebony cigar from his pocket and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Naturally," he went on, "I would not ask a man of your talents to aid me for nothing. I offer you five hundred pesos for the use of your brain."

I was all ears. If Gomez's cordiality surprised me, his willingness to part with money—especially five hundred pesos—was a bolt from the blue.

Mercado blinked and said, "You fascinate me. What has happened?"

"A girl is missing," said Gomez. "I will pay five hundred pesos for your help. However, for the sake of the morale of the police department, I must have your word that I will get all the credit if you find her."

That made it clearer. I guessed there were glory and kudoes, perhaps even promotion, if Gomez found the missing girl. Doubtless, he had decided that whatever he got out of it was worth much more than five hundred pesos. However we still could use five hundred pesos.

"It sounds like a reasonable offer," said Mercado. "Tell me what you know about this girl."

"A gringo," said Gomez. "A blonde gringo. Her family has money. She has been working in the city as the secretary to an American writer, one Professor Workin. Last night she disappeared, leaving a note behind her. Here is the note."

He withdrew a vast leather wallet from his tunic, extracted a piece of paper and handed it to Mercado. I got up and read it over his shoulder.

I know that you and others who love me will be shocked at what I am about to do. However, in certain matters one must use one's own judgement. Romantic love is a greater force than all other kinds. So I am going away with my knight. Don't worry and forgive me.

It was written on a small, uneven piece of paper which apparently had been torn from a larger sheet. It was in sprawling feminine handwriting and it was unsigned.

"Her name," said Gomez, "is Isabel Scott. She has probably fallen in love with some *valiente* who has run off with her because of her money."

THE word *valiente* in Spanish may mean exactly what it sounds like or it can be spoken ironically to indicate a two-bit braggart along the lines of Juan Cabajal. Cabajal, with a handful of dough, boasting of the gringo blonde he was about to run away with and Gomez with a police report of a missing girl fitted together much too well to be purely coincidental. However, I had no intention of opening my mouth until Gomez had laid his five hundred pesos on the sanitary desk.

Mercado handed Gomez back the note and said, "Have you checked the handwriting?"

Gomez nodded. "It is undoubtedly the handwriting of Isabel Scott. Now, will you help me?"

Mercado nodded slowly. "For five hundred pesos, I shall help you. But first I want to know why should you pay cash from your own pocket to solve a routine police case?"

Gomez adopted an expression of smug righteousness. "Patriotism," he said. "To aid the good-neighbor policy. The American Embassy is worried. To find this girl will cement relations between our country and the United States. In this world of chaos, it is a beneficial thing if two countries can—"

For the second time that morning the doorbell rang, thus saving me from listening to a dull and obviously phony speech. I clattered along the antiseptic floor to the front door, still wondering why Gomez was handing out five hundred pesos.

On the other side of the door stood a

blond lad of about twenty-four. He wore no hat and his hair was awry. His face was flushed and he spoke with an excited Indiana accent.

"I want to see Mercado," he said. "They tell me he's the smartest detective in Mexico. He's *got* to do something."

I led him into the living room, asked him his name and indicated Mercado. He ignored Gomez, faced the bottle-decorated desk, and speech bubbled from his lips.

"My name's Rolland. Roger Rolland. Student at the University of Mexico. My fiancee is missing. You've got to find her. I've no faith in these coppers, even if her family is offering five thousand bucks to the policeman who finds her. I want an independent investigation. I'll offer you—"

Mercado held up a slim, scrubbed hand. "Is the name of your fiancee Isabel Scott?"

"Yes. And I—"

Mercado silenced him again. He shifted his gaze to Gomez. Gomez found something of intense interest in his manicure. He studied the nails of his left hand with admirable concentration.

"Patriotism," murmured Mercado. "Good-neighbor policy. In this world of chaos no price, not even five hundred pesos, is too much to pay for happy international relations."

Gomez looked up. He had the grace to blush. He said, "I assure you—"

"I assure *you*," said Mercado, "that I will solve this case not because of amicable international relations, not because of my sense of justice, but only to see that you do not collect that five thousand dollars."

Gomez picked his bulk out of the chair and waddled sheepishly down the hall like a little boy caught red handed in the jam pot.

"Now," said Mercado to Rolland, "sit down, calm yourself, and state your case."

Rolland sat down, talked, but failed signally to calm himself.

"Workin, the guy she works for, saw her yesterday. She's helping him compile an anthology of short stories. She didn't show up this morning and he found this note from her. He notified the coppers. I think these coppers are dopes. I want you to look into it. Here, I stopped at the

bank and brought a retainer. Here's a few thousand pesos."

He handed a wad of blue bank notes to Mercado who shuddered. The number of germs which took up residence on old bills was legion. Mercado would have touched a leper as quickly as he would handle a bank note. I had no such scruples. I took the cash and counted it. It was the equivalent of one thousand American dollars.

"This will do nicely," I said. "Go on."

He shrugged. "I didn't know she was missing until a little while ago. I never wanted her to come here anyway, but she was crazy to travel. Her family let her go as long as she was working for the professor. They thought he'd keep an eye on her. Just to be near her I transferred from my college in the States to the University of Mexico."

Mercado looked at him shrewdly. "Did her family know that you were engaged?"

Rolland shook his head. "No one knew but us. Her family is quite wealthy. They don't think I have enough money to marry her. For heaven's sake will you do something? Lord knows what's happened to her by now."

"Very well," said Mercado, "I shall make an investigation. I shall see the professor and find out everything I can. Leave me your address and I'll call you if I discover anything."

I drew a deep breath. For years Mercado had been the mastermind and I the stooge. Invariably he held back information on me. But this time I had something. I had Cabajal.

"Rolland," I said, "pull yourself together. I guarantee that we'll have some information for you by tomorrow morning. As a matter of fact I almost have this thing figured right now. I just want to check before I make a definite statement."

Rolland looked at me gratefully. Mercado stared in utter amazement. His opinion of my deductive abilities was not precisely as high as the Empire State Building.

I said, "Rolland, you're sure she loved you? Sure she wouldn't have gone off with another man?"

"Of course, she loved me. Oh, I know what you're talking about. The cops hold that theory. They told me she said as

much in the note she left. But it's a lie. That note's a phony."

I waved him toward the door. "Very well. We will give you some information in the morning."

He nodded and left.

CHAPTER TWO

The Infernal Triangle

MERCADO gave me a dirty look. "Well," he said stiffly, "when you go downtown tomorrow to find that girl you can bank that money at the same time."

I grinned at him. He was nettled, believing I'd figured something out before he had. "Don't you want to hear my theory?"

"What is it?"

"That dame has run away with Juan Cabajal. They left town sometime between four this morning and whenever that note was found. She wasn't as nuts about Rolland as he thought."

"Are you playing thousand-to-one shots or do you know something?"

"I know something." I told him of meeting Cabajal at La Cucaracha the night before. He became more amiable as he realized I'd been merely lucky, not brilliant.

"Well," he said when I'd finished, "it's simple enough, then. We'll check the place where Cabajal lived. Maybe we can pick up the trail there. If not, we can check around the steamship companies, the railroads and the buses. Since he said he had the tickets we can't very well miss. Wait until I change my clothes."

He went into the bedroom, emerging some twenty minutes later clad like a more daring type of rainbow. His suit was a bright, jealous green and it had been cut by a scissors which flouted tradition. The jacket had a single button in the front and an even dozen on each sleeve. His shoes were yellow as the proverbial dog and his shirt pink as an embarrassed salmon's underbelly. His tie was utterly beyond my vocabulary to describe.

He used his atomizer once more before venturing into the warm air of the city, wrapped his scrawny neck carefully in a

woolen muffler and donned a chocolate brown topcoat.

As we went downstairs, he said, "Do you know where Cabajal lives?"

"We can find out in half the saloons and all the dance halls. We'll try *La Paloma* first."

Since *hombres* like Cabajal have percentage deals with half the bartenders in town to telephone them whenever a group of feminine tourists who looked like good business come into the *cantina*, I was by no means surprised when I obtained the address on my first try.

We then drove a couple of miles toward Xochomilco and the cab pulled up at a battered stone house.

A sullen fat man at the desk said he didn't know whether or not the *senor* Cabajal was in. He indicated that he didn't care either. However, he gave us the room number and we mounted a dark staircase which was indubitably alive with bacteria. Mercado buried his brown nose in his muffler.

I knocked on a door whose paint was flaking. Save for the echo of my own knuckles down the dark corridor there was no answer. As I knocked a second time Mercado took his nose out of his muffler long enough to say, "Maybe the door's open. If you're right he's far away by now but I'd like to look over the room."

The knob turned. I went into the shabby room with Mercado behind me. Mercado looked across the room at the sagging bed and said, "He *is* in. He's asleep."

I got to the bed first. I took one look. Cabajal was in, all right. At least his body was.

I flung back the dirty comforter which covered him. Behind me Mercado grunted and said, "It's not pretty."

It wasn't. Cabajal was stripped to the waist, still wearing his shoes and trousers. He lay flat on his back staring at the cracked ceiling. His skull had been smashed to pulp.

There was no mystery about the weapon. It was a **thick**, green-glass tequila bottle lying on the floor by the head of the bed. The paper of its label was as bloody as was Cabajal's head. On the scuffed carpet near it were **half-a-dozen hundred** peso notes.

Mercado came closer and peered at the body, being most careful to permit nothing in the room to touch his own scoured person.

He said, "He's been dead for some time. I'd guess twelve hours. We must examine everything in the room. But carefully. We don't want any possible fingerprints smudged."

I said, "We?" with ironic intonation. I was quite aware that this was a solo job. Mariano Mercado would rather have faced all the atomic bombs in the stock-pile than touch a single object in this filthy room. I sighed, took a handkerchief from my pocket and embarked upon a comprehensive frisk.

The room yielded nothing illuminating. In the pocket of the dead man's coat which hung behind the door, I found a wallet. It contained some money, a few scented visiting cards and a steamship ticket to Patagonia in an envelope.

I said, "He was supposed to sail today. At dawn. Obviously he didn't. However, there's only one ticket here. If he intended taking the girl there should be two."

Mercado's eyes were black and thoughtful above the edge of his muffler. He said, "Be careful of that ticket. I want Gomez to look it over for fingerprints."

I nodded and put the ticket back in the envelope. I said, "You think the girl sailed alone?"

Mercado shook his head dreamily.

"Then after she discovered that Cabajal didn't turn up, why didn't she go back home?"

"A fair question," said Mercado, "which I can't answer. Go tell Gomez Cabajal is dead. Ask him to look the ticket and its envelope over for fingerprints."

"Whose do you think he'll find other than Cabajal's?"

Mercado shook his head again. "I don't even think he'll find Cabajal's. Meet me at the office as soon as you can and we'll call on this man, Workin. I have to have a bath immediately."

A well fed cockroach waddled across the frayed carpet and began a slow ascent of Mercado's polished shoe. He regarded it with horror. He kicked out frantically, dislodging the insect, then turned and fled down the stairs as if a platoon of the more

vicious Furies were chasing after him.

I descended with more decorum and took a taxi over to Police Headquarters.

IT WAS dusk when we arrived at the place where Workin lived. It was a few miles beyond the city limits on the Cuernavaca road. The house was a two-story stone job with a rock fence in front of it. In its day it had evidently been quite a *casa grande*. But now it was in a state of weary dilapidation. At the rear the stone fence sank exhaustedly to the ground and the back yard, which must have been all of five acres, was unprotected save at its very end where a wide stream ran parallel with the road.

Mercado told the taxi to wait, as we mounted a ramshackle porch and tugged at an old-fashioned bell.

The *criada* who opened the door was a fat woman of full Indian blood. She seemed relieved to see us. When we asked for Workin she shook her head and said, "*El señor esta borracho, muy borracho.*"

I stepped across the threshold and the servant's information that Workin was drunk was corroborated forthwith. The hall stank of rum. It was as if we stood in a great wind which was rolling off a rum plant.

The woman threw open a door at the end of the corridor, gestured us through and retreated hastily.

The room we entered was used as an office. Two desks were against the wall, one of them holding a typewriter. A long table in the center of the chamber was covered with scattered manuscripts. On one of the desks were three full bottles of rum and half a dozen empties. At its side was a worn swivel chair and sagging in it was William Workin.

He was a thin man with a corvine nose, white hair and sunken cheeks. His brown eyes were bloodshot. He held a glass in his hand and as I drew nearer I discovered that his breath was such to make Bacchus avert his head.

Mercado said, "Good evening," in his perfect, unaccented English and stated the purpose of our visit. At the mention of Isabel Scott's name, Workin grabbed the edge of the desk and pulled the swivel chair upright.

"A tragedy," he said, drunkenly dra-

matic. "That innocent young girl eloping with some scum of the town. I dare not face her family. It's a frightful thing. I can not stand it."

He uttered a weird howling sound, let go of the desk, and the back of the chair dropped toward the floor. Workin went back with it. He lifted his glass, slopped rum over his shirt as he drank it.

Mercado looked at him long and hard. Then his sharp gaze moved about the room. It riveted at last upon the typewriter. He went over to it and touched the space bar with his gloved finger.

There was no answering click and the carriage failed to move.

"Ah," said Mercado, "the typewriter is broken?"

Workin pulled himself upright again. "Yeah," he said. "Busted spring or something. Gotta get it fixed." He uncorked a live bottle with his teeth and poured himself a handsome slug.

Mercado said, "When did it happen?"

Workin looked up, blinked and said, "Huh? Oh, the typewriter? Yesterday morning I think. Gotta get it fixed. You guys want a drink?"

Mercado didn't answer him. His little eyes darted about the room. I, no gift-horse examiner, helped myself to a moderate portion.

Mercado said, "You're compiling some sort of anthology, aren't you?"

Workin nodded without looking up from his glass.

"I don't see any books around here," said Mercado. "Save for that dictionary there and the Thesaurus."

"Just took a batch back to the library," said Workin. "I get what I want from the American library over there on the *Reforma*." He paused for a moment, then said brokenly, "When I think of that poor kid—hell, I don't dare get sober again." He drained his glass, replaced it on the desk and reached for the bottle again.

Mercado stared at the glass which was none too clean. "Drink from the bottle," he said.

Workin gaped at him and said, "Huh?"

"Drink from the bottle," said Mercado. "These servants never sterilize glasses properly. You run less risk if you drink from the bottle."

Workin was still bewildered. "Less

risk of what?" he asked wonderingly.

"Germs," said Mercado impatiently. "Disease. Have you the faintest conception of how many germs can exist on the edge of a dirty glass? May I tell you—"

Workin, I was sure, still didn't understand. But he saw it was one hell of a good idea without listening to the reasons.

"Damn good thought," he said. "Drink from the bottle. Save time." He snatched up the rum and tilted it to his lips. His grip on the desk slipped again and the back of the chair plunged down. Workin didn't miss a swallow.

Mariano Mercado strode toward the door without bothering to bid our host good night. The *criada* was in the hall. He gave her a five-peso note and asked, "The *senor* drinks a lot, eh?"

She shook her head. "Not at all until now. Occasionally, he would drink some beer. But ever since the secretary has run away he has done nothing but drink rum."

We went back to our waiting taxi and headed toward Mexico City.

"Well," I said, "where are we now? Do we know anything?"

"Not much. There is a lot of routine checking to do."

"When do we do it?"

"We don't. Let Gomez do it. It's his job. We can find out what we need to know from *la policia*."

"If there's no work to do," I said, "let's spend some of that fee Rolland gave us looking over the better bars."

Mercado shook his head. "No. You have work early in the morning. You are to go to the American library, get a list of every book Workin has withdrawn, and read them."

I am not a man who enjoys wallowing in work. I stared at him unhappily. "He may have taken out dozens of books. You mean I have to read them all?"

"Not all. Only those either written by an Englishman or published in England."

"And what am I looking for?"

"You will know that immediately when you find it. I should like to get done by tomorrow afternoon. You had better go home to bed."

"All right," I said without enthusiasm. "And what about you?"

He smiled at me. "I? I shall spend

some of Rolland's fee investigating those better bars you spoke of."

"All right," I said. "But I hope they serve your drink in an unwashed glass that a typhus case has just finished with."

He was still staring at me in outraged horror when I got out of the cab and climbed the steps to my apartment.

ALL the following morning I spent immersed in some rather dull books. I ate a light lunch and resumed my task. I ceased at precisely twelve minutes past three, at which time I jammed on my hat, thrust a copy of *The Purple Lady*, published by R. A. Rogers of London in 1916, under my arm, and dashed off in a state of febrile excitement to Mercado's apartment.

As I entered he was waving at a most intelligent fly with a flit gun. I speak of the fly's mentality because only a most elite fly could ever have figured out how to break through the fine wire defences that screened Mercado's windows.

At last he brought it down in a gray cloud of spray, stamped on it heavily, swept it into a dust pan and interred it in the garbage pail.

I threw the book on the desk and said with grudging admiration, "It's on page 135. How on earth did you know?"

He said, "I'll tell you something else," ignoring the fact that he'd told me nothing at all yet. "I've spoken to Gomez on the telephone. There were no fingerprints at all on Cabajal's ticket nor the envelope where you found them."

I wrinkled my brow. "There must be some fingerprints, even if they're undecipherable, on anything—unless someone wipes them off."

"Precisely," said Mercado. "Moreover, Gomez checked at Cabajal's hotel. He's holding that fat clerk as a material witness. I don't think it'll do him much good. The man says he's away from the desk a lot and all kinds of people are going in and out. He swears he saw no one suspicious go up to Cabajal's room." His manner was smug. It was obvious he knew more than Gomez or I did.

I said, "Well, what do we do now?"

"You go down to the University and bring back Rolland. I think we'll need him. In the meantime I will call my

archeologist friend, Professor Palacios."

I wrinkled my brow at that. Palacios was an archeologist of reputation. He held a Government job in charge of all digging in the Federal District. Archeology in Mexico is big time stuff. Someone is always finding priceless pieces of stone left by the Aztecs.

"What on earth has Palacios to do with this?"

"I'm going to ask him to do us a favor," said Mercado. "It may save a lot of time."

I inferred from all this that he was in his non-talking mood, which in turn meant that he was just about ready to come up with a solution to the mystery. I shrugged my shoulders and went out of the house as he picked up the phone and asked for the Government Department of Archeology.

I returned about an hour later with an excited Rolland who plied me with questions during the trip. Unfortunately, I couldn't answer them.

Upon our arrival Mercado had divested himself of the royal purple bathrobe he had been wearing and caparisoned his little body in an elegant suit fashioned of brown-and-yellow checks, a shirt of a torchy blue and a natty pair of two-color shoes.

Despite his eager desire for information Rolland took a moment out to blink. After his recovery, he said, "Mr. Mercado, have you any news for me? Do you know where Isabel is?"

"Not exactly," said Mercado. "But I hope to know tonight."

"Good. But you must let me give you more money. The thousand was only a retainer. For a complete job you're entitled to more."

Mercado eyed him oddly and shook his head. "No," he said in a strained voice, "you've already paid me enough."

That struck me as rather odd. Mercado was not a slow man with a buck. He wasn't frugal. But on the other hand it was unlike him to turn down a fee honestly earned and voluntarily offered.

"I have some money," said Rolland. "I can afford it."

This time Mercado didn't answer him at all. Instead he picked up the book I had brought. He handed it to Rolland

and said, "Turn to page 135. Paragraph three."

Rolland did as he was told. Mercado said, "Read it. Read it aloud."

"I know that you and others who love me will be shocked at what I am about to do. However, in certain matters one must use one's own judgement. Romantic love is a—" Rolland broke off suddenly. His face was pale and there was utter astonishment in his eyes. "My Lord! That's what Isabel wrote in that note before she disappeared. I saw it printed in *Universal*."

"Right," said Mercado, "and Workin's typewriter was broken that morning."

Rolland dropped the book from limp fingers. I thought for a moment that his eyes would bulge from his head. His face was cold and lethal and murder was written indelibly upon it. He said frozenly, "What do you mean?"

MERCADO said quietly, "As I see it, you were not the only man who loved Isabel Scott."

"You mean that scum, Cabajal?"

Mercado shook his head. "Cabajal never even met her. I mean Workin."

"Workin? That old fool? She could never have loved him."

"More's the pity," murmured Mercado. "That's why he killed her."

"Killed her?" gasped Rolland. "You mean she's dead?"

In a way Mercado's statement made some sense to me; in another it did not. "If he loved her, why should he kill her?" I asked.

"Why not?" said Mercado. "You have the superficial romantic viewpoint of your countrymen. If he loved her he had all the reason in the world for killing her as long as she did not love him. Half the killings in Mexico are committed for that very reason. The fact that he embarked on that sudden drunken orgy gave me the idea."

Rolland seemed stunned. He muttered rather irrelevantly, "I thought that Workin didn't drink."

"He didn't," said Mercado. "Then he suddenly goes on a terrific bender. As a friend of the girl, of her family, it is reasonable that he would be upset. But upset to the point of drinking up all the rum

in the world? No. Only a lover would feel that way."

"Or a murderer," I said.

"Especially a combination of both," said Mercado.

Rolland spoke as if with a tremendous effort. "What's all this business about that disappearance note? And why are the same words in that book?"

"Because," said Mercado, "Isabel copied them from the book which Workin happened to have in the house at the time. He told her that he loved her. She apparently turned him down. She also told him she was going to marry another man. Workin resolved no one should have her if he couldn't. He plotted to kill her."

I asked, "How did he get her to write that note?"

"It was simple. He deliberately broke the typewriter. He told her he wanted something copied at once. With the typewriter out of order, Isabel naturally copied it in longhand. Workin tore the words he didn't need off the page and kept the part about the elopement."

"Yes," I said, "but what of Cabajal?"

"That was part of the plan. Before he killed her, Workin got in touch with Cabajal. If he knew Cabajal at all, he knew he could be bought. Cabajal was presented with a sum of money and a ticket on condition he boast around town that he was eloping with Isabel and that he use the ticket the next day and keep out of the way until the whole affair had been forgotten."

It made sense now. "And in that way," I said, "no one would ever accuse Workin of murder."

"No one would ever suspect murder had been done."

"How did you ever figure this out? Especially the part about the book?"

Mercado shrugged with false modesty. "The spelling. Now, Isabel Scott was an educated American girl. Yet she spelled judgement with an *e*. That is an English spelling, not an American one. That argued she had been copying from something. The fact of the broken typewriter clinched it."

"Wait a minute," said Rolland and his voice was cracked ice. "It's a nice theory. It's an ingenious theory. And I completely believe it. But can you prove it? Can

you even prove there has been a murder? Can you find the body?"

"I hope," said Mercado, "that Workin will find it for us."

"When?" said Rolland. "How long will we have to wait?"

Mercado glanced at the watch on his slim wrist. "A few hours, if I've guessed right. When it gets dark we're going out to his house. Unless he has disposed of the body in some other manner than the one I've figured, we should be able to prove our case tonight."

I was becoming rather bewildered again. "How do you figure he has disposed of the body?"

"I believe he has buried it on his property," said Mercado. "Perhaps he removed it. If so, it'll take us longer to track it down. But the obvious thing would be to bury it on that acreage behind his house."

"Heavens," I said. "You mean we've got to dig up five acres tonight?"

Mercado smiled and shook his head. "No. I'm banking on Workin digging the body up for us."

"But why?" asked Rolland. "Why should that rat—?"

At this point Mercado coughed. It was not a racking cough. It was not a harsh, vibrant cough. It was a slight, discreet irritation of the throat. Its effect, however, was electric.

Mercado's face paled to the color of coffee grounds which have been used four times. He blinked hastily and muttered a Spanish oath. His tan and trembling hand stretched forth and grabbed a bottle of pills. He spilled three of these into his palm and swallowed them like a camel drinking water after ten arid days.

He grabbed one of the atomizers, opened his mouth and pumped as if he were putting out a fire. Then he leaned back in his chair with an expression which would have brought a tear of pity to the eye of a bronze statue.

"Duty," he said with calm resignation, "it will kill me."

Rolland who knew nothing of his hypochondriacal trend looked at him in amazement and said, "What are you talking about?"

"I should never go out in the night air," said Mercado. "It will doubtless

The Shabby Shroud

mean my death. But duty demands it. There is a killer to be trapped."

"It was only a little cough," I said.

Mercado laughed bravely. "A little cough," he repeated. "Just a little cough. Do either of you gentlemen possess any tubercular statistics? I can tell you some awful things."

He took a deep breath and began to talk. They were awful things, indeed.

CHAPTER THREE

Bury the Dead

IT WAS ten o'clock last night when we left Mercado's apartment in a borrowed car. The moon had not yet risen and the stars were obscured by clouds.

Mercado, who was driving, halted the car at the side of the road a good kilometer from Workin's house. He handed Rolland and myself flashlights and said, "Follow me and be careful. We may have to wait some time. Don't turn on those lights until I tell you to."

We moved cautiously through the darkness. The air was warm and the grass springy underfoot. As far as I could figure it out we were making a sort of flanking movement on Workin's place, a maneuver which would bring us out at the rear of the house.

At last Mercado came to an abrupt halt. From somewhere nearby odd noises came to my ear. There was an occasional clinking sound followed by a soft and somehow familiar drumming. I heard Mercado inhale sibilantly.

"Ready with the lights?" he whispered. "Bueno! Turn them on."

Our thumbs flicked against the metal buttons. Three yellow beams thrust themselves through the darkness and converged in a single golden halo some thirty yards distant. I blinked at the eerie sight etched brilliantly against my eyes.

Standing blinded, as if looking directly at the sun, was William Workin. He stood over an oblong pit in the earth and he leaned on a long-handled shovel. He was coatless and he wore no hat. His gray hair was awry and his drunken, bloodshot eyes held terror and apprehen-

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D. L. Champion

sion in their depths. Sweat ran down his face and as we advanced I could hear his heavy breathing.

I moved closer until I was at the edge of the excavation. It was about four feet deep and at its bottom there protruded from the earth one end of a burlap bag. There was something lumpy inside.

I shuddered. This time I was in no need of any explanation from Mariano Mercado. I knew that the pit where I stood was a grave, the burlap bag a shabby shroud.

Workin, who had been glaring at us defiantly, suddenly bent his head. Choking sobs issued from his throat.

"I loved her," he said brokenly. "I was mad. I couldn't bear the thought of anyone else marrying her."

I felt Rolland tense at my side. I heard him utter an obscene word. I grabbed his shoulder as he moved toward Workin. Mercado looked at him oddly.

He said, "The law will deal with Workin. Not you."

Rolland said harshly, "The law! You haven't even got capital punishment in Mexico."

"Ah," said Mercado, "do you believe that murderers should die?"

Rolland hesitated for a long moment. He said at last, "I believe he should die."

"Then you condemn yourself to death," said Mercado.

There was a long, strange pause. The moon climbed up in the sky and cast an argent light over the lovely Mexican plateau. Rearing darkly against the sky, the Sleeping Woman stood massively to the south. Workin stopped weeping abruptly.

Rolland said, "I condemn myself to death?" biting off each word viciously.

"Porque no?" said Mercado. "For you, too, are a murderer."

Rolland drew a deep breath. His hand hovered very close to his hip pocket and I stiffened. However, he made no overt move. Mercado flicked off his flash. He looked a bright-eyed gnome in the moonlight. When he spoke it sounded more like a soliloquy than if he was directly addressing us.

"Many men might have killed Juan Cabajal," he said. "The sort of people he knew might kill him for a hundred

The Shabby Shroud

peso note or less. Yet whoever killed him did not take the hundred peso notes which were there for the taking.

"Many of those who might have murdered Cabajal would have gone through his wallet. The bolder ones would have taken that steamship ticket and tried to get a refund for it. The more timid would destroy it. Neither of them would carefully wipe off the fingerprints and return it to the wallet."

Rolland rasped, "You fool, what are you trying to say?"

"THAT you heard, or at least heard about, Cabajal's boasting that he was eloping with your girl. That you found out where he lived, went there and quarrelled with him. You killed him. Then you found he had but one steamship ticket. That struck you as odd. But you reasoned perhaps he had already given Isabel her ticket, so you waited, waited for her to keep her tryst for the elopement. She never came."

Had I not been so engrossed in Mercado's narrative, I would, perhaps, have paid more attention to the hopeful gleam in Workin's eye, to the grim intensity of Roger Rolland.

"No," said Mercado, "she never came. So Rolland left the corpse of the man he had killed and looked for her. He found she was missing, that she had left a note which bore out the story that she was to run away with Cabajal. Rolland was baffled. So baffled that he drew five thousand pesos from the bank and engaged a *detectivo particular* to find Isabel Scott."

He stopped for a moment, took a step toward the grave and gestured gracefully, "There she is!"

"You were lucky," said Rolland, and from his tone I knew his throat was dry with fear. "You were lucky with Workin. You only had an unprovable theory until you happened to find him digging up the body tonight."

"Lucky?" said Mercado, a note of amusement in his voice. "Workin, will you tell us why you have engaged in this macabre nocturnal task?"

"I had to," said Workin hoarsely. "The Department of Archeology phoned me today. They told me they were going to

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start digging on this property tomorrow. They believe there's some old Aztec stuff here. I knew if they found the body I'd be suspected. I wanted to get it out of the way before morning."

"That was my friend," said Mercado to Rolland. "The *senor* Palacios of the Archeological Department. I asked him to call, to tell this lie for me."

"All right," said Rolland in a flat voice, "so you weren't lucky. You can prove a murder on Workin. You can't prove one on me."

Mercado shrugged. "I can not. I am a man of honor. But the *coronel* Gomez will prove it all right."

"How can he?"

"When I tell him my theory he will believe it. For a handful of pesos and a few blows his material witness will swear he saw you enter the hotel. Gomez may get other witnesses by the same methods if he needs them."

Mercado sighed sadly as if he were pained beyond all endurance at the extra-legal methods of the *coronel* Gomez. And it was then that Workin sprang.

He seized Mercado with his left hand and whipped a knife from his pocket with his right. It was a long knife with a rusted blade and a jagged edge. I was about to move in on him when a blood-curdling shriek left Mercado's lips.

For a moment I thought Workin had slashed his throat. Save in the matter of bacteria Mercado possessed as much physical courage as any man I know. But now as Workin held the knife two inches from his throat, Mercado's head was drawn back. There was panic and ineffable dread in his eyes. His face was no longer brown. Horror had rendered it a dirty gray.

"If anyone comes near—" yelled Workin—"I shall cut this man's throat."

I moved toward them. Mercado said in a cracked and high-pitched voice, "For heaven's sake keep away, Latham. Find out what he wants and give it to him."

I stood frozen with indecision. Rolland said, "I'm not going to stand by and see that killer get away with murdering Isabel no matter if he does nick Mercado."

Mercado uttered a despairing groan.

Workin lifted his voice hysterically, "Rolland, you fool, this is your chance as

The Shabby Shroud

well as mine. You killed Cabajal. You'll rot in a Mexican jail along with me. Join forces with me now. Let's escape. Let's get over the Honduras border. You can settle your differences with me later."

The moon was now high in the sky. Its bland silver light cast itself about the crazy scene. Mercado looking like a ghost, staring with horror at the knife blade; Workin standing over him like some mad priest above a sacrificial altar; Rolland, a thoughtful frown on his young face, slowly reaching in his hip pocket.

"Workin," he said, "it's a working alliance until we hit the border. Then heaven help you."

"What'll we do with the two of them?" said Workin.

"Tie 'em up. Here a knife's no good. I've got a gun. You go to the house and get some rope, a clothes line, something."

HE TOOK an automatic from his pocket, pushed Workin aside, took up a position a few feet to Mercado's side and covered us both with his gun.

As Workin thrust his knife back into his pocket I saw the grayness fade from Mercado's face and the color flood back into it. He squared his thin shoulders.

"Hurry up, Workin, get some rope," said Rolland. He added to Mercado, "Steady, you. I can do more damage with this gun than Workin could do with his stiletto."

Roger Rolland had never been more wrong in his life. But at the time he knew it no more than I did.

Mercado said, "Stay where you are, Workin. Rolland, drop that gun," and his voice was steady as a continent. Somehow, all the fear of a moment ago, all the tremulous horror, had dropped from him.

He spoke again. "Stand by, Latham. I may need some help." He advanced a step toward Rolland who raised his weapon so that it was levelled at Mercado's temple. Then Mercado, moving like a mongoose, ducked his head and made the damndest flying tackle ever made south of the Texan border.

Rollard went to the ground with Mercado on top of him. Workin uttered a cry of alarm and reached again for his knife. Tardily, I decided it was time for me to

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get into the fray. I laid my hands on the most likely weapon—Workin's shovel.

I swung it like a warclub and nailed Workin on the side of the head. He travelled six feet through the air and landed thuddingly beside the grave.

I picked up Rolland's automatic from between the struggling legs of him and Mercado. I bent and pressed its muzzle against Rolland's head.

I said, "Relax, Mercado. Rolland, get up."

Each did as he was told. "You stay here with the gun and the prisoners," said Mercado. "I'll go up to the house and telephone our friend *el coronel*. I do not think," he added thoughtfully, "that under the circumstances he can claim any reward."

He walked off, a cocky and erect figure in the now brilliant moonlight.

We sat in Mercado's office, a half empty bottle of *habanero* before us. He was in high fettle; I felt good myself.

"A nice piece of work," I told him, "but one point still baffles me."

"I thought I'd cleared up everything."

"No. I want to know why you were in complete panic when Workin held that knife on you; why you were a reckless hero against Rolland with his gun?"

Mercado looked at me as if my stupidity surpassed all understanding. "*Pero, amigo*," he said, "that knife was jagged, rusty and filthy. Millions of bacteria on that blade." He shuddered.

"Are there no germs on a bullet?"

"Not after it is fired. You see, the tremendous heat of the barrel sterilizes it. There could have been no germs on it after Rolland had fired."

This, I decided, was no longer an eccentricity. It was egregious fanaticism. I said, "Both of them can kill you."

"Of course. But you are looking only on the optimistic side. If the bullet fails to kill me I have a nice clean wound. If the knife fails—" He broke off and trembled from head to foot. "Latham," he said, pointing a brown finger at me, "do you know how many bacteria can dwell on the edge of a dirty knife?"

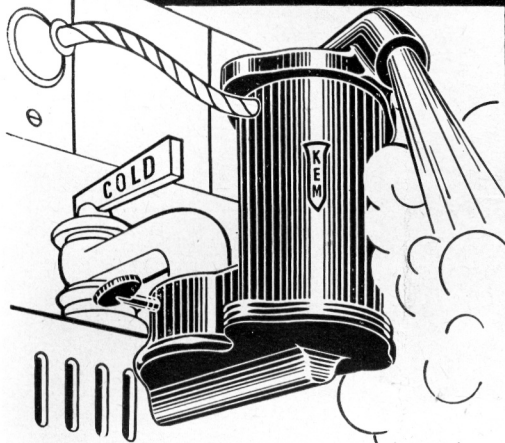
I sighed and filled up my glass. It was a hell of a lot more than you think.

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New Direct Mail Plan Saves You Big Money!

DE LUXE QUALITY SCOTCH PLAID

Fibre AUTO SEAT COVERS



Slips on in a Jiffy!

Colorful, Water-Repellent Scotch Plaid Fibre

For Coupes and All Front Seats

Unbeatable Low Price **\$3.98** POST PAID

Sedans and Coaches **COMPLETE SET** Front and Back Seat **\$6.98** POST PAID

Fits Most Cars!

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we challenge comparison because nowhere . . . but **NOWHERE** will you get these fine seat covers at our low price! Yes, thanks to our amazing direct-from-distributor to you plan, you can now own long wearing DeLuxe Auto Seat Covers at much lower prices than you pay elsewhere. And don't let our low price lead you to confuse our fine covers with those being sold elsewhere. No indeed! These are top-quality, DeLuxe Seat Covers finely tailored of rugged, water repellent scotch-plaid fibre and richly grained leatherette. Their smooth fit and handsome appearance will vastly improve the looks of your car, make it easy for you to slide in and out, protect your clothing and upholstery, and check driving discomfort. **SEND NO MONEY** . . . pay postman \$3.98 plus postage or send cash and we pay postage. If not completely delighted—return within five days for refund under our **you-must-be-pleased—or money-back** guarantee.

Check YOUR CHOICE OF Front Seat STYLE



A SOLID BACK For 4-door Sedan.



B DIVIDED BACK SOLID SEAT For Coupe or Coach front.



C INDIVIDUAL SEATS For divided back and seat

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Make _____ Model _____ Year _____ Price in Canada add 50c. No C.O.D.'s

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CHECK ONE I am enclosing \$ _____ in full payment. Send Postpaid. Send C.O.D. I will pay postman \$ _____ plus postage.

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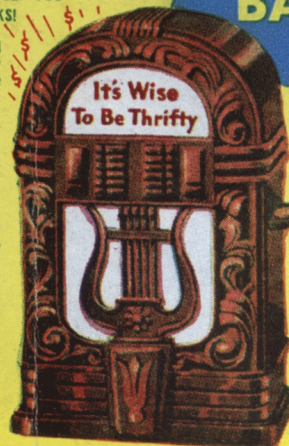
Now you can enjoy the luxury of steaming hot water . . . anytime, anywhere . . . and you don't have to heat your house to get it! Simply plug heater's cord in socket and presto! you have the hot water you want "in no time at all!" Completely portable and lightweight. Carry it anywhere! Use it for everything from boiling eggs to taking a bath. Immediate delivery guaranteed only if you act now! **SEND NO MONEY:** Merely pay postman \$4.98 plus postage on delivery. Or send cash and we pay postage. If not delighted, return in 5 days for refund.

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FRIENDS AND RELATIVES WILL HELP YOU SAVE, JUST TO SEE HOW IT WORKS!

You'll see those nickels and dimes rapidly add up to mighty dollar bills with this new Juke Box Bank that's a gay plastic reproduction of the tune-fol Juke Box down at the corner soda fountain. Bring it out at parties or when company comes to call. The coins and currency will really pour in, because everyone wants to see it light up electrically and flash its bit of advice: "It's Wise to Be Thrifty"—to which we might add: it's easy to be thrifty when you have an attention-getting, fun-producing Juke Box Bank.

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\$1.98 Post Paid Complete With Battery & Bulb

Put Your Coins in Slot and Press-in! **JUKE BOX BLAZES WITH LIGHT AS IT FLASHES:**

It's Wise to Be Thrifty

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