

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



OCT.

15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH THE BEST OF
DETECTIVE FICTION



**CASH
WALE'S
LETHAL
LULU**

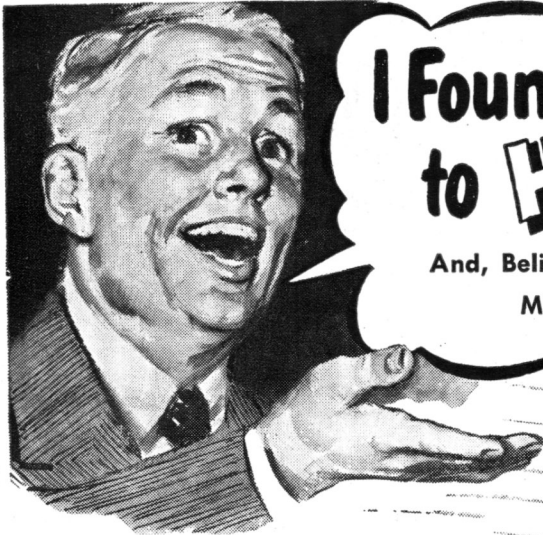
by **PETER PAIGE**

— ALSO —

JOHN D. Mac DONALD

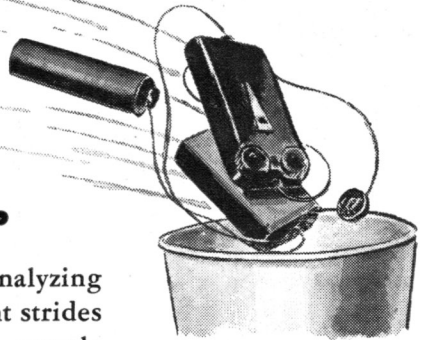
**WHO'LL
CARRY
MY
COFFIN?**

by **W. LEE
HERRINGTON**



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QUIZ

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GO DOWNSTAIRS TO
ROE'S STORE FOR
ANOTHER PRIZE!**



Tired and disheartened after a long day of attempting to sell his first play, young Pat Martin had just dropped in to watch a radio quiz show but then...

PLEASE...IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. I'M PENNILESS. I'VE BEEN SICK AND OUT OF WORK

YOU BROKE IT! PAY ME TEN DOLLARS OR I'LL CALL A COP!

YOU MEAN...?

YES, IT WAS ALL A PUT-UP JOB TO TEST YOUR CHARITY. NOW LET'S GET BACK TO THE STUDIO, YOU'RE NOT THROUGH YET!

WE HAVE DINNER CLOTHES FOR YOU BACKSTAGE. AFTER YOU CHANGE, TAKE THE LADY OUT AND DO THE TOWN ON US

WOW!



A RAZOR? RIGHT HERE, SIR

WHAT A SLICK-SHAVING BLADE! MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

IT LOOKS GREAT, TOO. **THIN GILLETTES** ARE PLENTY KEEN



TELL OUR AUDIENCE YOUR PLANS, PAT

WELL, DINNER, THEN A GOOD SHOW AND THEN A NIGHT CLUB, IF THE LADY'S WILLING

WHAT A CHANGE! HE'S HANDSOME!



IF MY BROTHER LIKES YOUR PLAY, IT'S AS GOOD AS SOLD. HE'S THE BEST AGENT IN TOWN

GREAT! THEN I'LL CALL FOR YOU TOMORROW AT THE STUDIO

SHE'S TERRIFIC!

AFTER THE SHOW

YOU ALWAYS GET SMOOTH, PLEASANT SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK AND FEEL SWELL WITH **THIN GILLETTES**...THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO YOU AVOID THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES WHEN YOU USE **THIN GILLETTES** IN YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR. THEY ARE PRECISION-MADE TO FIT EXACTLY. ENJOY TRUE SHAVING COMFORT WITH **THIN GILLETTES**



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ALL STORIES
COMPLETE 

15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

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We want to know if you're

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The November issue will be out October 1st

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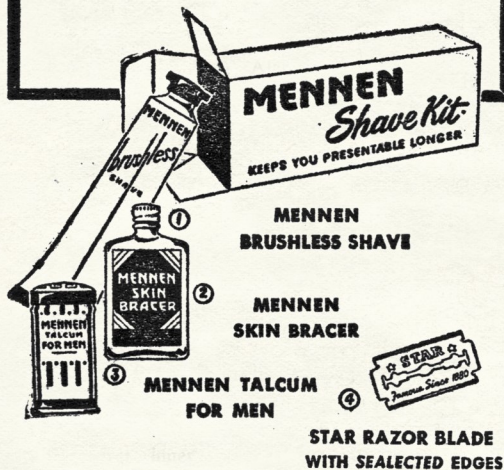
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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—*withholding your name if you wish*—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to *The Rackets Editor*—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Bashful Slickeroo

Dear Sir:

This happened recently in Rome, New York, and could easily be worked again anywhere.

A well dressed young man entered an insurance office and asked the office manager (a young woman alone at the time) for change of a dollar. He received the change and departed, but in a few minutes he was back saying he had a problem and asking if the young lady would help him.

He said that his mother wanted an appointment made at the beauty shop (operated by my wife) down the hall, but he felt bashful about entering as there were several women in the shop. Would the young lady make the appointment for him?

The office manager was glad to oblige, and dashed down the hall to make the appointment. The nice young man thanked her when she returned and left. Soon after, the office manager discovered that during her absence he had rifled the cashbox of \$150!

Moral: If you make change for a stranger, don't leave your office empty or your cashbox unlocked.

Charles Wheeler
Rome, N. Y.

A Swindle for the Teacher

Dear Sir:

When I was first teaching, two salesmen entered my classroom uninvited and tried to sell me an encyclopedia, of which they had a beautifully illustrated sample copy. As I was inexperienced, they easily embarrassed me before my pupils by speaking of my lack of interest in my work and my unprogressiveness in not purchasing better material.

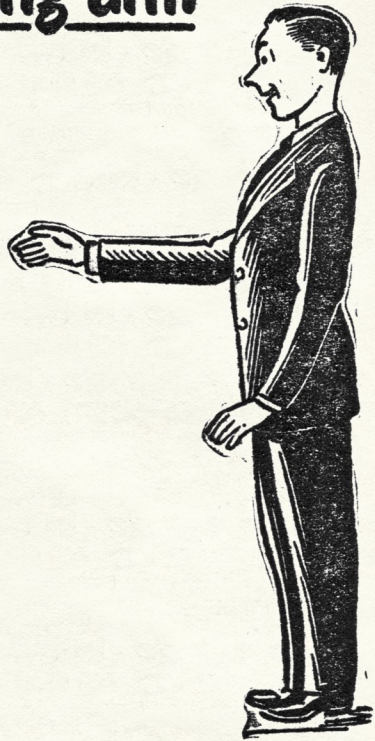
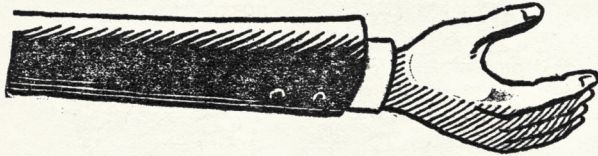
I felt so ill at ease (especially since one of them was maimed) that I paid \$16 I could not afford, to get rid of them. I never received anything for the money.

Viola Sunderland
Timber Lake, S. D.

(Please continue on page 8)

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Buy Two **WINCHESTER** TRADE-MARK DUAL-PURPOSE FLASHLIGHTS



Place one of your Winchester Dual-Purpose Flashlights on the highway 50 yards to the rear of your car. Its 1000 foot light beam and red warning side rays will warn other cars. The other Winchester Flashlight will help you see to change wheels.

You pay only \$3.10 for the 2 flashlights . . . Complete with batteries. Get them today. More than flashlights, they're a new idea in safety . . . 2 lights in 1. RED for Danger. WHITE for Safety.

NEW WINCHESTER 1511 HI-POWER BATTERIES

Last almost TWICE as Long!

Still cost only a dime. *But, measured by A. S. A. light industrial flashlight test, the new Winchester No. 1511 flashlight battery LASTS ALMOST TWICE AS LONG as the pre-war No. 1511. Olin electronic research has stepped up their light-making chemicals.

Use for flashlights, portable radios, photo flash holders, or any equipment using regular flashlight-cell size batteries. Winchester Repeating Arms Company, New Haven, Conn., Division of Olin Industries, Inc.

WINCHESTER
TRADE-MARK

FLASHLIGHTS AND BATTERIES



Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

Ice-Tea Blues

Dear Sir:

A local youth I know has a racket that is within the law, yet has the law enforcement officials literally tearing their hair.

The state-owned liquor stores are closed on Sundays, holidays and election days, but people's thirst, it seems, goes on just the same.

This young man picks up all the empty liquor bottles he can find during the week, and then on Sundays and holidays meets all the buses and trains coming into the nearby city.

With a knowing leer, he approaches his victims and says, "How'd you like a bottle of cold tea? And only three dollars a pint?"

It is surprising how many customers he gets for his cold tea, and the beauty of it is this—he is telling the exact truth, for it is cold tea!

Both federal and state law enforcement officials are helpless with rage, but there doesn't seem to be a thing they can do about it. If the sucker wants to pay three dollars for a pint of cold tea, and if the seller delivers exactly as advertised, he cannot be held for anything at all, it seems. Maybe in time the officers can think of some way to put a stop to the lad, but meantime he is practically rolling in wealth, and that's not all. Although he has been in custody a number of times, still he has his following of younger boys, who really think this twenty-four-year-old is pretty smart.

Ruth Ellen Smith
Star, Idaho

Expensive Chicken-Feed

Dear Sir:

We have a poultry farm, work plenty hard and in these times of sky-high prices and lower in proportion eggs prices it's a pain in the neck trying to make ends meet. That may account for our gullibility—or was it that swindlers work day and night, dressing up old schemes?

We feed a standard laying mash, but shop for the cheapest corn feed as long as it is sound.

About three months ago a big truck, heavily loaded, stopped at our house and two pleasantly friendly men came in, introduced themselves and enthusiastically began telling us about the wonderful bargain prices they could offer us on feed due to a quantity purchase from a distant mill.

Their price was two dollars per hundred cheaper than the local stores, and after opening two or more sacks to be sure the feed was sound, we gladly invested in thirty sacks.

Congratulating ourselves on the saving of sixty dollars, we directed the bargain peddlers to several friends' homes. They, likewise, eagerly bought as many as possible.

A few days later when we began to use the new feed, we discovered about fifty pounds of feed on top in each sack, the bottom half consisting of ground corn cobs, sawdust and rocks. The loss we and our friends suffered amounted to the profit on many a dozen eggs.

George Snider Sigler
Fullerton, Louisiana

Ready for the Rackets

Greenhorn Turns Red

Dear Sir:

In a local tavern just before Christmas, a well-dressed stranger displayed six pairs of men's fancy hose for sale. After examining the hose, I bought a box. The socks were neatly arranged in a fancy red and green box, ready for mailing.

The man said I could have the second box for the same price, and the third box free. They were sealed and identical with the first one. I accepted the wonderful offer.

I ended up trying to explain the joke of sending two of my best friends a fancy box stuffed with paper.

Van Gilley
Louisburg, N. C.

Photo-Finish

Dear Sir:

Two years ago, while my husband was in the service, my brother opened a traveling photography studio and asked me to work for him. I was to go from house to house and ask if they had children they would like photographed, and if so, arrange for an appointment. After my brother took the pictures, he would bring around proofs and they could have photographs made up if so desired.

We did fine. My brother took excellent pictures and everyone seemed satisfied.

Then we struck this small town. What a cold shoulder I received! It seems that some slick operators had come to that town before and collected \$1 in advance for photographs they never took.

This makes it hard for legitimate photographers who do fine work. Even though they don't want money in advance, people won't even listen to what they have to offer.

Mrs. W. S.
Bristol, Conn.

Cleaned Out Good

Dear Sir:

We had delayed having our furnace cleaned out during the summer, and last September when a man came to the door claiming to be a first-class furnace repair man, and offered to clean the flues, paint the furnace, and put it in first-class condition for the sum of twenty-five dollars, I immediately agreed to let him have the job.

He proceeded to take the furnace apart, claimed to have discovered broken parts in it, although it had operated perfectly during the previous winter. He discovered we had a "big repair job" ahead and had better buy a new furnace from him. When I refused, he walked off without putting the furnace together again. He was unknown at the address he had given and we were unable to locate him.

It was, therefore, necessary to pay out to a reliable furnace company \$109 to put the furnace in working condition again.

B. E. Edwards
Kansas City, Missouri

CARBURETOR
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BOLE
Honey-treated

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For the man with a sensitive tongue
CARBURETOR
cools your smoke,
makes it mild

\$2.50

3. Smoke is cooled by mixing with air from Carburetor

2. Cool air is drawn in through Carburetor.

1. Smoke from tobacco

Bowl of pipe is yellow because it is treated with real bees' honey. No "breaking-in" is required. Cool air drawn through the patented* Carburetor keeps the bottom of the bowl dry, so there is never a "wet heel". A pipe that beginners can enjoy without having to accustom themselves to it. Ask for Carburetor Yello-Bole at dealers, \$2.50. Kaufmann Bros. & Bondy, Inc., Estab. 1851, 630 Fifth Avenue, New York 20.

*U. S. PAT. NO. 2,082,106



This picture of Honey Girl is displayed wherever Yello-Boles are sold.



Identify Yello-Bole pipes by the honey-seal in the bowl. It keeps the honey fresh

CASH WALE'S LETHAL LULU

CHAPTER ONE

Matrimonial Come-On

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD:

About a month ago I received the following wire:

INSTRUCT MR. T. NOSLOW 944 W.
104TH STREET NYC ANSWER NO
CORRESPONDENCE FROM DEB-
ORAH SANGER UNTIL FURTHER
WORD FROM ME. LETHAL RO-
MANCE RACKET. SEND ME C/O

VERDE, CALIFORNIA, HER LETTER.
CHARLES WILSON

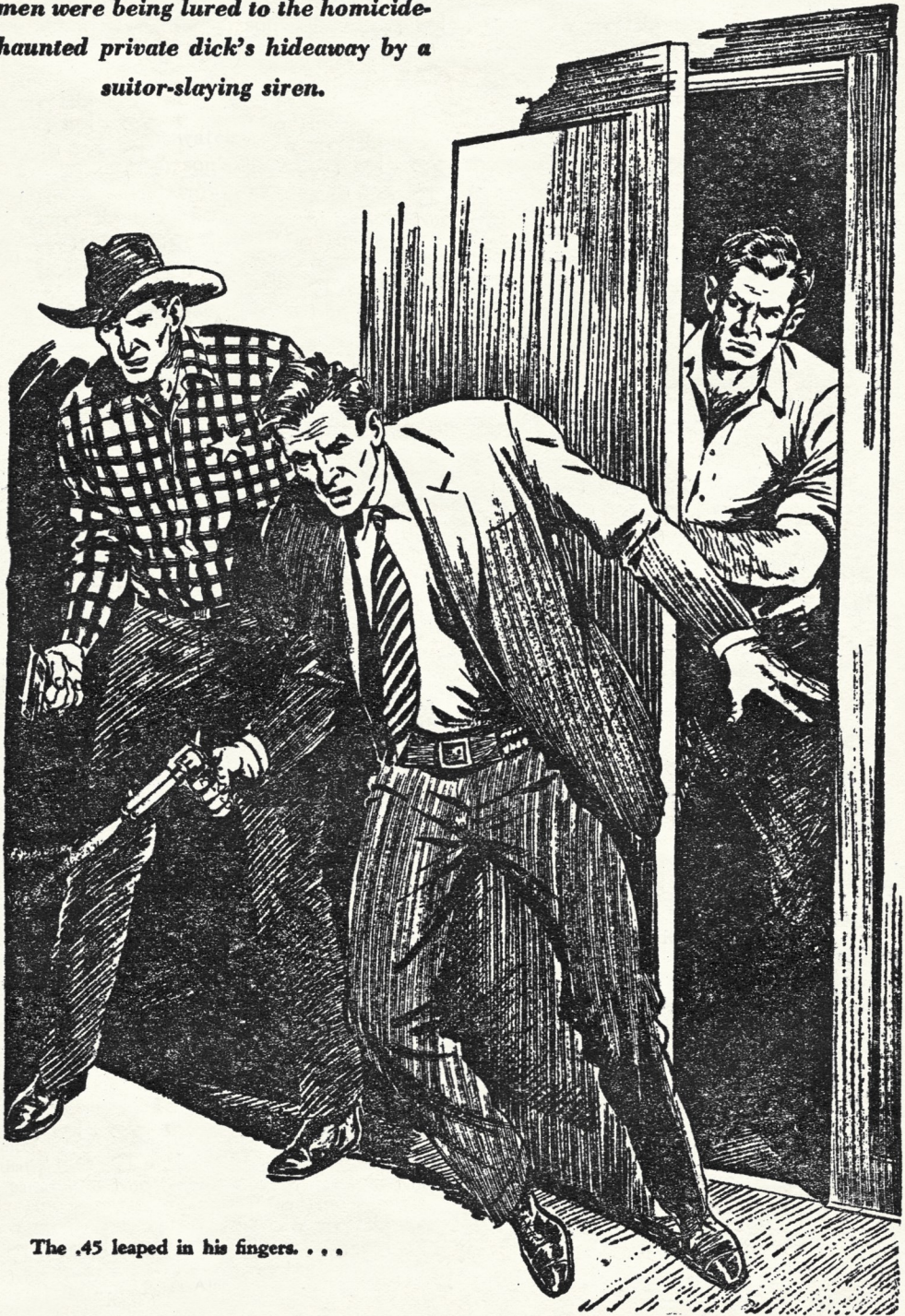
KNOWING "Charles Wilson" was an alias used by that sometimes gunman, sometimes private eye, currently a fugitive from a New York



**Startling
Crime-Adventure
Novel**

Everywhere that Cash Wale went, the cops were sure to go . . . and now lawmen were being lured to the homicide-haunted private dick's hideaway by a suitor-slaying siren.

By PETER PAIGE



The .45 leaped in his fingers. . . .

State homicide warrant—Cash Wale—I went to the indicated address and found Mr. Noslow to be a retired sea captain.

It took diplomacy and a fifth of good scotch to draw from him the fact that he was engaged in a correspondence romance with Miss Deborah Sanger, a romance which was on the verge of ripening into matrimony.

I had difficulty persuading him that he was probably the marked victim of a common racket, and even greater difficulty convincing him that to go to the police now would probably upset an apple cart.

In the end, I sent the following reply to "Charles Wilson":

DEAR CHARLEY,
NOSLOW DUBIOUSLY AGREES TO COOPERATE. BUT THE LADY'S LATEST MISSIVE SEEMS TO HAVE ACHIEVED YOUR END. IN EFFECT, SHE CALLS OFF THEIR ROMANCE, IMPLIES PRIOR COMMITMENTS HAVE PRIORITY, AND ADDS THAT FURTHER CORRESPONDENCE WOULD BE RETURNED UNANSWERED. WHATEVER YOUR CURRENT VENTURE—WALK SOFTLY. BEST OF LUCK TO YOU AND THE BIG GUY.

PETER PAIGE

Four days later, the following arrived via airmail:

Dear Pete,

You have to move fast. They've opened three anonymous graves up to here and if I don't crack this weird riddle, the Big Guy will sit down for the last time in Sing Sing. It's that bad.

Get Noslow to pen a letter to Deborah in his own hand. Have him imply he didn't get her last letter because he was in Cincinnati. He was there in order to cash in his last assets before making tracks for Verde, Deborah and marriage. He is now enroute—and expects to arrive on the twentieth.

Then I want you to fly to Cincinnati and mail that letter, Pete.

Aside from personal considerations, you'll be helping to trap the coldest-hearted killer this side of confusion. The personal considerations will be the story and my permission to use it.

The Big Guy says hello.

C. W.

It took herculean persuasion to get such a letter from Mr. Noslow. In the end it was written in an aura of scotch. I flew to Cincinnati and mailed it.

Two weeks later the following arrived: Dear Pete,

I've been looking at a blank page for half an hour trying to find a way to lead you into this tangle. What makes it hard is that it began in lots of places all over the country and I didn't come into it until the threads were well snarled.

I wouldn't have become involved at all if the Big Guy didn't think a bellyache was beneath his dignity to notice—until he rolled to the floor of Penny Green's ranch reading room, clutching at his groin and yelling: "Cash, make it stop! It's killin' me!"

Penny Green said: "My Lord; he *talked!*"

I felt the sweat on my own face as I gaped up at Penny. "Okay, he talked. We need a doctor fast. I think it's his appendix." I asked the Big Guy: "How long's it been like that, Slugger?"

"Couple days," he grunted painfully. "I thought it was sumptin' I ate. Dis mornin', when I pick up the jeep so's you can slide the jack under it, all of a sudden it stops—so I figger it ain't nuttin'. It's moiderin' me, Cash—"

I glared up at Penny, and she said: "You know we have no phone, Charley. The nearest doctor is McKeever in Verde."

"I'll take the jeep," I told her, making for the door. Over my shoulder, I yelled: "Leave him where he is. Throw some blankets over him—but don't let him eat or drink anything."

Her: "*But he called you—*" followed me into the night.

That was ducky. The man she thought couldn't speak had called the man she knew as "Charley Wilson", "Cash"—and that just about ruined the best hide-away a pair of hunted men ever had. But this was no time to bandy trifles—like the prospect of sitting on Sing Sing's hot chair if she thought of a "Wale" to go with the "Cash".

It took me about two minutes to reach the jeep and get it rolling in the ruts up the steep hill toward the pass.

That was the only highway to and from

El Rancho Verde. I faced a fifteen mile drive over the roughest, windingest, most unpredictable trail in the Sierras in order to reach the cluster of fifty houses that called itself Verde, California.

It couldn't be done in less than an hour, which meant it would be two hours before Doc McKeever got to the Big Guy—if I found him at home. Two hours, while the Big Guy slipped closer and closer to the black exit.

IT HAD been different several weeks earlier, riding the ruts in the other direction on the front seat of Luke Reardon's Model A.

"Lucky thing I stopped to give you fellers a lift," Reardon cackled. "Penny'll be mighty pleased—if she likes yuh."

"Do you think we'll like Penny?"

He slid the screwdriver tips he wore for eyes over toward me and closed one in a slow wink. "Ain't never seen a man wearin' pants didn't like Penny Green. Me, if I asked her to be Mrs. Reardon once, I asked her a hundred times."

He was a study in gray, as if he'd just broken through a nest of cobwebs. You could picture him wandering over the desert behind a burro—until you noticed the crumpled Stetson was in the forty dollar class and that his gray tweeds were custom cut. The yellow stuff on the butt of the .45 jutting from the holster between us was probably figured ivory and the large hunk of glass on the pinky of his left hand might have been a diamond.

I asked him: "How could she pass up a chance marrying a solid citizen like you?"

"She's jest stubborn! Women an' burros are the two most stubborn critters on earth! She won't let me loan her money. Hardly says thank you when I fetch the ranch's mail. Don't even notice how I buy every magazine she got a picture in."

"She a model?"

"Picture painter, Shorty. Penny's a real bony-fide artist!"

Around that time the ruts squeezed between the two cliff walls that formed the pass and dropped like a roller coaster into that valley no atom bomb will ever find.

The ruts ended in front of the green-stucco main ranch house with its red-tiled roof. Beyond it were several out-buildings and a narrow creek that wound through pastures stocked with horses and cattle. All around us were solid walls of forest that climbed up toward jagged peaks.

The Big Guy's ice-chip eyes met mine and we shook invisible hands.

Reardon grabbed a pack of letters from the rear seat and we followed him to the front door. He didn't bother to knock. We followed him into El Rancho Verde's social center, the reading room. He drawled: "Afternoon, Penny. Noticed some mail for the ranch at Verde, so I thought I'd—"

"You!" she said, cutting through his drawl and aiming a lump of charcoal at me. "I want you over by the fireplace. Go on!"

I gaped at her.

"Can't you hear me?"

I continued to gape at her.

She said: "Listen, all I want you to do is to get over by the fireplace. If there's anything on your mind, say it."

I said: "Wow!"

She laughed, and I felt like rolling over on my back, waving my paws in the air and uttering ecstatic barks.

A lot of woman, Pete. The Big Guy stands six-two in his sox and she didn't give him an inch. But don't get an idea of an outsize Lena. I could have hung from the belt of her levis and impersonated a watchfob, and it would have been a happy occupation. What she did to those levis and a tight pale blue sweater raised my blood pressure.

Her nose barely escaped being too short and her mouth was almost too large, but her widely spaced, sleepy eyes lured your attention from such trivia. Her pale gold hair was wrapped in a blue bandana.

She said: "Please?"

I went to the fireplace. Over the mantle hung a Winchester rifle. Over that hung a colored oil painting of an Indian scalping a blonde while a bleeding cowboy was in the act of jabbing a long knife into the Indian's back. Other weapons hung about on the walls, and other paintings that featured various forms of mayhem.

"Take the Winchester by the barrel

and grip it as if you were going to bash in a head," Penny Green ordered.

I took the rifle down off its pegs and told her: "Maybe this happens all the time, but all I'm here for is—"

"Later," she cut in, poisoning the charcoal over a blank sheet of paper before her. She nodded at me. "Go on, little man. Bat his brains out. I've been waiting for a face like yours all my life."

"What's so special about my face?"

"You look as if you'd just eaten your mother and were burned up because she wasn't seasoned right."

I said: "You don't conk citizens with gun butts. You risk getting a slug in the teeth. The way to conk a citizen is with the barrel."

She said: "For years and years the readers of Bloody Western Magazine have been seeing heads bashed by butts. Are you going to argue with tradition? Will you *please* grab that barrel?"

I grabbed it. She told me to sneer. I flared my left nostril. Reardon sat back in a wicker chair. The Big Guy stood motionless and stared blankly at nothing, listening to the noises nobody else could hear. Penny Green finally raised the stick of charcoal from the paper and said: "There!"

THE results weren't bad. More like a caricature of me than me. While I was admiring myself, Reardon handed Penny the packet of letters. I heard him drawl: "Didn't know yuh had a new critter, Lulu Riley, on the place, Penny. Letter's all the way from a John Drew in New Yawk State. What is she, Penny; a picture painter or a poem writer? I said—"

His sudden silence brought my eyes up to the spectacle of the tomatoes growing in the Big Guy's cheeks from the unabashed interest in Penny Green's stare.

Reardon whined: "Dangnation, Penny! Come all the way over the hills to do yuh a favor an' yuh don't even say howdy!"

She dazzled a smile at him and crooned: "Howdy, Luke. Thanks for bringing the mail." Then she turned the dazzle back to the Big Guy.

Reardon tried again. "Brought these riders along, Penny. Say they're lookin' for work. Remembered yuh sayin' as how

yuh needed a couple handymen around."

"You really want work?" she asked the Big Guy.

"That's us," I cut in. "Post war unemployed."

"What can you do?" she asked the Big Guy.

"Practically anything," I said.

"I was asking him," she said, keeping her smile on the lumps of scar tissue that, on the Big Guy's face, represented nose, brows, lips and ears.

"Ask me," I told her. "Slugger's dumb; literally dumb. We're handy with tools and muscles. We've done about everything, from pearl diving to plowing."

"And fighting," she added, keeping the Big Guy's cheeks aflame with her smile.

"That's what took his voice," I said.

"You his manager?"

"I'm his voice. Am I wasting it—or have you got jobs?"

She turned that smile on me.

"Slugger what?"

"Dugan. I'm Charley Wilson."

"This isn't an ordinary ranch, Charley. We have seven cabins tucked away in the forest, with writers in two of the cabins now. The stock is handled by Pedro and his crew, so mainly I'd want you to supply the guests' needs. This may include anything from fixing the plumbing to—" she indicated the charcoal sketch of me—"to posing. You would have to tolerate a certain amount of eccentricity."

"I thought I showed you I could," I said, flaring my left nostril in the sneer she had captured for posterity.

"We'll get along," she smiled.

You may have met Penny Green around the editorial offices in the big city, Pete. For a long time she's been painting those front cover pictures of people shooting, stabbing, punching and otherwise committing mayhem on one another for magazines. If you look carefully at the covers in the near future you may find the Big Guy's face—or mine—scowling from under a sombrero or over a bloody knife.

That was part of our job. The rest of it was strictly odds and ends. Pedro and his crew of Mexican hands managed the ranch animals as if they spoke the language. But when it came to nailing

two boards together, or puttying a pane of glass in a window, their fingers turned into thumbs and they went around unhappy.

Pedro's wife, Lolita, was the cook and housekeeper. We met her that first afternoon, while Penny smiled the scowl off the leathery wrinkles Luke Reardon used for a face.

We found Lolita squatting on a box between a pile of split logs and the stove.

She waved a brown palm at us. "You fallas wanna eat? Cook heem yourself! Hee hee!"

We found raw steaks in the refrigerator and fried them with onions. We set up a pot of coffee and found a batch of biscuits and some jars of jam and peanut butter.

Lolita egged us on with: "What cooks! Put some chile on heem! Mebbe a leetle sugar halp. Haw haw! More fire! More chile!"

Later, as we were straining this repast through our eager teeth, we had a sudden visit.

A swarthy face behind a fierce black mustache and under a crumpled black sombrero entered the open window at my elbow. The barrel of a carbine crawled over the sill under the face and settled at a point between us.

"I'm Pedro," the face announced somberly. "You the handyfellers? Okay. Lolita, she mebbe drenk a leetle too much *vino*. Okay. She preety preety. Mebbe you look at Lolita—but don't touch!"

Lolita, who was about four and a half feet tall, four and a half feet wide and had a silky black mustache, heaved a hunk of log that whispered past my nose and would have split Pedro's noggin asunder had not noggin and carbine vanished from the window first.

"That crazy falla!" Lolita raged. "Heem always foolin' around."

The three young Mexicans who were Pedro's crew; Efraim, Ramon and Miguel, left us alone. . . .

I met Vivian Schultz my first morning on the job when I set a kit of carpenter tools on the porch of Cabin Two and told the gray-haired, sweet-faced woman who appeared in the doorway: "I'm Charley. Penny says you have a folding table leg that shouldn't."

"Brag shmear voe sputt," she said, eyeing me brightly.

"Come again?"

"What reactions did you have when I said that? You see, originally Man spoke in grunts, squeals and similar sounds that expressed the inarticulate stirrings of his subconscious mind—and I'm trying to rediscover this means of basic soul-to-soul communication."

"It sounded as if you were clearing your throat in order to spit," I told her.

She slammed the door in my face.

Vivian Schultz. Nudging forty. She wrote for confession magazines and had four ex-husbands scattered around the country in spite of the fact that she seemed as sultry as an old pillow.

I finally got around to fixing her table's wobbly leg three days later and we spent a pleasant hour conversing in grunts, squeals and moans. Between the grunts, it came out she was a vegetarian and a student of Theosophy—and she said I was a natural primitive. . . .

The only other guest, Rose Senger, lived in Cabin Six. I was in the midst of changing a washer in her leaky cold water faucet when she looked up at me from her typewriter and asked: "Charley, how does it feel to be hit by a fist?"

Up to her neck she was strictly from toothpick and tomboy—except for the purple polish on her nails. Her head was Hollywood's idea of a spy. Purple paint coated full lips that seemed on the verge of smiling wryly. Her amber eyes slanted. Her skin, despite all the California sunshine in that valley, remained alabaster white, curving smoothly down over high cheekbones, slinking through hollows to her firmly modeled chin. In contrast to this, her inky black hair was swept back severely to a bun behind her ears.

"Like being hit with a fist," I told her.

"I'm serious, Charley. Morton just found a strange key in Etheldra's purse and, in a fit of rage, struck her. How does Etheldra feel?"

She wrote crime and love stories that featured. In her late twenties, she was, to the best of my knowledge, never married. Vivian Schultz didn't think much of her, but with a man-trap face like Rose's,

what other woman would be able to?

"Etheldra feels unhappy," I told her.

"Charley, your cynicism is wasted. Surely, you ought to know how it feels to—" A new thought dried the words on her tongue and brought her close to me. Five specimens of purple nail polish gripped each of my shoulders. That almost wry smile came to within an inch of my lips. "I'll bet you've hit women, Charley. You're a nasty little man, aren't you? Do you like me a little, Charley?"

I couldn't see past the hot glints in her slanted eyes now. I could feel sparks sizzling between our lips—until nothing lay between our lips but purple lipstick. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Chilled by Lulu

THAT'S the cast, Pete; you've met the only people who could have dug the anonymous graves. I've already mentioned what brought them together—that letter from a Mr. John Drew in New York State to a Miss Lulu Riley at El Rancho Verde.

There was no Lulu Riley on the ranch. But Penny wasn't surprised about the letter. Letters periodically arrived for people who weren't there, tourists who expected to stop at the ranch and didn't, or people who confused it with other dude ranches.

The Lulu Riley letter lay on a reading room table a few days, then Penny crossed out the *Please Forward* and wrote: *Addressee Unknown—Return to Sender*, on the envelope and sent it back to Verde with Luke Reardon the next time he happened by—thereby setting off the chain reaction that led to you flying to Cincinnati and brought me to this mountain cabin, penning these lines and trying to ignore the screams of a homicidal maniac.

This was a week before another un-called-for letter lay on the reading room table—the one from a Mr. Trebor Noslowsky, at 944 West 104th Street, New York City, to a Miss Deborah Sanger, at El Rancho Verde.

The Lulu Riley letter went back to New York State, back to the eager hands

of Mr. John Victor Drew. He tore it open and re-read the lines he had penned:

Dear Miss Riley, (or should I say Mrs. Drew?)

Dad never expected to hear from me again, so he left no forwarding address. I would like to see him again before settling down. Could you please send me your present whereabouts?

Respectfully,

John Victor Drew

John Drew still wanted to see his dad again. He packed his GI discharge, along with some clothes and a dog, in a second-hand auto and set forth across the highways of America to personally pick up the trail of his dad.

Anywhere along the route he might have driven off a bridge, fallen in love or come down with the mumps—and this would be nothing but a recital of the pleasantries the Big Guy and I enjoyed at El Rancho Verde.

Instead, he was parked on the narrow road, obstructing my trip back to the ailing Big Guy with the doctor. Doc McKeever tensed at my side in the jeep and yelled: "Charley, look out!"

I was already on my feet, all my weight jamming the brake pedal down—and that brought us skidding along the ruts to a stop about three inches behind the tail-light of a jalopy.

"Damned idiot!" McKeever growled. A short, wiry man with a clipped mustache, he shot me an angry glance now. "Didn't want to take this crazy night ride in the first place! Your friend better have something more than a stomach ache!"

I banged the jeep's horn.

Nothing happened.

That was a spot for it. The ruts skirted a cliff ledge. Solid wall to the left, and nothing but about twelve inches of grass between us and a thousand-foot drop to the right.

I crawled over Doc and stepped to the grass and inched forward along the side of the jalopy—until a dog barked into my face from the front window, almost sending me back off the ledge.

I palmed the dog's cold nose back and down, and glimpsed a lanky shadow clutching the steering wheel with both arms as if it was going to tear loose and

fly away without him. He just stared. "Push this heap on!" I snapped at him. "I have a doctor back there and a sick guy waiting for him."

The head part of the shadow swiveled toward me. I could make out rolling eye-whites and a gaping mouth full of teeth.

He gulped in the darkness, "Can't move. Not into space—"

He meant it. He wanted to hang onto that wheel and have the willies. I yelled back for the doctor to follow us, then I inched around the jalopy's headlamps and crowded into the driver's seat, jamming the willies and his dog over hard.

I could hear them both panting as I tooled the auto past the ledge, in and around half a dozen peaks and over the three other ledges. It wasn't until we were halfway up the last long climb through a forest of Christmas trees that he began sitting straight and fairly calm at my side.

"Thanks," he said. "I'd have had to stay there 'till morning. Couldn't help it."

"Scared of high places?"

"Scared."

After awhile, as we squeezed through the pass and started the roller coaster down toward the ranch, he volunteered: "I just graduated from a GI hospital ward. Something like that in the night still comes hard."

I asked him: "What's your beef? At least you graduated. Most of the rest of us don't know if we could pass anything but the entrance exam."

He seemed to like that.

"I'm John Drew. The collie's Drew 42. That stands for forty-second in his line, according to our farm's records—although it isn't our farm any longer. 42 and I are trying to pick up dad's trail. He sold the farm and headed for this ranch. I guess he never expected me to get out of the ward, or else he'd have left word for me. Hamilton Drew."

"He's not here now, kid."

"They probably left. How I heard it, she used to stay here a lot."

"She?"

"Her maiden name was Lulu Riley. Guess she's my step-mother now. They were supposed to be married at the ranch when he arrived. You hear about it?"

The jalopy's headlights caught Penny

standing in the open doorway of the reading room and waving.

"It'll have to keep, kid," I told him, braking before the door. "Just stay out of the way awhile. Things are going to happen."

TWO and a half hours later things had happened. Never mind the details, Pete. McKeever knew his stuff. The Big Guy's busted appendix lay burning in the incinerator. The Big Guy lay in Penny Green's room, and it stank of ether.

The rest of us were in the kitchen, gulping hot coffee, and listening to young Johnny Drew, who turned out to be a bony lank featuring red hair. He wore large hands and a weatherbeaten neck and ears that cupped out. His eyes had a habit of gluing themselves to other people's eyes for long, blinkless spells.

"It was a shock to me, I tell you," he told Rose Senger's slanted eyes, "when I came home and found Mr. Ferruchi and his family settled on dad's farm. He told me dad had been lonely. My brother, Tom, was killed at Iwo. And me, well dad never expected to hear my voice again. So he joined this club. You write a letter and—"

A romance club. An old gaffer, with most of his oats sowed, with his family raised; a Dutchess County squire with antecedents who probably rode cabin class on the Mayflower—and he fell into the clutches of some snapshots and a series of sultry letters.

"She's real beautiful." The kid flushed, his eyes switching to Vivian Schultz, who was stooped over, trying to establish a grunt and bark rapport with Drew 42. "Mr. Ferruchi saw her picture. Said Miss Riley was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen." The kid shifted his stare to Penny. "But you'd know that, ma'am. All her letters came from here."

Penny set down her coffee mug and asked quietly: "You say your dad's name is Hamilton Drew?"

"Yes, ma'am. You'd think she'd be young for dad, but he's a fine-looking man. Folks always turned around to look at him a second time."

Penny left the kitchen and Johnny

Drew produced a crumpled letter from his jacket pocket. "I guess I wouldn't even have known about this ranch if Mrs. Ferruchi didn't happen to find this in a crack in the attic." His eyes paused briefly at the eyes of Lolita, Pedro, Miguel, Ramon and Efraim, who were watching him somberly. "Don't know if I ought to show it, but she writes a mighty sentimental letter."

He showed it. The poor slob was trying to justify his dad's December romance. From Lulu Riley to Hamilton Drew, dated about five weeks before that night, probably her last letter to the poor old guy.

Dearest Hamilton,

Yes, darling! Yes, yes, yes! But hurry—please? I can scarcely wait to hold your hands, to hear your voice, to (shameless hussy that I am!) be crushed into melting ecstasy by your powerful arms . . .

I want to sit at your feet by the open fire and hear you sift the world's follies through your wisdom as you have done so magnificently in your letters. I want to play chess with you, hear symphonies with you, gallop over the desert at your side and camp under a canopy of chill starlight—

El Rancho Verde, darling. In Verde, California. I will meet you there on the 5th. Don't drive, sweetheart. Sell your car and fly to Reno. But now, my dearest—now!

*Your own,
Lulu*

Doc McKeever passed the letter to Rose Senger, frozen-faced, and said, "Mighty sentimental."

Rose Senger's eyes filled with mirth as she read it. They filled with something else after she passed it to Vivian Schultz and treated young Drew to a smile that put them alone together.

Vivian Schultz said: "Mmmmm. Real ughiam!"

Penny returned to the kitchen with the guest register. "He was here after all, John. Came the fifth and took Cabin Three. It was late at night. He'd had difficulty getting a ride in from Verde, as I recall it. I was too sleepy to get a very good look at him."

"But you saw him after that," the kid said, staring into her troubled eyes.

"That's just it," she frowned. "He—" She broke off as the sound that was to change El Rancho Verde from a Shangri-

la to a ghouls' paradise pulsed through the night, an eerie, wailing sob that climbed a ladder of agony stretching up to the moon.

"Damn coyote!" Pedro grunted, reaching for his carbine propped behind the door.

"More like a wolf," Doc McKeever opined, facing the night-filled window.

Vivian Schultz asked: "What happened to the darling collie?"

We all looked at the open door.

"Charley," Penny said.

I grabbed a flashlight and nodded to Pedro, who followed me into the night with his inevitable carbine.

Later, I heard a lot of opinions about it; local citizens arguing whether a dog could follow a month-old scent. The doubters claimed the wind that night had brought a fresh scent.

Whichever it was, Drew 42 had found his way to the patch of loam behind Cabin Three. He dug a little with his paws, then sat back and howled—then returned to the hole and dug a little more.

By the time we traced his howls to Cabin Three about a cubic foot of soil, humus and pebbles had been dug away.

My beam splashed over the hole and Pedro breathed: "Hot damn!"

He ran back toward the ranch house while I got the ash shovel from the fireplace in the cabin and went to Drew 42's assistance.

A lot of people were standing around in the darkness when I removed my last shovelful from the hole.

Johnny Drew's voice broke the stillness from behind me. "Dad never had any use for guns. In the first war he was a conscientious objector."

Doc McKeever dropped to his knees alongside the body in the hole and fingered the blackish clot on the man's forehead.

"Can't tell for sure. But it looks like a very small caliber—a .22 or a .25. Nobody carries that kind of gun in this part of the country."

"Someone does," I said dryly.

"Just saw him that one time," Penny Green's voice spoke dully. "Next morning there was a note on the bed saying he'd been called away unexpectedly. I still have the note"

"—called by the Lord," the kid's voice spoke solemnly.

"But I never saw anybody who called herself Lulu Riley," Penny went on. "Not then or ever. In the ten years I've had this ranch there's never been a person on it named Riley."

"Someone better get Sheriff Hoyt," Doc McKeever suggested, climbing out of the anonymous grave.

"Charley," Penny said.

"I'll take the jeep," I told her.

Drew 42 aimed his nose at the sky and howled. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Incendiary Penny

"CHARLES WILSON—f r o m whereabouts?" Sheriff Jasper B. Hoyt was asking me while I strained all the weary muscles in my brain and hoped nothing would go wrong.

"Back East."

"Upper New York State?"

"Trenton, New Jersey."

"But you've been in upper New York State?"

"Not that I can remember."

"I've seen you before someplace, Charley."

I sat very still and tried not to look like a guy making an effort not to look like anyone the sheriff ever saw before. He was a slender man with a large nose hooking down over tight lips toward a chin that bulged as if it wanted to meet it. He wore a black Stetson over absolutely no hair. He wore a black and green checked shirt, tan whipcord slacks and the butt of a large automatic jutting forward from an open holster on the left side of his belt.

"I've been a lot of places," I told him.

"It'll come back to me," he smiled tightly. "These things always come back to me. Him, too," he added, nodding toward the door of Penny Green's room, beyond which the Big Guy lay in bed. "I've seen him before, also."

"Probably in a fight."

"Probably. I like to watch fights. You his manager?"

"Until the hooks took his voice."

"And now you drift."

"That's right. A job here and a job there."

"Let's talk about here. In the three weeks you've been here, you've been in and out of most of the cabins. You've spoken to all of the people on the ranch." He sat back and made a temple of his tan hands. "I have a lot of faith in first impressions, Charley. They usually become lost as we grow accustomed to people; but you haven't been here long enough for that. Suppose you just ramble. I'll listen."

Smart?

Pete, this guy was as smooth as cream pouring from a pitcher. He didn't want my first impressions any more than he wanted my autograph on his nude skull. He wanted to sit there and watch my mind at work, in an effort to match that against the vague notion he'd seen me before.

This was the morning after we'd exhumed Hamilton Drew. This was Hoyt's last interrogation, probably because my late arrival on the scene more or less eliminated me as a suspect.

From the moment he appeared on the ranch with five deputies, he'd been functioning like a well oiled clock. He'd kept us all isolated from one another until the interrogations. They'd photographed the body where it lay, covered Cabin Three for prints, then taken the body into Cabin Three where Doc McKeever performed a rough autopsy.

Hamilton Drew's moldering clothes were enroute to the Berkeley police lab for analysis.

All the weapons on the ranch had been collected and fired and their slugs matched to the .22 slug they dug out of Hamilton Drew's brain.

Each of us had been asked to write a copy of the Lulu Riley letter to Hamilton Drew with both our right and left hands—and the results were compared with "Lulu's" handwriting.

A request had been sent Hamilton Drew's bank in Dutchess County for serial numbers on any large bills, traveler's checks, bonds or other securities he may have drawn before leaving for California. Other checks were being made into bank deposits, security boxes, bond holdings and income tax returns of the

people on the ranch. Every bank and broker's office on the west coast was being checked for links to the folk on the ranch.

Thorough? The guy was even checking into backgrounds deeply enough to find out who liked symphony music and who played chess!

Facing him there in the reading room, I felt as if I was sitting on eggshells. I had a board of editors in my brain to pass on every word that approached my lips. I told him Penny Green seemed the most normal person on the ranch. I told him I thought Vivian Schultz had been dropped on her head as a kid and that Rose Senger was full of queer spots. I suggested that Lolita used her broken English with too much sophistication to be entirely credible and that Pedro was a shrewd cookie. About Miguel, Ramon and Efraim, I shrugged.

He gave me that tight smile and shook his head when I concluded. "Still can't place you, Charley. You think any of the women on the ranch might be Lulu Riley?"

The editors in my brain told me to sit still and say nothing.

"Okay, Charley. You'll be around, won't you?"

I glanced at the door that stood between us and the Big Guy. "I'll be around, Sheriff."

He nodded and I walked the eggshells into Penny Green's room where the Big Guy regarded me somberly. "They change your bed yet?" I whispered. He nodded. I slid the .38 from inside my belt to under his pillow. "They didn't think of personal frisks," I whispered. "But they may."

One of his ice-chip eyes closed in a slow wink.

NEXT morning the deputies dug out the second old man from under the floor of Cabin Seven.

The only mark of identification on him was the label of a New Orleans tailor in what remained of his suit. He'd been under Cabin Seven a lot longer than Hamilton Drew had been under the loam beside Cabin Three, but he hadn't been shot.

His skull had been neatly skewered.

Later the same morning they exhumed the third corpse from a lime pit that had been an outdoor latrine a year earlier.

This one was just pieces of skeleton; enough to show it was male and elderly—but not enough to show the actual cause of death.

That tore it.

I heard the blow-off that afternoon because it happened to be time for the Big Guy's penicillin and streptomycin hypos and I was the lad who attended to those details. Sheriff Hoyt's voice came through the door of the reading room, full of needles.

"This is the letter from the so-called Lulu Riley," I heard him say. "And this is the note you tell me Hamilton Drew left on his bed that night. Same handwriting. You trying to tell me he wrote the letter as well as the note?"

"I mean to tell you nothing but what I've already told you," Penny Green's voice answered him heatedly. "The only time I saw him was that night. You've tested my handwriting. You know there's no resemblance."

"A minor point. A confederate in Verde could have done that. We've tested the typing on the letter's envelope also, Miss Green, and the address was written on your office typewriter."

"Anybody can get to it. All I can tell you is that I didn't!"

"Going back over your statement, here, you say he arrived about two in the morning and you'd been sleeping. You say he told you he'd gotten a lift in, but not who gave him the lift. You say you heard no car and saw nobody beside him. You say you gave him the cabin's key and never saw him again. Your cabins are all buried deep in the woods. Do you mean to say you sent a stranger out in the night to find the cabin by himself?"

"I pointed out the trail to him from the door. I offered to take him to it, but he insisted he could find it himself. He was a courteous old man as I remember him. I'd been up until midnight pulling a calf and was grateful of a chance to get back to sleep."

"Miss Green, I have here a ballistics report on the bullet that killed Hamilton Drew and bullets from the guns we rounded up on the ranch. It matches a

bullet from the .22 rifle you had hanging on the wall of this room."

"Anybody could have taken it off the wall that night."

"Anybody on this ranch?"

"On or around it. The front door is never locked. And I told you I sleep soundly."

"Another point, Miss Green. You paint covers for magazines which advertise these correspondence clubs."

"Rose and Vivian write for those magazines—and about twelve million people read them. Why limit it to people on the ranch?"

"Isn't it far fetched to suppose an outsider should be able to intercept mail for this ranch, then be able to appear silently when the elderly victims arrive, rob and kill them with a rifle that hangs on your wall—at a time when you 'happen' to be sleeping too soundly to awaken?"

"All I know is that I didn't kill the old man."

"Or the other old men?"

"Of course not!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Green. I'm afraid I can't ignore the body of evidence we have gathered up to here, circumstantial as it is. You'll have to come to the county seat with me and face arraignment."

There was a long pause while I swabbed the Big Guy with alcohol.

Then Penny asked: "I'll have to leave someone with instructions about the ranch. May I talk with Charley?"

"I'll give you ten minutes," the sheriff said.

She came through the door, closed it behind her and leaned against it, staring at me. I didn't exactly feel like wagging my tail then. It might have cracked some eggshells. She wore a powder-gray riding suit and some of the pale gold hair showed where her gray Stetson tilted back.

"You hear all that?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"I had absolutely nothing to do with it," she said.

I looked at her.

She approached the bed and put her large palm on the Big Guy's forehead, then turned to me with a twisted smile and asked: "How's the Sailor doing, Cash?"

"He's—"

I bit my tongue then and dismissed the board of editors in my brain as a batch of lousy muck-ups.

"Cash Wale and Sailor Duffy," she whispered, and the wise look in her eyes added: *Wanted for murder in Manhattan!*

I WALKED around the other side of the bed and slid my hand under Sailor Duffy's pillow to the smooth chill of my revolver's butt and told Penny Green: "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't care how many men you've shot," her whisper went on. "The important thing I remember about you is you were a brilliant private investigator. That's what I'm talking about."

The Sailor's hand clamped on my wrist. "Listen to her, Cash," he pleaded hoarsely. "Penny's hokay."

I could have moved my gun hand easier if it was caught in a power press. The hand that gripped my wrist had once traded punches for fifteen wild rounds with the world's heavyweight champion.

"So she's got nice curves, king sized!" I snarled at him. "Leggo my wrist. One peep out of her and we're fried in watage!"

"Penny ain't no rat, Cash!"

"All I want is for you to find whoever killed Johnny's father and the others," Penny urged. "I didn't!"

"That's all you want," I said. "Me poking into cop business until they take some pains to comb me out of their hair—and incidentally match my face to the face on a homicide reader in their office. Suppose I say no?"

She said, as if she was tasting the idea and not finding it pleasant, but finding it necessary: "Sailor Duffy can't leave that bed for at least another week. You might get away. He couldn't."

I yanked like crazy at that rod, but the Sailor's hand made my efforts about as useful as an ant trying to nudge over the Empire State Building.

"No, Cash," he whispered hoarsely. "Penny's in a spot. She gotta play 'em how they fall. She ain't no killer, Cash—not Penny, Cash—not Penny, Cash. You can find the killer, Cash. Cash?"

"Shaddup!" I hissed at him. "Leggo

my arm." He released it and I rubbed it, scowling up at that lovely Amazon, who stood looking at me with moisture in her wide eyes. "I want three fast answers. One: can Lolita read English?"

"Of course not! She—"

"Two: do Vivian and Rose knock out livings with their stories?"

"Rose does very well. Vivian depends on alimony. But—"

"Three: did you ever get a letter to Lulu Riley addressed here before?"

Her head shook, toppling drops of wet to her cheeks. "No, Ca—Charley. I'd have noticed a name like that. I—"

Someone knocked on the door and called out: "You'll have to come now, Miss Green."

"One more thing." I waved a finger at her. "I nose around and it reads you're it—all bets are off. And don't get illusions about throwing us to the wolves. One peep out of you, I'll manufacture some quick evidence that'll pull you down with us—and don't think I can't!"

She dropped her face to the Sailor's face. She raised it a few inches, smiling down at him through the wet in her eyes.

"Get well, you big ape!" she whispered.

Then she was gone leaving me to gape at the wet bubbling to the Big Guy's eyes. I didn't say anything. What could I say?

Pete, I could have stepped through a door and started running. But you know how it's been with the Sailor and me.

On the other hand, sooner or later Sheriff Hoyt was going to remember where he'd seen us before; in a pile of *wanted* readers on his desk, full-face and profiles.

Again on the other hand, if Penny Green found the pressure on her too great, she could always throw us to the wolves and say she'd seen us at the ranch around the time Johnny's dad arrived, but had been afraid to mention it until she was safe in the county jail on account we'd threatened her.

And she kept in touch, Pete. The first I knew of it was when I emerged from the Verde telegraph office after sending you that wire. This was the day after they'd taken her away. I was crawling into the jeep, when Luke Reardon's Model A pulled alongside.

"Charley, yuh got an hour?"

"What for?"

"Jest come from the county seat. Penny asked me to talk to yuh."

I crawled in beside him in the Ford and he headed out of town.

"Where we going, Luke?"

"My mine, Charley. Want yuh should know where to contact me in case Penny needs somethin' sudden-like."

"Thought you sold your mine."

"That was in Nevady. This one's where I live. Ain't gonna develop it unless I go broke or Penny stops bein' so danged stubborn an' becomes Mrs. Reardon."

Facing me across two tumblers of rye in his cabin, he said:

"They ain't set bail yet, Charley, but Penny don't act anxious to leave that calaboso. Told me to tell you if anythin' develops let her know. Now, what's she mean by that, Charley?"

"Probably about the ranch."

"No. How she said it, Charley, she meant about her chances of getting outta the calaboso."

"It beats me," I told him innocently.

"Wimmin!" He scowled.

We kicked around the subject of women awhile and then he drove me back to Verde. But each day after that he was out to the ranch with another cryptic word from Penny. The love-sick old duffer must have lived on the steps of that county jail.

And that was the prod, Pete. I had to flush Lulu Riley into the open. I had to before Penny Green cracked. I had to do it quietly enough to keep Sheriff Hoyt from reviving his interest in where he'd seen my face before.

That's all I had to do.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Rose by Any Other Name

TAKE it to one week from the evening they carted Penny away, the twentieth of the month. At four that afternoon mama Wale's little black sheep, Cash, was upholstering a reading room easy chair I had *de*-upholstered that morning. Sailor Duffy was occupying another reading room chair, squinting at a Penny Green magazine cover.

The Sailor was a victim of that new surgical therapy which makes the patient get off the bed as soon as possible after the operation and move around. This was his third day out of bed and he was coming back fast.

The action started when Vivian Schultz bustled in and squealed: "Ooh, Charley, you brought mail!" The words melted into gurgles and coos as she found two postcards and one letter addressed to her. The noises stopped when she singled one letter from among the rest and cocked her bird-like face at it. "Deborah Sanger," she murmured. Then, to me: "Charley, do we have a new guest?"

Business of me gaping at her vacantly.

"This letter for a Miss Deborah Sanger. Is she a new guest?"

"No. Maybe she's coming."

"Maybe who's coming?"

This was Rose Senger from the doorway, her hand linked in the hand of Johnny Drew, who had become a paying guest in Cabin Four, having no place else in particular to go.

"Oh, it's you, dear. You have a big letter from a man in New Orleans," Vivian announced brightly, watching young John's face turn almost as purple as Rose's lipstick.

Rose released the kid's paw and cat-walked to the mail table. I got a "Hi, Nasty." The Sailor got: "One of my stories, Slugger?" His gape flicked to her, then back to the magazine.

She picked her letter out of the pack, then lifted another and asked the world at large: "Who's Deborah Sanger?"

"Charley says she's a new guest—en-route, dear," Vivian told her.

"I said she *might* be someone on the way," I defended myself.

Lolita waddled in with the Sailor's supper on a tray and demanded: "What kinds of crazy beesiness goings on, Carlos? Thees chairs okay. Why you fooling weeth heem?"

I ignored her, my eyes riveted to Rose, as she cat-walked back to blushing Johnny in the doorway. She seemed to feel my eyes prodding her. She halted in mid-stride, glanced at the letters in her hand, then turned and spread her wry smile around the room.

"Sanger. Senger. I almost walked

out with it," she chirped casually to me.

She returned it to the mail table. On her way back to Johnny she noticed the Sailor had put down the mag to get his meat hooks on the food tray. She picked it up and squealed: "Why, Slugger, you darling! It *is* one of my—" She frowned at it, then favored him with a smile that contained all the sincerity of a loan shark's smirk. "You don't mind if I borrow it, do you, Slugger?" Before the Sailor's gape could crystalize into a nod or head-shake, she took Johnny's hand and crooned: "Let's go, dear."

They went.

Vivian Schultz raised the Deborah Sanger letter between her tiny eyes and the fading daylight in the window.

"Big, scrawling hand. Male. Vain. Accustomed to dominating people." She spelled out a few words visible through the envelope. "Had to go to Cincinnati to—humph! That much is obvious from the postmark. Bossy man. Hmmm. Deborah must be one of those clinging vines. Do you like clinging vines, Charley?" she smiled at me, tossing the letter back to the table.

"You got one beeg nervous!" Lolita scowled at her, waddling to the table and taking the letter. "Whynchoo mind you own beesiness?"

Vivian returned Lolita's fierce stare, walking around her and back to the door. When Vivian reached the door, she said: "Ugh! Blop! Ooof!" The door slammed behind her.

"Crazy womans!" Lolita scowled. She still held the letter. "Sanger—who shee, Carlos?"

"I dunno."

A shrewd light entered her brown eyes. "What kind monkey beesiness with the chair, Carlos?"

"Just fixing the padding, Lolita."

She aimed a brown thumb at the Sailor. "Heem batter?"

"He's through with the hypos."

Lolita waddled back to the kitchen where she puckered her heavy brows at the Deborah Sanger letter still in her clutches. She poked her head out the kitchen window and yelled for Pedro. In a few minutes he followed his carbine in.

"What is it now, my little desert flower?" he asked in Spanish.

"*Conoces una Señorita Deborah Sanger, Pedro?*"

His fierce mustache moved slowly from side to side. "Who is it?"

"Burro! Would I be asking if I knew? That little Carlos who carries a *pistola* inside his clothes, and whom neither of us trust, is making a secret business of this letter. Don't look now, my *querido*, but for a *duro* I will wager he is hiding behind the kitchen door and spying on us now. Can it have something to do with the *Señorita Penny*?"

"With my own hands I will pluck his heart from his body if it does," Pedro muttered darkly. He jerked his head. "Throw it in the fire, the damn *carta*."

"But maybe it is all innocent and I am imagining dangers?"

"It is only a letter. In the fire, woman! Before I put my hand to you!"

I was in the kitchen—from behind the kitchen door, of course—before Lolita could move. "Any coffee, Lolita? Hi, Pedro. Everything under control outside?"

"Never you minding!" He scowled at me. "The outsides, she is Pedro's troubles. You steeck to the eensides." In fast Spanish, from the side of his mouth to his motionless spouse: "I think you have reason, my little cactus blossom. Into the fire with it."

But I stood between Lolita and the stove.

"No coffee!" she told me heatedly. "*Después. Later.*"

She waddled past me toward the stove and I plucked the letter from her hand.

"Made a mistake, didn't you, Lolita?"

She went through a little pantomime of surprise. "Oh! I asking Pedro eef he knowing a Sanger womans. Pedro saying no."

I bore the letter out of the kitchen, hearing Pedro's low-voiced Spanish behind me: "It could be an unfortunate accident if this carbine went off in his back—no?"

"No! That kind of accident brings you to a room full of poisoned gas, you burro!"

The Sailor was munching his supper in solitude.

"This letter, pal," I told him, tossing it to the mail table. "I want you to con-

centrate on who looks at it, who touches it and what anyone says or does about it. Catch?"

"Who ya talkin' about, Cash?"

"Lulu Riley."

"But that letter's for a dame named Sanger, Cash."

"Same difference. She probably uses a different name on each new sucker. The main thing is for you to keep an eye on that letter. Okay?"

"Hokay!"

THAT letter you'd mailed from Cincinnati, Pete, the one from Trebor Noslow, said he was enroute with assets to meet and wed the beautiful Deborah, that he'd arrive on the twentieth—and this was the twentieth.

The night they took Penny away I sat up alongside the Sailor most of it, beating what brains I had against the wall around Lulu Riley.

She was intelligent enough to concentrate on lonely old codgers with assets and without personal ties. She was clever enough to lure them—with assets—from all over the United States with nothing more than some phony snapshots and some torrid letters as bait. She was tough enough to murder them as they came. Intelligent, clever and tough. I could assume she was careful enough to have her tracks so well covered that by merely sitting tight she was practically invisible.

Which meant I had to flush her into the open.

But *how*?

I sat up alongside the Sailor and worried the problem like a puppy worrying an old shoe, with about as much effect, until just before daybreak when the Sailor cocked a sleepy eye at me and rumbled: "You oughta get some shut-eye, Cash."

"Not until I find an angle, Sailor."

"At least one thing, Cash."

"What?"

"They ain't gonna be no more killin's."

"That's a thought for posterity. That's—"

My mind made a sharp U-turn and roared back to his statement. Of course there could be no more killings! Not until the law-heat was completely off El Rancho Verde and the people on it. Which meant there could be no more suckers enroute to

El Rancho Verde! Which meant, if Lulu had a victim on the hook now he had to be taken off the hook fast—because not only could there be no more killings; there could be no more letters!

Which lead to the next obvious question: had there been any recent uncalled for letters?

And that was bingo! As I told you, the return address of that Trebor Noslow to Deborah Sanger letter stuck in my memory on account it was around the corner from my old hat-rack.

Which reduced it to a question of time—if Deborah and Lulu were ditto. We'd found Johnny's dad the night before, which meant Lulu-Deborah, until the night before, had been confidently going ahead, buttering up Trebor Noslow for a cross-country trip. If, again, Deborah and Lulu were one. Which gave her less than twenty-four hours to get him off the hook, stop him from making that cross-country trip or even writing her any more letters—if!

Your answer to my wire cancelled the *if*.

Which meant I had a wedge. The letter you sent from Cincinnati telling Lulu-Deborah that old Noslow was enroute—with assets—had to flush her into the open. If she ignored the old sucker when he arrived and sat tight in the hope he would finally carry his broken heart away, she was running the risk that Sheriff Hoyt would become interested in this old gaffer in search of a mail-order spouse.

Hoyt might get hold of all Deborah's mail and snapshots to Noslow and put them through the police lab in Berkeley and come up with fingerprints that matched the prints of one of the El Rancho Verde menagerie.

So Lulu-Deborah had to get to Trebor Noslow first. But before that she had to read his unexpected letter—and there it lay on the reading room table.

All she had to do was get it.

Neat?

I thought so.

Vivian Schultz had toyed with it. Rose Senger had almost gotten away with it. Lolita and Pedro had almost destroyed it. Of course, if Penny Green was Lulu-Deborah, this was just a dry run—but I had to assume Penny was on the level.

So it lay on the reading room table, with the Sailor munching his supper and keeping, I hoped, his ice-chip eyes glued to it.

And I was pressed against logs alongside an open window of Cabin Six, listening to Rose Senger tell young Johnny Drew: "Run along now, honey. Mama has work to do and you'd just be in the way."

"But you told me you couldn't go on with the story until I told you how it felt when they gave me the electric shocks."

"This is a different story, dream boy. All sweetness and light. Please? Oh, Johnny, don't go away mad!"

There was a pause during which I thought of purple lipstick. Darkness was gathering about me fast. Night dropped like a curtain into this deep valley. A cold wind rustled down from the Christmas trees and crawled up my pants legs. I heard the cabin door open and shut. I glimpsed Johnny's lank form ambling down the dirt trail. He stopped once to kick at a pebble, then vanished among the tree shadows below the cabin.

The window filled with yellow glare.

I could hear Rose moving around inside. Heard something like twigs snapping, moved to the window and peeked. Twigs I had heard for a fact. She was stooped before the fireplace, arranging the twigs in a little tepee. She tore a page out of the magazine she had taken from Sailor Duffy, crumpled it lengthwise and slid it into the tepee of twigs. She struck a match and brought it toward the edge of paper—but not quite to it.

My hand got in the way.

Her slanted eyes flicked to the open window, back to me.

"Charley," she breathed.

With my free hand I brushed aside the tepee and retrieved the crumpled page. I released her hand and we both arose. The match flare touched her fingers and she dropped it with a little cry. My shoe extinguished it.

She put five dabs of purple nail polish on my arm.

I shrugged them off and crossed the cabin to its lone easy chair. I drew the .38 from under my belt and set it on the chair's arm and told her: "You stay right there, Cuddles. I wouldn't like to spoil all your plans by giving you a permanent limp,

but if you make a break while I find out why you snagged this book from Slugger, that's what you'll get. Believe me?"

"Charley, it's just that I—"

"Don't tell me. I like to find these things out for myself. It feeds my ego. Just stay near the fireplace and brood."

I glanced at the crumpled page. On top was the author's name: Rose Senger. I turned it over. On top of the other side was the story's title:

DEATH HAS SWEET LIPS

So far—nothing.

DEATH HAS SWEET LIPS

My eye ran down the page and came to:

"With tears of happiness streaming down her cheeks, Lulu wrote:

Dearest Lover,

Yes, darling! Yes, yes, yes! But hurry—please? I can scarcely wait to hold your hands, to hear your voice, to (shameless hussy that I am!) be crushed into melting ecstasy by your powerful arms. . . ."

IT WENT on, but that was enough.

How often do you get to eye a specimen like that? I glanced up at Rose Senger, who was gazing thoughtfully at me, and said: "Miss Riley, I presume."

"Don't be an ass!" she snapped.

I sighed and leaned back. "Okay, Cuddles. You tell it."

"What's there to tell? That's it. I write stories. That was part of a story I wrote a year ago."

"About Lulu Riley?"

"About anyone. That one happened to have a character I called Lulu Riley."

"I don't believe in that kind of coincidence, Cuddles."

"Who the hell does? And stop calling me Cuddles!"

She fumbled in the pockets of her levis and came up with a crumpled cigarette pack. She drew one and set it between her wryly turned lips. I wedged the .38 back in my belt and crossed the cabin with a match.

"Deborah Sanger, too?" I asked, holding the flare to the end of her cigarette.

Ping!

She leaned forward to get the light—but the light was gone. I was just holding part of a match stem with my fingers. Her purple lips held nothing.

We stood like that an instant, staring blankly into each other's eyes while the door opened.

"Hey," Rose Senger squealed.

She squealed it as I thrust her on her way down the floor. A second *ping!* zipped to my ear. A vase on a shelf behind where we'd been standing cracked in the middle and toppled down over us.

I didn't think I could reach the reading lamp alongside the easy chair before a third *ping!* found one of us on the floor. My hand didn't think so either. My hand was educated to correct such differences in time and space. Somehow, the .38 was in it.

The bulb shattered into jagged spark—followed by blackness—as my .38 roar contributed to the cacaphony.

The third *ping!* sucked a cork from the wood of the wall behind us.

Now that my eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness I could see through the open window to a lattice-work of moonlight among the tree shadows and something that seemed to be moving among the shadows.

Sprawled on the floor as I was, I had to aim by sighting. I fired, and squinted over the muzzle-flash through the window at moonstreaks and tree shadows. Nothing seemed to be moving now but the wind.

Rose Senger's sweated arm found my shoulders in the darkness.

"Deborah Sanger, too, Charley," she whispered. "Another mag and another story. Do you wonder I tried to sneak the letter out of the reading room?"

"Later!" I growled, trying to find movement among the tree shadows and trying to shrug off her arm.

It wouldn't shrug.

"Whoever shot at us won't come close, now that he knows you have a gun, Charley. I want to talk about that Lulu Riley business. I've been aching to tell someone ever since Johnny read that letter. I recognized it then, of course, but—"

Her arm tightened around my shoulders.

"Listen to me, Charley. Can you imagine how I felt when I saw that name, Deborah Sanger, on this letter today? I've written a lot of stories that included

a lot of letters—and it's beginning to look too crazily coincidental. It's too damn personal, as if whoever lured those poor old men here was setting me up as a fall guy.

"And that's all, Charley. Except that I'm no longer frightened. Isn't that funny? Someone may be waiting out there to shoot at us if we try to leave the cabin, so we can't leave, can we? We just have to sit here in the darkness and wait. All we can do is sit here and relax—"

She brought her other arm around my neck. I drew my hand back and asked: "Know anyone on the ranch who makes it a point to read all your stories?"

"Just Penny. She's illustrated a lot of them. But let's drop that, shall we? Just relax, Charley."

I pushed her backwards and felt my way to the doorway.

"Some other time, Cuddles. At the moment I'm more interested in Vital's statistics than Kinsey's. But I'll take a raincheck on the relaxation—"

I turned the knob, shoved the door and followed my .38 into the night.

My head exploded. The porch floor came up and slammed my chest. It rolled around me and pressed against my back. Hands tugged at my clothes. Feet pattered away from me.

The shadows of night crept out of the forest and dropped in my eyes one after the other, until the world of motionless, soundless, unyielding blackness. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Noslow Dynamite

YOUR eyes suddenly open and blink adjustment to the shadows of night. Gradually, you grow aware of the wind swooping down from the treetops. You begin to feel boards pressing up into your back. A tiny prisoner in your skull is trying to dig his way out with a dull pick.

I raised my head and found myself gazing through six inches of night into Rose Senger's slanted eyes.

"You all right, Charley?" she whispered.

Memory returned then. I searched through my throat until I found my voice.

"How long?" I croaked.

"How long what?"

"Since I walked out the door."

"Just seconds, Charley. When you left, I followed as far as the door to peek out—and saw you lying here."

Seconds. Someone could have done anything to me he—or she—wanted, but had been satisfied with seconds, had been content to hit and run.

I got to my feet and forced the shirt back into my pants and my hand kept passing over the buckle of my belt after the shirt was tucked in—until my mind caught up to my hand *that* was it.

My .38 was gone!

"Charley!" Rose called after me.

"Save it, Cuddles," I yelled over my shoulder, racing down that woodland trail. "Save it for later. I have things to do."

There was only one thing I should have done then. I should have piled Sailor in the jeep and made a break for Nevada and the trackless deserts.

But I couldn't, Pete. When someone takes the trouble to shoot at you, it becomes personal. When that someone borrows your heater by way of a clout on the nobbin, it becomes too damned personal to ignore.

Pedro and the three Mexican hands looked up from a pair of rolling ivories as I stepped over the sill into the bunkhouse. The dice hit a wall and bounced back, a five and a six. Efraim picked two crumpled dollar bills off the floor, leaving two. He rattled the cubes in his cupped palm as Ramon covered the bills, but Pedro's hand on Efraim's arm prevented the throw. I became the target of eight brown eyes.

I'd been coming in steadily. Now I reached Pedro's carbine, which lay on Miguel's bunk. I palmed the bolt area and found it warm. I dropped a clip containing only one cartridge to my palm, then worked the bolt, sending the cartridge that had been in the chamber hopping to Miguel's bunk. The clip in my palm was made to hold five cartridges, .30 caliber.

The carbine leaped from my hand and I scowled down into Pedro's scowl.

"I think you betta keeping you hands offa my stuff pretty queeck. I think mebbe you screams outta here now."

I told him quietly: "Yo pienso que Ud.

viva mas años si Ud. no tirará la carbina a mi otra vez."

His scowl melted a little as his dark eyes dropped to his carbine, then back to me.

"I didn't shoot at you—yet," he said in Spanish. "If I shot at you, you wouldn't be here now. Where did you learn to speak?"

"The carbine was fired within the last ten minutes," I told him in Spanish.

"At a coyote. In the woods beyond Cabin One. The coyote is still there. Did someone shoot at you?"

"There are three bullets in the wall of Cabin Six. The sheriff can match them to bullets fired from your carbine and tell whether the carbine put them in the wall."

"The only bullets around here that came from my carbine are to be found in the coyote beyond Cabin One."

We exchanged long, expressionless stares. Then I said: "During prohibition I worked for a man who used to work for Pancho Villa. That's where I picked up the language."

"Why should someone shoot at you?"

"At me or Rose Senger. Possibly because we had discovered something about whoever killed those three old men."

Pedro brightened and tossed his carbine back to Miguel's bunk. "Then tell this to the *policia* and they will set the *Señorita* Penny free. If the killer shot at you tonight, it can't be her. This proves it!"

"It proves nothing but that someone doesn't like me or Rose Senger."

"If you want to look at it that way, *sí*. But if you—"

"The sheriff will look at it that way. I agree that it seems to indicate Penny is innocent—if she hasn't been released without our knowledge."

"SHE hasn't. That old fool with the locked mine is eating in the *cocina* now. Said he just came from the *calaboso* where he wanted to leave money for her *seguridad*."

"Bail?"

"That is the word. But the *Señorita* told him she felt safer in prison, so he left her there and came here with provisions for the ranch, the old goat." Pedro snapped his fingers and turned bright eyes on Miguel. "Miguel, tell Carlos about that

old hen. Go on. Tell him all about it."

"It was so long ago," Miguel objected.

"This about Vivian Schultz?" I cut in.

"*Sí*," Miguel nodded. "Maybe a month ago. I happened by her cabin. It gives me great curiosity that a woman should wish to converse with beasts. What can they have of interest to say? That the grass is sweeter in this part of the pasture than that?"

"I will feed you grass pretty quick if you don't get to the point, you son of a burro!" Pedro scowled.

"And where will you find the army to help you do this?" Miguel scowled back. He put his thumbs in his belt and strutted between Pedro and myself, turned his back to Pedro and addressed me with elaborate courtesy:

"As I was saying, *Señor*, before this savage interrupted; curiosity led me to glance into her window. The old woman was behaving like a mad one. From the spout of the teakettle on her electric stove was coming much steam. Into this steam she thrust a letter.

"The steam caused the envelope to come open. She glanced at the letter inside, returned it to the envelope, closed the envelope again and I followed her back to the main *casa* where she deposited it on a table in the room of books. This is the trivial matter this threatener of his betters would have me tell you."

"When did you say this happened, Miguel?"

"Near the time you arrived on the *rancho*. It can be of no serious importance."

"Of no serious importance?" Pedro howled. "Have you never attended the *gringo* cinema, you burro? Out of a little thing like that the *detectivo* attaches the greatest significance! The whole world understands these things, while you worry which end of a pasture has sweeter grass! Burro!"

I left them arguing.

I circled through the woods until I came to Cabin One, a vacant cabin that lay deeper in the woods than the others. I spent about ten minutes there, doing things to the bed with some logs, a wastepaper basket, a pillow and a mop. When I was through, in the dim light from the window it looked like a gray-headed man

sleeping soundly, face down in the bed.

And Lulu-Deborah had to walk into this trap, Pete. I was betting three lives that she would! . . .

Vivian Schultz eyed me brightly from the wicker chair alongside the reading room fireplace.

"Your big friend *talked*, Charley! Isn't that mmmmm?"

The Sailor wasn't in the easy chair where I'd left him. The door of Penny's room was shut. I opened it and saw the Sailor on his back in bed, snoring. On the table alongside his bed was an empty water tumbler. Back in the reading room, Vivian Schultz continued to eye me brightly.

"What did he say?" I breathed.

"Just that I should watch the letter for you. He explained if he had to take the sleeping tablet, he couldn't." Her tiny eyes were glued happily to my face, as I forced myself to move casually to the mail table and riffle through the three letters there; two addressed to Penny and one to the ranch.

A hundred questions elbowed each other toward my lips. What got out first was: "Sleeping tablet? Who said he needed a sleeping tablet?"

"Oh, that was an idea I had, Charley! There is no better healer than sleep, you know." She wrinkled her nose in what would have been an expression of cunning intimacy when she was twenty years younger. "As a matter of fact, I practiced a little deception on him; told him the doctor said he should have it. And then he talked!"

"With his own mouth," I breathed.

"Isn't that wonderful? Real primitive. Torpid grunts—and gestures, too!"

"And you watched the letter," slipped out of my busy little brain. "What letter?"

She waved airily at the mail table. "One of those, I suppose. Why did you want it watched, Charley?"

THE parade of questions came to a sudden halt against my teeth. I swallowed them. I told my hands to stay away from her throat. I had to tell them twice. I told my face to remain blank. I told the hoarse scream wriggling up my throat to drop back to my stomach and drown itself.

I told her: "Slugger made a mistake.

His not talking came from being punched too often. Along with not talking, he sometimes imagines things. Maybe all that to-do about that letter this afternoon worked on his mind."

"That letter to Deborah Sanger, Charley? I was wondering what happened to it."

"Sent it back to Verde," I lied. "There was no point leaving it here."

"Penny usually left such letters here a few days," she said primly.

"To give you a chance to steam them open and read them?"

That ended the light chatter.

She came out of the wicker chair, her eyes growing dull, her mouth lax.

"You said—"

"What you heard me say."

She said: "You slimy, snooping, filthy little—" The door slammed behind her back.

The Sailor continued to resist my efforts to awaken him. I opened Penny's desk, pulled out her guest register and carefully printed, in the next vacant space:

20th—Mr. Trebor Noslow—New York City—Cabin One

I laid the open register alongside the three letters on the mail table.

I sat in the wicker chair Vivian Schultz had vacated and tried to arrange into a pattern the disordered impressions in my mind; whether Vivian Schultz had steamed open Johnny Drew's original letter to Lulu Riley from curiosity—or because she was Lulu Riley. Whether I had accepted too readily Pedro's explanation for his recently fired carbine; whether Rose Senger's actions in her cabin had hidden motives; whether anybody but Penny Green could have been on the right spot at the right time to do all that Lulu Riley had to have done; whether Lolita had more reason than intuition to assume the Noslow to Sanger letter was pure dynamite.

I tried to weave these questions into a pattern, but they all added up to confusion—and then I glanced up and saw Luke Reardon in the doorway, mopping his thin lips with a blue handkerchief and studying me with the slivers of metal he used for eyes.

"What makes the critter so darn unrea-

sonable, Charley?" he drawled slowly in my direction.

"What critter?"

"Penny. Won't take bail. Won't lemme hire a durn lawyer. Says she's better off where she is and you're better'n bail or a lawyer."

"She says that?"

His gaze reached across the room and pressed steadily against my eyes.

"More, Charley. Seems they found a stack o' bonds in a safe deposit box she had back in New Yawk. Says it was all through a broker back East, but the man's outta business now an' plumb dissappeared. So Hoyt's gonna change that material witness charge he's holdin' her on to straight homicide—an' she asked me to tell yuh she's plumb nervous about it."

"Okay."

"If yuh can clear Penny, somehow—an' that's somethin' I ain't figgered yet—my advice is do it right quick, Charley."

"That's your advice."

"I don't know what Penny thinks you can do, Charley, but I figger she's makin' the mistake of her life countin' on you instead of a lawyer. No hard feelin's, but that's how I figger it."

"That's your opinion."

He hefted the three letters off the mail table. "I'll take these to Penny in the maw'nin'. She gave me a limited power of attorney to buy provisions an' collect rents an' sorta keep things movin'. I'll keep in touch, Charley."

"That'll be nice."

I watched him out the door, then waited until his Model A came alive and rumbled away through the night up toward the pass.

The Sailor still snored.

I grabbed the Winchester from over the mantle, checked that it was loaded, stepped into the wind-swept night and made a wide circle through the woods to Cabin One.

In the cabin, I sat on the floor in the corner between the bureau and the far wall. I faced the window over the bed and the cabin's front door to the right. I was all ready.

I said: "Pleasant dreams, Noslow."

The mop and logs and wastepaper basket under the blanket "slept" on.

CHAPTER SIX

Come In, Killer

SITTING there in the blackness, watching the square of shadowy forest framed by the window, feeling the chill creep up my legs and arms, and cuddling the weight of the Winchester on my thighs, I thought it was neat.

And I wasn't kidding myself, Pete. Murder has no rules and my way of solving it had to be ditto—but she'd talk, this Lulu Riley-Deborah Sanger who suckered old gaffers to their anonymous graves with penned sweet-talk. She'd give me the little facts and data that would put her inside a sealed chamber inhaling gas—

Splat! Splat! Splat!

Three dashes of scarlet flame seared across my vision, filled my ears with roar.

Reflex dragged my hand to my belt in a futile grab for the revolver that wasn't there.

Something wet and smelly splashed across the cabin around the bed.

Lulu Riley must have sailed into the cabin on a feather. She must have tiptoed in on sponge rubber soles. She was nothing I could even vaguely see as my eyes blinked from the three quick flashes of gun roar.

Mind checked my reflexes and sent my hand back to the Winchester. I was scrabbling to my knees, bringing the rifle to bear on the door. Another part of my mind was growling: *She didn't even wait to talk to the guy—just stepped in the door and piled three slugs into him where he lay.*

Something hard *thudded* on the floor near me.

I had the Winchester aimed at the door now, but I didn't fire it. You don't think of such trifles as pulling a trigger when the darkness about you bursts into sudden flame.

Like a finger snap! One instant I crouched in blackness. The next, that whole cabin stood out like a technicolor shot of sunlight! Bright flames were leaping from everything to everything else; particularly around the bed where the mop handle was already glowing cherry red and at the closed door lighted in flames.

My mind had ticked off the smell that accompanied the splash—kerosine! And my hand had automatically dropped for the heavy object that *thudded* near my feet.

After that it was sheer animal; a question of slinging the Winchester across the cabin through the window with a shattering of glass that sounded over the growing hiss of flames. Then it was me taking a flying leap to the flame-covered edge of the bed and a dive headfirst through the window.

My shoulders knocked more glass tinkling into the night. There was a drop through the sudden rush of cool air. I rolled and tumbled downhill over twigs, pebbles, humus and leaves, until I lay spread-eagled on my back and panting up at a billion specks of diamond dust set in a black velvet sky.

I sat up and slapped at the tiny flames gnawing a hole in my levis. I spread my hands along the ground about me in search of the heavy object I'd brought from the cabin.

That was when my mind started catching up with me. Sitting half-dazed on the ground, my fingers curling around the familiar smoothness of the butt, I knew it was my own .38!

I WAS up on my feet with the .38 clutched in my sweaty little fist. Through the cabin's window I could see the flames swirling and rolling into a giant ball of dazzle that was already poking thin fingers of fire through the roof shingles. I turned and began stumbling down that woodland trail.

Oh, I can set a trap, can't I, Pete? For this you sweet-talked Trebor Noslow and flew his letter to Cincinnati!

Lulu Riley *had* to come to Cabin One to silence "Trebor Noslow". She came—and if Trebor Noslow actually had been in that cabin, there wouldn't be enough left of him after the fire to identify anything but his sex and probably age, and the fact that three slugs had been in him—from my revolver mixed in with the cabin's ashes!

Had I time, I would have stopped to bang my head against a rock.

I noticed the cluster of cars nosed to the main ranch house wall, but the fact

didn't penetrate the dullness between my ears until I was already through the reading room doorway. Then the tardy realization bumped into the words Sheriff Jasper B. Hoyt yelled at me across the reading room:

"Wale! You're under—"

He noticed the .38 in my fist then.

They all noticed it sweeping the room then. Pedro, Lolita, Efraim, Miguel and Ramon were clustered around the fireplace. Rose Senger and Vivian Schultz sat before the fireplace. Johnny Drew stood behind Rose. Two deputies, one with red hair and the other with a black mustache, stood behind Vivian Schultz. Sheriff Hoyt and Luke Reardon stood before the door of Penny Green's room.

All of them stared at the shifting muzzle of my .38, at the burns and tears in my shirt and levis, at what the grime and bruises and fire-smears must have made of my face.

Wale, Sheriff Hoyt had called me!

"Okay—Wale!" leaped from my throat. My eyes were tearing at their clothes, their hands, their shoes, their eyes—looking for a sign, a smudge or stain of anything to link one of them with the blazing cabin in the woods—and all I saw was their eyes gaping at me. That snarl spat from my throat again. "If I blast every one of you now, they can't do anything more to me. I want some answers—"

"That makes two of us, Shorty."

Luke Reardon's quiet drawl. He stood with his elbows bent a little, his palms poised over his hips; his right hand four inches from the figured ivory butt of his .45.

"Penny Green said she first saw yuh around the ranch the time that old Hamilton Drew feller was shot."

"She lied to save her neck!"

"Penny said yuh threatened her—said yuh promised gangster pals o' yourn you'd come after her if she told anyone who yuh was an'—"

"Damn it, Luke, I told you she lied! What I want to know—"

He didn't want to hear what I wanted to know. He was drawling: "That's *twice* yuh called her a liar!"

The .45 was halfway out of his holster. From the corners of my vision, I could see the sheriff and his deputies starting to

move, and Pedro's carbine rising from the floor.

My finger squeezed at Luke Reardon. The muzzle shifted to Sheriff Hoyt and the trigger squeezed again—in two futile *clicks* of metal against metal.

I swung the muzzle back toward the determination in Luke Reardon's eyes and sent four futile *clicks* across the room into the sight of his .45 clearing its holster and looming at me as large and black as the opening of the Holland Tunnel.

Time had run out. I couldn't throw my empty revolver at him, couldn't duck, couldn't do anything but stand there and watch flame erupt from the black muzzle before his fist—hear the sudden blast smash into my ears—and gape at the impossible picture of Luke Reardon halfway to the floor in a crazy, twisting dive, while the .45 leaped from his gnarled fingers and slithered across the polished floor almost to my feet.

SAILOR DUFFY was standing where Luke Reardon had been standing. The door of Penny's room had upset Luke Reardon, and now was toppling Sheriff Hoyt into the wall. The Sailor's hard, right fist caused the sheriff to lose interest in everything. I didn't see him fall. The redheaded deputy's silver revolver had cleared its holster and spat at where I had been standing.

I was diving and coming up with Reardon's .45 and feeling it buck in my fist from the angry roar that spun the redheaded deputy back into the far wall.

I brought the .45's muzzle down on Luke Reardon's hand as he groped for it from the floor. Then I brought it up toward the deputy with the black mustache. He became a statue, his automatic halfway out of its holster.

"Drop it!"

He dropped it.

It had become a roomful of statues. Pedro was a limp huddle on top of the equally limp huddle that was Sheriff Jasper B. Hoyt. The Sailor straddled them, Pedro's carbine in his right fist, the sheriff's automatic in his left. Miguel, Efraim, Ramon and Lolita eyed the Sailor as if he was an intruder from another planet.

Luke Reardon lay prone on the floor

at my feet, ignoring his mashed hand to stare up at me steadily with the scraps of dull metal he used for eyes. The redheaded deputy crouched over a dislodged painting, his left hand on his right shoulder and blood dripping through his fingers.

Vivian Schultz seemed to be asleep in the wicker chair. Rose Senger's eyes regarded me with yellow glints. Johnny Drew stared at me as if he couldn't believe that what happened had happened.

I could hardly believe it myself.

"Sailor!" I croaked, rising unsteadily from my knee to my feet.

It took him about two minutes to move around that roomful of statues and return to my side with every visible weapon jammed in his belt or gripped in his hands.

"You seem to feel better," I said.

"I'm hokay, Cash," he grunted. "Mebbe a little weak yet. I hadda hit the Mex twice."

"Hold 'em," I said. "Anyone moves, blast!"

"Hokay, Cash."

I backed out the door and spent a few minutes with the cars nosed against the wall, ripping the spark plug wires off all of them. I put a .45 slug through the two-way radio in Sheriff Hoyt's car. Then I ran to the garage and decommissioned Penny's station wagon and car. I backed the jeep out of the garage and drove it to the reading room door.

"Sailor!"

He backed out the door awkwardly. I had the jeep rolling the instant his second shoe came over the side.

I glanced back once as we were about to enter the pass. I scarcely noticed the cluster of silhouettes in the reading room doorway. Beyond the ranch house, the night was turning into daylight as the whole side of that mountain seemed to be going up in blaze.

"Hully gee!" the Sailor breathed.

"You feel all right?" I yelled at him.

"I'm hokay," he yelled back. "Some fun, Cash. . . ."

There's very little more, Pete.

Halfway to the main highway we began running into truckloads of fire fighters going the other way—which killed any chance Sheriff Hoyt had of getting us.

An hour later the Sailor was holding a

(Please continue on page 92)

SATAN'S SCAPEGOAT



A scream was
rising in Ward's
head. . . .

By
ROY SPARKIA

He was the deadly double—the ordinary ex-GI and the blood-crazed killer with a yen for attractive women.

WARD JARRAD opened his eyes into a nightmare world of sun-shot color. Oppressive heat blanketed him, as if he were lying in an oven. His face was hot, the skin drum-tight, and there was a scream in his head. . . .

"Snap out of it, pal." Fingers clutched

his shoulders, shaking him. "We're coming to Bay Haven. Home." Mel Storne's voice. Good old Mel, best buddy a guy ever had. With a mouth as wide as a frog, and a face as ugly.

The scream inside was rising harsh and terrified. Now he remembered the bar, the drinking, and vaguely—a blonde. Even more hazily, an apartment, cigarette smoke curling from crimson lips and a hard bright look in her eyes. She'd been pretty. A nice figure, too, and wearing a tight blue dress with a small diamond clasp.

The diamond clasp stuck in his thoughts.

Ward sat up, hands flinching to the scorching touch of metal. Steel plate, hot from the brilliance of sun. A nauseous emptiness moiled inside him, and he felt heavy with weariness. The steel plates swayed with a strange jerky movement.

"Where are we, Mel?"

"First class passengers on a freight train, pal."

"How come?"

"No dough. On account of because you fell for that blonde baby last night. Remember?"

He had a sudden vision of the blonde girl's eyes widening in terror. Automatically he fumbled a hand into his pocket. The diamond clasp was there all right.

He licked dry lips. "So we're broke again. What's next on the program?"

"Like I told you, Bay Haven's my home town, pal. Tonight we graduate to the gentleman class. We'll have money. And you'll meet the most gorgeous woman in this world. Darcy Hunter."

The scream was back in his head. Darcy Hunter! The name glittering with all the overtones of Mel's enthusiastic praise had been dangling in front of him since war days. He had only seen a battered snapshot, but even that was enough to suggest the startling, exquisite beauty of the sandy-blonde, Darcy Hunter.

Blonde like the girl last night. . . .

"What happened last night, Mel?"

"I thought it was a good idea to clear town. I loaded you on the freight train."

Ward said dully, "Did I kill her, Mel?"

"What are you talking about, fella?"

"The blonde. Last night."

"Shut up," Mel said angrily. "You

brood too much. Just forget it all."

Then it had happened again—Covertly, he withdrew the diamond clasp from his pocket. The bit of cloth clinging to it was blue all right, like the dress from which it had been torn. The blonde's dress. He slipped it over the edge of the car when Mel's head was turned.

"Don't look now, pal," said Mel, "but I think somebody doesn't like us." He pointed.

Ahead, the locomotive panted like a winded runner in a hysteria of haste. It was rounding a curve and its lengthy chain of creaking cars followed the bent line like a sleepy serpent. Four cars ahead, a man wearing the striped blue denims of a railroad man was weaving along the top runway of a boxcar. He carried a club.

"So what?" grunted Ward, watching the man.

"We'd better jump. It's only a couple miles more to Bay Haven."

Ward rose slowly, almost fell with the wave of dizziness that rushed over him. Mel supported him until his head cleared.

The railroad man was only a car ahead. Ward watched him move expertly around the apron of a tank car and step down to the end of the flatcar. He was a heavy-set man with wind-reddened face and bright alert eyes. He approached, swinging the club by his side.

"You two," he said. "Where you think you're going?"

"Next town," said Mel.

"Next town's the end of the line. Bay Haven. No tramps ride my train to the end of the line."

"We're not tramps," Ward said.

The man appraised him. Ward stood six feet, a lank bony body hunched imperceptibly at the shoulders. His face was lean and handsome, the eyes deep and brooding. Thin lines were graven from nostrils to the corners of a wide mouth. He looked older than his twenty-eight years. He wore a plain dark suit and a G. I. shirt without a necktie.

"In the war, wasn't you, fellas?" asked the railroad man. "All the tramps I meet was in the war."

"Yeah."

The man laughed harshly. "Too bad the war's over. Pile off, boys." He raised the club.

Ward whipped out at the man. The crunching jar backlashed from his fist to his heels. The railroad man fell solidly, arms flailing. He pushed himself up on one elbow, fingered the blood beginning to trickle from his mouth.

He swore softly. "You'll be sorry for that, fella."

A surge of hate carried Ward down to the man.

Mel caught at his arm. "Take it cool, pal. Calm down."

He batted Mel's hand aside, raging with a wild desire to lash out and purge himself of all the damned-up poisons inside. The frozen paralysis of terror on the man's face stopped him. His mind flashed back to a similar moment during the war. . . .

THEY HAD taken a truckload of cognac from the Germans, but the ensuing split had been only one fifth bottle per enlisted man and two bottles per officer. The rest was sent back to the higher brass at Corps. An undercurrent of resentment ran through the rain-bogged camp that evening, and Ward went to steal a case of rations from beneath the tarp of the supply truck to trade to the French farmers for raw Calvados brandy. An officer caught him red-handed. In a moment of fury, Ward brought up his rifle with all intent to kill. The mute appeal in the suddenly numbed officer's eyes saved the man's life.

That officer had been Mel Storne. Lieutenant Mel Storne then. He didn't report Ward. Instantaneously, a strange bond was formed between the two men, and it had persisted from that moment on. . . .

Ward let his arm relax. The railroad man rose silently, turned frightened eyes to Mel. "Better turn your buddy over to a nut house before he kills somebody," he mumbled. He moved off rapidly without looking back.

Mel sat down beside Ward. Both men awkwardly silent, staring out over the flat farmland that was sliding past. The slanting mid-afternoon sun had pooled it with heat, withered the green of the fields.

"I'm nervous," said Mel. "Knowing I'll see Darcy again, wondering if she's married yet. You'll like her, pal."

Poor frog-faced Mel, wanting only

beauty beyond reach. Once he had wistfully told Ward, *I've always loved Darcy. I always will. But she's never given me a tumble.*

So now he wanted Ward to meet this beautiful creature. Like asking for a kick in the teeth. Or a repetition of last night's horror—

"Count me out," Ward said flatly. "Keep your social life away from me. I'd only mess it up."

"Don't worry," Mel said dryly. "I'll keep you sober."

There it was, the puzzle. Alcohol. The inner viciousness that always seemed to be released by drinking. The two different people—one, a confused, ordinary guy; the other, a deadly, blood-crazed killer . . . with a yen for attractive women.

It had happened the first time during the dry rot period after the war's end when he spent months in a small French village waiting for the boat home. He began drinking in earnest then, keeping soaked to the bones in cheap cognac. And there was a little French girl who wet his face with tears when he was drunk, begged him to stay in France with her.

Until they found her strangled body in the woods one morning.

Afterwards, Ward found one of the golden earrings that pierced her ears in his pockets. Stained with blood as if it had been ripped off. He remembered going for a stroll with her, then everything had blacked out. Nobody had seen them together.

It happened again after army discharge. He went around with a little red-head for awhile—until she was found with her head bashed in and a cameo brooch missing.

After that, Mel Storne had hustled Ward out of town.

It was a puzzle, too, why Mel always covered for him when he got into trouble, in the army and out. Sometimes the wry humor of it, an ex-officer playing nursemaid to an ex-enlisted man, made Ward smile. But not for long.

So they'd strung along together, changing jobs as often as towns. Mel assumed the position of a big brother, always patient, always pleading with Ward to drink less, stay away from fast women. Why, Ward wondered. Why?

The train was squirming, swaying through the outskirts of a town, past factories, smoke-grimed houses, empty fields overrun with rank weed growth. In the distance was the flat glisten of Lake Michigan.

"Bay Haven," said Mel. "And Darcy Hunter. Oh brother."

* * *

Ward agreed, that night, that Darcy Hunter was the most stunning girl he'd ever seen.

They'd gone directly to Mel's house first for a bath, a shave and a change of clothes. Ward had donned one of Mel's spare suits. He was knotting a tie in the mirror when Mel came in, his wide mouth grinning.

"Guess what, pal," he said jubilantly. "I just telephoned Darcy, and she's throwing a party tonight. She wants us both to come right over."

There was a tightening sensation inside Ward, and the feel of his pulse bumping in his throat. He stared into the mirror, noting the dark shine in his eyes, wondering if it were fear or excitement.

"Mel—uh—do you have a little something to drink? I—I need it bad."

"Sorry, pal. I'm brewing you a coffee instead. You can have a couple of drinks later, at the party. But no more."

They walked to Darcy's place only a few blocks away. The evening was hot and muggy and abnormally dark. Flaky-winged fish flies clustered around the flaring streetlights, and the sidewalk was fluffed over with them. The delicate bodies, mashed by passing steps, sent up a cloying stench.

"A damned nuisance," Mel commented. "Some of the oldtimers say when the fish flies collect in such hordes, it's a sure sign of a big storm coming up." He glanced at the sky. "And it looks like it tonight."

The girl who met them at the door of the Hunter home was slim and graceful. She had honey-gold hair, blue eyes and a pleasant smile. "Mel!" she exclaimed. "So nice to see you again." She threw her arms around him impulsively and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Mel made the introductions. "This is

Kathy, Darcy's kid sister," he told Ward. "And she's grown up so much, I hardly recognize her."

"I'll bet," Kathy said, pouting, "that Mel didn't even mention that Darcy had a sister. I'm the ugly duckling of the family and my existence is kept a deep dark secret."

"He didn't, as a matter of fact," said Ward. "I'm convinced that Mel doesn't have an eye for beauty."

"She's flowered out since I went away," Mel apologized. "Last time I saw her, she was a gangling, gawky bobby-soxer. Honest."

Kathy sighed. "Don't waste your breath flattering me. You'll regret it after you've seen my gorgeous sister. But come in. The party's going full swing."

They went into a large, luxurious living room with a plushy gray carpet, pale lemon walls and a wide glassed doorway that opened out onto a stone terrace. The place was clustered with prosperous-looking people, drinking and talking with enthusiastic desperation. It was that kind of party.

WARD recognized Darcy without any help. She was exactly the type he had visualized. He saw her sitting on somebody's lap, arm thrown around him extravagantly, a cigarette in one hand and a highball in the other. She saw them and came over immediately, moving with the smooth assurance that came with a full awareness of her own striking beauty.

"Welcome home, Mel," she said. Her eyes were on Ward. "I'm so glad you brought your friend."

Mel introduced them.

The impact of her beauty on Ward was like a slap. She was wearing a tight-fitting dress of pale green that heightened the sleek, swelling lines of her body. Her sand-gold hair had been clipped short so that it curled around her head with elfin abandon. That and the faintly-foreign look of her high-cheeked face made Ward think of the French girls whose hair had been shorn by their countrymen as a punishing brand for having consorted with the Germans.

Under the lazy lidding of her wide-set gray eyes she looked at Ward in a way that sent an electric shock tingling through

him. *So this is what poor Mel is eating his heart out for*, he thought. *She's throwing the glad-eye at me already. Like I pictured her, only more beautiful.*

"Mel, be a dear and go to the bar and mix drinks for Ward and yourself," she said. It wasn't a request, but an order, purred out softly. "I'll entertain your friend until you get back."

"Of course." Mel had a strained smile as he went away. Kathy followed, hesitantly.

"Mel wrote me about you once," said Darcy. "What he wrote was simply fascinating. I suddenly had the feeling that I had always known you. I even felt like writing a letter to you." She laughed. "Sounds silly, doesn't it? My writing to a man I'd never met."

"It would have been nice if you had," he said, thinking, *the line is crude, but with her looks it doesn't matter*. He found himself staring at her earrings, spiral bits of silver that reflected the light.

"Do you like my earrings?" she asked. "They were made for me by a—friend."

"They're exquisite," he said. His pulse was beating in his wrist like a hammer.

Mel and Kathy arrived with the drinks. Mel thrust one at Ward. "This will hold you for a while," he said, winking. "I expect you to sip it slowly and savor it to the full."

Ward flushed in a rising tide of anger. The guy didn't have to rub it in. He took the drink in a hand that almost trembled.

"Come, Ward," said Darcy, hooking her arm through his. "Let's go out on the terrace and cool off."

"There's a storm coming up," Mel said dryly. "Don't get wet."

Ward gulped two-thirds of this drink down and walked off with Darcy. Dammit all, he thought, Mel's been asking for it. I didn't want to come. I didn't want any part of Darcy. Now she's sinking her hooks into me. Why doesn't Mel get smart and go for Kathy? She's all right, the kind I'd go for if I weren't such a helluva guy to get mixed up with. . . .

It was no cooler on the terrace. An odd paleness had lightened the night and the world seemed to have fallen into a breathless, waiting suspension of activity. From far off came the screech of a train whistle, sounding oddly like a thin scream in the dead thickness of atmosphere.

Darcy shuddered. She stood so close that Ward felt the quiver of her warm flesh against him. "It's kind of frightening. I mean, the feeling just before a storm breaks. Everything is tense, as if something were ready to explode."

Mel Storne appeared through the French doors. A vague, sardonic smile touched his wide mouth. "How you two getting along?" he asked. "Better than I am, I hope."

"Poor, darling Mel," purred Darcy. "Do us one more great favor. Our drinks are gone—that's a dear."

With an expression of good-natured martyrdom, Mel took the empty glasses and went through the glassed doors. In a few minutes he returned with re-filled glasses.

"This is absolutely the last drink I mix for you, pal," he said to Ward.

Ward took the drink unsmilingly. *Don't look at me as if I were such a damned heel*, he thought. *I can't help it if your woman prefers me. Anyway, I'm doing*

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STOMACH

JUMPY
NERVES



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you a favor. This witch is poison, and so am I. Find someone decent and nice—like Kathy.

Mel bowed gravely, as if he understood what Ward was thinking. He pivoted suddenly and walked away.

"Would you like to see the grounds?" Darcy asked. "There's a lovely river only a few hundred yards away."

"I think it'll be raining in a few minutes."

Her laugh was amused. "I don't see anyone whom I'd rather get caught in rain with." She took his hand in a tight clasp and led him off the terrace.

They walked down a sloping lawn and came to a low white picket fence. "Lift me over, Ward," she said. "I'll hold the drinks."

"Isn't there a gate?"

"Yes, but this will be more fun," she said smiling.

He lifted her over the yard-high fence with ease. Before he could put her down she had raised her lips, and he bent his head to meet hers. Her kiss was hot, stinging. When he put her down, his heart was thudding and there was a teasing smile on her full lips.

"That," she said, "was nicely done. The drinks weren't even spilled." She handed him a glass.

He was angry at his weakness, at his letting her get her way with him so easily. She was damned attractive, he had to admit, but he'd rather be with her sister Kathy.

He lifted the glass and gulped all of his drink down, feeling a satisfaction from the burn of alcohol sliding inside. He felt better.

"Likewise for me," she said, raising her glass. She drank it all down and tossed the glass aside.

There was a growl of thunder.

"We ought to go back," he said.

"There's an arbor on the riverbank. We can get under it if it rains."

They went on to the riverbank. The grassy bank was pooled in the darkness of towering masses of willow. The river glided by noiselessly, shining like black oil. A few big drops of rain splatted down around them.

"Come on," she said, leading him under the protection of a rustic arbor.

THERE was an electric sense of urgency in the air. The big drops came faster, hitting like hammer taps on the roof. Darcy shuddered, snuggled close. They sat down on the bench inside, and she lifted her face toward him, tense and expectant. "Kiss me, darling," she whispered.

He was heady with excitement, his heart thumping. Her lips were trembling, clinging. It was like taking a raw shot of whiskey. She strained closer.

A jagged dagger of lightning gashed open the night, followed by a giant slap of thunder. An explosive force seemed suddenly to be released inside, to rage upward, surging, spinning. He grasped her roughly, suddenly drew her hard against him.

She gasped, "Ward . . . Take it easy!"

Waves of beating rain slashed the arbor roof.

The scream was rising in his head, shrill, insistent. Fire stroked through his veins. Visual images flooded his mind, washing around a swinging, glittering object—a silver earring that grew and grew into something gigantic, swinging like a pendulum. A hoarse sob escaped him.

Thunder shattered the night. The spinning force inside seemed to burst, exploding in a climactic moment of towering strength. And then he was damp with perspiration.

And Darcy had gone limp in his arms. . . .

He stared at her, aghast with a sudden clarity of understanding. The knowledge of what had really happened filled him with an icy, increasing sense of horror. His mind was clicking along at frantic speed, seeking to unravel all the strange angles.

When he knew, he let his body go lax. Deliberately, he slumped off the bench and to the arbor floor. He lay there, still and prone. He had only to wait a couple of minutes to prove that he had guessed correctly.

Mel Storne rose from his hiding place in the shrubbery and stepped into the arbor. His rain-sopped shoes squished at each step. He stepped past Ward and leaned over Darcy.

(Please continue on page 95)

NO BONES ABOUT IT



He growled: "Muggs like you need a lesson."

Private Investigator Kent's favorite dream gal would languish behind bars —if he didn't scotch the real killer-diller.

HOMICIDE SERGEANT Terry Dugan stuck one of my Havana specials in his wide mouth, lit up, and leaned back in the chair I reserve for distinguished visitors. His pale blue eyes roved the walls, inspecting my pin-ups, of which I have plenty, many of my

By **ROBERT
CARLTON**

clients being movie people with a talent for trouble, if nothing else.

"You seem to know a lot of dames," he commented.

"One really never knows a woman," I smiled. The sergeant didn't need to look so flabbergasted. He'd been in my office before. "The distaff side is an enigma, Sergeant—full of crafts and wiles beyond the ken of mere man."

"That's what I tell my old lady," he

grunted. "Only I don't say it so pretty."

A small, formal silence fell between us, punctuated by the muted clatter of Helen's typewriter in the outer office. The sergeant seemed disposed to smoke, so I cleared my throat politely.

"I often read about your exploits in the newspapers," I said, wishing to blazes I'd given him a good cigar or else that he'd blow his smoke in the opposite direction. "You're building a fine reputation as a crime detector, Sergeant. I'm deeply honored you'd visit a humble private eye like me."

He held up a beefy hand. "Don't pour vinegar over your head while you hand me posies, Kent. I got your number. Know an actor named Miles Clifton?"

It seemed the amenities were over. I fiddled with a paper cutter on my desk. "Is this an official call?"

"Could be." The sergeant's voice was flat, calm. "Somebody shot Clifton in the back last night."

"Shooting in the back is uncommon in Hollywood," I said. "Characters in this town ordinarily use knives for that work." I let my eyes drift past him to the closed office door, and threw the intercom switch under my desk so Helen would get the conversation. It was an official call, all right. "Is the guy dead?"

"He's in the morgue," the sergeant said succulently. "We took a .45 slug out of his heart."

An uncomfortable silence fell between us again. I wasn't willing to talk, and the sergeant had lost interest in his cigar. We just stared at each other like two roosters trying to make up their minds. Pretty soon, the sergeant's face got pink, so I knew I was winning.

"You know a girl named Loretta Palmer, too," he rumbled, "and never mind denying it. You've squired her around for months. The way I get it, she's your steady."

"Sure, I know Lorry," I said. "So what?"

The sergeant puffed his cigar, the pink left his face, and a self-satisfied smile relaxed his heavy jowls. I could see he was about to release the news.

"This ain't bad," he said, eyeing the Havana special's glowing tip. "A good cigar eases a man after sixteen straight

hours on a case. So Loretta's in jail. Suspicion of murder. We found her this morning in Clifton's apartment, brewing coffee in the kitchen while the poor lad lay stiff and stark in the bedroom.

"Imagine that—brewing coffee!" He shook his shaggy head. "It takes a dame for cold-blooded murder. And she was your girl friend. Maybe you better come downtown with me."

I got my hat off the filing case. "Yeah," I agreed. "Maybe I had."

The sergeant made his two hundred pounds comfortable in the squad car's back seat. Between him and another meaty detective, I was glad to be thin.

"Could be she never killed him," he said dreamily. "I kinda hope not. I hate to see a dame gassed for murder."

I got his point. The sergeant and I had crossed paths before, and he took a dim view of private eyes "horning in on police jobs". The dick up front flipped the siren and opened a lane through the Hollywood Boulevard traffic. Dugan chewed his cigar.

"Must have been a wild party," he opined. "She was woozy as a fog-bound giraffe when we come in. Stumbling around the kitchen glassy-eyed with the worst hangover I've ever seen. Clifton was laying across the bed in a robe."

"Why not get a blackboard and draw me a picture?" I asked sarcastically. "So maybe I killed the guy. Jealousy, you know—one of the outstanding motives for murder."

The sergeant didn't like being beaten to the punch. "I was just thinking," he said huffily.

"Are you sure the taxpayers would like that?" I asked.

AT THE police headquarters downtown, Dugan's muscular sidekick guided me into a bare antechamber adjacent to the Homicide Bureau. He seated me on the usual polished walnut bench. It seems a rule among detective bureaus that a hard seat softens a prisoner's determination. After a short wait, while Dugan washed his teeth or drank a bottle of beer, I was ushered into his office. He had his hat off, but otherwise looked the same.

"If you had anything to do with this,

we'll find it out," he assured me stonily. "Now where were you last night from midnight on?"

I grinned and glanced around his office. There wasn't much to glance at—some straight-backed chairs, a battered oak desk, wanted posters on the gray walls, and Dugan.

"I see you like to play on your home grounds. I was in bed. I can't prove it, but you can't prove I wasn't."

"Smart, huh?" He punched a button on the desk viciously. "We're not fancy around here. I have a redheaded private secretary, but we get things done."

It was eating him again, my being a private eye with privileges no cop should be entitled to. Then an interior door swung open and I forgot about Dugan. I forgot everything but the blue-eyed brunette that walked in with a matron.

Maybe you like them plump, as I do. Lorry Palmer was plump in the right places, hippy, and aware of it. Even with her mascara off, her lipstick gone, and her silver evening gown wrinkled, she looked good. She took four steps and fell into my arms.

"Get me out of here, Eddie," she sobbed into my shoulder. "This minute! These people have been horrible to me, horrible. They say I killed him."

"Easy, baby," I whispered into her ear. "Watch it, or we'll both be in the pokey." I pushed her away sternly. "This is what you get for messing with movie actors. Maybe I'm not pretty, have a mole on my neck and big ears, but I'm honest and honor bright."

"I didn't kill him, Eddie!" Her eyes glistened with fear. "We were having a

drink, talking—and the next thing I knew it was morning and the police came in. Somebody must have slipped me a mickey."

I glanced at Dugan. He was still smoking that damned cigar. "Did you give her a blood test after you arrested her?" I asked.

"Hell, no." He spat at an unseen cuspidor contemptuously. "We don't test every wall-eyed murder suspect we pick up."

"You might," I suggested. "It would save work. If she'd been drugged, her blood would show it."

Dugan's grunt indicated his scorn. "That's a dodge. Anyway what's to prevent her doping herself and passing out to fool us? It's been done before. It's supposed to lull our suspicions, if the killer can't make a clean getaway."

"In that case she'd hardly be brewing coffee to sober herself up," I said. "Who found the body?"

"The maid." Dugan nodded at Lorry. "This dame was too gowed up to hear her from the kitchen. The maid went into the bedroom, saw Clifton, and ran to the manager."

Lorry's shaking fingers took the cigarette I offered. "Give it to me straight," I said coldly.

"I told you." She made vague passes at her mussed hair. "We had dinner at the Blind Tiger on the Strip, danced awhile, and about two went up to his apartment. Clifton wanted to talk about getting me in pictures."

Sarcastically I said, "They print Clifton's screen credits in small letters. Passing out jobs in pictures belongs to producers, directors, and other stratosphere

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boys. Why the hell aren't you content selling tickets at the Rialto?"

"We can't live on what you make," she snapped.

"Not in on the heights," I admitted. "But we might get by in a small pent-house."

"There's the motive." Dugan had his oar in again. "Clifton promised her a part in the movies and didn't deliver. That clinches it!"

"Guile and wile," I said icily. "Leave it to a woman. Am I in a pinch, Dugan?"

The detective shook his head. "Not yet—"

"But soon, you hope." I finished the thought for him and started for the door.

"Wait!" Lorry wailed. "Bail me out!"

"Quit kidding," I told her. "There's no bail for murder."

I WAS burning as I hit the street, so the hot March sun beating down on the Civic Center wasn't bothersome. I'm broadminded as most, but my gal friend in another guy's apartment at night doesn't please me, even if the guy's dead most of the time. I bought a newspaper and gleaned what information I could. The police hadn't found the murder gun, but there was a big picture of Dugan glowering at the body. I grabbed a cab and gave the driver Clifton's address in Laurel Canyon.

It was an apartment house, with a sidewalk canopy, tired doorman, and grilled iron gates opening into an enclosed patio. The bespectacled clerk paid me no attention, so I rode the automatic elevator to the third floor. I got out and walked down a brightly lighted corridor.

There was an elderly harness cop parked in a chair outside 314, reading a newspaper.

I nodded a greeting as I passed him. "Hello, Pop," I said cheerily. "Sitting out the heat wave?"

I continued down the corridor, turned left at the L, and beat it down the back stair. Why the police guard front doors after a murder, I'll never know. There's a service entrance to most apartments. I legged it through the trademen's areaway, and climbed two flights of concrete steps. The only sign of life outside Clifton's back door was a disreputable cat prowling a

garbage can. Otherwise all was quiet.

The skeleton key fit. I stepped into the kitchen and closed the door gently. I inspected the stove first. The drip pot had been used recently, still contained grounds. There was a lipstick-stained cup on the sideboard. That settled the coffee business, for the stain was Lorry's shade.

A light flipped on as I opened the refrigerator. There was no food on the shelves, just a conglomeration of bottles—mixers, beer, and a lone bottle of scotch, nearly full. I uncorked it, sniffed, and held the bottle to my lips. It tasted faintly bitter, as good scotch shouldn't. I examined the label—Old Loch Lomond—and spit the drink in the sink.

Tucking the bottle under my arm, I explored the pantry. In life, Clifton liked tinned crab louie, French onion soup, caviar, and other gastronomic oddities. There was an unopened case of scotch on the floor—a different brand. I shrugged. It proved nothing. Maybe the guy was simply changing his brand, for the better.

The living room was flamboyant. A huge Hawaiian ginger-blossom mural spread rampant color over a wall. The furniture was blond, Swedish modern, upholstered in white mohair. I examined Clifton's bookcase. His tastes ran to lush historical novels. The gilt-bound classics showed no use, were obviously for display. His record cabinet yielded a couple of classical albums and many pressings by silk-voiced crooners.

Wastebaskets are fascinating things to search, and often reveal unpleasant details of their owner's secret lives. I dumped the receptacle beside Clifton's desk on the floor and pawed around. Duns from a collection agency told me he seldom paid his bills on time. Various advertising circulars meant nothing, nor did the old copies of shop magazines. He doodled, evidently while talking on the phone. There was an empty book of matches from the Blind Tiger.

They'd removed the body from the bedroom, of course—but the counterpane hadn't been changed and revealed Clifton had been a good bleeder. I poked through his clothes closet and wished I owned as many suits, hats, and shoes. The pockets of his evening jacket were turned inside out, but a tweed sport coat held an item—

a folded, tab-size piece of paper. Scrawled across it in ink was:

1000—Eda j Ha—3 S. A.
O k AC.

The abacadabra symbols told no tales, but the paper looked interesting, so I tucked it in my pocket.

Guys that keep china cats on the floor should be murdered. I tripped over Clifton's, bounced off the cocktail table, and plunged headlong to the living room rug. The clatter was awful, and as I got to my knees I heard a key grate in the front door lock. There was no time to make the kitchen. I grabbed the two highball glasses that had fallen to the rug and stuffed them in my coat. Then I scrambled to a wall angle next to the foyer.

Maybe that cop was aging, but he came through the foyer like a commando, gun out, and breathing fire. I stepped behind him, and conked him with Old Loch Lomond. He slid silently to the floor. Then I got the hell out of there, fast. I wondered what Dugan would think.

THE sun was getting chummy with the Pacific Ocean as I left my chemist friend's in Santa Monica. He'd analyzed the scotch and the dried residue inside the glasses. Both contained barbiturate. Somebody had emptied enough goof balls into the liquor to put a horse to sleep. That made it mickeys for two and tough for me.

I got a steak at the diner on Melrose, and phoned Helen.

"The cops are looking for you," she said pleasantly. "Seems you left your prints on a cocktail table in some actor's apartment."

"A man can't wrap his hand in a handkerchief when he's taking a nose dive," I growled. "Quit casting reflections on my house-breaking ability."

"Any orders?"

"Yeah," I said. "Tell my lawyer to bail me out unless I call him by morning. Then go home and sleep tight."

I can really think in a steam bath. Peculiar, I know, but the heat loosens my muscles, relaxes my mind, and starts a chain reaction that explodes in thought. I went down to the Swede's place on Vermont and got the works. The Swede almost broke his broad back, pouring

water over hot rocks, giving me a salt rub, massaging—while I strained over my problem.

Finally it came to me. I had nothing to think about, except the abacadabra tab, and not being a cryptographer, I couldn't unravel that. So I thought to hell with it, wrapped myself in towels, and went to sleep on Swede's table.

The moon was up when I left the Swede's. I consulted my wrist watch—ten o'clock. Festivities were under way at the Blind Tiger, so I hailed a cab. The nightery should be a good place to dig for secrets. Patronized as it was by bookies, racketeers, and movie colony hangers-on, almost everybody was somebody's relative, or knew the location of a buried body—and some weren't adverse to exchanging knowledge for cash.

A blonde honey in a tight, flowered sarong took my hat. It was that kind of joint. Artificial vines trailed from paper-mache jungle trees, and a colored waterfall gurgled over mossy rocks near the orchestra. The place was lousy with bamboo, grass mats, stuffed parrots, and people. The props suggested Burma, Bali, or maybe just Hollywood.

I slipped the blonde a buck. "Know an actor named Miles Clifton?" I asked.

Her eyes got wary. She glanced at the dollar bill. "I might know him," she said coyly. "But you can't want much information."

The ten I gave her disappeared in the sarong's top. "I saw him last night with a brunette," she intoned. "And I saw the papers today. Beat it, skinny."

I took her wrist and twisted her arm. "I don't pay ten bucks for sass," I told her. "And sometimes I play rough with ladies. Anyone leave this joint with Clifton and the girl?"

She lost her wise smile. "They left alone. Are you a cop?"

"That's a matter for argument," I said.

I dropped her arm and made my way to the bar. I wasn't too surprised to find Al Ceech parked on a center stool, where he could watch the cash register. After all, he owned the joint. His bony face and droopy lips remained immobile as I slid onto the next stool.

"Stealing a nickel from you would be a hard job," I said cheerfully. "Ever turn

your back on one of your bartenders?"

Only his eyes moved, sliding sideways like a lizard's. "I've seen you around." His voice was flat, like his poker face. "But I don't care for your pan. It's not pushed in far enough."

"I'll have a drink on that," I told the bartender. "Bar scotch, with soda on the side."

The drink dispenser pushed a fifth of Old Loch Lomond across the bar, came up with ice and mixer.

I lifted the bottle and studied the label thoughtfully. "Not very good liquor," I remarked. "But maybe you buy it cheap."

Ceech's long fingers flipped cigarette ashes into a tray. "It suits most of our customers."

I poured a drink slowly. "Ever give it away—by the bottle, I mean—to special customers?"

He turned on the stool then, his hand going to his coat pocket, but his eyes stayed blank, filmy-gray.

"All right, let's have it. What do you want, Kent?"

"Not much. My girl friend is in jail, charged with murdering Miles Clifton. They cut some capers here last night. Thought you might tell me who else was in their party."

"Nobody else," he said with mocking finality. "They were a twosome and stayed that way. Now take a powder, before—"

"It's bad for business, chasing customers out, but," I shrugged and slid off the stool, "all things are relative, if we are to believe Einstein."

Somebody was lying, but somebody usually does in a murder case. I weighed all the imponderables and decided I was a damned fool. It might be simpler just to change girl friends.

NEWSPAPERS are good places to dig for secrets, too—if you have patience and a friend with access to the morgue files. Tony Genetti worked at one. I bought a pint of bonded bourbon and paid Tony a visit. He greeted me with open arms and two glasses.

"My favorite dick," he chortled. "He gurgles when he walks."

We got busy on Clifton's file. I disregarded the raves and blurbs sent out by

the studio publicity department, and the movie columnist's carols, looking for the meaty stuff. Clifton, it seemed, spent considerable time at Palm Springs and Las Vegas, was an aviation enthusiast, a horse race fan, and had been married three times, the last matrimonial venture ending in a Nevada divorce. It was a familiar Hollywood pattern. We pulled the file on Carla Synder, Clifton's last wife and found a nice, glossy picture.

It was the blonde hat-check girl at the Blind Tiger.

Sometimes in this racket you get so close to an answer, it's hanging under your nose so you can't see it. I figured from the first whoever murdered Clifton knew Lorry was accompanying him to his apartment, else there could be no frame, and the case stank to high heaven of frame-up. Carla Synder had been in the spot to know, maybe from some barbed remark by Clifton as he and Lorry were leaving the nightery. And, like I said, jealousy is a prime murder motive.

I went through Carla's thin file quickly. She'd risen from obscurity to marry Clifton—it was natural she should return to obscurity when he divorced her. She'd been a cigarette girl in a night club. It was a kindred occupation to her present one. She had reason to hate the actor after her brief whirl in the spotlight and sudden return to the wings.

I gave Tony the bottle and returned to the Blind Tiger.

In a way I felt sorry for the kid as I handed her my hat. Hollywood gives some girls a bad time. She had the face and figure, but what she used for brains, I don't know. Anyway, it was her neck or Lorry's—and I prefer brunettes.

"Carla Synder, once upon a time Carla Clifton," I said softly. "What a coincidence you're checking hats at the Blind Tiger."

Her eyes went wide at that, and she almost dropped my hat. She grabbed my arm and pulled me inside the check stand.

"I didn't kill him." She'd gone pale under her make-up. "Honest Willikens. You've got to believe me!"

"Twice today I've heard that song. Somebody killed him," I said thinly. "This joint closed at two a.m., and Clifton got it an hour later. Let's hear your alibi."

"I went home and went to bed." Her fingers dug into my arm. "It's the truth."

"Everybody tells me the truth," I said sarcastically. "Baby, you're in the soup. I'm calling the cops."

"No!" she screamed.

That scream brought a heavy-set lad from his post near the door. He pushed into the check stand, and I noticed the bulging muscles under his dinner jacket. One of Al Ceech's hired mugs.

"What the hell?" His agate-hard eyes fixed on me. "You! We told you to stay outa here."

I backed into a coat rack. "Don't get hasty," I said. "This is merely a social call."

He balled his fists, hunched his shoulders, and pushed Carla aside. "Mugs like you need a lesson," he growled. "With a couple of teeth missing you'll learn faster. You're dumb, and I hate dumb guys."

He swung. I ducked, but got tangled in somebody's fur coat. The blow glanced off my head and I careened into the wall. Agate Eyes bored in, and I saw Carla darting from the stand. I lunged for her, but the mug blocked me.

"Dumb," he gritted. "They burned the schoolhouse down to get you outa the second grade."

He slammed his fist into my stomach and I doubled like a jackknife. I knew it was coming, and tried to get away, but the retching nausea rising from my guts tear-blinded me. I stumbled forward, holding my stomach, trying to make the door. Carla was beating it, and Lorry's chances and mine were going with her. Agate Eyes pivoted on his heel, swinging from the knees. Then the room turned upside down and the ceiling caved in.

WATER splashed my face and trickled down my chin. Maybe I groaned—it sounded nearby. Then a stinging slap opened my eyes. Agate Eyes was standing over me, fist cocked.

"Okay," I said wearily. "I admit it. I'm dumb."

He stepped aside and my eyes focused on a desk. Al Ceech sat behind it, face still as death. I reared up to my elbows. I was sprawled on a leather couch in an office. All the doors were closed and the window blinds drawn. A radio played

sweet music softly, off in some corner.

"This is cozy," I said. My lips felt thick, swollen. "Did I arrive in a private elevator or did you carry me?"

Ceech didn't smile. "You were talking to Carla," he said softly. "What about?"

I tried to sit up, but the top of my head wanted to fly off. "Nothing. I was checking her smallpox vaccinations."

Ceech barely nodded. Agate Eyes stepped over and turned the radio loud, then walked back to the couch.

"Dumb," he gritted. "You said so yourself."

He grabbed my hair, yanked my head up, and slashed his knuckles across my face, I saw red and tasted blood—my own. I fell back, wishing I were in a Turkish bath where I could think.

"You talked to her about me." Ceech's voice sounded far off. "What did she say?"

"It's no use," Agate Eyes said heavily. "He's out, Acey."

I kept my eyes closed and pretended to be out. Acey? Why should that name be familiar? Then I remembered the abacadabra symbols. Ok AC. What the hell? It could be a signature okaying something or the other. Al Ceech. Acey—the guy's initials! 3 S.A.—it was hanging under my nose. Then I had it, all but the Eda j Ila.

I looked up at Agate Eyes.

"I'm getting smart," I said. "I'll talk. I asked her who won the third race at Santa Anita yesterday."

Ceech arose from the desk and came over to the couch. His face wasn't immobile anymore. His mouth worked convulsively.

"You have a bet on that race?"

"No, but Clifton did." I wrenched myself upright. "He bet a thousand bucks on a horse called Eda j Ila."

"Never heard of the nag," Agate Eyes said.

"Neither did I," I admitted. "But I'm not a race fan."

I pulled Clifton's tab from my pocket and spread it on my knee. "I got this from a sport coat in Clifton's apartment. You booked the bet, Acey. Handwriting experts will testify to that."

Ceech picked the tab up and tore it into little pieces. "The horse's name was Jade Ali. He won at fifteen to one."

"Nice odds," I said, feeling my hip. My .38 was gone. "So Clifton took you for fifteen grand. Jade Ali. That's cute—so you spell the horse's name backwards on your tabs. Well, a guy can't be too careful. Bookmaking is a felony in California."

"Is your insurance paid up?" Ceech smiled tightly.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't got my premium books with me. But let me pay you a compliment before you bump me, Ceech. You were clever. You didn't want your other clients to know you welched on Clifton, so you killed him. Not finding the tab must have disappointed you, but it wasn't too important. Dead men tell no gambling tales, and you had Lorry in a nice frame, anyhow."

"Dead men?" Agate Eyes appeared unhappy. "Did you rub somebody, Acey? Look, I'm not hired out for—"

"Murder." I ripped the word out. "That's what it was, mugg."

"You talk too much," Ceech said thinly. He pulled a .45 automatic and backed up to the desk. "Both of you. You should talk to the fish off Malibu Pier."

I looked at the gun. "A guy who watches his bartenders so they can't steal a nickel, wouldn't throw a good forty-five away, would he? You'll get the rug dirty, Ceech."

"It cleans easy."

I shrugged. No, I wasn't nonchalant. I wanted to loosen up, so I could move fast. I kept talking, pouring the words at Ceech, edging toward Agate Eyes.

"Mickeys for two, that was the tip-off. And they mixed them themselves, out of the bottle you thoughtfully gave Clifton, along with a pretty speech, probably, about how much you appreciated his patronage. And you promised to come up about three a.m. and pay off his bet. You paid off, all right, after they were passed out. That kitchen door was easy, wasn't it, Ceech?"

His finger tightened on the trigger, and I jumped behind Agate Eyes. Sure, I'd seen the bulge in the mugg's pocket. It was my .38, and I got it out, but not before Ceech fired. Agate Eyes jerked as he took the bullet, then pitched forward. I shot across his falling body, four times into Ceech's chest. It was plenty.

Afterwards, I picked up the tab's pieces. They'd paste together good as new. Then I shut that damned radio off, called Homicide, and sat down to wait. Dugan wouldn't like it, but what could he do? I still had the tab, and the bullet in Agate Eyes' belly would match the one from Clifton's body.

I wondered if Lorry would be real grateful.



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**DETECTIVE
TALES** 25c

THE CASE OF THE FIDDLING FIREBUG

By JIMMY NICHOLS

ALFRID DARROW was a modest man who lived in Evanston, Illinois, in the days when it was still an outpost, rather than a suburb, of Chicago. He wore a crumpled fedora hat, twenty-dollar suits, and was utterly devoted, in a conventional, Evanston-ish way, to his wife and baby son.

In short, there was nothing about him to indicate that he was the spiritual cousin of the infamous Roman Emperor, Nero. Yet Alfred, like the Roman, was destructively devoted to flames and a fiddle. Alfred was a pyromaniac.

He began at the age of eight by setting fire to his grandfather's hayrack. It went up in fine style, touching off two cornfields and a neighbor's barn, and young Al decided it was great fun. The fiddle was a dramatic touch that he added afterward. Its harsh, unmusical shrieks, as of an alley cat in great agony, became his trademark. And it was this that led, finally, to his arrest.

For a long time no one connected the amusing little man and his oversized violin with the rash of destructive property fires that broke out along the banks of the Chicago River in the summer of 1907.

Every city has its quota of fire fans—people who love to watch fires and who drop everything and run at the first sound of the firebell and the rumble of the heavy wagons. Police and firemen often noticed Alfred among the onlookers, scraping away at his fiddle, and put him down as one of these. It was then that they nicknamed him "Nero," but it was not until the fall of 1908 that they discovered how right they were.

At that time, the Chicago public was on the verge of marching bodily on City Hall and ripping the roof off. Nothing makes a Chicagoan more nervous than the smell of smoke, and the warehouse fires of the previous summer could not all be blamed on

spontaneous combustion, although the harried police chief insisted that such was the case.

"Find the arsonist!" heckled the newspapers. "Next conflagration may destroy the Windy City!"

On the night of the second of October, it was still unseasonably warm. A young rookie policeman named O'Clanahan, who later became a famous detective-sergeant, looked over his shoulder to see that there were no superiors in sight, then unbuttoned his tight tunic with a sigh of relief. It was hot and damp near the river bottom, and the smells of oil, chemicals and garbage were bad enough without his smothering to death as well.

Suddenly, a slender figure stepped out of the shadows near the great Allison Tea Company warehouse. O'Clanahan gripped his club. Then, as the stranger was lit up in a circle of flickering illumination from the gas lamp on the corner, the policeman relaxed and grinned.

"If it ain't the little firehound," he murmured, recognizing Alfred. But the little man either failed to see, or ignored, the approaching bluecoat. He had his violin with him. Tucking it under his chin and spreading his feet apart in the professional musician's stance, he began to saw back and forth across the strings.

O'Clanahan, on his way to check in at the station house, passed him at a good clip. "Watcha doin'?" he called. "Wait-in' fer a fire?"

Alfred raised his chin long enough to reply. "Yes," he said simply and went on playing.

The policeman was just entering the station when the entire force erupted from the front door and rushed down the steps. He heard the clang of firebells.

"Where is it?" he called.

"Allison Tea Company! By the river!"

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Suspense-Packed

Detective

Novelette

By

W. LEE

HERRINGTON



CHAPTER ONE

*Who killed Cock Robin?
"I," said the Sparrow.
"With my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin."*

HE CAME down the stairs slowly, his feet hunting for the steps in the darkness. I waited until I was sure he had found the bottom step. Then I put away my .38 Police Special and stepped inside the doorway and turned on the twenty-five-watt bulb hanging from the fly-specked ceiling.

Police Lieutenant Dickerson sat down on the bottom step and his eyes came up to mine. He looked at me without seeing me, like an old, blind dog that just knew, somehow, I was there.

"Randazzo?"

"It's all right now, kid." I tried saying it softly. "They will be here in a few minutes."

"Randazzo?" He had to be sure. I

moved him several feet and let him lean against the wall. Up on the second floor, a woman's voice droned huskily above the other voices and I could hear the intermittent whirr of a dial telephone. A little girl, about seven or eight years old, with a dirty face looked downward through the balusters and then a heavy hand jerked the child away.

Police Lieutenant Dickerson's head drooped and seemed almost to lay on his chest. He brought his head up slowly, and although his arm must have weighed a ton, he wagged his fingers and let the hand drop to his side again.

"Not a thing to worry about," he said.

"Take it easy, Lieutenant. They will be here in a few minutes." It must have sounded pretty hollow, but there wasn't anything I could do to make him any more comfortable. Not with the slugs in him.

"Don't try talking too much," I added.

Randazzo tried to shield the young hooligan . . . even when the kid joined the force—and mocked the shine right off his badge.



"You'd look better in a shroud," I told the lieutenant.

WHO'LL CARRY MY COFFIN?

"A lot of water under the bridge." Lieutenant Dickerson's voice was as shallow as his breath. "Wasted a lot of time, Randazzo. When the time came, it didn't take any special kind of education or grammar. They knew what I meant."

On the second floor, someone hung up the telephone and feet pounded down the hall. I looked up the stairwell into the sea of faces. The little girl with the dirty face looked down at me past the legs of people.

Police Lieutenant Dickerson coughed. His breath was wheezing a little now. "Pretty good job for a crooked cop, wasn't it Randazzo? Go upstairs and make sure I didn't miss, will you Randazzo?"

I looked up the stairwell at the faces again. They told me the answer. I read it in their eyes; the way they stared at Dickerson.

"Don't worry about that, kid," I said. "You didn't miss."

The sound of the siren was the signal. Feet began moving down the stairway. I put a cold hand under Police Lieutenant Dickerson's coat and closed my eyes, and in a minute I took my hand away and picked up his .38 and slipped it in my pocket and looked up the stairs again.

"All right," I said, "you can all come down and have a look now. He won't mind."

I went outside and waited. Inspector Landrum had the red light on and he held to the middle of the street. He left the car angled into the curb, got out and raised his voice above the still moaning siren.

"All right, Randazzo. Where is that rat?"

I felt the weight of the extra gun in my pocket. "What's the hurry?" I asked him. "There's not a thing to worry about."

"Chief Knight didn't have time to brief me on this," Landrum complained. "I don't know all the angles on it yet. Start with Chicago. Pick it up there about you going to see Al Tevlin and fill me in on what happened after that."

"Chicago? You know the story up to when I went to Chicago. What the hell more do you want?"

"It all started there, didn't it? It started there when Al Tevlin was cut into the deal, didn't it?"

"Chicago?" I asked him bitterly. "No, it

didn't start there. It started right here on the corner of Sixth and Hoagland Streets, ten years ago."

THINGS were pretty tough in Midwest City, ten years ago for a lot of us—including the Dickersons. Just the two of them now, Little Dickerson and his dad. It wasn't that he was small. He had got his name from his mother, who had been dead a long time. Her name had been Little before she was married and his father called the boy that. Maybe his dad never thought of him ever getting any bigger, but he was bigger now. You always used the whole name, Little Dickerson.

In a manner of speaking, maybe I killed him and he just took ten years to die. But if I had to do it all over again, there couldn't be any other way.

I took the witness stand and told what I had to tell: I was a patrolman, working out of the Flora Avenue Station. On the night of September the sixth, I had arrested three boys. One of them about sixteen, the other two a little older. Upon searching them, I had found in their possession certain identifiable articles that had been stolen from a service station.

"Is this boy one of the three?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are not mistaken in your identification?"

"No, sir."

"There are the articles, labeled A and B, that you found in his possession?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have any subsequent knowledge of the disposition of the cases of the two other boys arrested with this boy?"

"No, sir. I do not."

"This is the boy you arrested?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is all. Thank you, Officer."

I listened closely to what Judge Tomlinson had to say. Maybe the fact that Judge Tomlinson had been drunk the night before left him in poor form to deal with juvenile crime. I guessed the kid would get six months; maybe a year.

"Does the defendant wish to make any statement?"

The kid just stood there and looked into the judge's bloodshot eyes and shook his head.

"It is the judgment of the court, then, that you—" Judge Tomlinson's mind was a little hazy that morning and he had to look at his slip of paper to remember the name—"Little Dickerson, he confined in one of the State's Reformatory Barracks for a period of not less than three, nor more than four years."

I was as stunned as the boy. I licked my lips the same way the boy did as Tomlinson added:

"During your stay in the disciplinary school provided by the state for the rehabilitation of youthful offenders, you will conduct yourself in such a manner as to insure your ready adaptation to your place in society when you are released."

I should have made my move then. I should have asked the Court to reconsider the youth of the boy; the amount of the value of the stolen articles. Instead, since I knew it would be impolite to vomit in Judge Tomlinson's court, I went outside. Three weeks ago, the judge had agreed to the lowering of a charge of second degree murder to a charge of disturbing the peace against another defendant. But this was Midwest City. And the other defendant had been one of the judge's friends.

Old Man Dickerson came out of the courtroom in a few minutes. I stopped him as he went down the steps.

I said: "I had a duty to perform, Mr. Dickerson."

He just looked at me. "I know. You did it, didn't you?" His voice was dead and flat, and he went on down the street. An elevator dropped with him eight days later and killed him.

My supper tasted like boiled hay that night. My wife bawled me out for using profanity in front of our eleven-year-old daughter and I felt worse.

The daughter said, "Was he really guilty, father?"

I scowled at her. "Sure. He was guilty. What makes me sore—"

"Randazzo," my wife started in again. "Don't start all that over again." She wasn't a nagging woman. Just weary of my beefing about the force and the way courts are run. But mostly, the force.

You've seen forces like ours? Where

every time an election comes along, you kick in? It was just job security, and you took it and liked it or you took it and beefed about it and got kicked down a notch in the department.

I couldn't afford to get kicked down anymore. I got up from the table and lighted my pipe. . . .

When Old Man Dickerson got killed, I got permission from the Chief to go down to the state reformatory and break the news to Little Dickerson about his dad.

He took it the way he took everything else. He stood stiffly at attention, there in the Superintendent's Office and just looked at me when I told him.

After a minute, he said: "Did it hurt much?"

I shook my head. It had been pretty much all at once and there hadn't been any time for pain. The kid's eyes were sullen for a few minutes.

"You doing all right here?" I asked him. "Is there anything you might want I could do for you?"

"They get the old man buried all right?"

"Yes," I said. "That's all taken care of."

"I guess there isn't anything I want, then."

"You want me to come see you once in a while?"

"Why should you?"

"Well, I've got a kid of my own and, after all, you're just a kid."

"No," he said. "I don't guess it would do much good." The mark was already on him. He looked around the office and his lip turned up a little at one corner. "What more could I want? Plenty of clothes. We eat three times a day, and I know where I'm going to sleep nights. No, I don't need anything, or anybody."

That was when he really needed somebody. I said: "Well, if you don't want me to see you—"

"Why should you want to see me?" he asked.

"You weren't a really bad kid," I said. "I thought maybe I could help you."

"No." He hesitated a minute and the crooked little grin came back on his lean face. "I wasn't a really bad kid, I guess. No. Don't come back down here. When my time is up, I'll come see you."

"I'd like to talk to you when you get out."

"You will," he promised. "I'll come to see you, all right, and don't ever forget that for a minute."

I said: "Well, I'll be going then, if there isn't anything I can do for you."

"There isn't," he said. "Not a thing to worry about."

CHAPTER TWO

Who saw him die?

"I," said the Fly.

*"With my little eye,
I saw him die."*

INSPECTOR LANDRUM looked down at Police Lieutenant Dickerson and said: "Everything worked out just as you thought it would? According to plan?"

"No," I said. "Nothing went according to plan."

"You had your orders. You were supposed to let him get inside, and wait for us, instead of going after him yourself."

"I knew what my orders were, Inspector," I said. "I thought it over, all the way back from Chicago. You can't just walk into a man and let him have it in the back."

"You can give it to a crooked cop any way he lets you give it to him." Landrum's hand took hold of my arm and the fingers bit into the muscle. "Unless you learned to play the same way he played it. You and him were buddies for a long time, when you rode prowl together."

Inspector Landrum took his hand off my arm and went inside the doorway. He came back in a few minutes and held out his hand. I took Lieutenant Dickerson's .38 from my pocket and handed it to the Inspector. He looked at the gun for several seconds and put his fingers back on my arm. The hand had an official feel now, although his fingers were shaking a little like a rookie cop on his first arrest.

"If it didn't go according to plan, how the hell did it go?" he asked. One of the boys came down from upstairs then. He came over to where we were standing and spoke to Inspector Landrum.

"It's Tevlin, all right, and Mahaney, too. Both of them are pretty badly shot up. Looks like a three way split, all

right." He looked over his shoulder at Lieutenant Dickerson's feet. That was all you could see from where we stood. The cop turned to me.

"Did you see him get it?" he asked. "Or did it all happen upstairs?"

"I saw him die," I said.

* * *

I was halfway back to Midwest City, that day, coming back from the reformatory when the news broke on the radio. I thought it was a joke, or a soap opera plot or a gag, at first. Two hundred and twenty-four judges of election precincts had been indicted for vote fraud. Eighty other indictments had been handed down, still secret, awaiting the arrest of the persons named.

I knew then, it was a joke. It just didn't happen that way. Not in Midwest City. Then the names began to trickle into the news.

The U. S. District Attorney. The name of an honest federal judge. The foreman of the Federal Grand Jury. The judge and the D. A., and the fearless jury had built a fire in Midwest City and the growing fire was singeing people with names.

One day a tall, dark-eyed man who had been a special agent of the F.B.I. came to town, and the commissioners said he was the new chief of police.

He went to work. The cops stopped paying a lug to the party. People who used to sneer when they saw a cop began speaking to us again and acting like they had cleaned up the town, single handed. But it takes cops. Good cops and yes, maybe sometimes a few dirty cops.

That was the year a lot of people learned the meaning of the word *exodus*. As the indictments grew in number, the exodus of minor and major gangsters and racketeers and hoodlums went on. They began leaving.

And time went on. But one day another kind of blow fell on Midwest City. You would have thought the chief was everybody's favorite brother or close friend. He was that popular. But a man has to live. The chief drew a pitiful salary for a man who had made one of the best departments out of one of the worst. Since there was

no legal way to raise his salary, and he was honest and had to eat, he resigned and found a better job.

That was when they started coming back. Nobody blamed the new chief of police, Mike Knight. It was just that law enforcement had become a one-man job under the old chief. With him gone, the old faces began showing up again and it was not long before it was like old times.

LITTLE DICKERSON came back that year. He was bigger and his eyes were harder. Our daughter was fourteen then and very dignified. She answered the ring of the doorbell and stood looking at Little Dickerson, then she called out to me:

"There is someone to see you, father."

Little Dickerson came into the living room. He said: "I don't suppose you remember me."

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked him.

"You arrest a lot of people, I suppose."

"Not very many kids," I looked at his murky eyes and walked over closer to the drawer where I kept my harness and my gun.

"I told you I was coming to see you when I got out." He looked around the living room like a prospective buyer. "Nice place you got here."

"It's mortgaged."

"I hear most cops on the force are honest now." He laughed. "What ever happened to Lou Mahaney and Al Tevlin?"

"Let me give you some good advice, son," I warned him. "Stay away from guys like Mahaney."

"What happened to them?"

"Look, son. Haven't you had enough trouble?"

"I'm a big kid now. What happened to Tevlin and Mahaney?"

"Lou Mahaney had enough drag to get a dismissal on his case. Al Tevlin pushed a cop in the face and escaped. The way I hear it, he got to Chicago, worked his way up, and he's a big shot in the rackets back there."

The kid pulled at his lip. "Let's see. Al Tevlin was twenty, Lou Mahaney was twenty-three and I was just sixteen—and I'm nineteen now. I learned a lot down there, Mr. Randazzo."

"A lot of the wrong things."

"And some right things. How old do you have to be to get on the force."

It stunned me for a minute. "Talk sense," I pleaded.

"I only made the one mistake," Little Dickerson said. "I listened to Lou and Al and it got me into trouble. I didn't have any record and I got three to four. They had records and didn't draw anything. It ain't just that.

"My old lady was dead and my old man couldn't give me much time. Anyway, we were always buying clothes, I grew so fast. The easy way is the hard way. I want to get on the force and be a cop—wipe it clean, and let a lot of other kids get a chance to stay out of the reform school. How old do you have to be?"

My pipe had gone out and I re-lit it. It took a little time to explain it. He was only nineteen. He had a record. Even on a crooked force he would have needed two more years, a front, and a sponsor. If the old chief had been around I might have swung it, but not with Mike

Here's how I proved to Mary...

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE **ALKA-SELTZER** FOR FAST RELIEF FROM HEADACHE

I CAN'T GO, DARLING... THIS HEADACHE'S TOO MUCH FOR ME!

SURE YOU CAN! HERE. **SEE NOW FAST ALKA-SELTZER** MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER!

HERE WE GO! WE'RE OFF FOR FUN!

RIGHT, JIM! THERE'S NOTHING LIKE **ALKA-SELTZER** FOR FAST RELIEF FROM HEADACHE

AT ALL DRUG STORES

Knight. Anyway, I was just a Class "A" patrolman. Little Dickerson nodded as if he understood.

He looked toward the kitchen, licked his lips and swallowed, and his eyes were hard.

"Okay," he said. "Then I'll come back in a couple of years. Maybe then you'll lay it on the line for me."

"Maybe," I said. "Yes, maybe I will."

He grinned. "You thought I was coming back and try getting tough with you for arresting me? Or maybe put the bite on you for a soft touch?"

I nodded. My fourteen-year-old daughter opened the kitchen door a little. She had one of our plates with the blue flowers on it, and on the blue plate a chicken sandwich. In her left hand she carried a tall glass of milk. She smiled at Little Dickerson.

"I thought you looked hungry. You haven't really eaten your supper, have you?"

That was the only time I ever saw his eyes soften. He looked at me. I nodded my head, and we sat down at the table together.

CHAPTER THREE

Who'll be Chief Mourner?

"I," said the Dove,

"I mourn for my love.

I'll be Chief Mourner."

I KNOCKED the ashes out of my pipe as I heard Maria go to the front door. She came into the living room and looked over her shoulder, then looked at me.

"There is someone to see you, father." She went back to the kitchen and began helping her mother with the dishes.

I might not have remembered Little Dickerson, he had changed that much. All of the kid stuff was gone, and if the hardness of his eyes was still there it was just a hard glow. He looked past me at the kitchen. I shook hands with him and called my daughter from the kitchen. She took off her apron and came in and looked her question at me.

"Maria," I said, "this is Little Dickerson. One night, a long time ago, he came to see me."

"Not so long ago, Father. I was just a

child then, but I remember. How are you, Mister Dickerson?"

"Quite all right, Miss Randazzo. You're even prettier than I remembered."

"Mr. Dickerson wants to be a cop. That is why you came back," I asked, "wasn't it?"

"I told you I would come back."

"Maria, what do you think? Would he be a good cop?"

He watched her eyes, not mine. He stood straight and sturdy, like a fence post and looked deep into Maria Randazzo's dove-colored eyes. She looked at the top of his straight black hair and slowly down over the bulk of his chest, the flatness of his stomach, at the way his clothes fit, and at his highly polished shoes.

"He'll make a good cop, Father." She swung her eyes around to me and measured me against Little Dickerson. I lost in the comparison. He was taller and straighter and very much younger. She looked at the boy again, at his eyes and mouth. "He'll make a good cop, Father. An honest cop."

He smiled then. "Thank you Miss Randazzo for going down the line for me."

She said, "If you're going to be a good cop like my father, you can call me Maria. Good night, Mister Dickerson." She went back to the kitchen and put on her apron and closed the swinging door.

It was fairly simple, after that. We saw him several times a week while he was going through police school, and when he began his probation they put him on the prowl car with me as driver. I had the North End because my name was Randazzo and little Italian boys sometimes listened to my advice which they would have resented from an Irishman.

That afternoon Dickerson got his first taste of police work, right off the cuff. It wasn't much, just a family argument that had ended up with a few bloody noses and nobody had to go downtown, but it made the kid nervous.

When we got back in the car I patted his knee. "You'll get used to it. I was pretty nervous the first few times out." He grinned.

That night he came home with me to eat spaghetti and meat balls, and drink red wine—and look into Maria's eyes.

By late summer, he was a Class A Patrolman. That was the first time Mike Knight called us into his office. He was sorry as hell, boys, but you know how it is: a couple of the beefy boys want to ride the North End and, anyway, we need good cops out south. Things were getting back to normal in Midwest City by that time—so we went south, to the Country Club Station.

Four days later, Patrolman Dickerson made his first solo arrest. Not like a kid with a fish, but in his best formal manner. A drunk weaved in and out of traffic, gunned it through a red light at the next corner. Patrolman Dickerson put the accelerator all the way down and touched the siren. I hung onto the edge of the seat and pushed against the floorboards.

The drunk gave up three blocks ahead. The police car tied him to the curb and Patrolman Dickerson got out quietly, firmly. I watched him handle it alone, then he came back to the car. His eyes were hard and smoky and his words clipped at me.

"Follow us down to Flora Avenue Station."

I followed, with the prowler car and waited until he booked his prisoner, very formally, and signed the complaint with his name, rank and number.

The next morning we went on patrol an hour and a half late. We lost the time because we had to go to Chief Knight's office again.

Mike Knight said, "Randazzo, you're letting the kid take over on you."

"He ranks with me," I defended myself. "He's making a damn good cop. You know that."

"You can do too good a job. Now, this arrest you made yesterday, Dickerson. That was poor judgment."

"Why," the new cop asked. "He violated five traffic sections including speeding and the red light count. I arrested him and took him down because he told me off and after that, dared me to make it stick."

"The defendant is a man of influence. He claims you threatened him, cursed him and offered to strike him."

"Briefly," Patrolman Dickerson said, "I didn't make it stick. You going to dismiss on him?"

"It's all disposed of," Mike Knight said. He turned on me. "Randazzo, I put you guys out in Country Club because you ought to have some judgment. Now take this kid out and keep him out of trouble. Let's not allow the force to get a bad name out there."

He rifled some papers on his desk as we went out. We drove back out south and the boy was silent until we hit our district.

HE SAID: "I followed the rule book and the manual. I was polite. I was impersonal. The stinker was drunk and wanted to fight me—so I took him down. Is this the way it's played? The top cat gets the cream?"

"You heard what the chief said," I told him.

"Not *what* you know—but *who* you know? That it?"

I shook out a cigarette and offered him one. It was a breach of Rule 32-G, but he took it and we smoked.

"I went to night school and got my high school credits and learned how to be a lot of things, including being a damn fool." He was bitter. "I beat my brains out so that I can talk to other people intelligently because I thought someday I might be a cop and have to arrest somebody smarter than me. I didn't need to learn all that, just: yes, sir; no, sir; you're a big shot, sir."

"It's all in the day's work, kid. Don't let it get you down."

"Aw, to hell with it," he said. "I guess I had it coming to me."

By the end of the shift he was in a pretty good humor. When we drove into the police garage, he was humming an aria Maria had taught him. He frowned at me and said: "Tell Maria I'll call her later, will you? I'm not coming out to supper tonight."

"They'll take your hide off," I warned him. "Maria and her mother are beginning to think you're a little tin god." I patted his stomach playfully. "How do you keep it flat like that, with the kind of food that Maria and—"

He turned away from me and looked over into the dark corner of the garage.

He said: "I hear that Lou Mahaney and his boys are taking over, down in our old district. Selling policy and a few

other of their special kinds of rackets.”

I didn't say anything. I didn't think about it any more, until a week later when Little Dickerson again said, "Make it right for me about supper, will you?"

"Sure," I lied. "You know what you're doing?"

"I hear Mahaney is paying the boys in Car 19 about two hundred a week." He checked out and went up the street, heading north.

I went home and looked into Maria's eyes and saw that she had been crying. She wasn't just a kid anymore, although she still wore sweaters and skirts most of the time. No, not just a little dove-eyed kid anymore.

"Little Dickerson?" I asked.

She nodded and patted my hand. "It doesn't matter too much, Father. Just a show. That's all we were going to do. He called a few minutes ago, to make sure you hadn't forgotten to tell me he wasn't coming."

I'm a dope in a lot of ways. Not that way. I knew how the kid felt. I said, "The boy hasn't got over the first taste of his medicine. The chief bawled him out for arresting a big shot."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because—" How could you explain it? "When you get to be a cop—" That wasn't the way.

I put my arm around her and looked at her hair and eyes. Some of both of us were there, in her hair and eyes.

"Honey," I said, "I'm Italian. Your mother is a gray-eyed, blonde woman who gets sore when I call her a Swede. But we get along. You've got some of both of us in you. The force is like that. Does that make sense?"

"Not too much sense, father."

"The force is like marriage, honey. You have to take the part you don't like along with the part you do like, if you make it work at all. To be a good cop you have to break your heart and your head sometimes, too."

"I know that, Father," she said against my shoulder.

"When the kid gets over being hurt, he'll see it that way—take all the parts together to make the whole.

"He will be a good cop, too," I added, "when he quits trying to fight windmills."

"He'll be an honest cop? Like you?"

I nodded and sent her to the kitchen to get my supper ready.

LITTLE DICKERSON didn't bring up the subject of Mahaney any more the rest of the summer. His eyes that had been dark and brooding when he went on the force got a smile in them, but then Maria's eyes tipped me off. I got two extra presents that Christmas: A new son-in-law and a new partner on the patrol car. Little Dickerson was going places fast. When the chief called me in and told me the kid was going into the Detective Bureau, I was glad, for me and him and Maria.

A fool's paradise? Sure it was. I didn't know then how much time Detective Dickerson was spending with Mahaney or Mahaney's men and, when I got to checking, it didn't look too bad. The kids were living in a small apartment and their new car was a used car. When I began to hear the rumors, I gave—and took—a punch in the nose. By that time I was up for sergeant, and it cost me that, too.

Mike Knight said: "You'll have to let the boy live his own life, Randazzo. That kind of talk always follows a cop around if he buys a new shirt."

"He married my kid," I said. "The talk goes that he's getting his. You know what that means. Take a dime and you're a crooked cop. Take a dollar and you're so deep you have to play ball and get cross-eyed from looking the other way." I was pretty hot under the collar.

So was the chief. "I won't have any fighting among my men. Now go on back out there and get along with the boys. You can't control what a man says, or what he hears. That's all, Randazzo."

I went back. And because I was a cop I kept my ears open. And because I was a father, I kept my mouth shut. Little Dickerson didn't seem to change. He was a good husband to Maria and he was the same toward me as ever.

Even when he got to be detective sergeant, I opened my ears a little more and bit my tongue deeper and tried not showing the hurt inside me. Ever try that? It hurts more that way.

I thought Mike Knight must be pretty dumb, not knowing about it. The day

I went to his office to ask him to put me back on the examination list, I changed my mind when I got there. Lou Mahaney came out of the chief's office, grinning at me and waving a greeting as he went out. When I went in, the chief's humor matched mine.

"Well, Randazzo, what the hell do you want?"

"Nothing. I guess I've changed my mind."

"The hell you have. You came here to ask me to put you on the promotion list. What changed your mind?"

"If it's all the same to you—"

"It isn't," he barked. "Name your spot. You want to be a sergeant? Or maybe move over to the bureau?"

"I haven't got anybody fronting for me," I said. "Anyway, nobody like Lou Mahaney."

Mike Knight said, "I don't know which is which. Whether you have to be smart to be honest and dumb to play crooked, or the other way around." He looked at the office door, saw it was closed and came up and put his arm around my shoulder.

I said, "They tell me the boy is going bad, Mike."

"He's already bad. Lou Mahaney has him all the way. Now Lou tells me that if we win the election, he wants Dickerson upped a notch. Lou says the boy has to be made a lieutenant. If we win the next election, that means Lou Mahaney gets what he wants in the Fifth Ward."

"Yeah," I said. "And that means he owns two councilmen and a lot of cops. A lot of cops, Mike."

Mike Knight nodded his head. "I'm just a cop, Randazzo. You know how it

is. I get my orders from the top and I have to carry them out."

"Getting to be like old times, ain't it, Mike."

"Will be, right after election, unless some sort of miracle happens," he admitted.

"Like somebody running Lou out of town? Or maybe knifing him and twisting the knife a little? A .38 maybe? If I stay on the force, sooner or later I'll run into something the kid is mixed up in, bad. I've changed my mind, Mike. Larry Kehoe, over at the Burns Agency needs a door shaker. I guess I don't want those stripes, after all, not if it's like old times."

The chief was tired. He said, "You can have anything you want, Randazzo, stripes, or the bureau or anything."

I'm too old and experienced to blow my top like a school kid. I couldn't make sergeant by myself but I could have anything I wanted because my daughter was the wife of Lieutenant Dickerson. I tasted the words and they were bitter.

I said: "If the boys take over in the election, that means Mahaney is on top. I've heard talk about Al Tevlin coming in if that happens. With Tevlin and Mahaney on top—"

"There's nobody to stop them, Randazzo."

"I think I'll talk to Larry Kehoe."

"That won't get it. Let it ride and let's see what develops." The chief took his hand off my arm and went to the door with me. "Don't get any funny ideas, Randazzo."

Maria Dickerson came to have supper with us that night. Her eyes sparkled and she was ripening rapidly into a woman.



**SCALP
FEEL TIGHT
AS A KNOT?**



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"Little went to Chicago this afternoon," she said importantly.

"Chicago?"

"Uh-huh." She turned her wine glass round and round on the tablecloth. Her big eyes were proud. "He has some business in Chicago and if it works out, we can move into that place out south."

"You want to move out of the neighborhood? Away from the Randazzos?"

"Why shouldn't a detective lieutenant live out south?" she asked me. I didn't have any answer to that. Maybe it didn't need any answer. My wife came in from the kitchen and asked me if I felt bad. I stalled and told her I was tired.

The next morning she asked me again if I was sick. I shook my head and harnessed up for work. I had forgotten where I borrowed the phrase: "Not a thing to worry about," I said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Who'll carry his coffin?

*"I," said the Kite.
"If it be in the night,
I'll carry his coffin."*

I HAD known the police surgeon for a long time. He said there wasn't any reason why that old gun-shot wound I got back in the election-day riot in '34 should be bothering me now, but I sure had a lot of sick leave piled up and if he wanted me to, he would certify me as needing a rest. That's how I took some time off, complaining a lot of my ribs were hurting me.

There had to be an alibi for not wanting to go out to the kids' house for dinner, something to explain why you didn't want to talk shop with your friends anymore and why you have such a hell of a time keeping your contempt for her husband from showing in your eyes when you look at your daughter.

I sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the night sounds. My wife turned on the bed lamp and put her warm hand against my back.

"Sick, Randazzo?"

"No," I said. "I guess I'm not sick."

"You've been like this for a week. I know. I've heard you prowling around the house, sitting in the dark. Let me think with you, Randazzo."

"Hard work, and the election lug and when you get old—if you don't get shot before you get old—a measly pension. A hell of a lot of guys don't play it that way."

"You worrying about the election yesterday?"

"No," I lied. "It usually goes that way. It won't make any difference with me. Remember? I'm just a dumb, honest cop. They need us to do the work."

"We made the last payment on the house last month, Randazzo. That worrying you?"

"No," I said. I got up and began dressing.

"You going somewhere, Randazzo?"

I felt like hell. I called the night captain and told him I felt like hell and I'd let him know when I felt better—if I ever did.

I said, "I don't know how long I'll be gone." I took my .38 Special and put it in my pocket. "I'm going to Chicago to see a man."

I leaned over the bed to kiss her good-by. She had tears in her eyes and a big smile in her throat, and she kissed me and pinched my arm and said, "You big dago."

I slugged her playfully. "You big fat Swede." Then I went out. She locked the front door behind me. . . .

In Chicago I was lost. I hadn't been there since I trained at Great Lakes Naval Station. But one town is the same as the next when you're looking for somebody. You ask the right people and sooner or later you get what you want.

I found Al Tevlin at one of Chicago's best hotels. There weren't any flat-faced boys on the door leering at me, no fat-ringed fingers fanning me for a gun. Just a quiet opening of the door, and I went into Al Tevlin's suite. He seemed pretty sure of himself, even for Chicago. I put on an act for him because that was the only way I could get close to him. And I had to get close to him if I was going to help hurry him to Midwest City and the end I had in mind for him.

"You didn't have your boys frisk me," I said.

"I've been waiting for you, Randazzo." Al Tevlin laughed and poured a drink. "What took you so long? Is that the way

you boys back in Midwest City work? Snooping around for three days asking questions? Never do that, pal. Just walk into Chicago and tell the boys you want to see Tevlin. They'll tell you where."

"We're pretty slow in Midwest City," I admitted. The liquor was good and I took another when my glass was empty. "But it's getting to be like old times again."

"That's what they tell me." Al Tevlin winked.

WE BOTH laughed. It was a hell of a good joke. He had the clippings on his coffee table. He poked a finger at one headline:

**MAHANEY FACTION
GAINS SEAT IN MIDWEST
CITY COUNCIL**

I nodded. "Like old times."

"What brings you in from the country?"

"I'm getting tired of being an ordinary cop," I said. "I'm getting old. I was thirty before I got married, and I've got a married daughter now in her early twenties. She married a cop, too."

Tevlin winked at me again. "That's what I hear."

"He's doing all right. Me, I'm not even a sergeant yet. But I'm up for a sergeant's stripes any time now. What does a guy have to do to get his wide stripe? And how long does it take him to get the rest? To get a captain's bars?"

"All depends." Al Tevlin wasn't laughing now. He pushed the good liquor closer to me and I poured us both another drink. "How much weight do you carry?"

"Enough. Of course, Lou Mahaney's boys have the North End sewed up. But I'm pretty well thought of in the district. I could handle a precinct. Maybe two precincts."

Al Tevlin pursed his lips and looked me up and down. His eyes were wasp brown, without glitter. He said: "I ought to throw you out of here and have you kicked around. You remember me, Randazzo?"

I nodded. "The last time I saw you, I had just arrested you for petty larceny. You escaped on the way over to police courts. From what I hear, you have done all right for yourself these last ten years.

We can't be talking about kicking each other around if we're going to do business."

"Business?"

"Lou Mahaney was your pal ten years ago. He's doing all right for himself down in the North End. If I'm going to help deliver the North End—"

Al Tevlin laughed. "Still a little man, aren't you, Randazzo. North End? Hell, that's just a beginning. We're going to take the whole town."

"Better play it small," I told him. "This kind of stuff is on the way out. The machine-boss type of town is on the way out. You'll have to be damn good to stay on top in Midwest City, Al."

"You said it, kid." Tevlin let me pour him another drink. "At least you know what the score is. Take the cream, spread it thin. A normal profit and a big turnover." He tapped the clippings again. "How was it you came to see me?"

"I told you my daughter married a cop. Little Dickerson." Al Tevlin didn't seem surprised at that, and I went on quietly: "When he came up to Chicago the other day, I figured everything was about set and I knew I'd better get my oar in quick if I wanted a place in the boat. Your organization complete?"

"We have a few openings for a few choice men." He sounded just like a personnel director and his clothes looked just like a business executive or a Man of Distinction. I looked around the room and wondered what the cost per day was.

"I'd like to have those stripes," I said.

"You'll get them and more, too." Tevlin was all business. "Now, what is the average deal in a case like yours?"

"You ought to know. You're doing the hiring."

"I'm taking over Midwest City in a few days. When I do, look me up. We'll find something for you. Something a lad like you will like."

"You're taking over Midwest City. What's Lou Mahaney going to say to that?"

"Lord, you're dumb." Tevlin laughed. "Didn't Little wise you up? Mahaney and I have worked on this set-up for months. Midwest City is going to be a sort of branch office. With headquarters here in Chicago."

"I wanted to make sure," I said. "I've got a lot at stake. I guess you have, too, haven't you Al?"

"It's cost me a couple hundred thousand already, just lining up the right kind of—personnel."

"You'd better bring along some of your best boys anyway. Like I said, it isn't kid stuff anymore, down there in Midwest City. A lot of people still remember the last clean-up and if you let things get too big, someone might get hurt."

"I can handle anything I start," Tevlin said.

"But someone else may have to finish it. You better bring some friends along. You're practically a stranger there now. You may need someone to carry your coffin."

"I never worry about who'll carry my coffin. Little Dickerson can help carry it."

"Sure. But who'll carry his?"

Tevlin laughed at that. He said I was clever as hell and he would remember that. He was still laughing when I went down on the elevator and maybe I did look like a yokel as I took out the other part of my round trip ticket and looked at it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Who'll dig his grave?

"I," said the Owl.

"With my spade and trowel

I'll dig his grave."

MARIA DICKERSON opened the door, saw me, and threw her arms around my neck. She pulled me into the living room. Lieutenant Little Dickerson put his evening paper aside and grinned up at me.

"Hiyah, Randazzo."

I waved a hand and looked around the living room. "Pretty nice place you have here. I wanted to see how a Lieutenant of Detectives lives." He came up out of the chair and Maria went to the kitchen and closed the door. In a few seconds, she stuck her head around the door edge and said: "I'll have some chicken sandwiches ready in a minute, Father."

I wandered around the place, looking at the picture that had been added over the mantel of the fireplace; the square mirror on the opposite end of the room

and the latest photograph of Maria. She looked mature and cool and capable in that picture. No sweater and pleated skirt and scrawny neck and shoulders there.

When Maria brought the sandwiches, I ate my portion. I wasn't hungry, but it didn't lodge in my throat either. For once in my life I knew exactly what to do and how I was going to do it.

When Maria took the dishes away, I followed her into the kitchen and said: "I'll have to be running along and I'm taking Little with me. Business."

She looked a question up at me out of her dove-gray eyes and I put a hard, brusque look on my face and barked: "Police business."

"I'll take the car and run down and see mother, then," she said. I liked it that way. When the payoff came, she would be close enough to us to cry on our shoulder, if she cried at all.

We got into my old car and watched her guide the Dickerson car down the driveway and turn north. I looked at Lieutenant Dickerson.

Little Dickerson said: "I hear you went to see Al Tevlin."

"Yes. I talked to him in Chicago. That was after you went to Chicago."

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you, Randazzo?"

"I think so."

"You think it's going to be easy for a cop who has been honest all his life to throw in with the rackets?"

"It's all right for you, but not for me," I said. "Is that what you mean?"

We looked at each other and his eyes stalked mine and he tried getting down into my brain. I knew what I had to do.

He said: "Don't do it, Randazzo. This thing is shaping up into something big. For the lads who don't know the rules, well, they might get hurt."

"You're doing all right. Moving out south, all that sort of stuff. You're doing all right."

"I am at that," Little Dickerson said slowly.

"Lou Mahaney backed you and told the chief to make you a lieutenant." I turned on the ignition and started the motor and put the car in gear and drove north.

I thought about Maria, on her way to

my home. Pretty soon she would be laughing and talking with her mother—and pretty soon I was going to have a talk with Al Tevlin and Lou Mahaney and Little Dickerson. "You weigh enough now to get Mahaney and Tevlin together for a little talk?" I asked. "The four of us?"

He was silent for half a block and I turned and looked at him; at the clean line of his chin and the set of his jaw and the brooding, smoky look in his eyes. It added up to the look of a crooked cop.

He said: "Drive on down to the bureau. I'll get us together. It may take a little time, though."

We sat in Lieutenant Dickerson's office until almost dark. The phone rang. He answered it and talked to Lou Mahaney. Then we sat again, and when the phone rang he talked to Al Tevlin and hung up. He opened a desk drawer and took out an envelope and put it on the desk.

"You think money is the answer to everything?" he asked me.

"No," I said. "Money has a way of asking its own questions and giving some funny answers. Tevlin willing to cut me in? Willing to make me a lieutenant?"

Little Dickerson nodded. "We're meeting at Sixth and Hoagland."

"Why Sixth and Hoagland? Why not downtown?"

He laughed, "Just a funny idea of mine, I guess."

IT WAS dark when I met Little Dickerson at the corner of Sixth and Hoagland Streets. The night air was warm and the old buildings, dimly lighted, seemed to exude sweat of the hundreds who had lived in them. The one in front of us was a brick building with a narrow door and uncurtained windows along its two floors. I knew that upstairs, somewhere at the back away from windows, Al Tevlin and Lou Mahaney waited. Waited for their old pal, Little Dickerson, and the new recruit, Randazzo.

Little Dickerson looked at my face in the light of a bug-specked street lamp and he grinned. "I know how you feel, Randazzo," he said. "It looks bad, doesn't it? Doesn't this meeting place mean anything to you?"

I got out my gun and held it in his

belly. I wanted awfully bad to give it to him then.

"It does now," I told him. "Ten years ago. On this corner. You and Lou Mahaney and Al Tevlin. You got three years in the reform school. You dirty, stinking little rat! You came to my home and said you wanted to be a cop and you wanted an education. You fell in love with Maria and you went crooked.

"You're not *going* upstairs, Lieutenant. I'm going to *take* you upstairs. And when we open the door to the room up there where Tevlin and Mahaney are waiting, I'm going to let you have it, all of you."

He didn't change the expression on his face. "You just gave the boys the build up," he said. "You just meant to clean house, your own way."

I nodded. "Turn around and let's go upstairs."

"Not that way, Randazzo. Not that way. Ten years ago you arrested me here on this corner. You sent me away to a reformatory, and I learned a lot. I wasn't a bad kid up to then. I saw a lot of kids that weren't bad and I knew how they got started. Guys like Al Tevlin and Lou Mahaney and a million others, all there to get a guy off on the wrong road. I had ideals, Randazzo."

"Did you? . . . So have I."

"I came right back to where I started," he said. "I asked you to front for me. I went up the ladder as fast as I could and in another year, Randazzo, I could have talked Mahaney into making me chief. How would I look in Mike Knight's job?"

"You'd look better in a shroud," I said.

"Too bad it didn't work out that way." He looked at his strap watch. "Well, it's getting late, Randazzo. I'd better be getting upstairs."

"You? You mean *we*."

Lieutenant Dickerson reached into his inside coat pocket and handed me an envelope. "Open it," he said.

I looked at the contents of the envelope and whistled. I rifled the bills, most of them big ones.

"There is a typed list of names, dates and places along with it," Dickerson said. "A list of every cent I got from the boys upstairs. I'm going up now and bring

them down and then we are going over to headquarters and book them. Book Lou Mahaney and Al Tevlin. Then we arrest two or three others, and a city councilman . . . maybe two."

My mouth was dry. I said, "Wait, son."

I lowered my .38 Special and stepped back. He took his own short-barreled .38 from under his coat and held it against his leg.

"You think I've liked it, Randazzo? Being called a crooked cop?" He laughed. "When I owe fifty-six hundred on my house? And six hundred on my car? It was a good act, wasn't it? You thought I had fallen off my little white horse and got dirty? Mahaney's boy? That's what I wanted him to think too."

"We'll go together," I said firmly.

"These boys play rough, Randazzo. A good act? A good act needs a wow finish. No," he said, "if it spills over, your spot is down here."

"I've got a lot on my chest," I said. "I planned to take care of the boys up there myself, son."

"This is my show. If I don't get a good hand on the act, see that Mike Knight gets that list, and the money. Mahaney won't need it and it could be used to help kids down in the North End. Maybe a community house, or something."

"We'll work that out together," I said. I had a funny feeling in my throat and it was like old times, again.

He stopped before he went in the doorway and lighted a cigarette. In the darkness the match flared in front of him.

CHAPTER SIX

*All the birds of the air
Fell to sobbing and sighing
When they heard the bell toll
For poor Cock Robin.*

"SO THAT'S the way it was," I said. "My watch told me you'd be here in about three minutes. I heard a siren over on South Hoagland street and I figured you were right on the button but it didn't work out that way. The timing was off, all the way round."

Inspector Landrum came out of the doorway in a hurry. His eyes were wide and his voice held a little awe as he said,

"The M.E. says from the position of the bodies and the angle of the wounds, he figures the lieutenant must have got both of them before they got him. Suppose we had the kid wrong, Mike?"

I handed the envelope to Mike Knight. He had an awful look on his face, and I suddenly wondered how much he knew of what was going on in Little Dickerson's mind.

"I didn't count the shots," I said. "Too close together and anyway, he wasn't in there very long. He just came down the stairs, his feet hunting for the steps, there in the dark. When I was sure it was him there on the bottom step, I put my gun away and went in and turned on the light and somebody upstairs called headquarters."

Chief Mike Knight's arm was cool across my shoulders. He led me over to the department car and let me sit down. "We'll finish it now," he said. "We can handle the rest of it ourselves."

I nodded. I didn't ask him if he had been in the know—or if he had been in the dark with me. . . .

There are still kids leaving Midwest City for the state reformatory every year, like always—but not so many from the North End. And they still talk shop, between shifts, over at the police garage, and sometimes they talk of crooked cops. When a new man comes on the force, they haze him a lot as usual. When it's a real young cop, they take him over to Sixth and Hoagland Streets to the Little Dickerson Memorial. It isn't a pile of stone of a statue, or stuff like that. It's just a stone shelter house they built with the twenty-three thousand seven-hundred-nineteen dollars they found in the envelope.

It helps some for me to go over and listen on those occasions and wonder how far the kid cop will go.

It doesn't help much though in the night. Mostly, it doesn't help on those nights when we hear Maria walking around the house silently; or when she sits alone in the dark. Maria is older now, and sometimes, on band concert nights, when the kids make a lot of noise at the park, she goes upstairs and listens . . . in the dark . . . alone.

THE END



He'd work himself up into a rage and slap me hard across the face.

PUSHOVER FOR ● PURGATORY ●

To rescue the dry-eyed widow, Detective Manzoni searched for a boy scout who had been fully prepared . . . to substitute in hell.

By **STANLEY
C. VICKERS**

RALPH MANZONI, homicide bureau, turned off all the lights in his apartment and sat in the chair by the window. He picked up the binoculars to make his usual rounds. It was near midnight of a Saturday in July.

The red pin-points of two cigarettes outside a darkened window in the tenement

block indicated the adoring young couple were on their fire escape, trying to escape the moist purgatory of the still night. They seemed like good kids. At least, they enjoyed each other's company. The old lady of the front apartment was in her rocking chair, saying her rosary, an ancient madonna praying for the evil city.

Swinging the glasses, Manzoni twisted in the chair to look at the low apartment house directly opposite. Cerberus was at home. He sat at a table in his underwear, a bottle of beer beside him, a tabloid spread out beneath his massive, short-cropped skull. Probably waiting for the young girl to get home and bawl hell out of her, Manzoni speculated.

Manzoni hated Cerberus. He had named the man after the vicious, barking dog who rendered piecemeal the inhabitants of the third circle of Dante's underworld. Cerberus had a wispy wife who lived in terror of him and a young daughter who displayed so much gumption that Manzoni feared for her.

He put down the glasses and switched on the reading lamp. A detective with imagination, he mused, smiling. A guy who worked all day and half the night at grips with the big drama of the city, and who relaxed by looking in other people's windows.

He jumped to his feet as if to leave his fancies in the chair and paced the room. To hell with Cerberus. How about the Lansing case? That was a real puzzle. It had everything so far. The mysterious character of the old, well dressed man who limped. Love triangle. All it needed was a tricky ending. And the ending must be tricky—because so far Manzoni hadn't figured out what it was.

The Lansing case had opened with a muffled bang in a brownstone front, four-apartment dwelling on a downtown side street at 10:30 o'clock the previous Wednesday morning.

Mrs. Weinbert heard the bang. She lived in the second-floor-front apartment. She peeked out of her apartment and saw an old gentleman who carried a cane come limping from the rear apartment and descend the stairs as fast as he was able. Mrs. Weinbert returned to her front window in time to see the visitor to the Lansing apartment get in a cab. Next,

she ventured back to the hallway and tip-toed to the Lansing door. She thought she smelled gunsmoke and she telephoned her suspicions to the police.

When Manzoni arrived, two policemen were standing guard in the hallway. It was a dismal one-room, kitchen and bath apartment with two windows facing a blank, brick wall bearing a faded sign reading Graybar Storage Company. The body of a brawny, large man lying on a bed with a bullet hole in the center of his forehead didn't make the scene any cheerier. The man's wife was a waitress in a midtown restaurant, according to the janitor. A radio car was picking her up.

Manzoni strode to the window which was open. There was a fire escape leading down to the narrow alley between the apartment and the storage building. There was nothing else to be seen from the windows except the narrow expanse of sky visible over the facing wall and the top of another building beyond which a rooftop sign identified it as the Chadwick Arms Hotel.

The only thing in the apartment which stirred Manzoni's interest was a collection of charcoal drawings in a closet. They were mostly farm buildings and rural landscapes. Not bad, but not too good either to Manzoni's critical eyes. The best was a head and shoulders drawing of a long-faced, rather handsome man who wore a whimsically sad smile.

"Too much flattery of the subject," Manzoni murmured, "but some warmth there nevertheless." A glance at the bed informed him that the dead man had not inspired the picture.

He guided the pop-eyed Mrs. Weinbert from the crowded hallway to her own apartment. "Tell me all you know about the Lansings," he invited. He usually did pretty well with the ladies.

"He was a cab driver," Mrs. Weinbert launched herself. "He and his wife been living here, oh six months I'd guess. The wife leaves every morning at eight, gets back at six. Mr. Lansing worked nights. He'd leave the house about seven in the evening."

"Ever hear them quarrel?"

Mrs. Weinbert fluttered, then nodded vigorously. "Half a dozen times since they been here. They'd wake me up at

about four o'clock in the morning. That was probably when he'd get home. I'd hear the shouting and swearing. Maybe he was drunk some of the time. Last night was the worst. I think he hit her last night. I could hear her crying."

"Ever see this old man with the cane before?"

Mrs. Weinbert shook her head.

"Ever see any other visitors?"

The woman leaned forward and lowered her voice. "The last few weeks a man has come three or four times—always about nine o'clock and always after Mr. Lansing had left." Mrs. Weinbert shrugged expressively and that was all.

No, she couldn't identify the male caller. Yes, she thought she'd recognize the old man again.

MANZONI left Mrs. Weinbert's apartment as the whiteclad ambulance men were bringing the stretcher up the stairs. Behind them followed a tall, slender brunette and a policeman. The girl had large brown eyes, high cheekbones and a full mouth. Makeup wasn't noticeable. The kind of a girl a painter might think was beautiful, Manzoni thought.

She followed the ambulance men into the apartment without seeming conscious of the janitor, Manzoni or anybody else on the landing. The policeman behind her nodded to Manzoni. "She works at the Brandywine Restaurant on 44th Street," he said. "Been on duty there since 8:30 this morning."

Manzoni had a cigarttte and when they brought the body out, he slipped into the apartment and shut the door behind him. The girl was standing at the window, facing the brick wall.

"I'm Ralph Manzoni of the homicide bureau," he introduced himself. "Think you could answer a few questions now?"

She turned. Her eyes were dry and she looked more frightened than anything else. She turned around and sat down on the window sill. Manzoni didn't like that open window at her back so he walked over to where he could grab her.

"Near as we can tell somebody came here about 10:30 and shot your husband. From the position of his body on the bed and the presence of powder burns, it looks as though that somebody had a key and

shot your husband while he was sleeping. Who do you think might have done it?"

"I don't know," she answered, just the trace of a quaver in her voice. "Bill drove for the Peerless Cab Company." She paused as though there were nothing else she could think of to say about him.

"Directly after the shot was fired an elderly, well dressed man with a cane was seen leaving your apartment. He limped. Do you—?" Manzoni stopped, aware that the information had jolted Mrs. Lansing hard.

"How weird!" she breathed. "But it must be the same person."

"Go on," Manzoni invited.

"He came here a week ago last night, about an hour after Bill left for work. I'd never seen him before and I never would have let him in—but he said he was interested in my drawings. He said his name was Samuel Beacon and that he was an art dealer. I was working on a sketch at the time. Before I knew it, he was inside looking at it."

"How did he know you were an artist?"

"I never found out," Mrs. Lansing confessed. She had lost her nervousness in her story. "That was what kept bothering me, because only—only my husband knew I painted."

Manzoni noticed the break. Yep, you had to be careful all the time. Mrs. Lansing had almost let something slip. She was still shaken by it. And he was reasonably sure that it concerned the identity of the male caller to her apartment mentioned by Mrs. Weinbert.

"I only did it as a hobby," she continued more carefully. "But before I had time to ask questions, he was off on such an amazing analysis of my drawings that I could only sit there flabbergasted and listen and answer his questions. It was almost as if . . . well, as if it were a seance or something."

She hesitated and Manzoni sensed that she didn't really want to talk so much but that the visit with the strange art dealer had been so extraordinary she couldn't help herself.

"And what did he say that was amazing?"

"He looked through my drawing and he would say that they told him I was

unhappy, that some unspeakably malign influence was pressing me down. Those were his words. Then he said that I was unhappily married."

"And what made his words amazing was that they were true." Manzoni guessed easily with the help of Mrs. Weinbert.

"Yes," she answered defiantly. "That was why I sat there listening to him as though I were entranced instead of wondering what kind of a racket he was in. And he was so kindly," she added impulsively. "I couldn't help liking him. He seemed to want to help me terribly. It's the only reason I can give for letting him stay, for answering all the personal questions he asked me."

"What other personal questions?"

She stood up. "I can't you tell you any more about it right now," she pleaded. "He went away after about an hour." She paused, then added thoughtfully. "He promised he'd help me."

That was all. Except for one thing.

"Those pictures of yours in the closet," Manzoni said. "Would you mind if I took them?" He gathered them up, while she watched him silently.

THERE was nothing startling in the coroner's report. The murderer had placed the muzzle of his gun almost against his sleeping victim's skull, before firing the .32 caliber bullet which the police had dug out of the plaster behind the bed.

Thursday morning Manzoni visited the Peerless Cab Company. Lansing hadn't made friends. He was considered a surly guy who wanted to be left alone. "Must have been unhappy in love or something," the man at the Peerless garage complained. "Sore at the world."

Next, Manzoni visited the Brandywine Restaurant. As he had anticipated, the trail did not dead-end there. The cashier at the restaurant felt there was something vaguely familiar about the face of the man in Mrs. Lansing's drawing. She thought, perhaps, it might be a likeness of one of the young men who lunched regularly at the Brandywine. . . .

It was Friday morning when Mrs. Lansing came to headquarters at Manzoni's request. She sat down on the other

side of the desk and waited with an air of feigned composure.

"Mrs. Lansing, you had a visitor at your apartment recently—other than the old gentleman who called himself Samuel Beacon."

She sat there, frozen solid. He pressed a buzzer, then lifted one of her drawings onto his desk. A few seconds later the door of the small office was opened.

A grim-faced young man was shown in, the door closing behind him. He stood behind Mrs. Lansing's chair, keeping his deep-set eyes on Manzoni, and Mrs. Lansing started to turn around but didn't. She sat a little straighter in the chair.

"An unmistakable likeness," Manzoni murmured, studying the new arrival and then the drawing on his desk. "Although I still think the treatment tended to romanticize the subject too much."

Mrs. Lansing turned then. When the man stepped impulsively to her, she took his hand.

"This is Mr. Theodore Farrell," Manzoni said casually.

"You don't have any charge lodged against either one of us, do you?" Farrell demanded belligerently.

"No," Manzoni answered. "You're simply under suspicion of murder. Now, wait a minute," he cut off Farrell's sputtering—"we know that neither of you could have committed the murder. You were at your desk in the accounting department of your company, Mr. Farrell, throughout Wednesday morning. And Mrs. Lansing also has an iron-clad alibi. She was at the restaurant when her husband was shot. But you will admit that you both wanted Mr. Lansing out of the way."

"I hoped you wouldn't be dragged into this, Ted," the woman cried. She turned to Manzoni. "We met at the restaurant. Ted came to the apartment and I did that drawing. Sure, we are in love. But we didn't kill Bill Lansing!"

"Bill Lansing knew about you two, though," Manzoni prodded. "That's why he quarreled with you the night before he was shot. He found that picture and—"

"He didn't know," she cut in. "He may have suspected, but he didn't know. He found that drawing and he got a no-

tion that somebody had posed for it. But he wasn't sure. He would have quarreled with me that night, anyway. If he hadn't found the picture there would have been something else."

"You know we didn't do it," Ted Farrell said calmly. "Why not investigate Lansing's life a little. A cab driver gets to know a lot of funny people. Maybe he was in the numbers racket on the side, or peddling dope or any one of a thousand other things. Maybe he made some enemies. . . ."

Manzoni didn't like it. Here were two people in love and needing to get rid of a husband. But neither one of them could possibly have fired the shot. Manzoni didn't think that either of them had the proper connections or necessary cash for hiring the thing done. Farrell was an accountant with an unblemished record. Coming along in the company, but still on a modest salary.

As for Mrs. Lansing, there wasn't a trace of a connection with the world outside her dingy apartment and the Brandywine Restaurant—except for this thing with Farrell. And except for the old man whom she said she'd seen just once.

The old man had told her things no one else knew. Mrs. Lansing informed Manzoni in awe.

"Bill used to get home a little after three in the morning. He'd wake me up and start quarreling. It could be about anything, the lipstick on my face or the lack of it, that the window was open or it wasn't. I hardly ever answered him. He'd work himself up into a rage and slap me hard across the face. And the art dealer told me all about it. He sat there and told me these things," she insisted as if Manzoni were skeptical. "It was almost as if he were the Lord."

And then he'd left Mrs. Lansing in a daze, saying that he would help her.

She started:

"Do you suppose he meant—?"

"Mrs. Lansing," Manzoni said bluntly, "this guy may have been old enough to be an eagle scout, but doing away with your husband would have been carrying a good turn pretty far."

And how did the old buzzard know all the answers? Mrs. Lansing had to be lying or forgetful or crazy or something.

Manzoni considered the latter possibility so thoroughly that he arranged for a psychiatrist to look her over. She consented cheerfully. In fact, both Ted Farrell and Mrs. Lansing were looking more cheerful and were eager to cooperate. Might not mean a thing. Manzoni couldn't stop feeling, though, that they both had clean hands.

The psychiatrist gave Mrs. Lansing a clean bill of health. "Seems well adjusted, absolutely rational. High I.Q."

"In a few more days, examine me," Manzoni suggested.

So it was Saturday midnight, and Manzoni was absently gazing into his friends' windows, then pacing his hotel apartment thinking about Mr. Samuel Beacon, professed art dealer. Homicide had checked every art dealer in the city, but couldn't locate Beacon.

Then Manzoni stopped pacing. Maybe he didn't have the right answer to the Lansing murder, but he had an answer! A damn tricky answer.

THE detective went to the Lansing's apartment at nine the next morning. Mrs. Lansing had returned to her job. Manzoni asked the janitor to let him in. The janitor watched him curiously as he trained his binoculars over the roof of the Graybar Storage Company at the tip of the building beyond.

"I thought the guy was shot up close," the janitor fished.

"He was shot by an eagle scout," Manzoni said.

Outside, he stopped at a drugstore and telephoned Mrs. Lansing at the Brandywine. "Did Mr. Beacon know your name was Lansing—along with all his other remarkable information?" he asked her.

After a long pause, she answered, "I don't think he ever mentioned my name. . . ."

"The suite on the top southwest corner," the manager of the Chadwick Arms puzzled worriedly. "Why that's Mr. Dolivar, Wayne Dolivar. Fine old gentleman. Lives all alone, hardly ever goes out. Crippled up with rheumatism something dreadful. Why?"

"I'm going to drop in and see Mr. Dolivar," Manzoni said.

Riding up on the elevator, Manzoni was increasingly sure of himself. There was just one window on the top floor of the Chadwick Arms which peeked over the roof and to the right of the rising skylight of the Graybar Storage Company. He had tested that by using his own binoculars from the Lansing apartment. The Lansings thought they had absolute privacy and, in the summer, with that blank wall shutting off most of the air, they'd naturally leave their window and shade up all the time.

Manzoni knocked.

A voice answered, "Come in."

Mr. Wayne Dolivar reminded Manzoni of a Civil War Veteran, all spruced up to have his picture taken at the G.A.R. convention. He was sitting at attention in a morris chair by the window. He was dressed in a pin-striped suit, and there was a cane hooked over the arm of the chair.

"Who are you?" the old fellow demanded.

"Detective Ralph Manzoni of the homicide bureau."

"Sit down," Wayne Dolivar invited, waving at a chair opposite him. "I'd almost given up expecting you, although you'll notice the door was unlocked." He smiled as if he were having a secret joke with himself.

Manzoni sat down. "How did you get into that locked apartment?" he asked.

"I knew their apartment and their lives as though I were living there with them," Dolivar replied easily. "They kept the extra key on top of the door frame. I reached up and pocketed it during the evening I spent with Mrs. Lansing."

"How'd you know the name was Lansing?"

"I didn't . . . until the newspapers printed the story."

They sat there in silence a few moments. Except for a slight flush in Dolivar's wrinkled face, you'd think he was discussing the weather with an old acquaintance.

Manzoni took in the well furnished suite. "Why?" he asked.

Dolivar shrugged. "They were the only people left on this earth that I knew

well enough to care about. They were the play I attended and lived through every night. I'd wake at three a.m. to sit and wait for him to get home. And I began hating the endless, repetitious brutality of it. I began hating him. And I was there when the other man came. I watched them and I knew they were in love. I watched her paint his picture."

"And you decided you'd be an eagle scout," Manzoni concluded, "swooping down from your aerie to do the lovers the great big good turn."

"I have no regrets," Dolivar said testily. He stood up, leaning heavily on the cane and groaning. "And I fully expect that the state will repay me with a service of which no physician has proved capable."

"Indeed?" Now, thought Manzoni, *I've really got something for that psychiatrist to work on.* "What kind of a service?"

"Ridding me of this confounded rheumatism," Dolivar snapped.

* * *

When Manzoni got back to his hotel it was near midnight again. Mr. Dolivar was very comfortable in prison, assured of a more interesting place to finish his days than that lonely suite on top of the Chadwick Arms.

"How'd you tumble to it, Ralph?" the commissioner had admiringly demanded.

How had he tumbled!

Automatically he strolled toward the window, lifting from his pocket the binoculars he still was carrying. The binoculars which would transform the yellow rectangle of a window into the stage framing for Act 199, the drama of life. The drama of Cerberus, the snapping dog who was ruler of the circle of hell he'd created in a dingy city apartment.

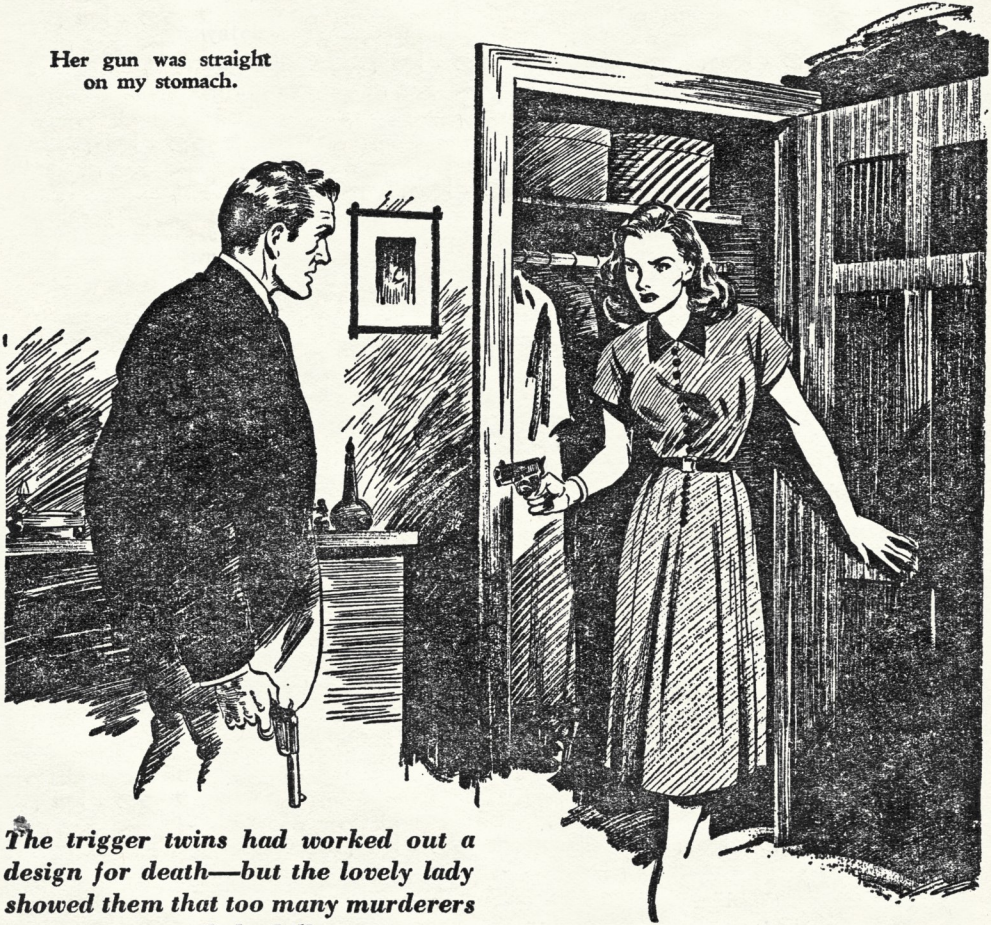
Suddenly he remembered old Mr. Dolivar's train of thought. Shocked, Manzoni listened to his hard breathing and looked down at his clenched fists, clenched with hatred for a man whose name he didn't know.

Very deliberately, he put the binoculars in their case and put the case at the rear of a bureau drawer. Then he shut the drawer.

DOUBLED IN DANGER

By **BRUCE CASSIDAY**

Her gun was straight
on my stomach.



The trigger twins had worked out a design for death—but the lovely lady showed them that too many murderers spoil the kill.



I COULD tell. It was the way he gave his order to the girl behind the counter. His lips didn't move. Two feet away from him you wouldn't tell he was talking. But I didn't stare at him. He hadn't made a point of noticing me.

The prison pallor was off his face. He must have been working the pear run too. They pay you just enough harvesting those damned pears to pick up a decent

meal or two on the way to L.A. I'd caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror a couple minutes before. The white was off my own face. You couldn't tell I'd been in stir either, unless maybe you knew the trick with the mouth.

I finished my coffee and went outside under the shade of the gasoline pump roof. I sharpened a match stick and chewed on it for a minute. Then I picked up my bag and started across the gravel, slow and easy.

Five hundred yards down the road I sat under a dried-up lemon tree. There

was barely enough shade to cover my head, but that was all I wanted—a place to sit and see what the hell cooked. Maybe I'd made a mistake. Maybe this guy had seen too many movies. Maybe he had a stiff upper lip or a shaving cut on his chin. Maybe he just talked that way.

I folded my handkerchief, laid it across my eyes, and leaned back under the tree. The highway steamed in the hot sun, and once in a while a high-powered limousine screamed by southbound or northbound. Nobody paid any attention to me.

A yellow dog crawled up out of an irrigation ditch a couple yards down the road, came over and sniffed me, and lay down in the shade of a bush. He snapped at a fly or two and then went to sleep.

"Headed for L.A., pal?" I could feel by the shadow that he was standing there over me.

I took the handkerchief off my eyes and looked up at him. He hadn't set his bag down. He was tall and lean, and his eyes were flat gray. They held no expression, and neither did his face. His mouth was twisted down at one corner. His ears were flat to his head, and small. His clothes were dusty and they seemed out of place. Same as mine.

"I'm going south," I said. I put the handkerchief over my eyes again.

"Mind if I join you?"

I waited a second and heard him set the bag down. Then I took the handkerchief off my eyes and gave him a cold look. I didn't say a word.

He tried a grin, and his face looked like it hurt. "I know," he said. "I know. I was thinking maybe we could split a loaf of bread I picked up at the store back there."

Two hikers play merry hell getting a ride on the L.A. highway. If you see a guy down the road ahead of you, you stay where you are, or you walk past and set up a couple hundred yards down the road. But this one. . . .

I figured, what could I lose? I'd tagged him right. He had tagged me, too. It didn't matter a fiddler's damn when I got to L.A. Any time was soon enough for what I had to do.

"Drag up a rock," I said.

We busted the loaf of bread, and I dumped my can of beans onto a paper plate. We finished most of them off, and

sat back smoking. He talked, but he didn't say anything. You got the idea he had a lot to talk about, but none of it was what he'd want to spill on first acquaintance.

I had a lot to talk about too, but I didn't say anything either. I wanted to find out what this guy had up his brand new dusty sleeve. So we sat there like a couple of suspicious lawyers and chewed on air.

He flipped the cigarette butt over onto the highway. It lay there smoking, and something roused the dog under the shade of the bush. The dog got up and went over to the butt. He sniffed at the smoke, and backed away. Then he turned and saw us. He came over and went for the folded plate of left-over beans. He nosed it open, and some of the beans got on the lean guy's shoe.

His face didn't change at all. He reached out and cuffed the mutt on the side of the face, and then slapped him the other way quick with the same hand. His dusty shoe flipped up and dug the dog in the ribs. The yellow mutt went yipping off down the highway, and limped into a thicket by the irrigation ditch.

Those kind of guys you don't mess with. Not at first. You wait around to find out what they're trying to prove to you. You wait until you find out, and then you figure what to do.

He turned to me. His gray eyes were flat, and his mouth was still twisted down. He didn't bother to talk stiff. He said: "Damned messy stinking pup."

I stubbed out my cigarette and got up. I picked up my bag and then looked down at the guy. "Coming with me, or not?"

His face split into a lopsided grin. "Not sore about the dog, are you?"

"Mister, it don't pay to get sore about little things like that. Not when there'll probably be bigger things. Maybe I think you're trying to tell me something. Maybe I know you and me are in the same boat, and might do a lot better together than alone."

He picked up his bag. "I wanted to see what kind of guy you were," he said, getting in step with me. "I figured you were okay, but I didn't know. Got to be sure, these days."

And he was eyeing me sharply when he said that. . . .

It felt good, just walking along on the

free ground, smelling the dirt, feeling the hot beat of the sun, shooing away the gnats and blue bottle flies. Nobody picked us up or even slowed down to give us a second look.

We holed up under a culvert that night, and baked a couple of hot dogs over a sagebrush fire. Hampton didn't say much for a long time.

"You just get out?" he asked me finally, looking out into the dark night, his face wiped clean of all expression.

I chewed on a matchstick for a minute. "Yeah," I said. "Just."

"None of my business," he said easily, and faced me. "I been in myself."

"Figured," I said. "Just out?"

"No. I been out four years." Then he laughed, noticing my surprised expression. "Oh, can't fool you, huh? You're right. I been away for six months, holed up in the High Sierras. Just getting back. Sierras are a swell place to cool off—if you're hot as I was."

"Where you from?" I asked.

"San Diego," he said after a pause.

"Going back there?"

His face closed up on me. "Yeah. I got business."

"Go someplace else," I said. "Don't go back where you came from. It's like walking back into a rat trap."

"Listen," he said, his voice low. "I got somebody to take care of. Then I move on. Until that unfinished business is finished—I stay in Diego."

HE WATCHED the blaze for awhile, then I could feel his gray eyes on my face. "You," he said. "Where you headed for?"

"L.A."

"Come from there, don't you?"

I stared at him. "How'd you know?"

"Your damned accent," he smiled. "I can spot 'em a mile off—accents. Born there, weren't you?"

I nodded. Then I saw the half-sardonic curve of his mouth.

"Okay," I said. "So I'm going back. I got unfinished business myself. Okay with you?"

He stared past the flames, out into the night. "Risky," he said finally.


"Going back?" I paused. "This job can't wait. You just got through saying the same thing yourself," I said slowly. "Didn't you?"

"Worrying out loud," he admitted. "You know, I've been thinking."

I studied the cut of his face in the glow of the fire. His jaw was tough, his forehead high, his nose sharp. He was a thoughtful, intelligent, dangerous guy—a killer. I knew that by the way he'd handled the pup. And by the way he handled himself.

His eyes were bright as steel. "We're both walking into powderkegs. Me, San Diego—you, L.A. We're both nursing grudges, and if I read the sign in your face, you're after some guy too. For keeps." He paused, and I knew I couldn't lie out of that one. "Me, too," he went on. "You beginning to see what I'm driving at?"

I did, but I didn't want to say. Going back to L.A. and getting mixed up in it again hadn't been very appealing to me all along. But there was the death of Ellen Kirby, my kid sister, to take care of; and there was the same guy who'd muscled in



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and taken over the racket while I was in hock. You can't let such a guy get away with it twice. You know?

But me, I'd be a dead giveaway. They'd tie up my return with the killing right off. If someone else got Morris. . . . It had occurred to me, just as it had to Hampton, that both our problems would be simplified if we switched places.

"Yeah," I said.

"We trade off, and we take care of each other's business. Then we both fade. Get me?"

I stared at him closely. "How will I know you've closed your end of the deal?"

He looked down into the fire, his face stiff and straight. "We both been in stir, Kirby. We know what happens to rats. Besides, I'll know if you've done your job, and you'll know if I've done mine." His grin was slow, but when it came it would have done the devil proud.

"I can find you, Kirby," he said. "And I guess you can find me."

Then we shook hands. Somehow, that centuries' old grip signifying a sacred pledge felt foul and loathsome to my hand.

"Vernon Morris is the name of the guy that killed my sister."

"Vernon Morris," repeated Hampton.

"They say she died 'accidentally' in a drunken brawl at a Malibu Beach house party. That's what the papers say. But I know different. She was shot. Murdered. I guess she knew too much about this Vernon Morris. The grapevine told me that, and you and I know the grapevine doesn't lie."

"No." He lit a cigarette off a burning sage twig. "Karen Brooks is the dirty double-crossing hellcat you—"

Something hit me like a bucket of cement. "Karen!" I snapped. "A dame? You want me to kill a dame?"

"Men die. Women die." He shrugged. His long tight face turned to me. The eyes were two glowing coals, and the mouth was a flat line of steel. "You want to back out?" His voice sounded interested.

There was no backing out. We knew too much about each other already. The way he operated, he'd kill me, and it'd be like taking a vacation with pay for him. I was in it up to the eyebrows now, and I had to stay.

I muttered: "A dame."

His words were sharp and bitter. "A stoolie! What do you know about her until you see her? She sent my brother to the chair on cooked-up copper's evidence. Judd was small potatoes, but he was still my brother."

"Okay," I said. "Okay. I had a sister, too. It's a deal."

Funny how you figure a thing like that. Vernon Morris had killed my sister. That was just after he'd moved in on the racket I'd been mixed up with, and taken it over—all after I'd been sent up. Me, I'd always been small fry, but it riled me to think he could get away with it. Just a cheap crook like that from Kansas City.

I wasn't going to have to kill him now, and strangely enough, I felt as if a weight had been lifted off my chest. I still had to kill this Karen Brooks, but that was part of a deal, and there was no bad blood involved. It was a job, like shelling peas or digging yams. I don't know, I just felt a hell of a lot better all the way around. It's funny the way you figure those things.

Finding her was easy. She was working in a branch office in the San Diego Public Library. In fact, her name was even in the telephone book. I thought that was funny, leaving her name lying around like that when she'd sent a guy to the hot seat. I figured she was a cagey cookie and knew how to take care of herself.

I took a street car out to the branch and hopped off. The library faced a nice sunny plaza, shady with pepper trees and covered with benches and pigeons.

Through the outside door I could see the girl at the desk stamping a pile of books. I studied her. Reddish brown hair, long and wavy. Upright nose sprinkled with a couple of stray freckles. Wide, generous mouth and a perfect set of teeth. Beautifully stacked.

That was Karen Brooks according to Hampton's description. That was my clay pigeon. She was going to be easy. She looked soft and a little on the innocent side. A plain jane. You know, the kid next door.

I turned and walked across the street to the park and sat down on one of the hot cement benches. I figured I'd hang around for a day to find out how she was set up in the male department. These hot-blooded

Romeos are liable to pop up at the damndest moments. They might see something they shouldn't see—even all the way across the street.

That was where I had my hotel room, right across the street from her apartment, facing her room. Follow me?

She came out with a girl friend and ate lunch around the corner at a tea-room lunch house. The girl friend was dark and had black eyes and a dumpy build. I thought about her for a moment, trying to figure some angle to work using her, but nothing came. I'm not too hot yet, dopping out these murder fixes.

Karen Brooks had a fine walk on her. She walked like a prize race horse trotting down the track for all the world to see and admire, and the hell with anybody that didn't think she was the best filly in the pack. Her clothes were inexpensive but they were picked with taste. I found myself watching her too much. So I went over and bought a bag of peanuts at the drug store.

Hampton was right. Those kind are the most dangerous of all. Square and straight on the surface, but twisted tanglewood full of holed-up sidewinders underneath. I sat the afternoon out, reading a newspaper in the hot sun, and then I followed her to the grocery store, the drug store, and home. Nobody came to see her that night. I watched from my bedroom window. She went to bed at eleven-thirty.

NEXT day I saw her go out to lunch at noon. She was alone this time. I cut across the street to a cafeteria.

I was eating behind a cool alcove hung with trailing ivy when suddenly I saw her walking directly toward me. She'd doubled back on me somehow, and come in the wrong place. Her blue eyes were on my face, and they lighted up in sudden surprise. That was all wrong. I'd messed it up. She'd seen me following her. I ducked my head down quick.

She came closer, looking at me steadily all the time. I didn't raise my head. I was sweating and holding my breath and trying to fade from sight. Remember, she was a stoolie, she was close to the law, and she was dangerous. Maybe she knew my pan from some police dossier.

She stood there a moment in indecision,

waiting for me to glance up and give her the come-on. I could smell the nice clean smell of the perfume she wore. I didn't move for maybe a minute. Finally she said, in an unsteady, trembly voice:

"Excuse me." She touched my shoulder with her small slim hand. "This is terribly embarrassing, but haven't I seen you somewhere before? Aren't you Gene Henderson?"

Gene Henderson. That was a new one on me. The name was new, but the dodge was as old as the Grand Canyon. Hell, I'd used that one in grammar school trying to get next to a redhead in the sixth grade.

I looked up. "More embarrassing for you than you think, Miss. I'm not Gene Henderson. Did you really think you'd seen me somewhere before?"

Her eyes kept on me steadily. She ignored the sarcasm. "Yes. May I sit down anyway?"

Two could play that game. I watched her eyes. "Maybe I am Gene Henderson, and maybe I don't want anybody around here to know it. What about that, Miss?"

"Oh," she said. She glanced over her shoulder. "Oh," she said again, and her hand came up to her throat.

"Sit down," I said, hiding a smile. "What's either one of us got to lose?"

She was wearing a big wide hat, one of those floppy summer things full of air holes. It spread out like a big straw halo, and made her face inside glow with a wonderful radiance of youth and vitality.

Covering a slight frown, she sat down opposite me and tried to look me over without letting me see her doing it.

I went on eating my fish.

An extremely painful silence came down between us, and after I'd waited awhile without making any effort to break it, I said:

"Why? Why, anyway? Just tell me that."

"Why what?"

"Why did you do that, Miss? Why did you say you thought you knew me? Did you think it would scare me off?"

Her mouth opened and her eyes widened. She blushed. "Scare you off?" It sounded preposterous when she said it like that.

I kept my face a blank. "Sure. I've

been following you. So what? Maybe I like the way you walk down the street. Maybe I get real lonely of a late evening."

She stood up, stiffly, her hat brim flopping about her stern little face. Her chin was a miniature Gibraltar. Her eyes were iceberg blue. She was trembling and the thin cotton print dress radiated her anger. I tried to keep from grinning.

"I made a terrible mistake. I really did. I don't know you at all! Nobody I know could be as rude as you, Mr. Kir—Mr. Henderson! Good-bye!"

And she whirled away and almost ran out of the cafeteria, her steps short and and angry and choppy. The skin around her neck all the way down to her wrists was beet red. A couple of guys sitting nearby grinned at me as she stormed by them. A girl dressed in a rose print frowned at me through a pair of harlequin glasses.

But I didn't take much notice of anything inside that cafeteria. My fingernails were digging into the table. In a momentary slip of the tongue, she'd tipped herself off. She was a stoolie, no doubt about it now. She knew who I was. She knew I was Joe Kirby. A kid like that with a memory for faces, a memory for names and facts and events, a memory for people—a kid like that was no good alive.

Yeah. Hampton was right. The soft ones were always the hardest inside. Nails and chunks of cement. To look at her you'd think it was some nice kid your sister had brought home for dinner. Or maybe a girl living down the street. But this one was dynamite. Gunpowder. Bullets.

I was half out the door and down the street after her before I realized it would do no good to follow her. I couldn't soft-soap her out of turning me in on her report. The police would just have to know I was in town. What the hell.

I got back to my room and lay on the bed staring at the ceiling and smoking cigarettes all afternoon. I'd have to get it over with that night. There was no use letting the kid run around loose much longer. If she'd already told the law I was in town, too bad. I'd just have to pull the job and fade fast.

About dusk I took the Maxim silencer

out of my dresser drawer and fitted it over my little single-shot Stevens. I sat there in the growing dark and waited, every so often lining the sights up on the window opposite. If I missed, I still had a box of shells. I could plug away to my heart's content.

The bellboy shoved a copy of the evening paper under my door and I got up and looked at it. Nothing big. Nothing small even. I flipped the pages through and read the comics, keeping one weather eye on the room across the street.

It wasn't until after I'd folded the paper up again and dumped it on the dresser that it hit me. Page one, lower right hand corner. I skimmed through the three short paragraphs.

A man described as the late Vernon Morris had abandoned his car, left a suicide note, and walked out into the Pacific Ocean near Malibu. Police, however, suspected foul play. They suspected murder.

I stared in the mirror at a tight-lipped, white-faced guy. Now there was no backing out. Before, I'd always had that one out. I'd figured I could get away if things got too tough, because maybe Hampton wouldn't succeed. But he had succeeded—and he hadn't left a trace.

Well, the sooner the better. Where was that girl?

"Damn!" The lights in Karen Brooks' room across the way were on full blaze. She had come in while I'd been staring at that paper. I couldn't see her now at all. I waited fifteen minutes, but she wasn't moving around in the room. I smoked and waited and chewed on my teeth. This would have to be sweet and lovely—and quick. I hoped.

The longer I sat there, the more jumpy I got. I don't know what happened, really. Nerves, conscience. Something got inside me and began gnawing away at my guts. Here I was, a hunter stalking his prey like a damned sniper in the brush. Dirty, stinking sniper, I thought. The lowest kind of animal fights in the open. I was something underneath the slimiest primeval thing that crawled.

I guess I would have stuck it out all right and killed her from the room there, just as I'd planned, if the damned phone hadn't rung. I'd turned the light off again, and I knew it wasn't any kind of trick.

I wasn't even sure if Karen Brooks knew I was holed up across the street from her or not.

Who was it? Karen? The police? Or—George Hampton?

I TOOK off the silencer and jammed the single-shot in my pocket. What the hell did the silencer matter? I could stuff a pillow in between her and the gun. She'd die just as quick. I wanted to get this thing over with fast, so I could fade. Ellen's death would be paid off. And that was all that mattered. I'd be square on the books.

Letting the phone jangle on and on, I went out of the room. The hall was deserted. I took the stairs down, cut around the back of the hotel, out into the alley. I went down a side street and entered the back of Karen Brooks' apartment. I got up by a service elevator.

When I knocked on her door, I didn't get any answer. I didn't expect to, at first. I waited and knocked again. The lights were still on inside. I could see the smear of light leaking out under the door.

I tried the knob and it turned. Perfect! She might be taking a shower, or bath. She might be dressing in the other room. I could sneak in and plant myself, wait for her to come in again. Then when she came out, I'd plug her and beat it. Damned silly I hadn't thought about the shower before.

I shoved in on the door and entered. The room was neat and empty. There were two closed doors, one to the kitchen and bath, and the other to a closet. I moved over to the closet door and pulled it open.

She was facing me, her eyes wide and terrified. Her mouth was pressed almost flat, and her cheeks were white with fear. In her hand she held a little .25 caliber gripped so tight that her fingers were bloodless around it.

"I knew you'd come! Why did I have to see you in that restaurant?" She started whimpering, and suddenly the tears streamed down her cheeks.

But the gun did not waver. It was straight on my stomach. I flipped the Stevens over onto the bed. This was the kind of kid who would shoot in a pinch, and she was in a pinch now. A very tight

pinch. I didn't want my stomach splattered all over the room. There are better ways of taming a tigress than by dying in front of her.

I raised my hands slowly and watched her eyes. I said: "Why didn't you tell me you knew I was Joe Kirby? It would have saved an awful lot of trouble."

"I thought we might be watched, Joe, and—" She sniffed and got some of the tears off her cheeks with a shake of her head. She came out into the light. Her heart was beating fast—the artery in her neck was throbbing heavily and rapidly. Her eyes were wide and blue and scared.

"Why'd you have to kill him?" she asked again. "Why didn't you let the cops find Morris? They'd have gotten him for the murder of Ellen Kirby and—"

"How'd you know Vernon Morris killed Ellen?" My voice was tight. "Nobody knew that except the cops!"

She stiffened. Her eyes were blue ice again. "I knew it, Joe. I knew he killed her. I was there at the beach house that night. Don't you see?"

That threw me. She was lying, the dirty little double-crossing dame. "That's a lie! The papers never carried anything about you, you little tramp!"

Her chin came up again. She held her head proud and high. Her eyes were clear, and there were no tears left in her. Her body was rigid and tight. And the gun came up at me, lined right on my heart.

"The cops were keeping me for a secret witness, Joe. Don't you see? As soon as Vernon Morris would come out of hiding."

"You recognized me in that restaurant. How the hell did you do that, Karen? Lie on, babe," I sneered. "Lie on!"

Her voice choked when it came out. Her eyes were like lupines in the rain. "Oh, Joe. Your sister Ellen showed me your picture, lots of times. I met Ellen on a bus once coming from Santa Barbara. Oh, Joe, don't you see? She wanted me to—to wait for you and—and look out for you when you came back. She said you weren't really bad, that you'd go straight if someone believed in you. She thought I'd be the one for you, Joe."

She gave a sudden little sob and backed up. The weight of the gun seemed to be

too much for her. Her eyes came up to me again. My mouth must have been sagging open like an incinerator door.

"Don't—don't make me shoot you, Joe. Don't make me do that." Tears welled in her eyes again. "I promised Ellen." But now her eyes were baffled and hurt. Her chin was firm and her shoulders were braced courageously. She crossed the room resolutely to the phone. "I—I guess I have to call the police, Joe."

"No!" I said suddenly. I damned near surprised myself. "No. Look, Karen. I didn't kill Vernon Morris. I swear it!" I waited a second, before I got out what I'd been trying to put in words all this time. And it hit me just as hard as it did her when I saw it. "Vernon Morris isn't even dead!"

Sure. Things had been working inside me, and now the whole puzzle fitted together.

Vernon Morris. Vernon Morris, hell! George Hampton! Vernon Morris was George Hampton! He'd just come out of the Sierras, holed up after the murder of my sister. He'd tailed me and tricked me into tracking the only witness—to keep me out of his hair, and to get me on the wrong track. He didn't even have any brother! And as for the fake suicide of Vernon Morris—he'd merely made himself disappear.

The only question was, where was Vernon Morris now?

Karen Brooks was staring at me strangely. She could see by my face and my eyes that something big had hit me. Somehow she knew at that instant that everything was all right again with me. Sis had been right. I was no damned killer at heart. I was just a dumb cluck who'd got pushed around too much by the wrong kind of people and got caught trying to shove back.

Right now I was fed up with it all. Right now I knew I'd have to settle accounts with Vernon Morris, and then I was through with those kind of guys forever.

"Oh Joe," gasped Karen, her eyes on my face, trying to see what was going on inside me. Then, as she looked at me something over my shoulder caught her eye, and her face froze into a mask. The

gun in her hand sagged down, and her mouth trembled. "Joe!" Her voice was a low sob in her throat.

I spun around, grabbing the gun from her. Yeah. I'd almost figured it like that. Just as I turned, the voice came from in back of me. Thin, sardonic, flat.

"No. I'm not dead yet. But, mister, you will be soon!" George Hampton. Alias Vernon Morris. Alias killer.

His thin gaunt face was twisted into a paper *mâché* grin, and the gun was in his hand. He'd come in through the fire escape, into the kitchen, through the door behind me. Sure. It was all so damned simple when you saw it. He'd called me on the phone to check up, and then he'd come to see with his own eyes.

He saw that I'd gotten wise to his little plan too late, too late for both Karen and myself.

His gun blazed. The slug tore into my side, and I brought up the gun I'd taken from Karen. It bucked in my hand as I fired it.

A slug tore into my arm then, and the fire of the two shots seared clean through me down to my ankles, and a black cloud ringed in around me, closing down on me. I didn't have a chance. I was going out slow, and there was only one hunk of lead in him.

With all the strength left in my rubbery body, I raised my hand again at him, at that damnable flat grin on his masked face, at that cynical gleam in those red-rimmed gray eyes. The gun jumped in my hand, and I saw a horrible glaze slap across his face. No red appeared at all on his body, but I must have gotten him somewhere in the stomach. The terror of a shot in the guts was in his eyes as he slowly sagged down into himself.

Beside me I heard the little Stevens bark in Karen's hand, and then everything went out of Hampton all at once. He fell flat over on his face onto the floor. His gun bounced on the wood with a loud clatter.

I couldn't hear much more. All I could make out was Karen whispering in my ear, telling me that everything would be all right.

Somehow, I kind of got that impression, too.

THRILL

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



Dizzy Dolores used a come-on gag on Private Detective Jim Bennett so as to duck Chunky, an ex-major who had taken her from a French burlesque cafe and brought her back to the States.



Jim Bennett saw the knife wound in Paul Sorenson, a Broadway actor who played the cold, quiet killer. Sorenson had taken his final curtain call in Dolores' apartment after an all-night drinking bout.



Hollywood was making a pix on the founder of Bennett's agency. The movie company's vice-president tried to take by force the agency records concerning himself and Dolores—and Bennett clipped him on the chin.



Chunky and Dolores decided to elope. They evaded Bennett's trap at the Terminal, and disappeared. . . . The complete story will be told in Robert Martin's—"She, Me and Murder"—in the November issue—out Oct. 1st.



By **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

CHAPTER ONE

A Tarnished Frame

LIZ REACHED through the shower curtain, turned the hot water off and the cold on. She heard Johnny gasp as the icy cold hit him. Then, remembering the slack drunken look of his mouth as he had walked in, she went slowly into the living room, sat huddled and quiet in a chair and lighted a cigarette.

And the wedding presents are still new, she thought. Only six months old. Johnny, why are you doing this to me? Why? You know how much it hurts. You know how my father, the Honorable Francis X. Bryan, lurched in night after night.

The detective said: "All ready to scam, hey?"

MY HUSBAND DIES SLOWLY

Exciting Mystery

Novelette



Liz Dutton hoped double-strength cocktails and come-hither eyes would find the weak link in the ward heeler's lie-forged chain that was hoisting her husband to the Law's gibbet.

She heard the muted roar of the shower and her smile was bitter and hurt. Yes, she thought, I've had a lot of practice with drunks, Johnny. A lot. She stubbed out the cigarette, got up wearily to put coffee on.

Maybe her marriage was too good to last. Johnny had all the gangling appeal of a half-grown air-dale pup. Sometimes she thought of him almost as a kid brother, though he was three years older than she. But when his lean arms were tight around her, there was nothing childlike about him.

And now this. She felt older, tired, crushed. Johnny had been too incoherent to be understood when he had come in. Maybe he had lost his job.

Maybe, she thought, they've gotten to him like they got to my father. Dad was a judge—and Johnny, at least up to this afternoon, has been assistant to the Commissioner of Public Works. Dad took dirty money, and drank to forget that he'd sold his soul. He died in prison, heart-broken and alone. Maybe this is the beginning of the long road for Johnny.

When the coffee in the percolator top made the right honey color against the glass she cut the flame and sat down at the kitchen table.

The sound of the shower stopped and a few moments later, Johnny with his robe belted around him came out into the kitchen. He was white and his lips were pale and he had a shame-faced look.

Liz forced a smile. "Gay, weren't you?"

He shuddered, spooned sugar into his coffee. "Sorry, honey. I know better than this, believe me. I left the office and had four double shots. They didn't touch me until I got on the stairs. Then—boom!"

Keeping her voice mechanically gay she asked, "But why four double shots in the middle of the afternoon?"

"I thought the war had toughened me up a little, honey. I guess it didn't. I worked all morning on budget figures and for two hours after lunch. To blow the cobwebs out of my tired head, I stepped out onto the fire-escape for a cigarette with the rain beating me in the face. You know how the building is all cut up into wings and angles. I could see, directly opposite me and one floor below, the office of District Attorney Munn. He was

talking to somebody. I could see Munn, but I couldn't see anything except the arm of the man across from him. The arm and some of the shoulder. He looked like a big man and he had his topcoat on, gray tweed. I saw him light a cigar and put the lighter back on Mr. Munn's desk. I was watching without even thinking.

"The air was doing me good. Pretty soon the stranger left and Munn was alone. I was about ready to go in. I felt like an orphan of the storm standing out there only partly sheltered from the rain, and looking down into Munn's big bright office only fifteen feet away.

"Just as I started to turn there was a hell of an explosion, a flare that hurt my eyes, glass tinkling all around and a shock wave that nearly knocked me down. When I could see again, I looked down into Munn's office. There was blood all over the wall. He was on the floor behind the desk. I could see one sleeve and his wrist—where his hand used to be.

"Munn was a nice guy. When I went back into the office George was jumping around and he asked me what that racket was. I told him it sounded like some sort of an explosion. I didn't feel like talking. I walked out. Guess I forgot my hat. I hit the first bar and didn't stop shaking until the fourth double shot."

Liz felt deep relaxation and realized the extent of the strain she had been under. She said, "That's what happens to anybody who tries to stop Wallace Earwin, with his horserooms, dope, fixed fights and crooked city contracts. Earwin killed my father too, only he let Dad walk around afterward as though he were alive."

As she poured his second cup of coffee, Johnny put his arm around her waist, pulled her close. "I won't do this sort of thing again, Liz," he said softly. And somehow she knew that he wouldn't.

"Johnny," she said, "I want you to promise me that you didn't see anything. You never looked down at Munn's office."

He frowned. "How do you figure that?"

"Johnny, Johnny! Don't be dense. I'm a city kid, darling. I know these people. See nothing and know nothing and you're safe as houses."

"But that isn't right. I could describe the guy's coat!"

"I love you, Johnny. People who would risk killing Munn won't hesitate over you."

He looked glumly down into the coffee. "I'll think it over."

She felt sudden fear. If Johnny rode into the middle of this situation in shining armor, he'd end up like a beer can under a truck wheel. She didn't want to make him stubborn about it. She walked back to him, turned and sat on his lap, her arms around him, her face nestled against his strong chest.

THE bedside phone rang. Johnny was breathing softly. He moaned in his sleep. She reached across him, lifted the phone off the cradle and lay back on the pillow, the cord across Johnny's shoulder.

"Yes?" she said softly.

"Liz? This is Harry Higby." The voice was low, secretive. She remembered immediately. Police sergeant. A rough red face from the old days, blue eyes with a certain integrity. Her father once said that Higby was the closest thing to an honest cop on the force.

Liz asked: "What do you want?"

"This has got to be quick, Liz. Munn was blasted today as you probably know. They got the fix on for your husband. Everything fits, Liz. I'm doing this because I liked your old man, and Dutton is a good kid. They'll be coming after him in a couple of minutes. Better get him out of there if you don't want a confession beaten out of him."

The connection was broken with a sharp click.

She hung up and shook Johnny roughly. He awakened slowly, reaching for her. "Johnny! Wake up. Quick! You've got to get dressed and get out of here." She clicked on the light.

He sat up. "Huh? What you talking about?"

"I just got a call. The police are coming after you. They think you killed Munn!"

"Are you nuts? If the police come, I'll tell them what I know."

The quick tears came. Tears of fear and helplessness. "Johnny, get dressed while I talk. Please."

He groaned and got up and walked over to the chair that held his clothes.

She said, "Johnny, they can prove you were on that fire escape. After it happened you were so rattled you left your hat. You went to a bar and got drunk. Munn was the assistant district attorney. He handled the case when my father was sent up. Motive and opportunity and a guilty reaction. I know how they work. They'll beat you up, Johnny. Wallace Earwin and Chief Demsey are like that."

He began to dress more quickly and worried lines appeared between his eyebrows. She belted a robe around her.

"But where the hell do I go, Liz?"

"How about your sister?"

"I don't want her in on this kind of a deal."

"Besides, they'd look there. Wait a minute. Let me think."

They both jumped as there was a heavy pounding at the front door of the apartment. Liz felt the heavy thud of her pulse as she stopped breathing. Johnny stood very still, his eyes wide. He dropped the coat he held and walked out into the front room, over to the door. Liz was close behind him.

He opened the door. A smallish man in a gray suit came in, a .38 revolver pointed at Johnny's middle. Two patrolmen in uniform were close behind him. The man in the gray suit had sharp, pointed features, a gray hat and topcoat close to the shade of his suit. His face was sallow.

"How nice!" the gray man said. "All ready to scram, hey? Sorry to detain you. Up with them!" The gray man turned. "See if he's clean, Boltz."

The younger of the two patrolmen slapped at Johnny's pockets. "He's clean, Lieutenant."

"What the hell is this all about?" Johnny demanded.

Boltz grinned at him. "About this!" He swung a hard hand with brutal force, slapping Johnny full across the mouth, splitting his lip, knocking him back so that he stumbled over a chair and fell.

Liz went at Boltz, her nails reaching for his face. The gray man caught her around the waist and pulled her back, shoved her into a chair. As she tried to stand, he pushed her shoulder so that she fell back. "Take it easy, lady. And you, Boltz, use your head! We don't want to

mark him. Sit in that chair right there, Dutton . . . Boltz, you watch the two of them while we take a look around."

Johnny sat in the chair and wiped the blood off his chin with his handkerchief and smiled across at Liz. His face was white. "It's okay, honey. They haven't got anything."

Liz bit her lip.

Boltz laughed. "We haven't got a thing, friend. Not a thing except enough to burn you. And you look to me like you'd crack real easy."

The gray man turned out to be Lieutenant Halsted. He searched the small apartment carefully, finding nothing of interest. He let Johnny get his coat and opened the door. Johnny was still trying to smile. "Get me a good lawyer, honey. A real good one."

He was gone. She looked down from the front windows and saw him shoved into the back seat of the white sedan. It drove smoothly away, rounding the corner, heading for downtown.

She had no way of knowing how long she stood there, staring down at the empty street. She wished that she had been taken instead of Johnny. Life had given her a lot of steel. Johnny was softer inside. He hadn't always had it easy, but he'd never had it really tough. She had had the raw experience of looking at her own picture in the paper, a stolen picture of herself in a bathing suit captioned, "Glamour Gal Daughter of Crooked Judge."

Johnny expected to be treated decently by life. Somewhere he clung to the idea that if you did the right things, life would treat you right. She knew how it would be with him. The lights, the heavy psychology, the hundreds of questions, the long hours while your nerves screamed for a cigarette and your lips were dry with thirst.

Liz sat down by the telephone and looked in the back of the book.

HE WAS a very round man with pouchy cheeks and wattled skin under his chin. He moved slowly, but his eyes were small, quick and bright. His name was Carl Schram and he was a very clever lawyer.

"You don't look so good, Liz," he said.

The afternoon sun shone on her hands locked tightly in her lap.

"Don't worry about me. Tell me what you found out."

He was sitting in the front room of the apartment, sitting in the chair that Johnny liked.

"I wouldn't take this case, Liz, except that—"

"We don't have to go over that again. You wouldn't take it except that my father gave you a break when he didn't implicate you when his case went to trial. Get to the facts, Carl."

"Sure, Liz—sure," he said soothingly. "I talked to him at noon today. They worked on him until six this morning and didn't get a damn thing. The kid is dazed. I guess he must have told them the same story a million times during the night. I imagine they're working on him again now."

Liz shuddered. "Can't you stop them?"

"You saw the paper. He's charged with the murder of Munn. You can't get him out of there with that kind of a rap. I talked to Halsted. He's not too bad a guy. Here's the way it goes! A man went in to see Munn at five of three. Man named Tom Merris. A big guy in a gray topcoat. That checks with your husband's story. Merris says he went in to talk to the D. A. about some anonymous phone calls he's been getting. Merris wholesales pinball machines. I can't figure much of a tie-in with Wallace Earwin.

"Anyway, Miss Hilda James, Munn's secretary, has her desk right outside Munn's door. Tom Merris comes out and the office is quiet. A few minutes later she hears a tinkle of breaking glass and a kind of a thud. She wonders if Munn has dropped something. Just as she gets her hand on the doorknob— Boom!

"She goes in and sees the body and comes out screaming. Nobody was in a position to toss the bomb through the window except your husband. Apparently it was a good shot. It went off right in Munn's face. Blew his right hand off, smashed his face and split his skull open. He never knew what hit him.

"Okay, so your husband had the opportunity. He's got two motives. One—Munn sent your father up. Two—Munn was going to order an investigation of

Public Works. Your husband didn't act right afterward. He acted the way a guy would act who has just done something like murder. He rushes out without his hat, soaks up four double shots in about twenty minutes and hurries home. His story is that he saw the blast from the fire-escape. Yet he didn't mention that fact to the man in the office who asked him what the noise was."

Liz said hotly, "You talk as if he did it!"

"Maybe you better tell me what you think. I should know if he did."

She jumped up, her voice shrill. "He didn't do it! He couldn't do it! He isn't the kind of person who can do that sort of thing!"

Carl Schram held up both hands. "Okay, okay. Don't yell at me. So he didn't do it. Well then, who did? I'm looking for a defense angle. If they don't break him, this thing'll come to trial. Juries think all city employees are crooks. He won't stand a hell of a lot of chance with what we've got so far."

Liz sat down, her knees weak. "A time bomb, or something like that?"

"Would a guy be holding a bomb up in front of his face? Besides you've got to account for Hilda James hearing it come through the window. They'll say it bounced on the desk and that was the thud Miss James heard. It bounced right into Munn's face and went off. The weak place in their case will be finding out where Dutton got the bomb—that is, if he didn't do it. Okay, don't look at me like that. I've got to figure every angle, if you want me to do you any good."

"I want to see Johnny."

"Tomorrow, maybe. Not today. I'll see what I can do. Understand, they may have more on him than Halsted told me."

"Is Halsted tied up with Wallace Earwin?"

"I—I don't think so. I think George Halsted is an honest cop."

Liz asked: "And what about Harry Higby?"

"He's as crooked as they come."

"He phoned me and told me they were coming after Johnny. That's why Johnny was all dressed and ready to go when Halsted got here. That's another thing that makes him look bad."

Carl Schram rubbed his round chin. "That's the first thing you've said that makes me wonder if maybe this husband of yours is being framed." He stood up. "Well, Liz, I'll report back when I've got news. About all we can do is pray they don't break Johnny down. Once he confesses, we're in real trouble."

She sat and looked at the door for a long time after Schram had left. She glanced at her watch. Four thirty. She put on a hat and coat and left the apartment.

CHAPTER TWO

Mercenary Babe

HILDA JAMES was a tall blonde who looked quite bloodless. Her legs were too thin and the bones in her wrists jutted sharply against the white skin. Her eyes were pale, chill blue as she stood and looked down into the face of Liz Dutton. Hilda James said sullenly:

"I've got nothing to talk to you about. You've made me a lot of trouble. At least your husband did."

The cold wind chilled Liz. They stood outside the front door of the building where Hilda James had her apartment.

"Trouble? You're civil service, aren't you? You'll keep your job."

"Oh, I'll keep my job, but it's an awful shock to a girl to run in and see her boss in a mess like that." She shuddered delicately. "It was awful, what I mean."

"Let me come up to your place with you, Miss James. I want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about. I told the police all I know. If you want to talk, go see them."

Liz made her face crinkle up. "Please. Please, Miss James."

"Oh, all right. Come on up. But it better be fast. I got a cocktail date and I've got to dress."

The apartment was small. The furniture was very modern, the walls finished a striking dark aqua, the draperies lemon yellow.

"Throw your coat over there," Hilda James said. "Now, what's on your mind?"

Liz looked around. "What a lovely apartment!"

"I haven't got time to wait while you admire the scenery. What do you want of me?" She glanced at her slim gold wrist-watch.

"Was Munn nice to work for?"

"What the hell has that got to do with anything? He was all right. Nobody's nice to work for. At least he didn't get the ideas that most bosses do. Why?"

"You must have been paid pretty well."

"What do you mean? Oh! This place? I've got some money of my own. Get to the point, sister."

"Who was waiting to see Munn after Merris left?"

"Mr. William Rigatto. Why?"

"Well, he's the one who used to be chummy with Wallace Earwin, isn't he?"

"I guess so. They haven't been chummy for a long time."

"Miss James, didn't I hear a rumor that Rigatto was spilling information about Earwin to Munn?"

Miss James shrugged. "You might have. There's always rumors. Look, if you're going to keep on asking questions, I'm going to have to get started dressing. Come on in the bedroom and you can ask while I work on the face."

The bedroom was also a decorator's job. Miss James had spoiled some of the effect by putting garish cushions and stuffed animals on the oversized bed. Hilda James took off her suitcoat and blouse and, in bra and skirt, sat at the dressing table and started to cream her face.

Liz stood behind her and watched her face by looking into the huge oval mirror. Hilda James was an obvious type. Fairly good looking. Conscious of all the angles. Willing to do anything for a little more luxury. From the number of bottles and jars on the dressing table, she did a lot of experimentation with cosmetics. Liz noticed a fair-sized bottle of a brand of perfume that she knew cost forty dollars an ounce.

The Rigatto business was interesting.

"Who made the appointment first, Miss James? Merris or Rigatto?"

Miss James frowned. "Let me see. Yeah, it was Rigatto. Merris came in and said he only wanted a few minutes. He came in before Rigatto did. Bill Rigatto made his appointment by phone."

"You sound pretty familiar with him."

Hilda James turned and stared at her. "Any law against it?"

Liz went on: "Merris left. Then you heard this tinkle and thump inside the office. Was it loud?"

There was a small, cool change in Hilda James' face. The pale eyes became very quiet. "It wasn't loud. I was the only one who heard it."

"Rigatto didn't hear it?"

"I said I was the only one who heard it, sister."

Liz looked at her. The utter stillness and bland honesty on Hilda James' face was as if she wore a sandwich sign labeled: *LIAR*.

Liz saw a pair of nail scissors on the dressing table top. With a quick motion she snatched them. She held them clenched in her right hand. She grabbed Hilda James around the throat with her left arm and pulled her back onto the floor, the bench toppling over with them.

She held her arm so tight around the throat of Hilda James that the girl could not scream. Hilda stabbed at Liz's arm with long fingernails. With her lips close to Hilda's ear, Liz said, "Stop fighting and tell me the truth, you tramp!"

Hilda continued to fight, trying to pull Liz's arm away from her throat. Liz brought the sharp curved blades of the scissors close to Hilda's white face. "Stop fighting or I'll fix that face so no man'll ever look at you again." She moved the blades closer. Hilda suddenly stopped. Liz couldn't see her face.

"Don't scream when I let up on your throat, honey. My husband is in jail and I'm going to get the truth if I have to make you look like cubed steak." She let up on the girl's throat and moved the points of the blades so they touched her cheek.

"I . . . I don't know what you're talking about," Hilda gasped hoarsely.

"Okay, then. This is going to hurt you more than it does me." She exerted pressure on the little shears, just enough to barely puncture the skin. Hilda gasped and tried to scream, but Liz cut it off quickly. "Ready to tell me the truth?"

Hilda started talking: "There wasn't any sound from inside the room. No sound at all. A phone call came in five

minutes after the explosion. I took it. The police were there. A man's voice said that I talk about the noise of glass breaking and a thump inside the room or the next time I walk in the dark I get acid thrown in my face. He said there'd be a thousand cash in it for me if I played ball."

Liz let go of her.

Hilda scrambled up. She examined her scratched cheek in the glass, snatched open the top drawer of the dressing table and spun around, her eyes blind with fury, a little silvered automatic in her white fingers.

"Get out of here!" she shrieked. "Get out! You didn't get it in writing! You'll never make me say it again! Get out!"

Liz backed carefully out of the bedroom, followed closely by Hilda James. "I'm going to call the cops," Hilda yelled.

"I don't think you will, Miss James. I don't think you'll do anything."

Liz put her coat on slowly, adjusted her hat, smiled in a friendly way at Hilda James and left. But once she had closed the door behind her, her smile faded. A very small thing had been accomplished. And it had happened in the presence of the one person to whom it meant the least. Liz needed no proofs of Johnny's innocence.

LIEUTENANT Halsted looked across the desk at her. His sharp face was drawn tighter with lines of weariness. His coat hung over the back of the chair. The collar of his white shirt was frayed and there was a spot of ink on one cuff.

He lit a cigarette, huffed the smoke out in an explosive gust. "So your husband's got guts. So we can't crack him. So what? That doesn't make him innocent. Not by a hell of a long sight."

As the keen gray eyes stared at her, she slowly and carefully told him of the entire interview with Hilda James, leaving out nothing.

When she was finished he mashed out his cigarette on the edge of the scarred desk. "It don't fit, Mrs. Dutton. I'm sorry but it don't fit. It don't feel right."

"What do you mean by that. The girl was lying!"

"Maybe she told you what she thought you wanted to hear in order to get those shears out of her puss. Look at it this

way. If we take her new story as being the truth, that means that Merris left a bomb in there with Munn. We know damn well that Merris was already out to the elevators when the bomb went off. So what was Munn doing? Trying to eat it? The morgue boys say that the explosion happened right in front of Munn's face. It was sufficiently violent to bust the metal encasing it into a few thousand pieces. We knew from measurements that he was standing up on the other side of his desk when it happened. The lab says nitroglycerine with a fulminate of mercury cap to get it going right. In a steel case. Something about the size of an apple. Would a guy hold a thing like that right up in front of his face? Munn wasn't nearsighted.

"I tell you, the only sensible idea was that it was tossed down into his office. From that fire-escape landing you can toss an apple through the window and hit the top of the desk. I figure it was a fuse so fixed that it would go off a half second after it struck. That would give it time to bounce. It bounced right into Munn's face and went off."

Liz asked: "How about his hand?"

"A guy would see it coming. That would be a reflex—to put your hand up to keep an oncoming object from hitting you in the face."

"But I know that John Dutton didn't toss it down there."

"And I know that John Dutton is the only one who could have. The angle is right. We got five witnesses to his going out onto the landing. Why would a guy go out in the rain to smoke a cigarette? We got witnesses as to how nervous he was in the bar. When he went back into the office he lied to the guy who asked him what happened. Lady, did you ever stop to think that maybe you trust that husband of yours too much? I've seen a lot of these people with faces like college boys and they're rotten on the inside. Maybe you ought to think of it from that angle."

Liz stood up. "I thought you would listen."

"I listen to everybody, lady. Everybody!"

"And you're honest, aren't you? I mean you wouldn't take orders from somebody to make sure that Johnny is the one

who'll die for the murder of Munn?"

Halsted stood up too, a faint blush under the gray of his face. "People don't usually get away with saying that to me. I make allowances for your worry about your husband."

"You can prove to me that I'm wrong about you, Lieutenant. Get that James woman in here and break her down."

"Might not be a bad idea. If we can break her, we'll know that she wouldn't have stood up at the trial. Carl Schram is a clever man in figuring out who's lying and who isn't." Halsted rubbed his lean jaw. . . .

Liz took a lot of time and trouble dressing, getting the lipstick and eyeshadow just right. She put on a shade too much makeup. The taxi was waiting. A smell of alcohol on her breath would help, she thought. In the kitchen she tilted up the brandy bottle, the raw warm liquor stinging her throat, spreading in warmth through her. One last glance in the mirror showed her bright eyes and high color.

Over the phone Tom Merris had sounded intrigued, faintly puzzled, and anxious to find out what was up.

When she walked into the cocktail lounge, she didn't glance at the bar. She went over to a circular booth in the corner, took off her gloves and ordered a bourbon manhattan.

He came over from the bar then, carrying his martini. He was a big man with a hearty, florid face, clothes too gay for his age, and an air of confidence. He beamed down at her and said, "Thank you, Fate. I expected a hag. Hags have nice voices too."

"You're Tom Merris?"

"That's right," he said, sitting down beside her. "Now suppose you enlighten a baffled old man."

"Not so old," she said, pouting.

"Well, not as old as I was before you walked in, Julie."

She had given him the name, Julie Hatton, over the phone. "I lied to you over the phone, Tom. I told you that friends of yours in Chicago told me to look you up. I've never been in Chicago."

He smiled. "I moved here eleven years ago."

She looked down at her drink, spun the glass slowly between her fingers. "This

is an awful thing to say, Tom Merris. I saw you here one night a month or so ago and I asked the people I was with who you were. They told me. Before that I saw you several times in other places. I was lonesome tonight. I'm tired of men who are too little and men who are too young and men who order off the wrong side of the menu. So I called up and gave you the story about Chicago." She looked up at him quickly, frankly, and then veiled her eyes with long lashes and looked back down at her drink.

"Too few people in this world are frank, Julie. I'll be frank too. I'm tired of women who are coy and women who are shy. We'll get along fine."

"Will we?"

"Doesn't that depend on you, Julie?"

"I don't know. I have to be entertained or I get bored, and when I get bored I go home . . . alone."

He put his big red hand over hers. "I can be a very entertaining character. I've got a pocketful of money, a list of twelve memorized jokes and a happy smile. As a starter, let's buy you a double one of whatever you're drinking."

"But of course," she said, and once again she looked at him.

CHAPTER THREE

Cocktail Siren

FOUR hours later Liz Dutton had trouble making her lips form words. Her feet seemed to float under her when she walked. But inside she was as cold and alert as when the evening had begun. Tom Merris had talked loudly and loud and he had drunk a great deal more than she had. His eyes were red and his face was flushed and words got tangled up on his lips.

They were in a small bar just off Central Avenue. He leered at her heavily and said, "Better go home now, hey?"

She shrugged. "I'm having too good a time, Tom."

"Don't be like that, baby. How about your place?"

"Can't go there. I've got a roommate."

"Then we'll go to my place. Let's get outa here. Check, waiter! Hurry it up!"

In the taxi he tried to paw her and she

pushed him away, laughing. "You act like you think you're a big shot or something. You be a gentleman or I'll have some of my rough friends take care of you."

He laughed. "Big joke. Got rougher friends than you got."

"Go on! All you do is sell pinball machines wholesale."

"Is that so! Is that so! Let me tell you, baby, Thomas L. Merris has got connections which are connections."

The taxi stopped in front of a neat white suburban house. Extending from the west side of it was a long shed-like wing. As the taxi roared off he pointed at it proudly. "Storage. Keep 'em in there. Got the workshop in there too. I'm a mechanic and a tool maker. Didn't know that, did you?"

He took her by the arm and hurried her up the walk to the front porch.

As they stood by the front door, two men drifted quietly out of the shadows on the porch. Merris whirled around.

"Send her away, Tom," one of the men said.

As Tom turned toward Liz, the tall man in the shadows flashed a light full in her face. She saw the light move as the man started in surprise. "Never mind, Tom. She better come in too. That's Dutton's wife."

When the hall lights clicked on, Liz saw the lean young-old face of Wallace Earwin. He was a tall, dark man, half bald, with deep hollows in his cheeks and a high-bridged nose. His eyes were cold and dark. The man with him was Harry Higby out of uniform. He blinked in the bright hall lights and seemed to be uncomfortable.

"This whole thing is going sour," Earwin said softly. "I don't like it. I don't like any part of it. What have you spilled to this girl?"

"Nothing," Merris blustered.

Earwin turned and smiled at Liz and she was reminded of a death mask. "You are in trouble up to here, little lady," he said gently, touching his fingertips to his lean throat.

"You're scaring me to death," she said with contempt.

"I would do that, if I knew how. It would be cleaner that way. You went to see Hilda James today. Then you went to see Halsted. Halsted told Harry here

that Hilda reversed her story when you put a little pressure on her. I don't like that, Tom. This thing is sour. It's got to be all cleaned up at once. It's your fault. If you'd used your eyes and your head and a match, we'd be okay now. Bill Rigatto'd be dead and they wouldn't have even bothered to pick up the Dutton chump. Hilda could have used her story about the package. We coached her long enough on it."

"But I—" Tom started to say.

"Shut up! I'm trying to think. As it stands, we want the Dutton punk burned for the Munn murder. Hilda breaks too easy. This Mrs. Dutton is too fast on her feet. It would be lovely if maybe Mrs. Dutton here went nuts and killed Hilda and Rigatto both at once. That would foul it up so that Halsted'd never unravel it."

Harry Higby said hoarsely, "Look, Mr. Earwin, I never figured on anything happening to Elizabeth here and I want you to know right now that—"

"Shut up, Higby!"

"I won't shut up until you promise that—"

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Earwin spun around and slapped Higby across the mouth. "Keep that mouth closed, Higby. Maybe you could shoot it off when you were an honest cop, but you can't any more. You're on my payroll—and I just said to shut up."

Higby retreated into sullen silence. He avoided looking at Liz. She wondered how he had gotten tied up with Earwin. The four of them stood in odd silence in the hallway. Earwin appeared to be thinking hard. Tom Merris, sobering fast, shifted uneasily. Liz measured the distance to the doorway. Too far. Earwin gave the impression of being able to move very quickly. He was a man who was known to be behind every dirty dollar in Ridge City. But he seldom soiled his own hands. He looked troubled.

Suddenly Earwin asked Merris, "Can you get Hilda to get Rigatto up to her apartment at any given time?"

"She can take orders, Mr. Earwin. She got friendly with Rigatto because you wanted her to."

"Could you fix up a surprise for the two of them, Merris? And make it work right this time?"

Merris glanced at Liz in alarm. Earwin saw his glance and said, "Take her into the other room a few minutes, Harry."

SHE didn't wait for Higby to grab her arm. She walked ahead of him. He pulled the door shut and clicked on a table lamp. The room was cluttered, but well furnished. Higby still avoided her eyes.

"My father said once that you were the closest thing to an honest cop on the force, Harry."

He scuffed at the rug. "Times change, Mrs. Dutton. You get tired of being a sucker while the other boys buy nice houses and big cars."

"What is he going to do to me, Harry?"

"You shouldn't have tried to get fancy with Merris. Earwin don't like that. And you ought to have stayed away from that James woman."

"And let them do what they want to with Johnny, I suppose? By the way, Harry, thanks for giving me the tip that made Johnny look bad. The timing was perfect."

He flushed. "I had my orders, Liz."

"What is going to happen to me, Harry?"

"I don't know," he said in a husky tone. "I don't run things. You know that."

She moved closer to him. "I know what they're talking about out there. The surprise. They want to fix it so that Hilda James and Rigatto get smashed the same way Munn did. He's willing to do that to a woman, isn't he? How do you think I'll look, Harry, after they get through?"

"Don't talk like that," he said in a husky tone.

"Merris will make it right here in his shop, won't he?"

"I suppose so."

"Just like he made the thing that blew up Munn?"

"If you know, why ask me? I'm not supposed to talk to you."

Liz felt a tingling along her spine, a hot flush on her cheeks, as the little bits of information all fell into place. She suddenly knew how it had been done. Her information would clear Johnny. What she had to say would satisfy Halsted's doubts. He would listen and then he would know also. He would even know why Merris had worn his topcoat in Munn's warm office.

"How would you like to get out of this mess, Harry?" she asked softly.

For the first time he met her glance. "What makes you think I want to?"

"Oh, the way you talked in the hall there. You were a smart cop once. You know that this thing is getting too rough. When Rigatto started to work with Munn it was all over for Earwin, wasn't it? Earwin doesn't know it yet. It is all over. Earwin was safe as long as he didn't get too fancy."

"Now, he's too fancy. The public is upset. You saw the papers. Maybe, Harry, if you cross him right now, there's still a chance for you. If you don't, you'll go down with him. You'll go into the ash can right along with Chief Demsey. You've got a family, Harry. It'll be tough learning a trade after you serve time. You will serve time, you know."

"You're over your head," he said, half whispering.

"Am I? I know how Munn was killed. I know just how he was killed. They've got to kill me to keep me from talking to Halsted. He's got to kill Hilda James.

He's got to kill Rigatto. He can't do less. Do you think a man can get away with four murders, even in Ridge City?"

"He might. He just might."

"But the odds are against it, Harry. The odds are bad. You stick and you bet your future on bad odds. If you cross him, I'll give statements to the reporters that'll make you public hero number one."

Harry licked his lips and scraped at the carpet with the edge of his shoe. "If I did decide to do—what you say, how would I go about it?"

"You've got a gun?" He slapped his hip. "Good. You won't regret this, Harry. Just stick close and when there's a chance, we'll both make a run for it. As soon as we get to Halsted, it's all over. All over for Earwin and Merris."

The door opened suddenly. Earwin said, "Bring her back out here." They went into the hall. Merris still leaned against the wall. The worry had left Earwin's face. He said to Harry, "It's all set, Higby. Tom Merris will have Hilda get Rigatto up to her apartment. You and I will take this girl there. That'll give Tom two hours to fix the surprise."

Merris held out trembling hands. "I don't like it so quick. Look at my hands. You got to be right to mess with that stuff."

"You'll do it just like I tell you to do it, Merris. When you go see Hilda right now, you'll get your chance to pick up the item we talked about. Two hours to work on it. Offer the James woman another thousand. She's hot for the money. We won't have to pay off."

Higby made a lazy motion and a .38 belly gun appeared in his hand. His eyes were almost closed. "Move over against the wall, Earwin."

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I'm out, as of right now. Watch it, Merris! Lock your fingers together and put your hands on top of your head. You too, Earwin."

Merris didn't move. He looked at Earwin. When Earwin slowly raised his hands, Merris did the same. "You're both coming in to have a little chat with Halsted," Higby said. "Liz, you move around in back of him and lift the gun. Right hand suit-coat pocket. Slow and easy!"

Liz slid along the wall. She came up behind Earwin, pulled his topcoat aside and reached gingerly into his suit-coat pocket. Her hand touched cool metal. She grasped it and snatched her hand out.

As she did so, Earwin whirled, his forearm catching her just over the ear. He swung her around in front of him and tore the gun out of her hand. She grabbed his gun wrist with both hands, trying to point the gun down toward the floor.

She was dimly conscious that Merris had started to run for the front door. Higby fired and, following the deafening roar of the .38 in the enclosed hallway, there was a smash of breaking glass.

Earwin hit her in the back of the head with his left fist and as the hallway darkened, she felt her hands slip from his wrist. She sagged, feeling his arm around her waist, hearing the repeated slam of shots and suddenly, the arm still around her waist, she went over onto her face, Earwin landing across her, driving the breath out of her.

LIZ was back in the room where Higby had taken her, where she had talked to him so long ago. She sat with her fists clenched, the nails biting into her palms, her mouth dry, rivulets of icy perspiration running down her sides.

Halsted, the lines gone from his face, poured a stiff drink in the bottom of a glass and handed it to her. "Don't sip it, Mrs. Dutton. Toss it down and it'll do more good." The liquor burned her throat. She gagged and coughed. Halsted said:

"We can ride on down or you can give it to me here. I'd rather have it here so you can show me if you don't explain it clearly enough."

Under the closed door shone the blue-white pulse of flash bulbs. A heavy voice said, "Okay. Move along now. Nothing to see. Go on home, folks. You there! Get away from the porch!"

"How about Harry?" she asked.

Halsted shrugged. "Two through the right lung and one in the gut. Maybe yes, maybe no. Hard to say yet. Merris is okay. Smashed shoulder blade and a mess of cuts where he took the header through the door. He'll testify. Earwin only took

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one. You could hide a baseball behind his ear where it came out . . . I got you so far. You talked Harry into making a play. He was going to bring the two of them in and Earwin got fancy. But that still doesn't give me the answer on Munn. Explain to a dumb cop, will you?"

"I can tell you the way it was planned. They knew that Rigatto had an appointment with Munn. They got Merris in there just ahead of him. Merris planted the bomb and it wasn't supposed to go off until Rigatto came in. The blast would kill both of them. Hilda would say that Rigatto came in with a package. No package left. Hence the package was the bomb. But it went off too soon. By luck they had a fall guy because Johnny happened to be out on the landing where he could see down into the office. In fact, Johnny saw Merris put the bomb on Munn's desk."

"What do you mean? If your husband saw that, why didn't he say something?"

"He didn't know it was a bomb. Neither did Munn."

"What the hell was it, Mrs. Dutton?"

"What is it that you can put on a desk and which a man will hold close to his face?"

Halsted looked blank and then suddenly snapped his fingers. "A table lighter!"

"Certainly. They found out the make of table lighter on Munn's desk. Merris got a duplicate. He took out the works, reinforced it, put in a firing pin device that would explode the cap when you depressed the lever. He filled it with nitroglycerine, put it in his overcoat pocket and walked very carefully to Munn's office.

"He sat across from him with the lighter in his coat pocket. He probably worked it out into his lap. He knew that Munn smoked constantly. When he was about to leave, he lit his own cigar, switched lighters, put the fixed one on the desk—which Johnny saw him do—and walked out with Munn's. The idea was that Rigatto would go in and sit opposite Munn. As soon as Munn lit a cigar, they'd both die."

Halsted frowned. "I can see that, but why did it go off too soon?"

"Remember what Earwin said about Merris using his head and a match? He,

My Husband Dies Slowly

meant that Merris should have noticed that Munn's cigar had gone out and should have lit it for him with a match before leaving the office. Merris left. Munn's cigar wasn't lit. He waited a few minutes before telling Hilda on the call box to send Rigatto in. During that few minutes he picked up the lighter and re-lit the cigar.

"As soon as Earwin found out that Rigatto *wasn't* in the office when the explosion happened, he had Merris call Hilda and tell her the new story."

"What were they going to do next?"

"It was all planned. Merris was going to see Hilda and grab a table lighter out of her place and have her get Rigatto up there. They were going to take me there and plant the loaded lighter. Her front room is small. A table lighter, once the cotton is removed, will hold a lot of explosive. They didn't know I had guessed. Merris would plant the fixed lighter and leave me there with Rigatto and Hilda. In the few minutes I'd stay and talk, the odds were good that someone would use the lighter. They had to risk that. Earwin would have been in the clear."

Halsted fingered his tie. "You know, Mrs. Dutton, I'm sorry about—"

"About Johnny? You're being sorry doesn't do much good, frankly. Merris will talk, and he'll be able to implicate Chief Demsey."

"Your husband's clear—and home now."

"Do I have to come to headquarters?"

"Come in in the morning and make statements," said Halsted. . . .

She looked up at the darkened front windows of the apartment and her heart sank. Johnny wasn't home.

But when she unlocked the door, she saw him standing silhouetted against the windows. He turned as she came in. She ran to him and his arms were around her.

For a little while, with the lights off, it would be as always. But when she looked into his eyes again, something would be gone. His trust in the rightness of things.

She held him tightly and even as she made small, incoherent sounds, she was grieving for the part of him that had died.

"Welcome home, darling," she said.

THE END



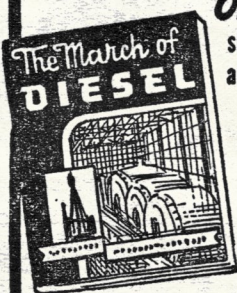
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Peter Paige

(Continued from page 32)

flash beam on a padlock that locked a steel-bar door to a hole. My second shot sprung the padlock.

In the deepest part of the hole I went to work with a pick that had been canted against the dripping wall. It took about ten minutes through soft loam before my pick dug into something even softer. I pulled the pick up from this hole.

Part of a human arm lay imbedded on the pick.

We spent the next two hours searching the cabin that lay in the woods between the hole and the road, until I reached under the bureau and tore loose from under the scotch tape traveler's checks adding up to twenty-three thousand dollars made out in the name of Hamilton Drew. After that we concentrated on the undersides of all the furniture.

In the end, I sat behind a table facing the door. On the table lay my .38—loaded now! There also was a pile of traveler's checks, money orders, letters of credit and bonds totaling two hundred and fifteen thousand, seven hundred and fifty-three dollars in value and made out in the names of seven different men. In my pockets were six thousand, eight hundred and thirty-three dollars.

I sat in the dark, waiting. On the bunk to my right the Sailor was sprawled, sleeping.

Very dull, very quiet, very cold—until the rising sun filled the cabin with soft, red glow and the front door opened. I said:

"Good morning, Lulu."

LUKE REARDON didn't want to bid me good morning. All he wanted to do was stand in the doorway with his face as full of expression as a wrinkled tobacco pouch. His eyes dropped once to the .38 slanted up at him from my fist, then remained glued to my eyes.

"When Penny told me only one Lulu Riley letter got through to the ranch, I should have known," I said. "Who but her own personal volunteer letter carrier could have intercepted them? When you told me you made it a point of reading every magazine she illustrated, I should have known—you in the woods outside

her cabin potting away at us while we sat and looked silly.

"Don't tell me," I gestured with the .38 as his thin lips parted. "Whether you really carry a torch for Penny Green or no doesn't matter. It gave you an excuse to hang around, to use her typewriter to address your mail, to make the place your headquarters.

"My guess is you intended no mail to get through to the ranch—except that letter from Johnny to 'Lulu'. That might be a trap. Somebody might be tailing a letter to a man you had murdered, so you let it through.

"But you couldn't help some of your victims reaching the ranch, although my bet is you met most of them in Verde in person, offered to drive them out and drove them here instead—to plant in your mine.

"I'm still talking," I said, stilling the words his eyes told me his mouth wanted to release. "You couldn't intercept the Trebor Noslow letter because I made it a point to pick that up in Verde myself—but you made it a point to be at the ranch

every day in case something like that happened.

"In your panic, you made that wild play to shoot Rose and me. But later, when I slid out of her cabin alone, you had figured a much better twist—probably because Penny had told you who I was. Did she?"

He didn't want to talk now, this grizzled old spider who spun a web of homicide over all the United States.

"It doesn't matter," I shrugged. "She didn't rat on me to Hoyt. You did. And you slipped away long enough to drop three slugs into poor old 'Trebtor' with my gun, then splash him with kerosene and set it off. That took care of any evidence Trebor might have with him that could be traced to you. It would make me Lulu Riley. After they dug my rod out of the ashes, and me being who I am, who'd believe I was not Lulu Riley? They'd be crazy if they didn't."

He didn't want to tell me a single, solitary thing, this animal who preyed on the loneliness of men. He continued to not want to tell me anything when I'd awak-

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Peter Paige

ened the Sailor, and searched until I found a padlock and we locked Luke Reardon behind the steel bars of his own mine.

But he wants to talk now, Pete. As I sit and write this and wait for night I can hear his hoarse cries and screams, and even make out snatches of his offers of millions, his pleas in the name of the humanity he destroyed to be at least removed from that biggest and grisliest of his anonymous graves.

But I can ignore him. When the sun slips behind a mountain and the land fills with darkness we'll start right on running again.

Your old friend,
Cash Wale

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD:

California readers should be familiar with this case, how it was two days before they found Luke Reardon trapped in his deadly mine, how they dug the parts of sixteen different elderly men out of that mine. Luke Reardon escaped the gas chamber—by landing in an institution for the criminally insane.

An accidental meeting I had with Penny Green in a New York editorial office brought forth the interesting trivia that Rose Senger had married John Victor Drew; that pixie-like Vivian Schultz had taken Miguel, the lad who could see no point in talking to animals, for her fifth husband. Penny Green swore she had not in any way betrayed Cash Wale to Sheriff Hoyt.

Despite these facts, one question continued to disturb me and kept me, in fact, from submitting Cash Wale's letter to a publisher—until the following arrived about a month later, scribbled on back of a postal card with a New Orleans postmark:

Dear Pete,

Of course it had to be Luke Reardon! He gave himself away in the reading room when he drew his .45 in the face of my revolver.

Who else but the man who had emptied it into "Trebor Noslow" could have known my .38 was empty?

C. W.

THE END

Satan's Scapegoat

(Continued from page 38)

Ward sat up. "Not this time, Mel," he said. "The drinks got mixed by mistake—when I lifted Darcy over the fence. She got the drugged one. . . ."

Mel whirled. Then he leaped.

Ward rose to meet the attack. The night crashed with thunder and the rushing downpour of rain. The two men met in a smashing onslaught.

Mel, fighting in a fury for his secret, was like a madman. He had Ward down, was groping for his eyes—

But Ward, with an exultation of relief, fought the man off. He was fighting with murder, and he knew it. He lashed out, jabbed Mel's head above the ear with his fist. And then he had grabbed the flailing arm, caught him off balance. He twisted up, got Mel over his hip, swung in a half-circle and sent him crashing against the arbor wall. Mel moved feebly on the ground.

Ward kneeled down on the other's chest.

"Stop. I've—had enough," Mel gasped. "Let me—up."

Ward let him sit up, but his hands held him savagely by the shoulders. "How'd you do it, Mel?" he asked harshly. "How'd you do it?"

Mel's laugh keened off hysterically. "You poor fool! Had you fooled since that time in France. Been dopping your drinks ever since. . . ."

Ward shook him roughly. "Why? For heaven's sake. Why?"

"Why? I'll tell you, pal," Mel said bitterly. "It's something you'll never understand. You think you know what it means to love a woman? Pal, you'll never touch one moment of the love and hate I've had in my system! To love a woman—and hate her at the same time—do you know what that does to a man? Not you, pal! You're too damned good-looking. Women fall all over you. It takes an ugly one like me to learn what it means to love, to be taken for granted, kicked in the face, laughed at. . . ."

"I loved Darcy, since we were kids. She always led me on, teased me. I gave her presents, mostly jewelry—all conceited women love jewelry. And she threw them back in my face. Tickled her funny-



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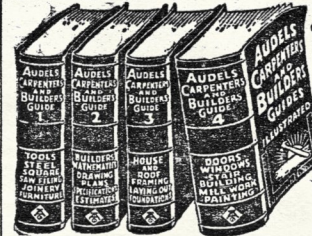
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bone when I finally asked her to marry me. . . ."

"But why me?" Ward asked. "How do I enter the picture? And the other women?"

He stared, frowning.

"You'd never guess, pal. I got to hate every attractive woman—because she reminded me of Darcy. And you, too, because you're the kind they go for. So I've used you as bait. Bait for the women I hate. I've killed some of them, and you've taken the rap with your conscience." He laughed. "I even got to believe you were really the murderer. You were my conscience, pal. Damned convenient, wasn't it. . . ."

"So you always used drugs in my drinks?"

"You guessed it. Two kinds. One to keep you wanting more liquor and women. And knockout drops. . . ."

Ward stood up. Outside, the rain had diminished, was a soft drizzle. "Come along, Mel," he said quietly. "We'd better take a walk. Down to police headquarters."

Mel got up. "I've got a better idea," he said. "Quicker and simpler." He leaped forward, ran toward the river. There was a sudden floundering splash. Then just silence. . . .

Ward watched, feeling a sensation like trickles of icy water dropping into his stomach.

He began to shake.

"Ward!" Kathy Hunter came into the arbor. Rain glistened on her cheeks. "I—overheard. . . ."

"And you saw?" He looked at the river.

"Yes. It's better that way. I knew something was wrong with Mel. His mother told me once. . . ."

Ward reached down and lifted Darcy's inert form. He slung her over his shoulder. "I suppose," he said, "that she'll wake up in the morning with nothing worse than a hangover."

Kathy took his free hand. "Come up to the house," she said. "We could both use a change of clothes, and a hot cup of coffee."

Her hand felt soft, gentle. . . .

The Case of the Fiddling Firebug

(Continued from page 47)

An idea rocked O'Clanahan like a bolt from the blue. Sitting down on the brown-stone steps, he began to scratch his head. The next day, Alfred Darrow, to the great scandal of his quiet neighborhood, was arrested and charged with five counts of arson. Abruptly, the number of fires in Chicago dropped to a quiet norm.

Alfred served only five years of his twenty-year term, was paroled for his model behavior and returned to his family in 1913.

Six months after he had been home, Alfred "Nero" Darrow experienced a classic retribution for his crimes, one that taught him much more than his comparatively short stay in the grim correctional institution at Springfield. On June 19, 1914, he awoke to the smell of smoke.

"Fire!" shrieked Mrs. Darrow. "The house is on fire!" And she ran to snatch up their seven-year-old son. Alfred, peering through the window, saw a shape slinking off through the trees. Leaping into the garden, he collared a neighborhood twelve-year-old who, dragged before the law, gaily admitted setting the fire, "just for the fun of it!"

Alfred's old friend, O'Clanahan, was in court when the case came up. The judge was inclined to view it lightly, as mere juvenile deviltry. "Guess you won't want us to be too hard on him!" he suggested to Alfred, smiling fraternally.

"Hard on him?" shrieked Alfred indignantly. "How can you be *too* hard on him! Do you know what this kid is? Why, he's a—pyromaniac! A regular Nero! He's dangerous! Lock him up for life!"

Then, as the child broke into sniveling sobs at this rude indictment, Alfred turned to him and said severely, "Believe me, young man, if you were my son, I'd fix you! Why, I have a son half your age, and do you think he goes around setting fires? No!"

Here he turned and addressed the amused courtroom. "Do you know what my son said to me the other day? He said, 'Pop, when I grow up, know what I'm going to be?' And I said, 'No, son, what?' and he said, 'A fireman!'"



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