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AND
MURDER**

by **ROBERT
MARTIN**

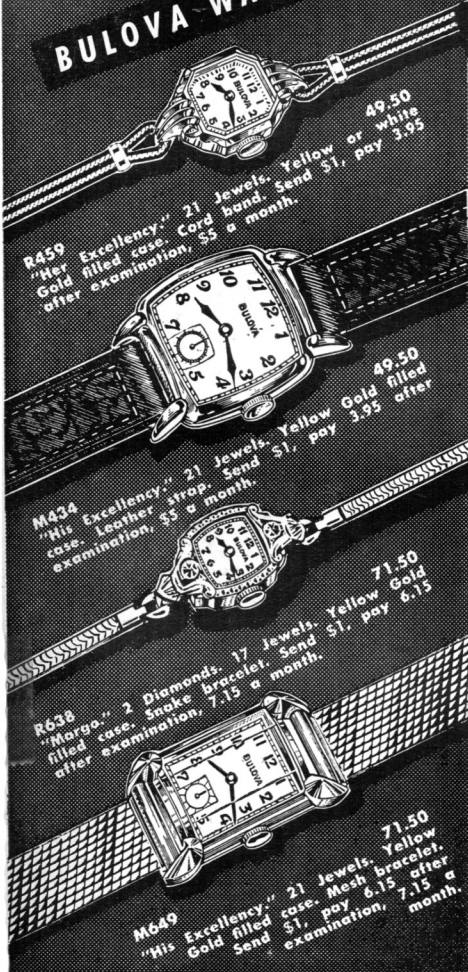
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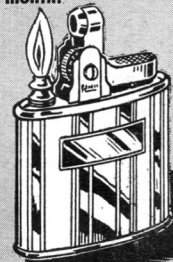
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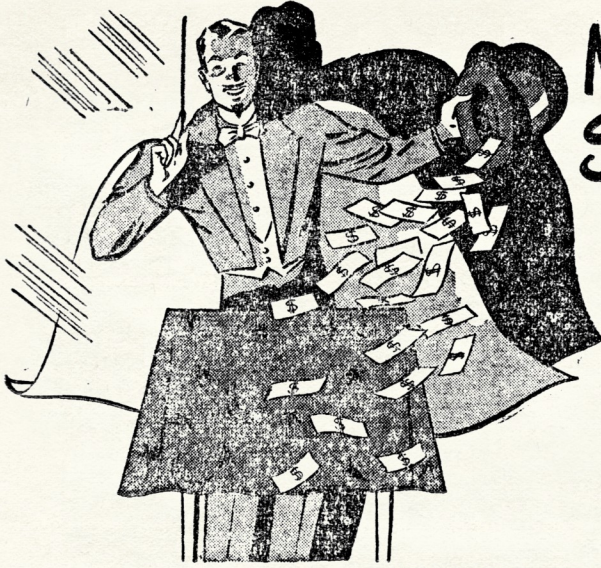
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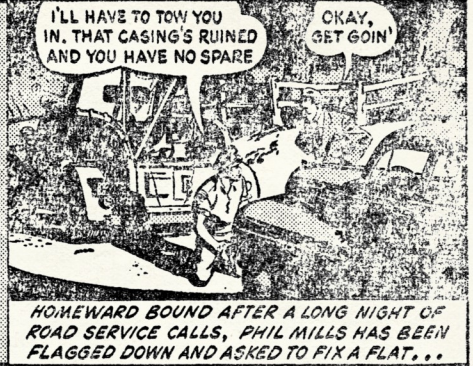
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A Blot on the

By TOM P.

THE Chinese had a name for it. Here in the West we call it the Bertillon system—fingerprinting. Like so many things we have in the West today, we like to think it was original with us. But the truth is, Confucius probably had been fingerprinted by the Chinese F.B.I. of his day.

And as far as America was concerned, it took an Englishman to bring home the importance of fingerprints in crime detection. The Englishman just left too many of them.

Not too many years after Alphonse Bertillon's system of body measurement—anthropometry—became the vogue of European police, a newer and more revolutionary development in crime detection became known. It was called fingerprinting. Scotland Yard was the first great body of criminologists to use it, and word reached the New York police in 1901—with the result that Inspector Joseph A. Faurot was sent abroad five years later to see this new-fangled gadget.

Inspector Faurot liked what he saw at the yard, and returned to New York fired with the wish to have the system become a part of New York's system. But he didn't take into account the attitude of Theodore A. Bingham, then police commissioner of New York City. It was just no dice. The commissioner was in no frame of mind to introduce such novel police-court-criminal business. Faurot tried to introduce the idea throughout the country, but found it a failure. At last he gave up—but never forgot.

Then a dapper man of fifty or so was arrested. He had been apprehended pilfering rooms of the old Waldorf-Astoria. In a very suave British accent, the prisoner refused to give his name or any other information to the police.

Escutcheon

COOPER

He might have been wanted for stealing thousands of dollars from hotel guests. There might be a high price on his head—but all the cajoling and threatening of the police could not break through the cool-mannered Britisher's reticence.

Inspector Faurot decided to take a chance. He got hold of the prisoner without his superiors knowing anything about it. In his best Island manner, the inspector said: "So sorry, old boy." Taking the gent's hand, he rolled the prisoner's finger tips over a pad, just as he remembered seeing it done in England. He knew he was asking for retirement by sticking his neck out, but Inspector Faurot believed in what he had seen, and was willing to take the chance.

The inspector mailed the prints he got from the prisoner to Scotland Yard. Why not? The prisoner's accent was English. It was worth a try.

A month later the police official was sweating bullets. No word from the Yard. He was ready to call it quits, when a package from the other side arrived.

The package contained all the information Scotland Yard had on the man caught at the Waldorf-Astoria. His name was Jason Carney, with aliases. He had a long record of previous arrests in England and on the continent. In fact they counted up to an even dozen. His New York arrest was his thirteenth.

Faurot, with no small pride, placed his evidence on Commissioner Bingham's desk. Fingerprinting came into its own in the United States. It is absolute evidence in the courts of this country today. In Washington, the F. B.I., with their master file of over 100,000,000 prints, can with comparative ease put the "finger" on any one who would step outside the law.

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SHE, ME and MURDER



For helping a chunky ex-major get his due from torchy Dolores, Jim Bennett picked up half a C note—and found that a movieland corpse went with it.



CHAPTER ONE

Blonde Trouble

THE McPherson job landed in my lap—literally. It happened at the time Atlantis Productions offered the big boss a sum of money roughly equal to the value of the gold buried at Fort Knox for the privilege of telling his life story on the screen. The boss will do almost anything for money, even to selling his soul to Hollywood, so he hastily wired all the branches of the American Detective Agency for complete copies of their files.

Sandy Hollis, my secretary, had been typing almost steadily for three days, and I had been sorting case histories and doing a little private censoring before she typed them. At eleven o'clock of the third night we began to see the end in sight, and so we knocked off and went to a little bar, the Round Table, off Euclid Avenue for a night-cap.

Sandy, sipping at her bourbon and soda,



asked me: "Who do you suppose they'll get to play the part of the boss—some pixilated ham?"

"A ghoulish would be more like it," I said.

And then this girl landed in my lap, and my mouth was full of hair and my



I took a step toward him. . . .

By **ROBERT MARTIN**

● **Jim Bennett Detective Novel** ●

nose full of perfume. Warm lips pressed against my cheek, and a voice squealed: "Oh, it's so nice to see you!" Smooth bare arms almost strangled me, and I clawed ineffectively at a pair of slim wrists.

Sandy Hollis sneered at me over the rim of her glass.

I managed to wiggle my head free, and I looked straight into the smoky depths of a pair of gray-blue eyes. There was also a mass of yellow hair, a cute little nose, a soft red mouth, and gleaming bare shoulders above a strapless, black evening gown.

"Be a sport," said a low husky voice. "Act chummy. I'll explain later."

Before I could say, "Scotch and soda," she had wrapped her arms around my neck and was pressing her lips against mine. I struggled, but feebly. Then she let me loose, and with a graceful movement slid off my lap and onto a chair between Sandy and me. I looked up into the angry eyes of a fat man in a double-breasted tuxedo.

I pushed my hair out of my eyes and grinned at him. "Hello, there," I said cheerily.

His gaze flicked from me to the girl in the evening dress. "Shall we leave, Dolores?" he said.

She shrugged her bare shoulders. "I think I'll stay a while, if you don't mind."

He leaned down and placed a hand on her arm. "Please come," he said. There was a faint pleading note in his voice. Twisting away from his hand, she shot an appealing glance at me.

Sandy Hollis was watching the whole show with an amused look in her brown eyes. Suddenly she placed a hand over the girl's. "Please stay a while, Dolores. It's been so long since we've seen you."

The girl gave Sandy a look of surprise. "Thank you dear," she said, and looked up at the fat man. "Please don't be difficult, Chunky. You run along. I'll be all right."

The fat man's face paled. He grasped the girl's wrist and tried to pull her from the chair. She struggled a little, and other people in the bar turned to look at our table.

I stood up. "Please," I said to the fat man. "The young lady does not wish to leave. If you'd care to join us, we'd be

delighted. If not, will you please get the hell out of here?"

He let go of the girl's arm and looked at me with brooding sadness in his eyes. He had thin brown hair, a well kept copper-tinted mustache, and a heavy, smoothly barbered face. He stared at me silently. Then he turned abruptly and strode to the check room at the far end of the bar. I saw him speak briefly to the check room girl. Then he put on his hat and coat and left.

The girl in the black evening dress lit a cigarette with nervous fingers. "Thanks, pal," she said.

"Was he getting playful?" I asked.

She blew smoke at the ceiling and laughed. "Well, not exactly. But I wanted to get rid of him."

"I thought he was cute," Sandy said.

The girl took the cigarette from her mouth and looked at Sandy and me. "Do you want to hear a story?"

"Sure," I said.

She cupped her chin in her hands. "All right, people. I'll tell you a story." It was then that I saw that she was a little drunk. Her eyes got dreamy, and she began: "I was in France with an American vaudeville act. The troupe broke up when the manager skipped with the money, and I was stranded in Paris. I got a job in a joint—they called it a cafe."

Dolores reached out and took a sip of Sandy's drink. I held up three fingers to Kenneth, the bartender.

"I did all right for a while," the girl continued, "until the joint closed. I didn't have any money, and couldn't come home. Then I met Major McPherson—that's Chunky. He was sailing for New York."

IT WAS only Tuesday night, and the bartender was working alone. He placed drinks on the table—bourbon and soda for Sandy and me, and a martini for the girl. She said to him: "Thank you, Kenneth, for remembering what I drink."

He nodded politely, and went back to the bar.

The girl raised her glass to me. "Thanks to you, too, Jack. Here's to fun."

I nodded at her, took a swallow of the drink, and tried to remember where I'd seen her before. I couldn't, and so I said: "And then what?"

"Well, people," she sighed, "to make it short, Chunky paid for my passage home. We sailed on the same boat. When we got to New York three weeks ago, I thanked him kindly and took the next train for Cleveland. This is my town, and I've got a job dancing in a club on the south side. But Chunky followed me, and now I'm stuck with him. I've let him take me out to dinner once in a while—when I'm not busy—but he keeps pestering me. What can you do with a dope like that?" She sipped at her cocktail and smiled brightly at Sandy at me.

Sandy spoke, and her voice wasn't friendly any more. "Just because you don't happen to need him any more, isn't that kind of tough on Chunky?"

"Tough on *him*?" the girl said scornfully. "Oh, brother! Listen, honey, all that baby talks about is income tax laws and double-entry bookkeeping, whatever that is. Tonight he took me to dinner. That was all right—I don't get paid until Saturday, and I'm running low on cash.

"But afterwards he got real reckless and had a few beers. He said he couldn't live without me, and that he had to marry me. Imagine that? I couldn't get rid of him, and there I was with another date at twelve o'clock. Then I spotted you folks—you looked like a nice couple—and I decided to brush Chunky off."

She grinned at me. "You were swell, Jack. Your wife, too. I owe you folks a drink. What'll you have?"

Sandy shook her head. "I think we'd better go home, darling. The baby sitter will be getting impatient."

I snapped my fingers, and stood up. "That's right. I forgot about little Alphonse. Will you excuse us, Miss?"

She looked disappointed. "Must you leave? Won't Alphonse be all right for a while?"

I glanced at my wrist watch. "Sure, *he'll* be all right, but I've gotta be at the shoe factory at six in the morning."

She faked a shudder. "Six o'clock in the morning?" Then she smiled up at me. "Well, thanks for helping me out. We seem to have gotten rid of Chunky. I'll just sit here and wait for Paul." She hesitated, and then added with an attempt at casualness. "Paul Sorenson, you know."

I didn't know Paul Sorenson, but I had seen him on the stage. He was playing the second lead in the road show cast of a current New York hit called *Blood On My Heart*. He was a lanky, blond young man playing a cold, quiet killer who had a way with women. He was good too, and the local critics were rating him over the star, Alden Shane, an aging movie hero who had slipped in Hollywood.

"I've seen his play," I told her. "Your friend is very good."

She smiled proudly. "Much better than Shane, don't you think?"

"Much," I said. "I hear Sorenson has a movie offer?"

Her eyes got dreamy. "That's right—a seven year contract with Atlantis. When he was on the coast before, they didn't appreciate him. Now that he's a hit on the stage, they want him back. He's leaving the show next week, and we're going out together. We're going to be married."

"Congratulations," I said.

"Poor Chunky," Sandy murmured.

The girl jerked her head at Sandy, and said to me: "What's the matter with the missus, Jack? Don't she approve of true love?"

"She married me," I told her. "If that means anything."

She gave me an appraising look. "It could mean a lot," she said thoughtfully. "How did you get that scar on your chin—working in the shoe factory?"

"Yeah," I said. "I was testing a pair of baseball shoes, a new model, and I slid too fast into third base."

"Let's go," Sandy said. "I'm tired."

The girl waved a friendly hand, and Sandy and I moved away. I paid the check at the bar, collected my hat and coat from the check-room girl, and walked out into the November night. My car was parked a block away. As we started up the street, a taxi stopped in front of the Round Table. A tall slender man in a camel's hair coat and a white scarf got out. As he turned to pay the cab driver, I saw that it was Paul Sorenson, the actor.

"Dolores wasn't kidding," I said to Sandy.

Sorenson crossed the sidewalk and entered the Round Table. He was hatless, and his yellow hair glinted in the light.

Sandy nodded. "That's Sorenson in

person. But where have I seen that girl before?" She took my arm, and we walked slowly along the sidewalk.

"Just been thinking the same thing," I said.

"I feel sorry for Chunky," Sandy said. "Poor man."

A bulky figure moved out of a doorway and stood in front of us. "I'd like to talk to you." The street light hit his face, and I saw that it was our friend, the fat man.

"What about, Major?"

"So she told you about me," he said bitterly. "Did she really know you—before tonight, I mean?"

"Of course not," I said. "I thought you understood that."

He shook his head like a hurt fighter coming off the ropes. "Then—it was just a gag—a brush-off?"

"Certainly," I snapped. "You aren't that dumb, are you?"

He didn't answer, and he started to move past us, back toward the Round Table.

I grabbed his arm. "Don't be a fool," I told him. "There's someone else with her now. Forget her. There's a million other girls."

He turned and stared at me dully. "What?"

"Come on," I said wearily, pulling him to the curb. I flagged a passing cab and pushed the fat man into it. He didn't protest, but crawled into the back seat and sat in a slumped position. I told the driver to take him home, and I watched the cab pull away.

CHAPTER TWO

Homicidal Trimmings

AT NINE the following morning, I was back in the office. As was my habit, I entered the office through the back door. In my early days, I had been trapped too often by characters camped in the outer reception room.

Sandy Hollis, looking fresh and attractive, was already at her typewriter. The morning sun slanting through the window made coppery glints in her hair. She swung toward me, held a finger to her lips, and pointed at the door which opened into the reception room. Then she handed

me a typed case report with several large glossy photographs attached.

"I knew I'd seen that girl before—the one at the Round Table last night. Read that," she said in a low voice.

I looked at the typed sheet. It was dated almost a year before, and headed: *WEBER, Enos W. No. 219*. I had forgotten about Enos W. Weber, but suddenly I remembered a somewhat shabby-looking man in a baggy tweed suit, a limp shirt collar with the knot of a stringy tie sagging beneath it. A thin pale face, a slash of a mouth. Gold-rimmed glasses and bushy uncombed hair. He had been with a second-rate circus, business manager. I read:

Weber, Enos W., 42, married, New York City. Engaged this agency to secure evidence against one Dolores Donovan, 29, dancer, Cleveland, Ohio, and to discourage her threat to sue him for breach of promise. New York operatives learned that Mrs. Enos W. Weber, of the address given us by client, was frequently in the company of Hiram X. Wyndham, president of Atlantis Productions, Los Angeles. When confronted with photos of herself and Wilson Fox, Dolores Donovan agreed to drop threats and signed statements clearing client. (This was also handled by sub-agents, per Article II, Section IV of Agency Regulations). Copy of statement, together with photographs, is attached hereto.

Client expressed satisfaction at results of investigation. In accordance with Agency policy pertaining to irrelevant and incidental information not affecting the immediate desired results, client was not informed of his wife's association with Hiram X. Wyndham. Case closed. . . .

I looked at the photographs.

Sandy said: "Do you recognize her?"

"Sure, I do." I pointed at the reception room door. "Is she out there now?"

"No. Our ex-client, Enos W. Weber, asked to see you. I thought I remembered him, so I looked up the file. You never saw the girl at the time, did you? Personally, I mean?"

I shook my head. "No—just Weber. Duke handled all the rest of it."

I hung up my hat and coat and went out into the reception room. Enos W. Weber had changed considerably. His hair was now combed smoothly and parted on the side. The thin gold rims of his glasses had been replaced with thick-

boned, amber-tinted ones. His smart double-breasted gabardine suit was tailored with careful fullness.

Weber jumped up and extended a hand. "Well, well, Mr. Bennett, we meet again." His clasp was firm, and he didn't hold my hand too long. His complexion, formerly a worm-white, was now a deep tan.

I said: "What brings you all the way from New York?"

He held up a deprecating palm and smiled. I saw that even his teeth had been overhauled, or replaced. "Not New York any more," he said, "except occasionally when business demands it. I'm in Hollywood now, Mr. Bennett—with Atlantis Productions. A vice-president, you know," he said carelessly.

"I didn't know," I said, "but congratulations. I suppose you're here in connection with that picture your company is making?"

He blew smoke at the ceiling. "No, as a matter of fact I'm not—at least, not directly. I'm here on personal business." He looked at me, and added in a low voice: "Can we talk privately?"

"Sure. Right here."

He looked around the room, shot a glance at the closed door leading into the inner office, and then sat down in the agency's best chrome-and-leather chair. I sat down opposite him, and waited for the ball to be tossed to me.

Weber said briskly. "Well, Mr. Bennett, I presume you recall that little unpleasantness I had about a year ago?"

I grinned at him. "You mean that Dolores Donovan business? She left town right afterwards—with that trumpet player, Hot-Break Fox. But I understand she's back in town again."

He looked annoyed, and flicked ashes with a nervous gesture. "Yes, yes. Do you mind if we don't discuss it?"

I shrugged. "You brought it up."

He leaned forward. There was now a faint shine of sweat on his temples. "This is very important to me, Mr. Bennett," he said earnestly, "and I'll be brief. You no doubt keep reports of the work you do for people. I want you to give me all copies of the report concerning me."

"Why?"

"Don't be coy, Bennett," he snapped. "You are well aware that Atlantis Pro-

ductions are making a picture based on the life of the man who founded your organization. I know that he is opening the files of all his agencies to the writers in our script department. If that report of my—my trouble gets into their hands, it'll ruin me."

"Maybe," I said. "Are you that important to Atlantis Productions?"

He nodded slowly, fixing me with his hot, intense gaze. "Yes—and I want it to remain that way. I can't—I will not—tolerate anything which might endanger my position."

I began to smell a very ripe rat. "Tell me," I asked him, "how did you happen to get in so solid with Hiram X. Wyndham? The last I knew, you had a penny-ante job with a glorified dog show."

"Listen, Bennett," he said nastily, "all I want you to do is to turn over that report to me. I'll pay for it, if that's worrying you."

"That isn't worrying me at all," I told him. "I'm just curious. How did you happen to get teamed up with Atlantis?"

"That doesn't concern you," he said coldly.

"What kind of a club are you holding over Hiram Wyndham?"

He puffed on his cigarette and avoided my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"It occurred to me that you used special persuasion to induce Wyndham to give you a soft job with his company."

"Like what?" he said in a tight voice.

I SAID: "Like finding out that Wyndham was seeing your wife in New York—and forcing him to set you up in style in Hollywood. Wyndham's home life is a fan magazine romance—a genius producer who is also a devoted husband and father.

"That's how you chiseled a job out of him, and that's how you keep it. But if Wyndham should learn about you and Dolores, you would no longer have a club over Wyndham—or your wife." I stood up. "I'm not selling any reports today. Good-by."

His face was gray beneath the tan. He got slowly out of the chair and attempted a wry smile. "You're very smart, Mr. Bennett. How did you know?"

"Routine checking in connection with the work we did for you."

"Why didn't you tell me about my wife and Wyndham?"

"You seem to have found out all right by yourself. And besides, you didn't even tell us that you had a wife. You paid us to get you out of the mess you were in with Dolores Donovan, and that's what we did."

He coughed against the back of his hand. "Would five hundred dollars buy that report?"

I shook my head slowly. "The American Detective Agency is big business."

"A thousand?" he said. There were little drops of sweat on his face.

I shook my head again. "I'd suggest that you see your script writers. Maybe they'd forget that they saw your name on a report—for a thousand bucks."

"No, no," he stammered. "They're gunning for me. I was put in over all of them, they'd leap at the chance to squeal to Wyndham. They'd pounce on that Donovan affair. You don't know how they are out there. It's dog eat dog—"

"Sorry," I cut in. I didn't think it was necessary to tell him that the report also contained mention of Hiram X. Wyndham's special interests—which would really make it a double-barreled bomb shell in the Atlantis studios—or that I had already decided to telephone the boss on the advisability of turning over the Weber file to Atlantis Productions.

"Two thousand," Weber said desperately.

I was suddenly very weary of Enos W. Weber and his back-stairs blackmailing. "A week's salary for you," I sneered. "You can do better than that."

He dug a finger beneath his collar. "Ten thousand," he said in a faint voice. "I promise I'll pay a thousand now and five hundred a week. Would that. . .?"

"Go away," I said.

He moved forward quickly and plucked at my coat lapels. "How much, then?" he pleaded. "Tell me how much?" It was still early in the morning, but I smelled gin on his breath, and through the lenses of his glasses I saw terror in his eyes.

The outer door opened silently and a big man stepped inside. He was wearing a brown overcoat and a tan felt hat with the brim turned up all around. I recognized my fat friend of the evening before, and I

tried to remember what the girl had called him. Chunky, that was it. He stood quiet, his blue eyes calmly flicking from Weber to me.

"Good morning, Major," I said cheerily. "Be with you in a moment."

He nodded gravely and removed his hat.

Enos Weber turned abruptly away from me, scooped up an English tweed ulster and a steel-gray Stetson, and half stumbled for the door.

"Good-by, Mr. Weber," I called after him.

His answer was the slamming of the door.

I looked a question at the fat man.

He coughed nervously, and said: "I learned your name, and your profession, from the bartender at the Round Table last night. I—I want to thank you for what you did for me. I see now that you were right. If I had gone back into the bar, I—I would probably have made a fool of myself." He sighed, and added: "There's been too much of that already." He paused, and fingered the brim of his hat.

I smiled at him. "Forget it, Major. All of us make mistakes over a woman at some time in our life."

He gave me a shy smile. "It was my last mistake, I hope," he said. "I'd like to tell you a little about myself so that you will maybe understand about last night."

This was a new build-up, but I motioned him to the chair vacated by Enos Weber, and said: "Shoot, Major."

"Please," he said smiling. "I'm no longer in the United States Army. I am plain Harold McPherson now."

"Okay, Harold," I grinned, "sit down."

He sat down. "I am a bachelor," McPherson began. "Just before Pearl Harbor my mother died, and I enlisted in the army with a captain's commission. Afterwards, I re-enlisted, was promoted to the rank of major, and was sent to the American zone in Germany.

"Just before my enlistment expired, I met Dolores Donovan—" he smiled wryly—"whom you have already met. It was Paris. I was lonely, she was nice to me, and I felt sorry for her. I paid her passage on the same boat which brought me home. Before we reached New York, I realized that I was in love. After we landed

I asked her to marry me. She said that she wanted to come to Cleveland first to arrange some affairs, and that she would write to me."

He paused, and gave me his shy smile. "Am I boring you, Mr. Bennett?"

"Not at all—but I'm afraid I know the end of your story."

His blue eyes clouded. "I suppose you do." He sighed. "Well, she didn't write of course. To her, I was just a ticket home. I realize that now. And after what happened last night—I'm going back to Newark and open my office again. But first, there's a little matter. . . ."

I pricked up my ears, smelling business. "Yes?"

He looked down at the hat in his hands. He was embarrassed. "In New York," he said, "right after we landed, I—I gave her a ring. A thick gold ring, with a diamond setting. It was my mother's. She refused to return it to me, and I want it back. It's worth maybe a thousand dollars, but that doesn't matter. I want the ring. After I get it, I'm going to leave here and forget all about Dolores Donovan."

I knew what was coming, but I waited.

HE LOOKED up at me, and I saw the pain in his eyes. "I want you to get that ring for me," he said quietly.

"Are you sure she still has the ring?"

He shrugged his big shoulders. "She may have pawned it," he said bitterly. "But I still want it back."

I stood up. "Where can I reach you?"

"I'm staying at the Erie Shore Hotel."

"Where does Miss Donovan live?"

"On the east side—1455 Kelly Court. Third floor, apartment four."

I wrote the address on the back of an envelope.

McPherson stood up and took out a wallet. "I don't know what your fee is, but if you wish a retainer—"

I held up a hand. "It's fifty dollars a day," I told him, "whether I recover the ring or not. I'll give it a quick try, and I'll tell you how much you owe me."

He nodded silently, and replaced his wallet.

"You know about Dolores Donovan and this Paul Sorenson?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "She's told me about him several times."

"All right," I said. "I'll get in touch with you."

He stood up, put on his hat, and held out his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Bennett. I—I feel better already. All I want now is to recover that ring, get back to Newark, and forget the whole thing."

"That's smart," I told him. We shook hands, and he went out.

When I entered the inner office to get my hat and coat, I told Sandy Hollis: "Let me have that Weber report, and the photos."

She put them in a large envelope and handed it to me. I stuffed the envelope in my overcoat pocket, moved to the door. "I'll be back sometime after lunch."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" She opened a drawer in my desk, took out one of a brace of .38's I kept there, released the cylinder, saw that each chamber was plugged with a brass cartridge, clicked the gun shut and handed it to me.

"I was just going to see a girl about a ring," I said to her. "Why the cops and robbers stuff?"

"Who ever heard of a private detective going around without a gun?" she said. "And besides, it impresses prospective clients."

I dropped the .38 into my overcoat pocket. "All right, just to please you." Suddenly I thought of something. I said: "Call the Los Angeles office and ask Horner to check on Paul Sorenson—anything he can dig up. Tell him to call back."

"Right," Sandy said.

"Hold the fort," I told her.

Dolores Donovan's east side apartment was north of Euclid Avenue, toward the lake. I parked the agency coupe a block down the street and walked back. It was a converted sandstone mansion jutting with balconies and many gables. On a concrete pedestal by the front door an iron boy in a jockey costume held a hitching ring in an out-stretched hand—a rusty reminder of the house's genteel and gracious past. The paint was peeling on the big, double oaken doors, and the brass knobs were loose and tarnished. I stepped into a wide hall with a bannistered stairway leading to the upper floors.

The place had a damp, ancient smell, and a cluster of empty milk bottles sat in a corner. There were ten mail boxes on

the wall, and I realized that this old house had really been cut up. I found a box with Dolores Donovan's name on it, but I didn't see any apartment number on it. I rattled my knuckles on a door at the right of the stairs. Inside, a dog began shrill yapping. The door opened, and a fat little terrier scrambled out and caught his teeth in my pant's cuff. I swore, and tried to kick him loose.

A shrill cracked voice said: "William! Get in here!"

The dog released my pants, took a final snap at my ankle, and scurried for the door. I got a glimpse of an old woman swinging a knobby cane. The cane smacked the dog's hind quarters, and he ki-yi'd out of sight. I looked up into eyes like a pair of licorice jelly beans.

"William doesn't like peddlers," the old woman said. She stood erect, with the cane in her hand, and her chin had a proud tilt to it. Her black velvet dress had probably been new in 1910. Her yellowish white hair was piled high on her head, and stuck with numerous tortoise shell combs. She could have been sixty, or a hundred and ten.

I removed my hat. "You have an excellent watch dog, Madam."

She tapped her cane on the floor. "What are you selling, young man?"

"Nothing, Madam. I merely wished to ask which is Miss Donovan's apartment."

"Hmmm." She narrowed her eyes and looked me up and down. "You don't look like the type."

"No?" I said.

She tilted her head a little and appraised me with her bright little eyes. "Well, young man," she said, "for one thing, your hair isn't long enough and you look sober."

"I *am* sober," I told her. "If you'll just tell me. . . ."

She pointed her cane up the stairs. "Third floor—used to be the ball room when my husband was alive. Made it into five apartments. Fourth door on the right."

"Thank you," I said, and I started for the stairs.

"She's probably still in bed," the old woman called after me. "Heard her in the hall at six this morning. Tell her for me that her rent is a week over-due."

I tipped my hat, and climbed the stairs. When I reached the third floor I stopped before the fourth door on my right. There wasn't any bell, and so I rattled my knuckles on the paneling. The door remained closed, and I tried the knob. It turned, and the door swung inward. I poked my head inside and looked around.

CHAPTER THREE

Busy Worry Wart

IT WAS a fairly large room filled with odds and ends of nondescript furniture. On a wicker table were three empty quart soda water bottles, a glass ice bowl with water at the bottom, and two pint whiskey bottles, one empty, and the other about a quarter full. An open archway was on my right, through which I could see the corner of a white enameled refrigerator, and beyond the archway was a door to what I guessed was a closet. Across the room was another door standing ajar, and from behind it I heard the steady sound of water splattering into a bath tub.

"Hey," I called. The only answer I got was the sound of running water.

I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. I now had a clear view into the kitchen. The refrigerator door was standing open, with an ice cube tray pulled partly out of its compartment. I stood still for maybe ten seconds. Then I took three steps forward to get a closer look at what I saw on the floor at the base of the refrigerator.

He was wearing gray flannel slacks, a sleeveless white undershirt, and he was barefooted. He was lying on his back, with his knees drawn up, and his arms flung wide. There was a fresh-looking red blot on the front of his undershirt. I leaned down. From the way the blood had bubbled out, I knew that it had been a knife. Paul Sorenson had made his last curtain call.

From the bathroom the sound of running water stopped abruptly, and a voice called out: "I'll have that drink now, darling."

I turned and stood in the kitchen doorway. Dolores Donovan came out of the

bathroom. Her head was lowered as she knotted the belt of a pale green silk robe, and she was humming softly to herself. Her yellow hair was piled high on the top of her head and tied with a green bow. She looked about sixteen years old.

She stopped her humming to say: "Not too much soda, Paul." Then she saw me.

She let out a little frightened gasp and took a quick step backward. From where she stood she couldn't see the body of Paul Sorenson. She watched me silently, her eyes big and dark.

"Where's—" she began, and glanced quickly around the apartment. Then her narrowed eyes swung back to me, and she said in a brittle voice: "How did you get in here?"

"The door was unlocked—and I didn't think you'd mind an old friend like me walking in."

She looked puzzled, but her eyes held an alert look. "Old friend?"

I sighed. "And to think," I said reproachfully, "that only last night you held me in your arms and kissed me."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "That little caper at the Round Table." Her eyes hardened. "That was last night, chum." Her gaze roved around the room again. There were tiny wrinkles of worry and fear around her eyes.

"He's gone," I said.

"Who are you talking about?" she said. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm talking about Paul Sorenson. And I came to see you about a ring."

"All right," she said harshly. "He was here. Is that any of your business? What are you—the house dick, or something?" Again I saw the shadow of fear in her eyes. "What's the deal? Did you see him in the hall? Where did he go?"

"Not far," I said gently, and I stepped away from the kitchen door.

She looked past me, and took a hesitant step forward. She saw the body then, and she said sharply: "Paul!" She took two more steps, and from the stricken expression on her face I knew that she had seen the blood. "Paul." Her voice was faint and choked, and her eyes began to glaze. I caught her before she hit the floor.

I carried her to the bed and laid her down. I placed a finger over the big artery in her throat. Her pulse was slow, but

strong. I left her and moved quickly across the room and stepped into the bathroom. It was just an ordinary bathroom, with a shower over the tub and a glazed curtain covered with green sailboats and red sea shells. The shower nozzle was still dripping water, accompanied by little wisps of steam.

On the linoleum floor along the wall was a pair of stubby black, high-heeled shoes and a small pile of woman's clothing. Two heavy bath towels hung neatly on a metal rod screwed into the wall, and a glass shelf over the wash bowl held a man's gold wrist watch and a burned-out cigarette stub.

There was a soft scratching sound behind me. I started to turn, but I was far too slow. Something heavy and blunt smacked the back of my head. Red, yellow and blue lights danced briefly before my eyes, and then there was nothing but a sudden pain which rushed me into blackness and oblivion.

* * *

I opened my eyes and listened to the steady drip of the shower. The bathroom floor felt cold against my cheek. After a while I slowly pushed myself to my hands and knees and in that position I swayed like a tired old dog, my head hanging down. After a couple of minutes I found that if I held my head up it didn't hurt quite so much. I looked around the bathroom.

Dolores Donovan's clothes and shoes were gone. The wrist watch and the cigarette stub were still on the shelf over the wash bowl. I got stiffly to my feet and stumbled into the outer room, hanging on to the wall. Dolores Donovan was not there. I lurched for the kitchen and hung in the doorway.

Sorenson's body was limp and bloody and quiet—so quiet that I could almost imagine that I saw him breathing. I spotted a full whiskey bottle on the sink, and I moved toward it. I had to step over Sorenson's body to get there, but he didn't care.

I tilted the bottle to my lips. It was hot and raw, and not very good whiskey, but it made me feel a little better—at least for the moment, and that was what I wanted.

I touched the back of my head. There was a lump which felt as big as a ping-pong ball. I turned on the cold water in the sink and let it run over my head. The water ran down my neck and soaked my shirt collar, but it felt good.

Then I stepped carefully over Sorenson's body, went back into the bathroom and dried my face and hands on the clean dry towels hanging there. I peered at myself in the mirror over the bowl. I looked like a corpse dragged out of the harbor. I brushed my damp hair back with my hands, picked up my hat from where it lay on the bathroom floor, and put it on. It was then that I put my hands in my overcoat pocket and discovered that the copy of the Weber report and the photographs were gone.

ONCE more I entered the kitchen. There wasn't any back door—just a window through which I could see the black roofs of houses. *Only one entrance to this fire trap*, I thought. *I must speak to the city council.*

On my way to the front door, I paused long enough to feel in the pockets of Paul Sorenson's coat. I found a clean white linen handkerchief, an unopened package of cigarettes, a wallet containing recent reviews of the play, *Blood On My Heart*, identification card and four five-dollar bills, and a match folder printed with an advertisement for the Round Table. I replaced the articles in the coat, stepped out into the hall, locked the door and put the key in my pocket.

As I passed the landlady's door, in the hall on the first floor beneath the curving staircase, the little dog, William, began to yap nervously at the sound of my footsteps. I went on out and got into my car. My head felt as though I had been on a three-day binge. It was almost eleven o'clock in the morning.

Twenty minutes later I was leaning on the desk of the Erie Shore Hotel. A willowy clerk with a high shine to his black hair grudgingly gave me Harold McPherson's room number, and I shot to the twelfth floor in an express elevator. He answered my knock immediately, and I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

Blinding green and yellow striped pa-

jamás covered his big body, and he had a fat brown cigar in his mouth. The air in the room was bitter with the cigar smell. The bed was rumpled and littered with the morning papers. On a table by the window was a tray, containing a small silver coffee pot and the remains of breakfast.

McPherson chewed on his cigar and grinned sheepishly. "I was just going to call you, Bennett."

"What about?"

He looked down at his bare feet, and then up at me. "About Dolores," he said, chewing on the cigar. "Miss Donovan. I want you to stop—Well the deal is off." He walked to a dresser, picked up a fat pigskin wallet, and turned to face me. "Just—uh—forget all about it. How much do I owe you?"

"I've just started," I said. "Don't you want the ring any more?"

His face turned from pink to red, and he squirmed like a small boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "No. You see, I—uh—oh, dammit, Bennett, we're going to be married."

I waited a second until I was sure I had understood him. Then I said: "Congratulations, and all that stuff."

His face took on a stubborn, defiant expression. "Don't look like that, Bennett. I was wrong about her, that's all."

"Just a little quarrel?" I said.

The sheepish expression came back to his face. "Something like that, I guess. "You see. . . ." He paused and his eyes got dreamy.

"Yeah," I said. "I see. That'll be fifty dollars."

He jerked his thoughts back from the land of orange blossoms and wedding bells to the work-a-day world. "Fifty dollars?" he said briskly, and he slipped some bills from his pocket and handed them to me. "I added an extra ten. Get yourself a bottle of scotch, or something." He smiled shyly. "I—I appreciate your trying to help me, but I'm glad that I don't need you any more." He laughed a little nervously.

I folded the bills and placed them in my pocket. "So everything's fine now?" I said.

He nodded happily and held out his hand. I shook his hand and left quickly, before I would say more than I wanted to say.

Down in the lobby, in a phone booth facing the elevators, I called Alec Hammond. As usual I found him at the West Side Recreation Center, a pool hall with poker and black jack in the back room. When he wasn't on a job red-haired Alec sometimes played poker for three days straight.

When his laconic voice said, "Yeah?" I said: "This is Jim. I've got a job for you—right now."

"All right," he said. "Where?"

"At the Erie Shore Hotel. I'll be in a phone booth facing the elevators. Hurry it up."

"Right," he said, and the receiver clicked in my ear.

I timed him. In exactly five-and-a-half minutes I saw him stroll casually through the revolving doors, as if he were just out for an afternoon's walk, and had not raced fourteen blocks in a taxi which had probably been prodded to speed by a five-dollar bill waved under the driver's nose.

I stepped out of the phone booth, moved over to the cigarette and magazine counter, and stood looking at a rack of postcards. Alec sauntered up beside me, bought a package of cigarettes, turned his back on the clerk and opened them.

Without looking at him, I said in a low voice "I don't think I'm tailed, but I want to play it safe. Big man, blue eyes, brown overcoat, tan hat, brim turned up. Name of Harold McPherson. Probably be checking out soon. Keep on him. When you get a chance, call me. But stay with him. Got it?"

Alec placed a cigarette in his mouth and looked out across the lobby as he felt in his pockets for a match. "Sure," he said softly. "How far is he liable to run?"

I twirled the postcard rack. "I don't know. New York, maybe. You got enough money?"

He lit his cigarette. "Sure. The suckers were biting last night."

I gazed intently at a colored picture of the Terminal Tower. "If you see he's leaving town, try and call me before he gets away."

I walked away, and Alec strolled in the direction of the elevators.

EVER since I had left Dolores Donovan's apartment there had been a small insistent worry in the back of my brain, and now that McPherson was taken care of the worry bloomed to a feeling of foreboding. I jockeyed the agency car through the traffic to the garage beneath our office building and took the service elevator upstairs. I entered the office by the rear entrance, and as soon as I opened the door I knew why I had been worrying.

In front of the steel files opposite my desk Sandy Hollis was struggling with Enos W. Weber. It was a silent, intense struggle, and neither of them heard me enter. Weber's back was toward me, but I recognized his clothes and his Hollywood haircut. He had Sandy backed up against the files, both of her wrists in his hands. Two of the file drawers were standing open, and typed reports and papers were scattered on the floor.

I jumped for Weber, grabbed him by one padded shoulder, and swung him around. His face was gray beneath his California tan, and his eyes held a wild glitter. I hit him on the chin, and followed it with a slap across his face. He made a stuttering sound and reeled against the

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wall. There wasn't much fight in him.

Sandy slid out of my way, and I moved in and bunched the sharply tailored lapels of Weber's coat in my hand. He tried to jerk away from me, but I held on and slapped him again. He struck out viciously at me, and I swung him around against my desk. He twisted sideways, his face averted, his long hair hanging in his eyes. There was blood on his mouth, he was breathing heavily, and I saw that there wasn't any fight left in him. I looked up at Sandy.

She was watching us, her eyes big. There was a red scratch on the bridge of her short nose, and her copper-colored hair fell over one side of her face. The sleeve of her silk blouse was torn, and there was a runner an inch wide on one of her stockings. She pushed the hair back from her eyes, and grinned at me. "I'm all right, boss, but we went 'round and 'round for a little while there."

I jerked Weber up close to me. He didn't resist, but stared at me dully, still breathing hard. In the inside pocket of his elegant English ulster I found the stolen photographs and the copy of the report. I held the report in front of his nose. "This wasn't enough?" I said. "You wanted the original, too?"

"And the negatives of the photos," Sandy said.

"What good are they to you?" Weber said in a choked voice. "I offered to buy them."

I felt like slapping him again, but I restrained myself. I said: "You're in love with Dolores Donovan, and that's why you killed Paul Sorenson."

He struggled a little, but I held him tightly. "No, no," he moaned. "I—I saw him on the kitchen floor—but I didn't kill him. Why should I? She means nothing to me any more. I—"

I slapped him. I couldn't help it. He covered his face with his hands and cowered against the desk.

I said: "But you knew where she lived, and you knew that she was with Sorenson. I'm calling the police." I reached for the telephone on my desk.

He grabbed my wrist. "No, no," he said desperately. "Listen, please. I'll admit I've been with Dolores lately—for old time's sake. But it didn't mean anything.

I followed you this morning. When I saw that you were going to her apartment. I waited outside. But I was curious, and the door was unlocked. When I looked inside I saw Dolores lying on the bed and you were in the bathroom, with your back toward me. So I picked up a metal candlestick from a table and hit you on the head. Then I searched you and found the report and the pictures.

"As I was leaving, I saw the body on the kitchen floor. I didn't know who he was—I swear I didn't. I got scared then, and I left. Dolores was still unconscious on the bed. You—you've got to believe me. Then I—I came back here to try and persuade your secretary to—"

"Persuade," Sandy said scornfully. "Such modesty."

The telephone on my desk began to ring. Sandy moved for it, but I waved her away. I picked it up, said, "Yes?"

Alec Hammond's voice said: "Jim, I'm in a booth at the Terminal. Our boy checked out of the hotel, and he just bought two one-way tickets for New York. The train leaves in twenty-two minutes."

"All right, I'll try and get there. But hold him—don't let him get on that train."

"What about the extra ticket?"

"If somebody else shows up, hold 'em both. Okay?"

I heard Alec sigh. "Okay," he said.

I hung up and looked at Weber. He had regained a little composure. He avoided my eyes, stared out of the window, and adjusted the knot of his tie.

I said to Sandy: "Any news from Los Angeles yet?"

She shook her head.

"I should be two guys," I said, and I picked up the telephone.

I called Detective Sergeant Dennis Rockingham, of Homicide. I was in luck. He was in his office.

"Rock," I said, "this is Bennett. I'm in a hurry, so don't ask a lot of official questions. First, we're holding a guy in my office for assault and attempted robbery. I want him booked, and I'll file charges later. Got that?"

"Sure," Rockingham said. "But—"

"There's more," I broke in. "You know our man Hammond?"

"I know all your hired guns," Rockingham said.

"All right. He's at the Terminal tailing a guy. The guy may be joined by a woman. They've got tickets for the next train to New York. It's leaving in—" I looked at my wrist watch—"eighteen minutes. I'm afraid I can't make it over there in time. Put it on the radio, and have somebody help Alec hold them. Tell Alec I sent you."

"What's the charge?" Rockingham asked.

"Murder," I told him, and hung up.

Sandy Hollis opened my desk drawer and took out my spare gun. She moved around to the door and pointed the gun at Enos Weber. Her hand was steady and there was a sparkle in her brown eyes. "Go ahead, Boss," she said to me. "I can handle him."

Weber took a step forward. "Now, wait," he began.

Sandy waved the gun, and he stood still, his frightened eyes darting from Sandy to me.

I grinned at Sandy and patted her cheek. "If he so much as moves an eyelid, shoot him in the stomach."

"I know where to shoot him," Sandy said. "Get going."

CHAPTER FOUR

If the Shoe Fits

I GRABBED a taxi at the curb but it was slow going. It was almost noon, and traffic was heavy. By the time we arrived at the Terminal, I knew that I was late. Running down the marble steps and out into the vast station I twisted my way through the mob, past the phone booths, and to the train gates beyond.

I said to a guard at the gates: "That New York train leave yet?"

He nodded. "Just left, sir."

I turned and looked helplessly at the crowd. I spotted two uniformed cops standing at the end of the long ramp leading up to the street level. They were peering about with hard looks on their faces. I knew them both, and I walked over to where they were standing.

One of them said, "Hello, Jim," and continued his intense scrutiny of the crowd. The other one nodded, and began to wipe his glasses with a handkerchief.

"The train's left, boys," I said wearily.

"You can get right back to your beats."

The first cop said: "We know it, Jim. But the sergeant told us to wait here for him." He looked up the ramp. "Here he comes now."

Rockingham's lanky figure moved toward us with long strides. A weather-beaten raincoat hung loosely from his wide shoulders. In a second, he had shouldered his way through the crowd and was standing beside us. He chewed on his red mustache and looked at me with his cold little blue eyes. "Well," he said softly, "what about it?"

One of the cops said quickly: "We didn't see Hammond, Sergeant. We covered the whole station. The train pulled out while we was still looking. And then we waited for you, like you said."

"All right, Frank," Rockingham said looking at me. He teetered on his heels and gazed up at the vast vaulted ceiling.

"Now, let's see, Jim. You wanted a man sent to your office. Something about assault and attempted robbery. You're a taxpayer, I presume, and so I sent a man over. Then, in further compliance with your instructions, I ordered one of our down-town radio patrols to contact your man Hammond here. This they apparently failed to do. I'm sorry about that."

He stopped teetering and pointed a long finger at me. "However, you mentioned something about murder. Would you perhaps care to enlarge a little on that?"

From my pocket I took the key to Dolores Donovan's apartment, handed it to him, and told him the address in Kelly Court. "You'll find a body on the kitchen floor," I added.

Rockingham tossed the key into the air and caught it in his palm. "I see," he said. "A body. Whose body, may I ask?"

"Name of Paul Sorenson," I said. "An actor. He was stabbed to death."

He nodded pleasantly. "You no doubt have the murder weapon in your pocket?"

I was wondering what had happened to Alec Hammond, and I was in no mood for Rockingham's sardonic routine. I gave him a quick picture of the whole mess and I didn't leave anything out.

When I had finished, Rockingham said: "Jim, your frankness amazes me. What's come over you? The odd part is, I think you're telling the truth—for once. But I

can't figure your angle. What's there in it for you? You say you've already collected from this McPherson. Why worry about it any more?"

"I've wondered that myself. Maybe it's my sense of civic duty. Don't I get any credit for reporting a murder?"

He nodded gravely. "Of course, Jim, of course. Would you care to join us on a little trip to the east side?"

I shook my head. "You know where to find me. I'd better get back to the office. I left Sandy holding a gun on that robber character I told you about."

"Good girl, Sandy," he said. "How did you ever get her to work for you?" He jerked his head at the two cops. "Come on, boys. We'll have things to discuss with Bennett later." He strode up the ramp, the two cops following him like a couple of bird dogs. . . .

When I got back to the office, the door was locked. I used my key and entered. Sandy Hollis was gone, but there was a note on my desk in her handwriting.

Boss: A policeman came and took that darling Mr. Weber away. I didn't have to shoot him—damn it! Have gone out to lunch, and to buy a new pair of stockings. How about putting them on your next expense report? S.

I sat down at my desk with my hat and coat on. A white corner of paper protruded from beneath my leather desk pad. I lifted the pad and saw the original report of the Enos Weber case, together with the other set of photographs, and the negatives. I smiled to myself at Sandy's foresightedness.

My head still ached, and I reached for my desk bottle. I had time for two quick drinks before Sandy breezed in and lifted her skirt to show me her new stockings. She had nice legs—long, and curved in the right places.

"Very pretty," I said. "The stockings, I mean. No trouble with our boy, Weber, huh?"

She hung up her coat, sat down before her typewriter, and lit a cigarette. "He offered me a lot of money to give him the report, and to let him go. I was just about to accept when that darn policeman showed up."

"How much money?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Huh," I sneered. "He offered me ten thousand."

She rolled a sheet of paper into her typewriter and turned to face me. "What's going on? Is that Weber mixed up in that murder you mentioned? And—"

My phone began to ring, and I picked it up. Alec Hammond's voice sounded faint and far away. "Jim?"

"Yeah, Alec. Where are you?"

"Halfway to Buffalo, on Route 20. The Sunshine Tourist Cabins, this side of Willoughby." He paused, and then he said in a complaining voice: "Who tipped off the cops?"

"I did. I thought you might need some help."

"Help? Hell, they messed up the deal. Just before the train time a blonde babe carrying a bag skips up to my fat boy and starts dragging him for the tracks. I start to close in on them, when the babe spots the two bulls coming in from the other side of the station, heading her off from the gates to the tracks. She grabs the fat boy, and the two of them highball up the steps to the street. I scamper after them, and I see them get into a cab. I snag a cab behind them.

"They ride all over town before they head out here. The babe's a looker, all right. Right now she and the fat boy are in a cabin. I'm in a gas station across the street. What should I do now?"

"Stay there," I said quickly. "I'll be right out."

I HUNG up, and said to Sandy: "Give me an envelope and a sheet of blank paper." She folded a sheet, put it in an envelope, and handed it to me. I put it in my coat pocket and stood up.

"Now what?" Sandy said.

I moved to the door and opened it. "If Rockingham comes here, or calls, tell him I'll get in touch with him when I get back."

She looked at me with troubled eyes. "Can't I help? You trusted me with Weber."

"Woman's place is in the home," I told her, and I went out.

As I closed the door, I heard her call after me: "What kind of a home do you call this?"

I got the agency car out of the garage, and headed east. Traffic was thinning out, and I made good time. On the highway west of Willoughby I saw the cabins. There were twenty of them all new and brightly painted.

A small building in the foreground was marked *Office*, but I turned off to my left and parked beside a row of air pumps at a super service station. I didn't see Alec Hammond so I got out and went inside. A chunky kid in a gray shirt and black leather bow tie looked up from a desk and jerked his thumb. "Outside," he said. "On the right."

"Thanks just the same," I said, "but I'm looking for a man who telephoned from here a while ago. Blue overcoat, red hair, freckles—"

"Oh, him," the kid broke in. "He's gone."

I looked across the road at the cabins, but I didn't see Alec Hammond's tall form. "Where did he go?" I asked the kid.

He shrugged. "I had a grease job on the rack, and I didn't notice."

I went out and drove the car across the road to the office of the cabin lay-out. As I entered, a large bald-headed man in a red plaid shirt looked up from a newspaper.

"Yes, sir," he said briskly. "Would you like a cabin? All steam-heated, showers in each one, radio for a slight additional charge—"

I held up a hand. "Who rented a cabin within the last hour?"

He stared silently for maybe a second. Then he said: "Why?"

"Police. And I'm in a hurry."

He started to bluster. "Now, look here. I run a—"

"Shut up," I snapped. "Let's see your book."

He went behind a tiny desk and tossed out a ten-cent note book. I turned the pages to the last entry. It was in blue ink. *Mr. and Mrs. George Shultz, Dayton, Ohio*. After it was a notation in pencil: *No. 15 Paid, \$3.50*. The preceding entry was dated the day before. I closed the book and moved to the door.

The large man said in a complaining voice: "I don't want no trouble."

I slammed the door and walked over the frozen ground until I came to cabin 15. It was like all the rest—blue and white, tiny,

with two cement steps leading up the front door. Venetian blinds were closed against the weak November sunlight. I rapped sharply on the door, and rattled the knob. Then I pounded with my fist. There was the metallic sound of a turning key, and the door opened just about two inches. Then I kicked it in, and shouldered my way inside.

It was an interesting tableau. Alec Hammond, Dolores Donovan, and Harold McPherson. They all stood facing me in the small room. Alec was on my right, against the wall, a reckless light in his greenish eyes. Backed against the far wall, cool and blonde and alone, was Dolores Donovan. Harold McPherson, who had opened the door for me, was backing slowly away. There was sweat on his face, and in his hand was a tiny black .22 automatic.

The girl said sharply: "Chunky! Are you crazy? Give me that gun."

He shook his head slowly, his eyes on me.

Alec Hammond said softly: "I'm sorry I had to let you walk in on this, Jim. But he got two tickets East on the bus at the gas station. It's due pretty quick, and I figured I'd better head them off. When I walked in, Fat Boy covered me with that dinky rod. Want me to make a dive for him?"

I shook my head at Alec, and said to McPherson: "Don't be a fool."

He wiped his damp face with his left hand, but he held the gun steady. "What do you want?" he said in a choked voice. "Why don't you leave us alone? I paid you."

"Murder comes high," I said. "A lot more than sixty bucks. Why don't you just come with us quiet-like?"

A fleeting look of panic crossed his face, and then his jaw stiffened. "What kind of nonsense is that Bennett?"

I measured the distance with my eyes. It was a small room, and one quick jump would take me to him. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Alec lick his lips slowly, and I knew he had the same idea. But even if we tried it together, one of us was bound to be hurt. McPherson held the gun close to his stomach, and the muzzle kept swiveling between Alec and me.

"Don't stall," I said to McPherson.

"You were jealous of Paul Sorenson. You hired me on a pretext, so you'd have an alibi that you were through with her. Then this morning you went to her apartment and killed Sorenson, while she was taking a shower. The knife was silent, and she probably never knew you were there. Then you hurried back to the hotel and put on your pajamas.

"When I showed up, you took me off the job. You didn't want me snooping around her apartment. With Sorenson out of the deal, she agreed to go away with you. Isn't that about it?"

His big body began to tremble. "No," he said hoarsely. "You're lying, Bennett. It can't be."

I took a step toward him, and Alec began to move slowly in from the side. McPherson backed up, like a cornered grizzly. I could tell from his eyes that he didn't know whether to shoot or run, or both.

DOLORES DONOVAN said suddenly: "So it was you." Her voice was almost a whisper, and tears were streaming down her face. "You killed Paul—you—" She flung herself upon McPherson and beat frantically at his face with her fists. He didn't make a move to defend himself; he just stood still and let her hit him.

Alec moved then, very quickly, and he grabbed the gun from McPherson's hand. I got the girl by the wrists and pulled her loose. She sobbed hysterically. "Oh, Paul, Paul," clinging to me like a hurt baby to its mother. I had a tough time prying her loose and leading her to a chair.

Harold McPherson stood silently, staring dumbly at the girl. He looked like a dead man.

Alec said, "Catch," and tossed the little .22. I caught it and dropped it into my coat pocket. Alec slipped his snub-nosed .32 from a shoulder holster and fingered it lovingly. Then he stepped up to McPherson and nudged the big man's stomach with the short muzzle of the gun. "You may as well sit down, Mac. We'll have a little wait, I reckon." He looked at me. "Or do we take him in with us, Jim?"

The girl said in a low choked voice: "Take him away—get him out of my sight."

McPherson stumbled to a chair. He sat

down heavily and covered his face with his hands.

From my pocket I took the envelope Sandy had given me, and removed the blank sheet of paper. I placed the paper on a small table and wrote with a fountain pen:

To Whom It May Concern:

I stabbed Paul Sorenson to death on the morning of November 24 because I was jealous of him. I was in love with Dolores Donovan, and she jilted me for him. She had nothing to do with it, and she did not know I had killed him.

I carried the paper over to McPherson, held it in front of him, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Just a formality," I said. "Would you mind signing this?"

He raised his head, and read silently. I handed him the pen. He took it, sighed heavily, held the paper over one fat knee and swiftly scrawled his name. I took the paper, folded it, and recapped my pen.

I said to him: "No woman is worth a murder rap."

He raised startled eyes to mine. Then he looked at Dolores Donovan. She turned her face away from him. There were tears on her cheeks, and her mouth was trembling. McPherson sighed, and looked down at his hands. He didn't say anything.

I said harshly: "Dammit, she killed Sorenson. She not only killed him, but she was willing to let you go to the chair for it. Why did you sign that confession?"

He didn't raise his head. "I wanted to find out how far she would go," he said in a muffled voice. "It'll make it easier for me . . . maybe . . . remembering that."

Dolores Donovan turned her head slowly. She sat very still, her hot dark eyes on McPherson. Alec Hammond leaned carelessly against the wall, his gun drooping in his hand. But there was a bright alert look in his eyes.

McPherson looked up at me, anguish in his eyes. "Don't you see?" he said bitterly. "I had to find out. When she called me this morning and said she was through with Sorenson and that she would marry me after all—that was just before you came to my hotel room—I was

pretty happy. Afterwards, I got to thinking. She had switched too suddenly, after the way she had treated me. But I decided to play it out. She wanted to leave town, and I agreed to meet her at the station. When I saw her there, she was nervous, and there was a look in her eyes. . . ."

He paused, and stared at the backs of his big, clenched fists. Then he continued in a cold, dead voice. He seemed to have forgotten that Dolores Donovan was sitting four feet away from him.

"I saw the policemen come into the station, and she became frantic. She dragged me out to the street. I knew then that it was something bad. But I was determined to play it out to the end. I . . . I had to. You say this Sorenson is dead. I don't know if she killed him. I don't care."

He moved a hand in a hopeless gesture, and nodded at Alec. "When that man knocked on the door, just before you came, she took a gun from her purse and I saw murder in her eyes. I—I really did. But still I had to know. I got the gun away from her, and then you knocked." He stopped talking and pulled his hands slowly over his face.

I said gently: "Then you actually signed a confession just to see if she'd let you do it?"

He looked up at me with burning eyes. "Of course," he said harshly. "I was in my room all morning after I left you. A maid was there, cleaning. A boy brought me the morning papers. And a waiter came with my late breakfast. Is that enough alibi?"

"My apologies," I said. "Once a sucker is enough, huh?"

He didn't answer me, and I looked at Dolores Donovan. She was watching McPherson silently, a bright wicked glitter in her eyes. She stood up abruptly, walked to the table, and picked up a black leather purse. Alec Hammond shifted his position slightly. From the purse the girl took a gold case, extracted a cigarette and placed it between her lips.

She turned to me. "Well, Mister Detective, what are you waiting for? You've got the big lout's confession—what more do you want?"

"Not much," I said to her. "Just the

reason you killed Sorenson. What happened? Did he tell you that he had a wife in California, and couldn't take you to movieland with him? Or was it just a little quarrel, which ended with a playful knifing?"

She smiled at me, but her eyes were as hard as a banker's heart. "You know better than that," she said brightly. "Really, you do. You'll recall that I was in the shower when you entered my apartment. Would I be taking a shower—if I knew that poor Paul was lying dead on the kitchen floor?"

Her voice broke, and her mouth began to tremble. She removed the cigarette from between her lips and lowered her head. Her yellow hair fell forward over her face and her slender body seemed to shudder.

Alec Hammond raised his eyebrows at me, and winked. Harold McPherson sat like a man of stone.

I SAID to the girl: "Your acts are marvelous—the one at your apartment this morning, and the one you're putting on now. You had the shower turned on, all right, and you gave me time to find the body. But after you turned off the water, you were too anxious to go into your act. You came out too quickly. People usually dry themselves after a bath, and that takes a little time. But you turned off the shower, and came right out.

The water dripping from the shower nozzle was too hot for anyone to stand under—it was steaming—and the towels in the bathroom were dry. So I know that you didn't take a shower. You were just waiting for me to find Sorenson, so that you could come out with your innocent act to put you in the clear. Then you pretended to faint. Enos Weber's sneaking in and slugging me made it all the easier for you." I paused, and took a deep breath.

Harold McPherson had lifted his head and was listening intently. Alec Hammond leaned indolently against the wall, a faintly amused expression on his face.

"No, no," Dolores Donovan murmured. "Do you really think I'm capable of—"

"Yes," I snapped. "You killed Sorenson in a jealous rage. From the upper landing you saw me talking to the land-

lady, and you heard me ask for your apartment. You knew that if you ran away you would be hounded for Sorenson's murder—and besides, there was no rear entrance to your apartment. So you went back inside, left the door unlocked, started the shower in the bathroom, and waited for me to walk in."

I stopped talking, and looked around the room. McPherson sat hunched over, and Alec looked at me questioningly.

"Drive my car over here," I said to him. "We can take Miss Donovan back to town."

Alec nodded gravely, and went out.

With a trembling hand Dolores Donovan replaced the cigarette in her mouth.

I said to her: "Isn't that about it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "That's about it. He said he wanted to marry me. He said he'd take me to Hollywood. And the funny part is—I believed him. Isn't that a laugh? This morning he told me he was married. I—I guess I went a little crazy."

She lifted her slim shoulders in a helpless gesture and opened her purse. But her hand didn't come out with a match. A thin length of bright steel protruded from her fist, and she lunged for me silently and swiftly.

McPherson let out a warning yell, and jumped to his feet. I was hemmed in between the wall and a table, and I didn't have time to get to my gun. Anyhow, I have a delicate weakness about shooting women. But I did the next best thing. I raised my foot, and Dolores ran straight into it. She collapsed in a moaning heap, and I leaned down and twisted the knife from her hand.

The door opened, and Alec Hammond stepped inside. He glanced quickly from the form of the girl on the floor to me. I said: "I had to kick her in the stomach. She could probably use a little air."

Alec grinned understandingly, moved over to the girl, and grasped her beneath her arms.

I turned to McPherson. "Coming with us?"

His face was like stone. He shook his head slowly, and the look in his eyes made me feel sorry for him.

I said gently: "I'm sorry I had to drag

you through all that. But I had to be certain."

"Of course," he said in a low voice. "It's all right."

I handed him the paper he had signed. "You might want that."

He took it and folded it absently in his fingers. Then he turned abruptly, picked up a black leather bag which had been sitting in a corner, and handed it to me. "She might want this," he said.

I took the bag and went out to the car. Alec Hammond was standing beside the open door, and Dolores Donovan sat slumped in the back seat. I told Alec to drive. As we pulled away I looked back and I saw Harold McPherson staring after us from the cabin doorway.

* * *

After we had delivered Dolores Donovan to the police, and I had told my story to Detective Sergeant Rockingham, he said: "What about this robbery and assault charge against this Enos Weber character? He's been raising hell and hollering for a lawyer."

"Let him loose," I said. "I withdraw my charges."

Rockingham gave me his sardonic grin. "You thought for a while that maybe he stuck a knife into Paul Sorenson. Is that it?"

"Maybe," I said. "Before I got to thinking about the girl's shower act."

Rockingham chuckled nastily, and Alec and I left.

When I got back to the office, Sandy Hollis said excitedly: "I just had a call from Horner, in Los Angeles. He said that Paul Sorenson is married, and—"

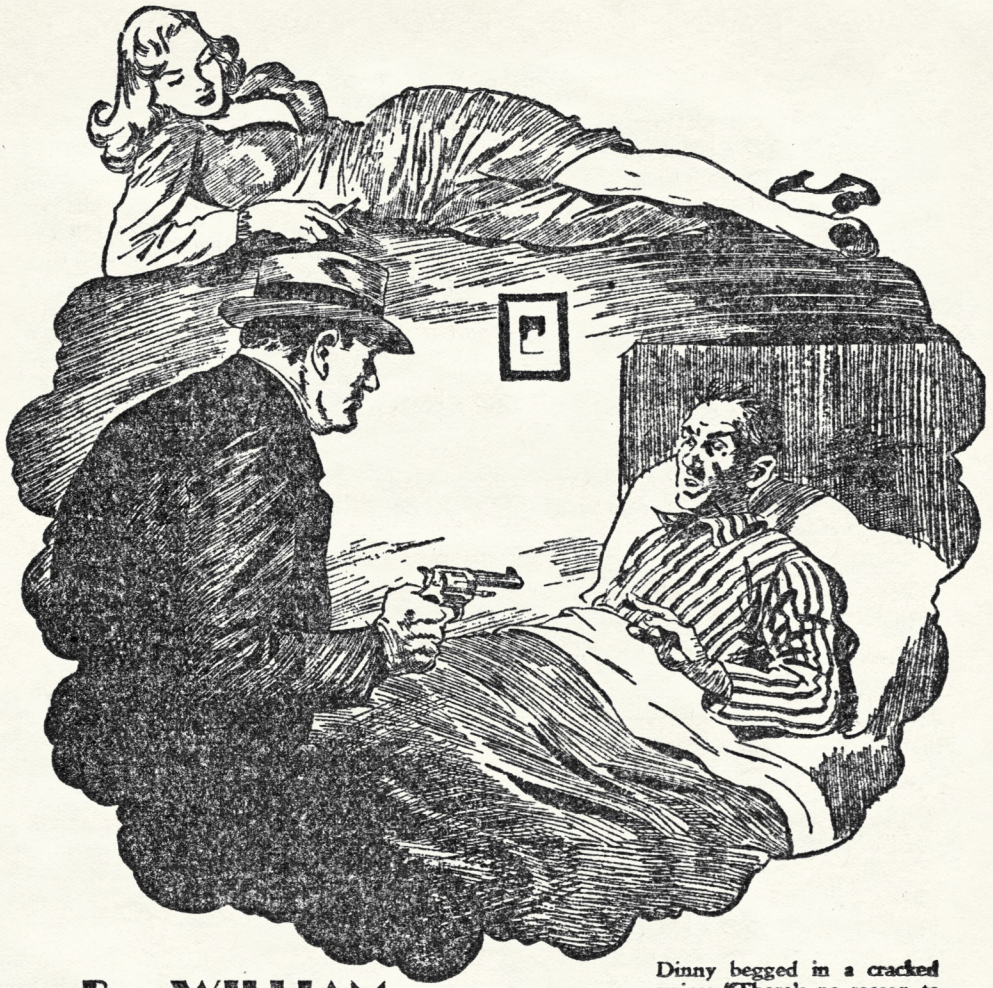
"Yeah," I said wearily. "I know. Let's go over to the Round Table for a little relaxation."

"Oh, fun," Sandy said, and she began to cover her typewriter.

I included the Weber-Donovan report with those sent to the boss for the scrutiny of Atlantis Productions script department. It never appeared on the screen, but the picture was a big hit, and it made the boss a national hero.

The last I heard, Enos W. Weber was tending bar in a dive on Sunset Strip.

THE END



By **WILLIAM
P. MCGIVERN**

Dinny begged in a cracked voice: "There's no reason to kill me—I ain't done nothin'."

SERGEANT BURT MORAN was a tall man with hard flat features and eyes that were cold and dull, like those of a snake. He was that comparatively rare thing among cops, a man equally hated by crooks and by his fellow officers. Operators on both sides of the law

Copper Moran wanted to hand her the world—in a beribboned, bloody package.

DEATH COMES GIFT-WRAPPED

forgot their differences and came to agreement on one point at least: that Moran was a heel by any or all standards.

Moran was a bully who shook down petty crooks for a few bucks whenever he got the chance. But he left the big boys alone. He lacked the imagination to serve them and, consequently, he never got in on the important payoff. There would have been some dignity in being a big grafter, but Moran grubbed for his few extra dollars the hard way, the cheap way, the way that earned him nothing else but contempt.

There was a streak of savage brutality in him that caused the underworld to mingle their contempt with a certain fear. Moran had killed six men in the line of duty, three of whom were unarmed at the time, and another who had died after Moran had worked him over with a sap for fourteen hours. The story of the men he'd killed wasn't told because a corpse is an unsatisfactory witness. Moran knew this. He knew all about killing.

Now, at two o'clock in the morning, in the cheap room of a cheap hotel, Moran was going to learn about murder. He had to commit a murder because of something new in his life, something that he had always sneered at in the lives of other men.

Moran was in love. And he had learned that love, like anything else, costs money.

He stood just inside the doorway of the room and watched the scrawny, thin-faced man who was staring at him from the bed. The man was Dinny Nelson, a small-time bookie who, Moran knew, carried all his assets in a hip wallet.

Dinny brushed a hand over his sleep-dulled features and said, "What's the pitch, Moran? You got no right busting in here."

Moran drew his gun and leveled it at Dinny. He knew what would happen with crystal clarity, not only to Dinny and the portions of his body hit by the heavy slugs, but after that, to Dinny's corpse, to the police department and to himself, Moran. It was an old story to him. He had killed six men in the line of duty and he knew the way everything worked. No one would doubt his story.

Dinny saw his fate in Moran's face. He began to beg in a cracked voice. "No, no, you can't," he said. "There's no reason

to kill me—I ain't done nothing. Don't."

Moran fired three shots and they were very loud in the small, thin-walled room. Dinny's body jack-knifed with the impact of the slugs, rolled from the bed to the floor. He didn't live long. Moran watched expressionlessly as Dinny's limbs twisted spasmodically, then became rigid and still. Underneath Dinny's body the roses in the faded pattern of the rug bloomed again, bright and scarlet.

There was two thousand, three hundred and thirty dollars in Dinny's wallet. Moran left thirty. The money made a comfortable bulge against his leg as he sauntered to the phone. . . .

* * *

While the coroner did his work and two lab technicians went over the room. Moran told his story to Lieutenant Bill Pickerton, his immediate superior at Homicide.

"Tonight I seen him taking bets in the lobby," Moran said. "This was eleven. I started across to him but he seen me and ducked into the bar and then out to the street. So I drifted away. Around two I came back, came right up here to his room. I told him to get dressed but the fool went for me. I had to shoot him."

Lieutenant Pickerton rubbed his long jaw. "This stinks worse than your usual stuff, Moran. You could have handled him with your fists. He doesn't have a gun."

Moran shrugged. "Why should I risk getting beat over the head with a chair or something?"

Pickerton looked at him with active dislike. "Okay, turn in a written report tomorrow morning. The old man won't like this, you know."

"To hell with the old man," Moran said. "He wants us to bring 'em in with a butterfly net, I suppose."

"All right," Pickerton said. He paid no more attention to Moran, but studied the body and the room with alert, careful eyes.

Downstairs, Moran hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of the Diamond Club. He stared out the window at the dark streets of the Loop, his impassive face hiding the mirth inside him.

When Moran had realized that a night club singer couldn't be impressed by a cop's salary, he had looked around in his dull, unimaginative fashion for a way to get some money. Nothing had occurred to him for quite a while. Then the idea came, the idea that a cop could literally get away with murder.

After he got that much, the rest was easy. He had picked Dinny because he wasn't big-time, but big enough as far as money went. Now it was all over and he had the money. There would be a routine investigation of course, but there was no one to come forward with Dinny's version of what had happened. Therefore, the department would have to accept Moran's story. They might raise hell with him, threaten him some, but that didn't matter.

Moran's hand touched the unfamiliar bulge of money in his pocket and a rare smile touched the corner of his mouth. It didn't matter at all.

He paid off the driver in front of the Diamond Club on Randolph street and walked past the headwaiter with a familiar smile. The headwaiter smiled cordially, for Moran's visits to the club had been frequent over the past two months, dating from the time Cherry Angela had joined the show.

Moran found a corner table and watched the girl singing at the mike. This was Cherry Angela. The blue spot molded her silver evening dress to her slim, pliant body, revealing all the curving outlines. She wore her platinum hair loose, falling in soft waves to her shoulders, and her eyes and features were mocking as she sang an old, old story about a man and a woman.

MMORAN forgot everything watching the girl. And there was an expression of sullen hunger on his face.

She came to his table after the number and sat down with lithe grace. "Hi, copper," she said, and her voice was amused. "Like my song?"

"I liked it," Moran said.

Her lean face was mocking. "I should do a back-flip from sheer happiness, I suppose. Would a beer strain your budget?"

"Go ahead," Moran said, flushing. "I've spent plenty on you, baby."

"You tired of it?" she said lightly.

Moran put his hands under the table so she wouldn't see their trembling. She was in his blood like nothing else he had ever been in his life. But he got nothing from her but mockery, or sarcasm that shriveled him up inside.

He knew that she let him hang around for laughs, enjoying the spectacle of a forty-year-old flatfoot behaving like an adolescent before her charms. For just a second then he wanted to tell her what he had done tonight, and about the money in his pocket. He wanted to see her expression change, wanted to see respect for him in her eyes.

But he resisted that impulse. Fools bragged. And got caught. Moran wasn't getting caught.

Some day he'd have her where he wanted. Helpless, crawling. That was what he wanted. It was a strange kind of love that had driven Moran to murder.

He took her home that night but she left him at the doorway of her apartment. Some times, if he'd spent a lot of money, she let him come up for a nightcap, but tonight she was tired.

Leaving her, Moran walked the five miles to his own apartment, hoping to tire himself out so that he could sleep without tormenting himself with visions of what she might be doing, or who she might be with.

But once in bed, he knew the walk hadn't helped. He was wide awake and strangely nervous. After half an hour of tossing he sat up and snapped on the bed lamp. It was five thirty in the morning, and he had a report to make on the murder in about four hours. He needed sleep, he needed to be rested when he told his story, and thinking about that made sleep impossible.

He picked the evening paper from the floor, glanced over the news. There was a murder on page one, not his, but somebody else's. He thought about his murder then and realized with a slight shock of fear that it had been on his mind all the time. It was the thing keeping him from sleep. Not Cherry Angela.

He frowned and stared out the window at the gray dawn. What was his trouble? This killing tonight was just like the others. And they hadn't bothered him.

There must be a difference somewhere, he decided. It came to him after a while. The others had been killings. This one was murder. And the difference was that murder made you think.

Moran lay back in the bed, but he didn't go to sleep. He kept thinking.

At ten after eleven Moran had finished his report. He read it over twice, frowning with concentration, then took it down to Lieutenant Bill Pickerton's office.

There was someone with Pickerton, a young man with mild eyes and neatly combed hair. He was sitting beside Pickerton's desk, and the two men were talking baseball.

Pickerton nodded to Moran, said, "This is Don Linton from the commissioner's office, Moran."

Moran shook hands with Linton and put his report before Pickerton. Pickerton handed it to Linton. Linton said, "Excuse me," put on rimless glasses and bent his head to the report.

Moran lit a cigarete and dropped the match in Pickerton's ashtray. He guessed that Linton was here to look into the Dinny Nelson killing. His eyes were hot from his sleepless night and he was irritable.

"Is that all you want?" he asked Pickerton.

Linton answered. He said, "No. I've got a few questions. Have a chair, Sergeant."

Pickerton remained silent.

Moran sat down, trying to control the heavy pounding of his heart. They had nothing on him. It was his word, the word of a cop, and it was the only word they'd get.

"Okay, this seems clear," Linton said. He put his glasses away, studied Moran directly. "I'm from the commissioner's office, Moran. The commissioner wants me to ascertain that the shooting of Dinny Nelson was justified. Let's start with this. You're a homicide sergeant, assigned to roving duty in the Loop. Why did you make it your business to go to Nelson's room to arrest him on a gambling charge?"

Moran was ready for that one. He explained that he'd seen Dinny taking bets in the hotel lobby, that it seemed a pretty flagrant violation, so he'd decided to pick

him up, even though it wasn't his beat.

Moran's voice was steady as he talked. All of this was true. He had seen Dinny taking a bet, had tried to pick him up, and Dinny had given him the slip. On that ground Moran felt confident.

"Okay," Linton said casually. "Now according to our information Dinny Nelson usually carried a sizeable amount of cash with him. But there was just thirty dollars on his body after you shot him. Got any ideas about that, Sergeant?"

"No," Moran said.

There was silence. Pickerton and Linton exchanged a glance. Then Linton put his fingertips together precisely and looked at Moran. "Did you leave the hotel room at any time after the shooting? I mean did you step out and leave the body alone?"

"No," Moran said. He wondered what Linton was getting at.

"You see, there was a bellhop on the floor at the time. He had brought some aspirin up to a woman. He has a record for theft and it occurred to us that if you left the room for any length of time, he might have slipped in, stolen the money and left before you returned."

"I didn't leave the room," Moran said. He felt scared. They might be telling the truth, but he doubted it. They were setting a trap, leaving an opening for him to dive into. A man guilty and scared would grab any out. Moran wet his lips and kept quiet. Crooks who got caught got scared. They started lying, blundered, and hung themselves talking. That wouldn't happen to him. They had his story.

Linton asked him then why he hadn't subdued Dinny with his fists. That was better. That was the sort of stuff he expected. Half an hour later Linton said he had enough, and Moran walked to the door. He was sweating. He was glad to get out. Linton might look like a law student, but his mind was sharp, strong like a trap.

As he reached the door, Linton said, "By the way, you know Cherry Angela, don't you?"

Moran's hand froze on the knob. He turned and his body was stiff and tense. "Yeah," he said. His voice wasn't steady.

Linton looked pleasantly interested, that was all. "I've heard her sing," he said.

"And I heard you were a friend of hers." He said nothing else, volunteered no other information, but continued to watch Moran with a polite expression.

Moran stood uncertainly for a moment, then nodded quickly to the two men and went out to the elevators. Waiting for a car, he wondered how Linton knew he was a friend of Cherry's. They must already have done some checking into his activities. Moran lit a cigarette and wasn't surprised to notice that his fingers were trembling. . . .

THAT day was hell. He couldn't sleep, and food tasted like sawdust. Also, he kept thinking, turning everything over in his mind a thousand times. That made him tense and jumpy.

That night Moran went to the Diamond Club for Cherry's early show. When he walked through the archway he saw her sitting at a corner table with a man. There was a champagne bottle beside them in an ice bucket and they were talking very seriously. Moran felt a bitter anger and unconsciously his hands balled into fists.

He started toward their table, moving deliberately. This is the time for a show-down, he thought. I'll chase that punk out of here and have it out with her.

Then he recognized the young man with her, and the shock of that recognition sent a cold tremor through his body.

It was Linton, the investigator from the commissioner's office.

Moran's face felt hot and stiff. He turned clumsily, hoping they hadn't seen him, and went back across the room, forcing himself to walk casually.

But splintered thoughts were flicking

into his mind with frightening intensity. What was Linton doing here? What was Cherry telling him? More important, what was Linton asking her?

Ignoring the headwaiter's puzzled smile, Moran hurried out of the club. He walked a block quickly before his heart stopped hammering and he was able to think. He knew he had behaved foolishly. He should have gone to her table, said hello and sat down. Any change in his normal routine would look suspicious now.

Lighting a cigarette, he realized that he must see Cherry tonight, find out what Linton had been after. He retraced his steps until he came to a doorway about fifty feet from the entrance of the Diamond Club. There he stopped and prepared to wait. For he had to be sure that Linton was gone before going in to see Cherry.

It was a long wait.

The last show ended, noisy customers streamed out, but still Linton had not appeared. Moran's throat was dry from too many cigarettes, and his eyes burned from lack of sleep. But he waited, a deep shadow in the doorway.

Then Linton appeared and Moran cursed bitterly under his breath. For Cherry was with him, bundled up in furs and chattering so that her voice carried along the street to him.

The doorman went out in the street to hail them a cab. There were plenty of cabs out and that was a break. Linton and Cherry climbed into one, and Moran hurried down the block from the club and caught the next cruiser. He told the driver to follow Linton's cab and it led them to Cherry's apartment.

Moran ordered his driver to stop half

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a block away. He watched while Cherry and Linton got out and went into her building. But their cab waited and in a few seconds Linton appeared again and drove away.

Moran let out a relieved sigh. He paid off his cab and walked slowly along the darkened street until he came abreast of Cherry's entrance. For a second he hesitated, wetting his lower lip uncertainly. It was stupid for him to barge in on Cherry now. It would look as if he were afraid, guilty.

But he felt he had to know what Linton had wanted. That was the only way he could release the tight, aching feeling in his stomach. He made up his mind and turned into her entrance.

She opened the door in answer to his knock, her eyes widening with surprise. "Well, it's a small world," she said. "I just left one of your buddies."

"I know," Moran said, and stepped inside. She had changed into a green robe and as she turned he saw the flash of her legs, slim, smooth and bare. But they didn't distract him now.

"What did he want?" he said watching her closely.

"The copper?" She shrugged and went to a table for a cigarette. "What does any copper want? Information."

He walked to her side and suddenly all the twisted feeling he had for her crystallized to hatred. She was so cool, so bored and indifferent, while he was ready to crack in pieces from the pressure inside him.

Raising his thick hand he struck the cigarette from her mouth with brutal force. She staggered, face whitening with shock and anger. But he caught her shoulders and jerked her close to him.

"Now," he said, in a low hard voice. "You talk, baby. What did that guy want?"

"You're hurting me," she said, breathing angrily. "He wanted to know about you. Now let me go."

The tight ache crept back inside Moran. He released her and let his hands fall to his sides.

"What did you tell him?" he asked hoarsely.

She turned from him and sat down on the couch. "I didn't tell him anything,"

she said, rubbing her bruised shoulders. "Now you can get the hell out of here. No guy pushes me around, Moran."

"Forget that," Moran said. "I didn't mean to get rough. But I'm in a jam, baby. I had to shoot a guy last night and the old women in the commissioner's office are on my tail. They're trying to frame me, and that's why that guy Linton was snooping around you."

Cherry's lean face was interested. She said, "Did you kill the guy, Moran?"

"I shot him. He went for me and I shot him, that's all."

"Oh," she said. She smiled. "You wouldn't do anything original, I guess. Nothing that might put an extra buck in your pocket."

"I get along on my pay," Moran said.

"And your friends have to, too," she said. "That's why you haven't got any, I suppose."

"I didn't get anything out of shooting the guy," Moran said. That was smart. Not talking, not bragging. Guys talked to dames, then the dames talked. That wasn't for Moran.

Cherry grinned ruefully and leaned back against the fat pillows on the couch. There was one light in the room, a lamp on an end table that caught lights in her loose blond hair and accentuated the soft curves of her body. Yawning, she put her legs onto the couch. The green robe parted revealing her slim calves in the soft light. She didn't seem to notice.

She was smiling, but there was a hard light in her eyes. "Tell me, Moran," she said, "how does it feel to kill a man?"

MORAN swallowed heavily. He couldn't wrench his eyes from her long bare legs, or stop the sudden drumming in his temples.

When he spoke, his voice was dry. "It's like anything else you do, like smoking a cigarette or buying a paper, that's all."

She sighed. "You're such a clod, Moran. You're like a big heap of dough that's turning sour."

He came closer to her. "I could be different with you," he said. "You drive me crazy, baby."

She laughed with real amusement. "In the Casanova role you're a riot."

"Damn you," he said hoarsely.

She laughed again and sat up, putting her feet on the floor. "Let's break this up," she said. "You're a jerk and always will be, Moran. I might have liked you a little if you were smart, or if you had a spare buck to spend on a girl, but as you stand you're hopeless. So beat it, will you? And stop hanging around the club."

"Now wait," Moran said. His anger broke, melted away. "You don't mean that. I'll go, but let me see you again."

Her voice was hard. "No. You're all through. Beat it."

Moran stood beside her, reached for her hand. "What would you think if I was smart, if I did have a little dough?"

"I don't want to play twenty questions," she said coldly.

"This is no gag," he said. When he saw interest in her face, he slid on the couch beside her and began speaking rapidly, the words spilling out in a rush. "I got a little dough," he said. "I got it from Dinny Nelson last night. He was the guy I shot. I blew him out like a candle, then took his bundle. It's all yours, baby, for anything you want. But we got to play it quiet until I get a clean bill from the commissioner's office. You see that, don't you?"

"Are you on the stuff?" she said. "Is this story coming out of a pipe?"

"No, no it's on the level," he said. "I did it for you, baby. I shot hell out of him and got the dough. And I'm in the clear."

"Let's see the dough," she said skeptically.

He took the roll from his pocket. He had kept it on him because there was no safer place. Now he spread it in her lap and watched her face. She fingered the money gently and gradually a little smile pulled at her lips. "I might change my ideas about you," she said at last.

"Sure you will," Moran said eagerly. "I'm okay, baby. You'll see."

"I kind of want to find out," she said, grinning at him. "Want to excuse baby a minute?"

He watched her as she walked to the bedroom door. Something tightened in him as he saw the way her shoulders tapered gracefully to her slender waist, and the way her hips moved under the silken robe. She turned at the doorway and winked at him, and he saw the gleam

of her long legs before she disappeared.

It was worth it, Moran thought exultantly. He felt happy for the first time since the murder. This was going to make it all right, and the tight ache inside him melted and he knew it was gone for good.

He lit a cigarette and leaned back against the cushions, closing his eyes. Linton could go to hell, and so could Pickerton. They had nothing on him, now or ever.

He opened his eyes when he heard the click of the doorknob. Straightening up, he crushed out the cigarette and got to his feet, a grin on his face.

The bedroom swung open and Moran's heart lurched sickeningly.

Lieutenant Pickerton walked into the room, a gun in his hand. The gun was pointed at Moran's stomach.

"You're all through," he said.

Moran stood still, the grin pasted on his face, his mind frozen in the paralysis of panic. He tried to speak but no words came out, and the noise he made was like the grunt of an animal.

There was the sound of a key in the front door and then Linton came in, gun in hand.

He glanced at Pickerton. "You get it all?"

"The works," Pickerton nodded.

Linton came to Moran's side, deftly slipped the gun from his shoulder holster. "You're under arrest for the murder of Dinny Nelson," he said formally. "Anything you say may be used against you. As you know," he added dryly.

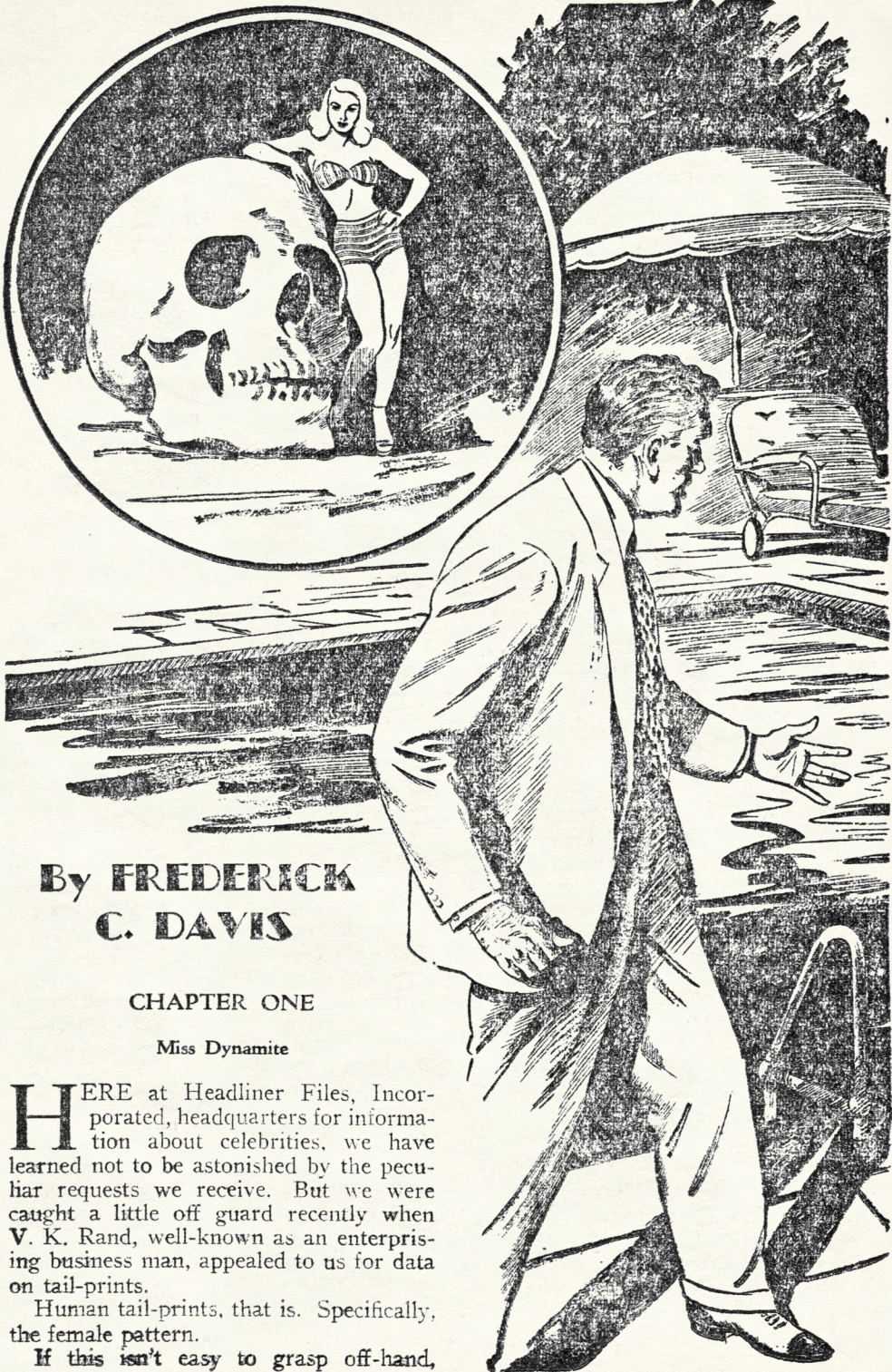
"Yeah, I know," Moran said numbly. Linton's words, the old familiar words, released him from paralysis.

Cherry appeared in the bedroom doorway, stepped around Pickerton and entered the room. She picked up a cigarette and smiled. Her fingers moved to the mark on her cheek where he had struck her.

Then she looked at Moran. "They wanted me to get you to talk," she said. "I wasn't going to, because I'm no informer. I might even have warned you that Pickerton was hiding in the bedroom, but after you hit me, I had to pay you back."

"That was just one of the stupid things

(Please continue on page 98)



By **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**

CHAPTER ONE

Miss Dynamite

HERE at Headliner Files, Incorporated, headquarters for information about celebrities, we have learned not to be astonished by the peculiar requests we receive. But we were caught a little off guard recently when V. K. Rand, well-known as an enterprising business man, appealed to us for data on tail-prints.

Human tail-prints, that is. Specifically, the female pattern.

If this isn't easy to grasp off-hand,

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Hackett poked her in the
stomach. . . .

*A delicious, larcenous mermaid had swim-suit magnate
Rand up the family tree—to roost there while Thackeray
Hackett tried to play a gunshoe Neptune.*

neither was it for me when the subject first reared up.

This customer came crowding into the final frenzies of another tough afternoon, announced by Polly Digby, our capable secretary-general. Appearing wearily at the door of the so-called private office of Headliner Files' business manager, where I attempt day after day to bring order out of chaos, Polly pushed her home-ly face inward and said:

"Mr. V. K. Rand is here, Mr. Preston, insisting on seeing somebody personally."

A glint in her eye warned me it might mean trouble.

"Where's Clarabelle?" I protested—Clarabelle Brown being the originator and sole owner of Headliner Files. "Turn this guy over to her, Polly. He'll be charmed."

"Miss Brown is on the phone, talking to our Hollywood office about opening a new branch in London," Polly answered.

In other words, I was stuck with it again, as is customary around here. "V. K. Rand?" I said. "You mean the designer and manufacturer of women's bathing suits? The head of the firm called Rand of Sunland?"

"That's him," Polly nodded. "I'm saving up to buy one of his suits for my vacation so the boys on the beach will pay less attention to my repugnant puss."

"Would you try it out on me first, when you get it, Polly?" I suggested, keeping my eyes from her luscious figure. "Meanwhile, I'm curious to meet this fascinating character who has so many ideas for adorning the female form with so little in public. Show him right in."

When V. K. Rand entered, he immediately impressed me as a man distressed in a decisive way. As if not having a second to spare, he pushed my visitors' chair aside and moved restlessly back and forth in front of my desk, his keen eyes estimating me. In appearance he was unexpected—a hulking he-bear of a guy with a rugged face and unruly, jet-black hair. About forty. Good-looking, his features having a slight Lincolnesque cast.

"Next time you need somebody to help you judge your final designs, Mr. Rand," I said, "or to inspect the all-over fit of your products, please keep me in mind. It would be a most welcome change."

He stopped short with, I thought, a groan. "Like everybody else, especially my wife, you've got the wrong idea of my job. I hire models, of course, but they stay in the salesroom for the edification of out-of-town buyers. I rarely see 'em—too busy. Personally I got tired long ago of looking at girls in swim suits. Frankly, I think they're more attractive wearing more clothes, especially long evening gowns—but of course that's off the record."

"You mean you don't construct your designs directly on the living subjects?"

"Of course not. Mostly I work with a drawing-board and plaster forms in standard sizes. It's all strictly business. To me, the topography of the female is a means to an end, and the end is profits, not pleasure." He leveled a dynamic finger at me. "That's why I've come here—to prove just that, to protect my investment."

"It sounds important, but I don't quite follow you, Mr. Rand."

He paused with an intent frown. "I understand you have certain lists. For example, birthdays. You can look in this list and tell me the birthday of any famous person in the world."

"That's right, Mr. Rand. We also have a list of favorite flowers of celebrities. We also have lists of favorite perfumes, hat sizes, shoe sizes and stocking sizes. Our most fascinating list is one of bust measurements. We are prepared at a moment's notice to tell you—

"Ah," interrupted Rand. "Now we're getting somewhere." He leaned eagerly over my desk. "What I hoped you might possibly have," he added, "is data on tail-prints."

I looked at him blankly. "Tail-prints?"

"WHY not?" he said, a challenging note in his voice. "Everybody knows how vital fingerprints are as a means of identification. No two alike. Same way with footprints and dental charts. So why not tail-prints?"

"You can't possibly mean the prints of human tails?"

"What's so damned unreasonable about it?" V. K. Rand asked, growing impatient. "Surely you've been in the lobby of Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, where the movie great have left

their marks in the cement pavement? Besides assorted signatures and handprints there are prints of John Barrymore's profile, Jimmy Durante's snuzzle and Betty Grable's leg."

"But nobody's tail-print," I pointed out.

"Well," V. K. Rand said, turning reasonable for a moment, "I must admit I didn't really expect you to have a gallery of tail-prints already collected. But," he added flatly, "since you haven't got this information on hand, it's up to you to get it for me. As a legitimate subscriber in good standing I demand it."

"Mr. Rand, please. Aren't you being a little ridiculous? I simply wouldn't know how to go about getting the lowdown on human tail-prints. Until now we've never had a single call for that form of information. Would you mind telling me what use you meant to make of it?"

"I have the tail-print of an unknown young woman," Rand explained. "For certain vital reasons I've got to identify her by means of it."

After considering this problem for a moment I asked, "Is this tail-print the only clue you have to her identity?"

"It is. Here, have a look at it."

Rand opened a large envelope which he had been shifting nervously from hand to hand. From it he removed a photographic enlargement, eight by ten. He shook his shaggy black head over it, then placed it in my hands.

"I took this picture myself last night, using my sister-in-law's camera. I'm not an expert photographer but it came out fairly well, considering that I made it by artificial light and had to guess at the exposure. But there it is."

SURE enough. The picture was a medium close-up of a corner of a classy swimming pool. A swimmer had climbed up from the water and sat on the edge, feet dangling, leaving a dark wet imprint on the cork-tile walk. The petite proportions and contours of this imprint showed it belonged to a member of the curvier gender.

Rand said: "This girl, whoever she is, has been cavorting in my private pool in the small hours of the night every night for the past week. So far I haven't been able to corner her. She doesn't come until

everyone has gone to bed, including me, and the place is entirely dark. Then she appears out of nowhere. The first suggestion that she's there is a gentle rippling of the water. She's always as quiet as a shy little sprite. She frisks about there in the night as if she hadn't a care in the world. My bedroom overlooks the pool and I've seen her vaguely in the starlight each time from my window."

"She's wearing a Rand of Sunland swim suit, of course?"

V. K. Rand set his jaw. "If she isn't wearing our flesh-tinted suit—she's not wearing anything at all."

"Please go on, Mr. Rand," I urged him.

He disappointed me by answering in the efficient manner of a very busy executive, "I won't give you the details now. It's enough to say she's slipped through all the traps I've set for her and has vanished in the night. And she's dynamite. I've damned well got to find out who she is—before she blows up in my face."

"At least you've managed to get this picture of the damp impression she left beside the pool," I said, studying it. "Surely you suspect someone among your narrower-beamed friends."

"Suspicious, yes, but indefinite," Rand said, sounding grim. "I have a partner, Robert Bertram. We own the business fifty-fifty. We're not getting along. Bert would like to eliminate me from the picture, take over the whole works for himself. He's conservative in business but free-and-easy outside office hours—an unmarried man who loves to romp around with models, including our own, and show-girls."

"Ah?"

"Exactly. Bert may have one of his favorite chicks frisking in my pool in the still of the night for purposes of his own. Frankly, I don't feel Bert is above the idea of using blackmail as a means of forcing me out of the firm. . . . But that much is only the half of it. The rest is my wife."

I said, "Oh" and let it trail off.

Rand was frowning intently. "Cynthia can be an extremely jealous young woman. Normally she believes me when I tell her that nothing in swim suits interests me more than the money, but now and then something causes her to break out in a

fever of jealousy. If she should happen to get hold of a really good reason—such as this mermaid secretly capering in my pool—she would flare up and divorce me. I most certainly do not want that to happen. I love my wife very much. If I should lose Cynthia it would really break me up.”

“Then she knows nothing about the babe in the pool?”

“My bedroom is directly over the pool but fortunately Cyn’s is in the front of the house. Thank heavens she’s a sound sleeper. But if she should ever discover that girl in the pool, at the base of a stairway leading straight down from my room—” Rand shuddered. “Cyn has a proud, vindictive streak in her. She’d nick me for a juicy property settlement and plenty heavy alimony. That’s the set-up—one building up to fancy blackmail. But if I can find out ahead of time who that mysterious water-nymph is, and expose the whole thing to Cyn as a sly scheme of Bert’s, then I’ll put myself in the clear.”

I understood Rand’s strange predicament and sympathized with him. Shaking my head, I began, “I’m sincerely sorry, but I’m afraid we can’t—”

A cheery, lilting voice from the doorway broke in: “But Walter, doll, of course we can! We’ll do our very best to clear up this whole troublesome thing for Mr. Rand.”

This, to my dismay, was my boss speaking.

CLARABELLE BROWN had appeared in my doorway, having eavesdropped from across the hall. A personable woman of fifty-odd, she came to Rand with a bejeweled hand extended and all her charm turned on. He beamed in return and she patted all the gray-gold ringlets all over her canny head as she continued to promise him quick results. Clarabelle is a native of Deaf Smith County, Texas, the daughter of a long line of frontier marshals, four times a widow and a woman to whom I am warmly devoted; but I could only listen in consternation as she assured Rand we would have this whole thing wrapped up for him in a trice.

“In fact,” Clarabelle said, laughing lightly, “we have an experienced, specially trained investigator for just such cases as

yours. His name is Thackeray Hackett. I’ll put him personally in charge.”

Rand had obviously never heard of Thackeray Hackett but he was smart enough to recognize a responsibility when someone else shouldered it. “All right, then—but I won’t pay any extra charge. This service is covered by the fee I’ve already paid. That’s understood?” And as Clarabelle nodded blithely Rand added, “All right, it’s a deal. I’ll send my chauffeur here at ten tonight.”

Clarabelle then happily escorted him out. When she came back I could only shake my head at her hopelessly. In a few seconds she had saddled us with what I felt was an assignment we should never have touched.

“Clarabelle, it’s really a little out of our line, going around and seeing what kind of marks people make when they sit down, isn’t it?”

“But, Walter, doll, he needs us, and we can’t afford to pass up such a fine business opportunity. Rand has only one subscription now, but he’s about to open branch shops at strategic points all over the country. If we can make him happy it will add up to a lot of money in time. All we have to do, really, is catch this girl red-handed—or wet-ended, Thack says.”

“Thack says that, does he? Clarabelle, have you forgotten that Thackeray Hackett is no longer licensed as a private detective? He lost his license last year, remember? If he does any private detecting now, he’ll get tossed into the pokey. It certainly won’t help Headliner Files any in a business way if you and I should happen to get nicked as accessories.”

“Walter, doll, just you leave the law to Clarabelle. Have faith in human nature, dear,” Clarabelle said blandly, “and everything is sure to turn out just fine.”

“You hope!”

I strode across the hall in search of Thackeray Hackett and soon learned why he had been so hard to find. He was comfortably ensconced behind the little bar built into the far corner of Clarabelle’s office. He had a martini glass in his hand and sardonic glints in his baby-blue eyes.

A tough guy to handle, this unfrocked shamus, and absolutely unshakable once he starts off on a scent. Of course it was an easy guess that he had subtly egged Clara-

belle into this. It was cause for worry. For from a few troublesome experiences in the past I had learned that given something as provocative as a tail-print to start with, Thackeray Hackett might make almost anything come of it.

CHAPTER TWO

Little Water Baby

AT A few minutes past ten that night V. K. Rand's chauffeur was piloting Thackeray Hackett and me deep into a realm of rich estates on Long Island.

Rand's land-yacht had called for us promptly at our office in midtown Manhattan. Hackett had been waiting eagerly, slicked up in his least threadbare suit, that glint remaining sharp in his deceptively soft-blue eyes.

"A word of caution, Thack," I said. "This job we've taken on is an odd one but also it's deadly important to everybody involved. We've got to watch our step. A misplay might play hell with Rand's private life, jam him up in his business and cost him a mountain of dough."

He gave me a barbed glance and impatiently tapped his cane—that dainty, arrowlike walking stick which is never beyond his instant reach.

"As a pal, Thack, let me ask you to keep yourself in hand. Our purpose is just to help Rand identify that mysterious girl swimmer, which should be both easy and pleasant. One good look will do it, but I'm looking forward to actually grabbing her."

"You make it sound so simple, Pres," Hackett said; "but one good look at her might mess up the whole thing even worse."

I frowned at him. "How?"

"Blackmail is a serious crime. A blackmailer plays for a big pot. In this case, to judge from what Rand told us, the stakes are higher than usual. So this blackmailer won't like us for interfering with him. He might get nasty about it."

"How?"

Hackett's answer was to shrug and swing his cane enigmatically.

Now our four-wheeled cloud was whisking us through a massive gate. The Rand mansion, a four-story shack in the Mount Vernon manner, complete with colonnades, sat close to the highway in order to provide a more expansive stretch of landscaped grounds behind it. As we rolled past screening gardens to the spacious parking section between the house and the six-car garage, we spied the swimming pool sparkling under vari-colored lights.

I stumbled a little, getting out of the limousine as the chauffeur held the door for me, because it was less interesting to watch my step than the girls decorating the pool. Three of them were grouped prettily at the far side, one drying her blonde hair, another lying on her back while flexing her lovely stems in the air, and the other simply lolling on a mat with a companionable highball.

Of course their suits—sunlight yellow, sealskin tan and panther-black respectively—were scantily designed Rand of Sunland numbers provided by the host. Having become tail-print conscious, I saw immediately that any of this tidy trio

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might qualify. Not so, however, the fourth, who came to us from a nearby chair. This one would never see forty again and she had a case of middle-age spread in rather an advanced stage.

"Good evening. You're Mr. Hackett and Mr. Preston," she said in a caustic voice which somehow managed to be pleasant also. "I'm Miss Coates, Mr. Rand's private secretary. Come inside, won't you?" Then, as she noticed my gaze lingering on the toothsome threesome, she explained, "Mr. Bertram's friends. He always has three or four of them in tow—or vice-versa. He says they relax him, as no doubt they really do." Her tone was concentrated vinegar.

She flung a white terry-cloth robe across her bony shoulders—strange that they were bony when her central zone wasn't—and conducted Thack and me across a terrace toward the rear of the house.

Another doll appeared. This one wore a cool-looking dress which in color resembled a tossed salad. Slender, with hazel hair and eyes to match, she had a quick bright friendly smile that put animation into her rather plain face as we were introduced.

"Patricia Prescott," Miss Coates said in her acrid inflections. "Mr. Rand's sister-in-law."

"Hello, men," Patricia said breezily. "What a lousy break for me. Girls overrun this place, thanks mostly to Bert, but handsome males are comparatively rare; and now, just when a choice pair turns up, I've got to hie off to town. Better luck time next time."

With her nicely teasing smile lingering, and swinging a leather case by the strap, she strolled on to an open convertible in the parking space. By this time I'd decided this was the most idyllic place I'd seen since Minsky's closed. I'd really like to settle here. Remembering business before pleasure, however, I dutifully followed Hackett, who was trailing Miss Coates through a door.

WE ENTERED a small office, Miss Coates' own. She wagged us to chairs and sank into another behind her typewriter. Taking up a cig lighter almost as big as a cake-mixer, she snapped it at

a new cig four times, but no go. After accepting a match from Hackett she brought a quart bottle of fluid from a closet and began refilling the gadget. Meanwhile argumentative voices came through the closed door of the adjoining room, which was evidently Rand's office when at home.

"Wrangling again," Miss Coates commented pungently. "Mr. Rand and Mr. Bertram. What a team those two make, always pulling in opposite directions."

On the whole, however, this could be a very nice secretarial berth and Miss Coates seemed to have had it a long time. V. K. Rand was the type of executive who takes along his business affairs and his secretary practically everywhere he goes, and does lots of dictating evenings and weekends. Framed photos on the walls showed him at banquets and on speaker's rostrums, sometimes with Miss Coates in the background, both looking much younger. Her job must have been an exciting one in those early days, to judge from the glow of her eager face in the pictures, but plainly enough time had soured her on it.

Staying tuned in on the strained voices, she added with a bite, "It wears me out, just hearing Mr. Rand and Mr. Bertram getting nowhere. It goes on all the time."

Hackett observed, "Do they work you too hard too, Miss Coates?" and this immediately earned him an interested smile. "I've heard Rand of Sunland is an outfit where the labor is hard and the pay low."

"You're telling me?" Miss Coates retorted. She seemed to be aware that she should be more discreet about it, but apparently she didn't give much of a damn any more. "If you just adore making bathing suits, that's one thing. Personally I can take 'em or let 'em alone. And with suits getting smaller and smaller every year, where's the future in it?"

"Of course the market won't dwindle away altogether," Hackett observed. "Unless you happen to be in Tahiti. As for Mr. Bertram, his bevy of beauties shows his private life isn't tied up with too many inhibitions, so you'd naturally pick him as a plunger in business. But Mr. Rand confided to us that Bertram's actually too conservative."

"It's Mr. Rand who spends fortunes on

promotion, while Mr. Bertram rails against it," Miss Coates agreed. "Mr. Rand is just the reverse in his private life too. I mean—well, I suppose I shouldn't mention this, but after all I've spent most of my adult life working for the man and only an hour ago he bawled the bejeepers out of me for spending seventy cents for a dozen pencils—"

Miss Coates paused, gazing almost sweetly at Hackett, who has that strange effect on women who should know better. "Yes? Were you about to say something?"

Hackett nodded and let her have it without warning. "Miss Coates, are you in love with Mr. Rand?"

She stiffened, outraged, like a school teacher hit smack between the eyes by a spit-ball from the back row.

Hackett merely gazed at his victim with a faint cynical smile and thoughtfully swung his little cane, looking as innocent as a choir boy resting between hymns. It was just this sort of incisive, searching sort of crack that made Hackett as comforting to have around as a triple-gang fish-hook in your hip pocket.

At one time no doubt Hackett had had a normally pleasant disposition. That was when he reigned over a plushy suite of offices on Park Avenue, where he had operated as a top-drawer private investigator. As a guy possessing a high sense of justice, Hackett had also distinguished himself by attempting to pin a murder on a killer who was so powerfully protected that Hackett had destroyed himself in his effort to nail him.

Hackett had lost his license, his career, and almost his last dime when Clarabelle Brown, pitying him, had made the mistake of hiring him for Headliner Files for peanuts.

Miss Coates was still sitting there, staring wordless and pale with indignation at our young Mr. Hackett, when the door connecting with the adjacent office was yanked open with angry suddenness. The man who came marching out was short and plumpish—the type which kittenish show-girls love to pat on the jowls and call Daddy. This was, of course, Bert, who collected cuties. Pulling on an aromatic cigar, he simply marched through the office without stopping, slammed out the opposite door and strode on chopply to-

ward today's lovely little crop of honeys.

"Come on, girls," he called to them. "Get your clothes on, little sweethearts. We're clearing out of this dreary dump and catching ourselves a little fun in town."

With pretty squeals of delight and lithe legs flashing, they dashed for the bathhouse at the far end of the pool. Meanwhile V. K. Rand had stopped near Miss Coates' desk, red-faced, to observe this through a window.

"Fat-head! Deliberately creates issues. Probably part of his plan to get rid—" Rand checked himself and added grimly, "Hester, I've brought Mr. Preston and Mr. Hackett here on a strictly confidential matter. We're not to be interrupted. You're through for the day, of course."

WE WERE interrupted at once regardless. The door was opened by a young woman wearing a white dirndl, a bright red peasant blouse exposing her smooth coffee-and-cream shoulders, and sandals on her small scarlet-nailed feet. Somehow her red mouth and dark eyes were emphasized alluringly by her dark-rimmed owl-like glasses. She had papers in her hands and, absorbed in them, began talking as she entered.

"Vincent, darling, this old budget of ours is simply impossible now. You haven't allowed any leeway at all, and with prices skyrocketing every day I just can't keep—"

"Cyn," her husband interrupted her sternly, "it's a very simple matter to live within a budget. You simply refrain from spending more than it calls for. Surely I can depend on you for that much coöperation."

Her eyes snapped up and she whipped off her glasses. A very tasty dish, Cynthia Rand. Twenty-four or five and nobody's little dunce. Spirited, yes. We saw the flash and felt the edge on it—that swift, bridling reaction that her husband feared—with, apparently, excellent reason. I decided that in Rand's place I would also be careful never to two-time this chick. It simply wouldn't be worth risking all the fire it might stir up—and the penalties.

"There are very few ways I can economize further, Vincent," she said. "We

might possibly cut down our water bill. Shall we stop using the pool?"

Uneasily silenced, Rand stared at her. She stared back as she added, "Or we might save a little electricity by cutting off the pool lights."

She turned then, her lips cryptically curved and with a last spicy flick of her glance stepped out the door. She hadn't given her husband an opening to introduce us, but at the moment he wasn't much concerned with the social amenities. Facing us round-eyed and pale in sudden agitation, he said hoarsely under his breath, "Good Lord, she's beginning to suspect!"

Hester Coates said, "What was that, Mr. Rand? Were you speaking to me?"

"No!" He wagged a hand at her. "That's all for tonight, Hester. . . . Gentlemen, please come with me."

Rand led us to the terrace at the edge of the pool. Now it was deserted. The water was smoothing into glass. The lights glowed colorfully under the surface and from a few brass standards around the walk. The night was black beyond the white bathhouse and the stars sparkled overhead. In Rand's place I would have waited for the mermaid happily, without a single complaint.

"The last time the little sprite appeared I turned cagey," Rand said. "When I heard her sounds I moved as quietly and slowly as I could. I sneaked down here and for minutes watched her, a sleek white figure playing about the far end of the pool. Then, thinking I'd surely catch her, I waited until she moved a little closer, then snapped that switch—the one there on the wall—which controls all the pool lights. But the lights didn't turn on. Instead, the pool stayed dark. She heard the click, gave out a gay little laugh and again she ran off in the starlight. Frustrating!"

Yes—putting it mildly. Me it would have had frothing at the mouth.

Following Rand we went into the bathhouse. There he pointed to a switch box on the wall in one corner. "The girl in the pool had loosened the fuses here. Tonight if she comes, she'll probably take the same precaution with the fuse-box. That will be her downfall—I hope. Anyhow I've planned it that way. With you two helping me we should pull the wraps

off this blackmail scheme tonight," he finished grimly.

"Just tell me how I can help with that," I said.

"You two will appear to leave. I've given my chauffeur instructions. Then, when the pool lights are turned off, move as quietly as you can into your positions. You, Hackett, sneak into that rather shabby coupé you see sitting there—my secretary's car. You, Preston, ease in here, inside one of the stalls, and keep an eye on the switch-box. I'll act as if I'm going to bed as usual."

I felt happier about this assignment as Hackett and I followed Rand back into Miss Coates' office. There he used the estate's private phone to call his chauffeur. Next conducting us outside again, he continued to brief us until his big car rolled up. Then he grasped our hands and loudly wished us good night, making quite a show of our leave-taking. We got into the car and were whisked away while Rand trudged back across the terrace.

The car veered out the gate and immediately the chauffeur braked it to a silken stop. We got out. He pointed to a hedge, then whooshed on in the general direction of Manhattan, still obeying Rand's orders and pretending to be taking us back to town. Left in the roadside darkness, we felt our way along the hedge, helped by the flickering light of passing headlamps, until we came within sight of the rear of the house.

Rand was standing on the terrace, finishing a cigarette. Abruptly he tossed it away and went inside, snapping out the pool and terrace lights. As our eyes began adjusting to the blackness, Hackett nudged me and drifted off. Seeing him only dimly in the starlight, I soon heard a faint noise at the old coupé in the parking space and knew he had posted himself on watch.

I eased back to the bathhouse, sidled inside and stationed myself in a stall from which I would surely see anyone who might try the trick of loosening the fuses again. The sprite would have to appear within six feet of me. So far, fine. This was a front-row spot.

Then we waited—waited a long time in the darkness, straining our eager ears—and finally came a faint rippling sound smoothly into the cool, clear pool.

CHAPTER THREE

Meet Miss Spook?

I STOOD still in the black booth, my blood tingling, my breath sucked in, listening. Now there was no sound at all except the rushing noises of the cars on the highway a hundred yards distant.

I slipped noiselessly to a position from which I could both watch the fuse-box and get a view of the pool through the doorway. From his position diagonally across the water Hackett had the approaches covered from the opposite direction.

Lights shone from the broad window of Rand's office. I could see him signing letters. He stretched, roughed up his hair and turned off his desk lamp. Other lights turning on and off inside the house traced his progress into the kitchen for a glass of milk, then up to his bedroom.

Finally the lights in there blinked out too, as if he'd turned in. Actually we knew he was watching over the pool; but with the whole house dark now—with everyone else abed too, conditions looked right for the mermaid to materialize at any moment.

We waited.

We waited some more.

We went on waiting.

Then—

The water really rippled. This time I felt certain I'd actually heard it—a musical sound, soft, teasing. My pulse drumming, I stood listening to it for a moment, not daring to move. I told myself, "The little she-imp didn't come in here to loosen any fuses," and the significance of that fact

galvanized me. "It means all the pool lights will go on when Rand snaps the regular switch on the terrace. Oh, brother."

The rippling of the water had grown bolder. I heard the smooth, rhythmical strokes of the clandestine swimmer. She had started from some indeterminate point and now, after several little side-trips, she was flowing in my direction.

I drifted to the bathhouse door—and saw her. She was a misty whiteness streaming in the water, a vague figure bordered in crystal wavelets, trailed by a gently bubbling wake. She lifted her slender dripping arms alternately in skilful strokes. Her hair seemed dark at one moment, blonde at another, as the starlight played on it. Her face, lowered to the quicksilver surface, was a misty, unrecognizable oval as she swam toward me.

She was at the edge of the pool, pausing to turn, only a few yards away, when I eased from the bathhouse door. Silently as I moved, her head lifted instantly—she glimpsed me in the faint star-shine.

"Take it easy, honey," I said. "Just come to papa quietly. Easy, now. . . ."

She hung there motionless at the edge of the pool, her face in shadow as I watchfully took slow steps toward her. If our plan worked out she would start a skittish retreat—unwittingly into the arms of Hackett or Rand or both. Our tactics, as we'd already agreed on them, were first simply to keep her in the water if possible; or second to block a possible flight into the woods until we had her in a three-way trap.

"Don't you fear, sweetie pie," I murmured, easing still closer. "Daddy won't

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hurt you a bit. Just hold still until I—”

SHE moved with a sleek agility that had me gasping. Next thing I knew she had sprung out of the pool and across the walk. For one instant she stood poised there in the close-cropped grass, a slender silvery figure. Then she was running, legs flashing in the starlight, toward the deeper darkness of the surrounding gardens.

“Lights!” I yelled. “Lights, lights!”

I heard the click of the switch on the terrace—and nothing happened. The lights stayed out.

“Stop ‘er, Rand!” I yelled again. “She’s heading over there near you now! Grab ‘er, grab ‘er!”

The darker figure of Rand was already springing off the terrace. The soft misty flash of the girl seemed almost within his arm’s reach. Then a sudden collision occurred between them—Rand grunted and stumbled back, and the girl, after clinging an instant, seemed to carom off like a doe changing direction in mid-leap. And now in her even swifter flight she seemed to be melting into the starglow too.

Rushing toward that uncertain spot, I tripped over a clump of boxwood, pitched off balance, caught myself dizzily, then scrambled on again. “Rand! Where are you? Where’s the girl?”

Rand gulped, “Gone!”

I found him standing helplessly in the darkness, breathing hard, gazing around for that nymph of the night who had vanished as magically as something in a fairy tale. There wasn’t a glimmer or a whisper of her now.

Rand said breathlessly, “Damnedest thing! Before I could grab her *she’d* grabbed *me*. Then, just as I realized what was happening to me, and tried to get my arms around her, she whirled off again.”

“Was there anything about her grabbing technique that seemed familiar?” I asked, short of breath myself.

He retorted, “No!” Then looking around, toward the house, he added, “Where’s that specially trained investigator of yours?”

Yes. Hackett. Where was Hackett? There was no sign of him as I trailed Rand back to the house. I stayed on the terrace, to peer around some more while Rand strode into his office. He turned on the

desk lamp and stared at himself. There were wet marks on his shirt and trousers—a print on each shoulder unmistakably left by a female hand—to prove all over again that our mermaid was no mere legend of the sea.

He peered out at me and asked, “Why the hell didn’t you corner her when she loosened those fuses?”

“She’s causing me to practically blow a fuse,” I said, “but she didn’t come near that box tonight—at least not the one in the bathhouse. Don’t be silly! Would I have passed up a chance like that?”

“Then what happened to the lights?”

Rand didn’t go off after the answer to that one just then. Instead, he marched out to the edge of the pool with a flashlight. He prowled along the cork walk, swinging the spot around, then halted with a gratified: “Ah!” I also paused to admire the evidence he had found.

There it was in real life this time, not a picture—a fresh wet tail-print. The sprite had evidently made it in the process of bouncing out of the pool. Its tidy contours verified the basic facts in the situation.

Now came light—not the rainbow glow of the pool, but the white shafts of headlamps. A car was rolling in along the driveway. It breezed into the parking space—Bertram’s open cab.

Bert, at the wheel, blithely puffed on his costly cigar as Rand and I advanced on him. He no longer had the tasty trio with him. He seemed to have traded them in on a new model—three for one, and a bargain at that. The dish he had with him now was a green-eyed redhead.

She alighted wearing rope-soled sandals, an elbow-length cape which didn’t come together in front, and a two-piece swim suit of pink stuff that glistened in every curve. And her suit was wet.

I said, “Well, things have been going pretty well with you since I saw you last, Bert, old boy.”

“Oh, hello there,” he said affably. “Nice seeing you again. My three little kittens found a phony duke and seemed to fall for him unanimously, in a body, so to speak. So I decided I’d look up my favorite redhead. Vince,” he said to Rand, “you know Letty Sumner, of course. Letty’s our head model—as if you didn’t re-

member. I just picked her up over at the Wenville place."

IT HAD been immediately evident that if any babe in this world could duplicate those specimen prints of ours, it was well within Letty's capacities.

"Very convenient for you, finding Miss Sumner so close at hand," I remarked skeptically. "Does she usually travel about evenings in this moist condition?"

"Why, dahlin'," Miss Sumner explained liltily, with a Southern accent broader than she was, "Ah just took a li'l dip a few minutes ago in the Wenviya's pool, dahlin', tha's all, hon-nes'."

"The Wenville's?" Rand said with a wry rasp. "Of course, Bert," Rand insisted ominously, "you weren't waiting in your car right outside the gate here? You couldn't have picked her up when she came running out a few minutes ago?"

Letty looked prettily puzzled, and Bert flicked a dime's worth of ashes off his cigar. Then he said, in a confidential, grunted warning as he gazed past us, "Oh-oh."

Turning, Rand suppressed a groan. The young woman who was crossing the terrace from the house was Cynthia Rand. Barefooted, she was wearing a peach-tinted "Shorty" nightgown and had thrown a hip-length bed-jacket over her shoulders. She paused, not saying a word, to gaze narrow-eyed at her husband. She closely noted the wet marks all over the front of his shirt; then she turned to gaze at the scant wet swim-suit which contained Miss Letty Sumner.

"Your explanation for this one is going to be simply fascinating, Vincent dear," Rand's wife said in tones of purest poison.

Rand groaned, "Oh, Lord!" and looked sick. The hopelessness of talking his way out of this mess held him speechless a moment. It was a tortured silence, broken when Bert Bertram's interest was caught by something moving in the parking space.

"Who's that rifling my car?" he asked sharply.

It was Thackeray Hackett.

Hackett had emerged quietly from the realms of the missing, had opened a door of Bert's gondola and was bending into it. I strode to him frowning.

"Where the hell have you been,

Thack?" I said. "Why weren't you in there catching when we were trying to rope that babe? If you'd only helped us we might have her corraled now."

Hackett straightened, shrugged and thoughtfully swung his dainty little cane. "I'm looking for a camera, Pres."

"What camera?"

"Somebody flashed a picture just a while ago—choosing the most crucial moment for it."

"You must have been asleep and dreaming. I didn't see even a glimmer of a flash-bulb going off."

Hackett turned his glittering baby-blue eyes on the group moving up on him—Rand, Cynthia, Bert and Letty. "You didn't see it, Pres," he explained, "because an infra-red bulb was used—a flash-bulb coated with a dark dye which shuts in all the visible wavelengths of light and lets out only the invisible infra-red rays, which are merely ordinary heat waves. Using such a bulb with infra-red film, you can take pictures in complete darkness without the subject's knowing it. I didn't see the flash either, but I did catch a dim purple gleam for an instant—the bulb itself as it fired."

Hackett added with a bit of acerbity, "What the hell, you can look up the technical data in a book, later. There's a more urgent question. Who was planted over there in the darkness beside the pool with a camera cocked?"

Nobody offered a guess. Cynthia Rand kept her eyes dangerously narrowed. Bert Bertram shrugged indifferently while his incomparable redhead just looked deliciously perplexed. Rand himself, at the mere mention of a picture, had begun looking even sicker. Then at Hackett's next question his expression changed to one of resentful alarm.

"Patricia Prescott," Hackett said. "Your sister-in-law, Mr. Rand. You mentioned in our office this afternoon that you'd borrowed her camera. When she left here this evening—or pretended to leave—she was carrying a leather case. So while we're looking for somebody who takes pictures, let's not overlook Patricia. Where can we find her?"

"Why—why, Pat's the assistant of a fashion photographer," Rand said, sounding shocked. "She told me she expected

to be busy at her studio most of the night on a special assignment of some sort."

"The special assignment may have been here, instead. Does she have a room in this house?"

"Why, yes, Pat lives here most of the time. She's one of the family."

Hackett asked acridly, "Would she have any reason to go into your basement—a reason, that is, other than to hide from us?"

"What? She has a darkroom down there. How did you know? What led you to ask—?"

GRIPPING his slender cane, Hackett had begun moving toward a corner of the house. His gaze was fixed on a basement window. We could see now what his sharp eyes had already caught—a flicker of red light behind the panes. Even as we realized what it meant a small explosion occurred before our eyes—the glass shattered, burst by the force of the swelling gases of combustion inside. Black smoke and red flames streamed out and up.

Suddenly Hackett was running to a cellarway beside the terrace. Cement steps led down to a door below ground level. Rand crowded close beside him, pushed in and snapped switches.

The large basement was filled with a faint haze of smoke. The air was warm. We heard the fury of flames confined somewhere. The dull roar came from a partitioned-off corner. Rand sprang to the door of that cubical section, yanked it open, then fell backward as red flames spilled out in a snarling burst.

Rand poised, rashly feeling impelled to rush in. Hackett held him back. Rand couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds inside that hot-box. Even at our distance the heat sprayed out the door with blistering intensity. Oddly, not all the darkroom had caught so far—the walls were scorching, but otherwise untouched. The inferno seemed concentrated in the center of the room—around the body of Patricia Prescott.

She lay in the very vortex of the holocaust like a burning dummy. She had already been dead for minutes. Either she had changed to black clothes after leaving us tonight, or else she was charred from head to foot. The fiercest flames

clung to her in a very destroying embrace.

Cynthia Rand screamed, staring horrified at her sister's flaming body. That sound signaled the onset of a general nightmare. I recall more screams, men's yells, every member of the household milling about with brimming buckets and fire extinguishers, including Hester Coates and all the servants.

Then the clanging of brass bells as the fire engines charged in, the hissing of white streams playing from the hoses. But the detail that registered on me as vividly as any other was the cynical face of Thackeray Hackett as he watched and thoughtfully swung his little hickory stick.

It caused me to remember an earlier moment when Hackett had warned, *Our blackmailer's playing for higher stakes than usual—he won't like us interfering—he might get nasty about it.*"

If Patricia Prescott's death wasn't an accident, then things were going to get very hot for everybody else concerned also—especially that snoopy little group known as Headliner Files.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder, My Darling

WHEN Clarabelle Brown is really worried she nervously plucks all the ruby, emerald and diamond rings off her left hand and redistributes them among the fingers of her right; then she plucks them off her right hand and puts them back on her left; and so on. At ten o'clock next morning she had already been doing this for an hour while I gave her a fireside sketch of last night's debacle.

"There you have it, Clarabelle," I wound up wearily. "We started out to get fifteen new subscriptions from Rand, which are now farther away than ever. What we actually have is a headache much bigger than it was to begin with, plus one thoroughly dead young woman who was much more attractive when alive."

"Walter, doll, I'm just as sorry as I can be that things have gotten a little mixed up, but don't you blame yourself," Clarabelle said optimistically. "I'm sure it's not entirely your fault."

"My fault?" I mouthed, recalling dis-

tinctly it was Clarabelle herself who had saddled us with this.

"Not really, I'm sure, doll," she insisted stanchly. "Just don't lose faith in human nature and Clarabelle, Walter, and everything will smooth right out."

Then hopefully she gazed at Thackeray Hackett, who nuzzled his little cane and kept a truculent frown turned on us.

We were facing Clarabelle across her desk in her front office, where we had returned at the earliest opportunity, just an hour ago. Over there on Long Island, in V. K. Rand's neighborhood, they have an especially hard-skulled variety of officials. Fire department officials, police department officials, and even insurance company officials, had closed in to grill us almost before the last embers were quenched.

It had been a sweet job of side-stepping, answering their sharply pointed questions without mentioning Rand's mermaid. She would have messed up the official situation the worst way for him, and certainly it would have given the newspapers a national field day. Working in relays, and sensing that we were holding something back, the officials hadn't given up on us until long after dawn.

Stubble and soot on my drooping face—Hackett somehow looked much fresher than I felt—I could only blink stupidly at Clarabelle and long for a soft bed and a hard drink.

"Practically every disaster that Rand wished to avoid is descending on him now, Clarabelle—and worse," I added. "A million bucks' worth of publicity, but all the wrong kind. The plot behind the water-baby still under wraps. Rand himself is left with nothing definite to go on, but his wife's suspicions have found plenty. The poor guy is deathly afraid she's about to cut loose with a blast of accusations in legal form. The best we can hope is that it will blow over as soon as the hick-town gestapo officially decides Pat Prescott's death was accidental."

"If it was," Hackett put in acridly, "so was Lincoln's." As we frowned at him he added, "They'd have some basis for it, though. Photographers often use alcohol to quick-dry their films. They might say a cloud of alcohol vapor was ignited in the darkroom when Pat lighted a cig-

A good theory—she did seem to be lying in a pool of flame—except that she was a non-smoker. I checked that detail."

Hackett curved his mouth wryly. "Actually Pat was up to her pretty ears in a crooked play. She was being a very bad little girl."

"You can't mean Rand's own sister-in-law was out to nick him!"

The glints grew sharper in Hackett's baby-blue eyes. "She died in mourning. Wearing black clothes, I mean. All black, even her stockings. Why had she rigged herself out like that? So she couldn't be seen in the dark, of course, when flashing that picture."

Clarabelle said quickly, "Thack, dear, aren't you guessing?"

He shook his head. "Her car was found parked a short distance up the road. She'd lied to Rand and to us about having to go into town. Actually she'd sneaked right back, keeping out of sight, to change into those black clothes and get set for a really special picture assignment—shooting Rand and the mermaid together. That's what all the cavorting in the pool had been leading up to—that picture, to be used as a tangible basis for blackmail."

I stared at him. "But by Rand's own sister-in-law?"

Hackett tapped his cane impatiently. "Slant it for yourself, Pres. After the fire was put out I took a look into a cabinet in Pat's darkroom—a metal cabinet, closed, not much damage done inside it. I found a few infra-red flash bulbs there—quite a rare item among a photographer's supplies. There's not a doubt in the world that it was Pat who shot that pic in the dark."

Then, while Clarabelle and I absorbed this in increasingly troubled silence, Hackett followed through with another blow. "Pat's camera case, empty except for some unused film-holders, was found in her car where she'd left it. The ruined camera itself was found in the burned-out darkroom. Also the film-holder that had been loaded into the camera—empty. As for that infra-red shot, maybe it's included in the ashes. I doubt it. We'll see it sooner or later. A million to one it was stolen by the person who murdered Pat to get it away from her."

Clarabelle echoed in a hollow voice.

"Murdered? Did I hear you say murdered?"

"Certainly murdered," Hackett repeated, sounding sad.

"THACK, dear," Clarabelle said in agitation, the tempo of her ring-swapping having increased, "if it's really murder the police will dig into it just that much deeper and harder. We've got to do something about it in a hurry, before they begin turning it into a three-ring circus for themselves. I promised Mr. Rand we'd straighten this whole thing out for him, and we simply can't afford to let him down—not a big business man in such an influential position as his. Thack, dear—Walter, doll—I want you to get the whole thing cleared up for Clarabelle right away."

Staring at her in a stupor, I inquired, "Today?"

"Of course today, dolls! The sooner the better! And I just know you'll do it, because you wouldn't think of disappointing Clarabelle, would you?"

Sitting there speechless, I heard Clarabelle's impossible demand topped off by a pungent question from Thackeray Hackett.

"Why are you looking so licked, Pres? Is it possible you don't see the obvious answer?"

"No, Thack," I said through closed teeth, "I don't see quite all of it just yet. I'm never at my best, you know, before breakfast."

His answer was to smile in his exasperatingly knowing way. I would have liked to deposit a fistful of knuckles in his teeth, but I hadn't the strength.

The phone had rung and Clarabelle had grabbed it up. Her eyes went round. "Why, good morn-ing, Lieutenant Blackley!" she cried, actually sounding delighted—and that really topped off the moment.

Detective Lieutenant Blackley, member of the police commissioner's special squad, was a frequent visitor to Headliner Files' office by reason of the fact that he was nuts about our charming boss. This was not quite enough, however, to rid his mind of a lurking, unwarranted suspicion that in some way we were fronting for a new kind of shakedown racket. Also, it was hardly a point in our favor that we em-

ployed Thackeray Hackett, an ex-private detective forced into disgraceful retirement. Lieutenant Blackley's message this morning caused Clarabelle to look alarmed for the first time as she chirped,

"Oh, yes, Lieutenant! Of course, Lieutenant! Why, my dear Lieutenant, you know—Thank you so much for calling, Lieutenant!"

Hanging up, slightly terrified, she informed us, "Lieutenant Blackley has entered the case at the request of the local authorities. Of course he's been told, Thack, dear, that you and Walter were there last night. The lieutenant is a really lovely man, except that he'll be only too glad to throw you into prison in case he catches you doing any detecting without a license. On the other hand, Thack, we can't pass up a chance like this to show him your heart's really in the right place, can we?"

Sometimes I felt Clarabelle had *too* much faith in human nature.

"Besides, we've got to finish up this job for Mr. Rand too, Thack, dear. Well, the lieutenant wants both of you back at the Rand mansion at one o'clock so he can question you all over again. So both of you dolls hustle over there right now, ahead of time, and get the whole thing cleared up before he arrives."

"Before—!" I couldn't believe my ears. "Clarabelle, I didn't get a wink of sleep all last night. I'm already worn to a thin shadow. Asking me to—"

Hackett interrupted, having risen. "All right, Clarabelle. If Pres doesn't feel equal to it, I'll go over there and polish it off alone."

That really did settle it. I might die on the way, but one thing I couldn't risk at this ticklish stage of the game was to let Hackett out of my sight.

"Good luck, dolls," Clarabelle cheered us on, gaily confident. "Give me a ring as soon as you have everything settled."

A wonderful woman, Clarabelle, in her way.

FORTY minutes and a big fare later our taxi turned off the Long Island highway. Rand's chauffeur, guarding the gate against the curious on-lookers, passed us in. Last night's fire in the basement, thanks to the fire company's expert con-

trol, had not damaged the exterior of the big house, except for soot. The establishment seemed normal enough, considering the effects of murder on the premises.

Our taxi deposited us in the parking space, I paid a princely price to the driver, and he toolled back down the drive, passing a uniformed teen-age boy pumping toward the house on a bicycle. The messenger held Hackett's interest. He watched the lad deliver a message to Hester Coates at the door of her office. The boy shuffled away as V. K. Rand hurried to Miss Coates and took the special delivery letter from her.

Moving now, Hackett pushed into Miss Coates' office with hardly a glance for her, and followed Rand to the desk in the inner office. Grimly Rand permitted me to follow Hackett in, but quickly closed the door on his secretary. Then he ripped open the envelope and from it drew a single small photographic print.

He gazed at it and turned sea-sick pale. Hackett and I also gazed at it with an understanding of his reaction. The shutter had clicked at precisely the instant to make it appear that Rand was holding the mermaid in an affectionate embrace, with her face lifted to his but turned away from the lens. The pose didn't look in the least deliberate. In Rand's place I would prefer my wife not to see this picture.

Rand had also pulled a note from the envelope. Like the address, it was printed in pencil, all in lower-case letters. He permitted us to read it:

we figure fifty thousand is a cheap price for the negative of this. get ready to pay and keep clammed up about this deal. otherwise your wife will receive a good clear enlargement and that will cost you even more dough.

Rand muttered, "Good Lord! I'm cooked!" He glowered at us. "A fine help you and your outfit turned out to be!"

Thackeray Hackett gave him a hard, pained look. "Don't be unreasonable, Rand. We haven't even had a chance until now. This is actually our first opportunity, and we are fully prepared to deliver the goods as promised."

Rand's frown grew stormy. "You can't mean that. You're bluffing."

"Not at all," Hackett answered blandly.

"Please bring everybody together out there at the edge of the pool. It will take only a few minutes to wind up this whole affair."

Rand peered at him incredulously, but opened the connecting door to relay the orders to his secretary:

"Hester, get everybody together out there on the terrace. I mean my wife, Bert and—Letty's still here, I believe? Letty too, then. Right away, Hester."

Miss Coates hastened. Rand moved along in a grim silence as Hackett strolled out to the terrace steps. Hackett nuzzled his cane, admiring the scene, including the mirrorlike water of the pool.

Cynthia Prescott Rand appeared wearing a simple dress, her lovely eyes red-rimmed from sleeplessness and tears. Bert Bertram, cigar and all, strolled up in a white linen suit, seeming blasé but actually full of tension. Letty Sumner, in a borrowed dress, green to match her eyes, looked luscious even with clothes on. Hester Coates remained at her boss's side. They all looked curiously at Hackett, not knowing what to expect from him.

"This will take only a minute or two, ladies and gentlemen," he said with a caustic sort of courtesy. "I merely wish to point out a blackmailer and a murderer among you."

They all looked at one another, then silently back at Hackett.

"Just step over here, please."

Moving to the spot at the edge of the pool where he had found the tail-print last night, he beckoned us all together in a semicircle. He stood with his back to the water, cynically genial, and as he placed Rand on his extreme left, then Hester next to Rand, then Bert, and so on, I began to suspect he was staging this arrangement very carefully. And then I saw why.

He turned suddenly. With apparent thoughtlessness, he allowed the point of his cane, as he held it under his arm, to jab Cynthia Rand. It poked her in the stomach, in fact, and not gently. Actually it drove into Mrs. Rand's midriff so hard that in recoiling from it, with a pained gasp, she stepped backward over the pool's gutter.

The next instant Cynthia Rand dropped with an indignant screech and a plunking

splash into the water directly in back.

INSTANTLY she was whipping about and spluttering, and everybody was reaching down to her. Hackett said, "So sorry, so sorry!"

Rand urged, "Here, Cyn, grab my hand!" In a moment she was being hoisted up by both arms, her husband pulling on one and Bert on the other. She coughed and spluttered some more, having in her consternation gulped in some water. They guided her to a cement bench at the side of the terrace.

Hackett was cleverly guiding her. The instant she was seated he grasped both her shoulders and brought her to a standing position again. Then, while she stood there with her dress plastered skin-tight, he stooped to examine the wet impression she had left on the bench.

V. K. Rand also stared at it, paralyzed. I lifted my wide-opened eyes to Hackett. He was grinning in a gleeful rabbit-out-of-the-hat manner. And unquestionably he was right. The pattern which Cynthia Rand had just impressed on the bench was unmistakably the same as the print left on the edge of the pool by the vanishing mermaid.

I would have recognized it anywhere. . . .

Cynthia Rand stood with her firm chin lifted, drenched but defiant. I recalled asking Rand, "Was there anything about the mermaid's grabbing technique that seemed familiar?" and he had answered, "No!" It was grounds for a cynical comment about marriage.

Rand gasped, "I can't—can't believe—" and he turned his stunned eyes to Thackeray Hackett.

Our young Mr. Hackett had undergone one of his quick changes of mood. Now that he had really sprung a trap on the mermaid, he found a warm-hearted sympathy for her.

"It should be easy enough to believe, Rand," he said. "After all, how could a young woman wearing one of your flesh-tinted swim suits slip in and out of this place night after night without being spotted? From the first everything pointed to an inside job—the fact that your water-sprite knew her way around the place so well, the way she could watch your move-

ments so closely, the ease with which she appeared and disappeared. She just popped in and out of the house, that's all. As final proof—what *was* wrong with the pool lights last night?"

Sounding dazed, Rand answered, "Main fuses removed from the master switch panel inside." Then he gulped, "My—my own wife blackmailing me?"

Cynthia Rand flared up. "No one who knows how tight-fisted you are will think it's so damned startling, Vincent! In six years of being married to you it's the best way I've thought of to get some extra money out of you."

He blurted, "You're exaggerating!"

"That's impossible!" she retorted, sounding poisonous again. "You've driven me crazy with your damned budget. I've had to answer for every last dime. At the same time I've watched you pouring fortunes into your business, promoting, expanding. In business you're a wild man, a plunger—but here at home, and with me? Brother!"

"Holy cats, Vincent, I've had nightmares thinking of what would happen if you should get caught in some sort of squeeze. We'd probably lose everything, down to our last swim suit. You wouldn't listen to my warnings, so I had to take desperate measures—this scheme of mine—to get a little money put aside. I had to salt it down in such a way that you wouldn't even know about it, too. I wanted it for myself, Vincent, but it would always be there for both of us in case of an emergency. It seemed such a marvelous plan, too—but dammit, it didn't work."

A queer look came over Rand's face. "If I'm so tight with a buck at home as to force my wife to such extremes—I'd damned well better reform!" He added, "Pat must have agreed with you about me, Cyn, if she was helping you." Then he turned on Hackett, even paler. "Wait. You can't possibly mean my wife killed her own sister."

"Certainly not," Hackett answered. "Her plan didn't include murder. Murder entered the picture when she lost control of the money-raising operation."

CYNTHIA gave Hackett a grateful, pleading look and said emphatically, "That's exactly right, Vincent. Pat was

to give me the picture she'd taken, so I could put the bite on you. But somebody killed her to get it from her." Bitter tears glimmered in Cyn's eyes. "I still feel I was justified in getting the money out of you, Vincent, but I'll never stop blaming myself for what happened to Pat."

Hackett shook his head. "Don't be too tough on yourself, Mrs. Rand. It's not your fault that an interloper moved in—and a potential killer at that."

His gaze passed over the five faces looking into his, pausing on Bert Bertram's.

"That has to be the answer. The murder might have been avoided in less urgent circumstances, but it was necessary in order to get the picture from Pat before it left her hands, while the interloper still knew where to find it. The interloper waited just long enough for Pat to put the film through a fast developer, quick-dry it, and make a proof print. Then it was essential to silence Pat. The stakes were big. The fifty grand was to be only a down payment."

Hackett added with a compassionate smile, "I said I'd need only a few minutes for this, and my time's about up. Well, I have a strange passion for something called justice. I feel murder should be paid for. So let's settle the bill now, in a nice, quiet way, please."

Cynthia Rand shivered a little inside her wet, skin-clinging dress. "Someone who's here now killed my sister?"

"What else?" Hackett went on softly. "Another inside job, you see. Somebody in a position to watch everything, including you, Mrs. Rand, sneaking back

into your room after a starlight frolic in the pool. So there's only one possible nominee. . . . Don't you agree, Miss Coates?"

Rand's secretary, never lovely, seemed to age ten years in ten seconds as we all stared at her.

"You can't mean Hester!" Rand blurted.

"The evidence can't mean anyone else," Hackett said, swinging his cane a little. "She alone had the opportunity. As for material proof—you saw the flames pooled around Pat in the darkroom, Rand. She'd been slugged down and an inflammable liquid poured over her. The alcohol she'd used for drying the film? Maybe; it helped, anyway. But alcohol burns with a clear flame and the flames streaming up from Pat's body were red. A compound derived from oil, more likely, such as gasoline or— Miss Coates, when we first talked with you in your office you refilled your cig lighter from a large economy-size bottle. Will you get that bottle for me now, Miss Coates? If you still have it? If you didn't use it to drench Pat Prescott's unconscious body?"

Hester Coates stood frozen still, staring, in open-mouthed dismay at Hackett.

He added gently, "There are other ways of pinning it on her, Rand—the envelope and paper she used when sending the print, and the lettering she wrote on them—but let the boys in the police lab work on them. We're dealing not only with criminal evidence but with a living woman full of years of accumulated bitterness."

We could figure it easily—now. When Hester Coates began being Rand's secre-

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tary—she was young, eager. She had devoted herself to him, hoping to marry her boss some day. She had turned sour on life when he married a younger and prettier girl. More and more, recently, she had come to see herself as a tired, worn-down woman with nothing to show for the best years she'd given to working for this man—and no hope of a worry-free future. Naturally she hadn't been able to save much, if anything, out of the niggardly salary Rand had paid her. She had grown deeply anxious about it, until finally, seeing a desperate chance to cut in on Mrs. Rand's plan—

It was clear enough to all of us as Hester Coates began backing away from Hackett—moving tensely along the pool walk while we all watched her in cold fascination.

"Please, Hester," Hackett said gently. "You won't find it so easy to disappear as the mermaid did. It's broad daylight now and you'd have much farther to go. You'd never make it. I'm afraid I can't even let you get started."

Hester Coates continued to retreat along the edge of the pool, poising to spin off into frantic flight at any instant.

"You're wondering how I can stop you, Hester. Have you noticed my cane?" Hackett lifted his delicate little stick. "You'd never believe how punishing it can be until you see the frightful results. Please don't force me to demonstrate, Hester. I feel too sorry for you already. But still I can't let you get away. I'm odd that way, about murder."

HESTER recoiled from Hackett's cane as he lifted it. Then, suddenly, sick with terror, she took the only move left to her—whirled to flee.

In the past I had seen Hackett's little hickory stick inflict terrible injuries on an adversary—shatter his knee-cap, tear a patch off his scalp, drop him helpless with a cracked skull. But he'd meant every word when saying he sympathized with her. He flashed the cane past her ear with a terrifyingly sharp flick, so that she leaped aside with a scream of fear.

As Cynthia Rand had done, Hester Coates fell over the edge of the pool and plunged into the water. Her drop took her down to the tile bottom. Then she propelled herself upward like a porpoise and shot up from the surface waist-high. Hester then, with flash-bulb clarity.

She was splashing wildly, with Rand and Bertram attempting to fish her out, when Hackett and I turned at the sound of a step. A man had come from an official police car that had stopped in the parking lot. He looked like a Gay Nineties bartender—round as a blimp, a gold watch-chain festooned across his paunch, his mustache a luxuriant handle bar, his sideburns long, a black derby on his head. He was Detective Lieutenant Blackley.

Blackley paused, his gaze on Hackett expressing the most astringent contempt. This estimable man, considering all private detectives to be a breed lower than streptococcus, loathed no one on earth more profoundly than he loathed our disgraced ex-shamus, Thackeray Hackett.

"Why, good morning, Lieutenant Blackley," Hackett said with flowery courtesy and a mocking smile. "In case you're looking for a murderer, there she is, in the pool, all ready for you. Just part of Headliner Files' regular service, you know."

Hackett's baby-blue eyes held exasperating, sardonic glints.

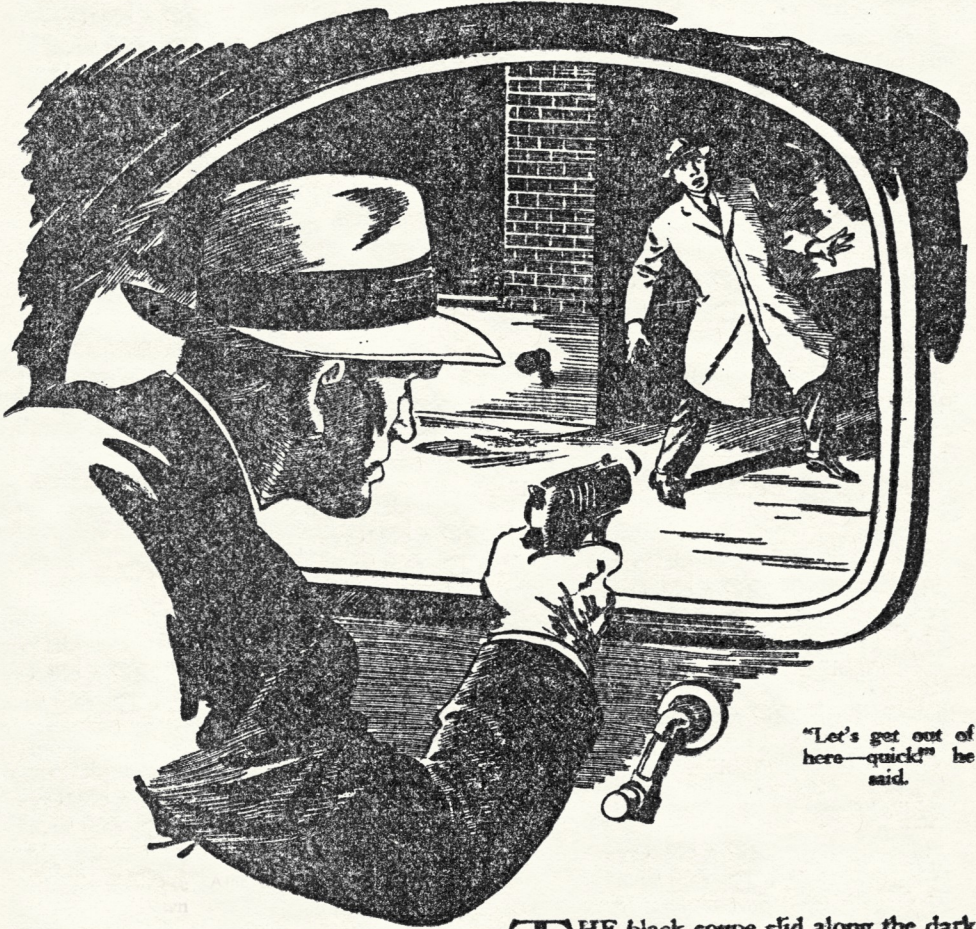
THE END

BARE FACTS

When nudism was about to join whale fishing as a crime in Ohio (did you know that it's illegal to fish for whales in any lake, river or stream in Ohio on Sundays?), among the testimony heard appreciatively by the state legislature was the following by Russell D. Abbott, the state's top cultist: "Membership in a nudist organization carries a good deal of weight in getting bank loans and credit ratings in Cleveland."

THREE MEN AND A CORPSE

By VICTOR K. RAY



"Let's get out of here—quick!" he said.

Two tough dicks wanted to save young Joey—who was coming up in life . . . too fast.

THE black coupe slid along the dark street, and a gun spat flame. The explosions, three of them, punctuated the engine's high whine. I shoved Joey Sciortino sideways, fell beside him, listened to the echoes reverberate in the narrow canyon of the street. I twisted to look at the car, a black Ford. I saw part of the license number, 26 J 34—something.

Joey's hand had dug inside his coat as he fell, and when he raised up he had a .38. Then he put it back inside his coat. "What happened?" he gasped.

"When I got my breath back, I said, 'They missed.'"

The car had already turned the corner, the noise of its engine mixed and lost in the sounds of the city. The street was vacant, except for us. The light at the far end of the block cast long shadows in our direction.

Then we saw the alley mouth that had been only a few feet ahead of us. We hadn't even noticed it before. We looked down the alley at a crumpled figure which lay on the cement.

"Look, Steve!" said Joey. "They weren't shooting at us." Joey's voice sounded young and relieved, and I realized he was pretty inexperienced in this kind of thing, after all. He wasn't the kind of guy he was trying to be, the kind who usually packs a .38.

I moved down the alley to the figure. I shined my pen-light into the gray, thin face. He was dead.

Behind me, Joey said, "Steve, let's get out of here."

I said, "I know this guy, Joey."

"Let's get out of here—quick!" he said.

I turned out my light. "We ought to report this, Joey."

"Cops'll be swarming all over the place in three minutes." I could see Joey's face in the dimness. There was a film of sweat on it. He wheeled, moved back to the sidewalk, looked both ways.

I stood there for a minute thinking we ought to report this. Thinking you can't walk into a murder, and then walk out on it. Not when you're a private detective.

I was thinking about my friend Hamp Sprague, a detective on the force, and what he'd said this morning. He'd said, "Steve, you guys are always on the wrong side of the law. Murder's not very pleasant any way you take it, but when you're looking at it from the wrong side, it's worse. I wouldn't like your kind of work at all."

I stood there over the body in the alley, thinking maybe Hamp was right. I'd been in town twenty-four hours, and I was looking into the eyes of a dead man, and thinking about not reporting it.

Then I heard Joey's voice again, strained, tense. "Steve, I can't afford to be tied up with a thing like this." He started to move down the street.

I said, "Wait a minute, Joey. I'm coming."

I joined him, and we walked fast back in the direction from which we'd come, back toward the little bar one street over. I could hear his breathing.

"You in trouble with the police, Joey?"

"No." As we came to the corner, he looked back.

We turned the corner, and kept walking, faster and faster, with Joey a couple of steps ahead.

"I haven't got any trouble with the cops, Steve," he said. "But they're laying for me, I think."

"Not Hamp Sprague?"

"Yeah, Hamp. You wouldn't think Hamp would try to pin something on me, would you? Looks like he'd have better things to do with his time."

At the next corner, the lighted front of the little bar was visible, and we went down to it. Then, two or three blocks over, we heard a police siren split the air.

Joey let out his breath. "There it is," he said. "Let's have a drink. I could use one."

We went in. We both hoisted our first one fast.

Hamp Sprague had told me about Joey, that Joey was heading for trouble. When I'd finally asked Hamp to join my agency in San Francisco, he'd said no, and steered the conversation quickly onto Joey. Joey and Hamp and I had grown up together.

Of course, Joey was dead wrong about Hamp trying to pin something on him. Hamp could have been the best friend Joey Sciortino ever had. Joey had known that once, but he'd forgotten it.

Things had been pretty hot then, the last time I'd seen Joey. We hadn't been able to have a drink, mull over old times. We'd been on Iwo.

Joey had come home shortly after that. He'd been rehabilitated. But good. I hadn't come home. I'd stopped in San Francisco on the way, had set myself up as a private detective, was doing pretty well. But I needed help to run my business. And I wasn't having much luck finding guys I knew I could depend on.

Hamp hadn't even wanted to talk about it.

He'd said, "I hate to see Joey digging his grave, Steve. He's running with Shade Cantrell's outfit. It's just a matter of time before Joey's in too deep to pull out." Hamp had brushed his hand back through his thick, prematurely graying hair, his eyes troubled.

I'd said, "It's hard to protect a guy, when he doesn't want to be protected."

"The mortality rate is high," said Hamp. "It's just a matter of time till Joey gets it."

The picture was clear. Hamp wanted to do something for Joey before somebody else did it to him. Mostly, cops sit on their hands till it's too late. That gives you some idea of Hamp Sprague.

Hamp had said, "Just this morning we picked up a guy in a ditch at the edge of town, with four bullets in him. We don't even know who the guy was." He'd looked at me, and grinned. "Maybe he was a private detective. Anyway, it may take us three or four days to find out. Then any hope of running down his killer will be gone. That's the way Joey will end one of these days. In a ditch, or in an alley. The mortality rate is high."

Maybe contact with an old friend would snap Joey out of it, we'd said. When he'd first come back, Joey had talked about setting up as a private detective. Then he'd found it profitable to drop the idea for a job with Shade Cantrell. Well, I could take him back to San Francisco.

WE'D met on the street. I'd made it look like an accident, because Joey was already getting touchy. We'd had our drinks, talked over old times. I'd made my offer. But I hadn't gotten to first base with him.

He'd said, "It's not for me, Steve." His tone of voice had said, "It's too tame. There's not enough money in it."

I'd sat thinking about my two friends. One of them thought private detecting was too dirty. The other thought it was too clean.

Joey and I had started walking a couple of blocks over to a joint owned by Shade Cantrell, the Crystal Club, and we'd run into the gunfire, and the body in the alley.

Now, back in the little bar, the drinks

had their effect. I began to calm down. I'll never learn to like death in any form. I looked in the bar mirror at Joey beside me. His face was still pale, tight.

I finished my drink, set the glass down. "Drink up, Joey," I said.

It jarred him out of his reverie. He jumped a little, grinned. "Sure."

I motioned the bartender for another. "Steve, who was that guy?" asked Joey suddenly. "You said you knew him."

"Nobody you'd know," I said. "He's from the coast."

Our drinks arrived. We raised our glasses. But some of our high spirits were gone.

"Did you know him well?" Joey pursued.

"He was just a guy mixed up in the rackets. I didn't know him very well."

Joey turned on his stool, went over to the juke box, and put a couple of nickels in. The music came up full and solid.

Joey came back. "What was that guy's name, Steve?"

"The guy back in the alley? Bruce Wardell. Something like that."

"I wonder why he got it," said Joey softly, his words almost lost in the music.

We listened. I could feel Joey's eyes turn on me every minute or two. I began getting an idea. The thing in the alley had shaken him up. It made me know again that he was pretty young in this kind of thing. That was good. There was still time. Hamp Sprague had been right.

When the two records were finished, I said, "Did you get a look at the guy in the alley?"

"No."

"He was a young guy. The last I saw of him was a couple of months ago. He was working his way up, carried a Russian automatic, I remember. I don't think he'd used it yet, but you couldn't be sure. Nobody could be sure. He was on his way up."

I spun around on my stool, went over to the juke box, played the first number over again. I said, "There's been quite a bit of hell raised in San Francisco lately. Everybody's trying to set himself up in some nice spot. This guy, Bruce Wardell, was going up fast. I don't think he'd bumped anybody off, but when somebody got bumped, Wardell was there to take

his place." I waited to see how he took it.

Joey shifted nervously, lit a cigarette.

"It was just a question of time till he got it," I said. "Maybe they'll catch his killer, maybe they won't. One thing certain, it won't make any difference to Bruce Wardell."

Joey pulled at his collar, wiped his face with his handkerchief. "These drinks are hitting me, Steve. Let's get out in the air. I've got to show up at the Crystal Club."

We got off the stools, and started for the door. Joey stopped. "Steve, let's take a taxi over there." He was thinking of the two blocks of dark, narrow streets.

"Okay." I went over to the wall telephone and called one. When I turned, Joey was back at the bar. He wasn't drinking again, just sitting. He waved the bartender away. His face was pale, a line drawn down his jaw.

Suddenly he spun around on the stool, and yelled halfway across the bar, "Steve, I'll do it! I'll take your offer."

His voice was too loud, and he turned red, grinned. He got off the stool, and walked toward me. "San Francisco, here we come!" He was laughing. He stuck out his hand and I shook it. He was happy as a kid, and so was I.

Hamp had been right. He'd said there ought to be something you could do for a guy like Joey—and there was. The killing had done it.

The taxi arrived then. "128 West Grand," Joey told the driver.

I said, "I thought you had to show up at the Crystal Club."

"The hell with that, Steve. There's one guy I want to tell about taking you up on that job. I want to tell him right now."

128 West Grand was Hamp Sprague's address.

We got over there in about five minutes. Hamp had just gotten home. We told him the good news. His heavy face split from ear to ear. "By golly," he said softly. "By golly, that's wonderful."

It was a fine excuse to break out a bottle, and Hamp did.

I kept thinking about that body back in the alley, the thin gray face, the staring eyes. Bruce Wardell.

I had to report it. Maybe some private detectives take murder as casually as they take a drink of bourbon.

I could say, "By the way, Hamp, old man, we saw a killing tonight. Yeah, it happened right in front of us. I even knew the victim. Boy, we got out of there fast! Report it? Why—uh. . ."

There is one magic time to report a homicide. That's the minute you find it.

HAMP poured drinks around for us again. Then he went into the kitchen to get more ice. I followed him.

In the kitchen, I said, "Joey and I saw a little trouble tonight, Hamp." I tried to say it calmly, but my voice wouldn't keep a level pitch.

Hamp said, "Yeah?" He pulled the ice tray out.

"We saw a murder."

"Yeah?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

He put the ice tray under the hot water faucet, let the cubes fall into a bowl.

"I said we saw a murder. . . . We didn't report it."

He refilled the ice tray with water, and went back to the ice box.

"I don't think you understand, Hamp." I felt like my voice might get away from me again. "We were walking down the street, a guy was shot in an alley about ten feet away from us. We thought they were shooting at us. I saw the car. License number, 26 J 34—something. You should be able to do something with that much of the number."

Hamp turned around, went back to the sink for the bowl of ice. "Yeah," he said.

I grabbed him by the arm. "What's the matter with you, Hamp? Are you drunk? I'm reporting a murder!"

"Okay, Steve. I don't guess this is the first murder you ever reported."

I said, "Wait a minute." I got a cigarette out, lit it. "Aren't you going to call headquarters and give them that license number?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'll call 'em." But he didn't make any move to do it. There was a funny look in Hamp's eyes.

The telephone was in the little hall just off the kitchen. I went to it. "I'm going to call headquarters," I said.

"What are you so worried about, Steve? We picked up the body already. A punk named Bruce Wardell. Four bullet holes in him. You probably knew him in San

Francisco. He was in the rackets out there, working up too fast."

I turned around and picked up the telephone. I put my finger down on the dial. And then I stopped. I held the receiver in mid-air for a minute. Then I put it down slowly.

I turned around. "How many bullet holes did you say?"

"Four—er—maybe it was three."

"It was four, Hamp. You said four." I began to understand. He'd had me on the ropes for a few minutes. Watching Hamp Sprague shrug off a murder was like getting punched on the chin. I remembered the story he'd told me this morning.

I said, "You picked up Bruce Wardell, all right. But the first time you picked him up was this morning—in a ditch at the edge of town."

I thought of the way Hamp had talked this morning: *There ought to be some way to snap Joey out of it.*

I said, "You staged a 'killing' for Joey's benefit. You figured I'd know Wardell, because it's my business to know guys like him. You counted on me to be sure Joey got the parallel between Bruce Wardell and himself." I looked at Hamp standing there holding that bowl of ice.

He grinned.

I was thinking of that dark street, the high whine of an engine, the three shots.

I said, "That car, license number 26 J 34— That was yours."

"That's right, Steve."

Then I thought of the body. And it suddenly came to me. "The body," I said. "You had to steal the body of Bruce Wardell from the morgue."

Hamp looked at me with mock seriousness. "Steve! I wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"The hell you wouldn't. But what if I'd reported that 'killing' to headquarters?"

"The desk sergeant was working with me," said Hamp.

That gives you some idea of Hamp Sprague.

"I slipped," continued Hamp sadly. "When I said Wardell had four bullet holes in him. I should have known you'd count those shots, even if you thought hell was breaking loose. You'd remember that only three shots were fired. I had only three blank cartridges tonight."

"You slipped on that," I said. "But you slipped before that, by knowing too much about Bruce Wardell. If he'd actually been murdered tonight, you couldn't have found out this quick that he was from San Francisco, and mixed up in the rackets out there."

"Yeah, I guess that's right," he admitted. He laughed suddenly, and I laughed, too. We both looked at that bowl of melting ice then, and thought of Joey in the other room, waiting. We were laughing so hard, I thought Joey would hear us, and come in.

Hamp winked. "I'm pretty smart, ain't I, kid?"

We went in where Joey was. He was sitting over by the radio with his ear glued to it, listening to the high wail of a trumpet.

He looked up, and said, "I thought you guys had found another bottle out there."

We filled our glasses again. We raised them. I looked at Joey. The lines of strain and tension had disappeared.

I looked at Hamp, and he winked, saying again with his look, "I'm pretty smart, ain't I, kid!"

I nodded.

I thought, yeah, you're pretty smart, Hamp. You're so smart we can't get along without you. The three of us are going to bust San Francisco wide open.

I thought, you're going back with us, if I have to try a little friendly blackmail. And I could do it, too. A detective on the force stealing a corpse from the morgue!

I winked back at him, and we drank.

In the next issue. . . .

NO GRAVE HAS MY LOVE

Startling novelette of a sojourn in hell

By John D. MacDonald

THE HUNTER

Shadow-boxing, crooked ward-healers got agent Foster to his prey—just as a sultry-eyed gamin tried her own brand of lead logic.



and the HELLCAT

Dynamic Novelette of Crime-Adventure

By FRANK WARD

She turned swiftly from
the bed. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Shapely Interference

I CAME out of the bar on Southport Street, leaning a little into a wind that didn't exist, and stood looking up and down while my windpipe fought a losing battle for air. People moved on whispering feet along the block, blending

into the shadows. Voices murmured in accents that had crossed oceans and generations to get there. Cigarette coals winked and flared on unlighted stoops. The night air was heavy with the left-over smells of the day.

Shaking myself to see if I creaked after the gin I had been pouring down my throat, I started off down the block, peering up at faint numbers where the plates still existed. Eyes followed me in-curiously.

I came to a tenement that had been going fast when McKinley was assassinated, and walked up a short path, past a littered plot of grass the size of a cancelled air-mail stamp, and started climbing the high winding stairs.

An old woman was sitting on the fifth floor porch, clicking her knitting needles. She took her time about looking at me, as if I were something she wanted to save until she had nothing else to do. I took off my hat and slapped it against my knee, and put a stick of gum in my mouth to quell the seared taste.

The knitting needles slowed. She peered up at me over glasses that were too far down to do her any good unless she wanted to inspect her feet. Her voice, when it came, climbed a long way but was clear and crisp. She said, "Young man, you make too much noise. Even for a district such as this."

"I'm sorry," I said. I didn't have any smart crack for her. She looked as if she could have topped it anyway. "I'm looking for a man who calls himself Zackary. Lionel Zackary. It's important."

"Isn't it always important? Who are you?"

"You wouldn't know me, Mrs. Armati. The name is Foster. From International Security." I dipped my fingers into my coat pocket and took out my identification and held it where her shrewd old eyes could see the card and the special deputy's shield.

The knitting needles stopped entirely then, and there was only the sound of her light breathing and the clang of a trolley bell on the next block. She spent a long time looking at the shield.

"It's real," I told her quietly. "You know that. Is he here?"

"Would I tell you, even if he were?"

"I think you would," I said gently. I was beginning to like her. She looked like a real old soldier to me. "It wouldn't make too much difference, even if you didn't. I know ~~his~~ his in this city. I've spent two years tracing him here. It really wouldn't matter, after two years, if I have to spend a lot more of it finding him."

"Who sent you to me?"

"He was seen here. That's all you need to know."

She sighed and let the knitting needles fall to her lap. "You are a very confident young man. Why do you want him?"

"Embezzlement. He was bonded with my firm for ten thousand dollars. That, plus the money he took. We don't expect to get it all back, not after this time. We do expect to get Zackary."

I lighted a cigarette and tossed the match over the railing. "That," I went on, "and the shooting of one of our men in Detroit ten months ago."

She made a convulsive movement in her chair, and started to say something just as a frosted glass door behind her opened. A dark-haired girl wearing a white peasant blouse and a colored skirt came out onto the porch.

The girl glanced at me inquiringly, then said, "Zack and I are just going down to the corner. . . ."

I let my hat drop to the floor and went around them both, moving fast, brushing the girl's hand aside, going into a long dim hall. I almost tripped over the guy. He had a cigarette in his mouth and was pulling a lighter out of his shirt pocket.

HE WAS a big handsome lad in a gray flannel suit and a soft white shirt, and he smelt faintly of Egyptian cigarettes and shaving lotion when I crowded him into the wall. He swore sharply at me and swung his knee up fast, without asking questions or taking time out to shake hands before the bell went for the first round.

I put my left fist into his belly, hard, and stepped aside in case he decided to get sick over it. He was tough enough to last out the year, though. His breath bounced off the far wall and he gave a smothered yelp, and tripped a fast right

at the side of my head. He almost took an ear with him. I spun sideways and tripped over the long runner and went down with a smack that jarred my hair loose.

Zackary got a breath under his belt and was halfway toward me with a mean look in his hard blue eyes when he saw the Police Special in my right hand. He stopped then, very still, unmoving, and then looked quickly over his shoulder toward the front door.

"Okay," I rasped. "We'll have no more of that. And don't try to break any track records, Zackary, or you'll be running on the front of your head." I backed up the wall until I had my feet under me.

"If you're one of Nick's playboys," he snarled through tight lips, "I'll take that iron away from you and feed it down your throat inch by inch. I told Nick I wouldn't stand any fuss from him, and that's what I meant."

"Don't stall me," I growled. "I've been just an hour or two behind you for two years, Zackary. I've come a long way to hold your soft warm hand. Try getting away and I'll tear your arm off." I gestured with the .38. "Get moving."

The fear that had been lying deep in his eyes disappeared. He started to grin, nervously, "Well, hell," he said. "That old rap. And I thought. . . ." He started to laugh, but still nervously. Then he shrugged, turned and walked out onto the porch past the girl and Mrs. Armati, and started down the stairs.

The old lady's voice cracked out after him, "Lionel!"

He paused for a moment and glanced

back at her over his shoulder. "Just take it easy, kids. I'll handle this my own way, and it won't take me very long."

"Not more than fifteen years," I said, and walked across the porch to the head of the stairs.

The dark-eyed girl, Toni, gasped suddenly when she saw the gun in my hand and lunged at me, shoving me over against the edge of the railing, tearing at my wrists. That was all the chance Zackary needed. I swore wickedly through my teeth and the old woman cried out, "Toni, no!" as Zackary's feet clattered down the stairs.

I flung the girl away, spun, saw him vaulting down the steps four at a time. He was in the yard before I could get a bead on him in that light, and by that time it was too late. I couldn't risk shooting on a darkened street. I might get Zackary, but I'd have hell's own sweet time bringing a couple of dead citizens back to life if my shots went wild and ricocheted.

So I went down the stairs after him, just because it was the only thing I could think of at that moment. But he was gone before I reached the street. I was a stranger there, even with my special deputy's shield—maybe more so because of it—and he'd been around that part of the world a long time.

I turned and retraced my steps, shoving the .38 out of sight under my coat, and went back up the stairs and picked my hat off the floor where I'd dropped it and stood looking at the sultry-eyed, sullen girl and Mrs. Armati. Nobody was paying us any attention. The night life of Southport Street was dragging on at its

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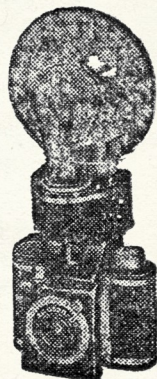
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usual pace, without interruption or alarm.

Through my teeth, I said, "That was nice interference, but it doesn't really matter. Now it's just a few more hours, or a few more days, until I get him again. And the next time he may pull a gun instead of swinging a punch at me. That will be when he gets hurt."

I shaped my hat to my head, nodded curtly to both of them and started down the stairs once more, hoping I'd never have to see either of them again. I walked away from there, back along the aisle of soft voices and shifting humanity and around the corner to where my car was parked.

CHAPTER TWO

Cooling-Off Prescription

CHIEF CARMODY reached across his desk and picked up a chewed yellow pencil. The chief of police was a neat, compact man with smooth silver-white hair, clipped high on the sides, and pink well-barbered cheeks, even at that time of night. He leaned back finally and fixed his direct grayish-white eyes on my face.

"Forty-seven grand," I said softly, "is a lot of money. We want it back, or what we can get back, and we don't think Zackary would run through that much cash, even in two years. He played it smart all along the line, moving out fast after he lifted the dough, and kept moving. Not spending so much one of our men would pick him out. So that means he has something left. To get that something back and maintain our prestige, we'll pay two grand on the line to the man who gets him for us, or who leads us to him." I paused and tossed my cigarette into an ashtray.

Carmody frowned delicately. He leaned over and began tamping at a cigarette butt with his pencil, but I could see his mind wasn't on his work.

"Two thousand dollars," he murmured thoughtfully, adding it up, counting out the change in his mind.

"All of that, Chief. When our company insures a firm and one of the men we bond goes over the hill with forty-seven thousand bucks. . . . Well, you can

understand our position. We'll go a long way to even the sheet."

"How would it be if you recovered only the money, Foster?"

"Better than nothing, but not too good. We want Zackary. Let him go and other bright boys with a yen for meeting fancy women and high living might get the idea they could pull a fast one, spend half the cash they lift, and turn in the rest without any questions being asked. What brought that question around?"

Carmody shrugged, sat regarding his polished nails as if they fascinated him.

"There are angles," he said finally. "The thing has possibilities. I'll look into the matter, personally." He stood up, smiling a gay little smile. "You'll hear from me, soon. And if there's anything you need in the meantime, just you get in touch with Lieutenant Del Vecchio. He'll be ready any time you want him."

I said I would do that little thing, matched him smile for smile, crossed his limp palm with mine, and left him to balance his books.

I walked down the hall and through a door marked *Squad Room*. Three plain-clothesmen were playing pitch-penny with dimes against a back wall. Over to one side, a battered PBX made inarticulate sounds. I sauntered over to the trio, put a cigarette in my mouth and waited.

After awhile, a tall lean character with shoulders as wide as a chorus girl's mouth edged a look at me over his shoulder. He had narrow squinty eyes, and a lean brown face with as much expression as a sheet of ice, and lank black hair that needed cutting badly. His suit said his connections were bad, or he was an honest cop. I thought his connections must stink.

He said, "You want in, Mac?"

"I want Del Vecchio."

"You got him. What can we do for you?"

"I'm Foster, from International Security. I've been talking with your boss."

He squinted hard at me, grunted, and walked stiffly over to the water cooler across the room from the dime-tossers and poured himself a meager drink. I went with him.

"Okay," he said resignedly, "so you talked to Carmody. What do I do now,

float on air?" He leaned back and drank.

"You must be a lieutenant," I said. "No sergeant would have the time to think 'em up like that."

He said, "Ha," and crumpled the paper cup, and added, "You one of the chief's pets, but? I mean, do I have to scratch your ears, or can I be my own sweet natural self?"

"You scratch my ears," I said sharply. "Nice and soft, and you can clip your nails right now."

He shrugged and looked sour. "Okay. Let's stop being kittenish. What do I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a big, handsome boy named Lionel Zackary. I almost had him earlier tonight, but he flew out on me. He's wanted back East for embezzlement. He's been in town maybe six, eight months, and he's probably got about twenty-five, thirty grand left. He's also wanted for putting holes in one of our men. Carmody said—"

"Yeah," he said mournfully. "I know what he said. If you wanted some guy to carry your hat, call on Del Vecchio. Okay, when you're ready to play, give me a call and I'll bring along my marbles."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll bet you play a wicked game."

He grinned suddenly at me, nodded his head and went back to the group by the back wall. I walked out to the elevator, rode down to the ground floor. Then I jacked my car out of the police parking lot across the street and drove back to the hotel.

THE room would have given a fair-sized Great Dane a hunched back. I locked myself in, peeled off my coat, and laid the .38 Colt on the dresser. Then I stripped to the skin, edged sideways into the shower and let lukewarm water run down my back while I thought of Mrs. Armati and the fiery girl old Mrs. Armati had called Toni. I could have spent a lot of time thinking about her, but I was still on company hours.

After the shower, I felt like a postage stamp that has been licked and allowed to curl. I uncorked a pint of bourbon, rang for the ginger ale and ice to go with it, put in a long distance call to New York and talked my way through a lot of In-

ternational money with Bardsley, head of the claims investigation department.

I had the phone book open on my knee when the bellhop came in with the ice and ginger. He was a small, wizened kid with a knowing lower lip and a sneer that reached his hairline and probably extended halfway down his back. He was buttoned up tight in a monkey jacket and fancy blue pants with black stripes down the seams, and he exuded confidence and body odor.

I gave him two dollars. He grinned a tight hard grin and leered down at the open phone book. In a silken voice that must have echoed along the streets of Sodom, he said, "Stranger here, huh?"

"Yeah, and that's the way I'd like to keep it, sonny. Blow."

He shrugged and eyed the bourbon bottle thirstily.

I grinned at him. "Scram, little man. I don't like your manner."

"Don't tell the manager," he smirked. "Or he's liable to have you tossed out on your can." He drifted out the door and slammed it behind him hard enough to rattle the mirror on the dresser. If he saw the gun there he was used to seeing guns, or didn't give a damn. I put ice with the bourbon and salted the mixture with ginger, and sat Buddha-fashion on the bed. Finally, I put the glass down and dialed the operator. I asked for police headquarters and, when the call went through, for Lieutenant Del Vecchio. He was at the phone before I could ask a second time.

"Foster here," I said.

He sounded resigned. "Go ahead, chum. Where's the corpse and how deep do we bury it?"

"I want some information," I told him, refilling my glass with one hand, "on the Armati's, mother and daughter. Can give?"

"Wait a minute," he said. He was gone considerably longer. When he came back he sounded worried. "Where you phoning from, Foster?"

When I told him, he said, "I'll be around in fifteen minutes. Don't get away." It sounded like an order.

He arrived fifteen minutes later on the dot, wearing a faded trenchcoat that flapped shroud-like around his gaunt

frame. He closed the door behind him, locked it, took off his coat and sat down on the only chair in the room.

"Look," he said without preamble, "you came into headquarters on Carmody's back, talked big about embezzlement and threw an angle into the chief he liked. Okay, so he's a man who knows his angles. I know his angles too. I ride around in his vest pocket most of the time. The Zackary deal is all right, but Armati isn't on the slate, Foster. You got Armati, you got trouble."

"I don't want Armati. All I want is some dope on an old lady named Mrs. Armati, who lives on Southport Street, and on a girl named Toni who lives with her. Why should that be trouble to anyone?"

He wiped his face with the palm of his hand and eyed the bottle, almost forlornly. Then he got up and mixed a drink, a long dash of bourbon with a feather of ginger ale to send it on its way, and sat down again. He seemed puzzled.

Finally, he growled, "Well, okay. The old lady is Nick Armati's mother. Nick, being a nice, lovable guy with only enough dough to buy half this town, doesn't do anything about the way she lives. Maybe she wouldn't take it from him. That I wouldn't know.

"The girl is sort of an adopted kid, you might say. The old lady gets lonesome, I guess, hanging around that dump all by herself. The girl keeps her company, has a job in a small office downtown. You get some idea of all the family love floating around from this: one day Nick got big-hearted, dropped around to visit his old lady, and tried to see the girl. The old lady nearly killed him with a shovel. Nick hasn't been back since."

I nodded, watching him. He put his glass down empty. Then he reached into his pocket for a pack of fine cut and rolled himself a neat cigarette, the thickness of a match, and lighted it.

"Zackary seemed to be doing all right with her," I said thoughtfully. "The girl was going out with him when I broke up the party."

"That I wouldn't know," Del Vecchio said. His blank brown face was wet and shiny. He ran his hand over it again.

"All right," I said, rolling over on my

back. "That's all I wanted on Armati. Or was. Now I'm curious to know just what Nick does for a living. Or would that be telling?"

He spat on the carpet. "My mouth's too big for my wallet. But it's no top-drawer secret. He's number-one politico here. He pulls the strings and milks the sacred cows. On the side, he's got a nice racket resting boys from out of state who feel warm and uncomfortable in a strange town. We all tip our hats to him when he goes by."

"Would that include you?"

"Want to see some pictures of the wife and kids?" he asked, looking at me somberly. He got up again and poured himself another drink and stood sipping it pensively. "Look," he said, after awhile. "You seem like a square guy, Foster. Take some good advice. If nailing this lad Zackary means sticking a tack into Armati, forget it. Go back to New York and tell 'em you lost the guy. Say he went over the line into Mexico or South America. You won't make much time here, and you might get hurt."

He put down the glass, still half-full, on the bureau next to the .38 Colt, pushed the gun around with his finger, then picked up his coat and ambled to the door. He disappeared into the hall with as much noise as a raindrop falling in the ocean. The door clicked shut.

I lay on my back while the bourbon put warm highlights in my stomach, and smoked a cigarette down until it scorched my fingers. Then I reached for the phone book, found the number I wanted, and picked up the phone.

CHAPTER THREE

Hot-Foot Dose

IT WAS half-past midnight when I parked the company car outside city hall. I climbed the worn steps, and went in through swinging doors that gleamed and floated free on oiled bearings.

A bald-headed cop with his holstered gun hanging down between his legs was slouched at a small desk in the middle of the large, austere foyer, like a pelican on an island. He gave the gun a hitch when

I came in, pursed a toothless mouth and wheezed. I walked over to him, laid my identification on the desk where he could get his straining eyes on it without popping an eyeball, and said, "Armati's expecting me, pop. Where would he be?"

He propped his eyelids up, looked blearily at the card case, and nodded toward the silent elevators. When I had one thumb on the *up* button he got out of his chair, moaning with effort, and came over and pulled back the doors and creaked his way into the car. "Ain't no use pushin' that thing," he said wearily. "I do the liftin'."

The old cop took me up to the fourth floor, muttering to himself, and let me out into a long carpeted hallway. He pointed a gnarled finger toward a pebbled glass door at the far end. "Thata way, bub."

I thanked him and went down the hall to the door, knocked sharply on the glass. A man's form blurred the light coming through, a lock clicked, the door opened. A slender, nattily-dressed man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a gun under his left arm looked out at me. "Foster?" he asked.

"Foster," I said.

"In here."

I followed him across an outer office, through a darkened inner office where a large man sat in a swivel chair looking out the window with an unlighted cigar between his lips, and into a large, plush room that was mostly thick rug and heavy drapery and pine paneling where the drapes ended.

A talented hand brushed against the places where my gun could have been if

it hadn't been lying back at the hotel or the dresser. Then the door closed behind me, with a slight soft swish of compressed air, and I was looking at Nick Armati.

He was built big and shiny, and as hard as a man can get leading the soft, easy life—which was plenty hard in Armati's case. He filled his wine-colored smoking jacket the way a pig fits its skin. His face was broad and heavily-planed with sharp lines around a thick petulant mouth. In that mellow light, his crisp black hair shone like polished metal. The thin mustache that followed the curve of his upper lip lent him a Spanish grandee touch. All he needed was a diamond-hilted rapier. He looked almost good enough to spit on.

"You say you have business with me, Foster," he said flatly, in a voice that gave the impression of leashed power. "Sit down and talk it up."

"Sure," I said, giving an impression of nothing at all. I sat down. "I'm Mike Foster and you're Nick Armati, and I've got business with you. Shall we go on from there?"

He flushed, just a faint tinge of color under the olive skin, and stood up slowly, flexing his shoulder muscles, and padded across the thick carpet to a section of bookcase and pulled out a dictionary. The bookcase swung silently and came to rest with a clink of cut-glass and made itself into a revolving bar. He poured drinks and sauntered back to the desk with the glasses in his hands and set them down on china coasters.

"If I understand you," he purred, "you have something on your mind beside bright cracks?"

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"You understand everybody you meet," I retorted, "or you wouldn't be where you are. I could sit here and drink your fine old brandy and have myself a whale of a time just looking at you, but that would get neither of us anywhere. Or I could offer you two grand in return for a certain favor, but that would be an insult to a man in your business. So I'll just tell you what I drifted down here to say, and go home to bed."

He lifted one eyebrow sardonically and went around the desk and lay back in his chair. "My business is knowing a good deal about people, Foster. For instance, I know you work for International Security, and I know you've been in town for two days. I know where you're staying, but I can't quite see what this visit has to do with me."

"Directly, nothing. But I've heard you aren't above renting room and board to boys who need peace and quiet for their nerves. A man in that business would get to know a lot of people. And I do mean a man named Lionel Zackary."

"Who embezzled forty-seven thousand dollars in New York two years ago," Armati murmured. He buried his long, proud nose in his brandy glass and sighed. His sharp black eyes watched me over the rim.

"I get tired of saying it, but that's the rhyme."

"And just what am I supposed to know about Zackary?"

"He was hot two years ago. He's still warm. There are circulars out on him from the East coast to the Pacific, with complete descriptions, pix and two grand in reward money on his head. Yet he walks around this town as if he owned stock in city hall, dressed fit to kill, without a worry on his mind. And not a cop in the district touches him. The chief looks blank and murmurs, 'Ah, yes', and the boys in the front office lift their eyebrows and change the subject.

"You've got a nice soft thing here, Armati. I grant you that. You've copped your bets all along the line, and I doubt that I could touch you with any local law. But I could burn the hell out of you with the Federals. That's not a threat. It's just an arguing point. I'm no boy scout, and I'm not paid to right

the wrong or keep the peace. All I'm paid to do is get Zackary back to New York, even if I have to extradite him, and to recover whatever dough I can from the forty-seven grand he took originally. That's clear enough, eh?"

"Go on," he said throatily, still holding his glass at mouth level.

"Here's the deal. Turn in Zackary to me and I'll take him back to New York and book him there, and that's the last you'll hear of it. He goes away for a nice long rest and our slate is clean. Hang onto him, for whatever dough you're getting out of him for protection, and International will pour hot hell down your back."

"You take chances," Armati said softly. "Big messy chances, don't you, Foster?"

"Not as big as all that, Armati. Not so big I can't handle them if I have to."

He eyed me for a long time. Then he shrugged gracefully, put his glass down, ran his tongue over his full red lips. "Maybe you've got a deal. I'll let you know."

"When?"

"In the morning. When I make up my mind."

"Good enough. Just remember everybody's got a soft spot, Armati, no matter how tough he looks, and Zackary is yours."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, again softly. He touched a button under the rim of his desk, and the neat man with the horn-rimmed glasses came in as if he had been swinging on the door handle, and took my arm. I smiled politely and nodded back at Armati and nearly broke the neat man's hand getting it off me. I went out through the two outer offices, past the large silent man in the swivel chair, and out into the hall.

A CLOCK somewhere off in the heat haze was striking two o'clock when I keyed my way into my hotel room once more and threw my hat at the bed. A neon sign directly across the street was flickering off and on. I saw the hat hit the figure on the bed. I saw it roll over him and go scurrying across the floor into a far corner.

When I turned on the light I saw the man. He lay soft and limp and curled

up on the bed with his hands pressed over his belly, and on the stained coverlet beside him lay a .38 Police Special revolver that could have been the gun I left on the dresser when I went out—and was.

The man was Lionel Zackary.

I closed the door and leaned my back against it and stared him heavily in the eye. His naked feet hung puffed and scorched over the foot rest of the bed, and a cheap nicked lighter with an inch of wick hanging out lay on the floor near his shoes. Someone had given him the old royal hotfoot. I wondered if he had laughed much. I walked around the bed without looking at him again and peered out the window.

Across the street under the neon sign a car was parked, a long black job with an official look about it, and behind the wheel was a man who could have been Del Vecchio.

I was big enough to throw my weight around, and I had a company behind me, but neither the company nor I were big enough to buck this. I went over to my bag and dumped the shirts and suit on the floor and unlatched a hidden flap and took out a .380 Browning automatic pistol and slipped a spare clip in my pocket. The gun went under my coat, out of sight on the left side, but good for a right-hand cross draw or a fast pull with my left. Then I bolstered my spine with a fast drink that had body to it, and went about the business of tearing Zackary's clothes apart, savagely.

He had been plucked as clean as a Thanksgiving turkey. The boys weren't missing a bet that night. Even the heels of his shoes had been pried loose and tacked back on lightly. Whoever had done these things to him wasn't looking for last year's lottery coupon. I was bending over his shoes when I heard the footsteps in the hall, heavy official feet doing a heavy official job.

I straightened up and stepped to the door, drawing the Browning, yanked the door inward and shoved the muzzle of the pistol deep into Del Vecchio's belly. The muzzle jumped off a short rib. He gave a muffled squawk and started to reach for the gun on his hip and stopped when I leaned more weight into him. We stood

staring at each other with hard eyes and breathing on each other. When he knew I wasn't kidding he let out a long gasping sigh.

"In," I clipped through set teeth. I was hot and sweaty and mad—and I was tired of running around with my nose on the ground while everyone took turns kicking the seat of my pants. He came in, wetting his thin lips, looking down at the gun in his belly, and husked at me, "This isn't going to do you any good, Foster. You can't elbow your way out of a murder rap."

I kicked the door shut and sneered at him, "You with your wife and kids!" I grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around and laid the Browning across the back of his head, hard enough to tuck him away for an hour or so. He fell straight and heavy, gashing his face on the edge of the bureau as he went. I shucked his gun out from under his suit coat, a .38 Detective Special that was old enough to vote. Wrapping a pillow around the barrel, I took the bundle into the closet and pulled the trigger once. The report was loud, but sufficiently muffled to make the guy next door think a truck was back-firing somewhere along the block, if he wanted to think about it at all. I beat out the smoldering pillowcase, dumped it under the bed and tossed the gun on the coverlet beside Zackary, where mine had been. It wouldn't fool them long, but it would slow them up for awhile.

To wrap it up neatly, I picked up my own .38 and went into the bathroom, where I dropped the gun into the flush box and replaced the lid. I was feeling so good about it all, I even took time out to run cold water over the back of my neck to take the crimp out of it, before going back into the other room. I could have saved myself the time. I was right in line for the crimp of the year.

I walked back into my room, wiping my hands on a towel. For just the length of time it takes a man to grow old, I teetered on my toes. While I wavered back and forth, still holding the towel stupidly in one hand, Toni Armati, her cameo-like face wan, turned swiftly from the bed where Zackary lay, snatched up the Detective Special I had left there, and pulled the trigger.

THE report almost knocked my eardrums into the pit of my stomach. Gasping, I dropped the towel and flopped down on my knees, fanning out my hands. My nose bounced off the rug, and off the floor that lay a scant fraction of an inch under it. I stayed there, listening to the quick, harsh sobbing of her breath and the startled movement that she made. Her gun clattered on the floor about five feet away and lay there, with just a wisp of thin bluish-white smoke from the muzzle. The smoke eddied in the draft coming in under the door and disappeared, like a bad dream.

I spat carpet dust and the taste of sulphur in my mouth. Raising my head a foot, I stared at her. Her eyes had rolled back a little in their sockets, showing the whites, and she looked as if she were going to be a very sick girl. She didn't seem the type to go around shooting men, even comparative strangers, in dingy hotel rooms. I rolled over and got to my feet and picked up the Detective Special and tossed it back on the bed.

"That was close enough, baby, to teach you better. You damn near shot my head off."

I caught Toni as she fell. Her head rolled back over my arm and an antique locket fastened around her full smooth throat by a thin gold chain jumped to the length of its coil, then fell to the floor. It was strictly fake, as far as the old gold and cut glass trade was concerned. But it was a nicely done fake, and too much money from where I stood for her to play around with.

Easing her down on the bed, away from Zackary's body, I retrieved the locket and dropped it into my pocket. Along the hall doors were rattling in their frames, cautiously, as doors do when a gun goes off like that, and curiosity was beginning to make its small, snoopy, insistent noises.

There was nothing I could do to cover up. Nothing I could do but get out of there. I went into the bathroom and got a glass of water and bathed the girl's face with it, until she moaned and her dark eyelashes flickered. I kicked my suitcase under the bureau, and hitched Toni's arm around my neck. I pulled her up until she was swaying dizzily beside me, and we

went like that out into the hall and along the hall to the head of the stairs.

Then I turned my head and used the tone of voice and face Del Vecchio would have used, and snarled at the peering eyes and wary stares. "Well, what in hell you all staring at? Get your snoots back inside those rooms and mind your own business before I have the whole joint padlocked!"

With that we went untidily down the stairs, bouncing from the rail to the wall, but staying on our feet. The sneering bellhop in the tight pants was leaning indolently against the front desk.

I stopped, and Toni moaned through her teeth and leaned her face against my coat. I didn't think she could get as far as the parking lot. I said, harshly, to the bellhop, "See that long black car across the street, kid?"

He unhooked his eyes from the girl, moistened his lips, and looked at the car Del Vecchio had used. He nodded.

"Get it over here," I ordered. He nodded again, without the smirk now, and his heels made sharp clattering noises on the lobby floor and across the pavement. The car's motor purred into life and the car made a wide illegal U-turn in the middle of the block and coasted back outside the hotel, stopping with the engine turning over.

I said, under my breath, "Come on, baby. Use your legs. Only twenty steps. Only ten. Only five . . ." She half-fell across the seat, bracing herself with her hands. I ran around to the other side and got in behind the wheel, as another car, equally long and silent, cut in ahead of us and pulled up with a faint squeal of rubber on macadam.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell of a Sleuth

A HEAVY-SET man wearing a carelessly expensive evening jacket stepped from the car and paused, watching us curiously. Another man, the same stolid character who had been mangling his silent cigar in Armati's office earlier that evening, got out on the other side and stretched himself. He peeled the canvas cover away from the

object he was holding under his arm, just far enough for me to make out the wicked barrel of a cut-down riot pump gun. He seemed bored.

He said clearly, to the gaping bellhop, "Beat it, kid." The kid went, silent as a damp leaf falling off a tree, and we were all alone on the street.

I said, through my teeth, "String along with me, Toni. Hang on tight."

Her voice was low, hoarse. "Why should I be with you? That Del Vecchio told me you killed Lionel. Why should I try to help you after that?"

"You saw what happened to Zackary, up there. You think that if Del Vecchio had been on the level he would have brought you along with him on a pinch like that? You know from what Mrs. Armati must have told you that I wanted Zackary alive. And you know what kind of a sweet guy this Nick is. How do you vote, lady?"

She hesitated. Then, after a little time, her hand moved slowly, sliding along the seat, and closed over my fingers and tightened, and she rocked my hand back and forth, just enough to make it worthwhile.

Armati's heels were as crisp as the wave in his hair. He leaned against the side of the car and poked his long nose in at me. He said, "I told you once, the chances you take are too messy for a man in your line of business. Do you step out, or do I have Danny help you along?"

I shrugged and stepped out, and his hand moved over my hip and lifted the Browning from its nest. He stood there, idly juggling the gun on his hand.

"My boys aren't too bright. Especially that dumb flatfoot Del Vecchio. You can

never trust a cop, Foster, not even a crooked one. Which one of you has the locket Zachary gave to little Toni here? You'll tell me, now, or what I will do to the girl you won't like at all. Nor will I, for that matter."

I licked my lips and glanced at Danny, who was leaning against the trunk compartment of Armati's slick heap, snuggling the buckshot-gun under his arm. I said:


"What do we get out of it, Armati?"

He shrugged. "The locket contains the key Zackary hid in it before he put it where he thought no one would look—around his girl friend's neck. He had sore feet. Do you think you're any threat to me? Stop talking and give me the thing."

I put my hand in my pocket and fished out the locket that had fallen from around Toni's neck in the hotel room, and let it drop into his outstretched palm. He nodded, almost indifferently. He dropped the Browning into his side pocket, flicked with his thumbnail at the catch on the locket, and tried to force it open. It stuck. He made an irritable motion with his hand, and flung the locket, hard, against the curb.

It sprang open and a small Yale key tinkled to the pavement near the hotel entrance, a key that would open the safety deposit vault where Zackary had cached his loose change. If I hadn't come along to give Armati a good cover-up for his murder, an alibi that would keep his underworld business rep in good order, Zachary might have gone right on living.

Armati made a quick, almost imperceptible motion with his hand, and his watchdog pushed himself away from the



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car and lumbered toward a hotel entrance.

Armati's belly would be soft, a desk chair belly. I hit him there with every pound I had in me. Nick gave a retching moan and folded over my arm. I put my knee into his sagging face and knocked him over on his back. His head made a pulpy sound on the macadam.

Danny yelled hoarsely. I spun on one heel, flexing my fingers to loosen the numbness in them. He was wheeling the riot gun sloppily, straddling his legs awkwardly as he tried to pick up the key and fire his cannon at the same time. I saw the flare of muzzle blast as his finger contracted too soon on the trigger, and heard the roar.

He missed me by a good five feet, but Armati's body to my left jumped perceptibly as the full load tore into him and spattered off the road. Toni screamed once, sharply. Danny, rattled and still off-balance, pumped his action and whipped the gun over to cover her, slamming his back against the front of the hotel to steady himself. Glass in the rear of the car flaked.

HE DIDN'T get another chance at her. From the entrance to the hotel, a gun blasted four times. Danny pushed himself away from the wall. He moved grotesquely across the sidewalk, reeling, clutching the riot gun to his belly.

The tall lank disheveled figure of Del Vecchio, hatless, moved against the light from the lobby. He stepped out onto the sidewalk, his old Detective Special jutting from his fist, took deliberate aim at Danny and clicked the gun. He pulled the trigger three times more, and got clicks. He looked down at the gun in his hand and swore a large bitter oath and threw the gun at Danny, just as Danny lined him up and pulled his trigger for the last time.

Del Vecchio coughed. He took a stumbling step backward. His shirtfront blossomed small spots of red. He fumbled self-consciously at his open jacket and pulled it tight across his chest and buttoned it with clumsy fingers. He walked crookedly over to where Danny lay on his face on the sidewalk and gave him a tentative kick. Painfully, he bent over and retrieved his gun and rubbed it absently against his leg, before putting it away un-

der his coat. From where I stood by the car, I could see the sweat breaking out on his smooth brown face.

I started around the car as Toni opened the door, and caught the handle. My hands were shaking, and my face felt oddly cold and lifeless. I stared down into her dark, frightened eyes. There was a rusty bitter taste in my mouth. I croaked, "You know how to drive this heap?"

If she heard me she gave no sign. I grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her roughly. "Look," I snarled tightly, "this is Mike Foster, baby. This is the guy who brings you trouble every time he sees you. I said, can you move this thing away from here?"

Toni looked at me vacantly and nodded her head. I pushed her into the car and slammed the door hard. She made a choking sobbing noise in her throat and leaned over suddenly, her lovely face urgent, her voice almost harsh. "Not like this, Mike. I'll see you again. Please!"

"Tomorrow," I told her. I could hear a far-off wail that was nothing else but cops, loaded for trouble. Right then I could have written a book about trouble. "The next day. Sometime. I don't know when. I don't even know what I'm saying or why the hell you should want to see me again. But I'll be there. Now will you get the hell away from here?"

She reached up and pulled my head down and kissed me, hard, on the mouth, and then the car was gone. I licked my lips and tasted something that might have been tears. The sirens were nearer.

I was all alone then, with Del Vecchio. He was on his knees beside Danny, his face a blotchy gray. He tilted his head toward the sound of the nearing prowling cars, and his lips quirked in a hard grimace. "That does it," he whispered.

I fumbled a cigarette out of my pocket and walked over to Danny's body and began scrabbling around until I felt the cold metallic touch of the key. When I stood up, it was tucked safely in my shirt pocket. Nobody in that town was big enough just then to take it away from me.

I stood up and said to Del Vecchio, flatly, "I don't know how bad you've got it. I don't even know why you bothered to pull a crazy stunt like that when you

(Please continue on page 97)

LETHALLY YOURS . . .

By VAL
GENDRON



She turned—and he
saw the naked hatred
in her eyes. . . .

*The lady is luscious and alluring,
thought killer Brad—but her frame
is showing.*

“COME IN,” Linda called. Her
voice was soft as silk and sent
the usual shivers of excitement
racing along his spine.

Brad opened the door of her hotel suite.

tossed his hat on the hall table and walked into the living room.

She said petulantly, "You're twenty minutes late."

"I got delayed." He sat down on one of the moss green, satin-covered chairs. He looked out of place. Brad Munford wasn't the sort of man to be sitting on satin-covered chairs. He looked like a little, insignificant bank clerk, and that was exactly what he wanted to look like.

Only his eyes as he watched Linda were not meek or mild.

"I've got a job for you." She ran her hand lightly through her golden hair. It was as artificial as everything about her. Her long, pointed fingernails were lacquered black, and the massed diamonds on her arms gleamed in the lamplight.

Brad's eyes never left her. They seemed to soak up the curves of her body as a thirsty man absorbs water.

"What kind of a job?" he asked thickly.

"The usual trigger job." She twisted the rings on her fingers.

"How much is there in it?" His tongue moistened his lips. The only time Linda ever called him was when she wanted someone put out of the way. That was getting to be pretty often. As a matter of fact, it was getting to be a profitable business.

Her exclusive dress shop on Madison Avenue was a swell front. Nobody suspected her, and Brad never attracted attention.

It was a swell set-up.

Linda stretched. "There's not a cent in it," she said softly.

He made an abrupt gesture with his hand. "Then count me out."

She only laughed. "You've always told me you'd do anything for me. Now the first time I ask you to do me a little favor, you refuse."

His eyes narrowed. This was something new and different. He'd known Linda for years and he'd never known her to do a thing without being paid.

"I'd be very grateful," she murmured.

"How grateful?"

"Very grateful."

Brad looked at her greedily. He judged Linda to be pushing forty, his own age. But she was one of those women who grow more desirable with age.

Maybe it was the mystery she surrounded herself with that attracted him. He knew absolutely nothing about her, save that she ran that dress shop and knew how to get in touch with people who wanted their associates removed permanently.

"Who is the guy?"

"Roger Burton. He's president of Wilton College about fifty miles up the Hudson." She poured two drinks, handed him one.

Brad's face twisted in disgust. "A college professor! Whatya want to kill a guy like that for?"

"Drink up," she directed. "That's strictly my own business."

He shook his head. "I don't get it. And when I don't get the pitch, it's no dice." He gulped his drink. "We been through plenty of jobs together, and you always played square with me. How do I know what's up here?"

"It's all right, I tell you," she said irritably. "No one would ever suspect a cheap Third Avenue killer of taking a pot shot at a college professor. You'd be a hundred percent in the clear."

He set his drink down hard. "That's what I don't get. So I'm a cheap Third Avenue killer. That's okay. But I'm not cheap enough to pull a trigger just for the hell of it. I gotta have a reason. Like..." He rubbed his thumb and third finger together.

"I should think I'd be reason enough," she said silkily.

His mind flamed. You can't do business with a dame like Linda for half a dozen years and not see her.

"Yeah, baby," he said thickly. "You're plenty reason. Where is the guy?"

From the belt of her negligee she took a folded scrap of paper. It was a map of Wilton college torn from the back of a catalogue. The president's house was marked with a small, inked cross.

"You go this way," she pointed with a long fingernail. "There's a garden here. He's in his study every night from tenthirty to one-thirty. Use a silencer and no one will find him till the next morning. By that time you'll be back in New York."

"How'll I know it's the right guy?" he demanded.

Linda handed him a newspaper clipping

with a photograph. "Got everything?"

It was only then that he noticed her eyes. Every time before when she had sent him on a job they had been cool, business-like and unemotional. This time they were fiercely malicious, vengeful.

Brad Munford, who'd been killing men for a living since his late teens, felt fingers of fear clutching his disciplined nerves.

A professional killer is like a professional hunter. He kills coldly, deliberately, with the minimum of effort. He took life as casually as he lit another cigarette.

But this was different. Linda's eyes made it different.

He walked out of her apartment at Park Avenue near 89th Street and cut over to Third Avenue. He walked down Third clear to 42nd Street trying to get the pitch straight in his mind.

He went into a bar and had a drink, but that didn't help.

A dame like Linda is as dangerous as she is desirable. This might be some sort of trap. Maybe she'd found herself a new trigger-man and wanted to get rid of him.

He was strictly a business man and he didn't much fancy giving a death on the house. He paid his way, and he expected everybody else to pay theirs.

Besides, killing a college professor was a stupid thing to do. You shot down a thug in a dark alley, or a racketeer at the wheel of his car. You gave it to a two-timing dame that some guy was mad at. People like that were playing the same game you were, taking the same chances.

But a college professor wasn't in the game. Kind of like shooting a doe out of season.

If he'd played the game straight he would have waited a couple of days and taken a train up the Hudson, got off a station before the college town at dusk, done the job, walked to another town and taken a bus back to the city.

That was the way Brad should have played it, but he didn't.

INSTEAD he drove out in his second-hand coupe and looked the town over. It was one of those quiet little places that made you think you're a thousand miles from nowhere. The clerk in the drugstore where he stopped for lunch even talked to him about the weather.

The weather was swell. A nice, sunny day with just enough wind to keep it cool, and the smell of growing things like perfume in the air.

Wilton College was one of those little ivy-covered affairs like you see sometimes in the movies. Kids walked around hand in hand, or stood talking in groups. It wasn't in the same world with Third Avenue and dames like Linda.

It was a funny pitch.

Along toward evening he spotted Roger Burton. He was walking away from the campus with a couple of books in his hand and a whole bevy of kids trailing after him and looking up in his face like he had the answer to everything.

Brad scratched his head. What did a guy like that have to do with a dame like Linda and a hired killer like himself? He passed the guy and looked him straight in the eye and wondered if the tall, distinguished man knew he was looking in the face of death.

It was a damn funny pitch.

Brad Munford was not a smart man. Killing was all he knew anything about. He knew exactly and precisely where to put it to silence a man quickest. He knew where to put it, when the guy was supposed to live a while and talk. He knew where to put it when it was supposed to do nothing more than scare the living daylight out of a guy.

Somehow he didn't like putting a bullet between Roger Burton's eyes. Burton wasn't fair game.

Brad laughed. Could be he was getting soft. He tried to think of Linda and how swell it would be to have her be grateful. It felt fine. It felt so fine he didn't mind so much about putting that bullet between Roger Burton's eyes.

Only if it was a trap she was laying for him, it might be a good idea to learn what connection there was between them.

There was the difficulty. If he went to a library or a newspaper office and looked the guy up, and then a couple of days later the guy got bumped off, somebody might remember.

He would have to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Maybe the newspapers would give him a line when they wrote the guy's obituary. Or maybe if he used that silencer he would have time after

he'd done the job to ease the whole joint.

So he played it straight. He bought a ticket to Albany and dropped off the train just after dark at the town this side of Wilton College. He walked along the highway, well out of the headlights of the passing cars. It took him two hours to walk to the campus. And all the while he was remembering Linda's eyes when she sent him on this job.

He found the garden without difficulty. The study window was dark. He held his watch to catch the light of the moon. It showed ten-fifteen. He was a quarter of an hour early.

He caught himself hoping the professor wouldn't come to his study tonight. There was something about the guy he liked. He thought about Linda, concentrated on the curves of her body. It wasn't hard.

The ground was hard. He would leave no footprints where he stood and waited. He would have liked a cigarette, but he was too smart for that. He relaxed his muscles, waited patiently.

At ten-thirty on the dot, the lights flashed on in the study. He could see the professor walking across to the old desk, putting down his books, adjusting the lamp. Then he walked over to the french window and opened it.

It was going to be like shooting a clay pigeon. This guy didn't know any of the rules. Roger Burton opened the window, stood there breathing the night air as he thoughtfully tapped down the tobacco in his pipe.

Everything he did made it easier. With the window open there wouldn't be a chance that the small tinkle of falling glass might alarm anyone.

Brad wondered if the professor knew how close death was. He took a small automatic from his pocket, leisurely checked the silencer and the safety.

There was a knock at the study door. Brad heard it easily where he stood.

The professor turned. "Hello Kitty," he said. His voice was warm and deep. A friendly voice.

"Hi, Dad!"

Brad was used to dames. He'd seen all kinds of them in his life. Yet this one took his breath away. She was young and slender like a breath of clean, fresh air,

with a springing step and dark brown hair. It made her face strangely pale.

She had a tiny white kitten in her arms and it mewed softly as she came across the room. There was something disturbingly familiar about the girl.

Roger Burton smiled down at her. "It must be something important for you to break in on me like this."

"It is," she said seriously. "It's terribly important. Jed wants to take me over to town for a drive and a soda. I know it's late, but we won't be gone long."

"Have you come to ask my permission?" Roger Burton laughed good-naturedly.

"Not exactly," she assured him. "But I'm worried about the cat."

"So!" He regarded her questioningly.

"It's not used to being left alone."

"I see," her father said seriously. "So I've been promoted to cat-sitter. Very well, but on one condition only."

"Yes?"

"After you and Jed are married, you promise faithfully to promote me to baby-sitter."

"It's a deal," she agreed.

Brad watched her as she hurried from the room. It was good and not so good. She'd be gone for an hour anyway, and he'd be perfectly safe in that time, but she was bound to come in when she got back to pick up the kitten. Damn the cat. That cut his time pretty close.

Roger Burton stood at the window scratching the cat's ear and murmuring comforting words to it. Brad waited until he heard the car drive away from the other side of the house.

The professor went back to his desk and sat down. He still held the kitten in his arms.

THERE was no more time to waste. Brad aimed and fired. Roger Burton was a sitting duck; he didn't know any of the rules of the game. He slumped forward on the desk. The kitten in his arms cried anxiously, wriggled free of his arms and stepped daintily onto the desk.

Brad slipped the automatic into his pocket and went through the french window into the study. It was so quiet in the room he could hear the soft ticking of the clock on the desk. He walked over and

looked down on the dead Roger Burton.

On the desk, the kitten industriously washed its face, cleaned away a tiny smear of blood from its white fur.

Roger Burton seemed still and small in death. Brad walked gingerly around the book-lined room. The titles on the books told him nothing; he never read books. If Roger Burton had been a thug, or a hired killer like himself, his room might have told Brad something. As it was, the room was as silent as the man slumped forward over the desk.

Brad moved quickly. He wanted to find the connection between the dead man and Linda and find it before the girl came and spread the alarm.

It was the white kitten who found it for him. Playing with a mechanical pencil on the desk, she chewed out the eraser, and Brad saw the roll of white tissue.

It was the carbon of a letter to Linda and he knew the minute he laid eyes on it that it was what he wanted.

Dear Linda,

I simply cannot tolerate your interfering with Kitty's happiness. It's true that Jed is a rich man's son, and that he is very much in love. But she believes her mother is dead, and discovering her connection with you would permanently damage any chance she might have for happiness.

I realize that as your husband I failed you in every way. There was nothing in my humdrum, prosaic life that could satisfy your pathological craving for money and excitement. I have been willing to pay you all these years because I felt I had failed you. But you cannot interfere with Kitty.

I am perfectly acquainted with your real business, masked by that dress shop, and if you do not leave Kitty alone, I shall be forced to turn over to the police the information I have gathered. A copy of this letter has already been placed in my safety deposit vault which will be opened in case of my death.

Brad wasn't sure of the meaning of the words pathological and prosaic, but he got the general idea. He had the pitch at last.

He didn't like it.

Roger Burton didn't belong to the same world of slinking shadows and sudden death that Brad did. It didn't seem to Brad that he had deserved death. He knew now what had been so familiar about Kitty—she had reminded him of Linda.

It's funny about dames like Linda. They can get in a man's blood, drive him half crazy, make him do almost anything. But once the magic spell is broken, the whole thing turns to loathing.

Brad had his own distorted code of ethics. But he couldn't convince himself that Roger Burton deserved the bullet between his eyes.

A dame like Linda should play the game straight. When she sent him out to kill Roger Burton with that vengeful, malicious look in her eyes, he should have known. And she'd wanted a death on the house, a killing for free.

* * *

Brad moved quickly. He stepped noiselessly from the house. It was eleven o'clock. He had half an hour before Kitty would come home and find what she must find in the study.

He cut across back yards until he was out of town, then he crossed a couple of open fields. It got him well away from town on a deserted country road. He

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walked north away from the city. He was taking no chances. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it. Maybe it was a trap after all.

There was no point in walking into one of these little towns where everyone knew everyone else's business in the middle of the night. He'd wait until daylight to catch a bus back to New York.

He played his hand cautiously and it took him a whole day to get back to New York. He picked up a paper and stopped in at a diner for coffee and doughnuts. He wasn't going back to his room, not for a while, and he was staying a good long way away from his usual haunts on Third Avenue. You can never tell with a dame like Linda.

Roger Burton's death hadn't made the front page. It was buried in the center of the tabloid. The paper called it a mystery killing and there were no clues. There never were when Brad Munford did a job.

At ten o'clock he dialed Linda from a pay booth. He let it ring three times and hung up. Then he dialed again. That was the usual signal. She answered at once the second time.

Her voice was soft as silk. "Hello, darling," she murmured. "I've been waiting for your call. I see by the papers everything went off okay."

"Not quite," he said curtly.

"What happened?" She seemed only mildly surprised.

"Why didn't you tell me that guy was your husband?" he asked.

There was a moment of utter silence. He could feel the tension along the wire. "Does it make any difference? Besides," she laughed provocatively, "how did you find out?"

"The copy of the letter that should have been in the safety deposit vault," he told her. "Weren't you taking a long chance?"

"Oh, that." She tried to dismiss it. "I knew Roger. I knew he'd never actually do anything he threatened.

"Want it?" he demanded.

"Of course, silly. Bring it on up to the apartment."

"Nope," he snapped. "I think maybe you're hot. You come to me."

"Okay, you're the boss," she agreed.

Now he turned on the oil. "I'm only thinking of you, baby," he murmured softly. "I'm afraid the cops may be tailing you. You oughta know how much I think of you when I offer to give you the letter. That oughta tell you everything."

Her voice was natural again when she said, "I trust you, Brad. We two have to trust each other. Where'll you be?"

"Come to the corner of Broadway and 44th Street, just as the theater crowds let out. Keep crossing and recrossing the street. I'll pass it to you then. If you're being tailed, no one'll be the wiser."

He didn't wait for an answer. He just hung up. He had baited the trap.

Afterwards he went to the bus station and bought a ticket to the West Coast. He wasn't going back to Third Avenue for a long time. There would be work for him out West. He had a reputation as a nice, clean worker.

He spotted her long before she saw him. It was easy in those swell clothes she wore. He waited until the crowds were packed tight.

He snaked out his automatic.

"Hello, Linda," he said in her ear. She turned and he saw the naked hatred in her eyes. At the same instant he saw the weapon in her hand. It was a small caliber job, tiny enough to be hidden in the palm of her hand. It had been a trick. Linda had meant to kill him.

In the fleeting instant before he pressed the trigger next to her, he saw the expression in her eyes change to stark terror. She had read his mind as accurately as he had read hers.

The soft pop of the shots was drowned in the noise of the crowd, the blare of the taxis and the rumble of trucks. This was not going according to plan. He was getting it the same way he had dished it out so many times.

Darkness closed in around him. Linda had double-crossed him, but good. The last thing Brad thought of as he began his long journey into the unknown was whether he had settled the score with Roger Burton. He gasped, fell and his fingers clawed the dirty pavement.

The crowd carried Linda away from him. As the pain gripped him he heard somebody say, "A lady's fainted."

THRILL

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

EDITED BY T. T. FLYNN'S DETECTIVE ACTION

DOCKET



Sheila Young, one of movie hero Mike Morton's ex-gals, got wind of a crooked fix on the sensational tieup of Morton's new picture with the big horserace—and tipped off famous bookmaker Mr. Maddox.



When Mr. Maddox returned to his suite, he was greeted by the muscle-men of the crooked syndicate and their sinister warning, "Heard you were leaving town." Maddox wasn't—and the boys tried some trigger talk.



Dealing with the muscle-men, Mr. Maddox settled down to his telephones, contacting notorious bookmakers from Mexico to Maine in a vain attempt to unmask the gigantic fix. Then he called on Sheila.



She led him to a luscious corpse near the monogrammed cigarette stub of actor Mike Morton. . . . T. T. Flynn will tell Mr. Maddox' latest adventure—"Mr. Maddox' Phony-Finish"—in the December issue . . . out November 3rd.

SUCKER'S FURY

CHAPTER ONE

Fatal Flunkey

JOHNNY BARR said, "Pardon me, sir." The man in the dark coat did not answer or move. He was standing squarely in front of Johnny's car door. The parking lot was unlighted, and in the dusk of evening Johnny could not see his face. He could see only that the man was tall; that his shoulders were thick and sloping and his arms unusually long. Against the yellow of the convertible his shadow was somehow ape-like and sinister.

"Look, will you please move?"

Johnny was annoyed, and not a little uneasy. This would be a nice place for a stickup. He started to reach past the man to the car door, and one of the long arms whipped up. The man's fingers flexed, and the fingernails of his hand raked down the side of Johnny's face. With the other hand he struck Johnny lightly on the cheekbone. Then he turned and fled, his long coat flapping grotesquely around him as he rounded the corner of a building and disappeared.

Johnny stared after him. "What a character!" he muttered.

He was angry, but not angry enough to run after his odd assailant. After all, the guy was big, a full head taller than Johnny Barr. The damage he'd done was slight to what he could have done.

Johnny got into his car and dabbed the blood from his cheek. *I would have to run into a screwball*, he thought. *Taffy'll probably scream when she sees me. Well, let her scream—she ain't my girl.*

He got the convertible rolling, and

Because good-natured Johnnie rushed to meet another guy's flame—his life was going up in sparks.



By HENRY NORTON



**Suspense-Packed
Murder Novelette**

With a quick motion, the bartender
raised the blackjack. . . .

pulled out of the parking lot. There was no sign on the street of the odd stranger. He edged into the traffic on Barrier Street and skimmed cross-town until the bulk of Taffy's old but still respectable apartment house loomed ahead.

Other people could sit around the Radio Club and have a quiet evening—but not Johnny. The higher echelons at the Radio Club used him for an errand boy. They borrowed his car and let him pick up the check and gave him the low spot on the totem pole generally, because his living depended on their generosity.

This job tonight was a very good case in point. It was Bud Wright who had a date with Taffy Taylor, but Wright was talking business over one of the tables in the Radio Club. So, with no thought of being refused, he'd asked Johnny to pick the girl up and bring her back to the club. And since Johnny was well paid as a free-lance announcer on one of Bud's local broadcasts, he went.

Still, if it hadn't been for that queer, womanish attack in the parking lot, he would in all probability not have minded the errand in the least. Taffy was a gay young radio actress who lived alone, and she was subject to occasional spells of frank tenderness that might make the trip most rewarding.

Her apartment was on the fourth floor. It was not necessary to pass the mail desk in the old-fashioned lobby of the building, but Johnny Barr kept his handkerchief ready nonetheless, to avoid being seen in his scratched condition. He called the self-service elevator down from the fourth level, and inspected his face in the cage's mirror. Rows of angry red oozed blood on one cheek. The other was reddening over the cheekbone. Well, maybe Taffy'd have some first-aid material.

The buzzer got no answer. He knocked on her door, and finally tried the knob. It twisted under his hand. He went into the apartment. The lights were out.

"Taffy!" he called irritably.

On a building across the street a flashing neon sign came on, sending a glow into the room and lighting up the body on the floor. Then the sign went out, and darkness hung in the room for a moment. The sign came on again, glowed briefly, and flicked out. Johnny Barr spun around and

immediately thumbed the light switch.

It was Taffy Taylor, her throat bruised, quite dead.

With an effort he tore his gaze from the girl's body. Other things about the room clamored for attention—Taffy's big black plastic purse with the lucite catch, open and upended on the bed; an overturned chair across the room; two glasses on the dresser, one still containing the remainder of a whiskey highball. Some of her clothes were laid out on the foot of the bed.

He edged warily around the sprawled body on the rug, picked up the phone. Promptly, the voice of the old man on the apartment switchboard answered: "Yes, Mr. Barr?"

A cold hand squeezed Johnny's vitals. "How did you know who it was?" he asked.

"Why, I—" The clerk was surprised and at a loss. "Why, when you made that other call a while ago you told me you'd call back and let me know if she was hurt bad."

"What other call!" Johnny shouted.

"Well, Mr. Barr, I've got it right here. It was Atwood—wait a minute—Atwood 6111."

"Oh," Johnny said. "Well, call the police."

"Yes, sir," said the old man. "Let's see, that's Atwood— Oh, you want to talk to them again? They're on their way up now, if that's what you want."

"Then skip it," Johnny said.

HE REPLACED the handset, cutting off the old man's questions. He turned and looked at the door, and as if on signal it opened and two men came in.

The first one was short, with a weathered face and gray eyes that flicked out at Johnny Barr from under hooded, heavy brows. Mulvaney of Homicide growled. "Who're you?"

"I'm Johnny Barr," said Johnny. "I just now came over to get Taffy—Miss Taylor—and found her like this. I was just calling the police."

Mulvaney stared coldly. "How'd you get your face scratched?"

"Why, I—you know, that was a funny deal. A guy was hanging around my car when I started over here, and he clawed my face."

Mulvaney said slowly, "I've heard maybe a thousand stories, but that's absolutely the worst."

"Well, it's what happened," Johnny said. "What about the girl?"

"Well," Mulvaney said. "I walk into a room where there's a strangled woman and evidences of drinking, and a slight struggle. You're standing here with your face all scratched up, waiting for the police department to answer your call."

"You think I—you think I did it?"

Mulvaney turned away from Johnny Barr and spoke to the tall, thin-faced man who had come into the room with him. "Call the wrecking squad, Dolan. Get Bialkin to work on the neighbors and employees."

It was fairly obvious to Johnny Barr that the man in the dark coat had been waiting for the sole purpose of marking Johnny's face. The whole point of sending Johnny over to pick up Taffy was to get him on the scene of the murder at a time when he would be a suspect and when the cops would be arriving.

He stiffened in sudden surprise. Then it had to be Bud Wright, didn't it? Bud was the one who'd sent him here. But Bud had spent the past two hours at the Radio Club, in plain view of a dozen people. As pleasant as it was to think of Bud's being gassed for this killing, that didn't fit.

No, it had to be someone who wanted Taffy dead; who knew that Johnny Barr was a willing errand boy who'd be going over to pick her up, and who knew very close to the time when he would go.

In a surprisingly short time the technical work was done and Mulvaney planted himself in front of Johnny's chair. "Well, Barr," he said. "How about it?"

"I think we can figure it out," Johnny said.

Mulvaney said, "Figure what out?"

"Who killed her. It's got to be someone from around the Radio Club. Someone who knew I was coming after her, and exactly when. It's got to be one of her friends."

Mulvaney sat down on the bed and looked at Barr. "Know something?" he said. "All those qualifications fit you just fine."

"But the man who scratched me!"

"That could be a lie," said Mulvaney.

"Well, it isn't," Johnny said doggedly.

Mulvaney sighed. "You could make this a lot easier," he said. "From what Branden tells us—the apartment house manager—this gal was popular. A good lawyer might get you off with a suspended sentence."

The killer had planned well. Mulvaney was content with Johnny Barr, scratched of face, and on the scene at the murder. He wasn't going to look any farther. Johnny Barr was elected to do one last errand for his friends.

Go to the gas chamber for me, Johnny—that's a good guy!

Mulvaney waited against the mounting wall of Johnny Barr's stubborn anger. Finally he shrugged and stood up. "Okay," he said. "Come on. We'll go down to the hall and talk about it for a while."

CHAPTER TWO

Miraged in Clues

AT THE HALL, which was police headquarters, Johnny and Mulvaney and a man called Perkins sat around a small desk in a small office and talked. Mulvaney put an end to the conversation by rising abruptly. "Well, I guess that's all, Barr. You can go."

"You aren't holding me?"

"Why should we?" said Mulvaney. "You told us you didn't do it."

"Well, that's fine." Johnny said heartily. "I've been planning to take a little vacation trip soon, anyway. Thought I'd go down to Guatemala, as a matter of fact. If you won't be needing me—"

"Better stay in town."

"So much for that," said Johnny Barr. . . .

He found his convertible in the reserved section in front of the police station. He drove back to the parking lot and went back to the Radio Club. Nothing much had changed. The evening's gayety was a little further advanced. There were a few more people. He did not see Bud Wright, and for that he was grateful. It would give him a few minutes to think what he was going to tell Bud, how he was going to explain not bringing back Taffy.

A girl said, "Hi, Johnny!"

Somebody said, at a table to his left, "There's Johnny Barr. He's a good—"

Johnny passed them without turning his head, and climbed up on a bar stool. The barman did not appear to notice his arrival, but he came over in a moment with a double bourbon and water. He thumped the glass down in front of Johnny Barr and smirked.

"Early for that kinda stuff, ain't it?" he said.

"I don't remember your face," Johnny said airily, "but your manners are damn familiar!"

"You ain't foolin' me, bud," Arnold said.

Johnny liked Arnold. There was a barman who knew his drinks, and his place.

"You ain't foolin' me," Arnold repeated now. "You start out to pick up the little chick Bud Wright is currently dating. You show up without her an hour late, an' your puss is all scratched up."

"So everybody knew about it?" Johnny asked. He tried for a bantering tone, but it wasn't good.

Arnold said nothing in reply, but made an elaborate ceremony of laughing into the sleeve of his neat white bar jacket.

"Where's Bud?" Johnny asked.

Arnold's smile faded, and he turned to study Barr's face. He turned again, then, to fill an order and Johnny watched the explosive play of light across his crisp black hair, against the white sunburst of his teeth in a lean, tanned face.

He's a better man than most of these guys he serves drinks to, Johnny thought. Could be I'll need a good man on my side.

Arnold came back presently and placed another drink in front of Johnny Barr, just as Johnny finished the first one. It was nice timing, but you expected that from Arnold. He knew more about the drinking habits of the members than most of them did themselves.

Arnold said, "What's bitin' you, my friend?"

Johnny picked up his glass, and put it down again without taking a drink. The need to talk to someone was on him, urgent and compelling. What he had seen, and what he feared, were too much for him to handle alone. So he spoke through

lips gone suddenly stiff. "I'm in a jam, Arnold!"

"I ain't surprised."

"Honest—Taffy's been murdered!"

The towel in Arnold's hand hesitated for only an instant, and then went on polishing the already gleaming bar. Arnold's head came closer as he leaned to reach an imaginary blur on the shining wood. "How does that make you in a jam?"

Johnny told him, interrupted once or twice while Arnold went down the bar to supply demands for drinks. The barman might have been listening to the latest in parlor stories for all that showed in his face, but Johnny found concern in the tightening of the man's eyes, in the slowing of movements usually smooth and flowing.

WHEN the story was done, minutely detailed, Johnny saw with something like relief that there was no disbelief or suspicion on Arnold's face. Johnny's spirits lifted a little. Maybe he wasn't in too bad a spot, after all. If Arnold believed him, maybe the police believed him.

Arnold said, "It's been nice knowin' you."

"But hell," Johnny protested. "They can't convict me of something I didn't do!"

Arnold's grin was devoid of mirth. "They can, an' they will!"

"They can't prove I did it!"

The barman laughed. "The case they'll make out of that—they won't need another thing!"

"But, Arnold! But—" And Johnny stopped because there was no more to say.

Johnny, he told himself, there's no future in being nice and obliging. Maybe you'd do better as a rat!

Arnold was talking again. "You might have an out."

"What?"

"You might turn up the real killer."

"Me?"

"It's all I can see."

"Oh, fine," said Johnny Barr. "Just like that I become a sleuth! Hell, Arnold, I wouldn't know how to start on a deal like that."

Arnold said, "You don't have to."

"No," said Johnny slowly. "I can just give up."

"That's the old fight," said Arnold. "That gas only takes a minute, and then, just think—no income tax, no hangovers, no sponsors—"

"How would you like to go to hell?"

Arnold made a fresh drink, and Johnny accepted it in moody silence. A tall brunette came over to the bar stool by Johnny. She placed her large purse on the bar and leaned toward Johnny so that her shoulder was touching him, and the soft scent of musky perfume enveloped him. Her voice was husky and tantalizing.

"You may buy me a drink if you ask prettily."

Mona Webster was show girl size, with curves that smote the senses from every direction, and a handsome, impassive smile, and Johnny had bought her many drinks.

But tonight he said:

"I'm out of the free drink business, chickadee. Wait for Hampton and let him get you drunk—or buy it yourself."

She studied him through narrowed eyes. "You're a little out of character tonight, aren't you, dear?" she said. "This club's got enough heels in it already. You're getting into fast competition."

"Beat it, honey," he told her.

She went away with dignity, and in spite of himself Johnny Barr enjoyed watching the slow, loose grace of her retreating body. He turned to see Arnold's eyes upon him, shining with malicious pleasure.

"Barr bites barfly," Arnold said. "I've seen everything!"

Johnny said, "You probably will, bud, before the night is out. By the way, where did you say Bud Wright is?"

"He went out with Howard Hampton. It wasn't more than a minute or two after you left."

"Oh," Johnny said thoughtfully, "if Bud was sneaking out to commit a small murder he wouldn't take a witness along. Certainly not an unfriendly witness like Howard."

"Unfriendly is right," Arnold agreed. "I had an idea they were going outside to swap punches, as it was. They'd been arguing all evening."

"Couple of chisellers." Johnny Barr dismissed them briefly. "Who else was around when Bud asked me to go for Taffy? There was—"

"Hell, I can remember from the drinks," Arnold said. "Barney Gatch and his babe. Denny Wilson at the bar. And Cliff dropped in to pal around with the customers."

"Umm." Johnny's mind was busy with the picture. Barney Gatch, the black-haired, gifted, indolent writing chief of Station KKD, with Jenny Dale, the slatternly actress he introduced as his fiancée, employed on all the dramatic shows he produced, and offended in public when he got drunk.

"You know, I don't like that Denny Wilson," Arnold said. "Sometimes I'm almost scared of the way he looks. He gets a gleam in his eye like Jay Raymond had about two days before he hung himself in his basement."

"What's one more screwball in this club?"

PSORIASIS

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After years of research, many noted medical scientists have reached an opinion that Psoriasis results from certain internal disorders. A number of physicians have for the last five years been reporting satisfactory treatment of this malady with a new formula called LIPAN—taken internally. LIPAN, a combination of glandular substances and vitamins, attacks what is now believed to be the internal cause of Psoriasis, and tends to aid in the digestion and assimila-

tion of foods. LIPAN is harmless, non-habit forming, and can be taken with confidence by both young and old. Physician inquiries are invited. Ask your druggist for LIPAN or write us direct for free booklet. Or, order 3 month's supply of LIPAN—bottle containing 180 tablets—at once, enclosing check or money order for \$8.50.

Spirit & Company, Dept. PF-11, Waterbury, Conn.

"He was nuts for Taffy Taylor," Arnold said.

"I didn't know that," Johnny mused. "Maybe I'll have a little talk with him."

HE PICKED up his glass and went down the bar. Denny Wilson sat hunched over a rum drink of zombie proportions, forehead propped on his hands. When he was the drunkest and the saddest, Denny wrote convulsing comedy dialogue for the Hampton agency. Just now he looked in condition to write the funniest show of his career.

"Hiya, Denny," Johnny said carelessly. "Where you been keeping yourself?"

Did you kill her?

Wilson lifted his glass with two careful hands and drank. A drop fell from his lips to the bar. He looked at Johnny Barr with glazed eyes. Softly, he said, "I am a stranger and afraid in a world I never made."

"Sure, sure," Johnny said. "Seen Taffy lately?"

Wilson's mouth twisted. "Threw me out," he said with difficulty. "But hell, the postman always rings twice!"

Johnny picked up his glass and went away. No wonder he writes comedy, Johnny thought. If he wrote what was really inside him, he'd tear himself to shreds. He couldn't kill, not even himself!

From a nearby table Jenny Dale raised the face of a fallen cherub.

"H'lo, honey," she said. "Have a drink." Her swollen face must at one time have been fresh and piquant. Her body was still youthful, but the clothes she wore were soiled and slovenly. Her voice, a thousand drinks past its prime, was deep and vibrant.

"Shut up, you drunk," said Barney Gatch.

"Sure, I'll have a drink," Johnny said.

They ignored him.

"You got a nerve callin' me names," said Jenny Dale. "The way you ignored me when I was sick in bed with flu!"

"Too bad you didn't die," Barney jeered.

"That Swim Girl, that Taffy! the woman said viciously. "Just wait'll I get my hands on her."

"I'll take her out again if I want to, and how do you like that?" snarled Gatch.

"Just plain bourbon and water," Johnny said.

Jenny Dale looked at him. "Beat it," she said. "Wha's idea comin' around here insultin' a lady?"

"Lady, she says!" said Barney Gatch.

Johnny retreated to the bar. Arnold handed him a refill, leaned across the bar to hold a match to Johnny's cigarette, and asked, "How's the detective business?" he asked.

Johnny said, "Strictly for the birds," relating the two conversations to Arnold.

"I don't see how you can figure Denny Wilson out of it," the bartender said. "He might mean he went up there; she kicked him out; so he went back an' killed her."

"Then called the cops, and got back over here in time to scratch my face?" Johnny pointed out. "Not unless he's jet propelled."

"Don't look now," Arnold said, "but you better have a story ready, my friend. Bud Wright an' Hampton just came in. Bud'll want to know where his date is."

Johnny said, "The news'll be out any minute."

"Maybe Wright knows more about it than you do," said Arnold meaningfully. "Don't forget, he's the one sent you over there. Dummy up. Maybe you can confuse him into makin' a break of some kind."

Wright and Hampton walked back into the room, passing close to Johnny's bar stool. Bud Wright stopped suddenly and looked at Johnny with a frown.

"Haven't you gone after Taffy yet?" he asked.

Johnny snapped his fingers ruefully. "I knew there was something," he said. "You know how it is—you get talking and the time goes by."

"I better call her up," Wright said.

He came back from the phone booth with a frown on his narrow face. "Man answered," he said angrily. "Hell with her. Forget it, Barr."

"You're the boss," Johnny said indifferently.

He watched them go back to the table where Mona Webster waited. Mona grinned at them, pushed aside her half-finished beer, and did a creditable imitation of a famous and half-loaded singer. Howard

Hampton laughed, kissed her, and ordered drinks with a careless wave of his hand.

Johnny watched Arnold cross toward their table with a loaded tray. Mona was doing an unctuous announcer now. She was very good. Then Bud Wright said something to her—and Johnny's scalp crawled. Her answer was a perfect copy of the soft voice of Taffy Taylor.

His thoughts were interrupted, suddenly and forcefully. A hand on his shoulder almost pulled him from his seat, and he turned to look at a long-jointed man with rumpled hair and red-rimmed eyes.

Thad Orcutt was police reporter on the "Morning Mirror," handling radio news on the side, which gave him entry to the Radio Club. He was a good reporter when drunk, and for all anyone knew he might have been a better one sober, had he ever tried it. His great drawback was a loose-tongued habit of telling the news before it had time to be printed.

Now he growled, "Gotcha, ya murderer!"

"Take it easy, Thad," said Johnny Barr.

"I'm callin' the cops," Thad mouthed. "After what you did to Taffy, you deserve to—"

"The police let me go!"

Arnold was there. "Easy, now, Mr. Orcutt."

Faces were beginning to turn toward them, pale spots of attention in the dimly lighted room. Orcutt would be shouting in a moment, Johnny knew. He must have picked up the story at headquarters. It'd be all over now.

Softly, Arnold said, "Turn him."

"Sure they let you go," Orcutt said. "Before they checked those glasses and found your fingerprints. Before they learned that Taffy'd made a phone call just a minute before you called the police!"

Johnny stepped away from the bar; Orcutt turned to face him. With a quick motion, Arnold blackjacked the reporter back of the ear. Orcutt sagged limply.

Together they propelled Orcutt into the employee's dressing room and put him on a daybed. Behind them, someone rapped on the door. Arnold snapped the latch loudly.

A voice said, "What's going on? Lemme in!"

Disgustedly, Arnold said, "It would be! First time in a year Cliff's been on time!"

He opened the door and the late shift bartender came in. Cliff Fantell was a tall, slim young man with blond hair plastered slick and smooth to his narrow skull. He had a wispy, fair mustache, and a red-lipped smile that was most appealing to the lady members after three or four drinks.

Cliff said, "What the hell you doin' to Orcutt?"

"He passed out," Arnold said.

"You slugged him!" Cliff snapped.

"Don't start throwing your weight around, Cliff," Johnny advised sharply. "You're an employee here, and I'm a member of the board of directors."

"You couldn't fire me without an excuse!"

"You've been hanging around the club mixing with the members," Johnny said. "That's against rules."

"Not when they ask me to!" Cliff said.

"Pipe down, both of you," said Arnold. "A little tap on the skull never hurt anybody." He looked thoughtfully at a point just behind Cliff's ear. "As a matter of fact—"

"Hey!" Cliff said in alarm. "It's nothin' to me! I just wanted to know if you needed any help with him!"

"Okay then," Arnold said. "You can go on shift now, sonny. Surprise the customers by being on time."

"And when Orcutt comes round, buy him a micky on me," said Johnny Barr.

They went out, leaving the scowling Cliff in charge. Now, with Arnold's white jacket replaced by a dark topcoat, there was no longer any way of telling which was the servant and which the served. Arnold was just a hell of a good guy to have around. And Johnny figured he'd need someone.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fugitive Look

JOHNNY took the convertible slowly up one of the winding boulevards to the heights above the town. Here was the swank residential district, where

houses perched precariously on hillsides so they could look down on their fellows, and a parklike tangle of undergrowth skirted the road. They stopped on a view point, switched out the lights, and looked down on the jeweled expanse of the city below them. On either side, other parked cars attested the privacy of the spot.

"Too bad you ain't a glamorous babe," Arnold said. "Like Taffy, say." He drummed on the dash with his fingers, and turned abruptly toward Johnny. "Let's get one thing straight and then forget it. You didn't kill the babe, did you?"

Steadily, Johnny said, "No, I didn't."

Arnold leaned back with a little sigh. "The killer took some pains to make it look like you. How one guy can kill the girl, make the calls, get back in time to wait for you at your car—Or, wait a minute! Scratch you first and then get to Taffy's apartment in time—"

"He'd have to know I was going to go after her," Johnny pointed out. "That still looks like Bud Wright. And Bud's got a motive."

"The motive the cops have for you is plenty," Arnold said.

"Hell, she was Bud's girl," said Johnny. "I was thinking—Taffy was the model for that Cranach Woolen Mills ad. You know, the Swim Girl. Well, that's a Hampton account, and Bud Wright is definitely out to get it."

"Cripes," said Arnold. "That'd just about finish the fat boy. I think he's got all his dough sunk in that new house of his."

"How do you figure?"

Arnold said, "Well, he's in to me for almost eighty bucks in drinks, so he must be skatin' on pretty thin ice."

Johnny said, "No, even if Wright does chisel into the Cranach account, he'd need Taffy. That's a big contract. Worth about a hundred-fifty thousand a year profit to the agency that handles it. And the Swim Girl's the key to the whole campaign. That just about clears Hampton and Wright—"

From one of the parked cars, a man's voice began to speak in a dry, monotonous tone. The words were inaudible, but in a moment the car's motor rasped to life, its lights came on, and the vehicle backed out and roared away.

"That sounded like a police radio," Arnold said.

Johnny snapped on the radio in his car, and as it warmed to life he spun the dial into the police band. It swelled until the voice was saying, ". . . Car 22 is about a block away. Wait till you are both on the scene. This is an arrest, so proceed cautiously. Detain anyone who might be with Barr in the convertible until Mulvaney—"

Johnny turned off the radio. "Hell with that stuff," he said.

Anxiously, Arnold said, "What you gonna do?"

"They get me in jail, I'm a gone pigeon," Johnny said. "As of now, I'm a fugitive from justice. Brother, I'm hitting the brush!"

"Suits me," Arnold said.

They stepped out of the car, went over the brow of the hill into thick brush. As they plowed downward, car lights wheeled above their heads, steadied and grew in brightness.

"Keep down and keep still," Johnny whispered.

There was stealthy sound from the parking area on the point, rising suddenly to explosive conversation, and Johnny grinned, knowing that they had found the car empty. He lay quiet in the brush, while the squad car crews milled about. Once a sharp white spotlight probed downward over the crest and swept the undergrowth, passing a few inches over Johnny's upturned face.

At length he heard the whir of the starter on his own car. It, and the two police cars, pulled out and went howling down the boulevard toward town.

FROM a thicket fifteen feet away there was a spurt of match flame, illuminating Arnold's face as he lighted a cigarette. Instantly from the dark brow of the hill a flashlight beam cut downward and a voice shouted:

"Stand where you are!"

The match went out, and Arnold plunged cursing into the brush. The man on the hill fired twice. Johnny found an egg-sized rock and pegged it at the gun's flame. There was a whacking sound and a cry of pain, then a fusillade of shots that tore through the underbrush. Johnny

threw again, got another hit, and the man retreated beyond the brow of the hill. Then there were only little noises, broken by the far throb of the city.

Johnny listened to the small noise come closer. Then Arnold's voice whispered softly, "You can pitch for my team any time, pal."

"Did he hit you?"

"Not even close. Look, we gotta get out of here."

"He won't be back in a hurry," Johnny said.

"My Lord," Arnold said. "You can't drive the police away with rocks. They'll be back here with floodlights and scatter guns. A sparrow couldn't hide in this brush."

"Where can we go?"

Arnold said quietly, "Pal, I can go back home. They can't prove I was with you. But where you can go is something else again."

"Look, how about getting a hotel room for a few days while I sort of look around—"

"You know a bellhop in town that wouldn't turn you in for a half dollar?" Arnold's whisper was scornful. "Look, Johnny, here's a slim chance, but it might work."

"I'm listening."

"Go up above the road. They'll be looking down here first. Only when they don't find you will they spread out. Meantime, you can keep working back from the road."

"Where do I stop, at the Rockies?"

"Hell, you'll end up on the Hampton place! Don't you know where you are? Howard Hampton owns five acres right above this point. You can camp out around his barbecue pit till I get word to you."

"You might have an angle there. They wouldn't be so likely to search an estate as they would the brush."

"That's a gamble," Arnold said. "The main thing is I can find you if anything turns up. And if your idea about Hampton being involved is any good, you might even turn something up for yourself."

Crossing the highway above gave Johnny Barr his first real understanding of what it meant to be a fugitive. There was the dark ribbon of hard top, a gravel

shoulder on either side. Then there was underbrush. Always before, if you came to such a road on foot, you looked right and left for cars, and if none were too close, you crossed.

Now the most vagrant glimmer of light might mean the approach of the police—or worse, of Taffy's murderer, come to find and destroy the Johnny Barr who refused to stand still for a murder rap.

For by now, certainly, the killer must know that the first trap had failed to spring. The police had failed to hold Johnny Barr on the evidence of his scratched face and his presence on the scene. And a Johnny Barr under suspicion but not confined was a danger to the real murderer. For Johnny knew he was innocent.

He hesitated on the edge of the roadway, and as a car swept around the turn he jumped hastily for the brush. It was the wrong move. If he had stood waiting to cross, he would have gone unnoticed. As it was, the car slowed and he saw the heads of its passengers turn in surprise to where he was disappearing in the undergrowth.

Cursing his own ineptness, he waited until the car again picked up speed and rounded the bend. Now, he thought, they'll report I was trying to cross the road as soon as the story gets out of a manhunt in this area. He had fallen into the most obvious trap awaiting a fugitive—that of acting like one. The thought crossed his mind briefly that perhaps the real culprit was also making a similar mistake. Not very many people were good liars, when you came down to it.

Soon he came to the low brick wall that marked the boundaries of Howard Hampton's estate. Through the fringe of growth, he could see the tiled roof of the main building, the low line of the stables, the white shell that made the swimming pool also a sunbathing deck.

"The house that jack built," Johnny Barr told himself. "Plenty of jack—Cranach Mills dough. Wonder what Hampton'll do if Bud Wright succeeds in pirating that account? Probably crash, but good."

He could find little sympathy for the arrogant Hampton. The man was unpleasant both physically and personally.

Yet he was never at a loss for feminine companions, for his agency was the biggest buyer of models and talent in the local market. Latest in the list was the luscious Mona Webster, feminine lead on the Cranach radio program.

He found concealment in a yew thicket near the pool. It was past midnight. The Radio Club bar would be closing in less than an hour. He wondered how many of the members would be on his side in the inevitable discussion. He'd ought to have a few friends in the gang, he thought. He'd done favors for most of them, one time or another. Pulling his light topcoat close, he settled down to wait out the night. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

You're Covered

WHEN the sound and light awakened him, he thought for a muddled moment that it must be daybreak. His watch told him, though, that it was just after two. The swimming pool lights were on, and there was a noisy crowd around the big electric barbecue pit at one side of it. Johnny Barr peered out cautiously.

"They've transplanted the club," he decided.

Almost all now at Hampton's pool had been at Johnny's at one time or another. Howard himself, and Mona; Bud Wright, already consoling himself for Taffy's death with a petite blonde from the Model Theatre, Denny Wilson, his tall spare frame morosely hunched, talked desultorily with Thad Orcutt, who had apparently recovered from his involuntary nap. Reeling Barney Gatch was coupled with Jenny Dale. Arnold, in white jacket, had obviously been hired to tend bar, while Cliff Fantell was dressed in tweeds and acting for all the world like one of the guests. Must be a real free-for-all, Johnny decided. Another handful of nondescript guests spilling out of the house toward the pool confirmed the diagnosis.

Arnold was methodically at work. He had a bar set up and glasses filled, then turned to the manufacture of hamburgers on the grill. The smell was almost more than Johnny could stand. It reminded him forcefully that he had missed dinner in

the excitement. For an instant he was tempted to come out of cover and join the party. Before he could act on the thought, however, Hampton took Cliff by the arm and led him away from the crowd, and close enough to the thicket so that Johnny could hear what was said.

"You sure that's loaded?" Hampton asked.

"Bet your life!" Cliff said.

He took a small gun from his pocket, shielding it with his body from the sight of those around the pool. He opened the magazine and showed it to Hampton. "See?"

"All right, put it away," Hampton said nervously. "Now remember, that Barr is a killer. If he shows up, shoot him down like you would a mad dog."

"Don't worry," Cliff said. "I'll fix him."

"I'm glad you suggested coming along as a guard for the party," Hampton said. "I'd have been apprehensive, knowing he was seen in this neighborhood."

"You got nothin' to worry about," Cliff said.

Johnny Barr made an unpleasant face. So the news was out and the manhunt was on! Trust Cliff, that climber, to horn into a party—and by offering to kill somebody.

"Cliff!" Arnold called. "Give me a hand here."

Fantell went reluctantly toward the grill. Arnold took a plate of paper-wrapped sandwiches and circulated through the crowd. He looked thoughtfully at the yew thicket, and strolled near. Deftly he tossed a sandwich into the edge of the brush. Then he moved on.

The white package dropped a few feet from Johnny's hand, but he did not reach for it at once. There were two reasons for that. The thought of Cliff's gun was disturbing. The slightest movement of the brush might bring on a nervous hail of bullets that would either kill Johnny outright or bring him out of hiding with a ticket to the death house.

But more disturbing was the sudden memory of an often repeated scene at the club. It was the picture of Arnold setting a fresh drink down on the bar, reaching with his other hand for the emptied glass. For one of the things that had set Mul-

vanev afresh on the trail was Johnny's fingerprints on a glass in Taffy's room. How else could they have gotten there, except from a club glass, carried there?

Other things crowded in—the way Arnold had exposed them under the crest of the hill by lighting a match; the bartender's admission that he had liked Taffy—even the way he had maneuvered Johnny into this dangerous hiding place. And as for knowing that Johnny was going to pick up Taffy; well, it added up, all too easily.

And then Johnny grinned a little, and reached for the sandwich. Arnold had been on duty at the club all evening, in plain view of every patron. His was the perfect alibi.

There was writing on the napkin. In heavy pencil Arnold had scrawled, "Talked Hampton into having party so you could see without being seen. Have fun, pal."

It was a sweet setup, at that, except for Cliff's gun. Cliff was making the most of his semi-official job. A number of times he loudly warned back couples starting for the surrounding shadows, each time raising a gratifying laugh. Still, when Mona Webster put her arm through his, he went willingly enough himself toward the darkness. They stopped on the shadowed side of the thicket.

"You're some kid," Cliff said huskily.

"You're cute too," Mona said. "But I don't want Howard to see us."

"How much longer do we have to jump around for that tub of lard?" Cliff grumbled. "You got him dead to rights, baby. Why don't you crack the whip on him?"

"What do you mean, honey? How have I got him dead to rights?"

He giggled. "You've always been careless with your purse. You left it in the powder room and I happened to stumble onto what a nice business you were doing."

"So you did." Her voice was silky. "And now you're as deep in it as I am. Don't forget that."

"Who's forgetting?" Cliff said. "Point is, you left your purse on the bar today, before Taffy picked it up by mistake. Arnold wanted to go out for a half-hour, so I was relieving him—And just happened to notice that paper you're carrying about

Hampton." He looked at her pointedly.

"Nosy little rascal, aren't you?" Mona said.

THEIR voices moved away, and Johnny Barr crouched low in the thicket with cold sweat trickling down his ribs. So Arnold had gone out for a half hour! It wasn't the perfect alibi after all.

Cautiously, Johnny wormed his way through the heavy tangle, back to the side toward the pool. The crowd was quieter now, grouped around the grill. It took only an instant to locate the reason for their quietness.

Mulvaney was there, talking to Arnold. Bialkin was a little way apart, in uniform, holster flap open as he surveyed the surrounding shrubbery with calm intentness. Johnny strained his ears.

"All right," Mulvaney said. "You must've had something in mind when you told us to come out here, Mac. Come on and spill it."

"Take it easy," Arnold said. "I told you the killer would be here. An' that's right."

"Okay, where is he?"

"Keep your pants on," Arnold said. "These things take a little time, you know. You don't wanna make this look too easy, or everybody'll want to be a detective."

Mulvaney said, "Were you in the car with him on the heights?"

"If you'll pardon a short answer," Arnold said. "Yes."

"I oughta run you in," Mulvaney growled.

They were interrupted by the brittle sound of a shot from the shadows. Something thudded into the thicket where Johnny Barr was hiding, and then Mona Webster came running into the lights, her voice rising in terror.

"It was Johnny Barr!" she cried. "I saw him. He shot Cliff Fantell. I tell you I saw him!"

"Which way'd he go?" Mulvaney snapped.

Mona waved one hand vaguely toward the lower part of the grounds, and Bialkin and Mulvaney were plunging in pursuit with guns drawn when Arnold yelled at them.

"Hold it, you dummies," he shouted. Mulvaney said, "Go ahead, Bialkin."

But he checked himself and came stalking back to Arnold. He took the barman's neat jacket in the grip of one big fist and shook him angrily.

"Start spilling, wise guy!" he said.

Arnold stepped back and smoothed his jacket. He pointed. "See the white package there, and there, and there? I put wrapped sandwiches by every clump of brush big enough to hide in. All of them are still where I put 'em except for one. That one."

He strode over to the yew thicket. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Arnold said.

Johnny crawled out of the cover, shaking with fury.

"You're under arrest!" Mulvaney said.

"You better start asking this louse some questions," Johnny said through clenched teeth. "Ask him where he went that half hour away from the bar. Ask him about the glass with my fingerprints. Ask him why he was so anxious to get me hid here, so he could turn me up!"

"What the hell, Johnny!" Arnold said in amazement. "I thought you'd have it figured out by now! Am I the only bartender on the party?"

Bialkin rejoined the group then. "You are now," he said. "Fantell's had it, right through the ticker. Do we charge that one to Barr, too?"

"He must have circled round and hid in there," said Mona Webster. "Look for the gun. I'll bet it's in there!"

And Johnny Barr laughed then, with a sudden freeing of strain. It was so beautifully simple. Everything fell into place.

"Sure, it's in there," he said, "and you aren't guessing, either, honey. You know it's there because you threw it in there."

"That'll get you no place," Bialkin said.

"Oh, yes it will," Johnny said. "She took the gun out of Cliff's pocket while they were kissing in the shadows, but she didn't know Cliff had already showed it to Hampton. Howard can identify it. So how would I have gotten it?"

"That's ridiculous," Mona said. "I don't know what you're talking about! Howard, are you going to let him talk to me like that?"

"Kissing in the shadows, eh?" Hamp-

ton said heavily. "I'd like to see that gun."

"You're getting smart, fatso," Johnny said. "This whole thing, including Taffy's death, got started because the little pigeon here was going to clip you, but good. She and Cliff were going to blackmail you silly."

"Now that's enough loose talk!" Hampton roared. "Officer, do your duty. Take this murderer away from here. Take him to jail where he belongs!"

"I wanna listen some more," Mulvaney said.

"I'll give you a quick run-down," Johnny said. "Taffy had picked up Mona's purse by mistake, and taken it home. Then Mona heard Bud Wright ask me to pick her up in an hour. She got one of my used glasses from Cliff, and went over, leaving Cliff at the club. She strangled Taffy, got her blackmail paper back. Then she checked with Cliff. He waited by my car, scratched me, and then called her. She faked Taffy's voice and my voice on the phone calls, waiting until just before I was due there."

"She wouldn't kill to get a paper," Mulvaney said.

"She shot Cliff because he knew what the paper was," Johnny said. "I think you'll find it something big. And if you need proof, I think you'll find it in her purse right now!"

Mulvaney said, "We'll have a look."

Mona's breath sighed out. "Then I guess it's no good, for I picked up Taffy's billfold too, and haven't had time to get rid of it." She grinned hardily at Johnny Barr. "You win, honey," she said. "Hampton was going to pay me plenty to keep Cranach from finding out how he'd misused their money. Well, it was a good try."

She held out her big purse with one hand, and the other flew to her mouth. Arnold's blackjack spun neatly, and she fell forward while a tiny capsule dropped to the grass.

"Let's let the state do it," he said.

"You're pretty good with that," Mulvaney said. "Why don't you join the force."

Arnold grinned. "Too busy taking care of Johnny."

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A department conducted this month by Joe De Santis, star of the "Under Arrest" program, Mutual Broadcasting System.

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 chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 265 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Psychology With Profit

Dear Sir:

For convenience I'll call him Harry Hillier.

He had an office close to mine, but was clearly coming to the end of his tether. On one skillful excuse after another, he had borrowed left, right and center till the list of suckers was exhausted—or at least I thought it was.

By the way he sized me up when we met, I knew he had me selected for the next touch, and I waited the moment with amusement, ready to say no however plausible the yarn he spun me.

Yet when the moment came, he took me for \$10 and I didn't even know it until he was walking out with it.

Here's how it happened:

Suddenly my office door opened and Harry rushed toward me, pushing a handful of bills in my direction. I could spot fives, twos, ones in their number.

"Can you change ten dollars?" he asked breathlessly.

"Sure!" I said, relieved that I didn't have to turn down an appeal for a loan.

"Thanks very much," he said, seizing my ten dollars and still hanging on to his own bills. "I'll be back in a minute."

He rushed out just as breathlessly as he came in.

And left me just as breathless.

I didn't attempt to follow him or make any futile attempt to get my money back. I figured the lesson in psychology was worth ten dollars: the way he sidetracked me when I was braced to refuse a loan. Anyway, I'm getting \$5 of it back with this letter.

J. S. Wallace
Ontario Canada

Ups and Downs

Dear Sir:

I'm employed as an elevator operator in a large downtown office building, and through experience I've learned to be on the look-out for solicitors, beggars, and high-pressure salesmen that seem to haunt the lobby. But the swindle of which I write was so well planned that even I, who have never considered myself gullible, became a victim.

At 4:30 p. m. one quiet Saturday afternoon, the telephone in the public phone booth in the lobby of our building began to ring persistently, and so I answered it.

"This is Mr. T.," said the voice at the other end of the line, "My office is up in Room 410." Although I had carried Mr. T. up and down in my elevator many times, I didn't know which of the numerous faces I see each day belonged to him. However, his name was familiar and I knew that his office was on the fourth floor.

The voice continued smoothly, "I made an appointment with my nephew to meet him in my office at five o'clock today, but I'll be unable to get away. I'd appreciate it if you'll explain the situation to him, and if he wants any money, give him what he needs and I'll see that you're well repaid tomorrow for your trouble."

I consented, he thanked me, and then I went back to my elevator. About a half hour later I was taking a young soldier boy down in my car when he suddenly asked if I happened to know whether Mr. T. had left for the day.

"His office is locked up," he explained, "and I can't understand why he didn't keep his appointment with me. Gee! I don't know what I'll do now—I'm stranded over at the hotel without any money. My uncle was supposed to meet me and lend me \$20.00 so that I could take the bus out to the Veterans' Hospital to get treatments for an old war injury. Now I don't know what I'll do!"

I hurriedly told him about his uncle's telephone call to me and gave him the \$20.00 that he'd said he needed. The soldier departed with a grateful smile.

But needless to say, I never saw my money again. When I called on Mr. T. the next morning, he advised me that he had never telephoned me, that he had no nephew in uniform, and that in the future I would be wise to investigate before I lent money to strangers.

Miss E. L. Liotta
Cleveland, Ohio

Lost Resort

Dear Sir:

Late one summer afternoon when farmers were beginning to long for a nice vacation in some cool spot, a car drove into our yard and two men came to the door.

When my husband answered their knock, they said we had been one of the lucky ones in a drawing to open up a new summer resort at one of the many beautiful lakes in Washington.

We wondered how our name got into such a drawing until I remembered a nephew living in

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Ready for the Rackets

the town from which the drawing was supposed to be operating. It would have been like him to drop our name in just for fun.

So we talked with the men a while. They told us each person whose name was drawn had the privilege of buying one of the choice lots on the lake shore for \$88.50. If we did not want to keep it, they would give us \$500 for it. They had pictures of all sorts of appealing rustic cottages to be built by them on the lot of our choice; we were to go there to personally take our pick.

Altogether it sounded so authentic and so much like what we had dreamed of owning that we gave them our check and closed the deal.

But as they drove out of the yard, we began to have misgivings—it was just too good to be true. Sure enough, the next day we saw in the daily paper that our two callers were arrested for getting money under false pretense. There was no drawing, no summer resort, no rustic cottage, and we were minus \$88.50.

H. B. M.
 Emmett, Idaho

Accidentally Rich

Dear Sir:

Tourists would do well to be choosy about the friends they may come across on the road. For instance, there was the case of the young couple recently arrested for trying to get fifty dollars from the parents of another couple who were traveling from east to west.

The crooked couple found out where the two motorists were from and got the names of one of the parents. They then sent a message saying that the two travelers had been hurt in an auto crash and needed money. They signed a fictitious doctor's name to the letter to make it more realistic.

But luckily the racket was nipped in the bud. The mother of the allegedly injured husband contacted the local police for more details, and they in turn got in touch with the police of the city where the accident was supposed to have occurred. No record of the accident was found, and the crooks were arrested. They went to the telegraph office to pick up the money, but found policemen instead.

V. I. Radd
 Detroit, Michigan

Use Your Specs, Sucker!

Dear Sir:

If people weren't so gullible and always trying to get something for nothing—but then there wouldn't be any "Ready for the Rackets" page in your magazine. It's the fine print that always catches the sucker, as in the case of the following racket:

A smooth-talking gent comes up to the house and tells the lucky couple they have been selected by the Gyp Roofing Company to have their house renewed with a free siding job as a means of promoting business in the neighborhood. The company also wants to take pictures of the house before and after for their sales catalogs. Of course the lucky people must sign

a release to the smooth-talking gent. Just a matter of form—business you know.

Well, to make the short story even shorter, the couple sign what they think is a release form, but it later turns out that way down there—in very small print—it says they will pay for the job. Something for nothing—there ain't no such thing!

H. P. Behnke
Detroit, Michigan

Pipe This!

Dear Sir:

I have been the victim of more swindles than I care to tell about, but the one which aroused my anger most of all was the apple salesman trick.

A man knocked on my door and showed me three large red apples, telling me all the apples in the basket he was selling were like them. I bought a bushel and started to empty them, but he told me I could keep the basket.

A while after he left, I emptied them and found that I had been swindled. As he said, all the apples in the basket were large red ones like the samples—but the basket contained one-third apples and two-thirds corn cobs!

D. G.
Bloomington, Ind.

No Butter Bargain

Dear Sir:

Butter had skyrocketed to the dollar mark. A little fat country man knocked at my door and

advised me he had a few rolls of country butter, fresh from his farm, that his regular customers had not taken that week. When he offered to sell it for 78c a pound and gave me a sample to taste from a nice yellow, bona fide lump, I grabbed two pounds.

Not only that, I called in my neighbors in the apartment building, and he disposed of ten more rolls.

I had a luncheon appointment that same day and was late. As I was running toward the bus, I passed this little man almost a block from my home. He seemed to be replenishing his basket from the back seat of an old car, seemingly stacked with cartons. I confess I was puzzled, but I was in such a hurry I forgot about it.

On my return, a delegation of neighbors called on me. Some carried filled teaspoons, some small, wax-paper packages, and some carried the original pound roll of butter. I got out my own and we compared notes. What we had really bought was oleomargarine—which sells for about half of what butter does—and it was poor quality at that. The only real butter had been the sample lump.

The little country man must have had a good supply of this nicely colored oleo on hand, for I learned later that many others in our near locale had purchased it from him under the impression that they were getting bargains in butter.

Selma Wolfberg
Chicago, Ill.

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94

Ready for the Rackets
Two-Time Boy

Dear Sir:

My wife and I both work and are home a very small part of the time, seldom together. Our newspaper is supposed to cost 35¢ a week, and every other week I gave the paper boy 70¢. One day one of the neighbors told me that he had caught the boy cheating and to look out for him. I checked with my wife and found that she, too, had been paying him every other week. He would collect from me one week when my wife was out, and collect from her when I was out. He was working the same racket on about a dozen working couples.

We now have a new paper boy.
 Kenneth N. Manning
 Charlestown, Ind.

Surprise Package

Dear Sir:

If some person purporting to be your next door neighbor phones and asks you to pay for a C.O.D. package for him, look out!

This has been happening to people around Hollywood, California. The friendly neighbor willingly agrees to pay the charge for his friend. After the delivery man has delivered the package and collected the charges, the victim waits for his neighbor to get home. When he presents the package and the bills, the neighbor knows nothing about it. The package contains some useless article.

My advice is—know your postal delivery man.
 R. W. Taylor
 Baldwin Park, Calif.

Song-Writers Never Win

Dear Sir:

I have been taken in by a very old and clever scheme—the song writing racket. If the facts I've gathered on the racket will be of any help to other song writers, I'll feel that the money I lost hasn't been entirely wasted.

The neatest part of the whole racket is that they are usually within the law. They advertise for song-poems to be set to music. The amateurs flood the mails with their poems.

You can be pretty sure your poem won't be rejected. On flashy stationery they tell you that your poem is wonderful, and for the small sum of from \$30 to \$150 they will set it to music, send copies to radio stations, etc. A very businesslike contract is sent along to be signed. Nine times out of ten the amateur scrapes up the money and sends it along. I did.

Once the song company has relieved you of your money, they will pay someone \$3 or \$4 to make up a tune and send a copy to you; copies which probably cost \$5. A few copies are sent to the broadcasting stations. From then on you're just another "sucker" to the company. If your song succeeds it's some kind of a miracle.

The song contests are another phase of the racket which captured a few of my hard-earned dollars. The entry fee is \$1, \$2 or \$3. One of the songs is published and the prize money paid, still leaving the schemer with a neat profit.

Ready for the Rackets

Workers for the Better Business Bureau tried writing a song bad enough to be rejected by the so-called publishers. They submitted it to twelve firms; back came the same old line: "Your song is unique, etc."

I have learned through experience and a good many lost dollars that honest song publishers ask no payment and never advertise.

Mrs. T.
Erie, Pa.

Haircut With Trim

Dear Sir:

A few days ago a man and a small boy walked into my barber shop. The man asked for a shave, haircut, facial and shampoo, and told the boy to look at some magazines.

When I finished with the man, he started to pay me, then put his money back in his pocket, saying, "You might just as well cut Johnny's hair while we're here." He boosted the boy into my chair, said he'd be back shortly and walked out.

After I finished cutting the boy's hair, he got down and started out the door.

"Just a minute," I said. "Your dad will be back soon, and he still owes me for your haircuts."

"Heck," said the boy, "that wasn't my dad. He just stopped me on the street and asked me if I wanted a free haircut. I never saw him before in my life."

F. M.
Salinas, Calif.

Bad Egg

Dear Sir:

I own a poultry and egg business in a small town in the western part of Kansas. I rely on the local farmers for my supply of eggs.

One of the poultry operational laws of this state requires that no dealer can buy or sell eggs unless they are candled and graded, but my business is too small to allow hiring of a full-time egg candler. Like the other small dealers, I candle the eggs in my spare time.

For years it has always been a mutual understanding between farmer and merchant that the farmer's eggs are good when he offers them for sale. Naturally, a few bad ones are expected, but some unscrupulous character is going around to the larger dealers and storehouses and picking up their rotten eggs. He usually covers the top of each case with good eggs, and then brings them to us small dealers for sale.

When we buy these eggs from the farmer, we don't have time to candle each and every egg. That would require handling 15 dozen eggs to each case.

We can't afford these losses indefinitely, and our business doesn't give profit enough to allow hiring help. We are strictly small-timers trying to get by.

Even if we find this individual, he's above legal prosecution. Any suggestions or advice will be appreciated.

Small Merchant
Western Kansas

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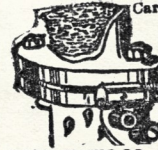
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Ready for the Rackets

Trouble in Three Pieces

Dear Sir:

In California we have fine second-hand clothing stores. A dapper-dressed gent comes in and buys from three to five suits very cheap, comes to Sacramento, takes the coat and vest and ties it in a loose bundle.

Then he hies himself to a cleaner. When the counter girl starts to open it, he insists it is okay and that he has to rush to an appointment. Poor little counter girl gives him a receipt for a three-piece suit.

In a few days, back he comes. The poor manager asks, "Are you sure you brought all three pieces of that suit?" When he gets his answer he has to admit that the trousers are lost.

He pays fifty dollars and up—about three or four times the value, and the crook still has his trousers. Cleaners beware!

Mrs. Ellen Williams
 Sacramento, California

Slug-Exchange

Dear Sir:

Here in New Orleans a sweet racket is being pulled on many unsuspecting.

A fellow will hang around a bank right after it closes waiting for suckers. Someone will arrive right after the bank closed trying to get some change. The fellow will approach and ask what the trouble is. Of course our unsuspecting sucker will say that he needed change and couldn't make it to the bank in time.

Well it just happens that our friend has twenty-five dollars in nickels and quarters wrapped in the bank's coin holders which show through windows in the paper how much they contain. Sure enough our friend has twenty-five dollars in change all wrapped up.

The sucker will not hesitate in taking advantage of this fortunate situation. After the transaction, the swindler disappears and our unfortunate businessman finds as he opens the rolls of supposed money that he has nothing but slugs.

Leonard J. Baumgarten
 New Orleans, Louisiana

Easy Dollar

Dear Sir:

A good friend of mine owned a practically new bicycle. A young boy about his age was passing by and noticed the bicycle. He came over to talk with him.

"That's a good bike. I like your swell headlights too," he praised.

"Thanks, pal," my friend replied. He was pleased with the compliment.

The stranger explained that he had wanted to go cycling that afternoon and wondered if he could borrow the bicycle. "I'll pay you," the youth said, extending a crumpled dollar bill.

My friend received it with a grin. That was one easy dollar. "I might not be home when you get back, so leave it on the porch."

The boy thanked him and hopped on the bike. My friend never saw the guy or the bike

Ready for the Rackets

again. When we reported this, we were told that three had already been stolen in the same manner.

Yes, that was an easy dollar.

H. R. S.
Oakland, California

Slightly Off-Key

Dear Sir:

Several months ago a piano tuner visited our community and finally, my home. He explained that at the time he was only examining the pianos to determine which ones needed tuning and the amount of repair each would need.

After playing one simple tune, he decided mine needed tuning. Now my piano is one of the older models and is equipped with genuine ivory keys and he innocently noted the absence of several of the keys. There were ten keys missing but I had saved them and naturally I gave them to him for examination.

He said he would have to take them to his shop to clean them before he could put them back on. Then he proceeded to pry five more, which were loose, off of the piano. So—he departed with fifteen of my ivory keys and a promise to return very soon.

To this day he has never returned, but I have since learned from a reputable tuner that those same ivories would sell for around five dollars each and are almost impossible to obtain. I have also discovered that he gave some of my neighbors the same treatment.

Now I can see that I gave the man about seventy-five dollars worth of ivories for one little five cent tune.

Bill Ison
Blackey, Kentucky

(Continued from page 70)

were on the winning side, unless you finally tripped over your badge." I spat smoke at him, beginning to feel as sorry for myself as I could get on my salary.

"But I'm making you a deal. I've got everything I came here for, maybe even more than that. I'm going far, far away. Get that, Del Vecchio? I'll never see you again. But if you bring that girl into any of this, I'll come back and feed you to the wolves by the inch. And you'd better take damn good care of that wife and those kids you were yapping about, while you're at it. You understand me, Del Vecchio?"

"Sure," he whispered. "Sure. I get you."

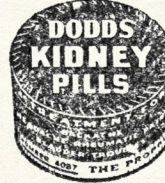
"All right," I said wearily. I turned and looked down the street, along five or six clear blocks with only the traffic lights for color and, perhaps, at a far corner, the winking of a tail light, making a fast turn. And then that, too, was gone.

THE END

1/2 AWAKE Nights 1/2 ASLEEP Days..

When you are tortured by fretful nights, never comfortable, and you feel over-tired in the daytime—your kidneys may be to blame. For healthy kidneys should do

2/3 of their work in the daytime. If they get out of order and fail, extra strain is placed upon them and they must work overtime at night. That is the time to use Dodd's Kidney Pills. Dodd's Kidney Pills help relieve this cause of night discomfort and disturbed rest. Help you enjoy restful sleep and awake refreshed.



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Beauty Hints No. 101

FRIENDLY FEET and SNAPPY LEGS

If you want a shapely leg and a trim ankle, the first thing to do is to walk—yes, walk—at least a couple of miles a day. Wear comfortable shoes that give the feet plenty of breathing space. This is important. The legs should also be exercised every day. Lie flat on the back, then raise each knee alternately as high as you can without straining, just like pedalling a bicycle. Do this fifteen times. Also hold leg steady and twist the foot from the ankle in a circular motion. Practice walking tiptoe as often as possible. Gradually the legs will become stronger and more shapely.

BLACKHEADS and SALLOW SKIN

Don't pinch or squeeze your blackheads. It may cause a permanent scar. Just get two ounces of peroxine powder from your Druggist, apply with a hot, wet face-cloth in the manner of a face pack. Leave on for a few moments, then wash off with clear water—your blackheads will have dissolved.

(Continued from page 33)

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you did," Pickerton said. He shook his head disgustedly. "What made you think you were smart enough to get away with murder? Your speed is the little stuff, Moran."

Moran wet his lips. "What did I do wrong?" he asked. He didn't know what was happening to him but he felt weak and drained.

Pickerton glanced at Linton. "You tell him," he said.

"We had nothing on you," Linton said, "except your bad record, and the fact that Dinny's money had been taken. But you acted from the start in a suspicious manner. During our first talk you were nervous, sweating. Later you came to the Diamond Club, but when you saw me with Cherry, you turned and got out. We saw you, of course.

"Pickerton came here to Cherry's apartment because we knew you'd come here. A smart man wouldn't have. I took Cherry home, drove off. You immediately barged into the building and I came back and followed you up here."

He glanced at Cherry, then back at Moran. "You were too nervous to be subtle with her, or to go easy. You pushed her around and that did what we hadn't been able to do, convinced her to help us. She played you like a sucker. You spilled everything to her, which is the thing only a fool would have done. Fortunately for us, Moran, you're a fool." His face became curious. "A cop should have known better. Didn't you stop to think at all?"

"I was thinking about the murder," Moran said slowly. "It was on my mind. That left no room for any thinking about the smart thing to do."

Pickerton took his arm and started him toward the door.

Linton walked over and shook hands with Cherry. "Thanks for the help," he said. He hesitated, then smiled. "I'd like to see you some time when I'm off duty."

Cherry pulled the robe tight around her slim waist. "Any old time—just any old time."

Linton grinned. "I'll call you."

He took Moran's other arm and the three men went out the door.

Moran walked like a dead man.

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They make us realize there are things between sky and earth we little dream of.

Because you yourself know of such fascinating visions of things to come, you will be intrigued by one of the most unusual motion pictures Paramount has ever made. It is "NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES."

It is a story...of a man whose uncanny knowledge of the future held so strange and strong a power over a beautiful girl...that he could name her exact Destiny on a menacing night "when the stars look down."

Come to scoff...but we warn you...you may remain to believe!

* * *

EDWARD G. ROBINSON

GAIL RUSSELL

JOHN LUND

in Paramount's

"Night has a thousand Eyes"

with **VIRGINIA BRUCE · WILLIAM DEMAREST**

Produced by **ENDRE BOHEM** · Directed by **JOHN FARROW** · Screen Play by **Barré Lyndon** and **Jonathan Latimer**

Have you ever had a "hunch?"—Do you believe such pre-vision is a power you can develop further?

Are you sure you would like to **KNOW** what the future holds for you—whether good or bad? Think twice before you decide whether it would be a curse or gift!



HE TOLD POLICE

"Suppose you were on a train. You see a cow Two seconds later you see a tree Ahead, there's a farmhouse, not yet in your view The only person who could see all three things at once...would be a man on top of the train... or someone like me... who can see the past, the present...and the FUTURE!"

JOHN LUND
tops his top-rank
performance in
"A Foreign Affair"!

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Painted by D. Mackay Houston, O.S.A.

He links the waving wheat fields of the West to the tables of the East. He builds a bridge between Canada's iron fields and much-needed American dollars. He brings you coal for your home . . . oil and gasoline for your automobile.

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