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DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

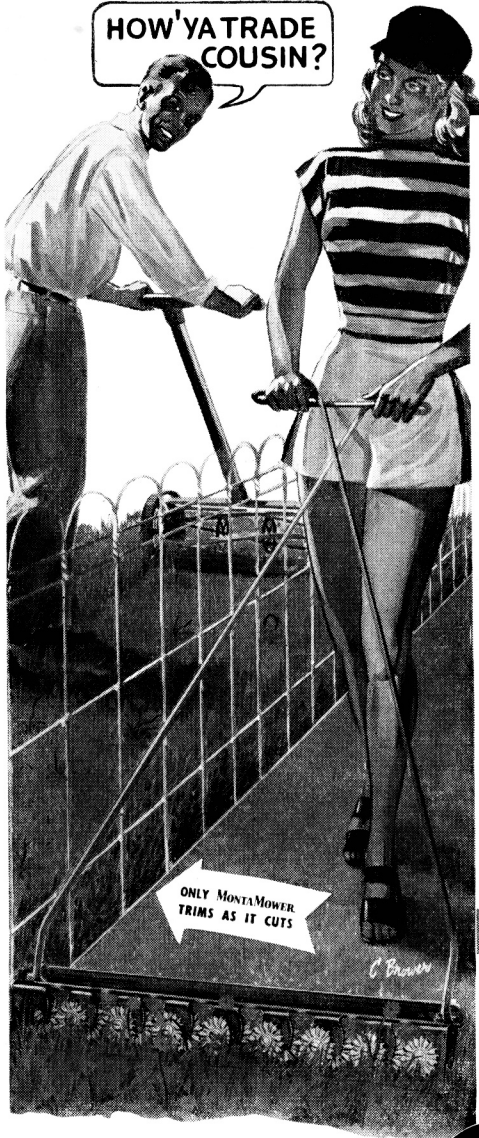
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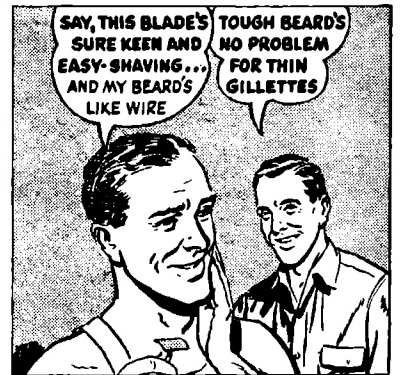
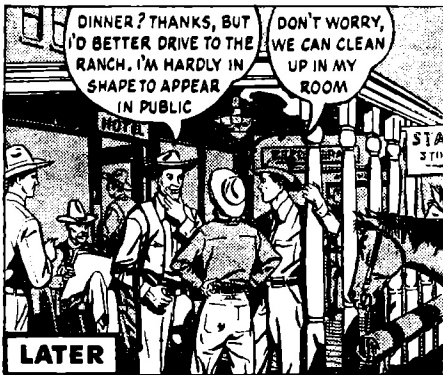
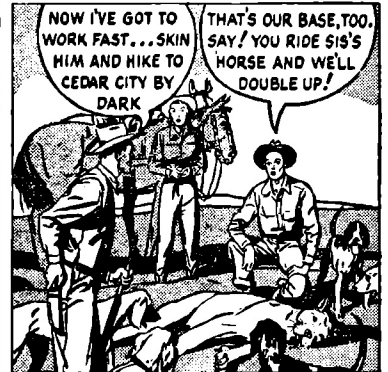
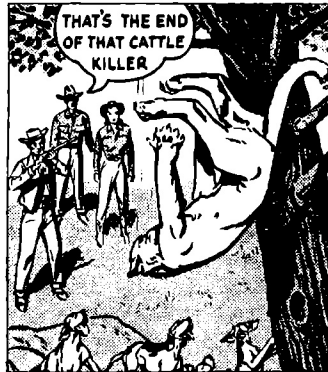
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Vol. 60

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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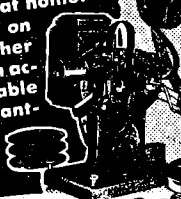
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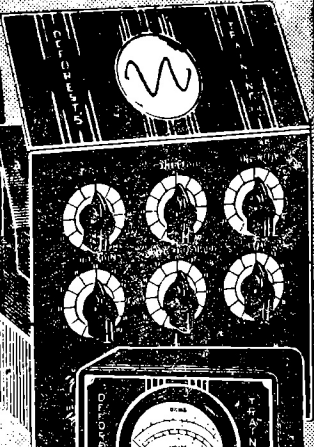
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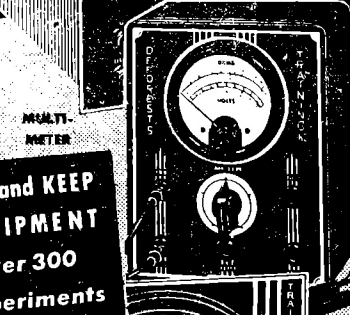
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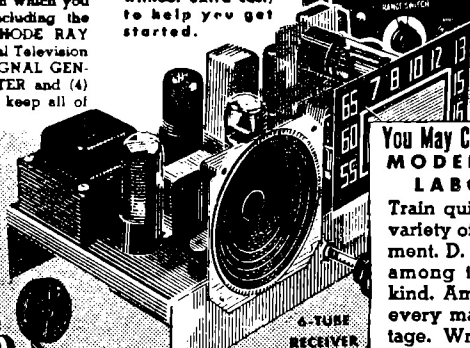
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• • •

For A Western: "Stampede" with Rod Cameron, Gale Storm, Don Castle and Johnny Mack Brown (Allied Artists).



A dam on the ranch of Tim and Mike McCall (Don Castle and Rod Cameron) is cutting off the water supply from the grazing land of some new settlers. Connie (Gale Storm), one of the settlers' daughters, tries unsuccessfully to get them to open the dam but only succeeds in infatuating Tim. He is killed protecting the dam from dynamiting. On a second attempt to destroy the dam, the settlers stampede the McCall cattle. Mike McCall loses the cattle but saves the dam after a vicious gun fight. Mike makes everything right in the end with Connie and the settlers. *Here's a real bang-up Western picture—cows, cow-pokes, settlers—and a rootin', tootin' film.*

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For Sports: "Champion" with Kirk Douglas, Marilyn Maxwell and Arthur Kennedy (United Artists).



Through crafty managing and put-up fights, Midge Kelly (Kirk Douglas) rises from a down-and-outer to a championship contender.

Because he can't make any time with his opponent's flashy girl friend (Marilyn Maxwell), Midge wins a fight "the syndicate" wanted him to throw. For this, Midge is hailed as a symbol of clean sportsmanship by the newspapers, but outside the ring he continues as a ruthless character hurting all those who stand in his way—including four women, his manager and his crippled brother (Arthur Kennedy). To the very end, when Midge Kelly seeks the championship, the public only knows him as a great battler—"a credit to the fight game." *Ring Lardner's great prize fight story is told with force and realism.*

• • •

For Mystery: "Lust for Gold" with Ida Lupino and Glenn Ford (Columbia).



Four men have died in the last two years looking for the lost \$20,000,000 gold mine in the Superstitious Mountains near Phoenix, Arizona. When Barry Storm is accused of murdering the last of these, he retraces his trail with the deputy sheriff to prove his innocence. From the deputy and a series of flashbacks he learns the history of the mine, which was first discovered by two Mexican brothers. Later a desert rat (Glenn Ford) comes into possession of the mine by killing off all contenders, including the scheming Julia Thomas (Ida Lupino). Back to the present, Storm discovers the murderer and the strange secret of the mine in the moonlight. *For all dramatic-detective fans—some real suspense and off the beaten mystery trail.*

• • •

For Adventure: "Scott of the Antarctic" with



John Mills, Derek Bond, Harold Warendor, James Justice and Reginald Beckwith (Eagle-Lion). Technicolor.

This is the true story of Robert Scott, an English naval officer, and his four companions whose expedition to the South Pole in 1909 ended in tragedy. Magnificently told, the picture follows the men from their homes in England, across the Great Ice Barrier of the Antarctic and on to the South Pole. Bitter with disappointment, they find that Amundsen's expedition had arrived at the Pole before them. On the way back from the Pole to their ship, the party fights the fierce Antarctic weather and terrain—to face an ironic tragedy when only eleven miles from safety. *A well-played, well-photographed chronicle.*

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Not gumshoe Buster!*



**NO TIME
TO BURN**

Graphic Novel of a Rough-Tough Detective

By MEL COLTON



"Frisk him," the big goon ordered.

"Mr. Carworth's expecting me."

She shook her head, went into a cute frown, snapped the inner-office switch and spoke to Mr. Carworth about a man named Hardin, Buster Hardin. I looked at her and decided she was a little on the dumb side.

Apparently Mr. Carworth was expecting me, because she turned her face my way, smiled—a sort of angelic, this side of heaven aura—and I looked for her halo. It wasn't around.

Then she came up with star dust in her eyes and said: "Mr. Carworth will see you now. Follow me, Mr. Hardin."

It was a pleasure.

And so I followed a shapely pair of calves down a thickly carpeted aisle until we came to the end of the hall and stopped. A highly polished door blocked our way and five feet up, in gold leaf, were the letters:

PRIVATE.

MR. PORTER HENRY CARWORTH.

That was all. It was enough. He was the boss. She said something about going

CHAPTER ONE

Rocks in the Head

A FEW minutes to three I pushed the heavy plate glass doors of the Great Western Diamond Brokers' offices aside and stood, hat in hand, before the receptionist. I thought I noticed the doll hesitate, so I said:

right in and I said that was just lovely.

I wiped the grin off my face and entered a typical executive's office. It had a quiet air of subdued dignity and practised silence. It had the usual run of pictures of tall buildings and the customary etching of an European cathedral. It had dull-paneled wall and black-leather chairs and an ash-mohogany desk over in the far corner in front of the windows. The blinds were down, giving the room a grayish light. A swath of clean air blew up about every second to remind one the air-conditioning unit was working.

It was peaceful, placid and serene. It was a good place to sneak a sleep.

A large man arose from behind the desk. He was Porter Henry Carworth. He told me so in a sharp, authoritative voice. He pointed to a chair by the desk, which I accepted, sat down and waited.

He had a fat face. He had two beady eyes that cushioned into his skin like raisins in a dough patch. There were two large ears and three jolly chins with no place to go. His lips were blade thin; a short pudgy nose with wide nostrils and light blond hair as thin as fine Japanese silk. He wore a blue-tailored striped suit with enough padding in the shoulders to stop a train.

He glanced at the clock on the desk and opened a drawer at the same time. "Well, well, Mr. Hardin. Johnny-on-the-spot. Three o'clock and here you are."

I had no comment to make. I could have stood a rum and coke.

He came from behind the desk and paced the floor. Something was bothering him. He was plain crazy or his undershirt was too tight. He clicked the inter-office phone and informed the receptionist that he didn't want to be disturbed.

He looked at the floor, then at the walls. Then he walked to the windows. Finally he stopped and stared at me. Then he exploded.

"Play smart with me, Hardin, and I'll break your neck!"

I got up. "Look, Mr. Carworth. I don't know you from Adam. I don't know your problems. All I know is you wanted to see me at three this afternoon. Okay. I'm here. Sell me."

A wave of air charged in from the air unit and brushed against his forehead and

raised a few strands of hair. His eyes bobbed. Then he reached into the open desk drawer and threw a photograph of a golden-haired girl my way. I picked it up off the desk and studied the tinted portrait.

Then I knew what was itching him. The photo was of the same unsure smile, the same goo-goo eyes and the sharply pencilled eyebrows of the blonde decked out in a mink coat who had played at the same roulette wheel with me at a gambling club called the *Chance-Inn*. It was the same young and stupid and sultry face trying to ensnare me from the picture.

I tossed the photo carelessly back on the desk.

"Well?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Carworth."

"Never saw her in your life, I suppose?"

"Didn't say that."

"So it's just another face to you?"

I said that was about the size of it.

"You're a damned liar, Hardin!"

TO PROVE his point, Carworth reached into that drawer again and pulled out some typewritten papers held together by a paper clip. He riffled through the first two or three, then began to read.

"Wednesday, January 6th. Time, ten-fifty p.m. Place, *Chance-Inn*. Miss Mary Jane Carworth, with mink coat, at roulette wheel with tall, well-built man known around town as a gambler. Name, Buster Hardin. Height, around five-eleven to six feet. Weight, around a hundred and ninety pounds. Type, nonchalant, in the know, with an indifferent air womer seemed to go for. Both played the color red. Hardin seemed to be playing a system. Miss Mary Jane followed his play. Afterwards both left the wheel for the bar. Some money was won by both parties.

"At bar, Hardin ordered drinks. Hardin noticed mink coat and made some remark not distinct enough for operator to hear. Mary Jane seemed fond of Hardin—"

Carworth waved the report in my face.

"There's more to this. So it was just a face! Just someone you never saw before. Don't fool with me, Hardin. I don't like it. I don't like it a damned bit!"

We stood looking into each other's eyes. His face became hard and taut, full of suppressed fury on the verge of being released. Only the air, blowing strands of hair up and down on his forehead, broke the muteness of the tension. From outside the faint clang-clang of a blocked street car floated in with indifference, and a horn honked and a motor raced. A staggering fly banged its brains against the blind.

I said: "Look, friend, is this interview over, or do we start batting each other around the room?"

He settled. "The interview's just started. I haven't told you this, but I haven't seen nor heard from Mary Jane since that report—almost a week."

I got the pitch. "Then according to your flick, I was the last to be seen with her."

"You're brightening up."

"Have you notified the police?"

"Not yet. There's more to this. I don't want the police in until I find out certain facts." He handed me a quick look. "For your information, Mary Jane isn't only missing; thirty thousand in diamonds are missing as well."

I raised an eye on that. "And you can't afford an insurance investigation either. Brother, you're in a hell of a fix."

"I've got to find Mary Jane. Where is she?"

"I don't know. I don't know your daughter at all. She's very playful, Carworth, and dangerous. I won't deny she was the girl that played my bets at the club. Why don't you ask some of her friends?"

"She has no friends her own age. The lot she runs around with are a bunch of high-powered heels. There's not a straight answer among them."

"What about the private eye? He seemed capable."

"That's just it. I haven't heard from him either since the report. This was mailed to me."

"How well do you know this operator?"

"Charlie Young's okay. Used to handle insurance investigations before he went out on his own. Known Charlie for ten years."

I had enough. "You're swinging at wide pitches, Carworth. I want no part of it."

I guess he didn't hear me because he kept going. "Mary Jane gets two hundred

a week to lose. I said lose, Hardin, and I mean just that. If I gave her more, she'd lose more. Gambles her fool head off. Runs in the blood. Her mother was the same way. Her old man had to check her too. It's a bad heredity."

I stayed for another round. "These diamonds she took, they belonged to the firm? Do you own this firm, Carworth?"

He squirmed on that one and took his time in answering. He came up with a forced smile.

"The Great Western Diamond Brokers belonged to a man named Dwight. His picture used to hang over there on the wall," and he pointed to where the cathedral etching was hung. "Mrs. Carworth was a Dwight and an only daughter. When she died, three years ago, the bulk of the estate went to Mary Jane.

"However, she must reach twenty-one before she gains half of it. The other half remains in trust. I'm the guardian and executor of the estate. So you see," he lifted his hands, tried that smile again, "if Mary Jane did take the diamonds, she might be thinking that they rightfully belong to her."

"How old is Mary Jane?"

"Twenty."

I said: "Yeah, just dandy. Next year you go out on your back. Thanks for wasting my time, Carworth, but I can't do anything for you. You'll have to interview some other sucker."

I walked to the door and turned about. Carworth was lifting a bottle of bourbon from a drawer and placing a glass on the desk. I guess he liked to drink alone.

He poured a good man-sized shot and drank it straight. He glanced up, discovered my presence, but said nothing; but I had a feeling he was laughing at me.

IT WAS a quarter to four when I left the elevator and walked into the drug store on the main floor just off the lobby, and looked up Charlie Young's address under Detective Agencies. He was listed as having offices on Highland Avenue in Hollywood, in the 1500 block—which placed it near Hollywood Boulevard.

I bought a pack of cigs, picked up an early newspaper, walked around and retrieved my car from the parking lot. There was a tricky dampness in the air. It lay

like a fine damp spray and yet there was a warmth about it that misled you into leaving the raincoat at home. It was sticky and clammy, and it took me thirty minutes of sweating to arrive at Charlie Young's offices in Hollywood.

It was a two-story building with a side entrance and a candy store occupying the ground floor. A small wooden sign hung from a rusty brace. It informed the sidewalkers that a Charlie Young ran a Confidential Service and the room where you could become confidential was numbered 209.

I hopped up creaky wooden steps and found room 209 in the rear. It was a dark and dusty and silent hallway. I tried his door, found it unlocked, and entered. Inside, a small office stared back at me with all the sadness of a bankrupt man. It was gloomy and the windows were smudged on the inside and grimy on the outside. The plaster smelt damp and cold.

It was like any other small-time struggling office, with the small oak desk loafing in one corner and a couple of chairs backed up against the nearest wall. The room managed to keep up its respectability with a rail fence and swing gate.

I pushed back the gate and noticed the inner office door to the right. I knocked, then opened it. The inner office was cleaner and neater, with three rows of files lining one side. An old walnut desk sat in front of the large dirty window and was piled a foot high with books and vanilla-covered folders. A portable typewriter rested in an open case. An empty customer's chair, leather and worn, faced the desk.

The air cringed with a musty odor that comes with damp wood or backed-up sewerage. My eyes swept down to behind the desk and rested on Charlie Young. Charlie was doing all right. He didn't need any outside help and he wasn't hungry.

Charlie was dead. As cold as last week's left-over potato.

He was slumped in his chair like a passed-out drunk. His chin pointed into his chest and his mouth hung open like a tulip. His shoulders sagged and his brown suit sagged as if he had lost a lot of weight in a short time. His stiff arms lay in his lap.

I came forward and took a closer gander. It was a nice face. That is, it had been a nice face. Black, curly, well-groomed hair and smooth skin. It was marred by a ring of black circling a small red dot, which separated his eyes just above the converging of the eyebrows. Dried blood ran in an uneven streak down the left side of the nose and cheek, curved around the edge of the mouth and had dripped upon his lapel.

An ugly sash of red cut a path of blood, which extended from his left temple clear back to the ear. This had been, apparently, just a sighting-in shot. He had been shot at twice. The second time was sufficient to prove the purpose, for it had been right between the eyes. I didn't bother to look for more attempts.

I noticed his hands. One was limp, palm out. His right hand was confusing. The thumb, little finger and fourth finger were folded together leaving two fingers extended like a baseball catcher giving a signal.

I finally dragged my eyes away from his hands and looked him over again. He was about thirty-eight or forty. The gray light seeping through the dirt-splotted window cast a ghastly, speckled light upon his figure and shadowed the desk. On the desk was a vanilla folder, flapped over, revealing a report.

I picked it up and hastily glanced at the contents. It was the same report Carworth had read parts of to me at his office.

There was a bare sheet of paper in the typewriter and the shift lock was down. Something Young had not as yet, had time to write. Or did he intend to write it? Or was he killed as he was about to light the fuse under somebody? Or was I jumping over mental broomsticks?

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsel Guests

GOING to a telephone booth at the back of a bar on Hollywood Boulevard I dialed Central Homicide. I had purposely waited until after five o'clock. Lieutenant Burns went on duty then and he was a smart cop. I figured I could sit on him for a break—if needed.

As Burns came on the phone, I said: "Too busy tonight to see a dead body?"

I heard a familiar grunt. "What's that? Who's talking?"

"An old friend."

"Old friends don't dig up dead bodies. Spill it. And quick."

"A Charlie Young. Private-eye. Sham-us to you, Burns. Look up his office."

Burns was mumbling as he was apparently writing down the call. Another phone clicked to the line and they were checking the station.

"Okay, who are you?"

I said: "Sherlock Holmes. But I'm tired. I give violin concerts at the Philharmonic now."

"Wise guy, eh? Listen, you—"

I hung up.

Then I looked up Great Western Diamond Brokers' phone number and dialed. A harsh voice boomed through, although it was slightly frayed on the ends. Carworth was still at his office.

I told him who was calling and added, "Still hitting the bottle?"

In certain brief and concrete language he told me to mind my own damned business.

"Okay, drink yourself into a stupor, Carworth. Your man Friday's taken a by-by pill."

"Make a little sense."

"Murder. A guy with some bullets in his head. Charlie Young."

"Good Lord!" I heard the groan and I heard a noise which probably meant Carworth had sat down too hard all at once. A long second dragged. Then he cleared his throat. "When?"

"He's cold. Very cold. Been dead for days."

"How about the police? They know?"

"I notified them. It's getting messy, Carworth. Have anything to say?"

"Say? What can I say?"

"Look, Carworth, this is murder. A man's been knocked off. A private-eye. You're going to have to say something, even if it's in deaf-and-dumb language. Cops are funny that way. They like people to talk."

He went cagey on me. "See what you mean. You got any ideas? You won't be sitting so pretty yourself, Hardin. You're on that report you know."

I said: "You're too anxious, friend. Unless Charlie made two copies for his office, the cops won't know about it."

"How come?"

"Because Charlie had been working on the report. I took the report off his desk."

"Good. Good work. That'll do it."

"Yeah. That'll do it. Hear from Mary Jane?"

"I did not," came chilly.

"Okay, Carworth. If a short, heavy-set cop by the name of Lieutenant Burns comes around with a hat full of questions—don't play tough. He likes it that way."

Carworth must have been sneering because his words were in that suit. "I'll handle my end. Don't lose any sleep on that, Hardin."

I told him he was cute, and hung up. It was getting no place fast....

I HUNG around town, had dinner, then I drove home to a little modern shack that squatted like a small poodle dog among the great Danes in the Hollywood Hills. I slid my coupe into the garage, which was level to the driveway and beneath the house itself. It was about seven o'clock.

The living room was dark but something was wrong. That feeling that comes over you when you've seen a double feature of a vampire-man and a human monster talking things over.

When my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I saw papers laying on the floor—a whole mess of papers and books from the shelves—chairs upturned, the rug folded over like a badly used accordion. A light leaked through from the rear bedroom.

I tiptoed back and opened the door. A blaze of light hit me as three faces turned and threw mouths at me with large O's.

They were in the act of giving the bedroom the same treatment as the living room. All three came upright from the various positions. Two of them were medium, chunky individuals with barroom faces. The third was a big boy all the way. Stooges for Nick Morgan, owner of the *Chance-Inn*.

One of the boys whipped out an army .45 just for practice. My insurance didn't cover that. The big boy looked puzzled. He looked like an ape that had been

thrown a waxed banana and couldn't figure it out.

I leaned against the door frame and waited. The big boy straightened up and I thought his head was going to hit the ceiling. His hands hit his hips and stuck. His head cocked like a water spaniel's and he showed me those teeth—all jagged as though a broken beer bottle had hit them and kept going on through.

A drawer from my dresser lay in his path and he kicked it aside. He came up and loomed over me. Onions spread aroma from his nostrils. His eyes were blank disks of greenish-gray.

I planted my feet firmly for a better understanding of the situation. "You boys got a search warrant, of course?"

"Sure we got one, playboy." He leaned closer and the onion smell was enough to bend me. "Pete's got it in his hand."

Pete laughed and shoved the .45 out for show. "You tell 'im, No-socks."

I said: "Okay, grifters, what gives?"

"You do," No-socks informed me. "Or maybe you like to play leap-frog with the walls, maybe?"

"What do you want?"

"That's better. I like you that way, playboy. Morgan wants papers. Like a report, maybe, huh?"

"How does Morgan know I have a report?"

"I wouldn't know, playboy. Honest to Pete, I wouldn't know. Morgan says you got it. So—you got it." He slapped my chest with his hand. It was a friendly tap. He was lobbying them in, warming up.

At that moment, I had my first clue. No-socks told me I had one. I had to think fast or lose the best portion of my face and perhaps the other part of the house. No-socks could probably throw the house right off its foundation. And if I couldn't out-think these morons, I'd go back pitching pennies.

I said: "You're wasting time, No-socks. Some of the boys took what you want a few minutes ago."

"Ya mean Tony and Riggsy?"

"Don't know their names. Morgan planted them in my car. They used a persuader like Pete's holding."

No-socks frowned. "Ya give it to them?"

"Right. I like keeping fresh."

No-socks let it sink in, or soak in, or flop in—or whatever a thought uses when it hits bone. He turned to his two helpers and got a blank shrug. They were willing to quit. The place was too clean for them. Not enough alcohol in the air.

"You wouldn't fool me, would you, playboy?"

I smiled, pleasantly and showed my teeth.

From the corner of my eye I caught his right shoulder lower a fraction. In that instant I shut my mouth and tilted my head—just in time to lose the full power of a striking fist that came up large as a bucket. It scraped my chin, skinned my cheek and bounced my ear. The force threw me backwards and against the wall. I slumped to the floor and was on springs. Then I settled down.

No-socks' lips curled. "Just practice, playboy, in case you play smart."

He motioned to his two helpers and they followed him into the hall. They tramped to the door like an elephant parade. I got up, holding my ear which was buzzing like a four-alarm fire, and stumbled to the living-room window in time to watch them pounding down the driveway.

No-socks wasn't smart at all—just big.

AFTER I cleaned up the house with a quick promise, I decided to find out what was so important about the report. So I laid out the Young report in front of me, pulled up a chair, switched on the table light and began to read about the adventures of the young, wild and cute Mary Jane Carworth—now missing with thirty grand in stones.

The first report was dated the 5th of January. It went something like this:

Mary Jane, alone, parked her car in the Chance-Inn parking lot on Sunset Boulevard and entered the club. Time, ten-fifty five. Later, dark Latin joined her. Name, Carlos Malindez, male part of dance team of Malindez and Marquella, feature attraction at the club. They disappeared from club proper, and went to gaming rooms in back. Mary Jane signed all tabs.

Mary Jane lost heavily at roulette and tried black-jack with same result. Escort Carlos Malindez did not participate. At twelve-twenty. Mary Jane began to feel her drinks and became loud and abusive.

Mary Jane left Carlos and the club in a

rage and visited numerous clubs along the strip. At four-twenty, Mary Jane returned home.

I set aside the first section of the report and reached for my pipe. I let the light tease the tobacco in the bowl for a few seconds, then eased into the chair and tried to obtain something like a thought on this affair. I watched the smoke rings dance blithely around the table lamp. They didn't tell me a thing.

The next report was dated January 6th. Except for the action which involved me at the club which Carworth had read to me, Mary Jane had spent a rather quiet day. It told in detail what happened, then continued:

Mary Jane went back to roulette wheel after talk with Hardin. She played all her winnings on color red. She lost and became loud and abusive. Played red again and lost all her money. She began accusing manager of establishment. Nick Morgan and Carlos Malindez escorted Mary Jane into office. Fifteen minutes later, Mary Jane came out with Malindez and was herself again. She had more money and continued to play.

That made it interesting. Nick Morgan never gave charity. Yet this blonde frill had tapped him. At last, I knew where the diamonds were drifting.

Suddenly the front door opened—No-socks had left it open—and a tall Spanish onion blew in. He closed the door quietly behind him, as if he were allergic to sound, and came into the living room and stopped five feet from me.

He was tall and he was dark and he was loathsome. I didn't like his greasy face, his pencil-thin mustache, nor the way he kept his hands in his side pockets. Two patch pockets on a sport jacket. Two hands bulging out with bad intent. One hand probably had a gun, the other a sapper, maybe.

A snap brim shaded two dash marks for eyes. They swept the room and landed on the table by the report. They stuck there for a moment, then came up and bitterly assailed my face. He twisted thin lips like he was tough. Maybe he was. There was a slinky, snakish movement to his body, and even when he stood still he was in rhythm.

He had a brittle voice, the kind you can break by hitting it.

"You, Hardin?"

"Who'd you expect to find—your brother?"

He licked his lips and shifted as though waiting for a musical beat.

"Start scratching," I chided. "What's the matter, lose your script?"

He just sneered. He was sneering when he came in. He just hitched it up a notch. "Maybe I like to hear you talk."

"Come off your horse, Pancho. You didn't come here in that two-by-four pose to play games. What's itching?"

"You are."

"Draw me a picture."

He ran that tongue over his lips again. "Mary Jane Carworth," he hissed.

"So?"

"Just this. Lay off, big shot. I'm warning you, nicelike. Play Prince Charming with some other dame."

I handed him my best half-cocked smile.

"Mind your business, and you stay healthy. Otherwise," he added with a motion of his pocket, "you go out of business—Chicago style—with flowers."

I had enough of this farce. I looked at my watch. "Okay, Carlos Malindez, you've worried me to death. You're going to be late for the floor show. Scram."

Both pockets seemed to move upwards at the same time, but nothing came out of them. Just tension. Then, in typical Latin fashion, he spit at me, turned heel and slammed the front door. I heard his Cuban heels hit the steps and onto the driveway.

I just sat and sat. Nothing happened. The clock tick-tocked and the faucet leaked. I finally concluded that Carlos Malindez was funny, too.

CHAPTER THREE

A Frame for the Eye

A SLIGHT breeze worked itself up into a tricky wind and blew through the palm trees and whistled off key. Now and then the windows rattled in protest, then gave up. The air had goopy fingers.

The corners of the room shadowed into deep purples and closed in, shortening the room. My pipe rolled over on its bowl and

simmered. Then everything seemed to relax and the shadows moved up on me and closed my eyes.

When I awoke the room was pitch except for the table lamp that still glowed. I stretched and looked up. I looked again, blinked, and looked hard.

In a chair, facing me, was Mary Jane Carworth!

I was looking at the same goo-goo eyes; at a nose, small and wiggly. Her mouth was trying to get happy like the rest of her face, but was losing to a pout instead.

Then she slid from beneath her mink coat and showed a black gown of careless material with bright gold sequins splattered here and there. The neck line was low and her tanned neck ended up with a tight necklace just below the chin. Her arms were bare except for a diamond bracelet that cost a man two-years salary.

She was showing me the best years of her life wrapped up in that gown. In her right hand—a small .22 was pointed at me.

Very cozy, indeed.

She dull-smiled me and said: "Well, ain't you glad to see me, handsome?"

I think I said, "Sure, sure." But I wasn't so sure. The room got cold all of a sudden.

She dropped her eyelashes and seemed to speak right through them. "You think I'm kinda—nice?"

I know I said: "Sure, sure."

She tried a coo in her voice. "Be nice to me, handsome."

I said nothing and waited for the next pitch. It came with a giggle.

"You work for my old man, don't you? The stupe put a dick on my tail, too. Now Malindez is watching me. I must be some stuff, huh? Everybody watching poor little me."

The only thing watching this kid was a nice psychopathic jag, I decided.

"Look, honey—"

I didn't finish. She broke it up with another silly giggle and the little .22 in her hand snapped at me. My pipe bowl jumped a foot off the table, a hole in its stem.

Within the instant, we were on the floor. I had lunged at her feet, threw her over the chair and landed with her on the floor. For the moment I stayed put, tak-

ing time out to thank my lucky star. She had been just three feet away and missed me.

Now she sobbed, "Please, help me. I—I'm frightened."

I picked up her gun, put it in my pocket, and lifted her to her feet. She pouted and rolled into my arms.

Now mind you, the kid had what it takes to make a guy forget himself, but in this instance I took into consideration the fact that she didn't have all her marbles.

I said: "I'm taking you home."

She whirled from my arms. "Not to the old man."

"Where else?"

She tried it again. "You like me, still?"

"Yeah, but I'm taking you home just the same."

She gave me one of those okay, dope, sneers, picked up her mink coat and said: "Well, let's go."

BUT I didn't take her home to Carworth. I drove her instead to a hotel on Berendo off Wilshire, where she said she was staying. It turned out to be one of those second-class hotel apartments with light housekeeping privileges. Her room was on the second floor toward the front. A tall, thin, goggled-eyed night clerk screwed his neck up from the books, smiled at us, then returned to his amusements. I guess he was used to strangers at two a.m. in the morning.

As we reached her door she started another roll into my arms.

A familiar object pressed into my back and with it a whiney voice that belonged to Pete, one of Morgan's rats.

"Yeah, great stuff, hold. And you, miss, just open the door and we'll all have a party."

Inside the room, the light was shining and I was marched into the grinning presence of No-socks. He was sitting on a steam radiator doing a Rodin's Thinker act.

"Playboy's back," Pete whistled.

I managed a nod toward Mary Jane, who just stood back against the wall, expressionless, her face as white and hard as a stone image. The kind you associate with Egyptians and the Pyramids.

"Nice going," I snapped at her. "You're

getting cuter and cuter all the time.”

“Frisk him,” No-socks ordered.

I was frisked. Pete took out Mary Jane's .22 and threw it to No-socks, who in turn threw it on the floor and into a corner. Then No-socks got up, stretched out and shuffled forward. He was getting bigger and bigger with each step. His eyes took on a funny look and he meant business. He was mad.

His face turned dark and he growled at me, “Ya tried to fool me, playboy. Ya tried to fool me.” He was all sour and his fingers curled into claws.

I shifted away from Pete, caught No-socks coming in wrong, and put all my weight behind my right fist. It clipped No-socks and stopped his coming. I followed through with a left, but he caught that in his hand, shoulder high.

A large paw shot out, covered my face, and fingers like meaty tenacles dug into my cheekbones. The hand drew me in a few inches, then reversed and shoved me away. I went stumbling back, hit the wall and slumped. I stopped halfway down as my knees went rubbery. I feebly threw up a guard, but nothing came through.

No-socks stood, legs straddled, hands hanging by his side, staring at me with green disks for eyes. Pete was smoking a cigarette by the door. Mary Jane remained against the wall. She didn't move. She didn't scream. She just giggled. Very nice.

The room was filled with chairs, an end table, a coffee table and a lamp. I couldn't reach any of them.

So I lunged across the room at No-socks to show I wasn't hurt. I came in low. I missed with a left, then shot all I had with a right into his unprotected stomach. He wasn't expecting that.

He grunted and doubled slightly. I went to work on his heart. He just grunted. He didn't stagger back or quit. He just grunted. It was nice exercise, but I couldn't keep it up all morning.

A large fist clubbed the back of my neck and my jaw-bone vibrated. My eyes banged into each other. A shoulder came in heavily and split my cheek. Something pushed me away and then drove a telephone pole into my stomach. I felt nauseated—falling into a shaft that never reaches bottom.

I sagged and felt the floor come up and touch my spread-out hands. I thought I heard a scream, but it was short and snapped off like a rubber band breaking. It might have been me.

My brain said I was on my uppers again. I swung; something grunted and smashed a hot flash of pain against my temples. I wobbled like a leaded quarter, but I stayed up. My eyes fought against the light and darkness and colors. It turned them around and around, kaleidoscope fashion, into a symmetrical design. My hands were reaching, clutching, tearing at the air, heavy enough to be carrying a shot-put in each fist.

Smelling onions fricasseed in sweat, I punched at it. It was soft. I tried again but air slapped back.

Something dark tumbled at me. I swung blindly—met the object half way, steadied it, then rocked it. I felt my knuckles turn into tissue paper. I had hit bone. It cursed and spat. It fell away and hit the floor.

I stumbled forward—maybe a yard or so—maybe ten miles. Something on the floor squirmed. I rubbed my eyes, trying to straighten them out, trying to stop their quivering. A quick movement behind me. A sharp, cold instrument behind my ear. The floor came up fast and hit me hard. The lights graduated into dimness, then exploded into specks of frantic light.

The whiney voice said: “I fix 'im, pal. He won't bounce no more.”

Something thick and brutal snapped. “I oughta bust ya, too. Don't need no help.”

The whiney voice again: “But you were down.”

Then the ceiling lowered and the walls pushed in close and someone turned off the lights.

A HEAVY blindfold was over my eyes. Then the blindfold became lighter in shade and greenish in color... then it steadied and lay flat... then it turned into a rug. A gray, ghoulish light sliced through the pulled shades, and rays of lint-festered light cut a thin line on the rug. I tried to get up but was all shoulders. I lifted my head and my neck pulled away. My hands were stiff, two sizes too big for me.

I finally got to my feet, as the ceiling spun. I held onto an object. A door frame. I leaned against it and put some air in my lungs. My chest became a pin cushion. I looked at my watch. The crystal was blurred.

I saw an in-a-door bed still up in the wall. I opened it but nothing fell out. A dead body wouldn't have shocked me. Nothing shocked me anymore. I was too numb and sick; too filled up with ideas that were big, but all wrong.

I closed the apartment door and took the stairway one flight. There was a rear exit leading to the street. It was dark, with streaks of lazy gray and pink yawning in the east.

It was also cold and damp and the air nipped at my sore face. I glanced at my watch again. A hazy five after six. I walked around to where I thought I had parked my car. It wasn't there. I found it a half block down and realized I had left my key in the ignition slot. One of these days I'll do things right. So I drove home with one hand holding my neck from toppling over.

As I drove the car into the garage and started up the steps, two men came out of the early morning light. Their sizes didn't bother me. I was ready to lay down and let them stamp me to death. One came forward and flashed a buzzer.

"Hardin? You're wanted at headquarters." The other moved in behind me.

I made a feeble reply. "What for?"

"You'll find out. Coming along?"

I said no. He didn't like my saying no. Nobody says no to a cop. His lips twitched and the cop behind him said something like: "You're not getting difficult?"

I said I was going to be difficult. That I was tired and worn and beat out. That if they had eyes at all they could see why it was easy to be difficult.

The one facing me quizzed my face. I didn't think he had the heart to hit me and drag me away. The other cop seemed to have disappeared but my eyes picked him up as he went nosing around my car, looking at the tires.

I fell against the railing, grabbed it and hung on. The cop shifted his feet and handed me a queer look. His hand played with his smooth chin. It seemed he had in mind to pick me up and carry me,

when a motor came up the driveway and stopped. The door flew open and the squat figure of Lieutenant Burns appeared. He came forward with a tired face.

"What's going on here?" He stopped and gazed intently upon my battered face. His hands clenched and he turned sharply on the young cop. "You didn't—" There was dynamite in his words.

The cop, all six feet of him, stepped back and his face reddened. "No, sir. He was like that when he came home."

Burns relaxed, told the cop to help me up to the house, then stayed back and talked to the cop by my car. When he came into the living room he sat down opposite me and looked worried. He picked at a callus on his left hand and spoke without looking up.

"You reported that murder—Charlie Young's." It wasn't a question. It had grown up to be a solid statement.

"I guess I did."

"You guess?" He laughed. "You can do better than that. You know—and plenty."

"Quit biting my tail, Lieutenant. What's up?"

He leaned forward. "So we quit the practice shots. What do you know about Carlos Malindez?"

"For a cop you don't get around much. He's the feature attraction at the *Chance-Inn*."

Burns sat back and tapped his knee. He watched the weariness come clutching at my body and show in my face. When he thought he had waited long enough, he said:

"Carlos Malindez's body was dumped in Baldwin Hills near Inglewood. The death car drove off the road and onto the soft red clay shoulder and dumped him. Your car has red clay marks. My man Souers discovered it when you drove in—before you had a chance to wash them off!"

I saw a beautiful frame staring at me. I said: "If you don't mind telling me, how did I kill him?"

"Malindez was strangled. Hyoid bone crushed. Almost tore his head off."

I snickered. "Sounds like me, doesn't it?"

"Trying to tell me you've been framed. Buster?"

"Or about to be."

"Yeah. You're as innocent as a fargo dealer in an opium den, Buster. Let's have it. Straight."

And so I told him all I knew, where I had been, how I had been manhandled. I told him about Carworth and his wild young daughter who liked to gamble and run around with a .22 and pull disappearing acts. Then I ended up with: "Did Malindez have a gun on him?"

Burns gave me a once-over look and said, "Uh-uh. Why?"

The room whirled and I closed my eyes. My voice seemed far away, a million miles or so. "Just a thought..."

His voice came back again. "We've already checked on this Carworth. He hired Young. Found check credits on Young's books. And Carworth's got a record. Rum-running in Detroit during Pro. Went straight after that..."

* * *

I must have fallen asleep. My mind began to float and drift like flotsam along pilings of time.

I saw a shapely pair of calves just ahead of me prance down a carpeted aisle. I saw Carworth jump from his desk and shout words that sounded like: "Play smart with me and I'll break your neck!" I saw the face of Charlie Young and it was sad and broken, and I saw a huge fist come at me and ring my ears. There was a Latin spitting at me; and a pair of pencilled eyebrows and goo-goo eyes on a blonde face—a face of a girl who was missing with thirty thousand in stones, and she was shooting at me from three feet away...and I thought I had an answer....

CHAPTER FOUR

By-By Blues

THE sun was warm when I dragged myself out of the chair. My eyes wavered, then settled and cleared. The clock said one. A patch of afternoon light squared away at the table lamp that was still burning and haloed the bullet-wounded pipe.

Somehow that pipe reminded me of the faces in my sleep and the answer—now *what* was that answer?

After a shower and a shave—carefully circling the cut cheek—a couple of cups of black coffee, a change of clothes and a .38 police special in my arm holster, I saw a doctor friend who fixed my cheek with a couple stitches and didn't ask foolish questions. He was a medical man, not a D.A.

I stopped off at a drug store and phoned Central Homicide. Burns was out, so I left a message and drove on to the Carworth home.

It was one of those two-story white stucco rancho types that sprawled over about an acre of ground. It was a modified Spanish which is typical of California homes, with the patios in the front and sides, and wooden window bars and red flagstone steps. The roof was red tile with yellow cornices, with a three-car garage in the back holding onto the color scheme. Small rose bushes led you up to the first patio, through a wooden gate, and then to the door which welcomed you from under a stucco arch.

I hit the brass knocker a few raps. The door opened and Carworth greeted me. He was wearing a smoking jacket that hung like a pup tent. He was still big, but he looked flabby and tired. His eyes were bleary and red-rimmed; his lips hung lifelessly. When he took my hand, his was damp.

"Come on in, Hardin."

Carworth led me through a reception room the size of a hat box. I trailed him into a large room, with beige-covered rugs that whooshed underneath my feet; walls done up in rich deep browns, which contrasted with the brown neutral-shaded curtains, gave the room a bronzed glow. Then we came to a small, compact den. Here Carworth stopped and bade me sit down with a wave of his hand.

The room was done up with an Arizona sandstone fireplace on one wall, knotty-pine paneling for the others and an asphalt-tile flooring. I sat down in a low, comfortable chair, as Carworth brought over a decanter of liquor and set it on a receiving table. He made another trip for glasses and gave me a help-yourself wave of his hand.

He took out a long Cuban cigar, offered me one, which I refused, and then cushioned his weight into another chair op-

posite mine. He seemed nervous and unsure, ill.

"Hardin, you wanted to see me."

I said I did.

He said: "The police have been here."

I said that I knew that too. He eyed me suspiciously. He said again. "You wanted to see me."

I slumped into the chair, ankle over ankle, and lit a cigarette. It was going to be a tough session. I began easily enough.

"Carworth, you've gotten me into a mess. You and your daughter and your lies. You're going to get me out of that mess, clean and healthy."

His face was empty and drawn. All the life gathered in his hands, which were fumbling with the unlit cigar. He kept looking at it, turning it over and over, fascinated by the band.

He muttered, "In what way, Hardin? In what way have I lied to you?"

"Don't go simple on me, Carworth. First, the stolen diamonds that I don't think were stolen at all. Second, the missing daughter that wasn't missing at all." I leaned forward. "Everything is love-dove, but not for me. I'm left hanging by the proverbial noose. I'm fussy about getting tied-up in a murder rap. And I'm tired when giggly dames take pot shots at me. Shall I continue?"

His eyes backed into his head until they were mere pin points. But he finally lifted them from the cigar and peered out at me, tired. "Continue."

I HAVEN'T found out yet whether Nick Morgan is fencing for you, or you for him." Carworth raised his head as he watched me carefully. "But you and Morgan work well together. Especially on reports. You are the only one who knew I had the file copy, because I told you so over the phone. Result—my house is ransacked by Morgan's man."

I reached into my holster, brought out the .38, and laid it across my knee. "Maybe you better start explaining."

Carworth gazed at the gun as though it were a piece of uninteresting furniture. He shifted his weight and finally threw his cigar on the table. He reached for a drink and took it straight.

"Hardin, that gun isn't necessary. You

are entitled to some explanation, seeing that I've tried to use you. A Lieutenant Burns of the Police Department has unfortunately dug up some information about me which I have been trying to live down. It is not pleasant to possess such a record—a criminal record of some years ago—and it is not easy to live down, I assure you."

My cigarette was tasting like dried carpet, but I waited. And puffed.

He smiled, a funeral-attendant smile, a sort of refined double-take. "Have a drink, Hardin. You're all tense."

I kept my eye on him as I poured a straight shot and watered my mouth with it. It was smooth, velvety, smoky scotch.

"Hardin, I used you because you were one type of man that could be beneficial to me. I was alone. I needed help."

"You're jumping around like a scared rabbit. Let's get to some facts. What's Morgan got on you?"

"You guess, Mr. Hardin."

"Morgan knew your record."

"Exactly and he was holding it over me. That kind of a past in my business is—well, curtains."

"There must be more to it than just a record."

His eyes blinked. I had scored without tilting the machine. "There may be."

I finally caught on. "Then you didn't lie to me. Mary Jane was copping the diamonds, gambled them away at Morgan's and did disappear as far as you were concerned."

His hands lifted half way, then dropped in defeat.

"Morgan cashed in her diamonds at a ridiculously low price and sold them back to me at a huge profit."

"So you called in Charlie Young. Why?"

"I had the idea that perhaps I could scare Mary Jane into sense. I had Charlie trail her. If I could have only gotten something on Morgan, something to level back with. Then I received the report. I figured you were a right guy. The man I could use. And with Mary Jane missing, it gave me the chance to act tough and threaten you, force you into helping me."

"And so Charlie Young gets bumped off."

There was a lot of silence. Then: "Hardin," came slowly. "I didn't kill Charlie Young."

"You know who did," I snapped.

Carworth's hand reached out my way and just hung in the air like he was about to pat a dog. He was shaking. I fixed a couple of drinks. He drank his like water. I sipped mine. I was beginning to feel sorry for the guy.

And I was getting smarter by the minute. I said: "So that's been eating you. And Morgan's been blackmailing you on that, too."

He shook his head slowly, like a shaggy lion after a sun bath. He lifted his massive head and smiled, but it was a dying man's smile, the brave and happy one that falls empty and short of its mark. His cheeks rolled into soft pie dough.

He shoved his hands out and held the palms upward for me to see. Then he moved them up and down, in half inch jerks, as if he were weighing the world.

I said softly: "Malindez?"

He nodded.

I added: "You strangled him with those hands?"

He fixed a gaze at the fireplace and rooted his eyes to a spot.

"Why?" I asked.

"Malindez came here that night. He tried to shake me down. Told me Mary Jane killed Young. Said he had proof. He had driven her to Young's office Sunday morning. They had been trailing the detective. Sort of a turn-about. She went up to his office and killed him. It was Sunday and nobody was around. Malindez was going to hand her over to the police unless I came across."

"He want anything else?"

"A lot of crazy ideas. Marriage to Mary Jane. It got all mixed up. He kept coming at me with demands. Morgan knew, too. Then last night, late, or rather early this morning, he came at me again. I lost my temper. I charged him and then—he was on the floor. I had broken his greasy neck!"

"You used my car. What was that for? Another frame-up on me?"

HE RUBBED hands over his face, massaged his cheeks until they were red. "Malindez took your car. I was

looking for a spot to dump him when I saw your car outside. I rode around with him in the back seat and threw him out in the hills. Then I just took the car back to that hotel and left it."

"Leaving me with red clay marks to explain to the cops," I snapped.

"I had no choice. I had to get rid of him for Mary Jane's sake."

I studied his face for a moment, then said, "How long can you keep on protecting her?"

He didn't answer. He went to staring at that spot on the wall again as though he were going to drill two holes right through with those beady eyes.

I got up and jabbed my cigarette out. I said quietly, "The cops will have to know about this."

He turned his head and gazed at me, his face mottled and splotched with fear. Gobs of sweat clung to his forehead, then drooled down his cheeks. His lips opened and closed in short spasms. His eyes went dead. A strange, uneven tremor came over his body. He became a lump of devitalized flesh. His eyes went back to the wall and stuck.

He wasn't going to tell me anything more. He was all washed up and he knew it. And so I left him trying to find salvation with that spot on the wall.

I closed the outside door and gathered in the fresh air. It felt good after the closeness of the room and the sight of a broken man.

A single shot cracked out!

I grabbed the doorknob and was about to return to the house when there came a short, cut-off scream, a little high in pitch, then a rustle of material. I heard a clatter of heels as I wedged back to the door. It was coming around from the side drive. I crept to the edge of the house and crouched.

A figure flashed by, but I swung out, caught the arm and swerved it around towards me. I hugged it close, throwing my other arm tightly about the girl and held it, almost squeezing the breath out of her. My hand closed in on the wrist, pressed it, and a gun fell to the walk.

"Le' me go," came muffled from the locality of my chest. I opened the front door and flung the girl into the reception room. She stumbled and fell to her knees.

When she looked up, there was a mad gleam of frustration in those eyes.

"Get up, Mary Jane."

She arose and felt her wrist where I had pressed it hard. Rubbing it, she kept her face averted.

I went outside, picked up her .22 that she had dropped and returned to the house. I grabbed her wrist again and dragged her, reluctantly, through the living room and into the den. There I stopped short.

Carworth was sagged in his chair. His head dropped down and to one side, his left hand on the arm of the chair. His right hand hung down with his fingers enveloping the butt of a bull-nosed .32. A bullet had pierced the temple and blood was oozing out in tricklets, rolling down the side of his head and staining his shoulders.

Mary Jane uttered a shrill scream, pulled away from my grasp, ran through the living room. I heard the outside door slam. High heels clattered down the flagstone walk.

It was suicide. Carworth had thrown in his losing hand at last. I glanced down, caught sight of my glass of scotch and a cigarette butt. I took the glass and cigarette and carried them with me as I left. I used a handkerchief to close the door.

I drove for a few miles, got rid of the glass and the cigarette, and then headed back for Hollywood. And this time I knew where I was going in this affair.

CHAPTER FIVE

No Prayers Left

I HOPPPED up those creaky wooden stairs again to room 209. The office door was open and the smell of fresh paint blasted my nostrils. I stepped over planks and pails of paint setting on newspapers and saw the inner office—Charlie Young's last holdout.

"It was clear of furniture, clean of anything except four bare walls, now nicely painted a bright cream, and two painters looking out the window at a dame across the court with crossed legs.

I coughed.

The two painters came around, frowned,

then the bald one grinned. "Nice dame," he remarked.

I said: "Yeah. You fellows clean up this place? All of it, I mean?"

The other painter, with a wad of tobacco in his jaw, squinted. "So we did, fella. You from the union?"

"Police!"

"Gee," muttered the baldy. "Thought you guys were all through here. That's what the boss said."

I tried to look hurt and authoritative at the same time. It was tough on me. I made a quick measurement of where I thought Charlie Young's head had been in relationship to the line of the wall, and said: "Either one of you fellas dig anything out of that corner?"

Both looked at each other. Both shook no.

"You sure?"

Finally, the bald-headed one said, "Well, copper, I tell you. The boss said you guys were through, like I just said. So maybe there was something in that corner."

I jumped at that. "What?"

"Maybe a hole, maybe the size of a big pea."

I said: "Could have been a bullet hole—"

"Come to think of it, copper, yeah."

"Know if any of the boys took that bullet out? Was it dug around the hole?"

"Don't think so. Looked like the bullet just went in and got buried. Must have went between the file cabinets."

I went over to the corner, bent down and said, with my finger almost touching the new paint: "About here?"

They both nodded. I started to take my knife out and go to work on it when two big hands grabbed my shoulders and gently pushed me back. The man with the wad in his jaw squinted again.

"Look, copper, we just finished that. And you ain't messing it up. We ain't difficult, but you gotta see the boss first and get his permission, cop or no cop."

That did it. I tried a sneer. No good. I threw a few choice and strong words at them about halting the process of law and order. No good. I got up, said I'd be back, turned about and left them.

Then I did the next best thing. I drove out towards West Los Angeles.

near Santa Monica, where the air fields are, found an empty lot with two by fours for fence braces. Taking out Mary Jane's .22 plaything, I proceeded to ram a bullet into the brace. Afterward I dug the bullet out, rubbed dirt on it, stuck it in my pocket and drove home.

I didn't think Mary Jane would appreciate just what I was doing for her, but later on, with the proper care—maybe...

Home I cleaned Mary Jane's .22 thoroughly, put it in the fridge to cool off and get the cordite smell off it. When I called Central Homicide again, I got Burns.

I said, "Carworth just popped off!"

I heard a groan.

"What?" Burns shouted.

"Suicide."

"When?"

"This afternoon. He took a powder just when I was leaving?"

"When you were leaving!" Burns exploded.

"You heard me."

He snapped back. "I heard you. I'm sick of hearing you, Buster. And that

was a slick deal you pulled, leaving that message for me to check up on Malindez's record, while you dash over to blanket Carworth. But not slick enough. I'm coming over, Buster—and not to hear your alibi. I'm taking you in."

The receiver got wet in my hand.

"Don't push your luck, Lieutenant. Be reasonable. Give me thirty minutes. Just thirty minutes. Then pick me up at the *Chance-Inn*, in Nick Morgan's office—and don't be later than thirty minutes."

I didn't give Burns a chance to say no. I hung up fast.

FIFTEEN minutes later I was being shown into Nick Morgan's office in back of the *Chance-Inn*. Nick's office was full of modernistic junk. A series of chrome tubing, leather and square blocks for chairs. Even his desk was curved and had a drum-shaped lamp with a fish-bowl bottom on it. Wiggly gold fish banged their noses looking for the trap door.

Nick sat like a seventeenth century feudal-lord in a high-backed chair next

Country Doctor

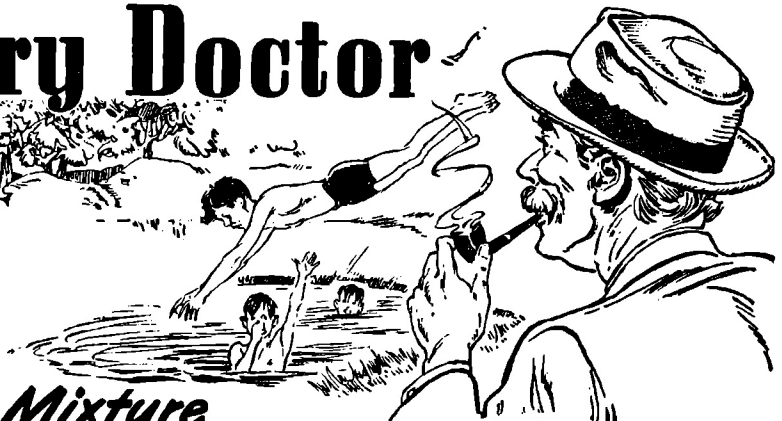
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to a fake fireplace. The chair and fireplace were out of place. For that matter, so was Nick Morgan.

No-socks stood by the desk. He grinned at me with his Kentucky Cavern of a mouth. There was only one way to take that monster—with a sledge hammer. And in the chair near Morgan was Mary Jane, all decked up in her mink coat, cross-legged and using that dull shadow smile on me.

Old home week.

Nick got up. He was tall and thin and active as a garter snake; with pale face, hawk eyes and slick black hair that grayed at the temples. His suit was midnight blue and seemed to have electricity in it. You could eat off his white shirt and wipe your chin with his bow tie. He pointed a finger to a chair.

I cushioned down into a chair as wide and deep as a stadium. Half way down the cushions took hold like a sudden elevator stop. He sat back in his throne chair. Seconds passed without the breeze taking a verbal beating.

Then Nick said in a smooth, sure, measured voice, "You wanted to see me, Buster?"

"That's the general idea."

"What's the beef?"

I said, "Your boys play rough."

"So?"

"You should have asked me for the report. I would have given it to you." I reached into my pocket and brought out the office copy of Young's report to Carworth. I flipped it and it fell at Morgan's feet.

Nick didn't move. He just let his eyes grow small and dark. He had sludge in his voice.

"Feeling smart?"

"Why not? I'm full of surprises."

Nick said: "You got one for me?"

I said: "Mary Jane Carworth."

The name didn't even cause the small goldfish to turn tail. Nobody cared whether I had Mary Smith or Cleopatra. No-socks had his pocket knife out and was cutting his nails. He was very dainty about it, like an elephant with a toothpick.

Nick looked at his hands. Nice, bony, parchment-shade hands. He kept looking at them as if they were expensive an-

tiques. Then he said: "Anything else?"

"Yeah. You're washed up, Morgan, and good."

"You handing out invitations?"

"In a way. You like to be a pallbearer? Not a pleasant job, but it's the least you can do for a pal. A chump named Carworth."

I thought I noticed Mary Jane's hands clench, but I wasn't sure. My eyes were on Nick, and No-socks. I figured Mary Jane as helpless without her .22—which I had in my pocket.

Morgan remained stiff and poker-faced. He said, "What are you doing? A Western Union act?"

"I sing too—" I grinned— "condolences. Carworth's death cuts into your revenue quite a bit. Or have you Mary Jane all tied up?"

Morgan managed a smile, all cold and bitter and snaky around the ends. No-socks moved to his side.

I said to No-socks, "Stay stuck, Gargantua. You've had your fun."

No-socks cocked his head. "Gargantua?"

He started for me.

JERKING out my .38, I patted its cold nose. No-socks grinned. Morgan waved a hand at him to back up. No-socks hesitated. Morgan glared at him and waved his hand. The big boy backed up, obediently, like a trained dog.

Morgan said: "How much you carrying?"

I said: "Enough."

"How much's enough?"

"You've been blackmailing Carworth for years because of his criminal record. You've been fencing stones for Mary Jane that she's taken and selling them back to Carworth at a good price. You've been using Mary Jane as bait to bleed her old man as maliciously and inhumanly as any person could possibly be. Now you have Mary Jane tied up to a murder rap, and you're going to keep her under wraps until—"

"You know too damned much!" came crashing at me from his parched lips. Morgan's eyes blazed forth, then faded out like a burnt lamp. No-socks sucked his teeth while Morgan's face twitched and his lower lip got chewed. Then Mor-

gan glanced at No-socks. Signal. Here we go again.

Mary Jane was just a human prop. Ice began to stick to my nose and lips. No-socks showed anticipation. He came forward. I got up, fast, and stuck my gun out at his vital organs.

I snapped, "Keep coming and you'll get a load of prayers!"

He kept coming. He kept coming with that half-human, half-gorilla spread. Perspiration dripped down from my arm pits and tickled my ribs.

To have a gun is one thing. To have him keep coming at you, empty-handed, is another. He wasn't courageous; he was plain nuts. But he was smart in one sense, smart enough to know I wouldn't shoot. I was bluffing. But, I guarantee, if he had flashed a weapon he would have been undertaker's bait.

And I wondered where Burns was. Had fifteen minutes passed yet?

Now No-socks was close enough for me to smell that onion breath. I stepped back. He came ahead, his stride longer than mine.

"Get rid of him," Morgan ordered. "Get rid of him for good."

The human automaton stuck an arm out to grab my neck. I shifted, twisted my gun and brought the butt down hard on his elbow where the crazy bone should have been. His arm went stringy. He bellowed like a stuck pig. Then he charged madly at me. It was his big mistake. I sidestepped, rammed a flat hand against his passing shoulder.

He went sprawling over a chair. I moved quickly around the chair and tapped the base of his skull with the butt. Something went *quish*, and No-socks hung over the chair as lifeless as an old rug. I guess that made us kind of even.

Morgan was behind his desk, his hand in the drawer when I turned on him. I laughed.

"Grab that gun," I snapped. "Go ahead. You stand a better chance empty-handed with me."

Morgan's face was now the same shade as his parchment hands. He stood—just stood.

I played with him. "Go on, reach for it. Go on, sweat clear down to the ankles, Nick."

Morgan's fingers came out of the drawer filled with air. He placed them flat on the desk. Then he straightened up, businesslike.

"What's your price, Buster?"

I looked at Mary Jane. The same smile, the same pout, and the same hopeful eyes. She was playing the winner. Then she pushed up her smile, rolled her eyes and came over to me. She ran a flat palm up my sleeve. That made us partners.

I said to Morgan, "I'll take around thirty grand. About the same amount you filled your pockets with—"

To my surprise, Morgan just laughed at me. His head turned to the door. There, pushing a flunky away was—Lieutenant Burns and Company.

Morgan said: "You musta just heard him, Lieutenant. Trying to bribe me to keep quiet about this dame's murder rap." He looked me over like a grinning cat. "Charles Young's wasn't it?"



Mary Jane clutched at my arm as her throat tied up into knots and stuck in her neck. Faced with the police, the realization, brought desperation. Fright clawed her face. She was a scared kid now, with all the veneer cracking off. A kid that had had a lot of fun swinging other people's gates only to discover sometimes the gate swung back, and hard.

The kid went into a few loud choruses

of hysterics; then she fell to pieces. She swayed and fell to the floor. I picked her up and laid her on a chair.

"Better get a doc," I said.

I WAS seated with Lieutenant Burns in his room at headquarters. We had run out of talk. It was cigarette time. Burns was seated by his desk, sucking on a cigarette and waiting for the phone to ring. I was blowing smoke and waiting for the same thing. We were waiting for the psychiatrist's report on Mary Jane.

Nick Morgan was booked on receiving stolen goods, for hampering justice and a few other legal counts. No-socks was under observation. A lot of happy doctors would be trying to determine what happened to that skull and how a man could live with it.

I had told my story—that is, most of it—to Burns, and he didn't care for it at all. I wasn't even Buster to him anymore. And he was going to get me for something.

The phone rang, cutting through the silence like a streak of lightning. Burns grabbed it and listened. He nodded, then hung up. He took his time in speaking. He stamped his cigarette out in a glass tray and then flipped it at a cuspidor on a leather mat. He missed. Then he raised his eyes; tired eyes and not too happy.

He finally muttered, "She's a psycho all right. We'll have to wait for the trial—"

That made it the spot for me to say: "What trial? She didn't kill Young."

The silence that followed was so thick you could have leaned on it.

In a strange voice, Burns muttered, "What was that?"

I shook my head from left to right. "She didn't kill him, Lieutenant. Look, I know she confessed at the hearing that she shot Young. Well—she did shoot him, but she didn't actually kill him!"

I reached into my pocket and took out the .22 gun and the bullet and placed them on his desk. I said: "I dug the bullet out of a corner in Young's office."

Burns stared at them. Then: "That's a .22. The bullet that came out of Young's head was a .38."

"Right. So what about the other bul-

let? The one that just creased that guy?"

"What about it? We got the one that counted."

I took a deep breath. "Let's put it this way. Mary Jane, playing big shot, went up to Young's office and pulled out a gun—this gun, a .22. She probably giggled and let him have it, the same way she did to me—but her aim was lousy. I told you she was just three feet from me and missed. She had better luck with Young. She got his ear anyway, *but that certainly didn't kill him!*"

Burns frowned. "You're telling me I slipped—"

I over-looked that crack. "There were two shots. One crossed his temple—the .22. I thought at first it was just a sighting-in shot. I was wrong. The bullets must have come from separate guns. The bullet through the head, the payoff one, came from a .38. Young's last attempt to tip us off—that two-fingered salute—proved it was two people."

Burns thought it over. He washed his teeth with his tongue. "Then: 'Who's .38?'"

"Malindez. According to his own story to Carworth, he drove Mary Jane to Young's. Probably urged her on, then followed her to the office. When she came running out, hysterical, he looked in, saw his chance to do the job, place the blame on the kid and really have a hold on the Dwight money. Besides, he probably was ducking from the police back East and didn't want any private-eye snooping in his business."

Burns carefully plucked a cig from a pack, and slowly lighted it. When he blew enough smoke, he smiled and grunted.

"Okay. We'll put it that way. But what's been bothering me since I got that psychiatrist's report was the fact that this Mary Jane wanted to cuddle up with you after she tried to shoot you and—according to your story—you just took her home, eh?"

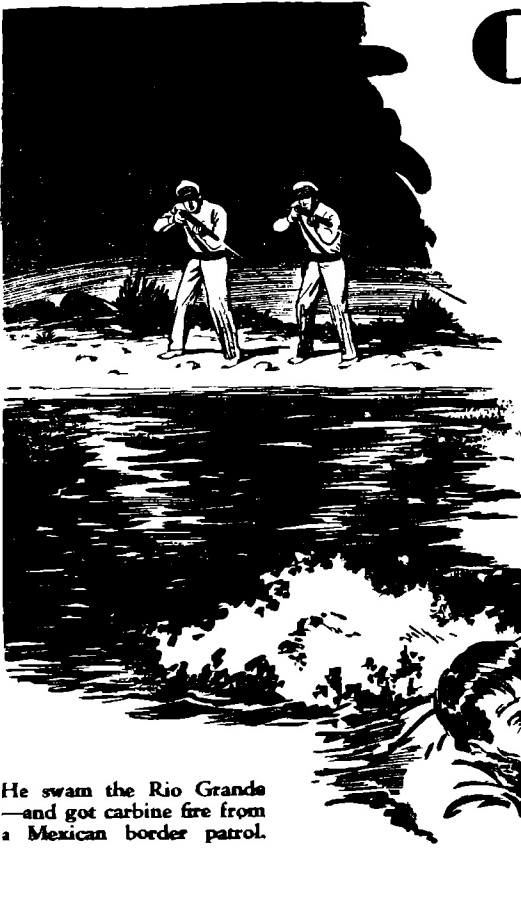
I grinned at him. "I just took her home."

Burns grinned right back. He didn't believe me. Which just goes to show you that even a smart cop can be dead wrong—on some things.

COFFIN CURE

A Surprise
Short-Short

By PETER
PAIGE



He swam the Rio Grande
—and got carbine fire from
a Mexican border patrol.

*Barney McGuire's number was up—
but he wouldn't give up the ghost.*

SAY, I noticed you boarding this train back in Long Beach, handling yourself extra easy and careful. Told myself: "There walks a man whose doctor warned him to favor his heart." Was I right?

Knew it! Gives you pause to reflect, hey? Reminds me of Barney McGuire the time he lay two weeks in a cave. Had nothing to drink but swampy-tasting water out of a pail carried by a little Mexican girl who didn't seem to notice all he ate was grass.

Twelve years old, but she showed no fear of the grizzled man in the cave. Didn't seem to notice the dried blood on the rags he wore for trousers. Just

watched him solemnly out of the big, ripe olives she used for eyes while he gulped his fill. He'd set the pail down and go through motions like a man eating, asking her over and over again to bring food.

But she gave no sign of understanding.

She'd just tote the pail away and up the hill where her folks lived in a 'dobe shack. He wouldn't see her again until the next time she passed with a pail of water from the well at the foot of the hill.

He couldn't leave the cave because the bullet in his thigh limited him to a short crawl. He wouldn't send a note with the girl for help because every law officer in

the country was probably licking his chops over the size of the reward offered for the capture of Barney McGuire.

As the days pushed each other off the calendar he got weaker and weaker. His mind took vacations. He'd catch himself laughing like a crazy man, laughter that bubbled into sobs. He'd catch himself beating his fists against the floor of the cave. Then he'd force himself to lay back and reflect. But all he could remember was the future. According to the three greatest heart specialists in the United States, his future contained thirty days. . .

It started eleven months before the cave, when an Ace doctor put Barney through the annual medical ropes and wound up clucking his tongue. You never heard of the Aces? Ace-High International Detective Service. That had been Barney up to the doc; a gun, an eye, an asker, a human tail—the kind of citizen who ate trouble raw.

This was trouble he found it hard to swallow. He spent his savings on the three biggest heart men in the country—for the same verdict: one more year on the planet, period.

It gave him pause to reflect. He considered Barney McGuire up to there and, looking back over his yesterdays, he didn't feel happy. Most of his life, he concluded, amounted to blank spaces. You spend a third of your life sleeping and a third of it working. The rest fills in with eating and killing time—at least to a confirmed bachelor like Barney McGuire.

He got the *might-have-been* and *might-have-done* itches. The *might-have-beens* he left in mental moth balls. You don't become president or a big-league baseball batter in one year. But the *might-have-dones* crept from the drawer in his brain where his kid dreams had been gathering dust and tickled him where he yearned.

He suddenly wanted to see the dawn come up like thunder from a lagoon across the bay. He wanted to sip tequilla in the Halls of Montezuma. He wanted to drift through Pagliaci in a gondola, watch a bull and matador make faces at each other, chase Carmen through the funny, crooked streets of Paris.

He boiled it down to a reasonable possibility—old Mexico. But it had to be in style; he didn't want to swap eight hours

of daily toil north of the border for eight daily hours of toil in Enchilada-land.

So he asked the cashier of the last payroll he guarded to look in his hand.

The cashier said he knew Aces were on the ball, but please to point that revolver someplace else before something happened.

Barney hinted something would certainly happen if the cashier didn't steer the sedan they were riding out of town instead of back to the cashier's firm.

Next day the cashier was found in a patch of woods outside town with his wrists handcuffed around a young oak, with bitter memories of a thirty thousand dollar payroll and his sedan.

Later the same day an alert Pennsylvania State Trooper spotted the sedan approaching Pittsburg. He chased it around side roads and finally into a carelessly placed stone fence. Then he chased Barney McGuire on foot through half a mile of mountain forest—until a sudden downpour and nightfall obscured the issue.

THE issue—Barney McGuire—entered Pittsburg on foot the same night with the thirty thousand and a climbing fever. His gun lay back in the woods. He managed to bury most of the thirty thousand under a *Keep Off The Grass* sign in a public park before collapsing on a wet sidewalk.

Double pneumonia, followed by appendicitis, followed by yellow jaundice, paraded through his system and it was three full months before they turned him out of the charity ward. The head medic clucked his tongue sadly over Barney's heart before turning him loose.

Barney discovered Pittsburg lay under a foot of snow and the *Keep Off The Grass* signs lay stacked in a storehouse.

Shocked? I tell you Barney McGuire was ready to cash in his last chips right then. But he'd waited so long for a taste of his dreams, he decided he could odd-job through the winter and concentrate his tamale safari into what few months remained.

But when spring budded in Pittsburg and the park department returned the *Keep Off The Grass* signs to the sod, they didn't hit the exact spots they'd been

the year before. Barney spent a month of nights scrabbling like a maniac around this particular sign, until the park people got tired of replacing his divots and posted a guard.

By then nine months had shuffled through the calendar. The three that remained had become like diamonds. So he couldn't *pasear* through Mexico in style, but *pasear* he would.

Took him all of another month to odd-job his way down to Texas. His first five attempts to cross the Rio Grande ran into border patrols; the last occasion resulting in a five-day chase through the mesquite and sage. He finally found a region full of cliffs and buttes and head-high mesquite. And there one night he tried to swim the Rio Grande—and got carbine fire from a Mexican border patrol.

By the time he crawled back up the U. S. bank of the Rio, he carried a slug in his thigh. He carried it around a butte and halfway up its other side—and that brought him to this cave.

So there he lay at the fag end of his dream; nothing to drink but the swampy-tasting water; nothing to eat but grass; nothing to contemplate but how the minutes were dribbling through the leak in his heart—and no company but the solemn-faced Mexican girl.

He could barely understand what was happening when the Texas Rangers appeared at the cave's mouth, with the Mexican girl waving an old true-detective magazine and screeching:

"Heem's the wan from *el periodico*, no? I gets the rewards money, no?"

When the judge gave Barney McGuire

eighteen years, Barney just laughed . . .

But I wasn't laughing ten years later when they turned me loose for good behaviour.

Sure, I'm Barney McGuire—but that ain't the point. How come that I lived ten full years on borrowed time? Not only that, *but every doctor who's gone over me since says I'm good for my allotted threescore and ten!*

I pondered it and pondered it—and suddenly it hit me like a baseball bat.

I scrambled right back to Texas, to that little 'dobe shack on top of the butte, where that now twenty-two-year-old Mexican tamale listened to a plain and fancy business proposition that resulted, among other trivia, in her becoming Maria Conchita Hernandez *McGuire*.

We started small, but we're getting so big we can hardly keep up with the demand. Now, I just happen to have a bottle of it right here in my briefcase; a mixture of the swampy-tasting water from that desert well and essence from the grass growing around that cave—McGuire's Miracle Heart Restorer!

For only five dollars a bottle, this wonder potion should certainly interest—

Hold it a minute, mister, you still got five minutes to Grand Central. This miraculous heart re—what's the rush? I was about to mention I happen to be letting it go for only two dollars a—

Oh, mister, you'll find it's also good for lumbago, arthritis, scabies, dandruff. Wait, mister! It's a dandy window polisher; it'll shine shoes, clean silver—

Mister, for only ONE dollar a bottle, you can't afford to— Hey, mister—

HOW THE FOREMAN GOT HIS JOB

① WE'LL BE NEEDING A NEW FOREMAN SOON, TOM-ANY IDEAS?

JIM IS A GOOD MAN-IF HE ONLY WEREN'T SO HARD OF HEARING-IT'S SUCH A HANDICAP

② THAT NIGHT MARY-WHERE IS THAT AD ABOUT THE PARAVOX HEARING AID? I HOPE I HAVEN'T PUT IT OFF TOO LONG

JIM IS A NEW MAN WITH HIS HEARING AID

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gamble with dynamite.*



Her lips snarled like a startled car. "It's finished
now. . . ."

By **JOHANAS L.
BOUMA**

THE apartment was like I had never known it before. Maybe any familiar place begins to look strange when you know you're going to leave it. Maybe I had lived here too long and made too many plans. You get tough and cynical when they turn sour, and there's always the thought of unfinished business left be-

hind. I tried not to let it get me. But I wasn't ready to make a speech, either.

Tony had dropped in at the club earlier that evening, the first time in a month. I've been stooging for Tony for the past five years, managing the Crimson Clover Club. Tony Morand, a swarthy little guy, pot-bellied and shy, but hard as steel if he has to be.

He made it in the Twenties, when the rackets were raw and a guy had to be tough. Now he's a respectable citizen, and his club is swank on the hills above Hollywood. Three bars, a lush cocktail lounge, a floor show twice nightly and a name band. And no games in the cellar and no wheels upstairs. Strictly on the up and up.

That's for the business. Tony is something else again. He's a gambler, and making an honest living hasn't cured him from following the big floating games. Say he gets word of a game in New York. He hops a plane and he's gone maybe a week, maybe two. This time a month, and that covered half-a-dozen cities in the Middle West. I'm telling you this to show you that he trusted me to run his business, and run it without having to be around.

"Pete," he said, and stopped to light a fat cigar. He smiled through the smoke, and I could see the worry lines crease his face. "Pete, how's it been going?"

"Never better. We're drawing the movie crowd every night. Good spenders, you know?"

He sighed. "Fine, Pete. And how's Janet? She come around much?"

A guilty conscience can raise hell with a man's insides. "You come straight here?"

He rose. "Checking up to see that you keep on the job," he said. He came around the desk and patted my shoulder. "That's kidding, Pete. I'll go home now. Maybe I'll drop by later tonight."

I looked at him anxiously. "No luck, Tony?"

His smile was a little sad. "Lucky in love, unlucky—you know that one?"

I knew, all right. But he didn't. For the past two years he'd been unlucky in both, but he didn't know about the first one.

Time was when Tony didn't need to touch what came out of the club. He'd make more in a week than the club raked off in a year. But not since Janet entered

his life—and mine—a couple of years ago.

One day I thought we could do with a canary in the lounge, so I called an agency and they sent a girl out. At first glance she looked like any of the hundreds you see around this town. She had reddish-blond hair, shoulder length, blue eyes and full lips. But when she moved across to the desk, I noticed the shape.

And that wasn't like anything I had ever seen before. It was the way she carried herself, giving you the feeling that she knew she had plenty, but wasn't too anxious to show it. I grabbed the edge of my desk and hung on.

Her name was Janet Rutledge. She had come West for the same reason they all come, to crack the movies. No luck for Janet, so she had ended up singing in a dive on Main Street, in the city.

I showed her the lounge and had one of the boys make music on the piano. She sang two numbers, and I could imagine the Main Street boys clutching their shot glasses. I don't mean to say she was just a lush blues singer; she gave you something extra. She took you out of the place. She made you think back to old and forgotten loves so that it twisted your insides, and made you want to weep at a wasted life.

I hired her and she went on that night. She wore something in black lace, off-the-shoulder. When the small spot hit her, the boys at the bar jerked around as if drawn by a magnet. After her first song, there was more of a crowd in the lounge than in the main room.

I didn't tell her what to sing or how many. I wanted to find out how she'd react to a crowd, and I needn't have worried. She went on every two hours. Each time she held it down to three songs, no matter the applause. After her second appearance, I could have made money selling bar space.

IT WAS my policy never to bother with the female help, but this time to hell with the rules. I knew what I was up against—or I thought I did. During that first week there wasn't a night went by but she got a dozen invitations from the local playboys. Every day boxes of roses and orchids arrived by messenger, and once a diamond bracelet that would have

cost me a year's salary. She kept the flowers; she sent the bracelet back.

At first I kept it strictly business between us, and that wasn't easy. I'd catch myself watching her, and that hollow aching would run all through me. But this was the real thing with me. I was nuts about her; she was the kind of girl I'd always dreamed of and never met. I wanted her out of this place and in a home. I was thirty-three and it was time for me, and I wanted her to share it. That's the way I felt about her.

The next night was Saturday, the big night. Around two in the morning, closing time, I was in the office, wondering how I could break it. Then she came in.

"Mr. Gainer?"

I smiled. "Yes?"

She bit her lower lip. "I—I don't know if I like singing here. There's such a crowd. I—"

She stopped to plead with her eyes. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want her going away. And Tony hadn't seen her. He was off in Reno, bucking the games. Because he would understand, I wanted him to share this with me.

But I needed time. I didn't want this to be a rush job where you crawl in a car and rush to the City Hall. The real thing to me meant an engagement before marriage. What I did was to offer her a fat raise if she would stay.

"Mr. Gainer, I don't know how—"

"Call me Pete."

She smiled and came around the desk. "You mustn't think that just because—"

I honestly didn't think so, and I said it. She was a scared kid, is all. An honest kid. What else could she be with a voice that could make you crawl into your past? I stood up. She reached out impulsively and touched my hand.

"Pete—"

"You'll stay?"

"If you want me, Pete. I—I'm sort of surprised. I mean you doing this for me. I didn't think you liked me."

"How can you say that?"

She looked down, shaking her head, but I could see her lips curve in a smile. "You acted sort of—well, cold."

Then she raised her face; and her eyes weren't blue any longer. They were dark and they were deep. My ears were ringing.

I grabbed her shoulders. For a second she searched my face. Then she gave a kind of sigh, and her mouth came up against mine, and we were trembling.

"From the minute I saw you it was this way. Janet, I—"

"Why did you wait so long? A week. A whole week."

"There were too many other guys hanging around."

"There are no other guys. There's only you. From the first minute—just the way you said."

"It'll always be like that with me."

"And me, always."

She had a small apartment about ten blocks from my place. I took her there. She made coffee, and we laced the coffee with brandy and drank it sitting together on the sofa. It was everything I had dreamed it would be. She told me of having come from a small town in the Middle West, and not liking the life, and coming to Hollywood. It was an old story, but it didn't sound that way to me.

I told her about being a bartender before the war, and then the war, and later coming back as head bartender in Tony's place. I told her what a swell guy Tony was, and how he'd given me a chance to take off the apron and slip into a tuxedo and a fancy office while he ran around the country to follow the games of chance. . . .

A couple of days later, Tony came back from Reno. He was feeling good, and that meant he'd cleaned up. I couldn't wait to introduce him to Janet, but I didn't tell him how it was between us. I wanted him to find out for himself, and be happy with me when he did.

At first, he didn't say much. He was shy, as usual, but when she sang for him I saw the change. Remember, I had known him for a long time. He wasn't a lady's man, and he knew it.

He listened to her, sitting cross-legged in a deep chair, the cigar smoke curling around his face. Then he put the cigar away, and a strange longing crossed his eyes. She was looking right at him as she sang.

When she finished, he sighed and shook himself, and I knew what she had done to him. He got up and straightened his coat, and then crossed over to her. She smiled down at him, a fat little man who took

both her hands and held them for a long time without speaking. Then he said: "You sing to the heart."

It was a pretty compliment, and she took it gracefully. That evening Tony stayed at the bar from opening till closing time, and to hell with the customer who would have used his seat.

I went in the office to check the take. It was nearly three by the time I finished, and I wondered why Janet hadn't shown. We hadn't missed a night together since that first time, and I was looking forward to being with her.

Locking the office, I looked around. The place was dead in a way that only a night club can get after closing time. A couple of janitors had the chairs piled on the tables and were sweeping the floor. I walked over there.

"See Miss Rutledge around?"

The little skinny one turned and leaned on his broom. "The boss took her home, Mr. Gainer."

I had to turn away to light a cigarette. "Thanks. Well, see that you lock up the place when you've finished."

"Sure, Mr. Gainer."

I walked out, their eyes following me.

THAT was easy enough to understand. In a club like that, things get around. But it burned me up. Not only about the talk that would be buzzing around the next day, but about Janet letting him take her home.

I drove home but it wasn't any good. I couldn't get her out of my head, and I turned the car and went by her place. There was a long, gray convertible parked next to the curb, and it was Tony's.

I didn't know what to do. I know what I *should* have done. In the first place, nothing disgusts a woman more than to have a man chasing her, even if she likes him. The thing to do is to give her the brush, and then she'll be the one doing the chasing.

That's what I had to do, and I knew it. So I did it, didn't I? I did *not*. I parked on a side street and waited for him to come out. After he'd driven away, I rushed up there.

She came to the door. "Pete—"

"I was kind of late getting away. But I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd drop in for some coffee."

That was lying in my teeth, and she knew it. She smiled.

"I'll make some fresh." She turned and looked at me. "Tony took me home."

So it was "Tony," and the first night, too. It had taken a week before she called me by my first name. I said:

"One of the boys told me he took you home."

"He's nice."

She came over and kissed me. "But not as nice as you," she whispered.

That was good enough for me. . . .

I didn't get to the club until six that evening. Tony was in the office, and that

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Bill Quinn, as Little Herman, the lovable, laughable East Side New Yorker in new mystery show, every Saturday night on ABC.



was a surprise. He had on a gray pin-stripe with a white carnation in the button hole.

"Pete," he said, "come over here." He looked embarrassed, like a kid who's received a gift and doesn't know what to say. "You know more about these things than I do," he said.

I went over. There was a long jewel case on the desk, and when he opened it I saw a string of rocks that blinded me.

"Ten Gs," he said. He gave me that shy look, blinking back the cigar smoke. "What do you think?"

"Man," I said, "I don't have to think." But I was thinking plenty. I had never known him to buy rocks for a lady, and this meant only one thing. "Who's the lucky dame?"

"No dame," he said flatly. Then he smiled. "Pete," he said, "you hiring Janet changed my whole life. I've never been a happy man, Pete. You know that. Too much money and running around—" He waved a pudgy hand. "It didn't mean a thing."

I leaned hard against the desk, "Janet."

He got up, shaking his head. "One for the books, eh? A dumpy guy like me falling for a girl after all these years." He tapped his chest. "She got hold of me in here, Pete. I think she likes me, too." He waited a second. "What do you think, Pete?"

It was the way he said it that got me. Trusting, like he was asking his father for advice. I turned to the liquor cabinet. "I think it deserves a drink."

I felt sorry for him, and that was all. I knew Janet wouldn't accept the necklace, and that it would probably end right there. But I was wrong. She didn't refuse it. She wore it that night in the lounge. And she left with him after her midnight performance.

Outside of business, I didn't speak to her for a week. Then one morning, about ten, she came to the apartment. She had on slacks and a short brown coat. She was breathing rapidly, as if she had been running.

"I couldn't stand it any longer not seeing you. Why have you stayed away?"

"You've been pretty busy."

"I'm all mixed up," she said. "He's been so nice, and—"

"I'm not mixed up," I said. "Maybe only a little about you. I thought it was fixed between us. I thought it was the straight and narrow, and after that—"

"Yes?" she breathed.

"I want to marry you," I said.

She didn't say anything for a minute, just standing there and looking at the window. Then she said softly, "It would be nice, wouldn't it?" She looked up. "He's buying me a car, Pete. He wants to marry me, too."

I went over and grabbed a bottle out of the cupboard and had one straight. "I can't buy you a string of diamonds, and I can't buy you a new car," I said. "But I can offer you this apartment and the hundred a week he pays me. Only it so happens I don't want to buy you."

Smiling sadly, she said, "Poor Pete. An apartment and hundred a week."

After a long, long time, I said, "I'll want you to quit your job. And we'll have to tell Tony. And about that necklace—"

She moved out of my arms. "Tell Tony?"

"About us. He's treated me swell, Janet. I don't like to hurt him."

"But you don't understand. I'm marrying him. That's why I said—"

Some kind of wildness went through me. I started to tremble. I grabbed her and shoved her to the door. "Get out."

"Pete—"

"Get out, damn you. Get out—"

She took one look at me and got out fast.

SO I found out about her the hard way. I'd seen the surface and I'd lifted the sheet and peeked at what was underneath. She didn't work that night, and I missed her. Tony showed up and bubbled all over me about his coming marriage.

I didn't hate the guy, understand? I couldn't. I only felt sorry that she was taking him, and that he didn't have the brains to see it. Not that my gray matter hadn't taken a beating.

They were married a week later. He bought her a big house on a high hill in Beverly. Out of kindness to him I went to the house warming. The guests were few, mostly business men and their wives he knew around town. He showed me through the house, and then the grounds

outside and the big double garage. There was a wooden partition inside with a small door, her new coupe parked on one side, his convertible on the other.

Then we went back in and I made some sort of excuse and beat it out of there. I didn't even go back to the club, not his. I went downtown to a side-street bar and tried to get stiff. But it didn't help one little bit.

They went to Hawaii on their honeymoon. They were gone a month, and meanwhile I worked like a dog and tried to get her out of my mind. I got hold of another singer for the lounge who wasn't too bad. But about the only thing she could do was to add background to the general bar noise.

The day they got back, Tony came to the club alone. I was glad of that. We shook hands and grinned a little, said the usual things. He looked happy, but he also looked worried. He walked to the desk and drummed on it with his fingers.

"How do we stand, Pete?"

"Well, you never took anything out, Tony." I showed him the books. "It's been piling up."

He breathed. "A wife," he said. "They cost money." He fumbled around a little, and I knew what was coming. "I'll have to withdraw some, Pete." His money, and it was like he was apologizing for taking it.

"There's plenty," I said.

He wanted twenty thousand, so I wrote out the check. My signature was good as far as the club was concerned, but I had him sign it just the same.

"I got word," he said. "There's a game back East—Jersey. I'll take a week or so." He grinned. "Lucky at love, unlucky at cards. I hope it doesn't work that way for me."

It did. He'd been gone three days when he wired me for an additional ten thousand. I knew what was wrong, all right. Before, the money wasn't the object in his gambling. Now he was playing to win, probably forcing himself to win. And that never works out. The harder you try to win at gambling, the more you'll lose. It's the guy that doesn't give a damn who usually gets fat at the table.

The night after he'd wired for the money, I'd closed up shop and was at the

apartment early. A knock sounded on the door. I sat still for a long time. I didn't want to open that door. I knew who it was, and also knew how it would be if I saw her again. As long as I could keep away from her, I was all right. I liked my job. I liked and respected Tony. I got up and opened the door.

"Hello."

She was muffled up to her eyebrows in mink. A silver gown peeked from beneath the mink and sprayed the floor. She wasn't smiling. But there was such a look of longing on her face that it made my legs go weak. "Pete," she said, "aren't you going to ask me in?"

Me, I didn't say anything. Maybe my face told her. She brushed past and I closed the door. A half swirl and the coat dropped from her shoulders.

"Pete," she breathed. The next second her breath was against my face.

"You know this is wrong."

"Don't be so old-fashioned."

"It isn't just us. It's Tony. He's your husband now. He—"

"He's a darling." She patted my cheek. "But you're the man I love."

Tony was gone a great deal of the time . . . and he was losing steadily. Three months later there was five thousand left in the account.

"I don't know what's wrong," he said. "I can't make a pass and I can't hold a hand." He paused. "Bills," he said, but he didn't sound bitter. "The house re-decorated. Dresses, gowns, jewelry, beauty parlors." He counted them off on his fingers as if he'd done it a hundred times. "I bought a yacht," he said. "She wanted to go to Catalina. A small yacht, but a yacht." He shook his head. "And I lose twice as much trying to make it up."

"Sell the boat," I said. "Tell her to cut down. You can't keep this up."

"I couldn't do that." He paused again. "I'm giving it one more try. Maybe I'll be lucky." That was the last time he tried it, and he was gone a month.

JANET came to the apartment the evening after he'd left. I told her how things stood with her husband. Her eyes narrowed a little. "There's still the club," she said. "That should be worth fifty thousand."

"Maybe," I said. "But it won't last the way you go through the green stuff."

"He could operate a gambling place over the club. There's plenty of room, and—"

"He wouldn't do that, not even for you."

She looked straight at me. "Would you do it for me?"

I knew what she meant. Before I could say a word, she said, "It can work out. We can do it, Pete. Then it's ours, ours. There's more than one gambling place around here. And with the type of crowd we draw—"

"You want to get rid of Tony," I said.

"If you put it that way, yes. He's losing everything he has." Her voice rose. "What right has he—"

"He has every right. The money is his to do with as he likes. But you're at the bottom of the whole thing. If you weren't so damned—"

"I'm his wife, don't forget that."

"A fine wife he's got, and a fine guy to manage his business."

"We can work it out some way. It's our chance, Pete. We'll never have another chance like this as long as we live."

"We won't live long taking that kind of chances."

She got up and prowled the floor. "Sometimes you have to take a chance."

"Janet," I said. "Get out of here. And don't come back."

There was murder in the look she threw me, and there was fear. She grabbed up her coat and ran out the door. . . .

I didn't see her for the next month. Somehow I didn't care. There was murder in her brain, and if she would stoop to commit it, I didn't want to be around. Then Tony came back and told me about dropping in later that night. But he didn't drop in. He called me up and said Janet's car was downtown. He wanted me to pick it up and drive it to the house. Then we would go back to the club in his car.

I found the car on Wilshire. The tank was empty, so I had it filled and drove it up there. The garage door on her side was open so I wheeled it inside and closed the door. Tony was out there waiting for me. He said, "You drive, Pete," and his voice was sad.

For a few blocks he didn't say anything.

When we stopped for the Sunset light, he said, "She ran out of gas. All the stations were closed, so she took a cab home."

"I filled the tank."

He patted my knee. "Pete, I hate to say this, but you're out of a job."

I waited.

"Bad luck," he said. "Very bad luck. I put the club on the line." He shrugged. "The other guy held the winning hand. I talked to him about you, Pete. Maybe you can stay on."

"Let's leave me out," I said. "But why the club? Why not the house?"

"I couldn't, Pete. The house belongs to Janet."

"Have you told her about the club?"

"I tried, Pete. I honestly tried. Maybe tomorrow." He straightened up and breathed deep. "I'll get along fine. Maybe a touch here and there. I've got a lot of friends, Pete."

I knew how many friends he'd have. But him saying that, a guy who'd made it the hard way, brought it home to me that this was an old man talking.

"And I've got Janet," he said. "Hell, a man can do anything with a wife like her at his side."

I stayed around the club with him until closing time. Then I went to the apartment, my mind made up that I was getting out. Reno, maybe. Las Vegas. I knew my way around well enough to know that I didn't have to worry about a job. But this place, no. I couldn't stand the thought of being around when Janet gave him the brush. And I didn't want to see her again. Anyway, that's what I kept telling myself.

I started to pack. By the time I got everything ready, the phone rang. It was Janet.

"Pete, something terrible has happened. Tony—"

"Get hold of yourself," I yelled. "What about Tony?"

"He's in the garage, and the door is locked from the inside, and—"

"Have you called the cops?"

"No, but—"

"Call them. I'll be right out."

The cops were there when I pulled up. They had backed Janet's car out on the drive, and the door on Tony's side of the garage was open.

"We had to crawl through that partition door to get him," one of the cops told me. "Carbon monoxide. Deadly stuff."

They had called the fire department, and the boys were working on Tony with the pulmotor. But you can't bring a dead man back.

A couple of more cars stopped out front. The medical examiner looked at the body. A couple of fingerprint boys I knew went to work, and a photographer took pictures. Janet had broken down, and a detective was having a tough time asking questions. Finally he gave it up and came over to me. I told him about Tony losing the club and he wrote it down. Then he said for both of us to show up at the station the next morning. He looked at the sky. "That won't be long," he said. "Make it around ten."

AFTER they'd cleared out, I went over to where Janet was sitting on the back steps. She looked up at me. Her face was white. "It's awful."

"It's what you wanted to happen, isn't it? Well, now it's happened."

"How can you say such a thing?"

"Forget it," I said. "Dry your tears and get some sleep."

"Take me somewhere." She shuddered. "I can't stay here."

"Where do you expect to go at this time of night?"

"Let's drive to the Santa Monica bluffs. I want to look at the ocean. It's lovely in the morning light."

I stayed in the driveway while she went up for a coat. She came down wearing that long mink job. Without a word, she crawled into her car.

"We can take mine."

"This is fine. You drive."

I climbed in and turned on the switch. Then I backed out to the street. It was still dark enough to use lights, so I snapped them on. Then I noticed something and stopped.

"What's the matter?"

"Where did you go tonight? I mean, did you drive anywhere after I drove Tony to the club?"

"No—" It took a while to get to her. Then she laughed, but she was still uncertain. "I was home all the time. I told you about—"

I stared at her. She moved back a little, clutching herself around the middle.

I said, "The tank was full when I drove it up tonight. Now it's half full."

She looked at the gauge. "Why—maybe some of it leaked out. Maybe they didn't fill it."

"They filled it," I said. "Where were you?"

She didn't answer and I grabbed her. There was a funny sound. I reached down and threw her coat open. A length of garden hose was wrapped around her waist.

What I didn't see was the gun—not until it was in her hand.

"I have to get rid of it, don't you understand? If they become suspicious and start looking around, they might still be able to find that carbon monoxide passed through it. I don't know about such things. I can't take any chances."

"Very smart," I said, and looked at the gun. "Fix the hose to your exhaust and run it through the partition door. Just before he drove up, you probably had the

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big door open. Not too much of the stuff would escape before he drove inside. Then close the door quick and lock it from the outside. Is that right?" She didn't answer.

"He was an old man, older than he thought. He couldn't take many drags of that stuff before passing out. And by that time you had the inner door fixed so he was locked in. Maybe you gave him an extra dose before calling me. But there's one thing you forgot. If they're suspicious enough to look around, they'd question the gardner about a missing length of hose. They're not dumb, you know."

She was frightened, but she held the gun steady. "What shall we do?"

"First, give me that gun—"

"Stay back, Pete!" Her eyes gleamed. Her lips snarled like a startled cat. "It's finished now. . . Can't you understand? The club, it's ours. We never have to worry."

I had this one chance. Maybe telling her would throw her off guard long enough for me to grab that gun. "He had the club," I said. "He lost it in a poker game. Give me that gun."

She gave a scream and jerked her gun-hand backward, tripping the trigger I pounced on her. The gun went off. It was a muffled sound, but that was only the

report. The bullet hitting her was like smacking your hand against a sandbag. She fell back.

"Pete—"

I had the gun now. "Don't move. I'll call a doctor."

She tried a smile. "Never mind the doctor. Call the police. I think I can hang on that long. I want them to get it all straight."

I rushed in the house and I called the cops. I told them to bring a doctor, but I had a feeling that Tony would end up with her after all. She was down on the seat when I got back.

"It didn't work, did it, Pete?"

"Don't try to talk, Janet."

"I made a mistake. I gambled. Tony lost and I lost." Her voice lowered. "I—was a fool. A hundred—a week and an apartment. Now I'll never see that apartment again."

"Please, Janet."

"Kiss me, Pete. Then everything will be all right."

I kissed her. I couldn't see her face for the tears.

"Now I can hold on." She sighed a little, holding tight to my hand. "I love you, Pete."

After a while I heard the cry of a siren coming up the hill. It was a lonely cry.

BUT, JUDGE—

A Groton, Conn. submarine base seaman admitted setting two fires, but said he had only done so because he wanted to be a hero and save people.



Arrested for declining to remove a siren from his auto, a Newark, N. J., man declared it wasn't a siren but a "wolf whistle."



Hailed before a U. S. Commissioner for dumping some of his mail in bushes, a Pittsburgh postman explained he had only done it because his feet had got tired.



A Chicago man arrested for driving off in a hearse, stated that he didn't mean to steal it. He was "just joy riding."

An Apalachin, N. Y. man admitted sawing down a telephone pole, but said he had no ulterior motive. He just didn't like the phone company.

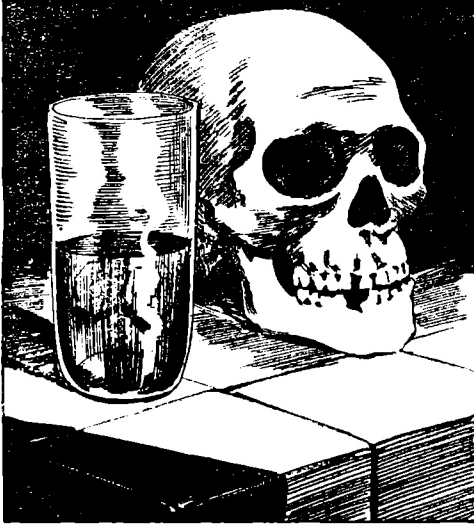


An Atlanta man admitted turning in a false fire alarm in a hospital, but explained it had happened only because when he bent over a drinking fountain the water got in his eyes instead of his mouth and he had reached for a towel—but pulled a fire alarm box instead.



A Washington woman confessed to burning her boy friend's clothes. Her reason? She had done so because he had burned hers.

—H. H.



At a Miami Beach *cabaña*, Mr. Maddox offered his scotch and soda to radio-canary Fritzie, who gave it to Broadway slander-ferret Armstrong. His bodyguard drank it . . . and keeled over—dead.



Fritzie's beau, Cuban-bankroll Munez and sharpster Hannigan, arrived—and she disappeared. Afraid of foul play, her maid guided Mr. Maddox into a wilderness . . . just as Fritzie pulled a gun on Armstrong.



While Masterton-detective Cassidy and Armstrong hunted for a corpse, Mr. Maddox picked up bets on Munez' horse, Si Magnifico—and gave Hannigan lay-off money. But a battle started. . . .



And Mr. Maddox was herded onto an ocean-going speedboat. . . . The complete story will be told in T. T. Flynn's track novel—"Mr. Maddox Tips A Homicide"—in the August issue . . . published July 1st.

HELLCAT OF HOMICIDE HIGHWAY

By **BRUCE
CASSIDAY**

Action Novelette of
Cross-Country Pistoleers



● ● ●
Her eyes blazed. . . . "I'll kill
you, Johnny!"

*The redhead tricked car-pirate Johnny Blood
into shooting it out—
with his past.*

CHAPTER ONE

Hell-Bent Redhead

THE shiny ribbon of U. S. Highway Forty crawled westward over the rising Colorado landscape, hugging the cold hard earth, taking to itself the soft curves and the restless shape of the rich rolling rangeland. The midnight sky hung high above, and the stars were crys-

tal clear. The moon burned huge and grotesquely bright in the thin mile-high air.

Highway Forty, highway of the pioneers. Highway Forty, trail through the granite gate of the Great Divide. Highway Forty, monument in macadam to the blood and sweat of empire-builders. Highway Forty, highway of homicide, hot-car getaways, and hell-on-wheels.



Along that slick writhing ribbon of pavement the speeding coupe tore along, swaying drunkenly from side to side, the scorching rubber tires clinging screechingly to the soft asphalt. Its clear headlights swept twin yellow beams through the black air, brushing the blazing white center-line, painting the waving fields alongside the roadway a glittering gold.

In front of her to the right, the green-eyed girl at the wheel of the coupe spotted the hulking gray outline of the auto court. She slammed on the brake and the tires munched into the pavement. The machine howled to a skidding, jouncing stop, and the girl ripped the key from the dashboard, threw the gear into neutral, and jerked on the emergency. She punched open the door and hopped out onto the road shoulder.

From her coat pocket she drew the gun. It was a .38 Colt. She stared at it a moment and dropped it back into her pocket. She hurried along the roadway then, towards the auto court, and the heavy metal slapped against her thigh as she broke into a choppy, high-heeled lady's run.

In front of the auto court, pulled off ten yards from the highway, stood a shiny slick fleet of new automobiles—nine brand new cars bound for the gyp marts of San Francisco. A sleek black caravan of golden merchandise. A twentieth-century covered wagon. The 1949ers.

Only in this case, each of those cars had a scratched-over serial number. Each of those cars was as hot as the hinges of San Quentin. Those rugged pioneers were car pirates and they flew the flag of the Jolly Jalopy-Jumpers.

The girl's heels clattered along the boardwalk between the lines of darkened slat shacks. At the last shack on the right she stopped, felt inside her pocket for the gun. The slick hard metal slid into her palm and she nodded silently.

Through a crack under the window-shade a slit of yellow light cut through. It laid a shimmering golden beam across her face. She had red hair and it was clean and curled and alive with an electric magic. Her eyes were green, dotted with gold flecks, and in the dull, flickering electric light, they glittered and sparkled like a

million in cut jade. Her nose was turned up at a sporty angle. She wore a twisted little smile for a mouth, and her lower lip was full and glistening and pouty. Her upper lip was a curve of go-to-hell arrogance. She was stacked like a gambler's million-buck deck.

The girl looked back through the jerry-built auto court to the highway, but there was no movement either in the shacks or near the cars on the road. Only the cold, merciless moon laid an icy mantle of light on the frozen ground.

Pulling the gun out of her pocket, she walked up the rickety shack steps. Her heels clattered on the creaking unfinished wood. Inside the room she could hear the sound of voices—men's voices. One was loud and the other was low and controlled.

Then both voices stopped as if the men had heard her steps, and there was a tense, waiting silence inside.

With a violent, almost savage twist, the girl flung the door open and pushed her way into the room. The bright, blazing light of the bulb in the ceiling blinded her for an instant, but she pulled the door shut behind her and moved out of the light, her back pressed tight and stiff to the wood panel. She was trembling, but the gun did not waver as she pointed it at the man seated across the table from her.

Another man, standing with his back to the door, had just turned around, and that gent's hand was frozen in mid air, pinched off in the act of hoisting his rod. He looked like a kid caught swiping gumdrops, and he tried to smile. Nothing much happened except that his jaw slid down around his belt buckle. His throat squeezed tight and some scattered sounds choked out. It wasn't very good laughter. But then, it wasn't a very good joke.

The tall blond man at the table held his hand tight on the Smith and Wesson .45 inside the pocket of his heavy leather jacket. He stared back at the girl, and time stood still between them for a long, blazing instant.

The shock of seeing the girl called Cyd Saxon standing there—the cone of raw light cutting across her face with a hard line of black shadow—knocked Johnny Blood temporarily off his pins. He flicked his eyes to the man standing across the table from him, looking so much now

like nothing but a foolish, startled geek.

INSTANTLY, feeling Johnny's eyes on him, the other man snapped together, and a thin mask of a smile crawled over his face. His eyes hid and his mouth flattened straight. He watched the girl with a blank, inscrutable stare.

Johnny Blood's hard blue eyes hooded briefly and tiny pinpoints of light glowed inside them.

"We were just talking about you, baby," he said to the girl, evenly. "Why don't you drop that rod and draw up a chair? We're friendly-type guys when you get to know us."

Johnny Blood relaxed his lean frame in the wood-backed chair. He ran the slender, iron-hard fingers of his left hand through his thick curly hair. Sliding down a bit inside his heavy leather jacket, he smiled at the girl where she stood un-waveringly, still pointing the blue gun barrel at his face.

"Besides," continued Johnny Blood. "I've got a rod in my right pocket, aimed smack at your lovely chest, and if I go, you go too. So how's about it, kitten?"

He picked up a smoking butt carefully from an ash tray with his left hand and dragged on it. Through the slow smoke he stared at Cyd Saxon.

Her green eyes took in all there was to know about Johnny Blood, clean back to his great-great-grandfather. What she thought about, what she saw did not show in her eyes. They flickered an instant, and her nostrils flared. Her lower lip twitched and she glanced sideways at the man standing.

"Is that guy sitting there the big shot?"

she asked the man. Her voice crawled over Johnny Blood, seeping inside his clothes and into his flesh. That voice knew whiskey and cigarettes and music, and it knew men. It knew every man that was ever born or ever would be. And it hated every one of them.

Sam Dane nodded. "Yeah," he said. "That's Blood. That's Johnny Blood." Dane turned to Johnny with a faint sneer on his lip. "Meet Cyd Saxon, Johnny. You remember seeing her and hearing her sing tonight. She's the hot canary at the Club Peril."

Sam Dane was a tall, sharp-cut, tough guy, and his dark gleaming hair was blue-black and wavy on his neatly shaped head. His nose was wide and strong. There was a crude and raw strength to his dark, blunt mouth, and his teeth were big and white. The cut of his jaw was flat and hard and his neck was thick and it sat heavy and erect on his body. Born of violence, spawned of grit, reared of discord.

Dane turned back to Cyd Saxon. "Johnny and I been chewing you over, baby. Turns out Johnny takes a dim view of you coming along with us. I figure he's got a point. Because, honey, what's the big idea you barging in here like that with a heater in your mitt? You like to of peeled ten years off me and Johnny's hide. Something up?"

Cyd Saxon leaned back into the darkness. With a derisive flick, she tossed the gun onto the hard table. The Colt wasn't cocked and it didn't fire. Johnny looked down quickly and recognized the weapon. It belonged to Dan Horrell, one of his hot-car pilots.

"There's a present for you, Johnny."

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She moved in on the table, touching the edge of it with her coat. The coat was opened and when she leaned forward, every curve of her body tightened to her dress. Her hands fanned out and she rested the ten tips of her fingers on the table top.

She stared at Johnny close and hard and the atmosphere between them crackled with tension.

Johnny glared back. "Where the hell did you heft this cannon, Cyd?"

She got through hating Johnny Blood and she got through charging the air. She drew herself up and took her slim white fingers off the table. She jammed them into her big coat pockets. She rocked back on her heels and drew herself into her coat so there was no more tight dress visible.

She said smugly, "A wise guy gets into a knock-down drag-out at the Club Peril. Well, I pick up that hot rod, thinking it'll buy you out of a lot of hasty explaining—for a price. The price is a deadhead tab to San Francisco."

Blood stared at her, and the hot light from above poured inky black shadows into the lean hollows of his cheeks and eyes. His lips moved stiffly.

"Got to blow the state, so you figure us for a soft touch. Plant a brawl on one of my men, grab his heater, and come here with your big green eyes to plant a crop of alligator tears."

Her mouth widened into a beautiful, serene smile and her nose wrinkled. Her eyes smiled and her lips smiled.

But it was Sam Dane who interrupted them.

"Get off it, Johnny. We can use the kid now. We got ten cars. We need ten drivers. With Horrell in the can, we need her." His black, glittering eyes flickered briefly. His heavy lips bent a bit more, and the white teeth glistened. "Unless you're still—uh—that way about dames, Johnny."

Cyd Saxon's bright green eyes flared for an instant, and her mouth twitched. She seemed to know all about the meaning of those cryptic words. She did not move from the yellow cone of light. She stood there, her eyes on Blood, watching him writhe under Dane's contemptuous look.

The sweat was beading out on Johnny's forehead. He could feel a hot iron hoop binding in on his temples. His pulse slogged blackly through his neck and his scalp crawled. Dane knew dames were the soft spot in Johnny Blood these days, and Dane could use a hot needle.

"We can buy some guy in Denver in the a. m.," Johnny growled. "The hell with this one. A dame'll blow this whole rat-race higher than a kite."

DANE'S pupils narrowed to slits. He leaned forward, his eyes hot and black, close to Blood's. "I mention dames and you like to flip your lid. I mention dames and you tighten up like vapor lock. I mention dames and there's garbage in your eyes. What's with you and women, Johnny?"

The words came out mercilessly and tauntingly, lashing with the fury of a cat-of-nine-tails. They crashed over Johnny Blood like pounding combers on a stormy beach. With a tremendous effort he kept himself still.

Make it sound casual, Johnny. Make it sound like a crack about the weather. You've been waiting for a showdown like this. The hell with it, that this dame's here. She'll never matter. The cops don't listen to that kind. Check this one to Dane. Your good pal Dane. Your buddy.

"The Old Man tells me you had trouble on this same run a couple months ago, pal," Johnny said slowly, his mouth dry and hot. The words stuck to his tongue as they came out. "Something about a black-haired chick you latched onto in Aurora, Colorado. There was a slight murder involved, somewhere along the highway. Aurora, Colorado, too—less than a mile from here, Sam, wasn't it?"

Dane's eyes went expressionless. It was as if he had suddenly become another man. Another man who would take the place of Sam Dane and answer no questions that Dane didn't want answered.

Before Johnny Blood the image of Kay Dallas rose as it had a thousand times before, and he could see again the sweet, neat face, framed by her rich, blue-black hair. He looked again into her sober, wide, brown eyes, and he felt the consuming despair surging up inside him. And he was helpless against it.

He would never again kiss those soft warm lips. He knew that all over again, and the knowledge brought back every pain he had ever felt for her or because of her, and he tasted the bitter, sour loneliness that welled up within him. Never to kiss her again. Never to look in those eyes. Never to brush that damp hair back from the smooth, moist brow.

There was only one thing for him now, and that was to stop the man who had killed her from killing any more. After that there was nothing for him in the world.

If it was you, Dane, who murdered that kid. If it was you who killed Kay Dallas Blood—my wife. . . .

The hard blue lips crawled over Dane's even white teeth. His eyes hid under his lids. "Who are you anyway, Blood? Nobody seemed to know much about you in Detroit where you was supposed to blow from. I checked. Found out about your prison record in New Orleans, all right. You're a right gee, okay enough. But who are you?"

"What the hell, when the Old Man asked me, I said, that's my pal, Johnny Blood. Sure, let him ride herd this trip, Boss. We get along fine together, me and my pal."

Dane's glittering black eyes were staring down at Johnny now, and his heavy eyebrow was cocked up crookedly.

"I don't know, Blood," he said softly. "Maybe I dealt myself a bob-tail flush."

Then the black tension in Johnny Blood broke in a flood, and he could see again, very plainly, the stolid, sober face of Cyd Saxon, and the dark, brooding face of Sam Dane. The moment hung on edge, and then Blood heard himself laughing suddenly. He stood up and leaned across the table and smacked Dane openly on the arm with his palm. Pals.

"Forget it, Dane!" He laughed. "You and I get along fine, Sam!" He turned to Cyd Saxon. "Sure, you're in, doll. We need a driver. If you got the cops on your tail, it doesn't matter. We all have! We're hell-bound for Frisco, anyway, gang. On hot-car highway! Let's slug down a bottle of rye to Highway Forty!"

Cyd Saxon was laughing, and there were almost tears of relief in her eyes. Dane sat down at the table, pulling up a

chair for the girl. And as their sudden movement stirred the room, the outer door shoved violently inward and someone gasped on the dark stoop outside.

Cyd Saxon turned and her hand flew swiftly to her mouth. She gave a horrified gasp, her eyes wide with terror.

Johnny Blood took one brief startled look at the apparition reeling in through the door, and he leaped to his feet, rounded the table, and caught at the crumpling body. Sam Dane shoved back the chair and cursed and slammed the door shut behind the moaning man.

In the bright, ruthless electric light, the gray, agonized face of Blackie Knight was sweaty and splotted with new blood. On the soiled shirt inside his jacket, blood leaked out in an ever-widening circle. The sports jacket was ripped and stained with oil and grease, and the torn threads bristled from the coat seams like rag-doll stuffing.

Blackie's eyes lifted open and the pupils were wide and ripped-up. The gray rim of the retina was only a thin wire separating the depths of the black from the blood-rimmed white. His mouth shook, and the sweat rolled down along the surface of his gray skin.

"Johnny," he whispered. "At the garage. Morrison's hideout. Putting a new spark plug in your jalopy. Somebody sapped me on the skull."

Johnny felt his throat tightening up. "Who, Blackie? Cops? What's the story?"

"I don't know. Not cops. I came out of it just as they were piling into the car. To take it off. I blasted a shot. They gunned me down. Drove off in the car. I couldn't see their faces."

Sam Dane's black eyes were snapping bright. He lit a cigarette. Absently he tapped it against the back of his hand to settle the tobacco. He was breathing hard and his jaws ground together.

Johnny Blood said, almost tenderly, "Go on, Blackie. What else?"

"I seen a dame, Johnny. That's all I seen. A dame. I—"

His eyes glassed over quite suddenly and quite silently. He shuddered, gasped, and tensed. Then he relaxed and slumped down in Johnny's arms.

Cyd Saxon was gaping at Blackie Knight and her mouth hung open in

fright. She was scared stiff from her red hair all the way down to her red heels. She looked up at Johnny Blood and his eyes were hard and blue on hers. Dane stared at her over the smoke curling up from his cigarette.

Johnny Blood stood up.

"Of course," he said quietly, "there are plenty other dames in the world besides you, aren't there, Miss Saxon?"

She looked from Blood's hard face to Dane's dark eyes, and then she looked back to Blood's. Her mouth shook and her eyes flooded over with hot, glistening tears. She lifted her hands to her face and doubled over in a sudden agony of fright. She stumbled to the chair and sat there shaking pitifully.

But Blackie Knight didn't move at all.

CHAPTER TWO

Roadhouse Rendezvous

THE orange neon above the roadhouse read: CLUB PERIL. The neon lights blinked on and off with a mad, senseless regularity. Waves of orange light flooded over the slick black highway, then curled back into the darkness like an ebbing wave, and then flooded over the pavement again.

Seated at a darkened table by the end of the long shiny bar, Johnny Blood looked out into the cold night. The blue second-hand light from the moon gleamed over the rolling plain with a soft, carpeting roll.

And inside Blood's stomach, the liquor stirred a dark, brooding warmth. He sat and waited. She might take her time, but she would come to him.

At the bar behind him stood a short, dark barkeep named Pete. His eyes were half closed as he caught some extra standing-up sack time. The bar was deserted now except for Pete and Johnny Blood.

The Club Peril was an ordinary roadhouse, with a varnished maple dance floor to the rear, a long dining room to the right, and the warm little barroom in the center. On the second story were offices and rooms. At the end of the dance floor stood a raised platform. It was on this platform that Johnny Blood and Sam Dane had first seen Cyd Saxon the night before, singing in front of a hopped-up

group of loud and hot dance musicians.

When Sam Dane had gone to check into this Cyd Saxon stuff, Blood had headed back for the auto court. Idly Blood wondered what Cyd Saxon had done from that time to the moment she had entered the auto court shack. And, for that matter, what had Sam Dane been doing?

Pete the barkeep had been easy, Johnny thought ruefully. He had spilled info like a shot glass punctured with BB holes. Without thinking. Without worrying. A guy might not live very long acting that way.

No, Cyd Saxon hadn't been singing at the Club Peril long at all. Just seven days. She'd drifted in, pretending she'd had her purse snatched in the last town just before missing the bus. She'd checked with Riff Kirk, the leader of the hot band combo. He'd listened to her warble. She'd get ten bucks a night and that was good-enough dough for her. Riff Kirk had called in Bill Shultz, the owner of the Club Peril. She was hired on the spot.

A little too damned pat, mused Blood. A little too damned soon after that last trouble in Aurora. A little damned close to the murder of Kay Dallas. A little too tight for coincidence. And then, there was always that neat trick she'd pulled with Dan Horrell, to get herself a hitch on the car caravan. How did that redhead fit in?

Just twenty yards up the highway, toward the Rockies and the Great Divide, the body of the woman identified as Kay Dallas had been found beaten to death seven weeks before. Twenty yards from the Club Peril. And now, once again—monkey business on Highway Forty.

Cyd Saxon came and stood hesitantly at the end of the bar, glancing at the barkeep and staring at the back of Johnny Blood's head. Without turning, he knew she was there. She put her hand tentatively on the bar, flat down, and then she took it up and stared at her palm. She straightened up, raised her chin defiantly and walked toward him. She walked proudly the way she always walked, and it was a walk that made men stare.

She crossed in front of him and turned and looked down. Pete, the barkeep, coughed nervously. She heard him, but she did not notice. She watched the curly

thick blond hair on Johnny's head, and she wondered a moment whether or not she might touch it. She did not put out her hand at all. She sat down instead, folding her hands on the table.

He looked up and studied her round face dispassionately. He hid behind his eyes as he watched. But there was nothing to worry about. It wasn't there the way he had thought it would be. There was no feeling in him at all for her. He was dead inside. He had died when the girl with the blue-black hair had died.

That was good. Because he knew now instinctively that this girl was on the opposite side of the fence from him, and he knew they would never meet each other—except to fight. She was a cop. A prowl. Maybe a Fed. She was after information and maybe she was gunning for the hot-car combine. Johnny Blood was not on that side of the pasture. He could never be on the right side again after what had happened to him, and what had happened to Kay Dallas Blood. What good was the law when it threw innocent men in jail and let murderers walk the streets free?

He smiled across the table at her and said: "I figured you'd come."

She bit her lip and watched his hand curl around the shot glass on the table. "I came to pack up my clothes. I'm going with you."

Cyd reached out her hand suddenly and touched his. The blood crawled along his skin like wildfire, but he did not move it. Her palm was warm on his fingers, and she was closing her hand over his. He could feel her pulse on his skin. "It is still on, isn't it, Johnny?"

"I don't know." He watched her ex-

pression closely. "Those cars are hot. You probably guessed that. If they spot that stolen crate in the hills, we're dead ducks." He leaned back and drew his hand from under hers. His lips curled. "Why don't you come clean with me, kitten? You're no canary that travels the one-night circuit. What's the pitch? What do you want?"

She whispered, "Can I have a drink, Johnny?"

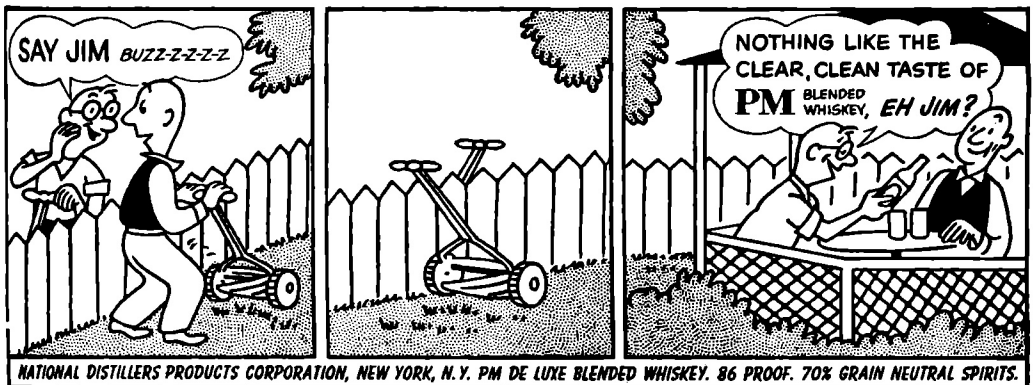
Johnny looked over his shoulder at Pete. He nodded towards Cyd Saxon and the barkeep turned around and poured a drink. He slid the glass down the mahogany. It stopped by Johnny's shoulder. He reached up and handed it across to Cyd Saxon.

SHE sipped it and looked away from him a moment, getting the words organized. Then she spoke. "All right," she said. "I'll tell you all I can. You're a con, Johnny, and you've got a two-year record. I know that. And I know why you served it. You're no killer. You're not even a natural-born bright boy. Maybe when I finish, you'll decide to help me."

She leaned back, nervously fumbling for a cigarette in a gold case. She got it out and lit it with a jerky flick of her hand. She waved out the match and stared at the crimson smear on the end of the butt. He watched her mobile mouth and his own lips bent down.

"Your hot-car masquerade isn't what I'm out after, Johnny. I've got it cased from the word go, but it's not what I'm out for."

"Masquerade—" He broke off the question himself. He could see by the



stubborn tilt to her jaw that she would tell him the story only the way she wanted to.

"You start in Chicago with a bunch of brand new registered cars assigned to Frisco, right? Then you switch these ten, one by one, with brand new stolen cars along Highway Forty from St. Louis to Denver, to get the hot jobs away from the prowled areas fast. Then you sell the real McCoy's in the hot-car areas where they look good. You dump the hot cars in Frisco and distribute them up and down the Coast, far away from the suspicious zones. It's a pretty neat little racket."

He leaned forward suddenly. "Why are you telling me all this? You stalling? Did you kill Blackie? Did you kill the girl? What are you working on, her murder?"

Her lip curled at the corner. She smiled and her sulky lower lip glistened a moment. She lifted a shoulder slightly in a delicate shrug. The air between them danced and shimmered, and the rye hit him with a heady, smashing jolt. He reached out and gripped her hands tight in his own. Her fingers were hot and soft inside his.

She laughed. The sounds of her laughter grated on his ears. "I'm glad you said it. I didn't want to say it first. That girl was no prize, Johnny. I've seen better fruit growing on crab-apple trees. Anyway, she's dead. Kay Dallas Blood is dead, and she's rotting in hell—right where she belongs."

He reached out and raked her a slashing blow across the mouth. Through the sudden roaring in his ears and the black smothering darkness closing in, he could hear a gasp from the barkeep. There was an abrupt cessation of sound. Then Pete laughed nervously and breathed again, and the room spun back into focus.

Cyd Saxon was smiling at him, a lopsided, brittle smile. Her eyes were hot with tears but she would not shed them. She brushed them away with a quick, savage swipe at her eyes. Her lips curled again.

"Was it worth it to spend two years in the clink, Johnny, just to cover for her? You're better off she's dead. If she was alive, you'd have to be with her now, and you'd be mixed up in the same shameful, terrible racket she was mixed up in."

"What do you know about Kay Dallas, Cyd?"

She brushed a cigarette grain off her lip with a shaking hand. She leaned forward and took a deep, steadying breath. Johnny Blood told himself again that there was nothing between this girl and him, and he was glad it was that way. He wondered idly why he kept reminding himself.

She said: "I know this, Johnny. She was mixed up in something low, and vile, and horrible. And I'm asking you to help me. If you do, maybe we can crack it together. I'm not asking you to side with the law, Johnny. That would be too much after all that justice has stood for to you. I'm asking you to side with humanity and decency and the last vestiges of what's good in the world."

Johnny Blood's eyes narrowed. "I don't get it. You playing me for a sucker, kid? There was nothing wrong with my wife. She was a crazy, restless kid, and she ran around with all the wrong people. But there was nothing bad about her. Believe me. I know. She just got started on the wrong foot and—"

Cyd Saxon leaned forward desperately, her body pressed hard to the small table between them. She leaned over close to Johnny Blood's ear and her lips brushed past his cheek and she whispered one word in his ear. His skin tingled with the electric touch of her lips, and his guts chilled into ice at the sound of her word.

"Dope."

She leaned back and stared at him. She nodded as she watched the flood of nauseating truth wash over Johnny Blood. He suddenly saw the whole picture as it really was. He knew now what had been wrong between him and his wife, Kay Dallas. He knew what had ruined their life together. He knew what had caused her to run off periodically like a half-mad, hurt pup, to disappear for days at a time, and then to come back, begging for forgiveness, crying hot silver tears, sobbing uncontrollably in his arms.

And he knew why she had let him take the rap for that bad check charge. She had known they would find out she was a hophead if she had tried to serve a prison term.

Hophead.

Not a pleasant word in any man's lan-

guage. Like a damned fool he had never guessed. Lord, how had she been able to keep it from him so long? Yes. She was better off dead in that case, just as Cyd Saxon had said. She was better off dead than alive that way.

He shook his head slowly, trying to clear out the poisonous, wretched helplessness that welled up in him. He turned his eyes to hers and stared at her hopelessly.

Her own face went soft. Her mouth opened and it was gently smiling. There was sympathy and understanding and compassion in her voice.

"Now you see, Johnny. The C-runners are using your car convoy to ship the stuff to the West Coast. From New Orleans, through St. Louis, marked for delivery in San Francisco."

He shook his head. "But Denver. Why this trouble in Colorado?"

"Kay Dallas was a member of a small hijack ring trying to steal the original shipment en route to Frisco. It's worth a quarter of a million in cold cash, Johnny. Kay followed the convoy and tricked her way into it here at Denver. But something happened. Somebody found out she was one of the hijackers. They killed her. And the original shipment went on to Frisco."

"How did you pick up the trail?"

"I followed a snow-runner from New Orleans, and picked up the story of the last convoy trouble in St. Louis. I flew on ahead to wait. But I slipped up. The tea's gone now, Johnny. It's in that car of yours. You were the decoy. Luckily you weren't there working on that plug when they came to get it. The dust is still hidden in the car. We've got to get it back!"

The world was steadying itself slowly about Johnny Blood. His fingers closed in on the shot glass and a savage, raw fury gripped him. He nodded his head slowly, and his heart and stomach felt like cement.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "We'll get that car, kid. We'll get the guys that killed my wife. We'll smash this stinking, hellish racket all the way to hell-and-gone!"

The trail was getting thinner. The end was in sight. Johnny Blood felt something like a half-mad exultation surging

up inside him. He dumped the rye down his throat and stood up. "You coming?"

Cyd Saxon was staring over his shoulder, her eyes blazing wide and her mouth frozen open in a little O.

Johnny spun quickly, trying to duck. The sap struck him and blacked him out before he could see who had come up on him from behind.

CHAPTER THREE

Meet the Little Woman

THE man leaning over Johnny Blood was a big, heavy-set man with a massive face and large brooding brown eyes. He was close to two-hundred-fifty pounds and his clothes were tailored carefully to drape his huge body. His mouth was big and rosy and his cheeks were slab-like and beefy. His hands were long and his fingers were slim and white and the nails were polished and trimmed. He smelled faintly of spicy shave lotion.

"That's better, boy," said the fat man. His voice was gentle and soft. When he spoke, the flesh crawled on Johnny Blood's body, and he struggled dizzily to sit up straight.

He was in an easy chair, unbound, un-gagged, weighted down only with the dull sluggish sickness of unconsciousness. His head was as thick as clam chowder and there was a tightly pinching scab drying on his scalp. His hands were torn and bleeding and his clothes were twisted on him.

Besides the massive man with the voice of a woman, there were three other men in the room. One was a freckle-faced young man with square protruding ears, dressed in a tweed jacket, tweed slacks, and Argyle socks. He looked wrong in them. He was not a tweed man. He looked old but he was young. Johnny remembered him, now. He was the clarinet player in the hopped-up bebop combo at the Club Peril.

The next man, sitting easily in a chair, holding a glass of liquor in his hand, was the dark-skinned, long-haired trumpet player who led the band. Riff Kirk. He was smiling with an oily interest at Johnny Blood.

The last man stood behind Johnny's chair. He was a tall, lean, big-boned man with a hawk nose and a scarred face. The piano player. Billed as Dominoes Dawes. His hands were enormous, the knuckles big. His fingernails were cut square and they were not polished. Cigarette smoke was dribbling up over his face; both hands were waiting for a phony move from Johnny Blood.

Dominoes' mouth was curved down in a wry smile. His black, lidded eyes glowed with a spectacular black fire. They looked out from behind the cadaverous hawk nose, scornfully inviting a try from Johnny Blood.

The fat man said, "I'm William Shultz, and this is my night club." His eyes smiled into Johnny's face. "It's always nice to make the acquaintance of my customers. Don't you agree?"

"Where's Cyd Saxon?" Johnny grated out. His head hurt and he put it gently in his hands. The picture was shaping up, and it was not a pretty one. These riff kings were all bindle-stiffs. Quite possibly they were the hijack combine Cyd had mentioned.

Shultz darted a quick triumphant glance at Dominoes standing behind Johnny Blood. Then his amused, limpid eyes turned back to Johnny's face. "Don't you worry about her, my boy. She's all right." He nodded slowly, and a lovely, velvet smile caressed his rosebud lips. "Why should we hurt her, Johnny? We just paid her and she left. She did just what we told her to."

"Just what we wanted her to do!" laughed the freckle-faced man. His voice had a twang and a whine to it. He laughed again, tittering nervously. "She's a fast number, that girl Saxon. She sure as hell can do what she wants with you, can't she?"

"What do you want with me, Shultz?" snapped Johnny Blood to cover the sudden sickness in him. Cyd Saxon had lied. She was in with them. She had led him into the trap. She had told just enough of the truth to focus his attention on her, and then—bingo. It was that simple. She'd suckered him to a fare-thee-well.

"Why bring me here" he growled. "What's it all about?"

Shultz strolled over to a desk in the

corner. It was as massive as he was, but it had a gentler design. Shultz pulled the chair around and settled his massive body carefully in it. He reached out and took up a cigarette which he carefully lit. The slick, shining surfaces of his fingernails flashed light as he waved the match out. Then he smiled an engaging, dimpled smile at Johnny Blood.

"I may look like a weak man, Mr. Blood. But you must put your faith in me, sight unseen. I am not a weak man at all. I do not have the arrogant advantage you possess, that *savoir faire* of toughness, that bright neon light that says, Danger, Mad Dog. But I assure you—I am not a man to be stopped by anything!"

The lisping, lilting syllables, spoken in that soft, musical voice, masking the ruthless, brutal ferocity in the fat man's eyes and the unrepressed contempt for the world, made for a spine-chilling and sinister combination. A man like this would not stop at shooting.

"So?" Johnny clipped out the syllable and shut his mouth hard, forcing the flicker from his eyes.

"I am a desperate man, Mr. Blood. Due to our various weaknesses, we are all sometimes desperate men. I believe you will bear me out in that. Some of us are weak for money—and some of us are weak for—well . . ."

JOHNNY BLOOD'S eyes darted to Riff Kirk's face. The trumpet player's dark black eyes were glistening in the half light. The freckle-faced youngster was grinning idiotically. In back of him, Blood could hear Dominoes breathing heavily. The menacing, fierce tension in those huge itchy stranglers' hands almost crawled through the air onto Johnny's tingling, cold neck.

The fat man ripped the cigarette angrily from his mouth and spat distastefully. He stared at the cigarette a moment, and rage and fury boiled up inside him, quaking his mountainous body with racking shudders. With a savage, feral growl, he hurled the butt down onto the carpet, and ground it beneath his big shoes, twisting and scraping it into nothing but dirty brown shreds.

"Stinking, miserable, tasteless filth!" With a lunge, the huge man threw himself

to his feet, towering forward, coming at Johnny Blood. Blood leaped up, but Dominoes' throttling fingers clamped around his neck and hurled him back into his chair. His coat tore at the shoulder and his shirt ripped. He writhed there, but Dominoes held him tight.

Shultz's bugging, burning eyes were inches from Johnny's face. Heavy veins throbed in the fat man's fleshy face. His mouth was a distorted rosebud of blood-red sponge, and his nose glistened with sweat.

"We need that stuff, Blood! Where the hell is it? If you don't come across with it, I'll kill you!"

Riff Kirk leaped up and dragged Shultz away from Blood. "Easy, boss. No use playing it like this."

"What do you want?" gasped Johnny, straightening up, the sweat cold on his body. These four half-crazy hop heads would tear him apart. Lord, he had to stall, stall, stall! Anything to get time.

Then a hideous realization flooded in on him. Stall what? Stall his funeral? What do you want to do, Johnny? Die quick, now? Or die slow, later?

The fat man steadied himself. "I want that snow you've got planted in that hot car of yours. The car we picked up from the garage. We couldn't find it, but it's there, all right. One of my men saw it put there in St. Louis. Damn it—"

"I have no idea where it is, Shultz," Johnny said quietly.

The fat man stood there staring at Johnny Blood thoughtfully. Several plans seemed to pass through his mind, and then he rubbed his wrists slowly.

"Get the car ready," he said softly. Freckle-Face leaped to his feet and moved to the door.

"About time," he laughed, and pushed through the door.

Shultz walked to the window, covered over by a dark, pulled-down shade. He turned and faced Johnny Blood. His brown eyes were dirty and filled with hate. "We'll get that stuff. Or you'll go for the damndest buggy ride you ever took in your life! . . ."

They left the highway and wound up into the rising foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The road was gravel and the car bucked like a sea-sick rowboat. Dom-

inoes had Johnny's own .45 jammed in his back, and there was no chance to duck out into the night or make for the chaparral. He'd be dead in two shakes of a Colt trigger.

The bright blue moon still laid a cover of icy moonlight over the hills and the rocky slabs and the talus brush.

So the lovely Cyd Saxon was a dirty little Judas kid. Sure. That's the way double-crossers were made—sugar and spice and everything nice. Otherwise they wouldn't be good two-timers. She'd played one sweet song of surrender to him. He'd been plucked for every heart string he ever owned. Even the sobbing violins in the background had been of Philharmonic caliber. What an act. The song and dance of death.

She'd told the truth, with just one important fact missing. She was the one trying to get the dope off the hot-car caravan, not Kay Dallas. She was Schutz's man. Probably she'd been with them when they'd stolen the car and blasted down Blackie Knight.

Blackie had said: "I seen a dame."

Perhaps Cyd Saxon had killed Kay Dallas, too. She, or the Shultz crew. They were all in this jamboree together. The nose-candy nippers. The reefer refugees.

Kay Dallas hadn't been a hop head. Hell, he should have known that. Kay was just a reckless, go-to-hell doll, with a lot of headstrong ideas. When she'd pulled out on him and left him flat, she'd probably been on a binge with some of those college characters she'd known at Tulane. Hell, no sense hanging a white-powder past on the kid just because some green-eyed, kiss-me-kate had said the word.

A black sickness ground in on him again. They'd killed Kay Dallas, this miserable, stinking crew. They'd planted her dead, slashed-up body by the side of the road, while Johnny Blood was sweating out a two-year rap in the tank. A man couldn't leave a blood debt like that unpaid!

He'd get the murderer. Then that debt would be wiped clean off the big slate in the sky.

THEY were winding up into the craggy hills now, and the foliage was thin. The air turned light and cold and fine.

He had to gulp like a fish on a beach to get air enough to breathe. They were a mile and three-quarters high now. That was mighty close to the sky.

The car drew abruptly to the side of the road and skidded to a halt. Dominoes jabbed the gun in Johnny Blood's side. "Out, boy."

Johnny piled out and stood on the cold gravelly road. He stared about him. High crags loomed jagged and lonely against the black sky. The moon was brilliant and eerie bright and close enough to freeze a finger on.

A deep ravine dropped sheer from the road, and Shultz pointed to the rim. "Go on over there," he said to Johnny.

Johnny walked cautiously across the gravel bed.

"Raise your mitts," snapped Dominoes.

Johnny stopped walking and lifted his hands.

"Go on. Walk," said Shultz.

Johnny went to the edge of the road. He looked down. The sheer, breath-taking drama of the drop-off rooted him to the spot. Along the glass-smooth surface, needles of rock jabbed up into the air, and there were pockets of shale jammed into small vees. Ledges jutted out into the atmosphere, and spears of brush clung to the needle-like spurs.

But mostly it was flat, bare-faced, unblemished cliff. Hundreds of yards below one tree grew. One solitary tree in all the rocky desolation.

"Well?" purred the fat man from where he stood by the car. "What do you think of that, my tough, fool-hardy friend?"

Johnny turned around slowly, grinning flatly. "Nice view. If you're interested in the next world."

The fat man drew out a gun. He adjusted the safety and looked up. Cocking it coolly, he lifted the barrel at Johnny Blood. A sickening, dread sweat oozed out on Blood's hide, and the grin died on his mouth.

"Like to divulge the whereabouts of that lovely sleep stuff?" slowly smiled the fat man.

Johnny shrugged.

"It's a long way down," murmured the fat man. "Others have dropped by the wayside. More will. You can't buck us, my friend. Neither can the rest. But

then, you certainly made a nice try."

The cold breeze strayed over Johnny Blood's neck. Trickle of sweat ran down his spine, and electric fingers strayed over his skin.

"All right," swaggered the fat man, carelessly drawing a bead on Johnny Blood's guts. "This is going to hurt you worse than it does me. Here goes. One, two—"

There was no place to jump, no way to turn. The wall of rock was quick, shattering suicide. The gravel paving was flat and there were no road gullies to roll into. No place.

Johnny cursed the luck that had robbed him of the right to kill the murderer of his wife. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. There was no use pretending he didn't care. He did.

But the fat man was slowly lowering the gun. His voice was soft and thoughtful. Dominoes scraped his foot on the gravel. The freckle-faced guy cleared his throat. Riff Kirk rubbed his chin.

"Tough boy," muttered the fat man. He tucked the gun in his belt and walked forward to Blood. "Okay," he said. "One more chance. I need you, damn you! I need you for my sugar! Come on. One more chance. I didn't intend to use this one, but I'm going to have to. Don't look so smug, Blood. This'll do it. Believe me. This will crack you."

They drove on and on, and finally they turned down a narrow, rock-rimmed roadway. There were pine trees in the clearing and under the pines stood a big, rambling log cabin. Inside the cabin burned a flickering, yellow coal oil lamp.

They trooped from the car to the porch and the fat man nudged Johnny Blood into the lodge. A log fire burned in the fireplace. They stood around it warming their hands.

There were deer heads and moose heads and saddles hanging on the walls. On the table someone had left a cocktail glass. There was a lipstick smear on the rim.

Cyd Saxon's hangout. She must be mighty proud of herself for her work tonight, Johnny Blood thought. She must be turning cartwheels of joy upstairs. Cut out the acrobatics, honey bun, and come on down.

She came down the stairs in the semi-

darkness and stood at the foot of the steps. The lamp flickering in the center of the big room didn't cast much light at all. Johnny looked up where she walked toward him. His eyes met hers then, and the shock that went through him tore him like lightning. His eyes burned and his heart conked out completely for the long count.

It couldn't be. But it was.

KAY DALLAS BLOOD came forward, her eyes bright and warm, her mouth turned up in that soft, gentle little smile. She said, "Hello, Johnny," as if nothing had ever happened, and then she was in his arms and he was kissing her and holding her tight. There was nobody else in the room and there were no murderer's in the world and there were no hop heads and there were no hot-car rings.

There was nothing but Kay Dallas and Johnny Blood.

And a smiling, amused gent named death.

For a long time they stood there in each other's arms and finally Johnny Blood knew he would have to let her go. He drew back and looked at her face. There were tears in her eyes and some were sliding down her soft cheeks. Her mouth was smeared with lipstick, but she was smiling and happy and her hands were around his neck, curling in his hair.

His own eyes were hot and stinging and he cursed under his breath.

"Kay," was all he could say.

She kissed him again on the cheek and hugged him closer.

"A very touching reunion," drawled the oily voice of Bill Shultz from the fireplace. "I would, however, like to remind you that we have a certain business transaction to attend to."

She turned rigid in Johnny Blood's arms. At the sound of the fat man's voice, her voice froze, and her eyes went wild with fear. The breath squeezed out of her body. She turned to Shultz's massive hulk towering over the fire.

"All right," she whispered. "Go on."

Shultz smiled tolerantly. "I might point out to you both that there is no chance whatsoever you will find a way out of that tiny little room upstairs. Am I right about that, Kay darling?"

She opened her mouth, then tipped her head down and nodded slowly.

"Merely bars on the windows," the fat man nodded genially to Blood. "A necessary precaution. Big, tough, gray iron bars. Don't look that way, Blood. The little lady can see the trees and the birds and the sky. It's a nice view, too. Woodsy. Bucolic as all hell."

Blood growled and moved forward. Immediately the .45 was jammed into his back and there was a warning murmur from Dominoes Dawes.

The fat man's eyes hooded. "That's better, Blood. Just stand steady. You'll be all right. First I'd just like to explain how Miss Dallas—"

"Mrs. Blood, Shultz!"

"—Mrs. Blood came to be here. It seems there was a slight slip-up in identification. Somehow the credentials of your wife got mixed up with those of the girl she was with. Unfortunately, the other girl's body was battered quite beyond recognition. A—uh—slight auto accident. The police seem to suspect murder, simply because of a bullet hole in the back of the head."

Freckle-Face giggled, but the fat man turned on him angrily. "Shut up"

"Go ahead, Shultz!" rapped Blood.

"That's all. We thought it quite convenient to hold your wife here inasmuch as there was no mention of anyone accompanying the dead woman. Of course, we couldn't have your wife running about shouting at every cop she saw that her friend had been shot in the back of the head, now, could we?"

Blood's hands were sweaty at his sides. He started to say something to the fat man. The words were not formed, but the hate was pushing them out. Then he clamped his teeth abruptly shut and reached out for Kay Dallas. He took her by the arm.

"It was only by luck that you yourself should come looking for her, and that we should so fortuitously meet." Shultz chuckled. "Far be it from me to make my offer of your freedom downstairs here. Your wife knows what we want. Why don't you talk it over upstairs?"

Blood's hands knotted up. He took a step forward, and Kay grabbed at him in desperation. Blood pushed her aside

and moved toward Shultz. Shultz caressed the gun in his belt and his eyes blazed. Then his soft voice spoke again:

"You probably want to be alone. Go on."

Out of the corner of his eye, Blood saw the blued barrel of the .45 in Dominoes' hand. The freckle-faced kid was reaching into his belt. The fat man's eyes hardened suddenly. His voice lashed out the words in the shrill whine of an enraged fishwife:

"Make it damned snappy!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Rescue Squad

JOHNNY BLOOD turned slowly, took his wife by the arm and led her up the darkened stairway. Behind them they could hear movement in the big room. The tension was gone. The fat man was breathing again.

She opened the door to her room and looked up at Johnny Blood. Her eyes were big and wide in the half-darkness, and she smiled at him. She said:

"I'm glad you're back, Johnny. I've waited and waited, wondering if you'd make it or not."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Come on in."

They walked inside and she snapped on the light and closed the door. It was a small bedroom with a bed and a dresser. All the windows were barred solidly with tough iron bars.

"My Lord!" growled Johnny Blood, pacing the room. "They've made you live like this all the time! How could you stand it? Couldn't you get away at all?"

"I tried it once," she said simply. "They shot at me and I got scared and I must have fainted. I just didn't have the strength to get away."

He walked toward her and put his hands on her shoulders. A terrible, jarring, tender feeling for her took hold of him and he lifted her up in her arms and held her close. He kissed her on the mouth.

"Oh, Johnny," she said. "You're here now, and that's all that matters."

He put his head in his hands. His head buzzed and throbbed from the blow of the sap. He could not get it straight even

yet that his wife, Kay Dallas, was still alive. That she was a prisoner in a Rocky Mountain hoosegow. And that they had to get out somehow.

He lit a cigarette and let the smoke climb down and bite into his throat. Shaking his head slowly, he said:

"I'll never let you out of my sight again. You just can't keep out of trouble. It comes looking for you. Lord, Kay, it's been that way all the time. What makes you that way?"

She leaned back and shook her head. Her eyes were studying him watchfully. "That was terrible for you, being in jail like that for me, wasn't it, Johnny? Was it—was it really awful?"

He turned and faced her. There was no expression in his eyes. He thought successively of slapping her hard across the face for that two-year term in the clink. Then he thought of cupping her face in his hands and telling her she shouldn't worry about what he'd gone through. Then he thought of lashing out at her with stinging words and biting threats and icy curses. Then he thought of shrugging and passing it all off as a big joke.

He said. "It was awful, Kay. There isn't going to be any next time. I swear to heaven, kid, the next mess you get into—that's the end. Have you got it straight? That's the end."

Her eyes went to the coverlet and she plucked at a tassel. She smoothed it out with her tiny fingers and then she looked at his face. Her eyes were deep and soft. She nodded her head gently.

"Yes, Johnny," she said. "I'm terribly sorry about all that. I'm sorry about this trouble, too."

"How did it happen, Kay? Tell me." Johnny Blood leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Just like Shultz said. It was Jennie Parker, Johnny. Remember her?"

"No."

"She went to Tulane with me. She came over one day with her car. She was going to St. Louis for the weekend. So we left that night. In St. Louis, Jennie met a cousin of hers called George Parker and he had to get to Denver in a hurry. So the three of us started for Denver."

"Good Lord, Kay—"

"Well, there was just nothing for me to do at home alone, and . . . Well, anyway, we got to a place called the Club Peril outside Aurora, and George disappeared. We couldn't find him anywhere. We tried to get the manager, that Schultz, to look for him, but he wouldn't budge out of his office. That horrible old mountain of a monster.

"Jennie and I ran out into the car to go to Denver and get the police. It was dark and we got the wrong car. Two minutes later another car drove up alongside us. It tried to force us over to the side of the road. Jennie got scared and put on the gas instead of the brake, and the car shot ahead.

"Jennie went faster and faster and then they started shooting at us from the car behind. We both got scared to death. I ducked down behind the seat, but Jennie couldn't. Suddenly the back of the car ripped, and a bullet came in. Glass fell out of the rear viewer and then the front windshield split up.

"A minute after that I heard Jennie give a little whimper and she slumped over. The car swerved hard and bounced around. I grabbed at the wheel, but I couldn't see what I was doing. Then there was a lot of smashing glass and metal snapping. I passed out.

"Somebody came up from the car behind and dragged Jennie out. They mumbled about her awhile and then they saw me. They came and dragged me out. 'She's alive,' someone said. 'She goes with us.'

"I had Jennie's purse, somehow. She had mine. She was so badly hurt you couldn't tell who it was. That Parker man didn't show up at all to identify her. Shultz already had me up here. That's all."

Johnny Blood shook his head wearily and opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. "Is that all?"

She nodded slowly. "That's all."

Johnny sighed. "It's so damned bad—it's good. I guess it couldn't be anything but the truth. It sounds too wild to be made up. Well, that's that. Now what?"

Her eyes were in shadow. "You have got the stuff, haven't you, Johnny? You've got it where you can bring it to them?"

HE STARED at her. He saw a lot of things in that one blinding instant, but they were all contradictory, and he could not decide which were the true signs and which were the false ones.

He saw a guilty kid who had played him for a sucker ever since he'd kissed her the first time, who had always sent him out to grab roasting chestnuts out of million-dollar fires, who had tossed him into stony lonesome for a twenty-four-month stretch to cover her own slip-up, who had reefered and jagged and dreamed on poppy and sent the bill to her ever-loving husband.

At the same time he saw an innocent kid who had a perfect knack for finding trouble in each passing streetcar, who had tried and tried but failed to make anything come out right in her lifetime, who had cried and sobbed and torn her hair on his shoulder begging for his forgiveness, who had loved him always and who had come back from the darkness with apologies and sorrow, who would always love him and would give him the world on a platter if she could.

"I don't know where the dream stuff is," Johnny said slowly. "I wish I did. We're in a tight mess, kid. I hope we can slip the noose."

"You don't know where it is," she repeated, and a dazed, scared expression crossed her face. "You've got to find it, Johnny! I mean it!" She went on hurriedly. "Shultz is a killer. So are all those hop-head bebop boys!"

Her eyes narrowed suddenly, and a cunning gleam crept into them. "Are you testing me out—to see which side I'm really on?" Her lips tilted up suddenly to his face, and her skin was a warm glow of loveliness close to him. "Don't you trust me at all, Johnny?"

He patted her on the cheek. He stood up and walked to the barred window. "Yeah. But I don't know where the candy is, kid."

She sighed and got up. She walked over to him and stood by him, looking out into the blackness of the forest. Then she turned to him and smiled. She pressed close and laughed.

"It doesn't matter, Johnny. At least we're together now. And that's all that means anything to me."

He touched her hair and his fingers were on her cheeks and he knew she was playing the cards straight once and for all. He knew her phony-sounding story was true; only a smooth logical story would be a lie and could never have happened.

He kissed her again, and deep within him was the fierce, burning knowledge that they would get out of this thing somehow. And when they did, she would be his forever.

The window shattered in the half-dark room and he twisted aside. A brassy hard voice came from the night. "Johnny!"

It was Sam Dane. Johnny weighed a lot of angles fast. Dane was working for the Old Man. Dane should be a straight operator. But you couldn't figure too many angles in a big blow-up like this.

"Yeah?"

"We got the joint surrounded, Johnny-Boy! I had one hell of a time latching onto your back-trail. But that barkeep at the Club Peril is such a jerk he tipped the whole thing off."

"How many guys we got?"

"Seven. Listen."

A heavy footfall outside the door echoed through the stillness. A fist pounded on the door. The voice of Riff Kirk came to them, sardonic, heavy.

"Break it up. You've had time. Come on out. The Big Boss wants to see you."

Outside Dane gasped. "I'll have to open up on them right away. You got to play it for all it's worth. Wait for us and then take off!"

Riff Kirk shouted, "Damn it! You hear me? Open up!"

"Our car's outside in the barn," Dane whispered. "These guys bumped off Blackie Knight. And your wife, too. See you, Johnny!"

The door shuddered and pulled open. Light splashed into the room and Johnny Blood and Kay Dallas looked into the shaking muzzle of Riff Kirk's gun. Kirk's eyes were half-crazy with the craving for dope and the sweat was heavy on his skin. His mouth was a twisted bloody scar. . . .

Inside the semi-dark living room it was quiet, and no one moved. Through the gloom of the dark stairway they descended slowly, Kay Dallas and Johnny Blood. And behind them, with the gun, came Riff Kirk.

There was no sound from the slopes outside the lodge. It was as if the whole mountain range had suddenly been draped with a thick scarf of unearthly silence. Everywhere there was quiet waiting and watching.

Blood knew he would need a gun to get Kay Dallas out of the cabin alive. His feet moved mechanically down the steps, and he could see the fat man's huge bulk leaning heavily against the mantel piece. The freckle-faced kid sat on a leather chair arm, grinning. Dominoes turned his glittering eyes toward the stairs.

Slowly Blood passed on down the steps. There must be some way he could get Kirk's gun. Only a few seconds remained before Dane'd open up outside. Johnny cursed himself for not asking Dane for a gun. Alongside him, Kay Dallas picked her way carefully down the dimly lit stairs. Step by step. Six more steps. Five.

Of course!

With a sudden startled cry, Johnny Blood turned his ankle sharply on one of the darkened steps, threw himself heavily backwards onto the stairs. Twisting about, he snapped the startled hop head's legs in his arms and wrenched hard.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cornered

KIRK lost his balance, clawing with bitter curses for an instant at the bannister; then he pitched over. Catching his knee on a step, he doubled over and sprawled down across Blood's crouched body. Blood grabbed the gun and tore it from Kirk's hand.

Then he shoved the body of Riff Kirk ahead of him, cold-cocked him on the skull just behind the ear, and faced the startled men in the semi-dark living room.

"You'll never get out of here alive!" lisped the fat man testily, moving sideways, bringing up a gun. "It's three to one, you fool!"

Blood pulled Kay Dallas down beside him and raised the .45.

"Listen, Shultz," rasped Blood. "This place's surrounded. Believe it or not. You're busted like an unfilled straight." Shultz let out a savage, shrill laugh.

"Don't make funny music, Blood. If you want to shoot it out, we're willing."

"There's seven men outside—waiting to nail your hide to the nearest barn. Do you want to drop your guns, or do you want to take a chance?"

The fat man moved slowly across the room, towards the flickering funnel of light in the center of the room. When he reached that illuminated spot, he'd be a perfect target for tonight.

"I'll take my chance, Blood. One shot at me, and you're dead. You're the one that's faded, Blood." Blood's eyes flicked over to Dominoes. The shoulder holster was empty and the gun in his hand looked heavy as a cannon. It was. Smith and Wesson .45—Johnny's own.

"It's dark back here by the steps, Shultz. You'll never pick me off with the first shot. Then it'll be too late. I'll have you hammered to the floor by then."

The fat man stopped, his beady eyes raging. He puffed his chest out like a gigantic, bloated pouter pigeon, ruffled up his feathers, and snarled. "You can't bluff me, Blood. I'm coming at you."

Shultz looked up at the bright cone of lamp light and hesitated. Johnny raised the gun. Then a triumphant, hideous grin curled on the fat man's bright red lips and he strode into the light, raising his gun at the dim shadow of Johnny and Kay Dallas.

Instantly the outside night exploded with a tremendous volley of shots. Claws of iron tore the fat man's coat. Shreds of cloth and padding bristled out from his shoulder and a bloody streak tore across his cheek.

He screamed, a shrill, unearthly scream of terror, and dropped to the floor. "Outside, men! Get 'em! We're bushed!"

Dominoes raised his gun calmly and shot the coal oil lamp out. The room pitched into swirling blackness. Blue smoke filled the room with the stink of cordite, and shots rocked about them.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Blood whispered to Kay Dallas. He pulled her up and they crawled over the unmoving form of Riff Kirk. Slowly they inched their way across the rough board floor. The blackness was clearing up a bit, and the blue smoke drifted lazily about like summer clouds.

A towering bulk reared up in front of them.

"There you are, Blood!" the fat man screeched and shots blazed away at Blood and Kay. Blood leveled his own gun and threw three shots at Shultz. Shultz cursed and staggered backward, screaming with agony.

The brash, flat voice of Dominoes knifed the air. "Shut up, you damned yellowbelly!" An orange tracer split the air, aimed from inside the room over by the window. The hot slug ate through Blood's shoulder.

He winced and cursed and sweat came over him. He shuddered, lifted his gun hand again and sank another slug into the toppled, punctured bulk of the fat man. Shultz howled and cursed and lapsed into unintelligible gibberish. And in a short moment he was bubbling his last. Somewhere inside his head a ringing voice was reading him a list of debts he owed from a large sealed doom's day book.

Kay Dallas was tugging at Blood's shoulder. "Here's the door," she whispered. "This way."

She spun the door open and they both broke into the cold, pine-tanged night air. The door slammed shut behind them. Immediately a hail of bullets showered down on them from the slope rising about them.

"Damn it!" shouted Blood. "It's me! Johnny Blood!"

A muffled curse came from the firs. "Well, damn, damn! I thought it was fat man!"

"Where's Dane?" Blood rasped out, crawling with Kay Dallas through the prickly pine needles matting the hillside.

"Damned if I know," grunted the man behind the tree. It was Hack Sneed, one of their ace spinners. "Last I saw him," drawled Hack in his Georgia Cracker twang, "he was headed for that car of ours parked inside that-there barn."

Two shots rocketed out of the lodge and spit fir needles up around them.

"Johnny," Kay Dallas whispered. "Give me a gun so I can slam some back at those rats!"

Johnny laughed. "Hack, give a rifle to this kid here."

"Winchester? Sweet little ole deer gun. How'd about that 'un, honey?"

The girl reached over and cradled the Winchester in her arms. "Oh, it's lovely, lovely," she crooned. "Go on, Johnny. I'll stay here. Okay?"

"Keep your powder dry, twinkle-toes."

Johnny Blood inched through the foliage and came down on the barn in back of the cabin. From the darkness outside the structure he could hear a movement inside.

"Who's there?" he hissed into the darkness.

There was a long, tense pause. Johnny raised the gun and pointed it into the midst of the eerie silent interior. He tightened his finger on the trigger and pressed.

"That you, Johnny?" Dane whispered cautiously.

Johnny let out a long, whistling sigh. "Yeah. Almost plugged you, pal." There was a swift, choppy movement by the car. "It's me."

AND then a strange, terrifying thing happened, numbing Johnny with surprise and shock. A heavy, loud explosion rocked the barn, and lead sizzled into Johnny's leg. The furious biting fire raced through him like fever pains and he reeled back against the chinked log wall of the barn. Warm blood seeped out on his leg.

He could only gasp, "Sam! Sam! It's me! What's the matter with you? It's me!"

Another shot came, but this one ricocheted from the wall and the slug bent and whined up through the cold night air.

Johnny threw himself desperately to the ground and crawled on his belly. He felt the car loom up over him suddenly. He reached up and touched the underside of the running board. He was covered now. He pulled out the Smith and Wesson he'd grabbed from Kirk. He shook his head to clear it. Grease rubbed off the driveshaft housing onto his hair. The blood was seeping out onto his pants leg, but he could do nothing for it now.

Two more shots blasted out, and he could hear Danne's feet prowling about in the darkness. Dane was breathing heavily, and every so often he would let out a gasping little cry.

Dane was hit. How badly?

Dane was the number one dope-runner

of the big snow gang. He went along with the hot-car convoy to be sure there was no monkey business from hijack gangs. He'd slipped up for a fare-thee-well this trip. Dane was the one who had suggested to the Old Man that Johnny Blood ride herd this caravan. Sure, use Johnny Blood as a decoy for the Shultz hijackers, so Dane could wait for hell to pop and then pull the sleep stuff out of the fire.

Dane had tipped his mitt now. He'd come here to the hot car to get out the hidden dope load. And now that Johnny Blood had guessed it, Dane couldn't let Johnny Blood live. Blood would demand his cut, a big cut. And that was out. One-hundred percent secrecy was necessary for a dope run. Anybody knew that. None of the other hot-car bugs knew the powder-peddle set-up at all.

So this was showdown for Johnny Blood and Sam Dane. It was now or never.

A hell of a nice guy to go on a binge with, Dane was. A hell of a nice guy to shoot a game of pool with. Or blackjack. Square, honest, straight. A hell of a nice guy to play hide-and-seek with. It's your move, Dane. Play it, pal.

Dane was moving around the car, his steps taking him toward the entrance to the barn. He kicked his feet out in front of him, looking for Blood's body on the ground. Johnny Blood grinned.

Dane got to the entrance and stopped. He set a valise down on the ground near his feet. The precious cargo of illicit sleep! Johnny Blood snaked out a cautious hand, lifted the bag and eased it under the car. Then he slid across the ground, rolled out from under the car, climbed up by the radiator, the gun tight in his hand.

He couldn't see anything inside the barn. The moonlight was gone and the pines cut off the slightest starlight. What little did get through was blotted out by the barn roof.

Dane went slowly down on his hands and knees, reaching for the valise. Then there was a startled gasp, and Dane's hand clawed over the ground frantically. A sobbing curse broke from his lips. He dropped to the cold dirt.

Johnny Blood slipped along the side

of the car and stood over Dane's crouched body. Blood bent down, plunging his gun in Dane's back, reaching across quickly and jerking Dane's pistol from his hand.

Dane stiffened. Rigor mortis, damned near.

"Hello, Sam," said Johnny Blood. "Stand up, pal. Long time no see."

Dane got to his feet like a hundred-year-old man.

"Raise 'em to the hay loft, kid. I don't like to play games all the time."

Dane raised his hands high. He didn't need to stretch them. He was tall and he was tough. He outweighed Johnny Blood by ten pounds. He was two hundred. Blood was a hundred ninety. Blood sized up the tough muscles and the thick neck Dane sported.

"Glad I've got the drop on you, pal. For a minute there I thought you had me nailed."

Slowly Dane turned around. Johnny Blood could barely see him, but he could almost feel the big teeth glistening.

"We could make a deal," Dane murmured softly. "I got you out of a damned tough spot in there, kid."

"You came up here to pick up your snow cargo, Dane. Not to play Boy Scout to your old buddy. Don't weave any funny tales for me."

"That candy's worth a quarter million, Kid Colt. That ain't loco weed. What's with you? Sound good?"

Blood laughed suddenly. "So it was you all the time, wasn't it? Using that hot-car racket for a cover so you could get good gunmen to back you. Using me for bait to smoke that hijack outfit into the open. You were just standing around with your hands in your pocket waiting, weren't you? How about that?"

"Sure it was me. It's just you and me in on this thing now, Blood. The boys don't know anything. Listen, by the time this shoot-out's over, all those hop heads inside will be drowned in their own slimy juice. You and me can take this box of Paradise pills and nobody'll know the difference. How about it?"

"What about the Big Boss? He in on it?"

"No, pal. Just me. I got it from New Orleans, and it's all paid for. In S.F. we sell it to a fence I got lined up and—"

"You kill Blackie Knight tonight with that Saxon dame? How about that angle, Dane? I don't like murder."

"No. Hell, Shultz bumped him off when he lifted that crate."

"You kill that girl the last trip?"

There was a long, tense silence. "Listen, pal, those things happen. These babes tried to deadbeat us out of our car—with the stuff in it! Hell yes, I shot one of them, and the other took a powder off across the fields."

A heavy, dead emptiness settled over Johnny Blood. Dane wouldn't lie about killing a girl. Not when he was faded with a rod. This time it was the truth. Dane had killed the girl who was along with Kay Dallas. Not Shultz.

That meant that Kay Dallas had been working with Shultz all the time, trying to get him to give over the goods with her low-voiced, convincing, double-crossing lies. And Shultz had tried to make it look as if he was holding Kay, not working with her. Lord, what was the use?

Suddenly Dane jumped down on the two guns, at the same time hitting Johnny hard. Johnny crumped and the two loose rods flew into the pine needles outside the barn. Johnny slammed Dane back and Dane's body bounced into the hard fender of the car. The car rocked back and forth.

Dane slugged at Johnny's heart, backing him toward the chinked log wall of the barn. Johnny drew blood to Dane's eyes. Then he tried to sizzle in a punch on Dane's neck, but he could not get the proper angle.

The gun shots from the house had suddenly ceased. There was a cry from the firs. Somebody came pounding down the slope toward the house, jubilantly shouting:

"They're smoked out, Sam! Sam! Johnny!"

Sam's mouth was bubbling blood, and Johnny slammed another fist into him hard. Dane crashed back on the car surface, and then bounced off and lashed Johnny Blood out onto the mat of needles in the clearing.

Dane leaped on top of him, slamming blow after blow into Johnny's face and chest. They were raging automatons, maniacally crushing the life from each other.

The gentle voice of the girl did not penetrate their numbed brains at all. Johnny seemed to hear it, but he did not pay attention.

It was only when the bright blue searchlight burned down into them from the top of the slope minutes later that they recovered enough to stop. Together they gazed blindly up into the shimmering, dazzling light.

The voice over the loudspeaker belted at them, sending combers of magnified sound crashing about the hills.

"We've got you covered, men! Come on out with your hands high!"

That voice had authority behind it. It had the smell of John Law to it. The cops had circled them and had smashed up their little reefer rendezvous. The jamboree was a bust. But a complete bust.

CHAPTER SIX

The Last Round

THERE is an interesting psychological point about the advantage of surprise. At that precise moment of surprise, the world can hang in the balance. There is no precise or definite reaction you can count on. One time a cornered man will run like hell. The next time he will surrender meekly and drop his guns.

The surpiser or the man surprised can win in that one shimmering instant—that stoppage of time when everything swings into balance and the cards are all back in the deck. When the tables move again, they can swing either way.

Dane moved first. He jumped up and lit for the car. Blood knew what he was after and he dove at him.

Curses rang out from the slope, and bullets bit down into the barn. None hit either Blood or Dane. Cops began pounding down through the firs. They had the house covered already, and in the sloping knolls the hot-car pilots were slowly walking in with empty, gun-less hands.

Blood and Dane scrambled along the ground for the satchel. They searched and they scratched for it, but it was gone. They stared at each other foolishly.

Then Johnny Blood remembered. What had Kay Dallas been doing talking to

them while they were slugging each other? He had heard her vaguely. Kay Dallas. She had come and she had taken that bag and she was running away with it into the hills. Because she was in it as much as anyone, and she would always be in it, and there was nothing he could do about it now—except stop her.

Stop her forever.

Johnny Blood cursed and ran to the back of the car. He grabbed up a gun from the ground and ducked out into the raging bright light of the police spot. Only for an instant did it pick him out from the trees. Then he plunged into the black shadow and went smashing through the dark pine foliage.

Behind him rose yells and shouts. Bullets whined through the blackness. Dane was screaming: "Where the hell you going?" Then Dane took out after him. A shot cracked through the branches. Dane was scared stiff. He had to kill Blood or die himself. There was a murder rap to worry about now.

Blood did not know why he was taking this direction into the hills. He only knew somehow that Kay Dallas had gone that way, too. Kay Dallas had come down and grabbed the sack of cocaine and she was off to the races. She would try to make the rimrock, circle down back, and be out of the hills by morning. And she would have a quarter million in snow strapped to her back.

There was no anger in him that he had been tricked and cheated again by the woman he loved. There was no black fury at her. He had gone through it all too often to feel it again. Pain was dead in him. This time he knew only that she must be stopped. She must be stopped because she was no longer a human being. She was a mad dog with no rational impulse to law or order or honesty.

She loved him; there was no question about that. He loved her. But she would go on breaking the law, killing people, running mad on C jags. She was a crazy little doll without any understanding of life. She could love and she could hate but in between there was nothing.

Johnny Blood did not realize he was sobbing as he stumbled through the black night, dodging fir branches that clawed at his eyes and slapped at his cheeks. He

did not realize that he was crying out crazily to himself, saying her name over and over again.

With a terrible, grating gasp, he pitched forward and smashed flat on his face. An aching, painful tearing ripped at his chest. Vaguely he thought that he had been shot in the back, and that the bullets had raked through his chest and torn apart his ribs. But there was no blood, no numbing sensation.

It was in his head this time. And in his chest. He couldn't breathe at all. The darkness about him spun crazily. Then everything righted, and there were black and yellow spots moving about before his eyes.

Thin air! He was two miles high. No wonder. The thinness of the air was tearing at him, pulling him down into the earth.

Spang!

A heavy shot came from behind him. Dane! Dane was following, trying to get his mitts on that two-hundred-fifty thousand of C. The branches waved about him, but no lead creased him.

He stumbled again and crashed down. The gun dragged heavily in his hand. He lifted his head, and his mouth was open, and he was gasping like a fish out of water. The world swam in his eyes, tilting crazily, gyrating dizzily like a raft in a heavy typhoon. His hands were numb and his feet tingled.

He stumbled on at a reeling dog-trot, and then he was out of the trees. He was staggering along a limitless shaft of rock rearing high into the sky. The cold gray mass stretched out above him like a giant monolithic path to the sky.

Crack!

The slug bit the stone beneath his feet. He traced along the line of fire, sighting up the jagged rock barrier. Like a small, frantic ant with a heavy crumb, Kay Dallas was crawling fiercely over the murderous rock sabers to the safety of the rim far beyond. The bag dragged along behind her.

As he watched, she stumbled and shrieked out. She cried again in anger, and he saw her duck down into a cavity to drag up the heavy bag. Then she came up and moved on laboriously. He could hear her shouting angrily to herself.

He called: "Kay! Stop! You can't get away! Come on back!"

She twisted around and saw him. She lifted the gun and winged down a shot. He laughed savagely. "Come on back, Kay! You can't get away with it!" But she went on.

Doggedly he followed. He moved onto the slashing, cutting crags, stumbling and pitching forward dizzily. The breath went out of him and he blacked out. Seconds later he came swirling to, like a pearl diver breaking water, and he slugged on. The blood-red dizziness was crowding down on him and he could see nothing but the moving figure ahead.

Then she fell and he did not see her get up. He stopped, squinted. There was no movement.

"Kay!" The voice came out of him shaking with excitement and fear. He clambered over the rocks madly, stumbling, dragging himself up, bleeding, gasping. He fell full length over a sharp razorback and passed out.

HE CAME to, the agony tearing his head, the air crashing back into his chest. The tingling pain of hot blood rushed through him, pumping through his bursting arteries like hot oil in an overheated engine.

Then right in front of him, not three yards away, she rose suddenly, facing him, her eyes black with fury and anger.

"You followed me! Damn you, Johnny!" She thumbed up the gun and aimed it at his stomach.

"Give me that sack of cocaine," he said levelly, holding his own gun on her.

"Go back, Johnny! Leave me alone!"

"No, honey," said Johnny Blood. "I can never do that again. It's my fault, maybe, you've come this far. Maybe they'd have shot you sooner if I hadn't always been sticking up for you."

Her eyes blazed and her mouth tore open. "I'll kill you, Johnny! So help me! I'll kill you!"

"Maybe you will, but I'll have to kill you, too. That's the way it is."

Her eyes went soft. She smiled. "Maybe you're right, Johnny. Maybe this running around like crazy is all wrong." Her eyes brightened. "You know what we could do, Johnny? With the money we

get from this bag, we could go somewhere and start in fresh! If you're back with me, then I'll be all right. It was just because you were away that I went haywire."

"And before that, Kay?" he said, tired. "What was it before that?"

"Just a crazy kid thing, Johnny. I've grown up. My gosh, I was only a young punk out of college then. Now I know better." She smiled at him, her lovely brown eyes filling with tears. "Don't you believe me? Don't you love me, Johnny?"

"Yeah. I love you. There'll never be another like you for me. But I guess maybe my love isn't enough, Kay. I guess I can't make you good just by being in love with you. There has to be something else."

"We can go to San Francisco," she said eagerly.

"Later, maybe. After you pay for what you've done already."

"Jail, Johnny?" Her voice failed her for an instant, and she looked down quickly. "You won't stop loving me, will you, Johnny? For being such a no-good little trouble-maker, will you? You'll forgive me?"

He nodded slowly. There was a tearing, racking pain inside him and his eyes were suddenly on fire. He tried to speak, but he choked up. He reached out and cupped her chin softly in his palm. "Yes, I'll forgive you. For everything. Forever. Without you there'd be nothing left for me in the world."

She drew herself up to him tightly, and her hair was soft and feathery against his cheek. Her lips were on his cheek, and on his mouth, and she was clinging to him as if she could never let him go.

"Honey," he whispered when she moved away. His voice was sandpaper and cement. "Give me the bag," he said and stooped over to pick it up.

"No," she said. "You hand it to me, Johnny."

Something in her hard, flat tone froze him. He raised his head. She was standing there, lovely in the night, her little fist glued tight around the outside of her gun. Her eyes glittered and her mouth was tempered steel.

He shook his head with a sad sigh. Slowly he stood up. "No, Kay," he said. "I won't."

She snarled and her gun came up. She slammed the trigger. But it only made an empty click. She stared down at the traitor gun with incredulous horror, and threw it onto the rocks.

"Of all the dirty, rotten luck!" she screamed.

She backed off, then, crouching like a cub-robbed cougar. Her eyes were fiery and slitted.

He pointed his own gun at her. "Come on. You're going with me. The game of hide and seek is over." He lifted the bag and waved the gun. "Go on, Kay. Please."

For a long, breathless instant she stood there, crouched, the fire of her anger eating away at her. Her eyes were watching his face and looking through to the bottom of his soul. She knew he could not shoot.

With a sobbing little cry she leaped at the bag and tried to tear it from his hands. He pulled it away from her and leveled the gun at her body.

"Don't, Kay," he warned. "Stay where you are."

She came at him again, her brown eyes twin fiery lights. She flew at him, coming apart all of a sudden like a sprung alarm clock. Her tight fingers were on the gun and a shot went off. He felt the burning, searing flame from it. Pain jolted through him. He gritted his teeth.

Suddenly all the weight of her body slipped off him, like a heavy overcoat sliding from his shoulders. Holding the smoking revolver in his hands he looked down. There was quick blood over her and her eyes were open wide. A half smile twisted her lips and she was a broken and pitiful thing on the sharp rocks.

He stood there and the tears poured down his face. He said her name again and again. He kneeled over and picked up the bag. . . .

Cyd Saxon was stumbling toward him over the rocks. She had been standing ten yards away, waiting.

"I'll take it, Johnny. I've got Dane in custody down at the lodge. Along with your hot-car pilots. The bebop gangsters are there, too. I'm working with the Narcotics Department, if you haven't guessed."

(Continued on page 98)

KISS and KILL



The newcomer reached for
the .32 . . .

By **ROBERT
TURNER**

*Sultry Helene could always bewitch Al
into getting her out of a jam—
and himself into one.*

SHE knew where to find me. That's how sure she was of the whole thing. She came straight to The Paste Pot, an East Forty-Sixth Street gin-mill that caters to newspaper and magazine people and other characters. She swept into the place like it was the swankiest bar this side of Hollywood. It wasn't. It was another giggle-water parlor with a big A for atmosphere in the form of dim lights and walls muraled with famous cartoon originals, autographed by their creators.

She stopped halfway along the bar, her gaze moving along the row of customers.

Murph, the barkeep, eyed her as though she was some skirt off Third Avenue. Neither Helene's tall, regal beauty nor the expensively tailored suit that covered it, nor the fifty-dollar permanent, fazed Murph. If a European queen had walked in, he'd have greeted her the same way.

He said loudly: "What's your pleasure, honey—and believe me, it would be a pleasure." Murph is a funny fellow. You ask him.

She tilted her head. She didn't smile. The soft lighting added sheen to the red-gold loveliness of her hair and put little warm fires in her eyes.

"Has Al Arnold been here tonight?" She had a vibrant voice, soft as a south wind, with just the right class and culture intonations. Thousands of women try to speak like that, but it isn't anything they can acquire. You have it or you don't. Helene had it in acres.

Murph jerked his thumb toward the booths in the back. He had a habit of insulting old customers in a way that would have earned anybody else a punch in the nose. He said: "You'll find that drunken, no-good heel in the back, baby. You need any help, scream."

She came into the back of the place under full sail. I wasn't alone and that was fine. I wouldn't have wanted Helene to find me alone and crying into my bourbon on a Saturday night. Mari, the girl with me, was young and pretty, with intense black eyes and an expression that tried to be sophisticated but had a couple of years more to go.

Helene stopped by our booth, holding her purse tightly in front of her with both hands. Without looking at Mari, she said: "Al, I want to talk to you."

"They let *anybody* in here, don't they?" Mari said icily.

I saw Helene jerk her head around and fix her gaze on Mari in a stony, fixed stare. I knew that look. I said: "Mari, honey, you just asked for trouble. You are about to be whipped with words. You are about to become, quote, a chit, a bit of fluff, a face without a brain, unquote. Gird yourself." I was uneasy about Helene's coming here looking for me, or I wouldn't have been promoting something like that.

Mari applied the poise she'd bought recently at a Westchester woman's college

and snubbed her cigarette into the tray, carefully. "Who is she, Al?" she said brightly. "Somebody we know?"

"The Woman of the Year," I told her.

"Miss *Picture World*. Helene Arnold. My wife. Do you mind?"

She minded. Shock spread over her face. The dark young eyes grew wide and confused. She hadn't reached the page in the book where they told what to do about this. I felt a little sorry and helped her out. I looked up at Helene and stopped the things she had on her lovely, curled lips.

"What are you here bothering me for, Helene?" I said. "You're out of your bailiwick, Sheba. You're on the wrong side of the El."

Helene swallowed hard and forced the embattled-woman look off of her face. She put on a smile. It was her number three, special smile. A gentle, almost frightened bit of business that barely flirted around her full mouth. I would rather have seen Helene with her claws unsheathed, with her teeth showing. That I knew, and had handled before. This other was bad. She wanted something from me and that was crazy. What could I give her now?

"By the way," I said. "How's the Thane family? I hear you're making it a family affair now. You're playing up to that young, sissified pipsqueak, Gerald Thane, as well as his rich old man. Honey, you really cover all the angles, don't you?"

HELENE looked stunned. Her eyes went very wide. For a moment, a strange expression flashed across her lovely features. "How—how did you know about that?" she said. "How did you know I—I've been seeing Gerald Thane?"

I looked smug. "Never mind," I said. Why tell her the simple answer? Let her stew about it. "The power of the press, m'dear. We newsboys pick up lots of bits of interesting information."

"I don't understand it," she said. "Gerry and I've been very—" She stopped, stared coldly at Mari. She said: "Al, I've got to see you. It's important, Al. I—"

"You see me," I said.

"Alone," she said. "Please, don't make a scene."

What she meant was, that if I didn't do what she said, *she* would make a scene.

I'd been through Helene's scenes before. I told Mari: "Okay, honey. Go on up to the bar and wait for me there. This won't take long."

Mari nodded, not saying anything. She was a good kid. She got up and left the booth. Helene moved into her place. She didn't waste time. She said:

"Al, I'm in terrible trouble. You've got to help me. You're the only one who can help me with this."

I took a deep breath. "Look, let's get straightened up. You don't take favors; you don't take help from me. Not any more. You outgrew me. You forget a few things. Who am I? A lout of a no-good sports writer who makes a few extra peanuts a week doing a Sunday supplement piece. I'll never *be* anything. All I'm good for is drinking too much and gambling. I'm not fit to be married to a decent woman. I'm a bum. How do I know all those things? You told me so, dear Helene. Many, many times. You—"

"Please, Al!" She stopped me, her eyes pleading. "This isn't any time for rehashing old differences. You don't understand, Al. I'm in trouble. Terrible trouble."

I wasn't through. I wasn't going to let her stop me with that. "And who are *you?*" I went on. "You're Miss Hoity-Toity, the career woman, out to wear the whole wide world on her little finger like a good-luck ring. Helene Arnold, who wouldn't let any jerk of a husband hold her down. Well, you've moved up into the big time, honey."

"You're managing editor of the mighty *Picture World* magazine. You hobnob with the great, the bigwigs, and the end is not yet. From what I hear, you'll wind up owning the damned magazine. Well, fine! Now go get some of those lifted-pinky pals, those suave and worldly chums who always thought your husband too, too quaint, to get you out of whatever jam you're in."

She shook her head, desperately. "Al, none of those people can help me with *this*. I need you." She saw it wasn't going over. I was holding out. She dropped her A bomb. She leaned across the table and whispered, her eyes wide and scared, her face pale under its perfect makeup. "Al, listen to me. You've *got* to get me out of this. I—Al—I've killed a man."

I looked down at her hands. Both of them were holding one of mine. They were fine hands, with long, tapering lovely fingers, beautifully manicured. Once I had kissed those hands. Once, too, one of those hands had slapped me, viciously, stinging hard. Now, she was telling me they had taken a man's life. *It was like Helene not to get any blood on them*, I thought. *She never got soiled—on the surface.*

I looked up and into her eyes and for a second some of that wonderful control of hers was gone and I'd never seen her hit so hard by anything.

"Al," she said. "Help me out of this and I'll do anything for you. Anything."

When Helene looked at you like that, that covered a lot of territory. I didn't need a road map. She shook me, I won't say she didn't. But I managed to hold onto the edge of the world with one hand as it spun around. I said:

"What makes you think you can do things for me, anymore? What makes you think it isn't too late?"

Helene hit me with her eyes, everything that was in them. She knew how—she'd been playing in the biggest league. "Is it, Al?" she asked. "How could it be too late for us?"

My hand slipped off and the world got away from me. "All right," I said. "Give it to me. Tell me everything about it. We'll see."

"No," she said. "Not here, Al. We've got to leave here, and we've got to hurry. There isn't much time if anything's going to be done."

It took me a few seconds to make up my mind, completely. A lot can lance through your brain in a few seconds. This was my chance, I thought. This was my opportunity for the big boffola on Helene. This was where I'd come in. She was down to nothing once more; right where I'd found her. I could leave her there this time. I could say sweetly: "Go to hell, honey, in a big hurry. For me, will you?" It was what she deserved. It was what I should have done.

THREE years ago, she was just another smart, good-looking kid pecking a typewriter for Intercity Press, the big syndicate. I was a big shot to her, then, Al Arnold, featured sports writer. I didn't

make much money but I knew a lot of people, a lot of names.

I was liked. I could get favors. She had to have a start somewhere; I guess I looked as good as anything that had come along, that far. She married me. That gave her a meal ticket and plenty of time to bone up on the fine points of getting along in the world. It gave her a little more money than she'd had for clothes and polish. It gave her camouflage and cover-up while she started to claw her way up.

When she was ready, she made me get her a job again. Not just any job. It had to be on *Picture World* magazine. I didn't know why, then. I didn't know Helene had her sights raised so high for quite awhile. I used to work for Eli Thane, millionaire owner of *Picture World* and a string of other successful mags when he was Managing Editor of a Pittsburg daily, years ago. When she pumped me for everything I knew about him, I thought it was just curiosity, hero worship, or something.

She went to work in Thane's organization and I was dumb. I didn't catch on to her comparatively rapid rise within the next couple of years, from secretary to associate editor to editor and finally managing editor, second only to Eli Thane himself. I was proud of my smart, ambitious wife.

If she was suddenly a very busy woman and we got so that we didn't see much of each other, well, that would change eventually. She said so. It would only be for awhile, she told me, when I'd question her about it. Look at the money, she'd say. Let's rake in all this big cash she was making for a couple more years and soak it away.

After awhile we'd have a juicy nest egg and I could quit the syndicate and knock out the novel that had been boiling in me so long. She knew she had me there. I went on the ride. I went all the way.

That wasn't smart, was it? You're not ever smart when you go for a woman like I went for Helene. Life is good, life is sweet and the merry-go-round goes round and round and all the maxims and pretty sayings are true.

If we kept moving to bigger and more expensive apartments; if she spent every nickle we both made on clothes for her and entertainment for a lot of pseudo-sophis-

ticated heels who were always around, lapping up expensive liquor—I believed that was the way it had to be. If Eli Thane, distinguished and handsome, smooth and cold as lake ice, was always around—well, you had to be nice to the boss.

When I finally began to tot up the score, found out what inning it was and who was winning, it was too late. I started the big blow-up, but she finished it. She told me off. She told me what I really was to her, told me that she'd done nothing but use me since the day we'd met.

Now she didn't need me anymore. I could get to hell and gone away from her. Leave her alone. Shift for myself. Stop being a parasite, hanging on to the skirts of a rich, successful wife. Not in those words, of course. In that icy, lah-tedah manner that had become part of her the past several years.

So I left her. I went on a two week binge that was the talk of a crowd who took binges instead of aspirin. Then I settled back to the old haunts, the old life, the old ways. It was all over. Except that I wasn't fooling anybody. The torch I carried lit half the town. . . .

All of that went through my mind, sitting here across from Helene again for the first time in six months. Even if none of it had been that way, I'd still have been smart to shy off when she told me she'd killed somebody. Nobody should mix themselves in a mess like that. But some guys don't change. They never learn.

"Okay," I told her. "Let's get out of here." I stood and walked up front and tossed Murph my bill to hold for me. I told Mari to be good and I'd see her some other time. We left the Pasted Pot.

Out on the street I punched my shoulders against the cold, spring night air and wished my topcoat wasn't with Uncle Moe. "Where?" I asked.

"My place, Al," she said. "I've got a car around the corner."

I walked with her around to Forty-Seventh. I felt a little crazy. Helene had told me she'd killed a guy tonight and I was going with her to try and help her do something about it—and we talked about the thing as though she wanted me to come up for a fast game of gin.

The car was a long load of cream convertible, with the top up. Helene got into

the driver's side and I slid in next to her. She flicked the dashlights on. I looked at her and she was all the beautiful things in the world to me that moment, rolled into one. She was the moon and stars you reach for when you're a kid—only this kid had *had* the moon and the stars—had them snatched away from him. Now they were back in reach again. I put my hand around her slim wrist as she reached for the ignition.

"Wait a minute." My voice sounded funny, husky and catchy in the throat as though I had a cold. "Is this straight? You're really in that kind of a jam?"

She turned toward me and her eyes looked full-into mine, the dim glow from the dash shining on them. It was like one of those dream sequences where you fall lazily into deep, clear, warm, scented water and go down, down, down into the lazy, pleasant depths of them and never seem to stop.

"On the level, Al," she said. The lah-ted-ah was gone. She was Helene Riker once again, the kid I'd fallen in love with and married.

MY HAND tightened on her wrist. "You know what you're asking me to do? If I get caught in this with you—"

"I know," she said. "I didn't know who else to turn to. I didn't know what to do."

I pulled her roughly toward me. I held her hard and I kissed her hard. That was like it once had been. With my mouth still so close to hers I could feel her breath on my lips, I whispered: "One condition, Helene."

"All right," she whispered. "It's a deal, Al. For always, this time. Honest."

I said: "If you double-deal me on this, I'll tear you all the way down, even if I have to take the slide, too. I wouldn't have far to go, anyhow. I'll really do that."

"I know it," she said. "Don't worry about it, darling. Just get me out. Get me out."

I let her start the car then and told her to talk. She did. She said: "It's Eli Thane, Al."

That was funny. Moments before she told me, I'd somehow known it. Maybe not so funny. She'd had her eye on Thane, or his millions, all the way. He was wealthy, influential. But he was no kid. He had a

grown son, Gerald, and two wives, already. He liked smart, expensive women and he liked Helene—that was obvious. But he was the fox who'd chewed his way out of the trap twice. He was a wary quarry and he had a rep as first-rate heel.

"It was self defense, really, Al," Helene was saying. "Nobody will believe that, though. I—I wouldn't stand a chance."

"With what?" I said. "How did you do it?"

"His gun," she said. "A revolver. He had it in his pocket."

"That helps," I said. I lit a cigarette and I had trouble with the match the way my fingers were shaking. "Go on."

It wasn't a nice story but it was simple. He'd come up to Helene's place to tell her to stay away from his son, to leave young Gerald alone. Somehow, he'd found out that Helene had been seeing a lot of the boy. Old Eli had been drinking heavily and was in an ugly mood. When Helene had refused to be intimidated, he'd gotten rough.

He'd told Helene that she'd been playing *him* for a sucker a long time; he'd be damned if she was going to do the same thing with his son. She wasn't going to get away with it. He'd pulled the gun from his pocket. There was a struggle. The gun had gone off as she'd struggled to get it away from him.

All the time she'd been talking I watched her face. She kept her eye on the road and the midnight traffic. Deadpan, she could have been telling me about the fashion show she saw that afternoon. Her voice had been low and even.

I said: "If that's it, a smart lawyer can get you out of it. You don't need me at all. What do you want me for?" I could see her on the witness stand with only a little makeup and wearing a simple, inexpensive frock that would make her look like she had when I first met her. With her hair pulled back tightly from her forehead and her eyes very wide and awed, she wouldn't have anything to worry about.

Her knuckles went white on the steering wheel. "Don't be crazy, Al. Even if I was exonerated, I'd be ruined. *You* ought to know that, Al. I'd be finished!"

She shook her head wildly. "I *can't* do it that way. Al, there's another way.

Listen to me. There's a back stairway—a sort of combination service entrance and fire stairs. We—if we could get him down into the car parked in the back alley. . . . If we're careful, with a little luck. Al, no one saw him come in. I know that. Nobody knows he was there. I—"

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"He never let anybody know he was coming to my place. He said it would start a lot of silly talk. That's one reason I moved to this new place. There's no doorman, no elevator oper—"

"Never mind the diagrams!" I stopped her. I felt my ears and neck hot with anger. "Stop the car, Helene. I'm getting out. You can't get away with a crazy thing like that."

"What's the matter, Al?" she said, desperately. "Are you afraid? That's the reason I thought of you. You were the only one I figured could help me because *you* wouldn't be afraid."

"You're damned right I'm afraid," I told her. I reached toward the ignition. "Do you stop this thing or do I?"

She braked and angled over to the curb. I looked out the window. We were on a lonely East Side street, near First Avenue. The car stopped. She reached across me and started to open the door. I got the faint, sweet scent of her hair in my nostrils.

"All right, Al," she said. "I'm not afraid. I'll—I'll do it, myself."

Helene didn't get the door open. My hand covered hers on the handle, stopped it. "You would, wouldn't you?" I said.

She turned her face toward me and she was very close. "I've got to," she said. "I've made up my mind. It's the only way. It's a gamble but at least I have a chance to win. The other way I could only lose. If there're any consequences, I'll have to take them."

"What will you do with him?"

She had it pat. "He has a summer place in Rye. There's nobody there. I'll stay off the parkways and take little-used roads. I'll leave him there. If I'm careful about fingerprints, there won't be any way to connect it with me. Maybe I can make it look like he was shot when he caught somebody robbing the place. I—"

"With his own gun?"

She straightened up, back of the wheel again. "I can get rid of the gun."

I took a deep breath. "I'll go up there with you and see what the set-up is. If it looks bad, I'm still backing out. I'm staying clean. Can we use that back way to get in without anybody seeing us?"

"Yes," she said.

WE DID that. It was a small, hanky-panky apartment building in the Sutton Place section. There was a big garage building in back of it, with a driveway that led up to a side entrance. We parked in this dark driveway and walked down a pitch-black alley that led to the rear entrance of Helene's building. I let her open the doors. I kept my hands in my pockets. I didn't touch anything.

The living room of her apartment was huge, but the air was close. Beautiful, it looked like a show window moved intact. Except for the man sprawled on his back, one leg doubled under him and one arm flung out.

Death and the shadowy diffused lighting of the room undid all the fine work barbers and sun-ray lamps and facial massages had done for Eli Thane. His features sagged with the laxness of death and his complexion was ashen, mottled around the jewels. His mouth gaped and you could see his bridgework. His toupe had gone askew when he had fallen. I had never even known that he wore one.

The bullet had made a black hole in the starched whiteness of his hand-tailored shirt and he hadn't bled much. There was only a small stain. The revolver, a nickle-plated .32, was lying on the floor near his right hand.

I stood, looking down at him for a moment. Helene's hand fumbled for mine, her fingers like icicles. I glanced at her from the corner of my eye. Her lips were pulled back hard against her teeth, almost baring them. Her eyes looked too bright in the dim light.

I looked around the room. Every piece of furniture was in place. There was no sign of a struggle. Every ash tray had been cleaned. There was a briefcase lying on the cocktail table. Either they hadn't started to go over their work when this had happened or Helene had picked the papers up and stuffed them back into the briefcase.

"Do you think you can carry him, Al?"

He wasn't a big man. He was lean and compactly built. "Surely," I told her. "I could carry him."

"We—we'd better get going, Al."

"I'm not *going* to carry him." I breathed in deep—and it hit me all of a sudden. Sometimes it's like that. You can't make up your mind about something. The smoke filled air does it. Abruptly it all crystalizes in your mind, leaps into perfect perspective like a television image after a right turn of the dial.

I looked at Helene and she had turned toward me. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her like a new contralto making her first nervous concert appearance. Alarm was in her eyes and in the sudden twitching at one corner of her lovely, red mouth.

"What do you mean, Al?" she said.

I stared down at the corpse on the floor, then glanced up and let my gaze swerve around this luxuriously furnished room with the indefinably light, feminine touches. The contrast was sickening. Especially when I knew that the dead man on the floor had made all this possible for Helene. He was no angel, but he'd done some good things and he'd done some big things. I remembered him as a guy I used to work for. He'd been tough but fair.

"I'm backing down, Helene," I told her. The cloying thickness of the air was be-

ginning to give me a headache. My voice seemed to come from down in my belly somewhere. It sounded too deep and a little melodramatic and silly, but I couldn't help that.

"That's a man lying there on your pretty rug, honey. A human being. Not a hunk of meat to be lugged from one part of the state to another. I've done a lot of wrong things, Helene, but this stops me. Besides, my old reporter's instincts tell me there are some things that are off about this."

Her eyes grew wider. Her breathing became very fast. She almost spat it at me: "You—you don't believe me? I told you the truth, Al. You've *got* to believe me!"

"There are some things I don't understand. Like, do you mean to say that tonight was the first time that this—shall we say—difference of opinion between you and Eli occurred?"

"No," she said. "But—well, I was always able to handle him before."

"I see. And the gun? Why was he carrying a gun?"

"He was afraid of being held up," she said quickly. "It was a phobia with him lately."

I took a deep breath. "You have all the answers, don't you, Helene?" I turned from her and started toward the door. Half-way there, I stopped. "I'm



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going, Helene. If you want to tell the truth, I'll stick with you on it. I'll do anything I can to help you. I'll get the papers to give you every break possible. I think I can do that—if you want my help, Helene. I can't see it any other way."

She looked trapped. She looked at me as though I'd suddenly turned into vapor. She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe a man had turned her down for something. Especially me. She said, shrilly:

"You idiot, Al. You damned, idealistic fool!" Desperation twisted her lovely features. She reached out a hand toward me pleadingly. "Al, wait! Listen! I'll pay you. Help me, Al, help me and there'll be a lot of money. I promise you. I swear it. I'll make you rich. I—"

She stopped, seeing my expression. "What's the matter?" she said. "Al, why are you looking at me like that?"

All of a sudden things started to come to me. "Where are you going to get all this money, Helene?"

She looked confused. "Why, I—I've got some money of my own, Al. I've got a couple of thousand."

"That isn't a lot of money," I told her. "Not for help in getting out of a murder rap. Where is it going to come from? Helene, stop kidding me. There's an angle to this you haven't told me about. Stop being cute. Spill it."

"I don't know what you mean, Al." She frowned and cocked her head to one side in a puzzled manner. But her fingers were working over and over again into fists at her sides. "What makes you think that?"

"All right," I said. "I guess I'll have to pry it out of you. When was the last time you saw young Gerald Thane?"

She tossed her head and looked me straight in the eye. "Why, I don't know. A few days ago, I guess. Why? What's that got to do with it?"

"NOTHING much," I said. "Except that you're lying. Haven't you got a sense of smell? Doesn't this thick smoky air smell like the stink of perfumed cigarettes? *You* don't smoke 'em. Old Eli Thane doesn't smoke 'em. The only person I can think of who would enjoy having the smoke of a good clean weed

loused up with perfume would be old Eli's sissy son, Gerald. He was here tonight, wasn't he?"

Her head started to swivel toward the bedroom. She caught the involuntary movement too late.

I said: "Say Gerald was up here tonight when the old man came. Maybe he had warned the boy to stay away from you. Maybe he'd told *you* to leave Gerald alone. When he saw you together here tonight, he could have blown his top. It would have been a nasty bit of business. Especially if Eli threatened to disinherit Gerald or something like that. I've got a hunch that it wasn't you who killed Thane at all. It could have been Gerald—and *you're protecting him!*"

Her eyes got wild. "You're talking nonsense, Al," she said. "Do you think I'd risk—"

"Yes." I stopped her. "I do. If you could get me to help you keep Gerald clean of this jam, you could milk him four ways to Christmas for the rest of your life. Either by blackmail—or forcing him to marry you. Gerald is the sole heir to the Thane millions now. Isn't that the real score, Helene?"

"No!" she cried. She ran toward me and flung herself into my arms. "Al, Al! How can you think anything like that? Stop talking like a crazy man and help me. I'll make you rich—rich—"

I reached up and wrenched her arms from around my neck, flung her to one side, but it was too late. The man who had come gliding out of the other room got to the .32 on the floor before I could stop him. He stood there, with the weapon gleaming in his fist, leveled at Helene and me.

He was a big guy, but sloppy fat and flabby. He had good features, except for the heavy-lidded eyes the color of used wash-water and the mouth that was too red and full. His hair was little gold ringlets.

Looking at him, I suddenly felt sorry for old Eli Thane. It must have hurt him to have something like this for a son. This character in the fawn-colored gabardine suit and the flopping soft collar and the huge lavender silk necktie.

His voice was deep but with an un-

(Continued on page 96)

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Here today and gone tomorrow is the sad tale some of us have to relate because we've been swindled out of our hard-earned cash by dishonest characters. Yes, we've all been stuck at one time or another by racketeers and brazen breakers of the laws.

That's why we're keeping this column really on the ball and moving with the times. On hand now is information you readers have sent in about dealing from the bottom of the deck on everything from merchandising farm produce to buying television sets. We're printing these letters as quickly as we can—so that you readers can load your personal artillery with this up-to-date know-how on the slick schemes con men may try to pull.

And we're asking you to continue sending us letters, telling of your personal experience with racketeers and chisellers of all kinds. If we use your letter, we'll pay you \$5.00—helping you and your fellow-readers at the same time. Of course, we'll withhold your name if you wish.

However, no letters will be returned, unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. You'll understand that because of the press of mail in the office, we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters.

Be sure to address all letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Now, let's turn to the current rackets:

The Editor

Swindled by a Shark

Dear Sir:

Have you ever been swindled by a shark? And I'm not referring to those voracious creatures of the sea, (although the characters I mention do have certain fishy characteristics, too).

I mean the swindlers who prey upon the amateur songwriters by advertising their services in magazines or letters to a purchased list of "suckers".

In 1947 I hit at a hook I saw in a magazine in which I had faith. I sent to G— Music

Company a Western ballad. This brought a prompt reply via air mail, together with a "contract" and sheet of music flaunting a popular crooner's picture on the cover of the printed music.

They promised to publish my song with a royalty contract from which I would receive the usual benefits, a percentage of all record sales, sheet music, etc.

However, the one "catch" was, I had to furnish \$45.00 to cover the cost of publishing. I had been warned by A.S.C.A.P. not to pay any company for publishing a song, but I thought that if they had published songs plugged by famous singers they must be reliable, so I sent them the signed contract and the forty-five dollars!

Hearing nothing from them, I sent a query, to which they replied that the song was "coming fine" and they would have good news for me very soon. Again I waited, then sent another query.

They reminded me to look on the contract, where, in fine print, was a clause stating that "*in event the song was published*" I would reap the benefits from a royalty contract, etc., etc. That they had promised nothing. That I had my copy of the printed song, which I had paid for, and that they had done all they had promised to do. In other words, they had my forty-five bucks, I had a few sheets of music, and I could go fly a kite for all these people were concerned!

In desperation I wrote to A.S.C.A.P., who replied that they had received so many complaints about this concern that they had prepared literature on the subject, some of which they enclosed!

The G— Music Company previously was expelled from the society because of unfair dealings, and were an unreliable concern. It again warned me of paying *any* concern for publishing a song, for *no* reliable concern ever requires this.

G— Music Company still has my forty-five dollars and as for me—my song is still unpublished.

There is a whale of a difference between *printed* material and *published* material, as this little experience has taught me. So think twice, amateurs, before you let a song shark sink his teeth into your ambition! This is one case where the fish baits the fisherman, and when he gets you on his line, Brother, you're really sunk!

The only way to get rid of the song-shark is to starve him out. If he is unable to find food for his racket he cannot long survive. So if you don't play around with sharks, you won't get caught!

Mrs. D. E. Stebbins
Woodsville, N. H.

He Was Took

Dear Sir:

I am a free-lance photographer. One day I received a letter from an agency asking for certain types of photographs. I sent them forty-three photographs.

After about two weeks I received another letter from this agency stating that they were submitting my photographs to publishers for possible publication. They asked for more of my photographs, and I sent them another group. This went on until I had sent them more than a hundred pictures.

At the end of five months I wrote them a letter of inquiry. My letter was returned stamped: *Address unknown.*

Irvin W. Reed
East Jordan, Mich.

Unfriendly Chat

Dear Sir:

This racket is one which has been played on other small store owners besides myself.

I was in my store alone one afternoon when a neighboring meat market owner came in and told me that some one wanted to speak to me on his phone. The person on the phone had explained that the operator couldn't get me over my phone and had suggested that he call a neighboring store. The man had said the call was of great importance, so naturally I hurried over to the meat market.

The man on the phone said his name was Mr. Hill and he was from out-of-town. He talked with a slight lisp and was almost inaudible. He said an old friend of mine, a Mr. Lee, had told him to look me up, but since he didn't have time for a visit he thought a call would be the next best thing.

I told him that I knew no one by the name of Lee. He said he was sorry to have bothered me and hung up. When I returned to my store, I found the cash register had been looted of fifty dollars.

Mrs. Margaret Williams
Cleveland, Ohio

Ten-Spot Long-Shot

Dear Sir:

I had dropped into a midtown bar for a drink, after the fights, and gotten into a conversation with a stranger who called himself George. George had been very insistent about paying for my first three drinks. Too insistent.

I knew it was a sucker play when I made it, but I shoved a ten-spot at the bartender and said, "Never mind his dough, he's paid for the last three drinks!"

The bartender looked undecidedly at the talkative man in the black suit who had sidled up to me twenty minutes ago. The man opened his mouth to object, but I cut him off.

"Go on, take my money!" I insisted. The bar-face took it.

George kept an incessant line of palaver going. The bar-face returned with my change.

He stopped between us, looked puzzled, as if he couldn't remember whose change it was. George turned up the volume and made with the gestures as if afraid that I would interrupt him and maybe tell the bar-face it was my change. The truth was, that I would have said something if I had been able to.

The bar-face set the money down directly between us. But the way the beer glasses were situated, George had easier access to the money. He didn't even glance at it.

George kept on prattling; something about horses and Florida. His brother owned a racing horse and George spent two months in Florida each year.

You don't interrupt a man who has been buying you drinks, just to pick up your change. George didn't let up for five minutes. By that time, the urge to pick up my money was gone, but I didn't forget about it. I was too suspicious. The bartender shouldn't have forgotten it was my change, and George had turned up the volume at just the right psychological moment to make me forget about it.

Because of that, I was able to discern the succeeding steps.

George's voice dropped to soothing tones. I grunted assent and nodded my head at intervals. George toyed with his glass as he talked. He rolled it between his hands or bopped it with his fingertips.

When he finally let it alone, the glass was in front of my money, blotting it from my vision.

Now George raised his voice, made with the gestures again, and edged toward me, as if trying to impress me with his Florida talk. Naturally, I was crowded back. George now stood directly in front of the money. Nice going, I thought. It was going to be a shame to spoil it.

It came suddenly! Although, I had been expecting it, it still took me by surprise.

George glanced at his watch. "Holy smokes! The wife'll kill me for staying out this late! So long, pal," he said.

He grabbed my ten-spot change and pocketed it.

Then my right hand closed around his left arm like a vise.

"You made a mistake, pal." I said. "That's my change!"

Now he was the one who was surprised. He looked like a cockroach that didn't know which way to jump. His face turned chalk-white. This was something he hadn't expected. He would have walked out before the average victim became aware that he had been done out of his change.

The look on my face told him I meant business.

"That's right," he smiled weakly, handing it over without further hesitation. "I hope you don't think—"

"Naw, naw," I said. After George had walked out, I grinned at the bar-face. The bar-face scowled.

J. J. Rodriguez
New York, N.Y.

Fill Their Purse

Dear Sir:

I was working at a filling station as a gas pump man, when, one very busy day, a car with two men in it drove up. They took five gallons of gas—which came to \$1.05.

The driver gave me a \$20.00 bill and I gave him his change. Then the other fellow said it wasn't necessary to break a \$20.00 bill since he had the exact change. He gave me \$1.05 and asked for the \$20.00. More cars were waiting for service, so in a great hurry I gave him the \$20.00.

They were gone before I realized what had happened, and I couldn't do a thing.

C. D. Horlman, Jr.
White Plains, N. Y.

Painting the Town

Dear Sir:

The men looked honest, and since they said they were veterans, I was anxious to help them. It is hard to know what to do about these strangers who go from town to town. I thought a moment longer. Then looking once more at the eager young faces, and the bright discharge buttons in their coat lapels, I told them to go ahead.

The house did need a painting; especially the roof—on the other hand, \$100 sounded like an awful lot of money. But the brand new truck with all its shiny, modern spraying equipment seemed to tell me that this was a paint job to last me a lifetime. I dismissed my worries and went into the house.

Several hours later, the two young men knocked on the door, said they were done.

It did look like a new house! Gleaming white walls, bright red shutters, and a cherry red roof made my little home look like it was smiling all over the neighborhood. I felt I had found a real bargain.

The last thing I did before going to sleep that night was to pat myself on the back.

But oh, when I awoke the next morning! The soft raindrops I had welcomed sleepily during the night, thinking of the thirsty plants in my garden, had transformed the yard completely. There were tiny rivers of red rushing from the roof of the house, mingling with white as they came down. My eyes looked from the red firs, to the white rose bushes and from them to the matted, speckled grass. Then I rushed outdoors. My lovely little house had changed overnight to a miserable mess of paint and wood.

Back into the house, I ran. With a sick feeling, I called the bank to stop payment on the check.

"Sorry, ma'am," the bank-teller's voice came over the line. "Those fellows cashed that check in on merchandise at the Variety Store down the street!"

I called Judge Hudginds. He'd know what to do.

"Your house?" His voice bounced at me. "You should see mine! You know how Ella is. She insisted on a violet roof with pale yellow shutters. I'll never live this down!"

He hasn't—and neither have I.

Mrs. K. Fischner
Houston, Texas

Short-Time Pal

Dear Sir:

"Mr. Burns, who knew you at school, is in the office to see you," announced the girl.

"Remember me?" asked my visitor when I came in.

"No, I don't," I replied.

"Well," he said, "maybe you've forgotten. It was so long ago. I used to work on the farm back of the college. I'm Charlie Burns."

Although I could not recall any Charlie Burns, I did not want to hurt the poor fellow because as students we sympathized greatly with the farm help, and they were good to us.

"Remember Mike Petersen? He's dead now."

Certainly. I remembered Mike!

"And Johnny Sloane. He's been very sick."

Here again my memory was dim.

"And the dean, Mr.—oh, what's his name? He's still there, isn't he?"

"Oh sure, old man Wheary is still the boss."

"The boys didn't have much love for him."

"That's right."

"And the one that used to be so peculiar. What's his name again?"

"Oh, you mean Judge?"

"That's it."

And so the conversation went for about ten minutes, I unwittingly supplying the names of the faculty members.

Then Mr. Charlie Burns began his swan-song. He told me he had left the farm and had been chef in the navy. As I think back I wonder whether he knows how to boil an egg. He said he had no place to sleep that night. But if it were possible for him to manage over the weekend, he would have a chef's job, which had been offered him, on Tuesday. He said he could get a bed on the Bowery.

I put my hand in my pocket and counted out nine dollars. Taking the money, he thanked me and added:

"Is that all? It's pretty hard for a fellow to get along on that for three days."

"Wait here a minute, will you? I'll see what I can do?"

I walked into the inner office and called up a classmate who worked a few buildings away. He used to be a frequent visitor at the farm.

"No," he said, "there never was any Charlie Burns at that farm. What does he look like?"

"About five feet six. Reddish hair. Reddish face. Heavy built."

"Haw, haw, you poor sucker! Morris had a visit from that guy last week. He gave him twenty!"

I rushed into the front office. It was silent and empty.

"Where is he?" I shouted to the girl in the corner.

"He walked out as soon as you went inside," she said!

Thomas G. Chase
Great Neck, N.Y.

Hose Business

Dear Sir:

Two years ago I was one of hundreds of civilians employed at a large government installation in San Francisco, and one of the requirements, naturally, for office workers is a neat, well-groomed appearance. It was a simple matter to keep oneself clean and our clothes neatly pressed, but the greatest problem of every working girl at that time was getting enough stockings. Usually, I was lucky to have one good pair which I could wash each night and wear again the next day.

One morning one of the men clerks told us that he had heard an announcement over the radio that three pairs of nylon hose could be obtained by sending the amount to a box number in San Diego, California. This sounded wonderful, and since it had been over a radio station no one doubted that it was true. Not only several girls that I knew sent in the amount, but quite a few of the men too ordered hose for their wives.

That was the last anyone in that place ever heard of their money. However, I had sent my money in the form of a personal check, and when I received my cancelled checks from the bank I found this check had been indorsed by a company in Chicago, Illinois. This seemed very odd, as I had mailed the check to San Diego. After waiting awhile longer, I decided I would try to do something about it, so I wrote a letter to the Postmaster General's Department in Washington, D. C., explaining what had happened and enclosing my cancelled check. I received a courteous reply, stating that the company would be investigated and I would be advised of the outcome. That was the last I heard and the matter was practically forgotten.

Now, about a month ago I received a letter from the Office of Inspector, Post Office Department, Chicago, Illinois, saying they are pleased to inform me of the successful prosecution in Federal Court of the operators of that company, against whom you made complaint. On September 14, 1948, they entered pleas of guilty to charges of using the mails in furtherance of a scheme to defraud. It went on to give details of the sentences imposed, and expressed appreciation for my assistance in bringing criminals to justice.

We are unable to recover the money we sent, but, for my part, I feel that it was worth the cost to help prevent the further operation of a racket of this kind.

Ruth S. Olsavsky
San Francisco, Calif.

Expensive Ride

Dear Sir:

I thought I knew all the rackets till I found out the hard way that I wasn't as smart as I thought.

I was serving in the Merchant Marine, and was going back to my ship after a shore leave. After rushing to Penn Station I discovered that I had just missed the train that was to take me

where my ship was docked. The ship was due to leave shortly and I was wondering if the next train would get me there in time, when a well-dressed man started a conversation with me.

During the course of the conversation I told the man of my plight. The man told me he was a department store executive and that he was waiting for someone. If this person didn't show up in five minutes, he promised he would drive me to my ship, which happened to be near where he was going.

His party didn't show up, and he told me that he'd have to go over to his office to see if his party was there. We walked over to a large department store and he asked me to wait downstairs while he checked. In about five minutes he returned and told me he had to go to the bank to cash a small check for someone in the office. He explained that he was carrying only large bills and asked me how much money I had. I told him about seven dollars. He said that if I loaned him this he could leave it at his office and we'd save time.

I gave him the money and he promised he'd return it when he got his car keys at his hotel. He went back to his office and I waited for him at one of the store's entrances. After fifteen minutes I was getting suspicious, and a half an hour later I had been taken for a ride. Luckily I didn't give him all the money I had and was thus able to reach my ship before it sailed.

Richard Reinhardt
Bronx, N. Y.

Neck-deep in Fraud

Dear Sir:

Some time ago I read about women wanted to do work at home. Having three small children, I was unable to go out to work so thought this would be just what I needed, to earn a few extra dollars. I wrote to the company asking for information. In a few days I received a nice letter explaining how easily I could earn money making beautiful necklaces. They also said for me to send them two dollars in cash and they would send me the material to get me started. They also said my two dollars would be refunded as soon as I worked for them.

This I did. In return I received enough material to make one cheap string of beads. I made them up and sent them to the company. They were so easy to make that I thought I'd be making lots of money in no time.

Imagine my surprise when I received the string of beads back, with a letter telling me that they were sorry my work was not satisfactory—but that I could keep the lovely necklace in place of the two dollars I sent them. Lovely necklace, indeed! I could buy better ones for ten cents at the dime store. I later found that some of my friends were taken in, as I was, so that taught me a lesson, never to expect to earn money so easily. The company was the only one making money easily. Who else could sell ten-cent beads for two dollars?

C. K.
Berwyn, Illinois

(Please continue on page 94)

THE BIG STIFF

THERE is only one trouble in preserving a corpse: Never let the police know what you preserve it in. The 65-year-old runner for a trust company in New Jersey, disappeared from his familiar haunts on the morning of October 5, 1920. He had done it before—but not carrying one hundred thousand dollars in cash and negotiable bonds.

Scrutiny of David Paul's locker in the bank building disclosed that the man, despite his apparent years, had been squiring about three girls, a third his age. Also, a certain Frank James, a young auto salesman and depositor at the bank, reported overhearing the missing oldster remarking about man's inhumanity to man, and the fact that his wages wouldn't keep a man in beans.

On the opening day of New Jersey's hunting season, October 16, two hunters found the old bank runner quite dead in a shallow grave near a little stream not far from his home.

The mystery was then dumped into the lap of Ellis Parker, chief of the county detectives.

David Paul had been murdered—shot through the brain. The victim's clothes were soaked with water, yet the ground around where he was buried was very dry. The coroner said the man had been dead not more than two days. The weather had been very warm for that time of year. The medico pointed out that had Paul been dead any longer than two days, decomposition would have been much further advanced.

From all appearances, the old boy had been flashing his roll, and someone had done him in for it. The county detective scouted about the area where Paul had been buried and was mulling this over—when his eye caught some peculiar markings on the base of a tree near the stream.

The markings were such as might have been made by some metal—a chain perhaps—being fastened to them. Parker went back to the body, remembering the wet clothes, and took a close look at the

wrists. There were slight black-and-blue marks evident on close inspection. The officer decided that the victim's body had been immersed in the creek, and secured there by the chain fastened to the trunk, then later removed from the water and buried nearby.

But why such a laborious method in getting rid of the old man? Chief Parker, a very thorough lawman, had the water tested. It turned out to be heavy in tannic acid content. Tannic is a very powerful preservative used in tanning leather. The lawman asked the doctors if it would have the same affect on a human body. The answer was "Yes!"

Parker asked the doctors further: "Would water containing tannic acid preserve an eleven-day-old corpse sufficiently to give it the look of a two-day-old corpse?" Again the answer was yes.

This changed the complexion of the case. Someone who knew the properties of the creek and had murdered Paul.

The old man had been soaked in the stream to give the impression of being dead only two days before his discovery. If this was a fact, it meant the gray-haired old runner hadn't absconded with the money, but had been abducted and murdered for the bank pouch.

Some quick thinking by Parker brought him back to the man who had previously reported the oldster as saying he didn't have enough money to live on. A planted impression, Parker believed. The man was Frank James.

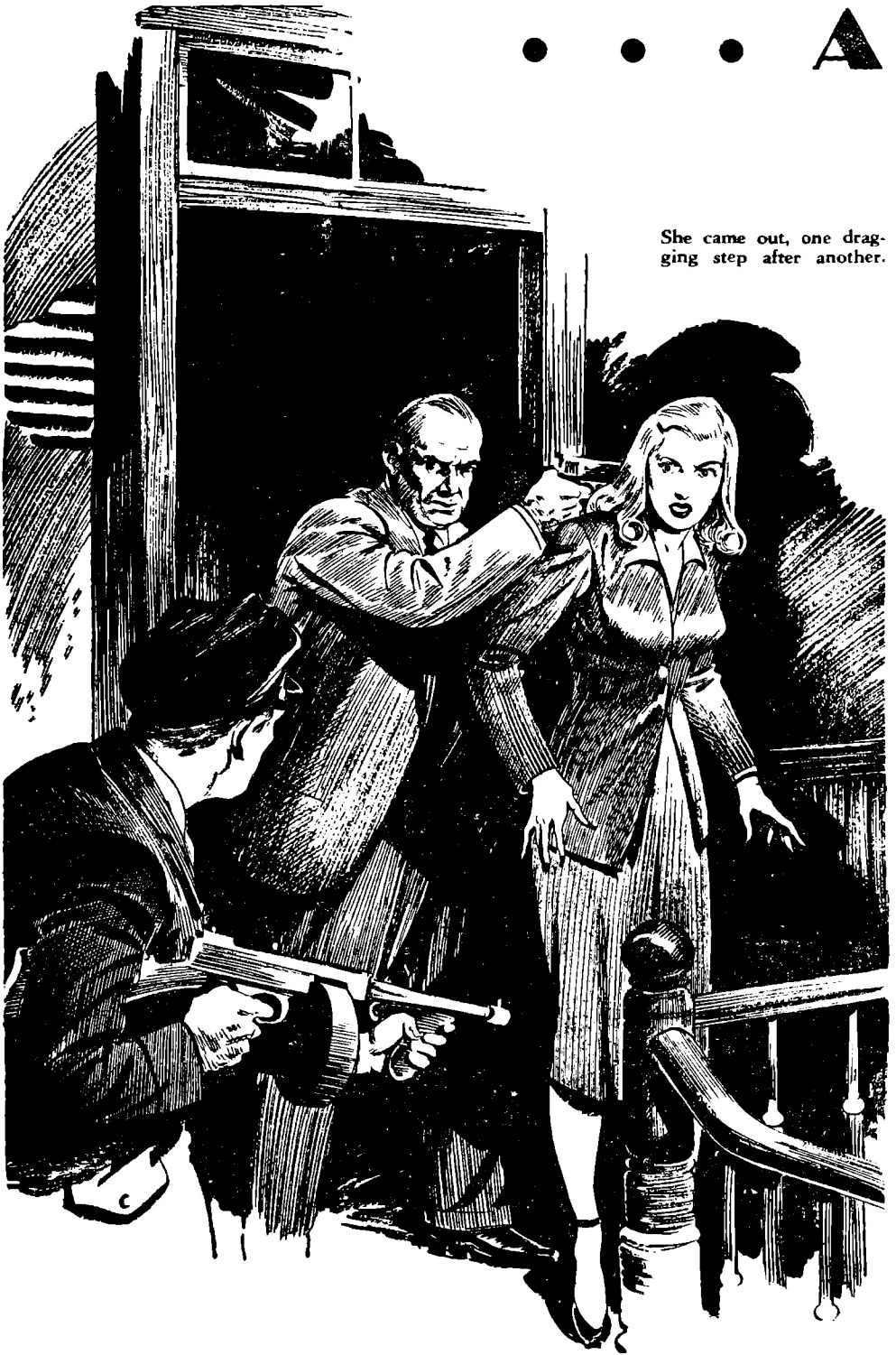
Shadowing James and a friend of the auto salesman, Parker soon found that the two were suddenly very wealthy and making little or no secret of the fact. Detective Parker also found out that James used to own a hunting shack along the banks of the stream.

Arrested, the two soon confessed to the crime. They were tried and convicted promptly.

They had a well-preserved case. But their captor knew his preserves just a little bit better.

● **By JACK PARKER** ●

She came out, one dragging step after another.



CORPSE-MAKER GOES COURTING

● Chill-Packed Mystery Novelette ●



By JOHN D.

MacDONALD

*News-hound Raffidy couldn't stay away from the amnesia-blonde—
and neither could her fiancé's death-dealing pals.*

CHAPTER ONE

Girl on His Hands

HE WAS sitting in a place called Stukey's on Primrose Street, and he had been there most of the afternoon, alone at a table for two, a table with wire legs and the black scar tissue of cigarette burns. At the far end of the bar, a little clot of beer drinkers were making a thirty-cent investment cover a

whole afternoon of video. Max dimly realized that they were so hard up for conversation they even watched the puppets in the late afternoon kid shows.

He wasn't drinking hard and heavy. But he was working on it. Somehow it had become important to achieve a state of remoteness. Whenever he felt himself sliding back into the uncomfortable reality of the present, he raised one finger and Stukey came out from behind the bar with another shot.

Three days before, the managing editor had climbed up onto a desk in the news room and addressed the whole working staff. His words had been as depressing as if he'd played a fire hose on the crowd. The sense of it was that the bankroll had faded, the promised backers had eeled out and thank you all so much for your loyal service and I hope you all find wonderful jobs within the next eleven minutes.

Max Raffidy sat and drank with a careful effort to maintain a detached state that was neither drunk nor sober. Because when he veered toward soberness he began to think that there were no jobs left in this town, in his town, and he'd have to hit the sticks. And when the shots came along a shade too fast he wanted to go out and punch noses. Being a large citizen with heavy bones and having a background of alley fights in this same city when he was a kid, he knew that if he went out nose hunting, he would land in a cage.

He could have taken his sorrows to one of the bars frequented by his fellow sufferers, but he did not wish to weep on shoulders, nor did he want tears on the lapels of his own tweeds, so he bundled up his misery and disgust and had taken it to Stukey's—not to drown it, but just to make it swim a little.

He sat alone and with his big blunt fingers, he peeled paper matches down so that they looked like little people. These he gave names to, the names of the people whose job it should have been to keep the *Chronicle* running. He laid them, one at a time, with a certain dedication, in the green glass ashtray with the chip out of the rim, and lit their little green heads with the butt of his cigarette, watching them flare up and writhe in unutterable torment.

He was vaguely considering taking his troubles to another bar when the raggedy screen door flapped and banged and the girl came in. She stood a few feet inside the door. The corners of her mouth were pulled down in such an odd way that Max told himself that here was a person with even more trouble than he had.

She saw him then, and her face lit up like a kid's pumpkin. She ran the three steps to the table for two, collapsed into the chair opposite him. He had his arm

outstretched on the table. She grabbed his forearm with both hands, her fingers digging strongly into him. She laid her forehead down against his arm, the breath shuddering out of her.

Two large and solid men in dark suits came in and stood a few feet behind her, looking down at her, looking inquisitively at Max.

"Oh, Jerry! Jerry, darling," the girl said, her voice somehow thick and twisted.

Max had been around a sufficiently long time so that he was about to say, "Take her along, boys." He recognized one of them as Billy Shaw, a district man.

But there was a sudden hotness on his thick wrist and he knew that a tear had fallen there. Somehow this made it all quite different. Tears were oddly in the mood of this day of unemployment, this sultry spring day.

He left his arm right where it was, with the warm pressure of her against it. He said mildly, "Something we can do for you boys?"

Shaw looked at him and said, "Seems she called you Jerry. Wouldn't you be Max Raffidy that used to drop into precinct, reporting police?"

"It's her special name for me," Max said.

"Don't go wise with us, Raff. What's her name?"

"If you want her name, let's do it right, Shaw. Let's all go right down and book her."

Shaw gave him a look of baffled disgust. "You people know too much. There's no charge, Raffidy. She was reported acting funny on the street. Crying and carrying on."

"She's fine now. All my women cry and carry on when they can't be with me."

Stukey came over drying his hands on his apron. "I'd just as soon not have no trouble here, gentlemen."

"Keep her off the street," Shaw snapped. He nudged his running mate and together they walked heavily out.

"Bring the lady a brandy, Stuke," Max said. Stukey shrugged and went back behind the bar.

NOW I have a tramp on my hands, Max thought. *Sir Lancelot Raffidy roars in on his white horse.* She seemed

content to make a permanent pillow of his arm. In fact, the arm threatened to go to sleep. The kitteny whine of the woman pretending to be a puppet had covered up the little conversation with Shaw. It still made a certain amount of privacy possible.

"Hey," Max said softly. He burrowed with his other hand, got a crooked finger under her chin, gently eased her up.

Her hands slid down so that she held his big hand with both of hers, gave him the warmest smile he had seen in many a moon.

Stukey brought the brandy and plodded away. Max gave the girl the Raffidy evaluation. Silly spring hat, worn a bit awry. Hair worn too long for fashion, long and blonde and curled under at the ends. Not harsh parched blonde. Soft and natural. Short straight nose, unplucked brows, gray eyes, damp with tears, gray-purple smudges of weariness under the eyes. A young mouth, warm and somehow crumpled. As though from recent hurt. Pale, with a smudge on her cheek and the side of her nose.

The tiny bugles blew inside Max. This was no tramp. This might have a very legitimate news interest. Then he smiled wearily as he realized that even if there was a news interest, there was no place to phone it in.

Obviously the kid—she wasn't over twenty-two—had been having a rough time. The side of her hand was scraped raw and her hair was tangled.

The gray eyes bothered him. She smiled right at him, but when he looked into her eyes there was an emptiness there. As though she were smiling, not at Max, but at somebody sitting right behind Max. A faintly creepy dish, this one.

"Drink your brandy," he said.

"You know I don't drink, Jerry."

Max grunted as though somebody had shoved an elbow into the pit of his stomach. "Baby, look around. They've gone. And you need the brandy."

She let go of his hand, picked up the shot glass. "Right down?"

"Down the hatch."

She knocked it back, thumped the glass down, gasping, coughing, strangling, new tears in her eyes. "Foooo!" she said.

He watched color come back into her

cheeks. "Sit right here," he said. Stukey was watching too curiously. He went up to the bar, paid the tab, went back to the table and got her and walked her out into the late afternoon sun. She clung to his arm. Usually Max did not care for the clingers, but this one made him feel very masterful. She was taller than he had thought, and she wasn't too steady on her feet.

"Where are we going, Jerry?" she asked. Her voice had the small and faintly faraway tinge that her eyes had—as though she talked to someone a few feet behind Max.

He stopped twenty feet from the door of Stukey's and said, "Let's straighten this out, kid. I'm not Jerry."

She moved away from him. Her eyes widened. Her mouth began to work. She began to make a hoarse moaning sound. Max had seen many ladies putting on an act. This was no act.

She looked as though she were about to run from him, screaming. He took three steps toward her, grabbed her shoulders and shook her gently. "Hey," he said. "Sure I'm Jerry. I was kidding, baby."

Right in the street, in the sunlight, she came into his arms, saying hoarsely, "Don't do that to me again, Jerry. Please don't."

Some moppets witnessed the deal, and did considerable hooting and whistling.

Max walked down the street with her and he felt oddly like a man juggling a hand grenade after the pin had been pulled. He had begun to feel a certain responsibility. So, if he had to be Jerry, he had to be Jerry.

"When did you eat last, kid?" he said.

"I . . . I don't know."

Hiram's was two blocks away. Not worth taxi fare. They took a booth in the back and she wanted her steak medium well. She ate without taking her eyes from Max's face and he began to think that this Jerry was one lucky character.

Finally he had a play figured out. He grinned at her, his lips a bit stiff, and said, "Honey, we'll pretend we just met, hey?"

"That would be nice."

"Glad to meet you, miss. My name's Jerry Glockenspeil."

"Silly! Your name's Jerry Norma. I'm Marylen Banner." She gravely shook his hand.

Max frowned. He said absently, "Hi, Marylen." The name, Jerry Norma, had rung a tiny bell way back in his mind. Jerry Norma had, at one time or another, been news. Not big news. Something about the sig of a page three quarter column.

In a low voice that shook with emotion she said, "Why did you do it, Jerry? Why did you run out on me like that?"

Max sighed inwardly. Boy ditches girl. Girl goes off the beam. Tired old story. Better get along with her, turn her over for observation.

"I shouldn't have done it."

"You were just pretending, weren't you?"

"Sure. Just pretending."

She said softly, her head tilted on one side, "The lights, the way they came on so quickly. And that concrete floor. The black drops. You walked away and the lights came on and then all that noise, like thunder. You doubled over and fell so slowly, Jerry. And then—when I ran to you—"

She stopped and put the back of her hand to her forehead, her shadowed eyes closed. With the smudges washed off, she was delicately beautiful.

Max shut his jaw hard. He ground out his cigarette and, keeping his voice level and calm, he said, "You thought I was shot, eh?"

Her eyes snapped open. "Shot? I—I—can't remember."

"I walked away from you and the lights came on."

"I think you left me sitting in the car, Jerry. Yes, in the car."

"Then the car was inside. A garage, wasn't it?"

"Now it's fading away, Jerry. I can't remember. I can't."

Suddenly she looked around, at the table top, at the floor under the bench. "My purse! I've lost my purse!"

"You didn't have it when you found me in that bar, Marylen. Can you remember where you were before that?"

"I don't know, Jerry. I was looking for you for a long time."

He realized that she spoke well, that her

clothes were smart, though not extremely expensive or shining new.

"I'll take you home, Marylen. Where do you live?"

"Please stop teasing me, Jerry. Please. I'm too tired to take very much."

Max stared at her. "Look, I just plain forgot where you were staying here."

"Don't you remember, Jerry? You met me at the train. We were going to find a hotel for me and then you said that when we were married I could move into your place. But my purse! All my money was in the purse. Everything."

"Now I remember. You came on the train from Chicago."

"Jerry, are you losing your mind? From New Orleans! When you wrote me, I gave up my job and found another girl to take over my share of the apartment on Burgundy Street. And I came to you as fast as I could, darling."

Max ran a finger around the inside edge of his collar. "Sure, kid. Sure."

"What will we do?" she asked. "We checked all my things at the station and my baggage checks were in my purse."

"Maybe we could get in touch with your folks."

"You say such queer things, Jerry Norma. I told you what happened to my folks. It was so long ago that I hardly remember them. I told you about my guardian and how there was just enough money for school, and then nothing."

"What am I going to do with you?" Max asked helplessly.

"You have plenty of money, Jerry, darling. Find me a room and tomorrow we'll shop together for what I need—to be married in."

Suddenly she winced, leaned low over the table and said, "Jerry, I'm sick. I'm so sick . . ."

WHEN he had the cab waiting outside, he went back to the table and got her. She leaned heavily against him, walked with her head down, eyes half closed. People stared at them with wry amusement, thinking that she was drunk.

He said to the driver, "Memorial Hospital, and snap it up."

But three blocks further on, he leaned forward and said, "Changed my mind. Take us to Bleeker Street."

He paid off the cab, walked her up the three steps, held her in his left arm while he got his key in the door. She collapsed completely inside the door and he picked her up in his arms, carrying her like a child. Gruber, the superintendent-janitor came out into the hall, stared at him, then grinned.

Max snapped, "Pick up her hat and hand it to me. Then get hold of a doc and get him over here. Try Morrison across the street."

He stepped with her into the elevator as Gruber went out the front door. He had to put her on the floor while he got his door key and opened his front door. The tiny living room of his apartment was rancid with stale smoke, thick with dust. Through the open bedroom doorway he could see the unmade bed. He turned sideways to get her through the narrow door, her head hanging loosely, her arm swinging.

He grunted as he lowered her onto the bed. Then he went to the window, stood smoking a cigarette, his back to her, until he heard the knock on the door.

Morrison was young, dark, quick. He put his bag on the floor, went over to her, took her pulse. "What's wrong with her?"

"You're the doctor. She's not loaded, if that's what you mean."

"Then get out and shut the door."

Max sat in the armchair. He picked up a newspaper, found that he wasn't getting any sense out of the words. He flipped it aside.

In fifteen minutes Morrison came out, leaving the bedroom door open. Max looked in, saw the girl was snoring softly.

Morrison looked angrily at Max and said, "Somebody gave that girl a hell of a beating."

"Beating?"

"Come here." Morrison led him into the bedroom, pulled her arm out from under the covers. There were two large purpled bruises between her elbow and shoulder. He said, "She's got a round dozen bruises like that. And look here." He rolled her head to one side, pulled the fine blonde hair away from her ear. Behind her ear was a large, angry-looking lump. "That looks like she's been sapped. But I wouldn't know. She's suffering from the

beating, from shock, maybe from a minor concussion. I gave her a shot of sedative. She'll sleep hard for twelve hours. There don't seem to be any broken bones. I'd like to get my hands on whoever treated that girl that way."

"That's a pleasure I would enjoy too, Doc." Max said gently.

"Five dollars, please. I'll stop in tomorrow and see how she is and see if we should take her down for x-rays."

Morrison took the five and walked out, still angry, slamming the door behind him. Max walked back in and stood by the bed and looked down at her. In sleep her face was composed, child-like. Her blonde hair was softly spread on the pillow.

He turned to the light-weight suit she had been wearing, went carefully through the two pockets. He found a balled-up handkerchief smelling faintly of perfume. Nothing else. Then he went over the labels. The shoes and suit had come from New Orleans, definitely. The other items could have.

He opened the window a bit further, looked down at her again and said, "Honey, you're gradually becoming a burden."

Closing the door gently, he left the bedroom. He locked the apartment. The street lights had just come on. The air was growing a bit more chill. At the corner, he swung onto a bus and took it down to within a half block of the *Examiner* office.

Townsend, on the desk, said, "Sorry, Raffidy, but we haven't—"

"This is something else, Bobby. I want to see if you got a clip on a citizen of this fair city named Jerry Norma. Jerome, I'd guess."

Townsend, relieved that Raffidy hadn't come about a non-existent job, gave him the use of an empty desk and, within a few minutes, a copy boy brought a brown manilla envelope from the morgue.

Ten minutes later Raffidy had a fair picture in his mind of a young man named Jerry Norma. In 1936, an alert gas station attendant had stashed the eighteen-year-old Norma with a wrench, while Norma was working on the till. He drew a one to three. Fifteen months with good behavior. In 1938, he had been implicated in the case against a car-theft

ring. Case dismissed for lack of evidence. In 1941, he was under suspicion of having tried to bribe a member of the State Liquor License Board. No case. No trouble with the cops since that time. In 1945, listed as one of the 'partners' in an enterprise called Valley Farms, Incorporated. Max knew the place. Riding horses. Whiskey sours for breakfast and a lot of fat gambling. A semi-private club with the rumored reputation of being 'protected'.

In 1947, a paragraph about how Jerome Norma, acting as agent for the Concord Amusement Devices, had issued a statement to the effect that none of the equipment located near the public schools of the city was in any sense gambling equipment, but should be considered as merely games of skill.

There was a cut with the paragraph. Max studied the picture. Yes, Norma would be about his size. A bit thinner. Same general coloring.

HE KNEW the type. A rough kid who starts out like a chump then finds that you can work close to the letter of the law without actually stepping over. A rough kid who gets smarter and smarter, learning where the four-thousand-dollar convertibles and the plush apartments come from.

But where would the girl fit? He had heard that Concord Amusement Devices was a segment of a national organization. If Jerry Norma was high up in Concord, he could very well take business trips to New Orleans. Gambling was on the way back there. And, meeting Marylen, it was also probable that Jerry could fall for her. She wasn't like what he was used to. She had—might as well admit it—more than a little charm and breeding.

He found a phone book, found a J. B. Norma listed. He signaled for an outside line, dialed the number given.

The phone at the other end was picked up in the middle of the second ring. A cautious low voice said, "Yes?"

"Mr. Norma?"

"Isn't in. Who's this?"

"I had an appointment with him for five o'clock. He didn't keep it."

"No. He went out of town for a while."

"When will he be back?"

"I couldn't say. If you'll leave your name—"

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Yeah. He loaned me his apartment here until he gets back."

"This is about some—some equipment to be installed for me."

"Oh!" There was a pause. There was a distant sound of voices. Max listened intently, but with the news-room noise around him, he couldn't catch what was said. The man came back on and said, "If it is in connection with the Concord Amusement Devices, friend, you get hold of Bill Walch tomorrow morning at the Concord offices. Know where they are?"

"On Madison."

"That's right."

Max hung up slowly. The girl had spoken of Jerry Norma falling over slowly in some place that could have been a garage. And now Jerry Norma was out of town. Way out, maybe. He knew of Bill Walch. Walch was also one of the partners in Valley Farms. A big jovial back-slapping man of mysterious and varied interests.

He thanked Townsend, walked slowly out of the building. He grabbed a cross-town bus to Primrose, went on back to Stukey's. The crowd was a lot heavier and the place was thick with smoke. He wedged himself into a foot of space at the bar. A variety show was on video.

Stukey came along the bar, poured the shot and said, barely moving his lips, "You had callers."

"Same ones followed the girl?"

"Other side of the fence, lad. Very harsh types. They wanted the girl. All I knew was she left with a stranger."

"Thanks, Stuke."

"They went the same way you went when you left with her."

Max downed his drink, dropped the money on the bar and was out of the door, moving fast before he had thoroughly swallowed the rye. He kept on moving fast until he rounded the corner where Hiram's, bright with green neon, shone in the middle of the block. Two cabs were parked in the stand at the corner.

He went over to the first one. The driver snapped the door open. Max pushed it shut and said, "People been bothering you with questions?"

"In a nasty way. Why?"

"They were tracking a couple who came out of Hiram's a little after five. Is that right?"

"Am I talking for free?"

"For whatever it turns out to be worth."

"Okay, so they wanted the couple. Vague on the guy but lots of detail on the woman. They let it be known they could be unhappy about it all. Joey saw 'em come out. The guy first to hail the hack, and then he went back and brought out this dish. Drunk, maybe. Or sick. Joey would have had the fare but his boiler didn't catch the first time and so a floater got the fare. These other nosey guys asked Joey about it until they got tired. Unless they can use cops, they can't trace it."

Max's sigh of relief came right up from his shoes, was expressed through his wallet. He went back to his apartment by bus. He had Gruber dig up a cot and install it in his small living room. In the meantime he went in, clicked on the bedside lamp and looked at the girl. She was breathing heavily and she hadn't changed position.

Max tipped Gruber, turned out the light and lay down on the cot, an ash tray on his stomach. He watched the pattern of the car lights across the ceiling for a time. Then he butted the cigarette, rolled over and was immediately asleep. He dreamed of someone coming up the stairs and it woke him up. He went into the bedroom, dug under the shirts, found the Jap automatic. Back in the living room he went near the window and, in the glow of the street lights, he jacked a slug into the chamber, clicked the safety on. With it under his pillow, he slept better.

CHAPTER TWO

Loaded—With Lead

WHEN the knock sounded on his door, he opened his eyes, squinting against the morning sun. His watch said eight thirty. He shucked on his robe, transferred the gun to the pocket of his robe and opened the door.

Dr. Morrison said, "How did she sleep?"

"Fine, as far as I know. Come take a

look." He led the doctor into her room.

Marylen had changed position and her breathing was much softer. When Morrison lifted her wrist to take her pulse, she opened her eyes. She looked around the room, her puzzlement showing on her face. Bewilderment began to be mixed with fear. Behind Morrison, Max put his finger to his lips and made exaggerated gestures for her to be quiet. She saw him and her eyes widened.

"Don't sit up, please," Morrison said. He opened his bag, took out a little thing like a flashlight. He held her eyelid back, shone the thin beam into her eye. Then he did the same with the other eye. He gently touched her behind the ear.

"Hurt?" he asked.

"Yes, doctor," she said in a small voice.

Morrison straightened up. "Try to rest, today. You took a bad beating. I'll leave these pills. One every three hours, please."

Max went with him to the door. Morrison said, "She's tougher than she looks. Sturdy girl. Keep her quiet today."

Max paid him and hurried back to the bedroom. Marylen looked up at him.

"You told me to be still. Why? Who are you? Was it a train wreck?"

"Train wreck!"

She sat up, holding the covers up around her throat. "Yes. Last night I went to sleep in the berth. Who are you? Where are we?"

Max said down heavily on the straight chair and said, "Concussion."

"What?"

"Marylen, you have a concussion. Or had one. I am—or used to be—a reporter. I know how concussions work. They kick your memory back to a time before the accident."

"Where's Jerry?" she said, her voice rising in fear. "Is he hurt?"

Max held up his big hand. "Now shut up a minute. Let me start from the beginning. My name is Max Raffidy. I was sitting in a bar."

Slowly he went through it, with her wide eyes fastened on him. He left out her description of Jerry doubling over and falling to the concrete floor. He left out his own guesses about Jerry. But he did report the phone call to Jerry's apartment.

When he was quite through she said, "And I thought you were Jerry?"

"I was beginning to think that was my name."

She looked at him speculatively. "You are a little like him. But not much. Mr. Raffidy, this must have been very difficult for you. I'm very grateful to you. I'll—"

"What? Call Jerry? He's out of town. You haven't got a dime and you've got only the clothes I found you in. You haven't even got a lipstick and you don't know a soul in town. You came here, met Jerry and somehow you two got separated and you were beaten up."

"I can't stay here, though!"

"Marylen, I'm no hero. I'm a reporter out of a job. Jobs are tight in this town right now. They won't hire me cold, but if I can walk in with a fat yarn, an exclusive, then I stand a chance."

Her lips were tight and she had a frightened look. "But—you sound as though something awful might have happened to Jerry!"

"I'm no alarmist, Marylen. But it could happen."

"I could go right to his apartment and talk to the man you talked to over the phone."

"I found out last night that some unsavory types are hunting for you, baby."

She sank back against the pillow. She looked blindly at the ceiling and said, "But I don't understand!"

"How did you meet this Jerry?"

"A year ago I went on a party with one of the girls who worked in the same office. I wouldn't have gone, but I was bored. I don't care for her. She's too loud. It was a cocktail party at a hotel. I met Jerry there. He's—very nice. He travels around, selling machinery and seeing that it's installed properly. He acted very—well, worldly, but he was funny and sweet and shy with me."

"He came down to see you?"

"Five times. The last time he proposed. He said he had certain details to clean up, business details. He said that we'd go out to the west coast and that he'd have a little capital to start a business of his own with. He would come down and get me and we'd be married and go west together. Then he phoned me. He sounded nervous, said things weren't working

quite right. He wanted me to come up here. I agreed. He wanted to send me money for the trip, but I said I had enough. He always seems to have plenty of money."

It was beginning to shape a bit more clearly. Max thought for awhile and then said, "Trust me, Marylen. You stay right here. I'll whip up some breakfast for you. Then I'm going to go to the place where Jerry worked. I'll see what I can find out . . ." As she sipped her coffee, he said, "This is a gun, baby. To fire it, you shove this little gimmick down and then pull on the trigger. Every time you pull it will fire, up to eight times."

"But I don't—"

"Somebody beat you up, honey, and they might want to try again. If someone knocks on the door, keep quiet. If they try to force the door, let them know you are in here with a gun. If they keep it up, shoot at the door. Okay?"

"If you say so, Max."

"That's what I want to hear."

She called, just as he reached the door, "Please get me an orangey shade of lipstick and a hairbrush and toothbrush and toothpaste."

THE waiting room was paneled in honey-blond wood, with the combination receptionist-and-switchboard-operator behind a square glass window. Latest magazines were on the low tables. Framed pictures on the wall were color photographs of snow scenes.

The girl said, "Mr. Walch will see you now, Mr. Raffidy."

He went to the door. She touched the release and he pushed it open. Walch had the first office on the left.

He met Max at the doorway. He said, "Max, I was damn sorry to hear about the *Chronicle*. Tough break, fella. Maybe I can give you a note to a friend of mine."

"No, Bill. Thanks anyway. This is something else."

Bill slapped him on the shoulder. "Sit down, boy. Sit down." Walch went behind the desk, sat down, nibbled the end of a cigar and spat in the general direction of the wastebasket.

Max said, "This is pretty delicate, Bill. A couple of days ago I landed a job fronting for a group of citizens who want to

open up a club well outside the city. I contacted a man named Norma. I was told he could get me the stuff my clients want for their club. I talked with Norma about an order of about a hundred thousand. He wanted a guarantee of good faith. I went back to my people and got fifteen hundred cash. Naturally I couldn't expect a receipt. Norma said we had to have a conference about a percentage cut after he talked to his principals. I was to meet him last night at five. He didn't show. I called his apartment."

Walch broke in. "I wondered who made that call."

"It was your boy Max. Now he's out of town and I'm in a spot. My clients want to hold off from making any definite commitment for a month or two. Lease trouble on the property they want. They want the fifteen hundred back. I promised it today. I look pretty sick, Bill. I've been around enough to know that you people can't use written records. So you have to go along on faith. What do I do next? I'd hate like hell to spread the word that your outfit had rattled me for a lousy fifteen hundred."

Bill Walch inspected the end of his cigar. For a moment his face was absolutely blank. He said softly, "I'd hate to think you'd gotten yourself a job with another paper, Max. I'd hate to think this was something fancy."

"How fancy can I get? That's your chance, the same way I took a chance with your boy named Norma."

Bill suddenly smiled, a warm and hearty smile. "We can straighten this out fast, Max boy. I'm expecting a call from Jerry any minute. When it comes in, I'll ask him and we'll soon know. Okay?"

With sinking heart and with an attempt to match Bill's smile, Max said heartily, "That'll be fine. Fine!"

Within a few seconds the phone rang. Bill said, "Be good and go back out into the waiting room, will you? This is pretty confidential. Big out-of-town deal."

On wooden legs Max went to the waiting room. He had the feeling that the gun had been left in the wrong hands. It would feel splendid in his pocket.

It was five minutes before Bill Walch appeared. He came into the waiting room with a wide smile and a long white enve-

lope, saying, "It checked out, Max. Here's your deposit. Come back and see us when your people get their lease attended to. Tell them that for strictly hands off by the county cops as well as the state boys, we'll take ten percent of the gross, based on a monthly audit."

Max went through the motions like a large smiling mechanical toy. He mumbled words of farewell, backed to the door, found the knob, went on down the corridor to the elevators. As he waited for the bronze arrow to swing up to the right floor, he peeked into the envelope. A flat sheaf of bills. All hundreds. Fifteen of them. He slipped the money out of the envelope, folded it once and slid it into his bill clip, behind a few tired fives and ones.

Down on the street he looked both ways, suddenly wary. It had seemed almost too easy. The tough part was to come—telling Marylen that the way Walch handed over the money was conclusive proof that her sweetie was no longer a matter of interest to the census taker.

He had worked on some fine fat stories, and in the process the *Chronicle* had chewed lightly on the frayed edge of the Concord organization, on the underlings, on the not-too-smart. But never had a lead opened so nicely. And there was no paper to back him. No organization. It was too early in the game to ring in the law. Yet he grinned with a certain satisfaction and the grin, as always, erased the somewhat moody lines of his heavy face, made him look younger and even a shade reckless.

Yet the hair on the back of his neck seemed to prickle. He walked casually east, stopped to look in a window. A man who had no place to go. The third window of the department store was rigged out as a bedroom, with a plaster dolly sitting on the dressing table bench. The dressing table had a mirror. It was in that mirror that he saw the one who sauntered on the far side of the street, pausing to cup his hands around a cigarette, tossing the match aside.

And behind the man who sauntered, a car slid into the curb. But nobody got out of it.

Max turned away from the window, walked more rapidly to the corner. As he

walked, his mind was busy. Obviously Walch had ordered the tail. But why? Where had there been a slip? Or did Walch still want to cover in case it was a frame and Max was working, on the side, for another paper, or even for one of the perennial civic improvement groups? If Walch was worried enough to employ the tail technique, it would have been easier for him to play dumb about the fifteen hundred.

The obvious thing was to get back to the girl. He picked up a cab at the corner, glanced back in time to see the saunterer swing into the waiting car.

"Up town," he directed.

After five blocks he leaned forward, handed the driver a bill. He said, "I might leave you in a hurry, friend. Pay no attention."

The driver gave a quick and startled look over his shoulder. Then he looked in the rear-vision mirror. He said, "Friend, I'll make a little time and then slow down by the Casualty Trust. Hop out there and go right through the building and with luck you can grab a downtown bus in the next block."

"You are an intelligent and perspicacious citizen."

"Thank you too much."

Max went through the bank at a semi-lope, looking ahead with the expression of a man trying to catch up with someone.

There was no bus, but there was a cab. Max grabbed it, looked back. Three blocks away he thought he saw a tiny figure come hurrying out of the door. He wasn't certain.

HE TOOK the chance of giving his own address. The elevator was in use, so he ran up the stairs, breathing hard. He had his key out and stopped absolutely still when he saw the door was ajar. He kicked it open, moved to one side and called, "Marylen!"

The rooms were empty and dusty, and the tired sun made too much of a point of the frayed rug. The keys that had slid from Gruber's hand lay in the sunlight. Gruber's hand was in shadow. The keys were on a chain neatly decorated with a white plastic death's head. Gruber lay on his face with his legs spread, his toes

pointed in. Max cursed slowly and monotonously as he knelt by Gruber. He got his thumb on the right part of the stringy wrist, felt the strong pulse thud. He rolled Gruber over. There was a deep red spot on the point of Gruber's chin.

The girl was gone, and her clothes were gone. On the dresser, there was a note in sprawling backhand finishing school writing which merely said: "*Thanks for everything.*" The note was weighed down with the Jap automatic. The safety was off. He noticed with clinical detachment that it was a silly way to leave a gun.

Gruber responded to the water treatment, dopey at first, and then violently and thoroughly angry, with all the heat and force that a stringy, sandy little man can develop.

Max finally got the sense of it. Mr. Raffidy had locked the girl in. This friend of hers had come and the friend had asked to have Gruber unlock the door. The girl had seemed eager to have the door unlocked. He remembered the friend, a small plump man with red cheeks, saying, "Miss Banner, Jerry is down in the car waiting for you."

After he had unlocked the door and the girl was in the bedroom dressing, Gruber had stepped in for the expected tip. The man had reached for his hip pocket and then his hand had come up too fast from his hip pocket.

No, Gruber was going directly to the cops. No fat little so-and-so was going to put the slug on him right in his own place. Max plugged the doorway while Gruber danced up and down in rage, getting even madder as he found a tooth splinter in his mouth.

Max got hold of one of the crisp hundreds. He crackled it, said, "This is to lick your wounds with, Gruber. This is oil for troubled waters. You can gripe all you want with the hundred in your pocket. Or you can yell cop and the hundred is in my pocket."

Gruber's dance of anger slowly settled down into a shuffling of feet and then he said, "A deal. But what are you mixed up in, Mr. Raffidy?"

"Never mind me. What did the guy look like?"

He didn't get any more than the original description. Gruber hadn't seen the

car. The girl seemed happy, but worried. At least, that's the way her voice sounded. Gruber went down to the elevator, grumbling about a respectable apartment house, and how the hell was he to know what kind of friends Raffidy had.

Max sat on the edge of the cot. The door was shut and he was alone with his enormous guilt. He thought of all the things he should have done. A nice safe hospital for the girl. An immediate report to Lowery, District Homicide Squad Captain.

He clenched his fists and looked at his knuckles. Raffidy, the hero type. Raffidy, the job-hungry kid. So hungry for a job that he got the girl a date with her boy friend. Her nice dead boy friend.

He reviewed what he knew of the local organization, looking for a starting point. At the top locally was Myron Ledecker, big wheel in both Concord Devices and Valley Farms. Tall, thin, consumptive-looking man with hawk nose, bald head and British accent. Club man. Semi-socialite. Accepted by those who didn't know or care that his bankroll was made up partly by schoolkids' dimes.

The next level was vague. Bill Walch was one. Brad Antonelli was another. Brad had started as collector of the pay-off from the horse rooms. Jerry Norma had been on the third level, reporting probably to Walch.

He began to work on how they'd found the girl. The answer wasn't long in coming. Once the two searchers had hit a dead end on the taxi, they'd gone back trying to identify the man she was with. Stukey wouldn't have talked. But the waiter in Hiram's knew him by name. He realized that he should have been smarter. But you can't turn the clock back.

One more step in the thought process. They had the girl, the actual witness to the murder, even though she didn't remember it as yet. Shock and the concussion had driven it out of her mind. They would assume she had told Max the story. He would have only hearsay, and yet they had a decision to make. He guessed that they wouldn't get rough with him. Two killings would be ample. Instead, they would try to discredit him.

It would be best to get the jump on them. At least one mistake could be cor-

rected. He phoned Captain Lowery. It took a few minutes to get through to him.

He said, "Ed? This is Max Raffidy. I want to report—"

In a voice heavy with sarcasm and exasperation, Captain Lowery said, "You want to report! You want to report! By heaven, Raffidy, if you send this department on another goose chase like you did twenty minutes ago, I'll have you picked up!"

"But—"

"I always thought you had good judgment, Raffidy. Maybe the *Chronicle* folding has softened your brain. I'm not interested in a damn thing you have to report. If somebody has heisted your wallet, report it to the cop on the corner."

Max's ear stung with the heavy click as Lowery hung up. They had moved just a shade too fast for him. And it could only have been done by someone who knew the city, knew of Max's friendships. Walch could have done it. The net effect was to close the ears of the department to anything that Max could stay, particularly as he had no proof.

He uncovered the portable, rolled paper into it, hammered out a terse report of everything that had happened. The last sentence he wrote was:

Lowery, if I wind up dead or missing, this should give you something to go on.

He folded it, sealed it, stamped it, mailed it from the corner. Far easier to hop a train. The fourteen hundred would last until the next job. But it wouldn't be so easy to forget long blonde hair, purple smudges of weariness under gray-blue eyes.

He sat over a cup of coffee and went back through every scrap of information he had. Jerry had met the girl at the train. The sleeper came in from New Orleans at noon. The girl had walked into his life at a quarter to five. Thus she had been with Jerry during daylight hours. She would have remembered staying over night. All her clothes were still checked at the station. Yet the girl had talked of the lights going on suddenly. Concrete floor. Gunshots. What would that mean? A garage would be lighted. Probably windows. Some kind of light.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers. A warehouse! That would fit very nicely indeed. Concrete floor. Concord didn't have local manufacturing facilities, he was certain, but they were a distribution point for everything from gimmicked roulette tables to sticky dice.

But where? Probably within the city limits, close to rail connections. He glanced at his watch. Plenty of time to hit the Assessor's Office.

He was known in the Assessor's Office and, with the rights of a citizen, he was given access to the records. Nothing looked promising under Concord, Ledecker or Walch. But under Valley Farms, Inc., he found a Market Street address. The clerk dug out the maps for him.

In the dull stubborn flame of anger, he had forgotten elementary caution. They picked him up as he came out of the Assessor's Office. He recognized one of them as the man who, earlier in the day, had picked him up outside the Concord offices.

They were large, muscular and efficient. They moved in and when he tried to twist away, one of them pivoted, chunked a hard fist deep into Max's diaphragm. Max's half-raised arms sagged. They supported him on either side. A few pedestrians looked curiously at the three as they hurried by. The two men laughed enormously, slapping Max's shoulders. They herded him quickly into a car, their faked laughter covering Max's agonized attempts to draw breath.

Once in the car, one man drove. Max got his breath, said, "Picked up like a jerk kid by two slob!"

The other searched Max's person, removed the gun with an admonishing clucking sound.

"Where are we going?" Max asked.

"To see Mr. Ledecker."

CHAPTER THREE

Escape From Hell

LEDECKER was sitting in an easy chair by the window in his apartment at alley arms. When Raffidy was hustled through the doorway, Ledecker looked up amiably and said, "Ah, Mr. Raffidy." He turned to the girl on the

couch and said, "Do you mind, my dear?"

She got up indifferently and walked out. One of the two men who had picked him up took the place on the couch the girl had vacated. The other one left.

Ledecker said, "Please sit over there."

Max sat. Ledecker said:

"You are an enterprising young man. Poor Bill Walch swallowed your story. He put a tail on you because he wanted to find out who you were acting for. We thought we might do better dealing direct. But a half hour later we found out that you were the gentleman who so kindly gave shelter to Miss Banner. Then we began to appreciate your cleverness, Mr. Raffidy."

"You're congratulating me?"

"Cleverness always appeals to me. It is at a premium in my type of business. And it is just that, Raffidy. A business. We take normal business risks. However, when a man chooses to defraud a more legitimate business enterprise, his employers can deal with a bonding company or with the police. That privilege is denied us. We have to take care of our own."

"But this wasn't taken care of in a very businesslike way, eh?"

"How do you mean that?"

"Too many loose ends. Like me, for example."

"Quite." Ledecker paused and looked out over the rolling fields, toward the distant line of woods. Saddle horses were winding down across the meadow. The heavy man sat on the couch, biting on his tongue as he pared his nails with a small pocket knife. Ledecker's legs were crossed, the free foot swinging idly.

"Mr. Raffidy, we had a small blunder. We anticipated Mr. Norma's plans. I have to keep large amounts of cash on hand. We do not know how Jerry got the combination, but our safe here was rifled a week ago. Everyone on my staff was under suspicion. Jerry made no change in his habits. But I did find that he had gone twice to the warehouse for no known reason.

"We searched the warehouse and found that Jerry had cleverly hidden the two hundred thousand dollars in a small packing case which had contained the wheel from a roulette table. However, we needed proof. One of my most trusted as-

sistants was planted in the warehouse. When Jerry came after the money he was—dissuaded.”

“Permanently.”

“Oh, yes. And then we discovered the blunder. Jerry had a girl with him. She battled vigorously but was finally quieted. My assistant phoned me. I suggested that the young lady be taken to a certain apartment we maintain on Primrose Street. He put her on the floor in the back of the car. In heavy traffic she managed to get the door open and lose herself in the crowd. It was my idea to find out how damaging a witness she might be.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“You are clever, Mr. Raffidy, in a gaudy way. We picked up the young lady. She faked loss of memory. But when confronted with the man she saw eliminate Mr. Norma, she had a fine case of hysterics. You spent considerable time with the young lady. Doubtless she told you her story. My question is—what am I to do with you?”

“You spoiled my chance of going to the police.”

“That was elementary.”

“What harm can I do you, Ledecker?”

“I don’t know. How can you prove to me that you won’t make the attempt?”

“I can’t.”

“Then this is a type of stalemate, wouldn’t you say?”

“Stop horsing, Ledecker. Make your proposition.”

“Impatience and impertinence, Mr. Raffidy. Here it is. My people have a strange distaste when it comes to the question of dealing with the girl. They will have no such scruples about you. You can go free from here, Mr. Raffidy, as soon as you have accomplished that slightly messy job.”

Max sat very still. “There’s no need to ask you what happens if I say that it isn’t my line of work.”

“No need whatsoever. Please don’t think that I enjoy this sort of thing. If you help us take care of the girl, then your mouth will be closed. You need have no fear of the law unless you try to cross me. We run an efficient place here.”

Now was the time to mention the report to Lowery. Max opened his mouth to speak of it, then closed his lips.

“What were you about to say?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” To mention the report would definitely seal the girl’s death warrant. Then he had another thought. “Why not throw this trusted assistant of yours to the wolves. That sounds easy.”

Ledecker’s smile was without humor. “The assistant is trusted because he had the good fortune to obtain documentary proof of an earlier indiscretion of mine. That was when I was younger, and not as wise. His position is far, far better than yours, Mr. Raffidy.”

Max slouched in the chair. “Just how am I supposed to kill the girl?”

Ledecker frowned. “Please, Mr. Raffidy. Discuss it in business terms.”

“Well, how?”

“There’s a choice of methods. We can have her taken over into the woods and you can shoot her. Or you can strangle her. Or you can hit her with a heavy object.”

“Business terms, eh? Why such rough ways?”

“For their effect on you, Mr. Raffidy, I would prefer that it be a rough way, as you express it.”

“Where is she?”

“Roughly sixty feet from you.”

“When is all this supposed to take place?”

“Right after dusk, I believe. That should be the best time.”

“Where does the body go?”

“We will take several pictures of the body and then it will be disposed of. There’s no need for you to know where or how.”

“And then?”

“And then, with my blessing, you go on about your business.”

“Why not just pick the two of us off? Why tie yourself in knots?”

Ledecker sighed. “There is too big a chance, my boy, that you might have tried to protect yourself with some silly report to the police.”

“Suppose I did. Then all I have to do is sit tight.”

“Hurt him a little, Joseph,” Ledecker said in a strained voice.

MAX spun out of the chair and got his back near the wall as Joseph came in. With the expressionless bore-

dom of a professional, Joseph ducked into Max's swing, taking the knuckles against his forehead. He moved in close, grunting with the exertion of each blow.

When Joseph backed away, Max dropped to his hands and knees, then fell over on his side. He pulled his knees up toward his chest and rolled his head from side to side, pushing against the pain, trying to think and plan.

Ledecker stood above him, seeming to sway, to shift back and forth through the mists that the pain brought. His voice was very far away. "There'll be no more lip and no nonsense, Raffidy, damn you!"

Joseph, torpidly satisfied with his work, had gone back to the couch. Max was spinning toward the edge of consciousness but, as the idea formed, he fought his way back. He wheezed, "Where'd you lose your British accent?"

He saw Ledecker's neat black shoe coming at him. He snapped his head back at the last moment and the foot went by, throwing the man off balance. Max grabbed him by the ankle and spilled him. He grabbed one wrist, twisted the arm up into a punishing hammerlock, got his thick right hand on Ledecker's throat. Joseph came charging across the room.

Max yelled, "Hold it!" He had Ledecker in a sitting position. He said quickly, "Come any closer and I shut my hand on this throat. With one squeeze, I can crush the windpipe."

When Ledecker reached up to claw at the hand, Max tightened the hammerlock. Ledecker painfully groaned, "Move back, Joseph."

Joseph, no longer expressionless, moved slowly back on the balls of his feet.

"I want Joseph to give me the gun he took off me," Max said softly.

"Don't be absurd," Ledecker said. His voice had more confidence.

Max gave a quick hard pressure with his fingers, released it. Ledecker's body shook with the convulsive coughing.

Max said, "Did you feel that, friend? Just a little more than that. Here I'll try to give you a little more without killing you."

"Wait," Ledecker gasped. "Joseph give him a gun."

"Boss, I'm not going to get—"

"Do as you're told!"

Max said, "Hold it by the barrel and slide it along the floor. Slide it right over here."

Joseph hesitated for long seconds. The automatic was slid along the rug. He released Ledecker's throat, snatched up the gun, scrambled to his feet. It took an effort to straighten his bruised body.

Ledecker stood up slowly. His face was calm. "What now, Raffidy?"

"You and Joseph line up against that wall, face to the wall, feet about a yard from the baseboard. Then lean against the wall, your palms flat against it."

Joseph looked at him with contempt. Max leveled the gun, saying, "So I have to smash your knee, Joe."

Joseph lumbered over to the wall. Max went up behind them. Swinging the automatic in a horizontal arc, he chopped the barrel and trigger guard heavily against Joseph's head, just above the right ear. Joseph's face hit the hardwood floor with a damp, meaty smack. Then keeping the muzzle a few inches from the small of Ledecker's back, he patted the man in all places where a small gun could be concealed.

Ledecker said, "Whatever you're planning, Raffidy, it won't work. I have fifteen employees in this place. Half of them are armed."

Max said mildly, "If you were me, friend, wouldn't you at least give it a whirl? Come on now. Turn around slow. The gun is in my pocket. I'm going to be a half step behind you. Anything I don't care for—and one goes right through you."

He could see the sheen of sweat on the man's face. "Where to?" Ledecker asked.

"Right out the door and down the hall to the stairs. Slowly down the stairs and across the club room and out to the drive. Then into the car. And then to town."

"Anything you suggest, Raffidy."

"And all the time you're walking, you'll be talking to me. Not too loud and not too soft. You'll be explaining some of your equipment. Understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Start talking now."

"One of . . . ah . . . the items we've had the most luck with this year has been a specialty item used in chuckaluck where the operator by merely putting his hand in

a certain position to spin the cage, can make the dice . . ."

His voice droned on. The hallway was empty. They met a man on the stairs, carrying a tray of drinks. The man backed into the corner of the landing to let them by. The door at the foot of the stairway opened near the bar. Two couples sat at the far end of the club room. Ledecker walked with his back rigid. Max kept what he hoped was an amiable smile on his face. Then out the side door to the parking lot.

Ledecker stopped and said, "The car will be brought over."

The attendant brought the car over, jumped out, left the motor running. A small cement mixer chattered busily at the far end of the parking lot. Several workmen were moving about in a leisurely fashion.

The impact of the slug seemed to come before the brittle sound of the shot. To Max it was as though someone standing behind him had whammed him on the shoulder with a hand sledge. It spun him around so that he faced the door, and he went down the two steps to the gravel, stumbling and falling, rolling onto his back.

His left arm was dead. He couldn't haul the gun out of his right pocket from that position. Ledecker came down the two steps toward him, frantic in his haste to get hold of the gun arm. At the second shot, Ledecker sprawled loosely across Max's thighs. Max looked up, saw Joseph at the upstairs window, revolver aimed, a look of intense dismay on his wide face.

Max immediately realized that Ledecker had in his eagerness, moved directly into the line of fire. He wiggled out from under Ledecker, scrambled around the car, driving his shoulder into the open-mouthed attendant, staggering him off balance. He jumped in behind the wheel, dropped the big car into gear and spun the wheels on the gravel as he heard the faint sound of another shot, heard the thunk of lead against the metal side.

The attendant was racing beside the window, reaching in for the keys. Max swerved the heavy car toward the man, knocking him off his feet. Then he skidded out onto the driveway, turning toward town.

He was dizzy and faint with the shock

of the wound. Pain was just beginning. He was grateful for the automatic shift on the car. He steered with his right hand at the top of the wheel, his left hand in his lap.

CHAPTER FOUR

Watch Charm

CAPTAIN LOWERY said, "Lucky the bones in your shoulder are as thick as the ones in your head. What the hell are you doing. Leaving?"

"If it's okay with the doc, why should you mind? Thanks, nurse. Just hang the coat over my shoulder." The night lights were on in the corridor of the emergency ward.

"We went out there, as you know," Lowery said.

"Thanks."

"Skip the sarcasm. We went out and put the clamp on Joseph. There's a charge against you for trying to kidnap Ledecker, and for stealing the car. They wanted to make it murder, but we found the slug and shot it down to the lab along with Joseph's gun. It matched. But, genius, no girl. No girl at all. Was there ever a girl, or were you just wishing hard?"

"Check with Dr. Morrison who has his office across the street from where I live. He saw her. Check with Gruber, my building superintendent."

"So there was a girl. I yanked in Walch and Antonelli and told them some hunks of your story. They laughed until they held onto their sides. Jerry Norma is on a business trip, they think. Ledecker would know, and he's dead. They told me I was getting soft in the head listening to newspaper people. So what do we do now, genius?"

"Can I go along for the ride?"

"To where?"

"We go to the warehouse and we take some lab boys along. Suppose it turns out that there was a girl and that something has happened to her? How about Walch and Antonelli and the rest of the organization?"

Lowery gave the impression of wanting to spit on his hands. "Brother, we get our chance to smack down on the whole outfit, but good."

They parked the two police sedans outside the warehouse. The warrant was in order. The lights were clicked on. Bright lights.

Max said to the lab men, "This grease spot looks like the car was parked here. Norma drove it right in. He got out. He was probably headed that way. See if you can find out if he was shot down."

In a few moments one man reported a well scrubbed place on the floor. They unstrapped the chemical kit and went to work, testing reagents. Finally one of them said, "Captain, there was blood here. Not too long ago. Maybe human. Can't tell yet."

Lowery himself found a bullet scar on the concrete. By lining it up with the scrubbed place, estimating the degree of ricochet, searching for fifteen laborious minutes, they found the slug half buried in the edge of a two by four that supported one shelf of a supply bin.

Lowery said, with a shade less contempt, "Now, genius, you're beginning to click. We'll accept the assumption that Norma was gunned right here and the girl saw it happen. Where to now?"

"They got her out of Valley Farms fast. With the big mess over Ledecker, and with my getting away, they'd be stupid to kill her. They'd hold her for a while to see what happens."

"And where would they do that?"

"Ledecker mentioned an apartment on Primrose."

"Nice neighborhood," Lowery said dryly. "Let's roll. This one is legwork."

It was ten o'clock before they had the right building, the right apartment. Lowery dispersed his men to cover all possible means of exit, including two in the courtyard manning the portable spotlight, armed with gas grenades.

At the head of the stairs, Lowery whispered, "Stay right here, Raffidy. This is business."

Max shrugged. It was good to lean against the wall. His shoulder throbbed heavily and incessantly. But when Lowery and his two men went down the hallway to the door, he moved up into the corridor and inched his way down toward the door.

"Open up," Lowery called.

"Who's out there?"

"Police. Open wide and come out with

your hands in the air," Lowery ordered.

A different voice, a soft mild voice, said, "Thank you. No."

Lowery let go with the whistle and Max saw the bright thread of light under the edge of the door as the men out in the court turned the spotlight on the window.

Lowery said, "You're covered all the way around. Better come out the easy way, or we get you the hard way."

Again the soft voice. "There's a girl in here, Officer."

"That we know!"

"I'M coming out with the girl in front of me. What then?" Max saw Lowery wipe his forehead with the back of his hand. There was a long period of silence.

Lowery said, "You won't make it."

The voice said, "I'll take my chance. Order your men to stand back."

Lowery moved away from the door. He lifted the .38 special in his hands, looked hard at it as though he'd never seen it before. He whispered to the two men with him. They walked heavily down to the end of the hall. Lowery motioned to Max. Max went with them.

Lowery said, "Okay. You're holding the cards. We'll be out of your way. But the moment you get two feet away from that girl—"

"Stop talking," the voice said.

Lowery went twenty feet from the doorway, flattened with his back against the wall, his right arm extended, the special aimed down at the doorway.

The hallway was still. Max heard the creak as the door opened inward. More silence. Then he saw her white face, the long blonde hair, the light-weight suit. She came out, one dragging step after another. He saw the fat pink hand that held her arm, the muzzle of the gun aimed at her head, the other fat hand holding the gun. Then the cheery round, rosy-cheeked face of the fat little man. As the man's small bright eyes swiveled toward Lowery, Lowery's gun spoke with heavy authority.

The fat little man did not waver. He dropped as suddenly and completely and thoroughly as though he had fallen from a ten-foot height.

Marylen swayed. She turned, like a sleep-walker, and she saw Max. She came down toward him, walking slowly at first,

and then running into Max's open arms.

Lowery leaned against the wall. The other man, a replica of Joseph, came out with his hands in the air. Lowery said, half to himself, "It had to be just right. A head shot and the reflex makes him pull the trigger. I had to get him in one spot the size of a dime, where the slug would sever the spinal column."

Max said angrily, "Why not let him go? Why take the chance?"

"Why, you poor damn fool, he'd have killed the girl as soon as he got clear."

Marylen, her face against Max's lapel, said, "I saw him kill Jerry. I remember."

Lowery, his temporary reaction over,

crack Antonelli. The little fat man's name was Stan Norton, Ledecker's blackmailer."

Max said slowly, "And now, Captain, may I phone in everything I know?"

"Hell, are you working?"

"With an exclusive like this? I've been working ever since I phoned in the eye-witness description of Ledecker's death from the hospital."

Lowery sighed. "Can I stop you? I'm going home and get some sleep."

"So am I. I'm going to stop in at Memorial on the way and check on the girl. As soon as she's well, I'll ship her home."

Lowery stood heavily at the doorway.



said, "And now, Mister Raffidy, where do we find Jerry Norma's body?"

"They're doing a hell of a lot of cement work at Valley Farms, Captain. . . ."

It was pale, gray dawn and the sounds of the city hadn't yet begun. Lowery, his well-fed face showing the dragging lines of weariness, hung up the phone. He said, "They got him. They'd slapped him in the face with a spade full of concrete."

"How about Antonelli and Walch?"

"Walch is beginning to crack. When he does, we can use the stuff he gives us to

"In some things Raffidy," he said, "you almost achieve brilliance. However, with women, you're on the dull side."

Max said angrily, "What should I do? Keep her as a watch charm?"

But he was talking to the closed door. He managed the difficult feat of lighting a cigarette. He laid the receiver down and started to dial the newspaper number. By now the waiting wolves from the other papers would be plaguing Lowery.

Halfway through the number he stopped dialing, said softly, "Watch charm. Hmm."

He hung up and started dialing again.



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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 74)
Once Over Lightly

Dear Sir:
A short time ago a nicely dressed, pleasant-mannered man came to my door. He told me he was taking a survey for a well-known publishing company, to find the most popular type of radio program for a new show to be broadcast.

He asked me a number of questions about programs, writing the answers on a printed form. He then told me the company had authorized him to place a few sets of their excellent encyclopedia to people who would answer and mail in, each week, a set of the printed radio questionnaires. My only obligation would be to pay a small delivery fee and to buy each year, for ten years, the annual volume of the encyclopedia, at a cost of \$2.95 a volume.

The salesman handed me the contract and in pointing out the line to sign on covered the top part of the form. As he was talking all the time, I paid no attention and signed. I paid him the postage in advance to save the C. O. D. fee. He left, and I put the contract away without looking at it again.

A few weeks later the books arrived C. O. D. for the postage. I immediately looked up my contract and found I had signed a regular sales contract to purchase the books at four dollars a month.

I wrote the company at once and explained the situation. Shortly thereafter, I received a check for my money and a letter explaining the salesman had dreamed up the survey gag himself to increase his sales. I was lucky, but a great many people are probably still paying for books they had accepted as a gift. Needless to say, next time I'll read my contract carefully before signing.

Mrs. K. A.
Pasco, Washington

No Sale!

Dear Sir:
The crook who picked me for a victim was too cheap to use a "finger man." He did his own spotting.

He accosted me at a meeting of my club. It's a rather large club and it probably wasn't hard for him to crash the meeting. In a casual conversation, he learned that I had a very old typewriter which I was going to trade in.

He pointed out that I'd get next to nothing for a trade-in. He then offered to trade me a nearly new machine for my old one with a very small payment as the difference. Naturally, I jumped at the chance. But first he wanted to see my machine.

The only time he could come around to look at it was a time when I was away at work. He had, as I now realize, steered the conversation around to learn my hours away from home.

Finally, I told him I'd arrange with the superintendent of my apartment building to let him see the machine. He came the next day—while I was out—looked the machine over and left. The superintendent never noticed that he set

the spring lock on my door so that it didn't lock, as they went out.

When I came home that night, I found that I was out one not-too-expensive fur coat, a watch and several small pieces of jewelry.

Just to add insult to injury, he hadn't even bothered to take my ancient typewriter! After this, no one gets into my apartment unless I'm there!

D. N.
New York, N. Y.

Here Come the Boys

Dear Sir:

In many of the larger cities in the country, unscrupulous publishers continue to capitalize on the public's sympathy for the war veteran. These men think up a name for their monthly paper, usually one involving the word veteran, and then go on a spree of "blackjack" advertising.

A crew of telephone solicitors contact businessmen in the town, claiming their paper does so much for the wounded veteran in the hospital who has been forgotten by the public. They sometimes say their only source of income is through advertising and most of this money goes to "the boys."

Sometimes, to justify getting advertising from the larger firms, they will claim outlandish circulation figures, but refuse to submit to an ABC examination.

Straight copy in the paper is taken from other sources, magazines, newspapers, etc. with little

or nothing original. Press runs are only large enough to see that each advertiser gets a copy and a few for further sales.

At the usual rate of five dollars per inch, these men are cleaning up thousands of dollars a month by appealing for charity.

They manage to just evade the law by not promising too much and also by sending a few measly dollars a year on cheap gee-gaws to distribute in the hospitals.

In spite of the excellent work done by better business bureaus, their work goes on. Most of the businessmen cannot conceive of anyone stooping this low to make a fast buck and do not bother to check on the publication.

W. M.

Cleaned Out Good

Dear Sir:

One morning a man, whom I did not know, driving a car I had not seen before, drew up to my house. He came to the door and asked if I had any soiled clothes that I wanted to have cleaned.

I didn't think too much about it, because our cleaning company always sends different men, but the strange car caused me a moment of doubt. But I thought maybe the regular car was in the shop and they were just using this one for today. I gave him a suit and a skirt I wanted cleaned.

Is it necessary to say that I am now minus one suit and one skirt?

(Name Withheld)

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Robert Turner

(Continued from page 70)

becoming softness. He said: "Good try, Helene. But I was afraid it wasn't going to work. You and your wild ideas!"

"Gerry!" Helene cried. "Why didn't you stay inside, out of the way. I—I could have handled him. I—"

"No, you couldn't." He stopped her. He took a long cigarette from his pocket. The scent of its smoke was cloying. "This is a tough hombre to handle, Helene. He knows you too well. I guess we were both a little dumb. If we'd had any sense, we'd have thrown open the windows and aired out this dump." He sighed. "I guess I'll have to stop smoking these cigarettes. The taste's beginning to nauseate me."

"Why," I said. "Not even you." My tone was light and bantering, but it was just bravado. I didn't like the skimmed-over look in Gerald Thane's eyes. I didn't like the way the tips of his manicured fingers showed white where he was gripping too tightly the .32.

"Gerry," Helene said, "what are we going to do now?"

"Do?" Gerald Thane laughed a little crazily. "There's only one thing to do. There have been other triangle cases. The jealous husband catches the wife with another man. He kills both of them—then himself. You understand?"

I did but I didn't think Helene did. Or maybe she didn't know what else to do about it. She started suddenly toward Gerald Thane, her hands out, pleading.

"Gerry, darling!" she cried. "You don't mean that. You can't do that to me!"

For one split instant, she got between me and the .32. That was enough for me. Gerald Thane deliberately shot Helene to get her out of the way for a clear shot at me. I heard the muffled clap of the gunshot against Helene's body. I saw Helene fall between us. I saw the smoking gun still in Gerald's soft hand.

Knocking it to one side with my left, I brought my right fist up from the knees. The punch caught him on the temple and it felt as though every knuckle in my hand cracked. But I hardly noticed the pain. I was too busy watching him pitch stiffly, sideways to the floor. He lay there very still.

Kiss and Kill

I looked at Helene. Her eyes were open and she was staring up at me and it was like looking into the pools of hell. Her lips moved but I couldn't hear the words. There was a black, burnt-looking hole in the front of her suit. I was scared, until I realized that the wound was a little high. The look on Helen's pain-wracked features told me that she thought she was going to die. I didn't think she would. She was too tough to get killed so easily.

* * *

I was right about that. Later, down at Homicide, Inspector Neal coned Helene along and let her think that she was really shuffling off. He got the whole story from her. I had figured it pretty much on the button. But that didn't make me feel any better. I hoped they wouldn't keep me there too long. The Paste Pot closed up at four. I wanted to get back there to see Mari and all the people I knew who were no-good in nice, ordinary ways. And to get as drunk as I could, as fast as I could.

GUILTY TALES

Arrested after he was found with a sack late at night in someone else's chicken yard, a Tulsa, Okla. man explained that he had just dropped around to feed the hens because he thought they might be hungry.

◆ ◆ ◆

A Salt Lake City woman admitted taking some lingerie from a department store without paying for it, but explained that she was an aspiring writer and merely wanted to learn the reaction of a shoplifter for a book she is writing.

◆ ◆ ◆

A Fort Worth, Texan admitted to police that he was the shadowy figure they had sighted atop a roof—but explained he was not a burglar, only a bridegroom on a honeymoon playing hide-and-seek with his bride.

◆ ◆ ◆

A Pittsburgh man confessed to a hold-up but explained he had done it only because he needed ten dollars to pay the court costs on a larceny case against him.

◆ ◆ ◆

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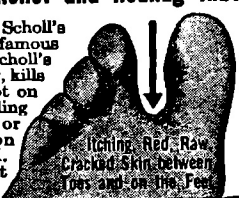
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Bruce Cassiday

(Continued from page 62)

"I guessed," Johnny Blood said.

"When they find out everything about you, Johnny—how you served a jail sentence for your wife, how you helped smash up this smuggling ring—they'll go easy on you.

"But that's not what I'm worrying about. It's Kay Dallas. After using you the way I did to lead me to these hijackers, it seems the least I could do was to take care of her for you. I'm sorry, Johnny."

Johnny Blood handed her the bag wearily.

"No. I had to take care of that myself." He tried a smile. It was no good. "I have no idea what made me track her down like that. I thought I loved her. I wonder what made me do that?"

He shook his head wonderingly.

Cyd Saxon smiled and put her hand on his sleeve.

"Guess it's the same thing that makes men better than animals, Johnny." She thought a moment and then added, "Better, and a hell of a lot unhappier."

She was reaching out something to him. He looked down. It was a pocket flask. He glanced at her and she smiled. He lifted it to his mouth and let the fiery whiskey slide down. He was grateful for its warmth. It was bourbon, and good, smooth bourbon too.

"My favorite brand," he said. He stared at her long and hard. "We seem to have a lot in common, after all, Cyd Saxon."

The memory of the jarring shock he felt when he first saw her, the memory of the touch of her hand on his arm, the memory of the feel of her lips on his cheek—all this flooded over him. He recalled too how he had fought the nearness of her, fought the beauty of her.

There was no reason to fight it any longer. He reached out and touched her arm. She turned slightly to him and smiled.

There wasn't anything that needed saying between them. They walked over the rocks together, and the cold morning wind was just beginning to run along the valley slope.

THE END

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