

15¢ DIME  APR. **DETECTIVE** MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

**SHEATHE YOUR
CLAWS, HELLCAT!**

by
**ROBERT
MARTIN**

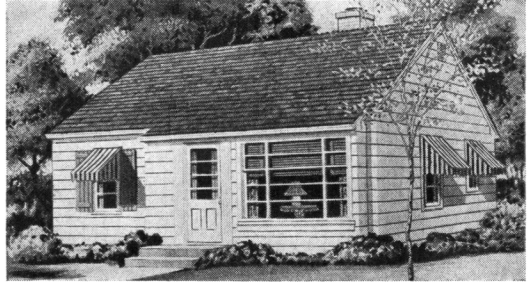
**BLOOD ON
THE MIDWAY**

by
**SCOTT
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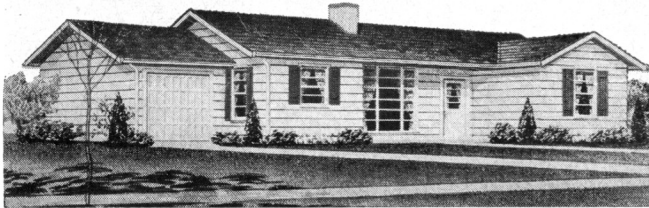


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**71
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TO
CHOOSE
FROM**



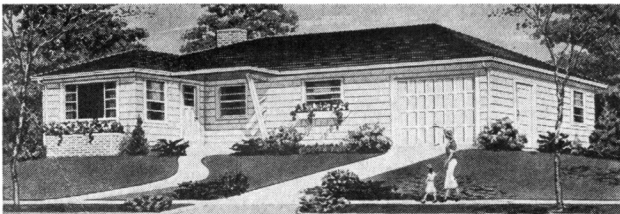
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THOSE
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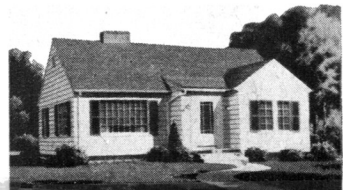
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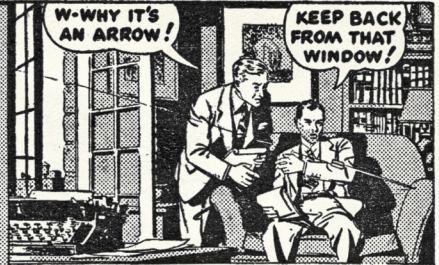
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INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN...



W-WHY IT'S AN ARROW!

KEEP BACK FROM THAT WINDOW!

IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN...



NOW HERE'S A MYSTERY JUST MADE FOR ROUTINE POLICE METHODS

BET YOU A DINNER I SOLVE IT FIRST

SHORT ARROW... SMALL PERSON



WRONG AGAIN! H-M-M-M

...AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES



A GIRL, EH? GOT HER NAME AND ADDRESS?



HERE'S OUR ARCHER AND, ODDLY ENOUGH, HER NAME'S DIANA

I WAS TARGET SHOOTING ON MY ROOF ACROSS THE AVENUE AND...

THAT EVENING



WASN'T OUR BET "DINNER FOR THREE", MR. KYNE?

SHE'S MARVELOUS

WHY CERTAINLY! SUPPOSE WE PICK YOU UP IN AN HOUR, MISS BAILEY



I DIDN'T SHAVE TODAY AND...

YOU'RE WELCOME TO MY RAZOR



SAY, THIS IS A SWELL BLADE! SKIMS OFF MY TOUGH STUBBLE LIKE MAGIC!

THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING



JUST IMAGINE! ME THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A REAL MYSTERY!

HE'S WONDERFUL LOOKING

YES, AND WITH A DASH OF ROMANCE, IT'LL MAKE A GOOD YARN

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15¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS



Vol. 62

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The May issue will be out March 31st

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

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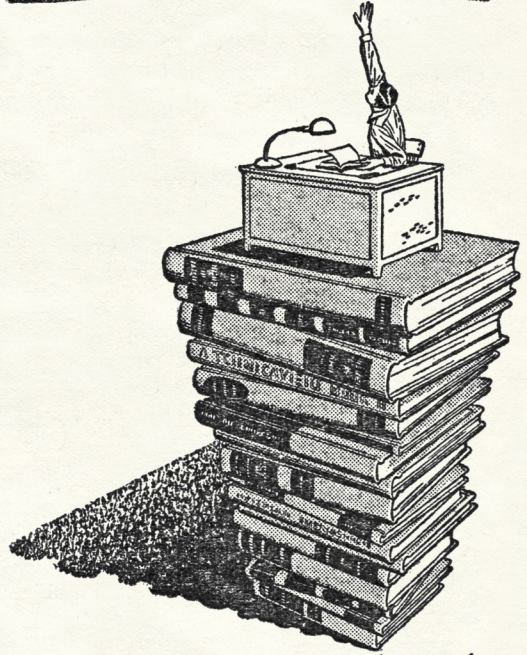
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READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Always remember that it's a crook's business to be convincing. Your best protection is to know your business better than he knows his. For as long as there are careless people, rackets will thrive.

That's why the Better Business Bureau in your town is operating—to help you safeguard your interests beforehand. And for the same reason, you readers turn to this column every month. Here we expose the latest double-dealing rackets making the rounds so that you can lock your doors before the thief comes—not after he leaves with your savings.

Each month we print the letters you send in which tell of your own personal experiences with swindlers and racketeers of all kinds. For every letter of yours we use, we will send you \$5.00—making it profitable for you to help us all learn from your experience. 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 understand that because of the press of mail in the office, we can't enter into personal 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, New York.

Now, let's see what we're up against:

Taken for a Ride

Dear Sir:

Born and raised in New York City, I should have been alert to swindlers of the city slicker type. It may have been that working on a farm in New Jersey for a couple of years put a showing of hayseed in my hair, and addled my brains a bit. Anyway I got "hooked."

Tired of farming, I came back to New York City and was standing outside an employment agency looking for a job on the "posted" list. Near me was another guy who seemed on the point of going inside. He hesitated a moment then asked:

"What type of job you looking for, Bud?" Without thinking much about it, I answered: "An elevator operator."

"Gosh," he exclaimed. "You belong to the union?"

I looked rather disappointed. When I last

was working in New York, elevator operators were "free lance." A union card would cost money.

That was blunder one, on me, letting a stranger read my thoughts!

The guy started again for the doorway, then came back to me, he says: "I was sent by my boss to find a doorman at this agency. Would you care for a job like that at so much per week?"

"Sure." I eagerly bit at the bait. "Couldn't you give me the address?" "Well," he looked over my build and suit critically. "It's at the Hotel —. Got a uniform?" I admitted I didn't have a uniform but probably could buy one. "How much money could you send?" he asked, not too interestedly.

"About \$25," I answered, because now I was eager for the job.

"Come on then. We'll go to a certain department store where the floor walker is a friend of mine. He'll give you a break on the price."

Like a lamb to the slaughter, I went along, all unsuspecting. At the store, we got inside, spotted the floorwalker headed toward the next aisle with his back toward us.

"Have your money ready," says my companion, looking at his watch. "I'm supposed to be back on duty. I'm ten minutes late already."

I get my money out, counted it to make sure it was exactly \$25.

Just then the floorwalker starts towards us, up the aisle next to us. "Here," says my companion. "I'll catch him before he gets to that customer." Snatching my \$25 he slips up that aisle—and disappears.

For a moment I hesitated, watching for him to emerge from the crowd of customers, somewhere near the floorwalker, before I snapped my fingers and started in pursuit. An elevator showed the "down" signal nearby, and I started down the stairs after it. Too late—the elevator was empty, the passengers gone, so was my \$25. Outside stood a big Irish cop who listened to my story sympathetically. Finally, as he admitted it was too late to catch the thief, he asked, "Where did you say you were born?" "New York City," I admitted.

"Begorra!" he ejaculated vehemently, "and I was born in Ireland, yet I never fell for a trick like that."

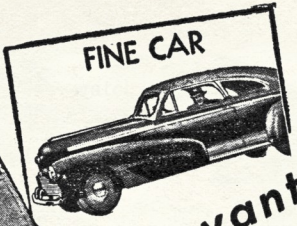
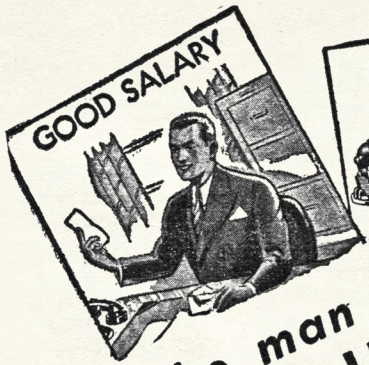
R. Gunderson,
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No Homework for Her

Dear Sir:

I have been reading your department for some time and think you are doing a lot to keep people from throwing hard-earned money away in an effort to earn more by working at home.

(Please continue on page 94)



To the man who wants to enjoy
an ACCOUNTANT'S CAREER

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

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Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

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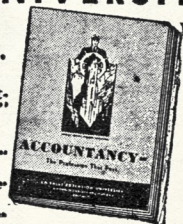
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*J. T., Mancelona, Mich.



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*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.



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*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.

*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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<input type="checkbox"/> Guitar	<input type="checkbox"/> Trumpet, Cornet	<input type="checkbox"/> Trombone	<input type="checkbox"/> Finger
<input type="checkbox"/> Hawaiian	<input type="checkbox"/> Pipe, Reed Organ	<input type="checkbox"/> Flute	<input type="checkbox"/> Control
<input type="checkbox"/> Guitar	<input type="checkbox"/> Tenor Banjo	<input type="checkbox"/> Modern	<input type="checkbox"/> Piccolo
<input type="checkbox"/> Violin	<input type="checkbox"/> Ukulele	<input type="checkbox"/> Elementary	<input type="checkbox"/> Mandolin
<input type="checkbox"/> Piano Accordion		<input type="checkbox"/> Harmony	

Mr. _____ Have you
Miss _____ Instrument?.....
Mrs. _____ (Please print)

Address.....

City..... State.....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c — STICK COUPON ON PENNY POSTCARD

SHEATHE YOUR

*Because the straying honey needed nylons,
Detective Jim Bennett played cat and mouse—
with a desperate killer.*



CHAPTER ONE

Five-Gee Bait

IT STARTED as a routine day for me, as routine days go with employees of The National Detective Agency, Incorporated. But it didn't stay routine for long. Murder may be common, but it is never routine.

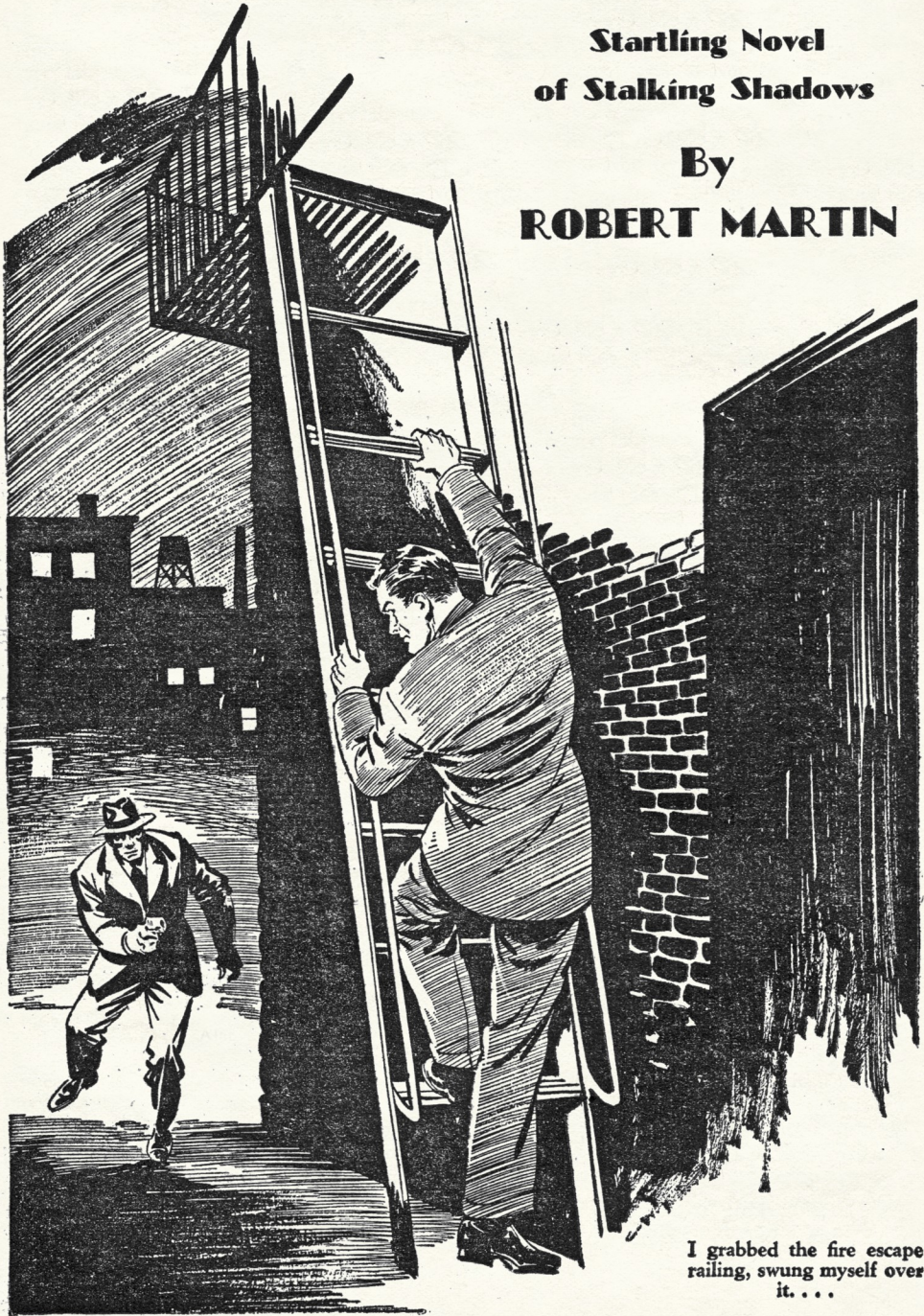
I had spent most of the day trailing a sixteen-year-old daughter of a local tycoon. The girl had skipped with the handsome but aging leader of a third-rate dance band. I found her where the Romeo band leader left her—in a juke-box joint. Three cheeseburgers and a malted milk convinced



CLAWS, HELLCAT!

Startling Novel
of Stalking Shadows

By
ROBERT MARTIN



I grabbed the fire escape
railing, swung myself over
it. . . .

her that she'd better return home to papa. When I drove her back to Cleveland, papa paid off with a fat check. Before I was off the front terrace, I heard him smacking the daylighters out of her with what sounded like a sturdy flat board.

It was past seven in the evening when I arrived at the office. Sandy Hollis, my secretary, had left on my desk some reports to the boss in New York, and a penciled note which read:

Jim:

Boss called—collect. Said he was charging call to our office to teach you to get reports in on time. Had 'em all typed, but you didn't show up. Better sign and drop in box. Man named Alvin T. Bayne was in around 5:00 p.m. Quite upset. Wants you to call him as soon as you return. Perry 26544. Wouldn't tell me anything, but left \$500.00. Told him I was not authorized to accept fees, but he left it anyway. I put it in the safe. 'Night.

S.

I lit a cigarette and thought about Alvin T. Bayne. I had met him several times, and his life story was well known in industrial and civic circles. People liked to call him a self-made man, a rough diamond. He was the owner and operator of a fleet of trucks covering Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and western Pennsylvania, with a main office on the Square, and branches and terminals in six cities. He lived in a big sandstone house east of town along the lake. His credit rating was Double-A Plus, and he belonged to three country clubs, four fraternal lodges, and just about every civic and service organization there was to join.

He had quit school after the seventh grade to work on the lake freighters. Then followed ten years of driving trucks from Boston to Los Angeles for various outfits. When he was thirty years old, he had purchased a tractor and trailer outfit and had gone into business for himself. Ten years later he had pyramided his single rig into three hundred units, and the Bayne Roadway outfits were a familiar sight on the highways of the midwest.

A year previously, according to the know-it-alls on the Square, romance had come to Alvin T. Bayne. In a gaudy backstreet nightclub in the shadow of the Youngstown steel mills he had met a dancer named Arlene Aragon—real name,

Beulah Zablonski—and had become her husband after a midnight trip across the Ohio border into quick-marrying Kentucky.

I had never met Mrs. Bayne, but I remembered him as a big, hulking man with serious eyes and thick brown hair. His suits cost him two hundred dollars a copy, but they never seemed to fit him quite right. His drivers sometimes found him lugging freight on one of his loading docks, and he frequently climbed into a semi-outfit and personally delivered a cargo to its destination.

I rather liked and admired Alvin T. Bayne, but I was tired from chasing the teenager, and I hadn't had any dinner. Still, business was business, and a detective agency can't make any money by knocking off at five in the afternoon. I picked up the phone and called Perry 26544.

A female voice answered in an intimate drawl, "Hello there, darling."

I said, "Is Mr. Bayne there?"

There was a second's silence on the wire. Then the voice said cautiously, "Who is this?"

"My name is Bennett, Mr. Bayne left word for me to call him."

There was another short silence, and then: "Mr. Bayne is busy at the moment. He's in the kitchen stirring a pitcher of martinis. He likes martinis, but I like manhattans. I already have mine, and now he is making his. I hate martinis. We're having dinner shortly—I mean, Alvin is. I'm going out. This is Arlene speaking—I mean, Mrs. Bayne. Could I give him a message for you?"

I decided that Mrs. Bayne had had more than a couple manhattans. "Look, ma'am," I said patiently. "Mr. Bayne asked me to call him. I haven't any message for him, but he may have one for me. How about you stirring his martinis for a while and asking him to come to the phone?"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly do that," she protested. "Alvin always insists upon making his own. He says I bruise them. But maybe I could stir them, ever so gently, while he talks to you. Shall I suggest that to Alvin?"

"By all means," I said.

I got nothing but silence for maybe three minutes. Then I heard a pleasant

tingling sound, and man's voice boomed in my ear, "Hear that, Bennett? They're just right and ready to pour. How about coming out and having a few?"

"Thanks," I said, "but I can't tonight. If you're busy now, maybe we could get together in the morning. You can come here, or I'll be glad to come to your office. About ten o'clock?"

"Tomorrow is no damn good," Bayne said. "This deal has to go through tonight. You come out here now, or you don't get a dime of that half-grand I left with that cute little brown-eyed gal of yours." He paused, and then added in a lowered voice, "I gotta see you tonight. That half-grand is only a start—if you come out now."

That got me. "How do I get out to your place?" I asked him.

He told me to follow the lake road out of town to the third crossroad and turn left toward the lake. His house was the last one on the right, facing the lake.

"O.K.," I said, and I hung up.

BEFORE I left, I signed the reports Sandy had typed, placed them in an envelope and sealed the flap. Then, carrying the reports, I moved to the door. The phone began to ring, and I went back to my desk and lifted the instrument. "Yes?"

It was Alvin T. Bayne again. "Listen, Bennett," he said in a low, guarded voice. "I'm glad I caught you—wanted to give you a picture so you could be thinking about it on the way out. I couldn't talk with my wife here in the room. She's gone upstairs with her damned manhattan to get herself fixed up—to play bridge at a female party in town."

He paused, and added bitterly, "Or so she says. But I know better. She's got a date with a guy, and I'm sick of putting up with it. I want to divorce her, but unless I work it just right, she'll take me for my shirt. I've been wise to her for a long time, but I've played dumb, waiting for my chance. This is it.

"I know she's meeting this heel—John Damon—tonight. I came home early this afternoon, and I heard her talking to him on the phone. I want you to get a load of evidence that'll stand up in court. and—"

"Now, wait," I broke in.

"You fellows know how to handle a job like that," he went on, ignoring my interruption.

"I just want to get rid of her, and forget about her. After you get what you need, go to my attorney, Orvil Hewing, in the Great Lakes Building. He'll wait for you in his office tonight. The quicker we act, the better. That fancy dame has sure been a high-priced headache to me. Next time I'm gonna pick me a nice fat farm girl, and keep her barefooted and fenced in.

"And another thing—tomorrow I've got a date with Hewing to cut my wife out of everything—my will, life insurance, bank accounts, property, the works. I don't want her to get her hooks on a nickel of mine. Now, look. She's leaving pretty quick. You just mosey out here, and you and me will have a couple or three drinks. We'll wait a while, and then you go out there and surprise the hell out of them."

"Mr. Bayne," I said, "my agency doesn't do work of that nature. It's against regulations. But I'll be glad to recommend someone for you."

"Dammit," he snapped. "If I wanted a two-bit peeper with a damned flash camera, I'd hire him. But this has to be a first-class job with no slips. I want you. That half-grand is peanuts. If you do me a job, I'll pay up to five grand—to get rid of her. How about it?"

Five thousand dollars. For a simple divorce job. I gulped. I thought of the stern agency ruling against such work, but at the same time I thought of the boss, that greedy and shrewd old man, who had built a vast and profitable organization upon the human weaknesses. To him, I decided grimly, five thousand dollars would purify a taboo divorce job and elevate it to the respectable realm of assistance in domestic relations. I said cautiously, "Well. . ."

"Good," he said. "Come right out. She's coming down the stairs now." He hung up.

I cradled the phone slowly, and leaned back in my chair. In spite of the prospect of a five thousand dollar fee, I wasn't happy. I knew about John Damon. A smooth, agate-hard character who dabbled in back-alley gambling joints and shady night clubs. He drove around town in a

lemon-yellow convertible, usually with a brassy, painted doll by his side.

Six months ago the county sheriff's department had tried to connect Damon, or his men, with the murder of a wild playboy named Jeff Fairfax who had lost a big chunk of his dad's money at one of Damon's dice tables. The playboy's dad had tried to sue Damon, and the kid had promised to testify. Two days later the kid had been found in a quarry with a bullet hole in his head. There was a big rumpus raised about it, but the case had fizzled out for lack of evidence.

I knew about John Damon, all right, and I didn't look forward with anything like pleasure to getting mixed up with him. But five thousand dollars was a lot of money, and business at the Cleveland branch hadn't been too good lately.

I took a short-barreled .38 from my desk drawer, checked the cylinder, dropped it into my inside coat pocket, locked the office, and went down to the street. I had a bowl of soup, a sandwich, and two cups of black coffee at a restaurant around the corner, climbed once more into the agency car, and headed east on the lake boulevard. It was after eight o'clock when I turned into the drive leading up to the home of Alvin T. Bayne.

There was a low black sedan parked in one stall of a three-car garage. The other two stalls were empty. I turned off my car lights, and walked across the drive to the house. It faced the lake. As I stood on the front stoop the wind beat against my face, and I could hear the waves pounding on a rocky beach below. I punched the bell button, and waited.

Through a wide window on my right I saw a softly-lit room filled with mirrors and pastel-tinted furniture. I punched the bell again. Nothing happened. I stepped down to a curving flagstone walk and moved around to the rear. Here was a latticed back porch, and I could see into a brightly-lit kitchen. I went up the porch steps, and peered through a screen door into the kitchen. On the sink there was a tray of melting ice cubes and an array of bottles. I recognized the ingredients for manhattan cocktails—whiskey, sweet vermouth, bitters, a jar of red cherries; and the gin, dry vermouth, orange bitters and olives for martinis.

I rattled my knuckles on the edge of the screen door. A gray-striped cat padded into the middle of the kitchen and gazed at me with steady green eyes. I rattled the screen door, noting that it was hooked from the inside. The only response I got was a meow from the cat. I went around to the front of the house again, and tried the door. It swung open, and I stepped inside.

"Hey," I said loudly.

Nothing but big chunks of silence. I began to move slowly through the elegantly furnished rooms, wishing that I was the hell out of there. On a huge low table before a long, tomato-red divan was an empty cocktail glass and two tall bar glasses. There was a long stirring spoon in each glass. From the contrasting diluted colored liquid in the bottom of each glass—amber in one, pink in the other—I guessed that they had contained Alvin Bayne's martinis, and his wife's manhattans.

In the low-ceilinged dining room, I found the table set with a silver pot of cold coffee, a wooden bowl containing a salad of tomato, onions and lettuce, and a plate bearing two sandwiches. Nothing, apparently, had been touched. I picked up one of the sandwiches and took a bite. Tuna fish. I chewed on the sandwich and gazed about. Off the dining room was a small alcove containing a small desk and an ivory-painted telephone. I moved over to the desk.

On the open page of a combination calendar and appointment book was a scrawled notation: *Thursday—dinner bridge at Florence Markham's. Today was Thursday.*

I wandered back into the living room. On my right a curving stairway wound upward. I went slowly up the carpeted steps. I didn't want to, but I was in it now, and I had to finish.

At the top of the stairs there was a wide space, a sort of an upstairs sitting room. On a polished table was another telephone, and a long-stemmed cocktail glass. Except for a lone red cherry, the glass was empty. Beside the table was a straightbacked chair and a floor lamp. The lamp was turned on. I moved to the nearest door and opened it.

There was a slightly musty smell, as if

the room hadn't been used. Probably a guest room. A tall chest of drawers stood against one wall. All of the drawers had been pulled out, and one lay upside down on the floor. I backed out and opened another door. It was a twin of the first room, with the same musty smell, with the drawers of the chest pulled out.

The third room had been lived in. It was big and masculine, apparently where Alvin Bayne had slept. The whole room was in a state of violent disarray—dresser drawers pulled out, their contents scattered, clothing and shoes strewn over the floor.

Then I backed out and stared at the fourth and last door across the wide hall. As I started to move toward it, an object on the floor caught my eye. I stooped down and picked it up. A man's wallet. I opened it. It was stuffed with various membership cards, all in the name of Alvin T. Bayne. The wallet contained no money—not a single dollar bill. I dropped it on the floor, and moved to the door. It was standing slightly ajar, and I kicked it slowly inward.

The scent of perfume was strong. I could see a huge mirror above a low dressing table. The mirror reflected my own image, showing that I needed a shave. Bottles and jars of beauty lotions on top of the table had been upset and scattered. I stepped inside the room and peered about. The same jumbled confusion. Various articles of women's clothing were scattered everywhere. Like the rest of the rooms, it had been quickly ransacked.

I swallowed the last of the sandwich. My mouth felt dry, and it was hard to get the sandwich down. I backed slowly out of the bedroom, and moved slowly down the hall.

I found Alvin Bayne in the bathroom. He was huddled on the floor, just inside the door. He wore a pair of green-striped shorts. Shaving cream lather was on his face, and a bullet hole under his left eye. A little blood had trickled down and mingled with the white lather.

The sandwich still seemed to be sticking in my throat. I turned slowly and went down the stairs. I walked straight out of the house, got into the car, and drove away.

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CHAPTER TWO

Back to the Wall

I SHOULD have called the police. But Alvin Bayne had been, or had been about to be, a client of mine. I knew that the five thousand dollars he had mentioned was now down the drain, but I figured I owed him a little something for the five hundred dollars he had paid in advance. The least I could do was notify his lawyer, and then maybe do a little snooping before the alarm went out and the cops took over. Bayne didn't need a divorce now, but I still wanted to earn the money he had given me. I knew I would probably get in bad with Homicide-Lieutenant Rockingham, but I had been in bad with him before, and I wasn't worrying about that.

As I turned into the main highway and headed for town, I thought I caught a glimpse in the rear-view mirror of a car behind me without headlights, but I wasn't sure. I kept watching, but as the traffic thickened around me I decided I had been mistaken.

The Great Lakes Building was on the west side of town. I found a parking space in front of a drug store two blocks away and walked back. The building was in the middle of a block beside a dark alley. Inside the lighted foyer I glanced at the office directory board and saw that Orvil W. Hewing, Attorney-at-Law, was on the third floor.

Since the elevators were closed for the night, I climbed a narrow stairway. When I got to the third floor, I walked down a long hall lined with dark offices with frosted glass doors. I turned a corner, and I saw that all of the doors in this hall were dark, too—except one. Hewing's name was on that door in big black letters. I started for it.

Behind me, a soft voice said, "Hold it."

I swung around. A big broad man in a gray tweed suit and dark brown felt hat stood about six feet behind me. He held a black automatic close to his side. With his free hand he crooked a finger at me.

"Come here," he said softly. He had a smooth, pleasant face, and he was smiling in a friendly manner.

I shook my head silently, and kept an eye on the gun in his hand.

He shrugged his big shoulders, and sauntered slowly toward me. When he was close to me, he cocked an eyebrow in a quizzical manner. "Packing a rod, friend?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't like the professional way he held the gun, and the watchful look in his eyes. He chuckled softly, turned a little away from me so that I couldn't make a pass for the gun. With his left hand he deftly lifted the .38 from my inside coat pocket. I let him. There wasn't much else I could do. He dropped my gun into a pocket of his tweed coat and grinned at me.

"I thought you fellows never got dressed without a shoulder holster," he said.

I found my voice, said, "That's just in the movies."

He smiled, and motioned with the automatic in the direction of the stairway. "This way, please," he said politely.

"Where?" I asked.

"Just a little walk, friend," he said. "Not far." He stepped behind me and prodded me in the back with the automatic. He wasn't gentle. "March," he said softly. "And no ruckus—or I'll do it here."

I walked.

He stayed a little behind me. As we went down the stairs, I said, "What is this?"

I heard him chuckle. "I don't mind telling you, friend—as long as you behave yourself. I'm just doing a little job for the boss. Really, you should know better than to concern yourself with Mr. Damon's lady friends."

We hit the landing. As we started down the second flight of steps, I said, "Then you followed me from Bayne's house?"

"Of course," he said.

"And you killed Bayne," I said. "I seem to remember a kid named Jeff Fairfax who was found in a quarry with a slug in his head."

"Now, now," he chided. "Don't be dragging out dead cats. Young Fairfax was indiscreet."

"So was Alvin Bayne," I said. "You killed him—for Damon. Because Bayne

was going to make a stink about his wife and Damon."

"How you talk," he said in a hurt voice. And then he added pleasantly, "I wouldn't worry about it, Mr. Bennett. It really shouldn't matter to you—not any more."

I began to sweat then. My knees went weak, and I stumbled on the bottom step at the landing. I hung on to the rail as we started the last flight down.

The soft voice behind me said, "You see, Mr. Damon can't afford to have unfavorable publicity. The officials have been quite bothersome lately. Besides, Mr. Damon has become quite attached to Mrs. Bayne, and he simply can't permit you to meddle in his private affairs. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly," I said hoarsely. "Alvin Bayne was about to become bothersome, too."

"Tut, tut," he said severely. "That sort of talk won't get you anywhere."

We arrived in the deserted foyer. I moved toward the door opening on to the lighted street.

"No, no," the voice behind me said sharply. "This way."

I turned slowly. There was a sick feeling in my stomach. He was holding open a door beneath the stairway. Oh, he had it all figured out, all right. I sighed, walked through the door. We went down a semi-dark hall cluttered with mops, buckets and stepladders, until we came to another door. He opened it, and I could see out into the blackness of the alley which ran beside the Great Lakes Building.

"Out," he said softly. "Walk slowly along the wall, on this side." He paused, and then added, "Just walk slowly away from me—that's all you need to do."

I turned to face him in the gloom. The muzzle of his gun bore directly on my stomach. He smiled pleasantly. "Good-by, Mr. Bennett," he said.

It was now or never. I was damned if I was going to walk meekly away and let him shoot me in the back.

I jumped out of the door, ran up the alley on the darkest side. No shots cut the night behind me, and I increased my speed. I shot a quick look ahead, saw the lighted street, the cars going past. Freedom and safety, just a half block away.

I lurched over the bricks, my breath sobbing in my lungs, my eyes glued on the end of the alley.

THEN, ahead of me, a man moved into the center of the alley. I saw him very clearly outlined against the light beyond. He walked slowly toward me. I could tell by the way he held his right arm that he had a gun in his hand.

I stopped suddenly, and flattened myself in the darkness against the wall. My breath came hard, and the sweat dripped down my face. I might have known, I thought hopelessly, that any hired gun of John Damon's wouldn't leave loopholes. I was trapped in a dark alley, with a killer at each end, like a duck in a rain barrel. There would be a couple of shots, indistinguishable from the clatter and roar of the traffic at each end of the alley.

They had picked their spot well. Shortly the boss would have to appoint a new boy to put his feet on the desk in the Cleveland office. I hoped that Sandy Hollis would like him.

I glanced up the alley in both directions. I couldn't see either of them now, but I knew they were there, getting closer. I felt as lonely as I ever had in my life, and I thought: Oh, well, it's for the glory, and the honor, and the profit of The National Detective Agency, Incorporated. Immediately I asked myself what glory there was in coughing out my life on the muddy bricks of a Cleveland alley?

Pressing against the brick wall, I stood quietly. If I made a run for it, I'd be a perfect target against the bright light at either end of the alley. I glanced over my left shoulder, and saw a sudden movement in the shadows. I edged along the wall, feeling the rough surface of the bricks catch and tear at my coat. I looked in the other direction.

In the blackness along the far wall I saw another furtive movement. Damon's boys had me pretty well spotted. They had held their fire until they were sure. Now they were closing in for the kill, like a couple of coyotes stalking a stray cow.

I edged another slow foot along the wall. My head bumped into something sharp and hard, and I raised an arm. My fingers felt the smooth, cold surface of steel. With both hands I felt—and I

knew with a sudden surge of hope that the steps of a fire escape slanted upward above me.

Groping some more, I located the railing and the position of the bottom step. I glanced upward, between the towering walls of the buildings, and I saw a landing of the fire escape outlined in a stray shaft of light from the street. That would be a perfect spot, I thought dismally, for Damon's boys to pick me off. But the fire escape was the only way out of the alley. I would just as soon die on the steep steps fifty feet off the ground as on the bricks below. Still I needed a little leeway—not much, maybe a couple of seconds. If a couple of rods were waiting to get me on the wing, I figured I could climb steps pretty fast.

In my pocket my fingers closed over a cigarette lighter. It was a good lighter, a gift from a red-headed widow in San Antonio, and I hated to give it up. But I didn't have much choice. I threw the lighter down the alley, as hard as I could throw it. It struck the opposite wall and clattered along the bricks.

Immediately, a figure leaped from the shadows on my right and ran up the alley past me. The other shadow, further down, jumped toward the direction of the sound my lighter had made.

Grabbing the fire escape railing, I swung myself over it, and lunged up the steps. I made the first landing in four jumps. Then I started up for the second. Again I made the turn against the rail and bounded up the home stretch, toward the dim bulb over a door. In the alley below me a gun went *wham!* and I heard the twangling zing of a bullet as it skittered off the iron railing. I grabbed the knob of the door, praying that it wasn't locked.

Another *wham!* and a bullet thudded into the door beside my nose. I twisted the knob violently, and kicked at the door. It swung inward suddenly. I pitched inside, almost sobbing with relief.

Behind me I heard the clattering feet on the steel steps, and I slammed the door. There wasn't any lock—it was just a door with a knob. I turned and ran down a long dim hall, turned a corner into a wider hall. I saw a row of frosted glass doors, all dark. I tried a couple of knobs. Locked, all locked.

Where was Orvil Hewing's office?

I ran. From the direction of the fire escape I heard a door slam and swift, scurrying footsteps. In my mind I pictured Damon's boys racing silently after me, guns in hands, eyes bright and alert, eager for the kill, wanting to please the boss.

I skidded around a corner. Another hall, long and endless, with the same rows of dark doors. Except one. At the far end I saw a light, glowing dimly through the frosted glass. *Orvil W. Hewing, Attorney-at-Law*. I knew it was his office. If I could make it, before Damon's boys turned the corner. . . .

I made it, and I pounced upon the knob. The door swung open. I jumped inside, looking frantically for the light switch. I saw it beside the door, flicked it with a finger, slammed the door, and clicked the catch on the lock. The room was dark, but not completely dark. There was a light burning over a desk behind me. I swung savagely.

A girl sat behind the desk, her face a mask of surprise and fear. I jumped for her.

"Off," I snapped. "Off, off—the light"

She stared dumbly, and started to push her chair back. I reached the desk, found the light switch, turned it off. There was nothing but blackness then, and I lurched around the desk to the girl. She made a low stuttering sound, and I shot out a hand. My fingers closed on a mass of silky hair, and I jerked her head backwards.

The stuttering began to grow up into a school-age scream, and I cut it off by slapping a hand over her mouth. Then I got an arm around her, and I held her against me. Her teeth closed over one of my fingers, but I didn't care—just so she didn't make a racket. I cocked my ears for sounds from the hall.

Thudding footsteps passed the door, and died away. I waited, holding my breath. The steps didn't come back. I waited some more. The girl was trying desperately to squirm away from me, but I held her. When she began to make a strangled choking sound, I clamped my hand more tightly over her mouth.

"Shush," I whispered hoarsely. "Please, please shush."

Her teeth bit deeper into my finger. It hurt, but a bloody finger is a hell of a lot better than a slug in the belly. Suddenly I felt her relax. I whispered:

"That's better, honey. I won't hurt you. Just don't make any racket." But I kept my hand over her mouth.

I couldn't hear any sound from the hall, but still I waited. Maybe five minutes. The only sound was a far-away tootling of traffic which waited up to us through a screened window on the street side of the office. Suddenly I realized that the girl was no longer biting my finger. But still I held her, and the minutes dragged on.

Presently I whispered: "If I let you go, will you promise to be quiet?"

She nodded her head.

I hesitated for a couple of seconds, and then I released her. I figured I was as safe as I'd ever be, and I couldn't hide in the office all night. But she kept quiet. The frosted glass of the door let in a dim light from the hall, and I looked down at the girl's dark head. She didn't move—she was probably waiting for me to cut her throat.

My finger was smarting where her teeth had dug into it, and I took out a handkerchief and began to dab at the small wound. "My," I said softly, "what sharp teeth you have."

She made no sound, and I moved around the desk to peer at her in the dusky light. Her head was down, her hands out of sight beneath the edge of the desk. She was trembling violently.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "Don't be scared. A couple of men were after me, and your office was the only one with a light in it. Besides, I have an appointment with Mr. Hewing. Mr. Bayne called him."

She stopped trembling, but still she didn't answer. I moved softly to the door, carefully released the lock catch, opened the door an inch and peeked up and down the hall with one eye. All clear. Damon's boys had apparently over-shot my trail. I locked the door again, moved back to the girl's desk, and turned on the shaded lamp.

The girl raised big, dark eyes to mine. She was rather a plain girl, with a pale oval face, a thin nose, and a well-shaped mouth devoid of lipstick. Her dark brown hair was combed back in a severe fashion,

exposing flat little ears. She wore a white long-sleeved blouse, with a small black bow tie at the throat.

"Who—who are you?" she asked in a low voice.

I took out my wallet, flipped it open to my license card, and showed it to her. She read it silently, then looked up at me once more. A little color had returned to her cheeks. She got slowly to her feet, and I saw that she was wearing a trim black skirt. A trifle thin, her figure basically was good.

She took a deep breath, and I could almost see her pulling her nerves back into line. "Since I know now who you are, Mr. Bennett," she said in a cool, crisp voice, "I suppose I should forgive you for scaring me witless. Mr. Hewing is expecting you. He'll be here shortly."

I offered her a cigarette.

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I don't smoke."

I put a cigarette in my mouth and felt for my lighter. Then I remembered that I didn't have it any more, and I said to her, "Do you have a match?"

"No," she said, "and there aren't any in the office. Mr. Hewing doesn't approve of smoking."

"Does Mr. Hewing drink?" I asked politely.

"Of course not," she said primly. "Mr. Hewing has no bad habits."

"Does he eat hay?" I asked.

She drew her smooth, unplucked brows into a faint frown. "Pardon?"

"If he doesn't," I said, "it just occurred to me that he's not fit company for man or beast." I grinned broadly, to show her that it was a joke.

She gazed at me with an expression of distaste. "Very amusing," she said coldly.

I wiped a little more blood off my finger. She flushed faintly.

"I'm sorry I—I bit you," she said, "but, really—"

"That's all right," I told her. "The scar will always remind me of you."

A GAIN there were steps in the hall outside the door. I quickly turned off the lamp. A shadow stood before the door, and I heard the knob rattle. Then I heard the jangle of keys, and I knew that it must be Hewing.

I turned on the light again and moved to the door, unlocked it, and twisted the knob. A big man with a ring of keys in his hand stared at me blankly. He was wearing a neatly tailored dark suit and a gray Homburg hat. In his left hand was a bulky briefcase. He had a smooth ruddy face, a blunt nose, and a square chin. His eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses were blue.

I said, "Sorry to lock you out of your own office. I'm Bennett."

He gazed at me with puzzled eyes. Then he said, "Oh, yes—Mr. Bayne's man." He moved past me into the office, and glanced curiously at the girl.

She said hastily, "Mr. Bennett said some men were chasing him, and he hid in here. . . ."

Hewing laid his briefcase on top of a desk, and turned to me. After I closed the door, I gave him a quick account of my game of hide-and-seek with John Damon's boys. When I had finished, he shook his head. "That Damon is a bad character. But why were they after you?"

I said, "Damon found out what Bayne had hired me for tonight—and he didn't like it."

"How did he learn what you intended to do?"

"I don't know," I said.

Hewing shook his head again. "A bad business. I advised Mr. Bayne against any such action, but he insisted." He sighed. "But I guess evidence is evidence, no matter by what devious methods we come by it. . . . Did you get it?"

I shook my head. "No—not yet. But I will, if you say so. Mr. Bayne hired me for a job, and I'd like to do him one—even if he is dead."

Hewing almost jumped, and his eyes bugged out. "Dead? How? Who?"

I told him all about it, everything. When I had finished, he sighed.

"This is extremely unfortunate. I see much litigation looming. Tomorrow I had an appointment with Mr. Bayne to change his will." He sighed again.

"If I get the dope on his wife, will that help?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. "If it is sufficiently strong, backed up by sworn testimony, it will help very much."

"It'll be strong," I said.

"Have you notified the police?" he asked.

"No. I wanted to see you first—and maybe run over to Damon's place before the cops began looking for Mrs. Bayne," I told him.

He nodded. "That was smart, Mr. Bennett, but I'm afraid we can't wait any longer. We'll be criticized as it is for delaying the report." He turned to the girl. "Miss Loring, will you please call the department of homicide and report the murder of Mr. Bayne?"

"Yes, sir," she said quietly, and picked up the phone.

Hewing picked up his briefcase and moved briskly to the door. "I'll go right out to Mr. Bayne's place," he said. He hesitated, and frowned. "I'll have to tell the police that you found the body, but how will I explain your absence?"

"Tell them I phoned you about it, and that you don't know where I am. That'll keep Rockingham off my neck until I finish what I've got to do."

He nodded slowly. "Ah, yes. Lieutenant Rockingham. A shrewd and efficient officer. It'll be difficult deceiving him, but it's necessary in the interest of my late client." He gazed at me with his frank blue eyes. "Mr. Bayne engaged me by the year, you know. This year's contract runs for another eight weeks. I'm still obligated to protect his interests."

I grinned at him. "I think you would anyway," I told him.

He turned to the girl, who was in the act of replacing the phone. "You may as well go home, Miss Loring. Thank you for coming down this evening." He moved his big bulk past me into the hall.

I waggled my bitten finger at her. "Good-by, Miss Loring."

"Good-by, Mr. Bennett," she said coolly.

I followed Hewing down the hall. When he came to the corner, I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. He gazed at me in surprise.

"Wait," I told him, and I peered around the corner. All I saw was the empty hall, and the beginning of the stairway—the one I had gone down with my soft-spoken friend in the tweed suit. I motioned to Hewing, and he followed me to the stairs.

He said, "You fellows lead rather a dangerous life, don't you?"

"It's a living," I said.

When we hit the street, I glanced at my wrist watch. Ten o'clock. Traffic had thinned out a little, and the night had turned cool. I looked up the street toward the mouth of the alley in which Damon's boys had treed me, and I shivered.

Hewing said, "If you—ah—find Mrs. Bayne with this John Damon, you will be willing to testify in court and swear under oath as to the—ah—details?"

I nodded. "Sure. That's the whole point, isn't it?"

He said, "I am the executor of Mr. Bayne's will, and if we are successful in breaking it as it now stands—that is, eliminating Mrs. Bayne's claims—I believe I would be justified in paying you a fee, a substantial one, out of the estate. For your professional services."

I grinned at him. "I never turn down money."

"You will most certainly have earned it," he said seriously. "The only chance we have of protecting Mr. Bayne's interests is the evidence you can secure to-night." He paused, and added, "Perhaps

I should go with you. Another witness would make it better—but no, I can't. As Mr. Bayne's attorney, the court would regard me as prejudiced."

"I'll handle it," I told him.

"Call me as soon as you can," he said, "no matter how late it is. I'll either be at Mr. Bayne's house, or at home." He held out his hand. "Good luck," he said quietly. "And be careful." His hand was big and strong, and his blue eyes were friendly.

"Thanks," I said, and I moved up the sidewalk. I decided that if I ever needed a lawyer, it would be Orvil W. Hewing. . .

Five minutes later I rounded a corner and approached the spot where I had parked my car. Lights from the bars and small restaurants glowed out on the passing cars and busses, and a nearby traffic light winked red, yellow and green. There were quite a few people on the sidewalks, and I passed a cop I knew. I nodded at him as I passed, and he said, "Nice night, Jim."

I came to my car. I took out my ignition key and opened the door on the driver's side. I started to get in, paused.



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A girl was sitting on the front seat, and I saw the glow of her cigarette.

A soft, throaty voice said, "I'd thought you'd *never* show up."

I got in beside her. And that's when my troubles really began.

CHAPTER THREE

Nylons to the Rescue

THE girl said, "Where *have* you been? I followed you all the way from Al's house. When you parked here, I couldn't stop in the traffic, and by the time I'd parked and walked back, you were gone. So I just got into your car and waited."

"I see," I said. The neon lights from a dinky bar fell fully on her face. She gazed at me frankly, a faintly amused quirk on her full red lips. I had never seen her before, but she was something extra special.

Not too young, maybe thirty, with a hard-soft face, wise blue eyes, and shoulder-length hair which gleamed like silver in the neon glow. Her cigarette was in a long holder, and she held it gracefully, poised, like a fashion model. She was wearing a soft black dress, with a deep V neckline, and it draped subtly over her full figure.

I turned on the headlights. In the glow from the dashlight I saw a smooth expanse of nylon-clad legs, crossed prettily. On her feet were black shoes, high-heeled, thick-soled, expensive, with a slender strap buckled snugly around her slim ankles. I tore my gaze from her, and started the car motor. Remembering Damon's boys, I glanced uneasily up and down the street.

"Would you mind if I moved out of here?" I asked her. "I'm allergic to this neighborhood."

She waved her cigarette holder. "Drive on. Any place. The night's young and I'm not fussy." She laughed softly, a musical, pleasant sound. "Don't look so worried, Mr. Bennett. I won't bite you."

I didn't tell her that I had already been bitten by a female. As I pulled the car away from the curb, I said, "You seem to know me. Who are you?"

She laughed again. "You should know since Al said you were a detective."

"Do you mean Alvin Bayne?" I asked her.

"Of course," she said. "Oh, I'm so happy. Al told me all about it—how you were going to get evidence against dear Arlene, so that he could divorce her and marry me." She turned toward me, and doubled her legs under her on the automobile seat.

"I'm Marsha Morgan. Al and I have been in love for a long time. He asked me to come out tonight—after Arlene left, of course—and he told me that you might be there for a little while. I suppose you have seen Mr. Hewing by this time, and that it's all settled?" She paused, and then said, "Al is changing his will tomorrow, you know. He told me on the phone."

"I've seen Mr. Hewing," I said, "but it isn't all settled."

"You mean Arlene wasn't with Damon?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe I will, later. So you saw Alvin Bayne tonight?"

She hesitated for an instant. I swung my gaze away from the traffic and glanced at her. She was frowning and looking at the tip of her cigarette.

"No, I didn't," she said slowly. "That's what worries me. I can't imagine where he could have gone. When I arrived at his house, I saw that Arlene's car was gone, but I parked down the road, just to be on the safe side, and walked back up to the house. When I went inside, the lights were on, but I didn't see anything of Al. Then the doorbell rang, and I didn't want Arlene or somebody else to find me there. So I hid in a closet.

"When I heard you leave—what were you *doing* all that time?—I peeked out and saw you get into your car. I knew then that you must have been the Mr. Bennett who Al was to see tonight, and I ran out to talk to you. But you were already driving out. I got in my car and started to follow you. Then another car zoomed around me, and it seemed to be following you, too. Its lights were out, and it stayed between my car and yours all the way into town, and then it disappeared. I followed you here and, well, here we are."

I stopped for a red light, and I said, "Did you—uh—go upstairs while you

were waiting at Mr. Bayne's house?"

I felt her gaze upon me, and she laughed shortly. "What a funny question. No, I didn't go upstairs. I had just arrived, and then you rang the bell."

I turned right onto the lake boulevard, and headed back across town. I said, "What did you want to see me about?"

She moved on the seat until she was close beside me. "Can't we stop someplace?" she said. "And maybe have a drink, and talk a little?"

"I'm in kind of a hurry," I told her, nodding at the dash compartment, "but you'll find a bottle in there—if you like it straight."

She placed a hand on my arm. "I hate to hurry a drink," she said softly.

I made an illegal left turn off the boulevard and swung down a road leading to the lake. I stopped the car in the sand, and cut the motor. Above and behind us the boulevard traffic hummed along, but it seemed far away, and I could hear the waves lapping against the breakwater.

Turning off the lights, I took out a pint bottle of bourbon. It had been there a long time, and I knew that it was almost full. I unscrewed the cap and handed the bottle to the girl. She tilted it to her lips, and I saw her profile against the moonlit surface of the lake.

She had two drinks before she handed the bottle to me. "Thanks," she said huskily. "I needed that." She fitted a fresh cigarette into the long holder and I plugged in the dash lighter for her.

Then I took a drink from the bottle. It was good bonded bourbon, but it tasted hot and bitter to me, and I replaced the cap. I thought of Alvin Bayne's lifeless body on the bathroom floor, and of the night's work confronting me. I thought of that terrifying experience in the alley. I knew Damon's two hired guns were still looking for me, that I couldn't keep running forever.

It was now a personal thing with me, over and above the money the agency might gain. I wanted to get going, get it over with.

The girl beside me sighed, and leaned her head back against the seat. "Why wasn't Al home tonight?" she said plaintively, "after he asked me to come out?"

"Why ask me?" I said.

She said in a tired voice, "Because he told me that you were coming out. You walked in as if you expected to find him, and then you went out. I followed you because I thought you were going to him—wherever he was. I—I want to be with him, to help him, if I can—especially tonight. He sounded so worried on the phone. It means so much to both of us, what you're going to do for us tonight.

"Al and I have been in love for a long time—ever since we met. But we didn't do anything about it, because Al felt a sense of responsibility toward Arlene—until he learned she was seeing John Damon. She's treated Al so shabbily, and I—I hate her so."

She turned to me, her eyes shining in the moonlight. "Take me with you," she pleaded. "It will mean so much to me to see the look on Arlene's face. And I can help you."

"No," I said.

Her fingers caressed my cheek, slid down to my chin, and gently turned my head until I faced her. She lifted her mouth, and her lips were soft and cool, with a subtle suggestion of withheld warmth. It was nice, and I liked it. I placed an arm around her shoulders, and I pulled her to me, while the waves beat upon the breakwater, and the traffic hummed above us. . . .

PRESENTLY she placed her hands against my chest and gently pushed me away. "You're nice," she whispered breathlessly. "I wanted to do that, to thank you—for Al and me. Al won't care."

I was sure that Al wouldn't care, not where he was.

"I mean what I said about helping you," she said.

"How?"

"Do you know where John Damon lives?"

"In an apartment on the east side. I'll find it."

She laughed softly. "See? I told you I could help. He doesn't live there any more. He moved last week into a new house he bought south of town. I forgot to tell Al when I talked to him on the phone this evening, and I was going to

be sure to tell him when I saw him."

I turned to face her. "How do you know that Damon has moved?"

"Once," she said quietly, "John Damon was a—a friend of mine. Before he met Arlene, and before I met Al. John and I still have mutual friends, and they keep me informed of his doings." She looked away from me, and I saw her cigarette glow red in the darkness.

"I—I may as well tell it all. Two days ago I received a note from John. He gave me his new address, and said he wanted to see me again. And—and he enclosed a key to his new house. I—I'll give you the key, if you'll let me go with you."

"Is he getting tired of Arlene Bayne?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said harshly. "All I know is that I don't want any part of John Damon any more. Al is so much finer, so honest, so much more of a real man—the only person I ever really cared about—really loved. Beside Al, John is just a heel." Her voice broke, and she turned her face away from me.

"Does Alvin Bayne know about your former friendship with Damon?" I asked her.

"Of course. I told him all about it. He doesn't care."

I turned on the ignition key. I decided that Marsha Morgan was a good girl to have around. But for her, I would have gone to the wrong address. And she was furnishing me with a key—a very handy thing to have for the job I had to do.

"O.K.," I said. "Get that key ready." I punched the starter button.

She turned and smiled at me like a little girl who has been promised at last that she can go to the circus. "Thank you," she said, and she began to wipe her eyes with a perfume-scented handkerchief. "But I can't understand what happened to Al tonight."

I nudged the gas pedal, and we began a slow turn in the sand. I felt tired and mean, and I wished the night was over. "I'll tell you what happened to him," I said. "He's dead." I gunned the car up the hill. . . .

I needed a gun, and I drove fast across town to my apartment. It was kind of a nightmare ride. At first, Marsha Mor-

gan stared at me like a crazy woman as I told her what I knew about the death of Alvin Bayne, while I wheeled the car through the boulevard traffic. She asked a couple of questions in a dead voice, and I answered them as best I could. After a while she turned away from me, and was very quiet. I felt a little uneasy about her, but I had worries of my own.

Parking a good two blocks from my apartment, I said to her, "I'll be back."

She nodded silently without looking at me. I moved up the sidewalk, worming my way through the late after-movie crowd. When I stood opposite my apartment I sized up the entrance and the street on both sides before I crossed and entered. I asked the night switchboard girl if I'd had any calls of visitors, and she shook her head. I skipped the elevator and walked up the stairs. I didn't see anybody except old man Goodwin, who was walking up and down the hall in his bathrobe, smoking a long cigar, as was his habit at this time of the evening.

I said, "Evening, Pop. Kind of quiet around tonight, huh?"

"Yep," he said. "Hey, Jim, how about some dominoes?"

I grinned at him. "Not tonight, Pop." Then I turned the corner, walked down the hall and stood in front of my apartment door. Everything was quiet. I took out my key, carefully twisted the lock, and gently turned the knob. I waited a minute, and then I kicked the door inward and flattened myself against the wall. Nothing but silence. I reached a hand around the door and flicked the light switch. All peaceful. I poked my head around the doorway, hoping that none of my neighbors were watching.

Everything looked normal. I moved slowly into my living room. Then I made a quick tour—bedroom, kitchen, bath, and I opened all the closet doors. No guns blasted at me, nobody knocked me on the head. I was relieved and a little disappointed. It was hard to believe that John Damon's boys would give up that easy.

From a desk drawer I took a spare gun—a Colt .45 automatic. It was a bigger gun than I usually liked to carry, but now, as I checked the clip and hefted its smooth cold weight in my hand, I was glad I had

it. It was too big to fit comfortably into my inside coat pocket, and so I tucked it beneath my belt on my left side with the butt pointing to my right. Then I went to my telephone stand, looked in my city directory for the number of Florence Markham, and called it.

While I waited I glanced at my wrist watch. Twenty minutes until midnight. The evening was getting along. There was a click in my ear, and I heard the subdued sound of shrill feminine chattering.

Then a crisp woman's voice said, "Yes?"

"Mrs. Markham's residence?" I asked politely.

"This is Mrs. Markham speaking."

"Is Mrs. Alvin Bayne there?"

"Yes, she is. Do you wish to speak to her?"

"If you please," I said.

"Just a moment." There was a moment's silence, and then the voice said, "Oh, I'm sorry. We're on the last rubber, and Mrs. Bayne is trying for a grand slam. I think she'll make it, too. I hate to disturb her now. Could I give her a message, or have her call you in a few minutes?"

"Never mind," I said wearily. "Thank you." I hung up.

I called information, and asked for the telephone number of John Damon. She said, "I'm sorry, sir, but that is a private number."

"Can you give me his present address?"

"Just a moment, sir," I waited. And then she said, "Mr. Damon lives at fourteen-twenty-one Aberdeen Road."

"Thank you, miss," I said, and I hung up slowly. Marsha Morgan hadn't been

kidding. I knew that Aberdeen Road was in a new subdivision on the southern fringe of town. I turned out the lights, locked my door, and went down to the street.

Marsha Morgan was still waiting. As I got in beside her, I said, "Still want to go with me?"

She nodded, not looking at me. "Yes, yes."

"Look," I said, "why not just give me the key? I'll put you in a taxi. No use in you getting mixed up in this."

She shook her head slowly, and her bright hair moved over her shoulders. "I want to go with you. I must go with you—now." She gazed at me, and her eyes held a queer glittering light.

I said gently, "I didn't tell you before—but I'm sorry about Alvin Bayne."

She lifted her shoulders slightly, and her lips twisted bitterly. "That's all right," she said carelessly, and she attempted a bright smile. "Shall we go?"

I said carefully, "Did you see anyone at Bayne's house tonight, before I got there?"

She shook her head. "No, no."

I started the motor, and wheeled the car out into the street. The .45 beneath my belt pressed uncomfortably against my stomach.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Hellcat Purrs Softly

JOHN DAMON'S residence turned out to be a big sprawling brick affair far out on the south side, where the fields began. It stood on a rise of ground,



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"

and there wasn't another house within three blocks. I drove past once, not too fast, not too slow. There was a big lawn, already thick with grass, and a blacktop drive curving around to a double garage in the rear. A five-thousand-dollar sedan with pale paint and a lot of chrome was parked in the drive, and behind it, half inside the garage, was a station wagon. The front of the house was dark, but I saw a faint light in a middle room.

I said to Marsha Morgan, "Does Arlene Bayne drive a station wagon?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

I drove for maybe a quarter of a mile before I came to an intersecting road. I turned the car around, headed it back for Damon's house—and stopped. I said to the girl, "Why don't you just wait here? I'll pick you up . . . when I'm finished up there."

She shook her head. "No. I'm going with you." She shivered a little, and then said in a tight voice, "If—if I had known while I was hiding in the closet, that all of the time Al was upstairs . . . dead. . . ."

"Try and forget it," I said. I took the .45 from my waistband and checked the safety catch. I knew what I had to do, but I wasn't in any hurry about doing it. I stared across the empty lots, weedy and ragged in the moonlight. "It looked like robbery—like somebody got into the house and was ripping through the place. They ran into Bayne unexpectedly, and they shot him. That's the way it looked."

She said bitterly, "It wasn't just robbery—it was murder."

"How do you know?" I asked quickly.

"I don't *know*," she said quietly. "I feel it." She paused, and gazed out at the night. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you this," she went on slowly. "Maybe I would never tell you if I didn't hate her so—Arlene, I mean. John Damon needs money, a lot of it, quick. Things haven't been going so well for him lately, and a Chicago syndicate is closing in on him—for not paying off after losing heavily in a dice game."

"He knew about Al's will, in which he leaves everything to her, and about his life insurance policies naming Arlene as the beneficiary, and their joint bank accounts. And maybe Arlene learned, somehow, that tomorrow Al intended to change

it all—cut her out of everything. And she told John." She paused, and then added, "Oh, I don't know, I don't know."

I said, "How do you know about Damon's financial troubles? Via the same grapevine—your mutual friends?"

"Yes," she said. She grasped my arm, and I felt her hand tremble a little. "Can't we go now?" There was a faint note of eagerness in her voice.

"In a minute," I said.

I heard her sigh. She said, "Could—could I have another drink?"

"Help yourself."

She got out the bourbon and took a long swallow.

"With Bayne dead," I said, "Arlene would get his money and be free to give Damon the money he needs. Is that the way you figure it?"

She tilted the bottle again before she answered. Then she said in a choked voice, "It—it's horrible. I—I don't know what to think."

Half thinking out loud, I said, "But how did Arlene know about Bayne changing his will? He surely didn't tell her." Suddenly I snapped my fingers. "This is the way it was—Arlene knew about the whole deal, and she tipped off Damon. She was listening on the upstairs extension while Bayne was talking to me. He told me she was upstairs, and that she had carried a Manhattan cocktail up with her. I saw the empty glass, with the cherry still in it, on the upstairs telephone table."

"She heard it all—about Bayne hiring me about his will, everything. And that's why Damon's boys were hanging around Bayne's house tonight, and why they followed me into town and tried to kill me in an alley. One of them killed Bayne—Arlene, herself, or Damon, or Damon's boys. They tried to make it look like robbery, and then they tried to get rid of me—because I knew too much." I held out my hand to the girl. "Give me that key."

She gazed at me in the moonlight, and her eyes were puzzled. Then she reached into her purse, and dropped a flat key into my hand. "It's for the side door," she said, "by the garage."

I didn't mean to say it, but I did. "You've used it?"

She looked away from me. "No, Mr. Bennett," she said in a cold voice. "I haven't used it. John told me in his note which door it fitted."

"I'm sorry," I said, and I pressed a thumb against the starter button. The motor purred softly in the night.

Marsha Morgan laughed shortly. "That's all right," she said, and she turned toward me. Her eyes searched my face. "I—I think I like you, a little. Please be careful—up there." She gazed up the road in the direction of Damon's house.

"Sure," I said. But I remembered the business-like manner in which the soft-spoken man in the tweed suit had herded me into the alley, and I thought of the careful generalship which had planted another man at the head of the alley in case I made a break. I knew that I was lucky to be alive, and I wished that I had a machine gun instead of the .45. Once more I urged the girl to get out of the car and wait for me to pick her up.

"No. I want to go with you."

"All right," I snapped, "but stay behind me, and do what I tell you."

She nodded slowly, and looked at me with solemn eyes.

I said, "Do you know what I think? I think that in spite of Alvin Bayne you're still carrying the torch—maybe a little one—for John Damon."

She hesitated a moment, and then she moved close to me, speaking with her lips close to my cheek. "Every man a girl loves takes a little of her away with him," she said huskily. "There were others before John, and before Al, and there'll be others after. Tomorrow, let's have a quiet drink somewhere, you and I, and I'll try and forget all the others."

"Until another one comes along," I said.

She moved her lips to my mouth, and I kissed her for the second time that night. It was nice, almost too nice. Then I felt the .45 pressing against my ribs. I pushed the girl gently away, and wheeled the car down the road toward Damon's house.

I SWITCHED off the lights and stopped a good block away. Marsha Morgan and I got out, quietly closed the doors. We walked side by side on the grass at the edge of the street. As we approached the

house, I saw that the light was still burning, and that the pale sedan and the station wagon were still parked where I had seen them. I stopped in the shadow of a clump of small fir trees, and grasped the girl's arm. The whole scene before me—the house, the grounds, the parked cars—was quiet and peaceful in the moonlight. Too quiet, too peaceful.

I was jittery and scared, but I could understand that—it was a familiar feeling. Any man who says he's never scared is either an idiot or a liar. But there was something beside fear—a queer, uneasy feeling. Guns blasting from the windows would have made me feel better.

I pointed to a white door near the rear of the house close to where the garage jutted out. "That the door?" I whispered.

She nodded silently, and she followed me as I circled the lawn, trying to stay in the shadows of the trees and shrubs. Presently I stood in the dew-wet grass beside a tall rose trellis, and gazed across the drive at the white door in the dark brick wall of the house. The rear bumper of the station wagon was about four feet from the door, with the front of the car in the darkness of the garage. I touched the girl's arm, nodded silently at the door, and she looked up at me.

"Yes," she whispered.

It was the first time I had seen her closely outside of my car. She had a slender, erect body, and her pale hair lifted gently in the night breeze. She was watching the door, her lips parted in anticipation and excitement, and the moonlight made deep pools of shadow beneath her eyes.

I had her key in my hand, and I loosened the .45 beneath my belt. "Stay here," I whispered. "Don't try to come in until I let you know." I paused, and then I added. "If I don't come out, run like hell for the car and drive to the nearest phone and call the cops. Got it?"

She dug her fingers into my arm. "Yes, yes," she said breathlessly, and she looked up at me. "Please be careful, darling," she whispered.

I patted her cheek, and I moved away from her across the wet grass.

Abruptly I stopped. Something was wrong, as wrong as all hell. What was

it? The quiet, the peace, the silent house in the serene moonlight? Was it the sudden remembered sound of a voice, the inflection of a word? A word, perhaps, like *darling*? A common word, affectionate, friendly, a term of endearment bandied freely about in gay circles.

My mind raced back to a time six hours earlier, and once again I heard Arlene Bayne's throaty drawl. *Hello there, darling*. The same tone of voice, the same inflection of words. *Please be careful, darling*.

I turned slowly, moved back to the girl standing in the shadow of the rose trellis. She watched me silently, her eyes big and bright. As I moved close to her, she backed away from me. She knew that I knew, and for an instant the knowledge lay there naked between us.

I jumped for her, clamped an arm around her throat, and I smothered her scream with my hand. She twisted and struggled violently, a choked strangling sound in her throat, but I held her, dragging her across the lawn toward the fir trees. I wanted to get out of the moonlight, find cover, lay low. But in my urgency and haste, my hand slipped for an instant from her mouth.

"Johnny!" she screamed. "Over here!"

I knew then that it was no damn use in trying to get clear. I let her drop, and I jumped for the scanty shadow of the rose trellis. I unlimbered my .45 just as two men boiled out of the garage from behind the station wagon. They stood crouched in the moonlight, gazing out over the lawn, and I saw the glint of the guns in their hands. I raised the .45.

Then I was aware of a swift crawling movement on the grass beside me. Fingers pulled at my gun arm and clawed at my face, and a mad scream beat against my ears.

"Here, Johnny! Kill him!"

From beside the station wagon a streak of orange flame stabbed the night. I tried to rip the girl's hand from my wrist, but her fingers were like steel claws, and I couldn't bring my gun up. I raised my left fist, aiming it at the girl's jaw close to my face.

Another shot, and I heard her sigh deeply, and her fingers slipped from my wrist. She was on her knees beside me, and she

fell slowly forward, her bright hair a silvery curtain over her face.

I began to shoot then, and the big gun bucked in my hand. It was a fierce pleasant feeling—the smooth pull of the trigger, the power-packed recoil. I fired three times, I think, and the night breeze wafted gun smoke across my face. I lifted the gun muzzle, and peered toward the station wagon.

One of the men was on his face in the grass beside the drive, and the other was leaning against the car, his head down, his arms hanging limply. I chuckled gleefully, and raised myself to a half-stooping position. I was wild, crazy, trigger-happy.

Something moved at the far corner of the house. I ran forward, stooping. A gun exploded, and flame reached for me in the moonlight. My left leg jerked, as if it had been hit with a sledge hammer, and my face hit the wet grass. I heard footsteps running on the drive. I pushed myself up, and I hobbled toward the drive. My leg didn't hurt—it just felt heavy and numb. I heard the frenzied sound of a car starter, and the motor of the pale sedan roared to life. I could see the car very plainly—the pastel paint, the bright grinning teeth of its grill, and the sloping, graceful windshield.

Stumbling and falling forward on the grass, I leveled the .45, steadying my wrist with my left hand, and emptied the gun into the left side of the car's windshield. The car swerved from the drive and backed violently into the side of the house. There was a crashing, crunching sound, and the car jolted to a stop. The motor coughed once and died, and then everything was quiet.

I pushed myself slowly to my feet, lurched along the drive, and peered into the car's left front window. A man was lying on the seat beneath the wheel. As I watched, one hand slipped slowly from the wheel and dropped limply to the seat. The man wore a gray tweed suit, and a brown hat was crumpled beneath his head. I recognized my soft-spoken friend who had invited me to take a death walk in an alley beside the Great Lakes Building.

I pushed myself away from the car, turned, and hobbled back up the drive. My left leg above the knee felt numb

and stiff, but I could navigate if I didn't try to bend the knee. As I neared the garage, I paused, remembering that my .45 was empty, and I moved cautiously forward. I saw three figures lying within a twenty-foot area, and figured I could stop worrying about my gun being empty.

I peered down at two men lying by the station wagon. They lay as they had fallen after jumping out from their hiding place in the garage, where they were waiting for me to walk into the trap. One man was on the grass, just off the drive, his face turned upward to the stars. I couldn't see where my bullet had hit him, but I knew he was very dead. He had a thick coarse face, with heavy black brows. I had never seen him before, but I guessed that he was Gray Tweed's pal of the alley rendezvous.

The other man was lying on the drive beside the station wagon. He was John Damon, in person. His eyes were open, and he stared at me silently, like a wolf caught in a trap.

"Where're you hit?" I asked him.

He coughed faintly, delicately. "Damn you . . . in chest . . . get doctor."

"Presently, presently," I mumbled, and I moved stiff-legged away from him. I crossed the grass to the rose trellis. She was lying on her side, her legs doubled beneath her, her cheek on an out-stretched arm, with her pale hair strewn in thin strands across her face.

HER eyes were closed, and in the moonlight I saw the bright glisten of blood on her lips and at one corner of her mouth. I tried to kneel down beside her, but I couldn't make it with my stiff knee, and

so I carefully lowered myself to the grass with one leg stretched straight out. Supporting myself with one hand, I touched the girl's shoulder.

She opened her eyes slowly, like a person awakening from a pleasant dream, and she gazed at me with friendly, drowsy eyes.

"Where are you hurt?" I asked.

Her lips curved in a little smile. "Does it matter?" she whispered. "Johnny's aim wasn't . . . very good, was it?"

"I'll call a doctor," I said, and began the slow process of pushing myself to a standing position.

"No," I heard her whisper, and I looked down at her. "Don't . . . bother. No use."

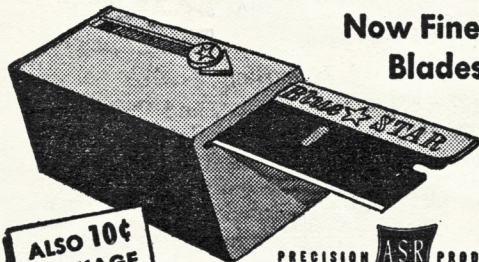
I turned away from her and moved as rapidly as I could to the white doorway in the side of the house. As I passed Damon's form, I saw him stir a little, and he watched me silently with cold eyes. I didn't say anything, and neither did he. I didn't need a key for the door—it had been unlocked all the time. I went inside, found a telephone, and called Alvin Bayne's house.

It took an argument to convince the cop who answered to call Orvil Hewing, but I finally got him. I told Hewing where I was, and to have Rockingham send out a doctor and an ambulance. He got excited, and started to fire questions, but I snapped, "Hurry," at him and hung up.

I went outside and crossed the lawn to where the girl lay. Once more I maneuvered myself into a sitting position beside her. She moved her head slightly, and stared at me with dull, heavy-lidded

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blue eyes. Painfully I shifted, stared back at her.

"Hello . . . darling." Her voice was so low that I had to duck my head to hear. "Why didn't you use my key?" she said reproachfully. "Johnny counted on that. When you stopped at the door, that . . . that was his signal."

"I know," I said wearily. "I know now. The key was just bait, to get me into a trap where Damon could kill me at his leisure. But you *were* telling the truth about his moving from his apartment in town to this place."

She attempted a weak smile. "Of course. We couldn't have you blundering into the . . . wrong house, could we? But why didn't you go . . . to the door?"

My leg was hurting now, bad, and I felt the sweat on my face. I tried to shift its position, but it began to pain more, and I sat still.

I said, "You are Arlene Bayne. Not a girl named Marsha Morgan—she never existed. But as Marsha Morgan you could give me the true story of what happened tonight, putting all the blame on Arlene and Damon—so I would be sure to go to Damon's house. You didn't care what you told me, just so you could lead me into the trap."

"You heard your husband's conversation with me on the upstairs phone, and when he went upstairs to shave, you shot him. Then you tore up the bedrooms to make it look like robbery, and scooted over to Damon's and told him what you had done. He put a couple of men on my trail, and when they failed to kill me, they reported back to Damon."

"You volunteered to be the bait, by posing as Marsha Morgan, to lure me to Damon's house so that they could conveniently take care of me. Your husband didn't have any girl friend. You killed him so that you and Damon could get his money—before he changed his will." I stopped talking, and rubbed my leg. It had started to swell, and I hoped the doctor would arrive soon.

"Yes," Arlene Bayne whispered. "It was like that. I—I killed him. He looked so surprised when I pointed the gun at him. Poor Alvin. But how did you know that I was Arlene? You never met me.

What did I *do*?" She asked me, low and plaintively.

I looked down at her slender form lying on the grass. I had the eerie feeling that we were a couple of other people, two strangers on another planet whispering together on a moonlit summer night; or a couple of disembodied characters in a painting by Dali. Maybe it was fatigue, and the pain in my leg, and the let-down from tension. I heard my voice saying:

"You should have said it sooner—I mean when you called me 'darling.' You called me that on the phone tonight, when I called for your husband, and you said it in a special way. I remembered it. A while ago, just as I was about to use your damned key, you said it again, and I knew that Arlene Bayne and Marsha Morgan were the same person." I looked up at the stars, and they seemed to be too bright and too close to the earth.

I said, "I suppose Mrs. Florence Markham, your bridge-playing friend, had been tipped off to cover up for you?"

I heard her say, "Don't blame Florence. She's a very close friend of mine. When I—I would go to see Johnny, I would tell Alvin that I was playing bridge at Florence's house. Florence is very understanding. She . . . she never let me down."

Just to be saying something, I said, "She sure didn't."

The night became very quiet. The crickets were singing a muted song, and from behind me I heard John Damon groan faintly. I didn't look around. To hell with John Damon. To hell with everything. The hot pain in my leg was crawling up to my hip, and I couldn't think of anything else.

Arlene Bayne's fingers plucked weakly at my sleeve. I glanced down at her, and I saw her lips moving. I lowered my head, and her soft whispering words barely came to me above the sound of crickets.

"Good-by . . . darling. . . ."

I saw her body stiffen, and then relax. She died with a little smile on her lips. I wasn't glad, and I wasn't sorry. I didn't feel anything but the pain in my leg.

From far across town I heard the tiny wail of a siren. I sat huddled beside the still body of Arlene Bayne and waited.

IT'S TIME TO SQUIRM

*Hard-boiled Zachow didn't know his own power . . .
when he short-circuited volumptuous Zelma—
into the slumber chair.*



*"Take off that damned
mask!"*

By
**ROBERT
TURNER**

IT ISN'T always a clever, involved, premeditated, fancy affair. Sometimes murder strikes haphazardly, without form or recognizable features. Then it drives the police crazy, if they even suspect it for what it is. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes it's just a killing. It doesn't fit into any special category. Sometimes it's like this. . . .

By noon time that day Zelma was drunk and glad of it. It was better that way. She couldn't stand herself sober. She couldn't stand anything, hardly. But when she got like this, with a rosy glow on, everything was different. She could even look at her own face in a mirror without getting nauseated.

She not only didn't look so ugly but she could actually see some of the nice things about her features that Doreen claimed to see. Doreen was a good kid. Doreen was always telling her beauty is only skin deep and that she, Zelma, had character in her face and that was a thousand times more valuable.

Zelma held the dresser hand mirror off at arms' length and inspected her features. With her other hand she fluffed her hair a little around her ears. Her hair was beautiful—she had to give herself that. It was as yellow and soft and shiny as corn silk. What if her chin was too long and square? All right, so you could hang a lantern on that jaw of hers, like some guy had once told her.

So what! She'd pushed a few of his teeth in for that. And the nose—well, there wasn't much really that she could say for the nose, even looking at it through this glorious alcoholic haze. It *was* too big and too hooked and spread all over her face and that was that.

The trouble was, she reflected, staring into the glass, the whole mold out of which her face had been cast was too generously cut. Even the cheekbones jutted out like doorknobs.

The eyes, though—that was where she'd gotten a break in the face department. They were large, too, only you didn't notice their largeness in that face. They were long-lashed and velvet-brown, those eyes. She had beautiful eyes. Doreen had told her so. And the eyes are the mirror of the soul, Doreen said.

It was all right for Doreen to talk like that, Zelma thought bitterly, putting down the hand mirror. Doreen had a beautiful figure *and* a lovely face. She had everything. Doreen could afford to be generous with her compliments, damn her. She didn't really mean that, though. Doreen *was* good to her!

Wasn't Doreen sharing this big beautiful apartment with her and wasn't she

helping to break her of the liquor habit and loaning her dough and teaching her routines, so that she, too, could be a big-name star like Doreen, with her name in lights? There wasn't anybody like Doreen. She'd do anything for that kid, Zelma told herself, anything.

She whirled her way out into the living room, feeling all light and feathery, and fortified herself with another shot from the three-quarters empty quart bottle on the cocktail table. She winced and shuddered as the drink went down, then giggled. Doreen was going to be mad at her for falling off the wagon like this, but she didn't care.

It was fun, being here in the apartment all alone for a change, wearing one of Doreen's costumes and getting pleasantly stuccoed. She had planned it from the moment she had heard that Doreen was going downtown early this morning to do some shopping. She had pleaded a headache to get out of accompanying Doreen, so that she could stay here alone.

There was a full-length mirror in the bedroom, in front of which Zelma walked. She was wearing one of Doreen's stripper panels, the skirt that wasn't really a skirt but two pieces of floor-length velvet.

The costume did things for Zelma's figure. She let her eyes roam over her reflection and a smile played over her ugly features. She didn't have to give anybody odds in the figure department, not even Doreen, Zelma told herself. She had it. Just once let the audience get a good gander at that voluptuous torso of hers and they'd tear down the house.

Zelma closed her eyes and stood there, swaying. In her mind she could hear that applause. And soon it wouldn't only be in her mind. Good little Doreen was taking care of that, too. Always before, agents and theatre managers had looked at Zelma's figure and sighed—then glanced at her face and groaned.

"Sorry, girlie," they'd tell her. "You've sure got the chassis for it and then some—but . . ." They hadn't gone into any details on the rejection. They didn't have to. Zelma knew why she was getting the turndown. It was her face.

But smart little Doreen had figured a way around that. She said that in another few weeks, after Zelma had a little more

practice with the routine, they'd be ready to spring their surprise. It would work, too. It would go over, no question, Doreen said.

STANDING before the mirror now, Zelma put on the mask. It was a lovely, expensive thing, the part that fitted over the eyes and forehead and nose, black silk and studded with sequins. The black lace skirt that hung from the top part of the mask was filmy and feminine looking.

When she was wearing that mask, no one would see any of her features. It had a tantalizing, provocative effect. It gave her an air of mystery which, coupled with her superb figure, was devastating.

The Masked Marvella! she would be billed. *The Mystery Woman! Who Is She?* She would be the sensation of the business, Doreen had promised. The same men who had refused to give her a chance at a career would then be clamoring for her. She'd never be able to repay Doreen for that.

To make good was the one big dream of Zelma's life. Her mother—whose statuesque figure she'd inherited—had been one of the biggest names in the business. But fate had punctured that dream when it had given Zelma her father's brawny face. Now, though, she was getting a second chance. Thanks to Doreen.

She went and switched on the bedroom radio. "I can't let Doreen down," she told herself now. She felt a little ashamed. "I'll just practise a few steps in front of the mirror and then I'll sober up in time to meet Doreen and Tommy after the two o'clock show. I'll cold-shower and

drink a bucket of black coffee and I'll be all right."

In front of the full-length mirror, Zelma danced to the beat of the radio band. She was completely lost in the intensity of her own performance when she heard the sound of clapping behind her and a man's shrill whistle of approval. She spun around, a scream rising behind her teeth.

He was standing in the doorway, a tall, thin, middle-aged man dressed like a cartoonist's version of a racetrack tout. A faun-colored fedora was pushed back on his balding head. A cigarette drooped from one corner of his mouth. He grinned around it, a cold expression. He was a handsome man in a sort of rough, hard-boiled and rakish sort of way, the kind of a guy with more brass than a flophouse bed.

"Who—who are you?" Zelma demanded. "How did you get in here? Get out! Get out!"

He put up a hand, palm out, like a traffic cop. "Easy, sis. Don't get your eyeballs in an uproar. I applauded, didn't I? You should save talent like that for an audience. Okay, I'll be your audience. Continue dancing."

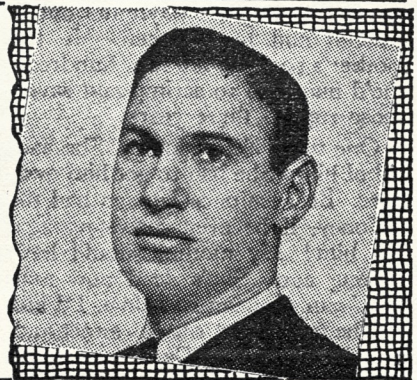
She held back a smile. Zelma was pleased by the flattery and she had to give the guy credit for his gall. "Look," she said. "I'm not fooling. How did you get in here? Not that it really matters. You scam right now before I start screaming. I've got lungs and they'll hear me to hell and back!"

"Go ahead," he told her, the insolent grin still stuck on his face. "I found the door on the latch, so I walked in. If you can find a cop who'll arrest me for enter-

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ing my own daughter's apartment, go to it, sis."

She remembered that the door didn't shut properly unless you went out of your way to slam it. The super was supposed to fix it. Then the import of the man's words penetrated Zelma's liquor-fogged mind. *His daughter!* This guy was Doreen's father, about whom she'd heard so much!

He walked toward her. He swaggered just a little when he walked. He stopped just a few feet away from her, wrinkled his nose, sniffing. "Hey, kid, you've been hitting a bottle. How about sharing the wealth? Maybe a drink'll cut through the inch of fuzz on my tongue."

Zelma didn't move. She just stood there, staring at him, letting her eyes go over him from head to toe.

"Hey," he said. "You think a tough old geezer like me can't have a pretty dish like Doreen for a daughter? Doreen! Listen to that! She's even got *me* calling her that. What was the matter with Dora Zackow? She had to make with the Doreen and change the last name to Darling. Doreen Darling!" He made a spitting sound with his lips as though getting rid of something that tasted bad.

Zelma still didn't say anything. She was remembering things. She was remembering Doreen crying and telling her about the nights she and her mother went without eating because her father gambled and drank up all of his pay. About the time he pulled out on them altogether, with her mother sick in bed. They went through hell for three or four months and didn't see him again until three years later.

He came back then for a week and got drunk, beating the daylights out of both Doreen and her mother. He took her mother's pay and the four hundred dollars she'd managed to scrimp and save during those rugged three years.

One thing Zelma knew. She had to get rid of him. She had to get him away from here. Because once Doreen had told her: "Honey, if he ever shows up again, I'll *kill* him! My mother should have done it long ago. She's dead now and can't, but *I* can. I mean it, Zelma, I'd kill him."

The funny part was, as sweet and gentle a kid as Doreen Darling was, she *had*

meant it. Zelma knew. This man, Doreen's father, had cut deep into the kid. It was because of him that Doreen believed all men were heels. For a long time she'd even thought that about Tommy Anders and still wasn't sold on his being okay.

"Listen, mister," Zelma said. "Maybe I'm talking out of turn but I'm going to tell you something for your own good. You've heard Doreen's in the big money now and you've come to cut yourself in. Well, I don't think you'd better try that, Mister Zackow. Doreen ain't goin' to put up with it. She hates your guts. She—"

"Wait a minute." He stopped her, holding up the hand in the policeman gesture again. His face got ugly and Zelma could see the evil in it. His muddy brown eyes were full of it. She saw his fists ball at his sides. "Who do you think you're talkin' to? Maybe you'd like a little back-of-the-hand thanks for your advice! Maybe I ought to—"

He broke off. Some of the ugliness washed away and the cocky grin came back. "Aw, hell," he said, his eyes dragging slowly over her. "Why do you want to rile me like that? I don't want to get sore at a babe that's constructed like you are."

"Keep my architecture out of it," Zelma told him. "You—"

"How can I, honey?" he cut in. "Hey, listen, what's the idea of the mask? You incognito or somethin'? Take off the mask and let's see your kisser. Then you and I'll go in and have a little drink while we wait for Doreen. And listen, I ain't the heel you think I am. I got dough. I'm loaded."

He stuffed a hand into both trouser pockets, brought out a fistfull of greenbacks. "I hit a parlay. I got ten and ten on it and the top horse pays a juicy price. I'm a money man, today. Where's that bottle you've been punishing?"

THE lift from being here alone in Doreen's apartment was all gone now. But the liquor was hitting Zelma harder, if anything. It was getting her a little groggy, a little fuzzy around the edge of the mind, so that she couldn't think straight. And she had to think straight to get this sharp, fast-talking heel out of the flat before Doreen got back—and

somehow keep him out. Outside of sobering up altogether—and there wasn't time for that—the next best thing was to take another stiff jolt. It would straighten her up, at least temporarily.

"All right," she said. "Come on. I'll buy you a drink." She led the way into the living room. She poured herself a whacking three fingers and downed it fast, watched Doreen's father do the same. She felt a little better and some of the cobwebs cleared from her brain. But she stayed on edge, jumpy.

She kept looking at this man and remembering the things Doreen had told her and hating him more and more for the kid's sake. That grin of his, that cockiness and fast chatter were beginning to give her the creeps. He was on her nerves and rubbing them raw. She had to get rid of him fast.

"Okay, Mr. Zakow," she said. "You've had your drink. Now beat it."

"Hey, what's the hurry?" He arched his brows in surprise. "And skip that mister, stuff. I'm Pete to my friends."

"You're no friend of mine," Zelma said. She felt her voice rising. "You get out of here before Doreen gets back. If she finds you here she'll kill you! She—"

His laughter prevented her from finishing. He roared with it, then cut it off suddenly. The ugliness flowed back into his good-looking, middle-aged face suddenly. "Are you kidding? Listen, if she so much as opens her lip with any back talk to me, I'll beat her silly. She's still my kid, remember. Any kid of mine's got to show respect for her old man."

"Respect?" Zelma laughed now. "For you?"

He was staring at her mask all the time now. He ignored her sarcasm. He said: "Why don't you take off that mask? I asked you before nicely. Now take it off! Or maybe you're ashamed to? Hey, that'd be a good one, if you were wearing that thing because you got a face like a witch, now, wouldn't it? That would—"

"Shut up!" Zelma screamed it, only the sound broke before it reached full height and came out only in a hoarse rasp. Her hands and feet suddenly felt numb. Pains shot through her head like streaks of fire. Something seemed to go wrong with her eyes. She couldn't see this Pete Zackow clearly. His face was all twisted, distorted and separated from the rest of him like some grotesque gargoyle. His voice came through the ringing in her ears, then:

"Now you've got me really curious! Take off that damned mask!"

She couldn't seem to move. It was suddenly as though somebody had nailed her feet to the floor and lead weights were hanging on the ends of her arms. She knew what he was going to do but she couldn't seem to stop him. She felt the mask ripped from her face. Another scream formed in her throat, but, somehow, no sound came out.

"Hell!" she heard him say. "I was wrong. Not like a *witch*! Like a *horse*! Hey, kid, you ain't related to one of them nags that brought that parlay in for me, are you? A horse-faced dame with a torso like Cleopatra! Now I've seen everything!"

Horse-face! Horse-face! Those two words and his laughing voice kept hammering in her ears after he stopped talk-

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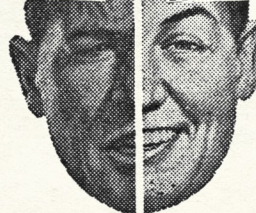
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ing. They grew into a shout, echoing as though a huge hall was filled with thousands of men shouting the nickname at her. And then mingling in with them were childish voices, kid voices from the long ago, using the same hated words. Then they suddenly cut off and there was only the ringing in her ears again.

She felt his hands on her arms, but the paralysis was still upon her and she couldn't do anything about it. She saw his grinning face come close toward hers. She heard his voice saying: "I'm sorry. I was only kiddin', you know that."

"Stop it!" The sound of her own voice sounded far away and unreal. She knew what he was thinking, what they all thought: *I'm going to give this dame a break! Hell, a dame with a phizz like that, doesn't get much attention.* That's what he thinks!

He ignored her. His hands were on her shoulders now, the fingers digging in cruelly. She heard his voice, suddenly whispering, "Listen, sugar, why don't you just slip that mask back on? I go for you in that. I—"

That did it. She wrenched away from him. She felt drowned in the sudden white heat of anger. *Slip the mask back on!* Different lyrics, a little subtle, but the same old tune, the same old story!

She felt her fingers around the neck of the whiskey bottle on the cocktail table. There didn't seem to be any weight to it at all as she raised it. She suddenly felt very tall and as though she was looking down on him from a great height. Her arm swung the bottle up and then down, savagely, with all her strength, against his skull. It made a funny noise when it broke and glass and the liquor that was in the bottle spilled down around his head.

He stood there for a moment, his thinning gray-blond hair suddenly filled with blood, his eyes walling back. Then as though somebody had kicked his legs out from under him, he went down.

The tallness swept away from Zelma and now she felt very small and alone. She looked down at the neck of the broken bottle, its jagged edges glittering, that she still held in her hand. A noise came from her throat, a crazy noise, half sob, half silly giggle. It kept coming and she tried to stop it but couldn't.

HOW long she stood there like that, she didn't know. But when she came out of it, she was cold sober. She looked down at Pete Zackow. Something about the way he lay twisted told her he was dead.

Zelma took the edge of the kimona and raised it up, took hold of the broken edge of the bottle with it. With her other hand, she wiped the part where her fingers had gripped it. She didn't know exactly why she did that, only that it had to be done. Then she dropped the bottle onto the thick rug with the rest of the broken glass.

She went into the bedroom and changed her clothes. Then she left the apartment without looking at the dead man again. She looked at the clock, though, and saw that it was after two. Doreen would be finishing up the early matinee show. She could catch her about now, having coffee with Tommy in the cafeteria around the corner from the theatre. She thought she had better go to Doreen and Tommy and tell them what had happened.

But Zelma didn't do that. Outside, the fresh air hit her and cleared her brain a little. The shock began to wear off. She began to think about what she had done. She had killed a man. She had committed murder.

Now, something like this had to happen! Just as she was getting a break, just when every dream she'd ever had was about to come true. It couldn't. It couldn't be this way.

She walked to a nearby park and sat down on a bench and thought about it some more. Then an idea came to her. Nobody knew *she'd* killed Doreen's father. They couldn't know. She'd wiped off her fingerprints, the only thing that could possibly give her away. Nobody would even think that she'd killed him . . . if she didn't say anything.

They'd think it was Doreen! That struck into her brain like a hot knife. Everything worked out that way. Every day, after they had their coffee, Doreen and Tommy took a walk down by the river between shows. Only today, Doreen would do that alone. This was Thursday. Tommy Anders was a musician in the pit band at the theatre and every Thursday he went down to the Union Hall.

Zelma stopped thinking along those lines. She couldn't let that happen. Not

to Doreen. Everybody knew how the kid felt about her father. They'd really hit her with this thing, if Zelma let it be that way. But she couldn't do that. She owed Doreen too much.

But *did* she? What about Tommy Anders? Who owed who for that? *She'd* introduced Doreen to Tommy. She'd been crazy about Tommy, herself, still was. What difference did it make that Tommy had never felt the same way about her, that she'd only been a friend to him? Maybe if Doreen was not around. . . .

Zelma thought she must be going crazy. She shouldn't think things like that. Not about Doreen. But they kept coming to her. She thought about how with Doreen arrested for murder, there'd be a big hole in the show tonight. She, Zelma, had the routines down pat enough to get by. They were only going to wait another couple of weeks so she could put some final polish to them. She could go on in Doreen's place tonight!

"They'll go after Doreen for this, anyhow," Zelma told herself. "The only thing that could stop them from grabbing her for it would be my going to the cops and telling them the truth—that I killed him!"

She got up off of the bench and started walking toward the heart of town, suddenly knowing that she couldn't do that. She couldn't sacrifice herself for Doreen. Not that way. It was too much. Nobody could make that kind of a sacrifice.

Downtown, she went into a movie house. The police, in routine questioning, would want to know where she'd been. All right, she'd tell them. Her headache had gotten better after Doreen left and she got bored, went out to a movie. As simple as that. . . .

But Zelma didn't see any of the picture. She didn't even know what picture was playing. She kept thinking this thing out and the whole business kept running through her mind. The part that had happened, like a movie reel running in slow motion—the part that was *going* to happen, like a preview of a coming attraction.

And Zelma knew that she couldn't go through with it. To see Doreen being put in jail, to live through the trial, to read about the thing in the newspapers, to hear it on the radio, to have people they both knew talking about it, to see the look on

Tommy Anders' face. To try to sleep nights. To have this thing to live with the rest of her life. . . .

It was late in the afternoon when she got back to Doreen's apartment. She noticed almost absently that the door was either fixed or somebody had slammed it shut. She keyed it open and went in. It was very quiet inside and she wondered if the murder hadn't been discovered yet. But that was impossible. The cleaning woman came on Thursdays, about three o'clock. She would have seen—

Zelma walked into the living room and saw the two men sitting there. One was a stranger, heavy set, with a florid complexion and sleek gray temples, a shrewd-looking, distinguished-looking man. The other was young and handsome in a boyish sort of way. Distaught looking now, with his black hair ruffled and the fine lines of his face strained with anxiety. He jumped up out of his chair and came toward her when he saw Zelma.

"Tommy!" she said and wanted to say some more but nothing more would come out.

He stopped in front of her, took her hands. "Where've you been, Zelma?" he demanded. "We've been worried sick about you. We thought maybe the shock . . . you might be wandering around in a daze or something. Doreen and a police sergeant have gone out looking for you."

"Doreen!" Zelma gasped. "But I—I was afraid they might think she—you know—that Doreen killed him. I—"

"Don't be silly," he told her. "Doreen was with me all afternoon. I didn't go down to the Union Hall today. Anyway, they knew you did it. They found your fingerprints on some of the pieces of shattered glass. And they found a strand of blond hair under his fingernail." His back was to the big man sitting in the chair. He suddenly winked very hard at Zelma. "Don't worry, kid, the police have pretty well figured out what happened. They know about that door. And this guy had a record for breaking and entry. It was either you or him. I—"

She didn't hear the rest of it. She was suddenly dazed and weak. The things Tommy Anders had said whirled dizzily in her brain. But one thing screamed out

at her: They knew *she* had killed him! She'd have only made things worse for herself by pleading innocent, trying to work that silly movie alibi.

She felt Tommy lead her to a chair and she collapsed into it. She was aware of the big man with the gray temples coming over and standing by her. He was Lieutenant Drake, he was saying. He realized she was upset and they didn't want to make her worse, but there were a few details they'd like cleared up. She had nothing to fear, he said. It was a clear-cut case of self-defense against an armed burglar whom she'd caught by surprise.

For a moment she could just stare up at Drake and Tommy. Then it dawned on her that there'd been no mention of the man she'd killed being Doreen's father. They thought he was a burglar and that she'd caught him trying to rob the apartment. Obviously, he must have had a gun in his pocket that she hadn't known about.

Somehow, she got through that interview with Drake. There was a little confusion on her part but nobody seemed to think anything about it. They seemed

to expect it, knowing she was upset. She learned, too, that the police were very glad the thing had happened. They'd been after this Peter Zackow for a long time, they said. She'd just saved them the trouble. It seemed that he had killed a bookie in a holdup the day before.

Later, when it was all over, Zelma and Doreen and Tommy went in for a drink.

Doreen told her that she hadn't used her real name in years and that nobody in this town knew it, so there was no way anybody could connect her with the dead man found in her apartment, as long as she didn't say anything.

For a long time after they finished telling her that, Zelma was quiet. She thought about how she might have spoiled everything if she'd persisted in her plan of trying to make Doreen take the rap for it.

Also with some twist of logic, she felt as though now she could live with that ugly face of hers and the incongruously beautiful body that went with it—as though the disastrous combination had finally done some good for the world.

A SLIGHT CASE OF TREASON

History, criminal and otherwise, is full of the deeds of men who have committed murder for the sake of the woman they loved—sometimes even upon the person of the loved one. But seldom does a gentle male, a henpecked Henry who would not hurt a fly, rate notice in posterity's annals. Mr. John Williams, of Gloucester, England, is the exception.

Mr. Williams did not kill—he died, arsenicked by Mrs. Williams, a bluff and domineering woman. So confident was she of his complete submissiveness, that she carelessly permitted some friends to view her husband's death struggles. And for the first and last time in his life, Mr. Williams talked back!

When his statement was read in court, posthumously, it sealed his widow's fate, even though Mr. Williams declared his indifference to the arsenic he had consumed.

"That I would forgive," the record read, "but I have always detested hot cereal for breakfast and for years she has made me eat it. This morning she stood over me and forced me to finish every spoonful of the cereal with the poison in it. At least, she might have made it more pleasant to take. . . ."

Mrs. Williams was promptly sentenced by an all-male jury.

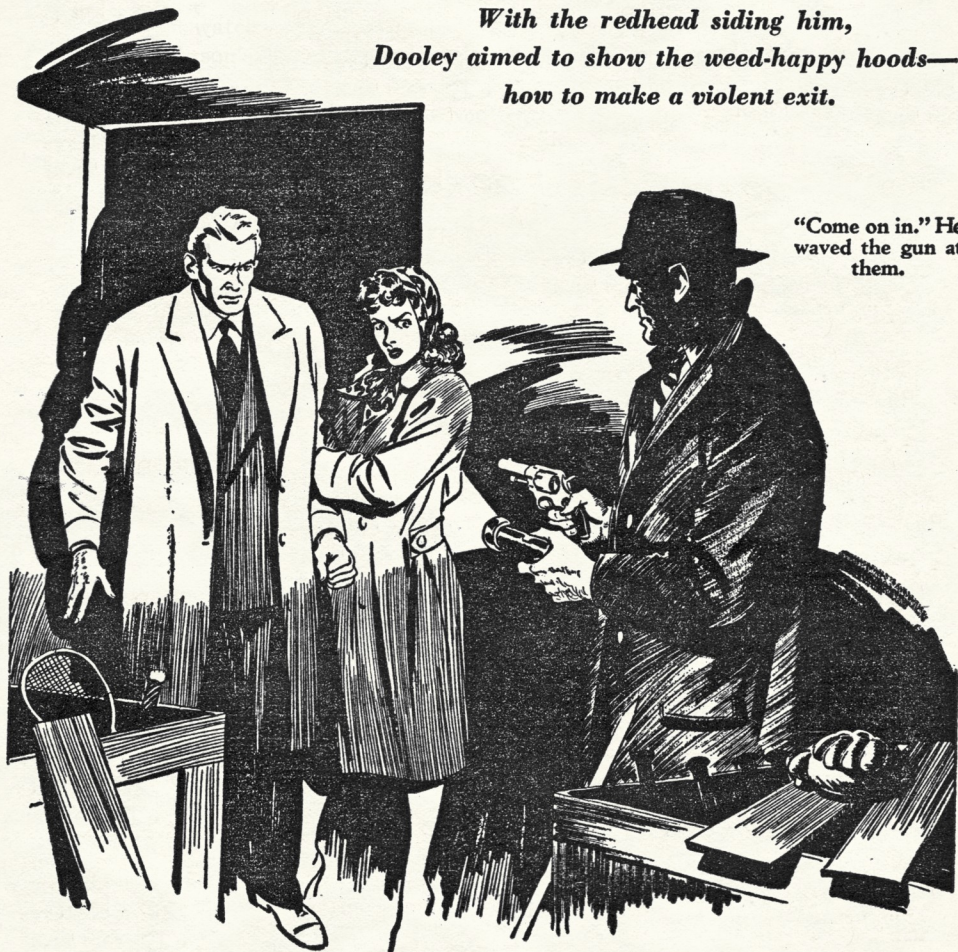
In those days British common law gave a wife-murdering husband an ordinary hanging. But any woman who killed her husband was tried for petty treason, for which the penalty was burning at the stake.

So—the incensed Mrs. Williams was burned up.

E. Jakobsson

ROCK-A-BYE KILLER

*With the redhead siding him,
Dooley aimed to show the weed-happy hoods—
how to make a violent exit.*



*"Come on in." He
waved the gun at
them.*

By **JOHN BENDER**

NOBODY had to tell Dooley that something was wrong at the Club. He sensed it as soon as he walked in. Some of the boys had a game of basketball going, but when they spotted him, the movement of the game almost stopped. They made a big thing of hollering it up again, not looking, Dooley noted, in his

direction, pretending not to see him.

He shrugged and went on down the hall to his office—a big, amiable young man who kept the smile on his face even though he was aware of the tension, the silence now, in the main gym behind him.

It was one of the cardinal rules in Dooley's place—the James Doolittle

Callahan Boys' Club—that all kids were welcome, and on their own. They made their own way and got advice only when they asked for it, which wasn't very often. They were a clannish, independent lot, these neighborhood kids, and you did not stick your nose in where it wasn't wanted.

Dooley knew. Years ago, before he'd become the ball player who had pitched the Titans to three pennants, he had been a kid in this same neighborhood himself.

There was no one waiting for him in his office, which was something else unusual, for a Saturday afternoon. The place was generally jammed with kids, noisy, jabbering youngsters, rough-housing Dooley and each other, fighting for his attention.

On a hunch he went out to the bulletin board in the main hall. The boys sometimes left messages for him there. Jabo, the middle-aged "boy" whom Dooley had put on at assorted jobs around the club, also used the board as a means of communication with his boss.

There was nothing but the notice Dooley had tacked up that morning:

Johnny Toker, the manager of the Titans, promised me twenty-five tickets for tonight's game with the Giants. Anybody interested, check with his folks and sign below.

A notice of that sort usually brought the signatures of the hundred or so neighborhood kids who used the Club. And sometimes the signatures of their male parents as well. Now, there were less than half-a-dozen names pencilled on the sheet.

And Dooley could not read them because they had all been scratched out, with a heavy, crayon pencil.

He rubbed his lean, dark face with his hand and stood there for a moment, considering. He went back to the gym room and interrupted the basketball game long enough to ask if anyone had seen Jabo. No one had.

In the swimming pool, Tony Davito, the teen-age monitor who kept the budding water artists out of trouble, shook his head also. Dooley tried the reading room and the storeroom without success.

Down in the back of the locker rooms, he heard the sobbing, the hushed youthful voices, and Jabo saying it would be all

right—not to cry—it would be all right.

Behind the last row of lockers he found them. In the space sometimes used to store extra equipment, Dooley discovered two kids and Jabo Johnson. The Carter twins—two twelve-year-olds whose father Dooley had gone to school with—sat against the wall, their young faces bruised, their clothing torn and dirty. Jabo was applying a cold-water rag to David Carter's nose, which had bled all over the boy's shirtfront.

"Well," Dooley said, "when did the cyclone hit here?"

He knelt and made a quick, professional examination. The bruises on the boys' faces were colorful and ugly, but Dooley didn't think that they were serious.

"You'll be wearing that mouse to school for a while, Tommy," he told the blond Carter twin. "You and Dave have a little gentleman's argument back here?"

"Not that. Not that at all, Dooley," Jabo said. "They wasn't fightin' one another. No siree! It's that no-good Joey Burns. He been around."

"He beat them up?"

"No, he jes' git things started, what I kin make out. I'm over in the storeroom—we got some crates of sportin' goods come in this afternoon. They's addressed to Mr. Hanson but they's all sports 'quipment, says so right on the boxes, so's the delivery man he say why take 'em over to the Alderman's office when I know they got to come right back here and—"

"Joey Burns?" Dooley reminded.

"Well, I'm working in the storeroom 'n I hear this commotion over here. So they's a couple, three boys back here with this Burns 'n they's so much smoke you think the place is on fire. Lord! So he's givin' the kids these here cigarettes, 'n I tell you, some of them boys, they's really gone."

"Reefers?" Dooley was astounded.

"Yes, siree."

With the help of the Carter twins, Jabo told it economically from there. They had refused to take any of the cigarettes, they said, and some of the other boys had got nasty when the Carters wouldn't join them for a couple of "kicks." There was a lot of pushing and shoving, and finally quite a fight. The sight of blood, finally,

had served to sober things up and the "smokers" had fled.

Dooley listened carefully to it all, the anger building slowly within him.

Dope wasn't new to the neighborhood. This tenement district was a place that bred the need for many kinds of temporary escape. But Dooley had never had any trouble with it in his Club. He had kept the kids busy and contented and clean. The thought of dope itself was bad enough; the thought of these kids of his getting mixed up with it was appalling.

"I want you to close up early, Jabo," he said. "Never mind that new equipment that came in. I want you to take these two boys home, too. Tell their father I'll call him later on."

"Gosh, Dooley," David said. "Jabo doesn't have to take us home. We'll be all right."

"You take them home," Dooley repeated to Jabo. He buttoned his topcoat. "I'll go have a little talk with Joey Burns."

HE WALKED briskly through the chill April sunshine that was disappearing behind the tenement roofs. Crossing Pennoyer Street he heard the youthful voices, the shouts in his direction: "Get the ball, Dooley! Hey, Dooley, toss it here!" and without thinking, or breaking his stride, he scooped up a low-bounding rubber ball and whipped it back into the stick-ball game.

Immediately, he regretted it, feeling the twinge in his left shoulder that was not quite a pain, but the memory of a pain. He recalled a day, two years ago, the shadows reaching out from the grandstand to the pitchers' box, the pain a knife in his shoulder as he handed the ball over to Johnny Toker and called it quits.

The doctors had been right—the arm was burned out, useless, incapable of hurling a baseball any more, and that was that; a life ended. So he had begun a new one. There was the Boys' Club he'd always thought about and for which suddenly he had the time, and more than enough money earned in his six years as the Titans' highest-salaried star to swing the deal.

He hadn't envisioned any trouble, any interference, from men like Joey Burns.

The building, sandwiched between a barber shop and a bar, wore its faded sign like a dirty undershirt, with no pretence at elegance. "*Bowling—Billiards,*" the sign said and underneath, "*12 Snooker Tables,*" in smaller letters.

Dooley went down the long, steep flight of iron stairs, into the place. This cavern of muscular activity held its own offensive breath against the fresh air that he brought in with him.

Most of the pool tables were occupied; on one of them a dice game was in progress. From the rear came the regulated thunder of falling bowling pins.

The men in the place wore different clothes, but there was a sameness to them all that was more pronounced than any uniform. These were the generation of his own age, who could have used a place like the Boys' Club in their earlier youth.

Dooley spoke to one of them. "Joey Burns around?"

The man chalked his cue. "Over on the alleys, I think."

There was a crowd of men bowling on the last pair of alleys, Joey in the middle of them, a little noisier than the rest. In his shirtsleeves, he was a tall and thickly-chested individual whose pants, it seemed, sought refuge in his armpits.

Dooley walked over and stood behind the twin row of spectator seats until Joey Burns looked his way. Then Dooley called him over. Joey was feeling very very high, he saw. The sight of the man, the bright hard eyes, disgusted him anew.

"Wassamatter, you get tired playin' hero for those kids of yours? Or you looking for somebody to go to the ball game with you?" Joey laughed coarsely, the spittle running out of the side of his mouth. "Hey, boys, look who's here! Mr. Boy Scout."

"You were over to my place this afternoon," Dooley said, ignoring the others. "I don't want you pushing reefers on those kids, Joey. I don't want you marking up my bulletin board. Don't come around again, understand."

He emphasized the final word, remembering about his left arm and using just the right hand, spearing it into Joey's solar plexus.

Burns doubled, his face draining of all

color. Dooley brought the flat of his hand up hard against the man's nose. The scream of pain tore Joey's mouth. Another right staggered him toward the wall. As carefully as a butcher cutting up a beef, Dooley stalked him, driving the right hand like an axe.

When he finished, the hulk in the corner bore only a slight resemblance to the dapperly-dressed individual who had been bowling.

The men who had watched this thing take place, looked from Joey to Dooley. Then one of them said, "I'm on a spare. C'mon, let's get rolling. . . ."

On the street again, Dooley had calmed down. Perhaps he had solved little, if anything, by this recourse to violence, but he could not deny that he felt immeasurably better for having worked Joey Burns into something resembling last week's laundry.

He supposed that there would be unpleasant complications. He had no doubt that Joey was just a local pusher, a reefer-happy hood who took orders from a higher echelon. It would be wise, he decided, to talk to Harry. Honest Harry Hanson, the people's choice for alderman, who ruled the neighborhood like a minor kingdom, which, in truth, it was. To Harry came the mighty and the meek, the kids, the grownups, the favor seekers and the party patrons, the scum and the cream of this polyglot society. For over fifteen years he had ruled the neighborhood, quietly but firmly, guiding it politically and morally from his small and dingy office over on Adams Street.

It was to him that Dooley had gone six months before, with his idea of a Boys' Club for the neighborhood. Harry had been intrigued by the plan and Dooley had been amazed at the speed and ease with which Honest Harry had found for him a suitable, tenantless building at a reasonable rental. Hanson had even offered to supply quite a bit of the sports equipment needed, and through some devious arrangement Dooley found himself "on salary."

FROM the phone booth in Straus' little candy store, Dooley called the alderman's office.

"He isn't here," the female voice an-

swered quickly Dooley's first question.

"Do you expect him back today?"

"Who's calling?" The girl's voice was one he didn't recognize. He told her his name and learned that Mr. Hanson was expected back and he hung up. He wondered what the girl on the phone looked like. It was that kind of voice.

He called the Carters and talked to Mary, Ed's wife. The boys would be all right; she thanked Dooley for having sent Jabo home with them.

"That horrid Burns," she added scathingly. She was not a woman who cursed absently or lightly, Dooley knew. "It's not bad enough, all the dope in the neighborhood. They have to get the kids in on the dirty stuff now."

"Don't worry," Dooley said. "Don't worry. I'll keep it out of the Club."

He hoped he could. But the more he thought about it, the worse it seemed. Some of the neighborhood kids were running loose on the weed even now, and he was worried about them. If the neighborhood wasn't boiling with trouble, it was sure as hell simmering. Honest Harry Hanson, Dooley was convinced, was the man to see. The only one who could straighten out this thing.

The alderman's office was a small affair of two rooms on the second floor of a loft building. Dooley pushed in on the door marked simply, "*H. Hanson*," and promptly ground to an abrupt halt.

Honest Harry Hanson's secretary was new, all right. He had never seen her before, and she was the kind of girl you would remember. The red hair alone would have been enough to keep a man from forgetting. And there were other charms, even more attractive, Dooley saw.

"Well," he said.

Quite casually, but aware of him, she finished smoothing her sheer nylon stocking. She said, "I've got a face, too, if you're just in here to wear your eyes down to the quick."

He raised his eyes. Within the silken copper of her hair, the face was very nice indeed. Her eyes were gray and frankly staring, estimating him. She was as lovely as the called third strike that won a no-hit game for you.

She said, "After you stop drooling, are you going to say something?"

Dooley grinned. He took off his hat. "I ought to come in and see Harry more often, that's for sure." More seriously he said, "You told me on the phone a little while ago that you expected him back. I'm Dooley Callahan."

"Ah, the sport world's gift to young America." The gray eyes widened just a trifle and she seemed to bristle less. "I'm Marcy Williams, Mister Hanson's new and beautiful secretary." Her brashness amazed him. "I didn't figure there'd be anyone coming in this late."

Dooley laughed. "Should I have whistled?"

"Before—not after you came in. Wolf whistles annoy me—occupational hazard. But this is my first job; I don't really need a club."

The light-hearted frankness in this red-haired girl was the brightest note of the day, he decided.

"Grab a seat," she told him. "He ought to be back soon." She went over to her desk. "That true about you being out of baseball for good; Dooley? Not just newspaper talk?" She read the answer in his eyes. "When you had it, you had it good, Dooley. You were the best. Pop used to take me to all the Titans' home games. He don't think much of south-paws, ordinarily, but you were top man in his book."

It went that way, easy conversation, the talk moving with the fluid speed of pepper practice before a ball game. It was fifteen minutes more before Hanson arrived, but Dooley and the girl didn't notice the time passing.

Honest Harry came in quietly, wearing his typical sad expression and the inevit-

able cigar, which no one had ever seen lighted. He was a thin man, reaching scarcely to Dooley Callahan's chest, and what there was of him could be contained successfully in a hundred-pound potato sack. He tossed his hat to Marcy and motioned Dooley to follow him into the inner office.

"I hear you had some trouble over at the Club," he began. "I hear you also put the beef on Joey Burns." He frowned. "You should have called me, Dooley, before you started throwing the muscle. Bad business."

The little alderman opened a desk drawer and took out a bottle and a pair of shot glasses. He poured two drinks and carried one over to Dooley.

"What was it all about?"

Dooley told him, holding the glass idly in one big fist. "Burns brought marijuana into the place, fed it to some of the kids." He explained the rest of it while Harry Hanson nodded, the frown fixed on his thin, gray-palored face. "Burns was on the stuff himself. He was feeling cocky, I guess." He mentioned the business of the bulletin board and the scratched-out names. "It looked like bowling alley crayon, and Joey hangs out at Vince's place. So I went over to the alleys and told him to stay away from the Club."

"You didn't call the cops at all?"


"The cops!"

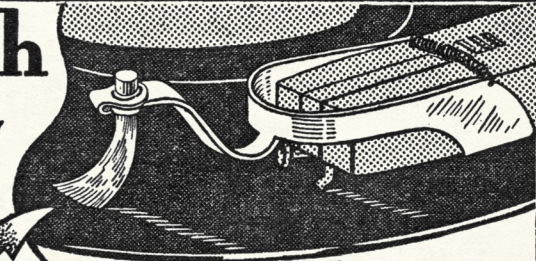
"To cover yourself. Now—it may not look so good. Well, no matter." Honest Harry downed his drink, made a rough noise of distaste deep in his throat. "Dooley, somebody found Joey Burns in an ashcan a little while ago. In the alley

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back of Vince's place. Two slugs in his chest."

As Dooley came to his feet, some of the liquor in his glass spilled out over his hand. "Was he—"

"That's right. Dead," said Honest Harry Hanson "Dead as hell."

THE drink did very little for him. He got up and put the empty glass on Harry's desk and rubbed his big hands together.

"I didn't kill him, Harry."

The little alderman waved his hand. "Nobody's saying you did, Dooley. I trust you, Dooley. You think I just let anyone run a Club in my neighborhood? But the cops are going to be full of questions, is all. How much can you tell them?"

"As much as I told you. As much as I know. Nothing."

"Well, they're not panting for you yet. We have some time."

The door opened and Marcy's red head popped inside. "You told me to remind you about your date with the Downtown Civic Association," she told the alderman. "You gonna make it?"

"Okay, okay," Hanson said. He looked at Dooley. "Don't worry too much about this, lad. I'll put my ear out, see what I can come up with. I don't think the precinct boys will give you any trouble."

Dooley smiled. "That's okay with me." He had no desire to tangle with the law. "I'll be down at the Club if you want to get in touch with me."

"You work nights too?" Honest Harry frowned.

"Some stuff came in today. I ought to clean it up. We got some more equipment this morning—thanks to you. Sports stuff. I ought to get it uncrated."

The alderman walked to the door, shaping his hat carefully to his head. He ran the tip of his tongue over his thin lips. "Why don't you let it go? Take it easy tonight. Won't it wait until Monday?"

"I suppose so."

"Then forget it. Why don't you hang around here? Then I can check with you later."

He was gone, then, and Dooley saw his shadow on the frosted glass of the door as the little alderman talked a moment with

his secretary. As the outer door banged shut, the inner door opened. Marcy Williams came inside.

"Long day," she said. "The boss man said I was to keep you entertained." She put a neatly-manicured hand against her mouth and made a silly gesture with her fingers. "Will that do?"

Dooley grinned. She was very lovely, and he wished that he had met her long ago. She was the kind of girl who could make Saturday night the finest night in the week. He saw her eyebrows climb and he realized that he was staring openly again.

She frowned, saw the bottle on the desk. "How about a drink? Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks."

Marcy shook her head. "This is one hell of a job, Dooley. Mostly I'm supposed to shoo people out of the office. Not keep them in."

He started for the door. "Well, just consider me crazy. Anybody will tell you southpaws are crazy."

He said good night and left. The thought of sitting around Harry's office, even with such a pleasant companion as Marcy Williams, was not enough. He did not feel in the least bit sociable with this business on his mind, nor was he entirely satisfied to be alone. Downstairs, he decided to go back to the Club and get the stuff uncrated. It was something to do at any rate, while he waited for Harry to get the slant on this thing.

Less than half a block away from the alderman's office he heard the tapping of high heels behind him. He turned, and it was Marcy Williams, her glorious hair caught in a silk scarf, a belted camel's hair coat engulfing her. He had not realized that she was so small.

"You're worried about the kids, aren't you?" she asked. She fell in step beside him, taking his arm.

So, all right, he was. The death of Joey Burns had put a darker shading on the affair. Abruptly Dooley realized that she was not demanding that he apologize for running out on her; she was simply talking fact.

"You think you can find something at the Club?" She had a knack for essentials.

"It's a long chance," he said.

She grinned. "I guess my boss meant for me to stick with you. I've never been in a boys' club before."

Going in the front door Dooley said, "You don't really have to hang around, you know. I'll tell Harry you did your best."

The red-haired girl smiled. "You don't get rid of me that easily, Dooley, me boy."

They went inside. Dooley pointed out the gym, the pool, the reading room; and she professed to be quite fascinated.

"You've a wonderful place here," she said. "It's fine for the boys, Dooley."

As they approached the storeroom, they heard the sound—the clank of metal on a stone tile floor.

"Some of the kids do night work?" Marcy asked.

"Probably Jabo came back," Dooley said.

He could see the faint light coming from the storeroom, which did not strike him as strange until he pushed open the heavy, metal fire-stop door and found the man inside.

MOST of the crates had been opened, and the crow bar which lay on the ground indicated that the man who faced them had been working at the task. He was a tall man, well-dressed, and the gun in his hand seemed a natural addition to his wardrobe.

"Busy little joint, ain't it?" the gunman said, holding the two of them in the beam of his flashlight. "Come on in." He waved the gun at them.

"What are you doing here?" Dooley demanded.

"Waiting for a street car." The man looked from Dooley to the crates. "Which one of these things has the footballs in it?"

When Dooley did not answer, the man came over to the doorway, waving the flashlight toward the packing cases. "Okay, buster. You look like you got a strong back. Open up them crates. G'on. There're footballs in one of them."

Marcy shuddered. "Humor the fellow, Dooley. Give him a nice new football. For heaven's sake, give him a dozen footballs!"

They moved toward the big boxes.

Dooley had no clear idea of what was happening, but he realized that the man behind the gun was not making idle conversation. The weapon was in earnest. He had a sudden, intuitive impression that the gunman was somehow connected with Joey Burns, deceased. He paused, standing just beyond the axis of the open door.

"You seen Joey Burns lately?" Dooley asked.

The gunman started. In that brief unguarded second, Dooley thrust out with his long leg, slamming the metal door, virtually sweeping the other man out into the corridor. Plunging behind the motion, Dooley caught the door with his shoulder and slammed it shut. He swung in place the long metal brace which pivoted on a stud bolt in the center of the door, locking it.

A pair of shots tore into the silence. They thudded into the door and Dooley fell away.

"Dooley! You all right?" There was no panic in Marcy Williams' voice, just the quiver of excitement.

"I'm okay," he told her. He nodded at the door. "He can't blast his way through that thing."

She took a deep breath. "This isn't my idea of fun for a Saturday night. I suppose Jesse James outside will go away."

As if in answer, the man called, "Open up! Play it smart and you don't get hurt. Lemme in!"

Dooley and the girl stood close together in the darkness, their breathing rapid. He felt her trembling. She was nervous, as was he, but she was not complaining, and it pleased him.

He found the lights and snapped them on, then went over to the packing crates. He pried open the remaining boxes. There were footballs in one of them, sure enough. They lay flat, deflated, in the sea of excelsior. But a couple of them, near the bottom of the crate, were suspiciously lumpy.

With his penknife, Dooley slashed the leather and examined their contents. Two packages, not very large, and wrapped tightly in wax paper. He whistled softly, holding them for Marcy to see.

"This is what he was after."

She looked at it. "Dope?"

Dooley nodded. "Looks like it. Uncut. Heroin, I think."

The girl whistled. In the corridor outside there was another shot. The door bolt jumped in its housing, but it held.

"Open up, dammit!" the gunman called.

What do we do now?" Marcy asked.

Any number of things suggested themselves to him, but they were impossibilities all. The small room was windowless, without connection to the outside world of the neighborhood. There was no phone, and even if there had been an extension, all the calls funneled into the switchboard in the main office, which was untenanted.

He held the packages, looking around the room. "Wait a minute!" In the corner, behind the many stacks of baseball bats, old and new, he spied the seldom-used sink. "Go other there and run the water," he told her.

As she did so, Dooley carefully applied his weight against two of the larger, heavier crates, moving them silently until they stood almost tightly together. Into the space between them, he dropped the packages of wax paper, then he jammed the boxes as flush as possible.

He raised his voice, calling to the man outside: "Hear that water? We're running this junk down the drain!"

The gunman yelled, "Wait a minute! Don't!" The water splashed into the basin. "Look, just open the door, and nothing happens. Honest! You got a half a million bucks worth of junk there, man!"

He broke off with an abrupt angry squawk, and the sound of his footsteps receded down the corridor. Dooley motioned for the girl to shut off the water, listening for any further sound from outside. There was only silence.

"Is he gone?" Marcy asked.

Then they heard the scuff of feet in the corridor, the sudden, naked command, "Drop it! Drop that gun!" and the pounding stutter of two guns. A pair of shots exchanged. Then a third, reverberating, rolling the waves of sound against the door behind which Dooley and the girl crouched.

"Dooley?" came the voice. "You all

right?" the little man outside asked.

"Why, it's Mr. Hanson!" Marcy said.

"All clear out here," Honest Harry Hanson called in to them. They could hear the alderman chuckling grimly. "You can relax," Hanson said. "I got him."

With a sigh of relief, Dooley opened the metal door and stepped outside. He saw the little alderman, the unlighted cigar in one corner of his mouth, the smoking revolver in his hand. Then Dooley felt the searing pain shatter his vision into a vivid, red-tinged cloud of nothingness and he was conscious only of the plunge which he was taking. The walls, the faint light, the alderman—everything swam into a red mist and he was falling, falling, his legs weak and ineffective. . . .

HE WAS lying in the corridor, his head and shoulders cradled in the girl's lap, and she was speaking to him, calling his name as if from a great distance. His head was a balloon that threatened to soar away from his body; the side of his face was numbed beyond all pain.

"He's all right," a voice said gruffly. "I didn't clout him that hard."

"Come on, Dooley. Come out of it."

He opened his eyes part way and saw Honest Harry Hanson standing there, the gun in his hand held casually but with unmistakable purpose, saw the gunman siding him, covering him and the red-haired girl who tended him.

It was a long trip back to full consciousness, because the things that came into his mind distracted him with their significance. The full detail was missing, but the shape of this night's events was enough to fill him with despair. This betrayal by Honest Harry Hanson was the final, bitter knowledge.

He heard the girl say, "Don't!" in an anguished whisper, but the politician's foot dug into Dooley's side, jarring him. He sat up groggily.

"Where's the stuff you took out of the footballs?" Harry asked.

Dooley grunted, "I ran it down the drain, inside."

"The hell you did! Don't try stalling. We didn't find any traces of it in the sink. I want it, Dooley. Real bad. A half

million dollars worth of junk ain't peanuts."

"I haven't got it," Dooley said.

He was not stupid enough to think that handing the stuff over now would end this nightmare. Sure, he was stalling. So long as they didn't find the dope, he and Marcy were safe; they had five hundred thousand dollars worth of insurance.

"Don't make me get rough about this," Hanson said. The small man's smile was cold. "I'm willing to play ball with you, Dooley." He grunted an imitation of a laugh at his own humor. "We can work this thing out nice for all of us."

Dooley got to his feet. "Honest Harry Hanson, friend of the people. 'Sure, Dooley, I'll get your Boys' Club started for you. Get it all set up. Don't worry about a thing.'" He spat.

"The Club was the perfect front you'd been hoping for, wasn't it? Hide your dirty sideline behind the kids' place. Cover the whole thing up with Dooley Callahan's reputation." He shook his head. "But you had to start passing the stuff to the kids, too! That's the worst—"

"No," Harry said. "No, Dooley!" It seemed important to the little alderman that he plead a point. "I wasn't after the boys. That was Joey Burns' idea—all his own. He was just supposed to make sure the shipment was in. But he had to play wise guy, and get some of the kids weed-happy. I took care of him for getting careless."

He stopped, aware that he had said too much. His small, beady eyes considered Dooley and the girl. He threw his cigar away, and he waved the gun menacingly.

"Come on, Dooley, use your head."

There was a chance, a bare chance, that someone on the outside had heard the shooting and would eventually investigate. There was a chance that Jonniver, the beat cop, might come in the door any minute. There was a chance, Dooley thought, as the seconds ticked away and Hanson's eyes grew tighter, that General Custer and his cavalry would come riding in, sabers drawn and bugles blaring.

"The hell with him," the gunman told Hanson. "Lemme work on the babe. She knows where he put it. She'll talk when I get through with her."

The silence hung between them. Dooley watched the girl's full lips tremble at the threat. Then her gray eyes flashed her defiance and she shook her head.

"Don't worry, Dooley," she said. "I'll take my turn at bat. We're still in the old ball game."

Foolish? A nervous attempt at flippancy? He was amazed at her reaction, but even more amazed at the effect within himself. The cold shiver of anticipation ran through his lean body as the idea came alive.

He cleared his throat. "Don't!" He looked from the gunman to Hanson. "Leave her alone, Harry. I'll—I'll show you where the stuff is."

"Don't be a fool, Dooley!" she cried.

He didn't feel that he was being a fool. He felt exactly like he had that day when the last pennant was in sight and hung on one more pitch. He was cold inside figuring the thing, making his decision. This one was the big one.

With Hanson and the gunman trailing him and Marcy, Dooley led the way back

(Please continue on page 95)

New
Monroe Doctrine:
"Switch to Calvert!"



NEW YORK, N. Y.—George H. Monroe, New York singer and entertainer, advises men of moderation: "Switch to Calvert Reserve—as I have. Calvert really is lighter, milder, finer. It always makes your occasional highball taste better."

HOLIDAY FOR A

CHAPTER ONE

Down in Davy Jones' Locker

THE sky was too blue to be real and the powderpuff clouds looked painted on. From the shoreline out, Fallen Leaf Lake was an incredible shading of palest turquoise into deep emerald. Only the gentlest breeze swept from the pine-studded mountains across the surface.

From the float I could see the gentle

sweep of the beach as it curved past summer homes down to the lodge a mile or two away. Slightly to the left, A. P. McEachon's place stood among the trees, a brown shingle house with a sharply pitched roof and a mammoth native stone chimney at one end. A gravel path wound from the long porch down to the roadway, beginning again on the other side to end

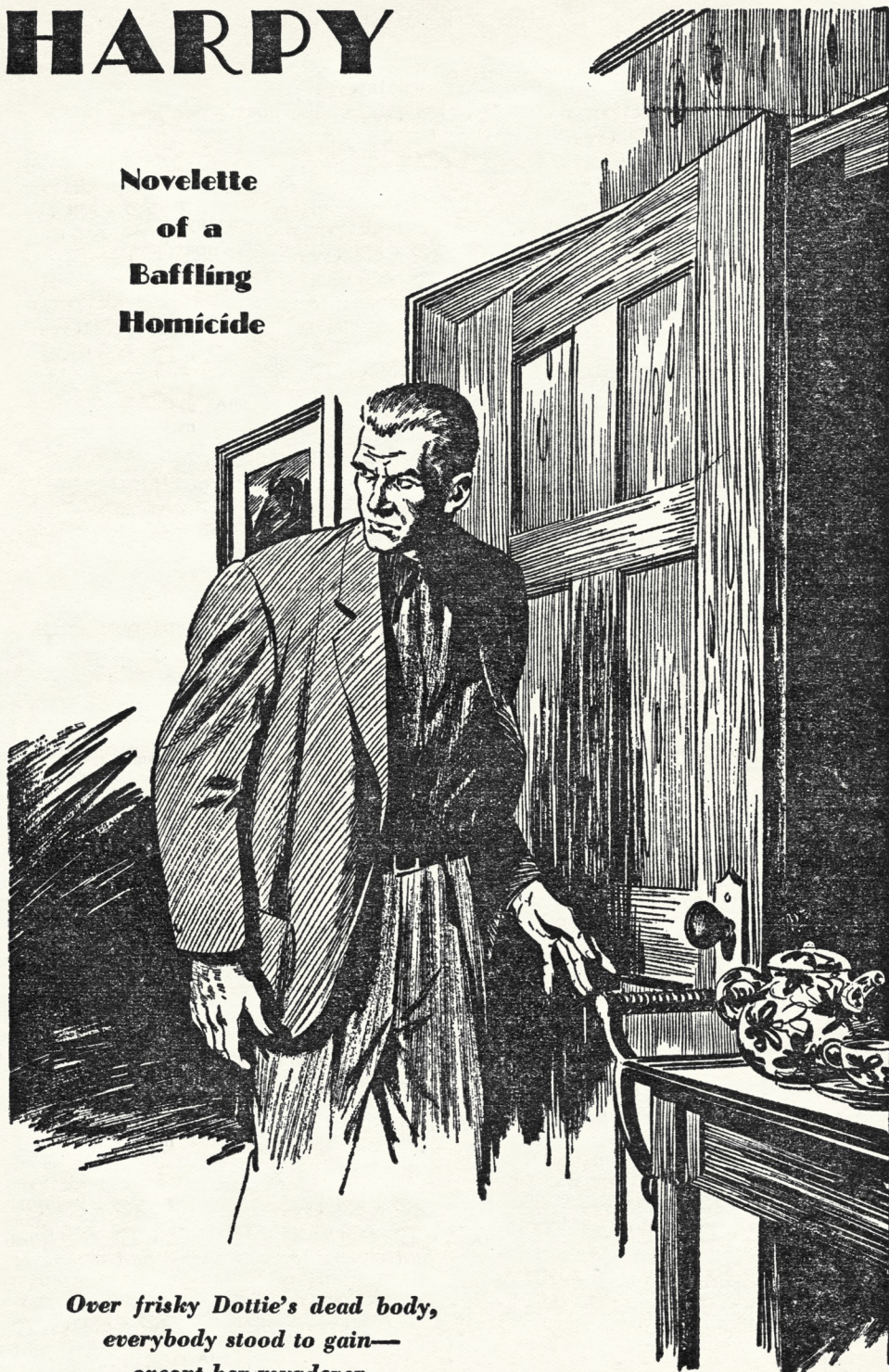
Both his hands were tight
around the butt. . . .



By R. M. F.
JOSES

HARPY

**Novelette
of a
Baffling
Homicide**



*Over frisky Dottie's dead body,
everybody stood to gain—
except her murderer.*

at a small boat pier about fifty feet from the float.

George Andrus was coming down the path, a slight, stoop-shouldered figure in a flowered purple-and-crimson sport shirt and white ducks. A duraluminum canoe was capsized on the pier, which Andrus tried to launch. The canoe probably didn't weigh over fifty pounds and the drop to the water was only a few feet, but he had to struggle with it. One end dropped first, shipping a bucketful of water, then the other went in with a splash.

I could have swum over and helped him without exerting myself, but George Andrus and I weren't speaking—at his election. He carefully removed his tan-and-white shoes and left them on the edge of the pier with his socks. His feet were nearly as white as the ducks covering his legs.

Somehow he made it to the rear seat without going over, and paddled in my direction. The aluminum nose bumped the side of the float and I grabbed the gunwale to steady it.

The thin face was serious and his pale eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses were full of purpose.

"I came out to ask you to bury the hatchet, Britten," he said. "I guess I was pretty childish."

I jumped inwardly when he called me *Britten*. My birth certificate bore the name of Lee Duane and after using it for thirty-odd years, a change came hard.

"Forget it," I said, and took his outstretched hand. "No point in a quarrel spoiling our stay here."

"I should be used to Dottie making a pass at every pair of pants within reach," he said dismally. "But I'm not. I guess I had a few too many drinks."

Dottie was his wife, a little blonde with hair like combed lamb's wool and a pouting face. From the neck down, she was a different story and one that a couple of ounces of bathing suit told eloquently: On the over-developed side with more curves than a coil spring.

Two nights before we had gone over to Cal-Neva, where Dottie had fastened leach-like around my neck after her fourth scotch and splash. Andrus had taken exception—with a wild right that knocked a rye and water out of my hand and

immediately brought the bouncers running.

By the time the dust had settled, Dottie had promoted a cab back to Fallen Leaf, packed up and left, and Andrus went off someplace to get drunk. The rest of us lost our shirts at roulette.

The breeze across the lake stiffened and a black thunderhead cloud edged over the mountain rim. The canoe skittered on embryo whitecaps and Andrus tried to keep his balance, clutching at the gunwales.

He was more out of place in a canoe on a mountain lake than he was in his sports getup. For him only a dark business suit and an executive model desk fitted, which was exactly what went with his assistant treasurer'ship at Pacific Home Insurance Company.

"She went to Reno," he said. "Not to get a divorce, although sometimes I wish she would. Look, I got this from her today." He fumbled with the purple hibiscus that formed a pocket on his shirt and handed me a postcard. One side had a lithograph of the Washoe county courthouse and the other bore a few lines of erratic scrawl.

Met the most divine man. Having a wonderful time. Don't wish you were here.
Dottie

Andrus said petulantly: "After all, Warren Reiger is my boss. Walking out isn't enough. She has to send this sort of thing for everyone to read. Drunk as a lord when she wrote it, too."

The edge of the thunderhead reached the sun and blotted it out like a window shade. A gust of wind across the lake almost pulled the canoe out of my hand. Warren Reiger appeared on the porch of the house and cupped his hands against the wind.

"Squall's coming up. Bring the boat in."

I gave the canoe a shove. "Paddle it back in the lee of the pier. I'll swim over and give you a hand with it."

Andrus nodded, his thin face peaked with concern, and I dove off the float. The wind drove the canoe to the pier before I covered half the distance in the water. By the time I reached the ladder on the near side, Andrus was around on the other, waiting and hanging onto a piling

to keep from drifting with the current.

HALFWAY out of the water, I stopped. Something in the black heaving water under the pier caught my eye. Something like a dirty sponge floating a few feet under the surface and shifting with the currents.

"Hurry up," George yelled. "It's beginning to rain."

It was, and the wind cutting across the water was sharp against bare skin, but the clamminess I felt was something more than cold could bring. I looked into the water again, for quite a long time. Then I climbed to the pier and helped Andrus with the canoe. Once it was docked, he scampered up the path with his head ducked against the big splattering rain-drops.

Reiger was still on the porch when I got there, a big, chesty man with cropped, iron-gray hair and a nut-brown face.

"These squalls can come up fast and hard. Last year a couple of kids were drowned when the wind swamped their boat." He was wearing gray flannels and a soft tweed coat over a creamy wool shirt.

"Can you dig up a raincoat and come with me?" I asked.

"Sure. What's up?"

"I'll tell you on the way down."

He was back in a minute or two with a black oilskin. We went back along the pathway. It was really raining now and the pines writhed in the wind. I still had only my trunks on, but I wasn't thinking of the cold.

"I think Dottie Andrus is in the water under the pier."

I'll always remember the expression that crossed his tanned face. It had shock and amazement in it, and concern—for Andrus, I supposed.

"You're crazy," he said hoarsely. "Dottie Andrus is in Reno. George got a postcard from her today."

We were on the pier by then and a peal of thunder rolled down the mountainside and across Fallen Leaf. I had to shout to get my voice above the wind. "I don't know how he got the card, but I'll still give odds she's underneath here."

"What are you going to do? I can't help much with these burns." He moved his bandaged right hand. The morning

before he'd wakened the house trying to light the butane oven.

"I'm going in the water again," I said, without much pleasure at the prospect. "I didn't want to while Andrus was here. She might not be very pretty."

"Lord!" Reiger said thinly.

The waves were higher now and slapped me against the piling. I worked my way from one timber to the next and a few times water broke over my head. The pale, blurred object was still visible under the water, fainter now under the ruffled surface, and almost directly below. Ducking around a pile, I took a deep breath and let myself sink. It was too dark underwater to see far, but I was close enough.

A foot or two away, Dottie Andrus' streaming blonde hair and waxen face loomed in the shadowed water, rigid and staring...

Someone said: "We ought to call the police."

Reiger didn't look up from the straight bourbon he was pouring. Water dripped off the black slicker and formed a puddle on the floor in front of the blazing stone fireplace. His skin had a gray tinge to it under the tan and his lips were compressed thinly.

"Go ahead," he said. "There's a phone at the lodge and one at Tahoe City."

No one moved. Rain blurred the windows and hammered on the roof. Every minute or so, a flicker of lightning shimmered through the windows and thunder crashed.

Except for Andrus, we were all in the big pine room in the center of the house. I was dressed and a couple of ounces of bourbon rested like half-cooled lead under my belt. I felt the need of more, a great deal more.

There were three people there besides Reiger and myself. Cathy Cain, a serious little girl with an innocent face, who was Reiger's secretary at Pacific Home; Miles Rand, a good-looking man with expressionless, fishy eyes and slick blond hair; and Avis Dunbar who was sitting beside me on the couch flanking the fire. Reiger had a wife but she was off somewhere crusading for the rights of woman.

Cathy Cain was busy collecting ashtrays on a squeaking tea wagon, with the precise

motions of a girl who would be efficient as hell at any routine job—housework, putting nuts on bolts, or as Reiger's secretary. Miles Rand leaned against the mantel of the fireplace in a calculated pose, idly rocking the highball in his hand.

"Poor George. What a terrible thing for him." This was from Avis Dunbar. She was a tall brunette with a severely beautiful face and hair as lustrous as an oil slick, drawn back tightly from her temples. A wide, even mouth and deep green eyes, almost brown. I wouldn't have fought off sympathy from her, myself, but I thought the dunking had been a little harder on Dottie than George.

They all worked at Pacific Home Insurance Company, which was the reason they were there—and it wasn't social. I was supposed to be in the insurance racket, too, and be on old pal of the company's president. Actually, I was neither. When I wasn't fishing dead bodies out of the water, I could be found in a small office on the wrong part of Spring Street in Los Angeles. An office with *Confidential Investigations* on the door.

McEachon, Pacific Home's top man, had maneuvered this gathering at his place. I didn't ask him how he did it; the important thing was that the right people were there.

CATHY finished with the ashtrays and started collecting empty glasses. She shuddered. "Gee, I hate to think of her down there in that boat-shed. All alone, and the rain pouring down."

Miles Rand finished his drink. "What difference does it make to her? You might as well be realistic about this sort of thing. I can even see how it happened. She came back here, probably had a couple of slugs of scotch while she packed, then wandered off the end of the pier, drunk. She always did drink herself blind."

Avis Dunbar asked: "How do you know it happened night before last? And where are the clothes and suitcase she took?"

Rand grinned at the dark-haired girl. When he smiled at her, there was more than just pleasantry in it. He looked ready to drool. "Elementary, my dear Dunbar. She was wearing the dress she had on the night we were at Cal-Neva.

You know Dottie wouldn't wear a dress twice in a row."

"Or at—"

Rand flushed. "Don't say it, Avis," he interrupted. "I may be cold-blooded, but I wouldn't make a crack like that."

The brunette shrugged and tapped her nails against the rim of her glass. "Go on. About the suitcase."

"It must have gone in with her. Right now it's somewhere on the bottom. She would be, too, if her arm hadn't caught in the pier bracing. I think it takes something like a week for a body to come to the surface."

Little Cathy Cain gave the groaning tea cart another shove and shivered again. "Gee, just think we were all swimming down there yesterday. Why, if anyone had swam over to the pier, they might have—" Her eyes widened in amazement. "But Mr. Andrus got a postcard from her this morning. It came from Reno and it was mailed yesterday. How—"

"I was waiting for someone to get to that." Miles Rand stepped off the hearth and rocked on the balls of his feet, trying to look self-important and succeeding very well. "There's an explanation for that—if you'll leave that cart alone for a minute, Cathy. Let's say Dottie planned to go back to the city but she wanted to take a dig at George. You all know how she loved to do it—except maybe you, Britten, but you can take my word for it."

I grunted and he went on.

"So she picked up the postcard on the way over, wrote her little note and paid someone to mail it in Reno. Hell, she could have done it any where along the line—Truckee, Tahoe Lodge."

He stopped and no one called him a liar. "Now this is very important, I think," he said and he wasn't doing at all well in appearing casual. He swallowed once or twice.

"The point is, Dottie's death was just a hell of a lousy accident. There's no reason to make it any more. But that postcard is likely to make trouble. By the time the papers are finished with it, this whole thing will be blown up into a front-page mystery. I think George will have gone through enough without that, and I don't think you want this houseparty to turn into a scandal, do you, Warren?"

Reiger was slumped in a chair and his voice came from the depths of it. "You're damned right I don't. Especially with my wife not here."

"All right then." Rand looked ready to jump into the air and click his heels together three times. His face brightened and he seemed to shrink back into a size for his clothes. "We're all agreed. Nobody says anything about the postcard and I'll explain it to George. While we're at it, might as well burn the damned thing up. Anybody know where it is?"

"Yeah. Right here," I said, and tapped the chest of my coat. "I borrowed it from Andrus."

"Oh?" That was a punch below the belt, but he recovered and held out his hand. "Let's have it then, Britten."

I didn't have a chance to tell him to go to hell. The door at the end of the room swung violently open, rattling the thin partition walls, and George Andrus stood in the opening, pale and red-eyed. His mousy hair was rumpled and the gaudy purple-and-red shirt was a travesty of the grief in his face.

"Do you have to sit out here, going over it and over it? Don't you think I can hear you?" His voice tightwalked on the edge of hysteria and his shoulders shook.

Reiger came out of his chair and crossed the room quickly. "I'm sorry, George. We'll stop."

Andrus' head dropped. "We fought all the time, but...I..."

Avis Dunbar left the couch beside me. I admired the view I had of her snug gabardine skirt and nyloned legs. It may not have been the time or place, but I probably would have even if she had been

walking to throw a fatal switch on me.

"We know how you feel, George," she said softly. "Just try to forget. It was simply a terrible accident, that's all."

There may have been a more appropriate time and place for the remark I made, too, but I didn't wait for it.

"The hell it was. She was murdered."

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight Caller

MILES RAND exhaled as if his windpipe had split. "You're kidding, Britten," he said with a sickly smile. His glance crawled in the direction of Avis Dunbar like a dog with a broken leg.

"Go look at her throat," I said. "She was strangled. Probably dead before she ever hit the water. An autopsy will tell."

Every set of eyes in the room moved to George Andrus. He looked from one to the other, reading the kindling suspicion. The tall, dark-haired girl moved back a step from him and Reiger abruptly took his hand off Andrus' shoulder.

"But I didn't. I didn't..." George Andrus said weakly, realization stark behind his glasses.

Rand planted himself in front of me. He had recovered now and was trying hard to look tough. "Say, what the hell is this, Britten? Since when did someone pin a cop's badge on you? I don't go for the way you do things, and I don't mind telling you, even if you are the old man's best buddy."

There was no point in holding out on them any longer. It was bound to come

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out as soon as the local law stepped into the picture. I fired my cigarette into the flames and got off the couch.

"My name isn't Britten. It's Duane—Lee Duane. I've got a license that says I'm a private detective and Pacific Home is paying me to prove it."

Warren Reiger leaned forward in his chair and looked sharply at me under his brows. "I thought there was something strange about the way you changed the subject every time I brought up the insurance business. Just what is it the company's paying you for?"

"To give one of you a nice long vacation at a country estate called San Quentin," I said. "Pacific Home's last audit showed up some missing securities—about thirty thousand dollars worth of them in bearer bonds. That was a month or so ago. Since then even the office cockroaches have been under investigation—"

I broke off and looked around the circle of attentive faces. For one of them, this wasn't news but their expressions weren't telling anything—except for Miles Rand. The blond's face was a dirty yellow.

"—with no results," I went on. "Except to narrow it down to you people for one reason or another, mainly opportunity to get at the bonds."

Reiger swore softly. "Well if this isn't jolly. I suppose McEachon thought of this little vacation, with you going through everyone's luggage. I don't suppose you'd want to tell me what reasons besides opportunity narrowed it down to us, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," I said. "One thing I can tell you, though, is that I got the job because I wasn't known in San Francisco. The surety company wanted to keep it under wraps until it broke or we hit a stone wall. As for the idea of coming up here, I thought if you all got together somewhere without your office manners, a break might fall in my lap."

"And how are you doing?" Avis Dunbar asked.

"Not bad. A murder ought to shake things loose." I picked up Reiger's slicker from the hearth where it was drying and pulled it on. "I'm going down to the lodge to call the law. In case anybody is thinking of taking a walk, go ahead. There's only one road out of here, remember."

It took me nearly thirty minutes to drive to the lodge, a distance of a couple of miles. The windshield wipers that could clear this kind of rain hadn't been made. In one place half the dirt road was washed away and the whole stretch was a bog. When I got there, they told me a tree had taken the line down and it wouldn't be working until morning, if then.

I turned the car around and drove back to the house. Tahoe City was a lot farther and the rain wasn't letting up. Driving there after dark on a washed-out road would have been one way to give Dottie Andrus company down in the boat shed.

A couple of the upstairs rooms were lighted and only the ruby flicker of the fire showed in the living room. Except for Reiger and Avis Dunbar, the room was empty and they obviously weren't expecting visitors. The back of his tweed coat was toward me and the girl's arms were around his neck.

The gust of wind sweeping in the open door gave them notice. They pulled apart. The proper Miss Dunbar didn't look so proper at the moment. Her face was flushed and her hair disordered. She straightened her blouse, touched a hand to her hair and walked past me. As she went by, I got a look that could have frozen Lake Tahoe in mid-July.

Reiger dabbed a handkerchief at a smear of lipstick on his mouth and walked over to the liquor stand. The level in the bourbon bottle was considerably below where it had been when I left.

"How about a drink?" he asked hoarsely.

"No, thanks."

He shrugged and poured one for himself. "Raise anybody at the sheriff's office?"

"The line was out. I'll have to wait until morning."

He took his drink down in a quick, neat shot and faced me. Little red veins colored the whites of his eyes and the flare of the fire lent the same shade to his skin. "Hell, a man's got a right to a little fun where he finds it."

"I'm after thirty thousand iron men," I said. "Not evidence in a divorce case."

"That's right," he said wearily. "Think you'll find it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. By this time it

could all be spent—down the drain.”

“But you do think Dottie Andrus was strangled.”

“No doubt about it,” I said. “And I think she was strangled by the person who took the bonds and for a reason having to do with them. Just what, I don’t know.”

He grinned wryly. “That would make it either Miles or George, or myself. A woman couldn’t have done it, could she?”

“Maybe—particularly if Dottie Andrus was too drunk to put up much of a fight. A woman might have done it because she thought it made it look like a man’s work. A smart girl might have figured that way—say like Avis Dunbar.”

“Oh, hell,” Reiger said with disgust. “Why would she finish off Dottie? What reason would any of us have, except George, perhaps?”

“I don’t know. Avis Dunbar started to make a crack about Dottie earlier to-night.”

“Nuts,” said Reiger. “That doesn’t mean anything. How could she have gotten here and then come back to Cal-Neva before we left?”

“There were three cars there. Yours, Rand’s and Andrus’. Maybe she borrowed one of them and whoever loaned it to her isn’t saying. Rand might have loaned her his—or you.”

Reiger shook his head firmly. “Count me out, Duane.” He expanded his big chest and yawned. “I’m turning in. We gave Andrus a sleeping pill so he shouldn’t start raving for a while.”

HE WAS nearly out of the room when he stopped. “You’ll hear this sooner or later anyway. George Andrus had Dottie’s life insured for thirty thousand—the same amount as the value of the bonds that were taken. Sort of a coincidence, isn’t it? Probably doesn’t mean anything, though. Being in the business, he was insurance-conscious like all of us and he could get it at cost.”

After he had gone, I made myself a highball and drank it before the bed of cherry embers in the fireplace. The memory of getting Dottie Andrus out of the water was too fresh to go to bed cold. It was a little after ten when I finished it, turned out the lights and left the room.

My bedroom was on the second floor,

off a narrow balcony running above the big living room and reached by a set of open stairs. Miles Rand was next door to me and the two girls had the third room. Andrus was below on the first floor and Reiger’s room adjoined his.

I didn’t go directly to my room. I opened the door to George Andrus’ room and looked in on him. A wedge of light fell through the partly opened door and across the twisted blankets on his bed. In the next room Warren Reiger stirred around, making the small sounds of a man undressing and emptying his pockets on a bureau.

Andrus slept restlessly, shifting and mumbling, his narrow face threadbare with exhaustion. I touched his shoulder and he groaned but didn’t awaken. A thirty thousand dollar insurance policy, I thought, and was glad I wouldn’t be in his shoes when the law showed up the next day.

Almost leaving, I noticed the hand gun on the pine table beside his bed, and reached across the sleeping man to pick it up. A small hammerless .32 revolver, loaded in all five cylinders and without any identifying marks. A cute toy to leave around within reach of a prime murder suspect.

I closed the breech and put it back on the table. If George Andrus had choked his wife and intended to blow his brains out, he might as well. The taxpayers would be duly grateful.

Five minutes later I was in my room, digging through my suitcase until I found what I wanted: a Colt .38 automatic in a shoulder clip. The holiday was over now. So long as people were tossing each other off the boat pier, Lee Duane would spend no more days in the sunshine.

Fortunately, there was an overstuffed chair in the bedroom. I dragged it next to the window overlooking the road, took off my shoes and loosened the color of my shirt. I had just finished checking the clip in the automatic when the knock on my door came, as soft as a kitten walking on cotton.

Avis Dunbar was on the balcony outside, the darkened living room behind and below her like a black velvet backdrop for the white satin robe around her. The sleek dark hair was down around her

shoulders and a puff of silk and lace nightgown showed at her throat.

"May I come in, or do I have to stand in the hall while you stare?"

I stepped back. "I can stare just as well inside."

She passed me, leaving a wake suggestive of perfume and soft warmth. At the window, she faced me, her hands clasped tightly enough to whiten the knuckles.

"I wanted to talk to you before you jumped to any conclusions about... about what you saw tonight."

"Such as?"

Her mouth was a thin line of impatience. "That's pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm not worried about my own reputation. It's Mr. Reiger I'm thinking about. He's been pretty decent to me and I wouldn't want to be a party to something that hurt him."

"I suppose you mean his wife."

"I do mean his wife," she said. "I don't know her very well, but, judging by what I've seen of her, she's a woman who thinks she owns a man when she marries him. And Mr. Reiger—well, he's like all men, married or not."

I lit a cigarette because I wanted something in my hands, and a smoke would have to do. "Are you in love with him?"

"Me?" She laughed, and it was hard to tell whether the scorn in it outweighed the incredulosity. "I'm not in love with him and I never will be. Listen, Mr. Lee Duane, I've got a good job with Pacific Home and I intend to go on to bigger and better ones. But I spent a good many years pounding a typewriter and wondering why before I woke up. Men run this world and there's only one advantage women have over them. The smart ones use it—up to a certain point in my case—and the plodders don't."

"It's as simple as that, huh?" I asked.

She nodded positively. A shrewd beautiful girl who had all the angles figured, or thought she did. "I've got a mother to support and a kid sister to help out. I need every cent I make. You might even say I had a good reason to take those bonds. But I didn't and all I'm trying to convince you of now is that loose talk will make Mr. Reiger suffer."

"That's big of you," I said, and I hoped

it sounded like a sneer. "Who will suffer? Reiger the man—or Reiger the boss?"

Two red spots burned in her cheeks and her face became as hard and rigid as sheet ice. "You can go to hell," she said slowly and distinctly.

Her faint perfume hung in the room even after she was gone. It was slightly irritating, like a very desirable piece of merchandise with an exorbitant price tag on it. I fastened the Reno postcard to the underside of a bureau drawer, turned out the light and made myself comfortable for the night. By that time the last suggestion of Avis Dunbar's presence was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

The Mouse Turns

SLEEP was a sometimes thing, half-hour jumps of the luminous minute hand on my wrist watch between gaps of fitful drowsiness. At two-fifteen the rain stopped and the house was abruptly quiet. Someone coughed and outside the night seemed filled with small creeping things as drops of water splattered from the pines to the undergrowth.

At first I thought it was overworked imagination. But the sighing of floor boards was too regularly spaced to be just the movement of the house. The door opened, soundlessly, in sixteenths of an inch, only the shift of an air current warning me. A hand moved across the room, only a hand, cut off from any body. Its fingers were hooded over the lens of a flashlight.

It moved until it was abreast of the pillow, then stopped. A sharp sound came like breath being sucked between clenched teeth. The light jerked. Something hit the pillow like an open hand on water.

I switched on the lamp and Miles Rand jumped upright.

His flat blue eyes jerked to the chair beside the window, me in it and the .38 Colt pointing at his stomach. When they reached the gun, they hung there, like fingers in a crack on a sheer rock wall. An eighteen-inch piece of firewood as thick as my wrist was in his right hand and the flashlight hung limply in the other. The crease in the pillow was exactly where my head would have been—if the

ball of black overcoat had been my hair.

He ripped his eyes away from the Colt and felt the mound under the loosely gathered blankets. "A suitcase."

"Yeah," I said. "Still after that postcard, huh?"

A kind of splintered confidence came back to him. "To hell with you, Duane," he said, and showed me a ragged grin, starting for the door.

Everyone seemed to be leaving my company with that remark. It was wearing thin. "If you try to walk out of here, I'm going to put a bullet through one of your legs and swear out an assault warrant. Maybe the charge won't stick, but you'll walk with a limp for the rest of your life."

He stopped and his tongue came out and tasted his lips. They weren't good, and it slid back in. "What do you want to know?"

"Why you're so eager to get that card. First, you tried to talk everyone out of it, then when that didn't work, you were willing to flatten my skull for it. Why?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and put his hands between his knees. Except for his shoes, he was still wearing all of his clothes. They looked as if he'd spent four or five hours twisting and turning in them.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you why. I sent it. That's why." His eyes watched me from under his lashes. "Is that good enough?"

"No."

"Don't you see? I was in Reno yesterday and just for a gag, I wrote the damned thing and mailed it. Hell, I thought Dottie had gone back to the city and I just wanted to give George a little needling."

His glance wavered back to the Colt.

It was still pointed at his belly but I let it drop in the direction of his knee. "Maybe I ought to shoot off one of your kneecaps—just as a reminder to tell the truth."

He spread his hands in a gesture that was supposed to be convincing. "But I am. When I bought the card, I kidded with the girl selling them and wrote it out there. She is bound to remember it as soon as the police start asking questions. I just don't want it to come out. The gag seems pretty raw now."

I closed one eye and squinted along the barrel, aiming the Colt at his knee. I squeezed the trigger until my finger blanched. The safety was on, but Rand didn't know it. His face went chalk white and his mouth fluttered open.

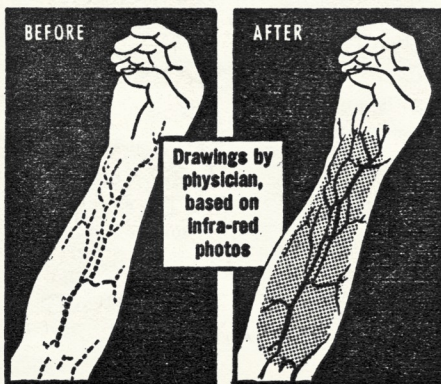
"For heaven's sake," he croaked. "Look out! That thing might go off."

"It's going to in a couple of seconds. Nobody uses a club for a reason like that."

"Wait!" His breath wheezed out of his lungs like air from a rotten tube. "There was another reason."

I lowered the gun and he moistened his lips. "Dottie and I used to be... well, sort of friendly. That was all over some time ago—for me, at any rate, but Dottie didn't want it that way. She kept threatening to kick up a fuss and queer me with Avis Dunbar." His smooth face grew earnest.

"I wanted to marry Avis—I still do—and Dottie was going to wreck everything. She was out for my scalp. So I sent the postcard just on the chance that George Andrus might finally do something, kick her out, wring her neck. Anything to get her off my back. That's why I wanted the card back. If the police got it, everything about Dottie and me would



HOW SLOAN'S LINIMENT AIDS MUSCULAR PAINS

Here's vital news for sufferers from muscular aches and rheumatic pains. Using infra-red rays, scientists have now succeeded in photographing blood-vessels *below the skin-surface*. These photos (see pictures at left) prove that, after an application of Sloan's Liniment, the veins *expand* . . . evidence that the treated area gets *extra* supplies of blood, to revitalize tissues and wash away waste matter and poisons faster.

When you use Sloan's Liniment, you *know* that it is increasing the all-important flow of blood to the treated area, and that this effect *extends below the skin-surface*. No wonder Sloan's helps to bring blessed relief from rheumatic aches, arthritis pains, lumbago, sore muscles. Sloan's has been called "the greatest name in pain-relieving liniments." Get a bottle today.

come out—and I can't have that.”

“So you want to marry Avis Dunbar. What does Reiger say to that?”

Rand's eyebrows drew together. “Reiger!” The name came out like a mouthful of rancid fat. “The only reason he's treasurer of Pacific Home is because his father-in-law owns a controlling interest. He's just a broken-down stock salesman. Andrus does all the work.”

I moved to within arm's reach of him. “And you were pretty friendly with Dottie Andrus.”

He grinned slyly at me. “Friendly enough. You know how it is with a gal like Dottie. A pushover.”

He liked talking about it; some of them always do.

I hit him across the face with the side of the gun. He wasn't expecting it, but I wouldn't have expected a club if I'd been in bed. He rocked back on the blankets, both hands clutching his mouth and tears starting out of his eyes. His voice was muffled and wavering.

“My Lord! You don't have to beat me just because—”

I got a handful of the tan linen shirt and yanked him upright. His lip was already beginning to swell and blood stained his white teeth.

“I'm going to beat you, pal, until you think the roof's fallen. Avis Dunbar knows. She wouldn't have made that crack if she didn't.”

HE SAGGED back against my grip and all the stiffening went out of him as if his bones had rotted. His eyes were dead eyes, like those of a man with a knife deep in his belly, waiting for life to drain away.

“I never told anybody,” he whispered, “but Dottie found out, damn her.”

“Count me in,” I said. “I'm going to know, too.”

“I was handy with a pen once before. . . just a kid out of school. . . easy money until they caught me. After I got out, I came to the coast. . . a different name. . . nobody knew me. Then Dottie came along. I kept some stuff I shouldn't have. Dottie found it in my apartment one afternoon. That was all she needed,” he said lifelessly.

“First it was just entertainment. Plenty

of it, and the most expensive. Then she began buying stuff and sending me the bill. Even that wasn't enough. She wanted money. That began a few months ago. She was breaking me, but I didn't know what to do. Finally, I decided she was trying to get enough to leave George, go away somewhere. That's why I sent the card. I thought George might break with her. . . anything. . . .”

His voice trailed off and I dropped my hand. This time it was the truth. After hearing it, I wasn't surprised he'd taken so much persuasion to open up. A man trying to live down one mistake and a little harpy like Dottie Andrus taking him to the cleaners.

He started for the door and I let him go this time. He hesitated with his hand on the knob. “Fingerprints,” he said, “I just couldn't take the chance they would check mine. I don't have to tell you what that criminal record would do to me, my work, Avis. But I guess you've got a job to do.”

“That's right,” I said, and Scrooge was in a minor league compared with me. “I get paid for it.”

He didn't say anything more, just stared at me with mute appeal in his eyes. Then he left—a man with one hell of a good reason for killing Dottie Andrus.

I went back to my chair and turned out the light. It was then nearly three in the morning, only a few more hours of darkness. In the next room springs creaked as Miles Rand flopped around on his bed. I wondered if anyone was sleeping in the house—except Andrus. Eventually, the noise next door stopped and quiet settled down again.

It must have been forty-five minutes or more before I heard another sound. And when it came, it wasn't the one I had been waiting for all night. The latch of the front door below my window closed with a muffled click and gravel grated underfoot. The sky was still clouded and it was as dark outside as only night in the mountains can be—like the bottom of a tar pit. No light showed—nothing except the night and more night.

I took the stairs two at a time, wishing there was time to check Rand's room and realizing there wasn't. Outside, rain water dripped off the eaves and the sound of steps on gravel came faintly from ahead.

I had a flashlight, but I wasn't using it and I didn't want the gravel to give me away. The ground off the path was soft and mucky, and branches reached out of the night to slap at my face. By the time I reached the road, I felt as if I'd been put through a threshing machine and dragged across a swamp.

No more footsteps. Nothing but the drip, drip of water and the sighing of wind in the pines. Then, farther down the road, something splashed in a puddle and I started in that direction. Twenty-five feet more, and still only blackness. This blind man's buff was beginning to get me down. I took the flash out of my pocket and started to turn it on. At least with light, I could see who was pussy-footing around in the light.

Below the road in the direction of the lake, something splashed. A big, noisy splash like a human body might make going in the water flat and limp. I put the light back in my pocket. If people were being pushed in the lake, the pusher very likely would throw a few shots at any snooping flashlight.

The clouds were breaking now and a few stars lighted the hillside about as well as an usher's flash lights an aisle. I reached the shoreline at the expense of a trouser leg and peered into the gloom. Some distance away underbrush rustled, then the tread on the gravel path sounded again.

Ten feet offshore an object floated on the lake. Something about the size of a soap box, glistening black. I found a dead branch and waded out in the water far enough to work it to shore. Even before it was within reach, I knew what was and whose it was. . . .

Dottie Andrus' suitcase contained about what you'd expect a woman to take for a stay in the mountains—and somewhat less than the usual assortment of unmentionables. Apparently, Dottie had been a gal who decided nature's handiwork didn't need improvement.

It also contained something the average woman wouldn't take: a sheaf of green, engraved bonds tucked in a side pocket. They lay in a fan-shaped heap under the beam of my flash, ten of them in one thousand dollar denomination, good for at least fifty cents on the dollar from any

back alley security fence. This was it.

Only a little water had seeped in the suitcase. With a light breeze it would have drifted to shore before it sank, but if it hadn't a patent leather handbag in five feet of Fallen Leaf's water would have been more noticeable than a green neon sign.

The first frigid light of dawn was crawling over the mountains when I got back to the house. It gave everything a weird appearance, like a landscape sculptured of ice. I left the suitcase on the porch and went inside. The place was as quiet as an embalming parlor on Halloween. My watch said five o'clock; the hour when even the condemned sleep.

Andrus slept like the dead. Some of the lines had gone out of his narrow face and his breathing seemed to start at the soles of his feet. I picked up a limp hand, let it drop and he didn't flutter an eyelash.

The revolver was still on the pine table. I checked it and put it back. There was no hurry. First there would be the matter of the muddy, wet clothing to change. That done, then the careful listening to make certain no one was prowling around, maybe even a check of the rooms.

The corner beside the graying window was dimmest in the room. I hunched there on my heels, the flash in one hand and the .38 in the other. Andrus' bed was roughly fifteen feet away and directly across from it was the door.

Twenty minutes went by. Twenty minutes with each second passing as slowly and distinctly as the drops falling from the eaves. My legs were numb and cramps stabbed at the calf muscles. The pale light freshened and outside a bird gave a plaintive, feeble chirp like an old, old man rising to another day.

When it came, it was only a faint squeak, eased out by degrees like a gently exhaled breath, nothing like it had been earlier. He came into the room as quietly as a shadow moving across concrete. If there hadn't been some faint light, I would have had only the creak of the tea wagon to tell me anyone was there.

Gloved fingers found Andrus' hand, raised it and fitted the revolver into it. It took only seconds to do it and the movements were gentle enough not to waken the man, even without a sleeping pill.

THE snap of the hammer was like an explosion to me. I didn't want him to try a second time; the next chamber was loaded. The beam of my flash caught him like a moth against a bulb, and I let him see the .38.

"No trials over, Reiger," I said.

Warren Reiger's breath came out as if he'd been holding it for the last forty-eight hours. He probably had; at least part of it. He dropped Andrus' hand with the revolver still in it and the man stirred. Sweat began running down Reiger's brown face.

"That tea wagon in front of the door," he said in a constricted voice. "So you put it there."

I found a lamp, turned it on and nodded. "Just something of mine to go with your stage dressing—the convenient gun at bedside, the bonds in Dottie's suitcase."

Reiger said thoughtfully: "I thought I heard someone following me down to the lake but when I looked in your room, you seemed to be in bed."

Andrus sat up and turned leaden eyes from one of us to the other without any expression on his slack face. His glance found the revolver in his hand and he stared at it aimlessly.

"Dottie was a handful, wasn't she?" I asked, keeping the Colt on the big chesty man. "You found your fun in the wrong place that time."

"Oh, Lord!" he said fervently. "She ran me ragged after she got her hooks into me. She knew I couldn't make a move because of my wife. I just didn't have the money. Every cent I make goes, and my wife knows where."

It was just a friendly little chat. He had killed a woman, tried to finish off her husband and in a matter of hours he'd be locked in a cell. But it was still only a friendly little chat—with an undercurrent that could have powered an electric chair.

"I suppose that scene with Avis Dunbar gave you some ideas," he said.

"It helped. And the phony gas burn on your hand. Nobody gets choked without putting up a fight, no matter how drunk. You were bound to get clawed."

He looked at his hand. The bandages were off now, but the gloves covered his flesh. "I hoped it would heal before she

was found. Then, too, it was only one hand. I had to use the other to keep her nails out of my eyes."

"It's always one hand—for the same reason."

"Anyway, I expected Dottie to be in the middle of the lake."

Reiger closed his eyes tightly for a second. At the moment he didn't look his usual athletic, clubman self; he looked a hundred and fifty years old and slipping fast.

"I made a point of finding out what was happening around the company. I had to. I even had a key to McEachon's confidential file—never mind how. That's why I knew all along who you were. I was going to make a killing in the market and buy back the bonds. It didn't work out that way. I was on margin and my broker sold me out."

George Andrus came to life like something dug out of a rock after a couple of centuries.

"So you killed Dottie," he said.

His voice was strangely level and flat.

Reiger scarcely glanced at him and when he did there was only contempt in his look. "Yes, my mousy little man, I killed your charming wife—which is something you should have attended to years ago. And what's more, I tried to frame you for it, and the bonds taken from the company. I wanted to make it look as if Dottie had come back here to run out on you with what was left of them and you finished her off.

"If Duane hadn't anticipated me, you'd be lying in that bed now with a hole in your head and I'd be telling everyone how I heard a shot in here." He drew his breath in raggedly and spat out the rest. "They'd believe me, too, Georgie, because they all know you wouldn't have guts enough to face a trial. How do you like that, Georgie?"

Andrus had a quiet, composed dignity to him.

"You just wouldn't understand, Warren. I happened to love my wife. I don't think you would know what that means."

"Oh, lump it!" Reiger said savagely. He looked out the window, down the hillside to the still water and across to the sharp new light of day on the range. His

(Please continue on page 96)

ALL BURNED UP

Natalie said sweetly, "If you want the next one between your horns—"



When high-voltage Natalie started shooting off his Magnum . . . private-op Richardson made fast tracks—over the nearest electric fence.

By TEDD THOMEY

WHEN I woke up, I had a giraffe-sized crick in my neck—and my Magnum was missing. I had left it within reach on the small, ash-blond end table beside my chair. Then I'd dropped off for thirty-eight or thirty-nine winks after supper.

A Magnum is a heavy, high-powered

revolver that handles either .38 or .357 caliber slugs. Believe me, it is no weapon for a kid.

Yet I had a nasty hunch that eleven-year-old Hughie Marsh had gotten his sticky little hooks on it. No one else would be apt to take the holster, too. The idea made me mad.

That hard, mohair chairback had really stiffened my neck. Rubbing it, I made a sixty-second search around the expensive, overfurnished bedroom. I caught a glimpse of myself in the tremendous, blue-tinted mirror over the fireplace.

I am not a good-looking guy. My hair—it's the color of a rusty bucket—was mussed. My eyes were angry and that meant they were sort of a dirty dark brown color. My jaw stuck out and my gray tweeds were rumpled.

Sliding up the knot on my maroon tie, I stepped out into the hallway, which was slightly smaller than the lobby of Butte's biggest hotel.

Sure enough, Hughie was out there waiting for me, sitting on the rug playing with a toy pinball machine.

"All right, kid," I growled. "Where is it?"

His big blue eyes looked up at me softly. "Where's what, Mr. Richardson?"

"You know damn—" I started over again. "You know blasted well what I mean!"

He shook his head. "Gee, Mr. Richardson, you talk in circles."

This kid, you've got to understand, was smart. But to look at him you'd never think his grandfather, old R. W. K. Marsh, owned enough C-notes to build a four-lane highway to the moon. Hughie's lemon-yellow hair always needed trimming. His T-shirt was soup-stained and there was two or three days' worth of grime on his face.

I don't want this to get around—but I grabbed that brat by the torn seat of his blue jeans and shook him till his little pink ears rattled.

"One minute!" I barked, making sure no one was watching us. "One minute to show me where that gun is!"

He didn't say anything. He led me down the big white marble staircase, through the plushy drawing room and out the side entrance. It was dark outside. Hughie took me over to a large poplar tree which grew beside the house's massive, red-brick west flank. Silently he pointed upward.

By squinting, I could just barely make out the shadow of the holster and its straps hanging from one of the branches. I felt like giving the kid the back of my

hand across his chops. Instead, I grabbed a low limb and swung myself up.

For a guy that's pushing thirty-three, I climbed pretty fast. My fingers found the tan leather holster. I draped the straps over my shoulder, congratulating myself that it had been so easy.

And then I saw that all the damn holster held was one of Hughie's water pistols. I started to let out a bellow.

But from the edge of my eye, I saw that something was going on in old R.W.K.'s den on the second floor. The window was only about ten feet from the branch I was standing on.

Natalie Dott entered the den on two slim, nyloned legs that never should have belonged to anyone so ordinary as a housekeeper. She pushed aside the shiny, soft-leather divan, exposing the round steel face of a wall safe. After spinning the chrome combination knob, she opened the door, exposing another door on the inside which had a keyhole.

As she poked in a key, a large, knobby hand grabbed her shoulder. R.W.K.'s hand. He'd followed her in.

He grabbed away the key. I heard them shouting at each other although I couldn't understand what was said. Natalie broke from the old man's grip. He pushed her and she stumbled backward, sitting down abruptly on the divan. Her red mouth was twisted and she spat some heavy language at him.

Then her hand came up from under the leather cushion. Orange flame winked from the gun she held. I could tell by the solid blast and the heavy shape of it that it was a Magnum. My Magnum.

Old Man Marsh took two steps toward her. He put something in his mouth and swallowed it. He fell at her feet and lay there without moving.

NATALIE'S oval face was white and stiff-looking. I knew how she must feel, because I felt the same way. It had happened so fast, so unexpectedly. My heart was knocking itself out against my ribs.

"Jee-miny!" said somebody nearby. "She shot Grandpa!"

I nearly fell out of the tree. Perched on a branch below me was the little wise guy, Hughie. Out of the darkness, his eyes

now loomed up at me like bright tin-cans.

"Get down!" I hissed. "And don't make any noise!"

For once, he did what he was told. When we dropped to the spongy lawn, I grabbed his plump little arm.

"Did you hide my gun in that divan?" I demanded.

"Yes, Mr. Richardson," he replied in a small voice.

I let go of him and ran back to the side entrance. Taking the steps three at a time, I raced up the marble staircase under the monstrous crystal chandeliers that were supposed to have cost old R.W.K. five thousand dollars a piece. When I got to the door outside the den, I halted because I had heard the patter of little feet behind me.

Turning around, I told Hughie I would spank him to a crisp if he didn't remain in the hall. I went in.

Natalie was no longer in the den. But old R.W.K. was there. He hadn't moved. And he would never move again.

Even in death, Old Man Marsh looked like a financial giant. He was lying on his right side. He was a long, broad man with a huge, bald and veined head. Staring out from under the gray bushes of his eyebrows were two blue eyes that looked fierce enough to melt concrete. His mouth was open. It was mean and wrinkled and there was a little jungle of wrinkles in the skin above his white collar. His hands were wide and thick with big knuckles. They were the hands that had swung a pick in the Montana mines in the years before R.W.K. Marsh gained that extra initial and the capital that started his career as a copper king.

The bullet had gone in just below the breast pocket on his navy-blue smoking jacket. It had made its exit directly behind his heart.

As I knelt beside the body, I heard a small scuffing sound.

Hughie, of course. He'd disobeyed me and was standing beside red shelves full of the Harvard Classics. I wanted to grab his ear and lead him back to the hall. But I reconsidered. Old R.W.K. didn't look bad—very little blood was noticeable. And if ever a kid needed a lesson, Hughie was the one. I hoped he'd get a good bellyful.

But the kid surprised me. Death didn't

crack his wise-guy, eleven-year-old veneer. He placed grimy little paws on the copper-riveted hips of his blue jeans.

"Well, Mr. Richardson," he said, importantly. "Don't you think you'd better put in a call to the sheriff?"

"Shut up," I told him. "I'm busy. Try being seen and not heard for once."

"I don't think you're much of a detective, Mr. Richardson." Hughie moved his yellow head slowly from side to side. "You should be capturing the housekeeper. She may try to get away!"

The kid was right, but I needed another moment to look around. I noticed that the inside, second door to the safe was still locked.

"You're not even looking for clues," added Hughie. "Like for instance what was it that Gran'pa put in his mouth?"

Hughie got down on his hands and knees beside me. He peered down seriously at old R.W.K.'s open lips.

And then abruptly Hughie stood up. There was a pained expression in his blue eyes. "Gee, Mr. Richardson."

He placed a hand on his stomach. He was a nice, bilious green around the gills. "Gee, I don't know why—but I don't feel so good."

As I led him briskly away, he didn't look back at his grandfather. Feeling pleased with myself, I locked him in his room which was next to mine. Then I headed for the extension phone in the master bedroom. I knew I didn't have to worry yet about Natalie trying to get away.

There had been no tell-tale flicker of the lights in the house. They always got brighter whenever the power was shut off on the electric fence which surrounded the estate.

I ENTERED the bedroom and picked up the French-style phone which was copper-plated in keeping with the copper decorations elsewhere in the room.

Immediately, I heard Natalie's voice. She was on another extension.

"No, Charley," she was saying. "I can't wait that long. You've got to get here right away—even sooner!"

"How big a door?" asked a man's voice. It was gruff and not too well-educated.

"About ten inches square," said Natalie.

"And it doesn't look too tough to crack."

She was right there. The inside safe door looked about as strong as a cheese box. I had missed the first part of their conversation but I could guess why Natalie needed help. Old R.W.K. must've swallowed the key to the safe just before he died.

"How much is there in it for me?" asked Charley.

"Twenty per cent. That means you'll get around fifteen thousand cash—which isn't bad for a half hour's work."

"No," said Charley. "But you're going to get sixty thousand." Charley paused. I began to see that he wasn't so dumb. "Who else is around?"

"Just the kid," replied Natalie. "And the private detective from Butte that the old man hired to look out for the kid. His name's Jack Richardson. He might be hard to handle, except for one thing. I've got his gun."

"Okay," said Charley. "I'll be right out!"

Natalie's voice grew cautious. "Remember, though, don't touch that front gate until it swings open by itself. Otherwise you'll get a shock that'll knock you into the middle of next Thursday!"

They hung up. The dial tone came on. After waiting a long minute, I spun the wheel for the operator. I knew I had to work fast. I would have to catch Natalie and get control of the Magnum before Charley arrived and complicated things.

I told the operator to get me the sheriff's office.

"One moment please." Along the lines, switchboards gave out assorted clicks.

There was a big angry, grunt-like sound in my ear and then the phone went as dead as King Tut. I pressed the cradle lever down a couple of times, but I knew I wouldn't be getting any outside help.

Score one for Natalie. She'd gotten to the phone line with a knife or a hatchet.

I wondered where I would find her and how I could catch her off-balance. In the old habit, my right hand slid inside my gray tweed coat. It came out feeling surprised. Without that heavy Magnum, I felt naked. I am not the kind of a guy who likes to do things the hard, dangerous way. I've been a private investigator for nearly ten years now—ever since I re-

signed as a sergeant on the Butte police force. Butte is a tough dirty miner's town and during these years I learned something—I like my hide the way it is. Free of .38 caliber perforations.

But I could see that in this situation the hard way was the only way. I couldn't leave the estate—not with that thousand-volt electric fence humming and crackling in all directions. Only two people had known the location of the control box that regulated the fence. Old R.W.K. Marsh and his housekeeper Natalie. Now only one person knew. And it wasn't Jack Richardson. I cursed myself out for not making a harder search for it.

It came to this. I would have to find Natalie, get the gun from her somehow, and—if necessary—knock her around a bit till she told me the location of the control box.

Before going downstairs, I stepped into Hughie's room. He was sitting in a chair throwing feathered darts at a football. He wasn't much interested in the target, but he seemed to be feeling all right. I knew he wouldn't miss his grandfather very much. The old man had never given the kid any affection. R.W.K.'s affection went to his mines, his copper smelters and his library of bank books.

I left Hughie in his room. On what I hoped were silent cat feet, I went down the stairs and through the entrance hall with its six polished granite columns flanking the gigantic front doors. I walked into the dining room. Like a steering wheel, my head kept swiveling around on my shoulders as I examined the room in all directions at once.

Maybe it was because she was young and pretty—but Old Man Marsh had trusted Natalie Dott. I didn't intend to make the similar mistake of under-estimating her. She had a gun. I had none. I didn't want to be surprised by her.

She wasn't in the dining room. I sneaked down the hall, cussing out the floor boards which squawked like a stepped-on pup. Since it was the cook's day off, I glanced into her room on the chance that Natalie might be there. She wasn't.

Continuing down the hall, I entered the kitchen, which was white and shiny and as big as the galley on a battleship. Everything was in order. The dozens of cup-

board doors were all closed. Plates and cups were drying in the automatic dishwasher.

I started toward the service porch—and then I halted because it occurred to me that I wasn't using very good tactics. It might be smarter to wait some place and force Natalie to look for me, so I could surprise her. I decided to return to the drawing room.

As I turned around, the pantry door opened smoothly and Natalie stepped out. It was the first time I'd been on the wrong end of my Magnum and I'd never realized before what an ugly thing it was.

TWO quick steps took me toward the service porch. The kitchen filled with fire and noise as the Magnum stuck its orange tongue out at me. A lot of hot air slapped my right shoulder. I decided to stay where I was.

Glancing down at my coat, I saw that had been a wise decision. Stiff, black strands of horsehair were sticking out through a big hole in the shoulder padding.

"I was raised on a ranch near Kalispell," said Natalie sweetly. "If you want the next one between your horns—just place your order!"

She held the heavy gun as confidently, as steadily, as a lipstick or a perfume atomizer. Her dark, almost black eyes roamed icily over my five feet ten inches. She wore a black dress which was her housekeeper's uniform—but the tight, shiny taffeta fitted her trim hips and narrow waist in a very unhousekeeper-like way. The only jewelry she wore was a thick gold wire circling the white column of her throat. So black it had blue highlights, her long hair tumbled softly across her wide shoulders.

"Will you take your flat feet to the drawing room?" she ordered coldly.

My feet aren't flat. In fact, if anything the arches are too high, but I didn't feel like arguing with her. I was sore—sore at myself for being such a bean-headed fool that I walked into her not-too-clever trap.

I went back down the hall to the drawing room. I strolled along, hoping she would come close enough so I could wheel around and bat the Magnum from her fist. But she was smart. The click of her

high heels stayed a good seven or eight feet behind me.

In the drawing room, she had me sit on the biggest of the three chesterfields. She took a strawberry-colored easy chair opposite me, keeping the Magnum trained on me from her neat little lap.

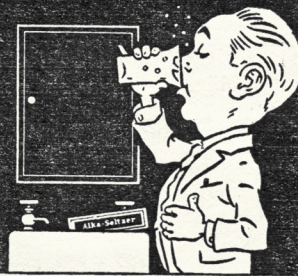
"Where's Hughie?" she asked.

"In his room."

That was the extent of our conversation for the next twenty minutes. I sat there with a headful of assorted thoughts that weren't worth a straight paper-clip. I thought about my job, I thought about Old Man Marsh, the electric fence and the hidden control box.

When I took the job, I figured it would be an easy way to put a thick green lining in my wallet. The year before, R.W.K. had received some threatening notes about the kid. Some unknown party claimed he would kidnap Hughie unless given five thousand cash. The police investigated, but the thing gradually blew over. The cops figured it was the work of a crank, mostly because such a small amount of money had been asked for.

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The kid spent only the summers with his grandfather. The rest of the time he lived with his married brother in Colorado. To protect him this summer, R.W.K. had the fence built and hired me as an armed baby-sitter. Twenty bucks a day plus room and board was all I could hit the old man for. And because we spent all our time at the estate in the Rockies about fifty miles east of Butte, I couldn't pad up any expenses either.

The fence was quite a project. It was eight-feet high with strands of barbed-wire running almost as close together as wires in a screen. Big black and white signs were erected every few feet warning people to stay away. At night they were illuminated. An ordinary wooden fence ran outside the electric one to keep any strolling deer or other wild game from rubbing their noses against a thousand volts. A similar wood fence ran inside to keep Hughie's nose safe.

Natalie stepped over to the blond-walnut console radio on which stood a chrome galleon at full sail. She turned a dial. In a moment the strains of an orchestra came lightly into the large drawing room.

I grinned at her. "Care to dance, honey?"

"No, thank you." She smiled. A pleasant smile—hardly that of a girl who'd just shot and killed a man. "You know it's really too bad you're a cop."

I shook my head. "A private cop."

"Same difference," she said. She sighed a little. "I'd much rather cut you in than Charley. I like the way your red hair curls in the back and I think you've got the nicest teeth I've ever seen in a man."

I wondered if she was kidding me.

"It's too bad I can't trust you," she added. Her black eyes were cool, but friendly.

"Try me and see," I suggested.

SHE shook her head and the dark hair rippled against her shoulders. She walked over to the wall behind the divan I was sitting on. I felt my pulses kick up their heels a little and turned around to look at her.

"No," she said. "Keep looking the other way."

I turned and glanced over at the radio. "What kind of a game is this?"

"Use your head and you won't get hurt," she warned. "I'm going to turn out the lights, but this gun will still be aimed at the skin right above your collar!"

I knew she wasn't going to put out the lights to play kiss-in-the-dark. It was obvious that her friend Charley would arrive any minute to crack the safe and she would have to cut the juice in the fence so he could get in. She didn't want me to know where the control box was hidden. By putting the lights out, she would conceal the tell-tale flicker that would occur when she flipped the fence switch. That way I wouldn't know when she stepped away.

The wall switch clicked behind me and the lights went out.

"Just keep looking at the radio," she said, gently, still behind me.

I sat there stiffly for a full thirty seconds, staring through the blackness at the soft, crescent-shaped glow of the radio's dial. A nerve did a little Irish jig in my throat.

I turned around suddenly.

The Magnum blasted orange flame over my shoulder and I heard pottery crash across the room.

"Eyes straight ahead!" snapped Natalie.

I swallowed. One moment I was sure she had left. The next moment I was sure she hadn't. But I knew she meant business—she'd proved that by the quick way she'd shot old R.W.K. I sat there on pins and thumbtacks, wondering why she didn't shoot me and get it over with.

It seemed to me that the control box must be nearby, possibly in the hall outside the drawing room. Obviously, she could spend only a few seconds getting to it and back. If she stayed away longer than that I would have a good chance of discovering she was gone. I strained the skin on my eardrums trying to hear her footsteps or her breathing. I heard neither. I heard nothing but silence.

She spoke suddenly from her chair over by the radio. "All right, Jack. You can put the light on now."

I swore. She'd moved around the room like a ghost. I got up, stumbled immediately over a hassock and finally found the wall switch.

The overhead chandelier came back to life. "Thank you," smiled Natalie. Big

and bold, the Magnum was still clenched in her slim magna-tipped fingers.

"You're not welcome!" I growled.

She got up from the chair. "Let's go over to the window, shall we?"

She stood at one end of the ten-foot-square piece of plate glass and I stood at the other. We looked out over the grounds. Straight as the edges of a checkerboard, the electric fence surrounded us, its lights glowing brightly.

In front of us, the black iron front gate was open. I grunted. That meant Natalie had gotten to the control box, all right.

As we watched, the brilliant front eyes of a car came through the gate and up the paved driveway....

Charley walked in carrying a small blue canvas bag. He was a big, lumpy guy in his late thirties wearing a dark serge suit that looked like it had been pressed by a cement mixer. He had a big flat nose with a broken, knuckle-like bridge. When I noticed his scaly gray eyes, I got uncomfortable. They were several sizes too small for his large face. They were severe and suspicious. They stated plainly that Charley whatever-his-last-name-was would kill me just as easily as he would brush crumbs off his necktie.

I tightened up inside as Charley took the gun from Natalie and aimed its round black mouth at my chest. He handled it like a professional.

"All right," he said, "where's the apple crate? And you—" he meant me—"you try one trick and it'll be your last. Understand?"

I didn't do him the honor of answering. I stared stonily at the Magnum. We went upstairs to the den, where Charley handed Natalie the gun and proved that the safe was an apple crate, all right. A few cracks of a ball-pen hammer against the cold steel chisel he took from the canvas bag—and the inside door snapped open.

Old Man Marsh was still lying there quietly by the divan. The front of his smoking jacket was a darker red than before. I didn't like to think about it, but it was two to one that Natalie and Charley would give me the same treatment to make their get-away safer.

I waited until Charley brought out the rubber-band-wrapped packs of green bills. Natalie's eyes left me to roam greedily

over the money. The Magnum's front sight dipped a little.

The den's windows were French style. High and narrow and hinged at the side. Two were open.

I PULLED in my head, spun around and crossed the golden Oriental in three long jumps. My eardrums quivered, waiting for the Magnum's thunder.

"Natalie!" yelled Charley. "Get him!"

I launched myself through the window as though I were still playing left halfback at Montana State U. A lot of things happened at once. I gave the screen the benefit of a hundred-and-seventy-pound shoulder block—and it split like waxed paper.

As I caught one of the top branches in the poplar tree, the Magnum found its voice. It bellowed and the branch broke—either from my weight or because a bullet struck it.

I'm no Tarzan, and I don't want to be one. I dropped a sudden ten feet. My stomach felt like it was wrapped around my ears. When my flailing hands finally found another branch, it bent like rubber. Half-a-dozen times I shot down and then up. I let go and aimed for another branch farther down, but the night was dark and I missed. My fingernails scraped bark.

The next thing I knew I was hanging upside down, my coat draped over my face like a potato sack, my left ankle caught in a forked branch.

Natalie was screaming. Charley cursed. I heard their feet smacking the stairs inside. In a moment, they would be under the tree waiting for me.

And there I hung, more helpless than a new-born possum. Leaves swatted my neck. My ankle bone hurt like hell. Twice, three times, I bent at the middle, straining my arms up toward a branch that seemed as far away as the big dipper. I caught it finally, freed myself and went down carefully.

When my heels hit the lawn, Charley and Natalie were dashing from the house's side entrance maybe twenty-five yards away.

I took off toward the front gate, hoping Natalie hadn't had time to close it. I was wrong. She'd been at the hidden control box again. The gate was locked.

As I veered off to the right, running as

fast as I could, I knew I was licked. There were no trees on the estate's grounds, not even a rock big enough to hide under. It wouldn't take them long to run me down.

The Magnum let go again. It's echo crashed up into the nearby Rockies and a long streak appeared in the grass ahead of me. Angrily blinking the sweat from my eyes, I zig-zagged, swearing at myself for being fool enough to get into such a situation.

I drew closer to the three fences. The wooden ones ran protectively inside and out. Between them, the barbed electric fence was humming and mumbling to itself, its bright warning lights marching straight through the darkness like lamp standards on Main street.

There was only one thing to do, one last chance to take. Charley's big feet were making noise on the lawn close behind me. I'm a great believer in the law of averages. Sooner or later, I knew, the numbers would click into place and one of the Magnum's big slugs would find me.

I scrambled up the first wooden fence. I went up fast with enough momentum so I could balance on the top for a moment like a tight-rope walker.

A few paces away were the angry electric strands strung to steel poles that were a good two feet higher than the fence I was standing on.

But I didn't balance there more than two winks. A glimpse set me off. A glimpse of Charley halting and sighting in carefully.

My heart was beating thickly in my throat as I thrust my legs as hard as I could against the wooden top rail.

I sailed up—and I knew instantly that I wasn't going to make it, that I was going to miss clearing the top electric strands by about two inches.

My whole body felt as stiff and electric as the fence itself. My brain had room for nothing but fear.

The toes of my shoes scuffed the wires. Trying desperately to hurl myself forward, I flopped down across the fence and the barbs cut through my gray tweeds right into my skin. I gave a last lunge with my legs and toppled the rest of the way over. I was completely surprised that I was still alive to do so, astonished that the thousand volts hadn't burned through me.

I landed on the back of my neck between the electric fence and the outside wooden one. Bouncing up, I sprang over the wooden job as if it wasn't there.

I hit the rocky ground running and dodged behind the first pine tree I came to. Peering past the sap diamonds crusted on the bark, I saw Charley climb the inside wooden fence, preparing to tackle the electric one as I had done.

And then suddenly the fence was humming and crackling again.

Before, I hadn't noticed the absence of the electric noises. I'd been too amazed at not being electrocuted. Now, though, I realized that the fence hadn't been working when I was caught on it.

HALFWAY up the wooden fence, Charley cringed as if the electric strands were a coiled-up rattler. He bawled over his shoulder to Natalie:

"Get back to the house and shut the damn thing off!"

I dropped to my knees behind the pine tree and picked up a couple of fist-sized rocks. I waited until Natalie had trotted halfway to the house.

Still on the fence, about thirty feet from my tree, Charley was illuminated beautifully by the lights. I clamped my fingers around a rock and launched it with a lazy spiral. It shot past Charley's shoulder and thumped into the grass.

He looked around. And then he glanced at me. Just in time. My next toss was a perfect pass into the end zone. It got him right between the eyebrows. Without a grunt, he fell off the fence and the Magnum went skidding along on its squatty barrel. Charley lay without moving.

Natalie turned around, and saw what happened and started running back. For the Magnum, of course.

I ran to the outside wooden fence and clambered up. If necessary, I was prepared to dash back to the shelter of the pine tree as soon as she drew closer to the gun. Climbing to the top rail, I listened to the electric fence's hum.

Natalie grew closer and I could hear the taffeto swish of her black skirt.

The fence continued to hum. Just as I was ready to run to the pine tree, the fence became silent. I jumped to the

(Please continue on page 97)

THRILL

DIME
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DOCKET



To the deafening applause of a cottonmouth, actor Lex Rawlins played his final curtain . . . in a Georgia swamp—with a killer chasing him.



After his body was found, producer Moylan insisted trouble-shooter Dalton clear lovely Margot. But Dalton told the star to him she was just another headache.



Suddenly the backwoods beauty flew in, aiming a shotgun at Margot—for stealing away a local hero. Dalton snatched up the gun . . . and the ladies started scratching.



When the smoke cleared, another man lay dead . . . in Robert Turner's violent novel—"Dizzy Doll Blues"—in the May issue . . . published March 31st.

DERELICT'S DERELICTION

*From the bottom of the junk heap came Travis—
to get himself a new coat of guilt.*



Travis stepped forward and kicked out at Kip.

By **ALVIN
YUDKOFF**

THE Bowery by night is like a view of Hades seen through dark glasses. The steel beams of the rust-seamed El overhead cut away even the angled light from the evening sky. The shuttered stores are dark with

heavy iron gates in front of every window. While in the flop houses, stretched unconscious on the pavements, curled up like crumpled socks in half-lit doorways, hurriedly sopping up bread and stew in the soup kitchens—are the men of skid row, like sleepwalkers in a nightmare.

Now and then, almost like a space-ship from another planet, a sleek new car may turn slowly onto the Bowery. The car is crammed with outsiders anxious to see the sights. For New York hosts have found this to be a wonderful routine to liven up a dull party:

"C'mon," they say when the scotch runs out, "let's go slumming on the Bowery!"

Vagrants on the Bowery are a practical folk, who know that slummers are always good for a handout. That is why on this particular night Travis felt no resentment when he saw the long black sedan turn onto the Bowery from Canal Street and head north very slowly.

Inside the car, two men were looking very carefully on both sides. No, Travis was not annoyed but he was curious. These two men had been cruising up and down the Bowery for the past half-hour . . . and they didn't look the tourist type.

Cops maybe? But as Travis took the last possible drag from the butt he had found on the subway steps, he shook his head. Cops didn't bother about Bowery people as long as they kept out of serious trouble.

Shivering, he drew himself back into the store doorway. It was going to be a bad night. Rain . . . cold enough for snow, he thought. He swallowed hard and his throat hurt. There it was again. A drink. He needed a drink. He'd do anything for a drink.

And it wasn't just the chill, either. A couple of shots would burn up in a flash of heat the warm thoughts that lay like dry tinder in his brain. Thoughts which rose up now and beat at him. Thoughts of Emily, of Dick—Travis wondered how tall he was by now—thoughts of the quiet block in Duluth where they had all lived so happily.

Travis scowled angrily. He didn't want to think, he couldn't bear it. He was grateful for the noise which broke in on

his senses. It was the sound of a car heading slowly along the street past him. The same black sedan. He watched it stop for the light at the corner.

It was worth a chance. Travis lurched to his feet and ran up to the car. "How about it?" he said, his tongue heavy in his mouth. He couldn't make out the faces of the men inside the car. "Something for a square meal?" he asked.

He heard a throaty chuckle from the man at the wheel. The other man, who was nearer to Travis, was eying him carefully. The driver said: "Way prices are these days, Johnny, a square meal takes a lot of dough."

"Whaddya say?" Travis pleaded. After a few months on the Bowery he was used to the teasing of those from whom he panhandled. "Two bits then. How about it?"

The light changed to green. "Go soak your head, you bum!" the driver said gruffly. He shifted into first. Travis felt the car move forward. He held on to the door handle.

"Please," he cried.

"Hold it, Kip!" the man nearer to Travis said. His high-pitched voice had a decisive hardness about it. The car jerked to a stop.

NOW the man opened the door and stepped out next to Travis. The driver remained in the car. "Cigarette?" the man said, holding out an open cigarette case to Travis.

Travis didn't understand this, not at all, but next to a drink a cigarette was what he wanted most. His fingers managed to close around one and he put it in his mouth.

"You need a light," the stranger said, flicking a lighter. He was a young man, Travis could see, tall and thin just like himself. The flame from the lighter was a powerful one and over the rim Travis could see the man looking hard at him. Suddenly he felt frightened, he wanted to run. But already he had inhaled and the warm tang of the cigarette made him stay. Besides, there was still the chance of a drink.

"What's your name?" the man said.

"Fielding," said Travis. "Mike Fielding." It was the name he had used the

last six months, since he had run away from Duluth.

"How long you been bumming around here?"

"What is this?" Travis said. The cigarette didn't taste so good any more. "You a cop?"

The young man smiled. "Hear that, Kip?" he said to the driver.

Kip laughed. "You'd make a good copper at that, Frankie," he said.

Frankie opened the rear door of the sedan. "A little ride, Mike?" he said.

"What is this?" Travis repeated, backing up slightly.

"We're not cops. Relax," Frankie said, his thin face curled into a grin.

"What do you want with me?" Travis said.

"A couple of laughs, that's all," said Frankie. "I'm looking for some local color to tell the folks back home. I'll even buy you a drink." Travis hesitated and Frankie scowled angrily. "All right, chump, crawl back into your doorway!" He got into the car.

"Hold it. Don't go!" Travis said. He pulled the door open and slipped into the seat next to Frankie. He forced his face into a smile, said, "Did you say something about a drink?"

Kip, alone up front now, made a U-turn and drove north. Travis settled back against the soft upholstery. Frankie pulled out a flask, an old-fashioned prohibition type, and handed it to Travis.

"Go ahead," he said. "It's better than what you're used to."

It was better, it was wonderful, Travis felt as he gulped down the whiskey. It was smooth, not the throat-searing stuff he had been drinking. Frankie pulled the flask away and some of the liquid spilled onto the bristles of his chin.

"Easy. There'll be more," Frankie said. He hesitated for a moment, then he said: "What's your name?"

"I told you," said Travis.

"I mean your real name." Travis leaned back again and did not answer. "None of my business, is that it?" Frankie smiled.

"That's it."

"All by your lonesome in the big city?" asked Frankie. When Travis remained silent, he handed over the flask. "All

alone in the big city?" he repeated now.

"Yeah." Travis took a long swig.

"How long you been on the street?"

"Couple of months," Travis said. "Tell you the truth, I don't remember exactly."

"What'd you run away from?"

"My wife and kid," Travis said. He realized he made no sense so he added, "I got into some trouble in Duluth, my home town."

"Woman?"

"That's it," Travis said. Now that he saw Frankie didn't want the flask, he relaxed a bit. Travis liked Frankie; he was so sympathetic, so understanding. "A new girl was hired at the plant where I worked. I—" his voice thickened—"oh, you know how it is. She was one of those dames you can't keep away from. She made me leave Emily—my wife." He shook his head slowly and took another drink.

"Then the new babe left you?"

Travis looked admiringly at Frankie. "Yeah . . . soon as I ran out of dough. I couldn't go back to Duluth. I couldn't face my wife and kid again."

"So you wound up on the Bowery," Frankie said. "Sure, I understand. I know how you feel." He paused. "But what about your wife? Doesn't she know where you are?"

Travis looked at the flask. "No," he said. "She probably thinks I'm dead. Everybody I knew probably thinks I'm dead." Hurriedly, he raised the flask to his lips again because he was certain now that his story was over Frankie would let him go. But the flask was empty. "And that's how yours truly ended up here," he said, turning and pointing to the window.

He was surprised to see they had left the Bowery and were driving through a strange neighborhood. Frankie leaned over to the front seat and his hand came back with a half-full bottle.

"There's still some left in this," he said and he handed it to Travis. "Help yourself."

WHEN Travis came to, his teeth felt clamped vise-tight on his lower lip. Hot shafts of pain hammered within his head. He forced his mouth open and then his eyes—and as he did the pain became even more severe. He groped about in the cramped darkness and his hand

brushed across the rough upholstery of the seat. He was still in the car.

But it wasn't moving. It was parked somewhere and he was alone. He managed to raise his head and look out. The car was in a closed, two-car private garage. Travis got out of the car, walking as carefully as he could to the garage door. The odor of gas mingled with the dry smell of tires. He unlatched the door and pushed it open slightly, holding his breath as it scraped across the gravel. Then he squeezed through the opening into the cold night air.

He stood there, lost in the blue-black darkness, wondering what to do next. He was drenched with sweat and his torn clothing offered little protection against the chill breeze that fanned across the yard. In front of him, about fifteen yards away, was a ranch-type house, its open patio facing toward the garage.

Then, from the patio: "—no coward, you know that, Frankie, but this thing gives me the shakes."

Now Travis could make out the two men seated on the patio, talking in low tones. "Stop stewing about it, Kip!" he heard Frankie's high-pitched voice.

"I need another drink," Kip said. Travis ran his tongue over his lips as he heard the clink of glass against bottle.

"Go easy, Kip!" Frankie said. "I'm going to need you tonight. I don't want you as worthless as that lush in there!"

"Worthless?" Kip snorted. "That's a laugh. If you can use him to get clear of the cops for good, he's not so damn worthless. Yeah," he said softly, "if Frankie Niles can go walking down Broadway because of this little caper, the bum in there is worth his weight in gold!"

In the garage doorway, Travis felt his body stiffen. Frankie Niles. The baby-faced killer who had cut down two cops in a Forty-fifth Street box office hold-up. Frankie Niles. A one man Murder, Inc. whom the police and F.B.I. had been trying to corner for two years. Travis sucked in his breath.

"Keep your damn voice down, Kip," he heard Niles say.

"Relax." Kip's voice was the calmer now. "The bum passed out an hour ago. If he wakes up, there's plenty of hooch on the back seat. He'll drink himself out

again. There's nothing to worry about."

"Well, no use taking chances."

"We're taking a big chance on this," Kip said.

"Are you? Who knows about this bum? Who cares? Nobody gives a hoot in hell whether he lives or dies!"

That's not true, Travis thought desperately. *My wife cares, my boy cares, people who knew me back in Duluth care. . . .*

"So this morning the house burns up. We'll set it for three o'clock when nobody's roaming around." Frankie Niles was speaking in an impersonal, business-like manner as if dictating to a secretary. "A bad stove—I've arranged it already. The house will go up like that," and he snapped his fingers.

"An unknown body—or what's left of it—is found in the ashes. I leave papers around. My papers. The body is so badly burned identification is impossible. But the size is right, the papers are right. So next day the headlines say: 'Frankie Niles Dead!' And that's it."

"It still sounds too damn simple," Kip protested. "The cops these days are no goons. They got all sorts of ways to identify, fingerprints, teeth—"

"The bum's fingers will be so toasted, they won't be good for anything," Frankie said. "Teeth marks? I've never had a cavity in my life, I've never been to a dentist, so where would they check? No, Kip, the cops will be glad to accept the news that Frankie Niles got himself stinking drunk and burned himself and his house down. Sure, usually fire insurance investigators make trouble. Well, I've taken care not to insure the place. I lose ten grand, okay, but so what? I've got a plastic surgery job all lined up and you know what hair dye can do."

There was a pause. For a moment Travis was afraid Frankie had seen him crouching in the dark. But Frankie continued: "This new dame doesn't like hiding out all the time. She likes good times and so do I. We're going down to Florida for the races, we're. . . ."

Travis slipped back into the garage. He went to the car and, sure enough, some whiskey was there. To settle himself he took a short nip, and with great effort forced himself to put the bottle down. He had to control himself, he had to think!

But what could he do to save himself?

They would see him if he left the garage since the door was the only way out. If he yelled for help, they would finish him off right away. There was a point to that though, he thought grimly. At least his death would be neater.

HE LOOKED around him. It was a large garage and since there was only one car in it, there was plenty of room. It sloped up slightly toward the side and in the far corner stood a rough wooden table, used apparently as a workbench. Travis stepped to the back of the car and tried to open the trunk. Perhaps there was a jack in there, or a monkey wrench, something he could use as a weapon. But the trunk was locked.

His eye swept across something on the table. It looked like a—*but no, that would be too lucky!* Unbelieving, Travis blinked hard before he looked again. Yes, it *was* true, there was a rifle on the table.

He stepped quickly across the floor and picked up the rifle. All at once, whatever hope had surged within him abruptly died away. For this was no rifle—it was a boy's B.B. gun, unused for years, with the bolt action so rusted it couldn't even be moved.

On the table, along with a variety of dusty junk probably left by the people who had sold the house to Frankie Niles, Travis could see an unused box of B.B. pellets. Angrily, before he thought, Travis threw the gun down on the table. It bounced off and fell on to the concrete floor with a clattering noise. Then Travis realized what he had done.

But it was too late. He heard quick steps across the yard, the garage door was wrenched open and Kip stood there, his powerful body framed in the half-light.

"Oh, you're up," Kip said. "How do you feel?"

"What do you want?"

"Now, now," said Kip. "Take it easy."

"Damn it, what do you want with me?"

Travis shouted, his hand fumbling behind him for the box of B.B. shot. He managed to get it open but his hand was shaking and he was only able to grasp a few of the pellets. He tried again and his hand slipped. The paper box toppled to the floor and the round pellets spilled down

the incline toward the door. Travis blocked off most of them with his feet.

"Come on, we'll give you a drink," Kip said amiably.

Travis felt the hardness of the table against the small of his back. "No," he said, "leave me alone."

"But Frankie wants you."

"What for?"

Kip hesitated. "To—to talk with you."

"You lousy liar!" Travis snapped.

"Listen . . . I heard you before. He's Frankie Niles and you're his gorilla." His voice rose to a shout. "But you're not going to do it, you're not going to murder me!"

"You need a drink," the big man said quietly.

"Listen," Travis pleaded. "I'm a human being too. Yeah, down-and-out, a Bowery bum. Yes, but a human being." His voice choked up, his legs felt stiff and cold. "Please, please Kip."

"Look, bobo," Kip said, "it's all common sense. It's you or Frankie Niles." There was a rumble of laughter from the doorway. "You or Frankie Niles."

Me or Frankie Niles, Travis thought. Of course . . . and he, Travis, was just a worthless, bumming derelict. Then, impelled by Kip's loud laughter, anger raced through him and for the first time in many months of apathy and despair he felt the hot fury of hate. *Me or Frankie Niles. Me or a ruthless killer. Well then . . . me!* he thought.

He could see Kip start walking slowly toward him, lifting his feet up as he stepped forward on the slight incline. Quickly Travis shifted his feet and the blocked B.B. pellets rolled down toward the approaching Kip. At the same time, he flung the few pellets he had in his hand at Kip's head. But his aim was high.

He heard Kip's surprised gasp as the big man's foot slipped on one of the steel balls. There was the jounce of Kip's heavy flesh falling against concrete. Travis stepped forward and kicked out. The point of his shoe ground into Kip. Travis heard a choked gurgle as he whipped his left foot into him. Then he flung himself past Kip, lurched through the garage door and sprinted down the driveway.

"Frankie!" Kip was shouting behind him when he reached the sidewalk. "The

bum's scrambled! He's made a getaway."

Travis could barely make out the sidewalk ahead of him as he ran. At the corner he turned left and hurried down the street, a tree-lined paved road with dark, wooden-frame houses on both sides. Then behind him he thought he heard a car motor sound.

"Help!" Travis shouted, but his cry seemed to be lost in the night. This was a drunken nightmare, he thought wildly as he stumbled along the silent street. Now he heard the car behind him. He didn't dare look around.

"Help!" he shouted again and tried to run faster. But his legs felt stiff and uncontrolled, his chest burned with every breath, his throat was choked with phlegm.

THE car was even with him now, then a little ahead, then braked to a stop. "Help me!" Travis yelled at the shadowed houses as he saw a man jump out of the car. He shifted step, tried to turn around quickly and fell to the ground. He felt a hand grab him by the collar and he was hauled to his feet. "Don't . . . don't," he stammered, trying to break out of the grip.

Then he saw it was a policeman. A few yards behind was a radio car with another policeman at the wheel.

"What's the matter with you, bud?" the cop said. He was a dark young man, short and stocky, very earnest. "Creating a disturbance this time of night. What's the matter with you?"

"Help," Travis said breathlessly. "Please help me. Frankie Niles is after me! Back there . . ." His voice cracked into a whimper.

Now the other policeman got out of the radio car and came up to them. He was an older man. As he pushed his hat back on his head, his graying hair caught the light of the street lamp. "What's up, Gino?" he said.

"Dunno, Sam," the younger policeman said. "This guy is working up a case of D.T.'s but good! Keeps blabbing something about Frankie Niles no less."

The gray-haired policeman turned toward Travis, and his shrewd eyes swept over Travis' clothes. "Uh huh," he said. Then: "So you think you're Frankie

Niles, eh? Is that it?" he asked gently.

"No!" Travis almost shouted. "He's after me, Frankie Niles is—" and suddenly he couldn't get his tongue working; he felt his throat gag up.

"Whew," Gino said, stepping back with a sour expression on his face. "Enough alcohol on his breath to anti-freeze my car."

"Yeah," said the older cop. "What's your name, buddy?"

"Fielding," said Travis.

"Where do you work?"

"Right now, I—I'm between jobs."

"Where do you live?"

"I—" Travis broke off weakly. "I've been staying on the Bowery. Oh, I know what you're thinking, but look here—"

"No," said the policeman. "You look here. You bums have a nerve. Coming up to a nice residential district like this and tying one on, noising up the neighborhood. I ought to dish it out to you!"



"Please," Travis said. "All right then, take me with you."

"Look, friend," the cop said. "We're going off our shift now. You're a lucky guy. It just so happens that today's my birthday and my wife and kids—three of them—are staying up to give the old man a party. So you're not going to sleep off your drunk in jail while I have to fill out a long report on you."

Travis started to protest but the policeman waved him quiet. "Two blocks down this street you'll find a small park. Stay there tonight but don't let me catch you around here tomorrow!"

"No," Travis said, "I'll go with you." He saw the amazed look on the policeman's face. "Frankie Niles—"

"Dammit." Gino, the younger policeman, was angry now. "Don't you know when you're well off or do you want us to run you over to Bellevue?"

Both policemen were facing Travis now and he was looking back in the direction from where he had come. Then he saw the long black sedan cruising slowly toward them. Instantly he realized the cops were with their backs to Frankie Niles. They would be cut down before they could even draw.

"Okay," Travis mumbled, "sorry to bother you." He turned and trotted down the street. He did not look behind. As the policeman had told him, a park was nearby. A small grassy area with a grove of trees in the center, it was the highest point in the neighborhood, which dipped down in a long straight hill below it.

Travis turned onto the park pathway. His running steps sounded loud against the silence of the night. He heard a noise behind him. It was an automobile motor, the heavy throb of a big car. He glanced behind. The black sedan was pulling to a stop alongside the park. They were coming for him.

Travis plunged down the pathway. He thought his lungs would crack wide open but he forced himself on. The pathway was lit by lamps about ten yards apart. He turned off the pathway and ran toward the dark grove of trees.

BUT something caught at his feet and he sprawled forward on the damp grass. Then he saw it—a low fence bordering the pathway. He tried to fight his way to his feet.

"Get up!" He heard Kip's voice from above, angry now, the good humor gone. "You lousy bum, get up!" Travis felt the point of a shoe rip into his ribs. "Or I'll—"

"Not here, dopey!" Frankie said. "There are coppers back there. We'll take him back to the car. Hurry!"

Kip reached down and pulled Travis to his feet. The two men, one on each side, tugged him to the car. Except for them, the street was empty of people. Travis didn't fight back. He was hopelessly, overwhelmingly exhausted.

The car was parked at the entrance, motor running, lights out, its wheels cut

to the curb so it wouldn't roll down the hill. Frankie shoved Travis onto the back seat hard.

"You drive, Kip," he ordered. He got in beside Travis. Kip walked around the front of the car.

Suddenly Travis dove forward. His left hand reached the emergency brake and thrust it downward; at the same time his right hand turned the wheel straight. Frankie blasted the butt of his gun down on Travis' head but the car started down. There was a scream from Kip as the left fender drove into his hip and Travis couldn't see him any more.

Now he jerked about and lashed out at Frankie. Frankie, too, had been thrown forward by the sudden movement of the car, which was gathering speed as it coasted down the hill. Travis hand closed around the gun butt. Half dangling over the front seat they scratched at each other, kicked, cursed, bit—anything that would give an advantage. Frankie's thin pale face was wrinkled in hate. His left fist punched out at Travis again and again.

Frankie was stronger, and slowly he brought the gun up and forced it toward Travis, pinning him back over the front seat. Choking from the exertion, Travis clawed at Frankie's gun hand, tried to keep it off. But the muzzle swept toward him.

The car was hurtling down the hill. The whine of the tires sounded over their heavy breathing as they wrestled. The muzzle was wavering in front of Travis' face now, the pain stabbed at him as Frankie kned him. Travis drew his left hand back and groped for the wheel. Grasping it, he yanked at it savagely. At the same moment he brought his right arm up.

Frankie was spun against the seat as the car veered crazily. For just a fraction of a second the gun jerked upwards. Then there was a roar that deafened Travis. Suddenly Frankie's grip relaxed and he slid to the floor.

Travis whirled around and grabbed the wheel. The car was skidding badly toward the left. He tumbled over to the front seat, shifted into second and braked it lightly. The car hit the curb, jounced up onto the sidewalk and sideswiped a billboard before he managed to stop it.

He cut the motor and, suddenly, everything was quiet again. Travis looked about. He was at the bottom of the long hill, the beginnings of a business district. A trolley car waited at the end of the line before starting its return trip. Across the traffic square, Travis saw the lights of an all-night bar.

Then he heard the police siren. It was at that moment that he started to shake. It was as if all the tension of the night had mounted up and was now overflowing and he couldn't withstand it any longer. Shivering, he bent over the wheel. He felt the coldness of the spokes against his face.

The next he knew, a hand was gripping him by the shoulder. Still shaking, he managed to look up and saw it was one of the policemen, the gray-haired one.

"Easy does it, guy," the cop said gently.

"It's Frankie Niles all right!" The other cop was examining the body in the back of the car. "With half his face blown off!"

"And Kip Saunders back there . . . out cold," the older cop said, eying Travis carefully. "This boy's had a busy night, Gino."

"You can say that again," Gino said.

Travis was trying to control himself but he couldn't. His entire body was sweat-soaked and the midnight air felt like an ice-cold shower. His head quivered, his stomach felt like a pitching mass of jelly. The car seemed to be rolling and he was afraid he would be sick.

"Golly, he's in a bad way, isn't he?" Travis heard Gino say.

"Yeah," said the other cop. "And I know it's against regulations but this guy deserves it. Here," he said. Travis felt the pressure of a few coins in his hand. "Pull yourself together. Get yourself a drink across the street while we call headquarters."

"Thanks, bud, thanks," Travis said. He managed to get out of the car and half ran, half pushed across the street to the bar. It was almost empty. A solitary drinker was at a rear table chatting with the bartender. Travis tried to catch the bartender's attention. He felt like screaming: *Hurry up! Hurry up!* But the bartender didn't notice him.

Travis looked out of the bar window, watched Gino guarding the car while a knot of people gathered. He saw Gino point toward him. Then a few of the on-lookers came across the street to the bar door and looked at him in wide-eyed, frank stares.

Travis was used to stares, but there was something different about these. For the first time in many, many months, people were looking at him not with contempt but with admiration and respect.

All at once his eyes were wet with tears. Ashamed, he forced himself to look away. His eye caught the gray-haired policeman at the police call-phone on the street corner. As the cop talked, Travis saw him look at his watch. Travis thought: *Poor guy, he's going to be late for his birthday party with his wife and kids.*

Wife and kids. The words clawed at Travis.

"What'll it be?" The gruff voice of the bartender broke in over his thoughts.

Travis started to answer: "Anything, a shot of anything," but then his gaze wandered out to the gray-haired cop again. He was still reporting to police headquarters, still looking sadly at his watch.

"What'll it be, Mac?" the bartender said impatiently.

Travis shook his head, turned and walked slowly toward the rear of the bar. Next to the juke box he could see a telephone paybooth. As he headed for it, he figured out just what time the call would awaken them at home in Duluth.

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His big hand held the
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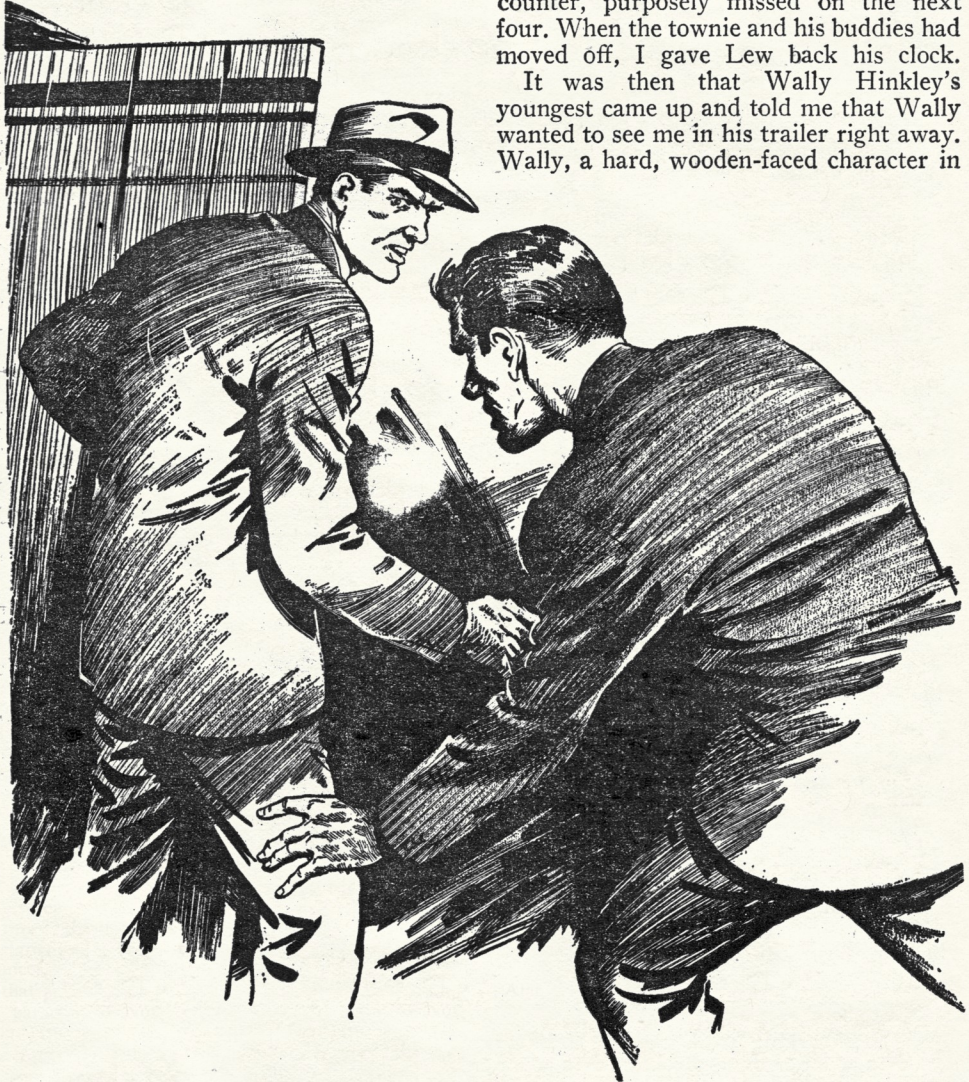


By **SCOTT
O'HARA**

• • • •

*Under the big tent
everybody was one scared family . . .
when the two-time slayer—
started cutting up.*

• • • •



CHAPTER ONE

-Coast into Hell

A MOOCH who fancied himself a good rifleman had been giving Lew Sudreau who runs the shooting gallery pitch a loud argument. When I got the word, I moved in and Lew loaded it with the special slugs. I took all the black out of the ace of spades in the required four shots and that shut the mooch up. I picked an electric clock off the prize counter, purposely missed on the next four. When the townie and his buddies had moved off, I gave Lew back his clock.

It was then that Wally Hinkley's youngest came up and told me that Wally wanted to see me in his trailer right away. Wally, a hard, wooden-faced character in

his forties with arms that hang down to his knees is our knife-thrower and he is billed as Count Steinmetz. He lives with an oversized wife and four kids in a trailer slightly larger than a doghouse.

I went down the midway, absently noting that Unit 8 of Crown Carnivals, Inc., was doing pretty well for an overcast Tuesday afternoon. The skills were working to build up the tips at the posing show and the freak top, but the kids were four deep at the rides. I walked through the jangle-music of the merry-go-round, the steel roar of the Whip, the bally-boom of the platform drums, the yelling of kids.

The door of the Hinkley trailer was open. I went on in. Ma Hinkley overflowed half the eating booth. Wally was sitting on one of the bunks. He works in tails and he sat there in pants, false shirt front and slightly gray underwear. He had a faintly greenish look around the mouth. Ma Hinkley looked grim.

The girl I had hired the day before—Brenda Hanson, she called herself—sat in the one chair staring at the folded hands in her lap. She wore the rhinestone outfit for the act and the adhesive of a new bandage was across her ribs.

"What the hell did you hire for me, heh?" Wally growled.

I sat on the other bunk. I looked at the bandage. "Losing your eye, Wally?"

"I nicked Ma in the ankle eighteen years ago, Jerry. And I ain't missed since."

The climax of Wally's act is when the target girl flattens herself against a board the size of a barn door, spread eagled. There are stirrups for her feet and handles for her hands. The board is balanced on a pivot so that it turns like a big paddlewheel, end over end. It spins pretty fast. Each time she is upright, Wally chunks a knife close to her until he has her outlined. It goes over good.

"What happened?"

"She did good on her first bunch of shows yesterday, Jerry. Not scared at all. I work down the left side and up the right side. So a half hour ago she shoves her middle over toward the knife. Like to give me a hemorrhage. I creased her and you shoulda heard the marks yell. How good did you check on her, Jerry?"

"You know I didn't have much time. Linda shoved off without warning. She'd been looking for a rich mark for two years and grabbed the first one who asked her."

"Did you go to an agency, Jerry?" They were both looking at me hard.

"Okay," I said. "You've got me. I couldn't find anybody the right way. I found her in a bus terminal drinking coffee."

It was a bad confession to have to make. When a more alert ownership took over the twelve units of Crown Carnivals, Inc., they had hired young men with junior executive experience but without carny experience to work in as managers, believing that, in that way, overhead would be more under control and financial reports more intelligible. After the war I spent two and a half years building a National-Bank size innertube around my middle. I jumped at the new job. And now I'd done something contrary to all rules of good management.

You pick replacement talent through the agencies. I'd grabbed one off the street. It would have been better to fold that part of Wally's act until the agency could supply us with a target girl. Maybe the seven months with Unit 8 was beginning to warp my judgment.

Ma glared at me and Wally sighed heavily. The girl didn't look up.

"Why did you try that, Brenda?" I asked.

Her knuckles whitened but she didn't answer.

"We've asked her and asked her," Wally said.

She was too thin, really. What should have been a very lovely slimness was gauntness. Her ribs were too easy to count. The hollowed cheeks and good bone structure of her face gave her the look of a dieting fashion model. Silver-blond hair of cobweb fineness hung straight to her shoulders. The way she was sitting, hunched over, a wide strand of it half concealed one eye. She wore the makeup for the act, heavy and theatrical.

Ma chuckled unexpectedly. "Lord, Wally! She'd be hard to hit if you tried."

"Think she'll talk to you, Jerry?" Wally asked.

I shrugged.

He said, "Come on, Ma. Let's take a walk."

WE WERE alone in the trailer. I remembered how she had acted like a frightened little woods animal until I had convinced her that I was legitimately offering her a job. Her suitcase was battered imitation leather. Her suit was of cheap stuff that had bagged badly where she sat down. She had agreed meekly that she could use a job. When I had taken a deep breath and told her what the job was . . . "Absolutely no danger at all, Brenda . . ." she had agreed without a moment's hesitation.

I had taken the pickup in because I had to pick up some slum for the sales pitches at the freight terminal, and Brenda had sat silently beside me on the way back out to the lot. Wally had been satisfied and I had gotten her a bunk in the sleeping top with Mae Cassidy and her domineering mother. Mae is the husky girl who rides a bike down the loop the loop and into the tank of water. It is our big free act, once in the afternoon and once at ten o'clock at night with the spotlights on her.

"Look at me, Brenda," I said. She slowly lifted her head. Her gray eyes were expressionless. "Tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Did you try to move over so you'd catch that knife in the middle?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I just—wanted to. That's all."

"Do you like it here?"

"It's all right."

"Wally and Ma have been nice to you. They pay well. If you'd done what you tried to do, Wally would have been through. Knife-throwers who kill the girl, no matter how, are always through. That's why he was so scared. He doesn't know how to do anything else. That would have been a hell of a nice favor to do him, wouldn't it?"

Two big tears detached themselves from her lower lids and slid down, making dark tracks of mascara. "I didn't realize that."

"But you do now?"

"Yes, Mr. Howard."

"You won't try it again?"

"No, Mr. Howard."

"Will you try to kill yourself in some other way?"

She didn't answer.

"What is gnawing on you, Brenda?"

"They—they'll find me and kill me anyway. I know they will."

"Who? Who would want to kill you? Is it something you know? Why don't you go to the cops if somebody is after you?"

She grew more pale. "No!" she gasped.

"Well, that's your business," I said.

"But if somebody was trying to shut my mouth, kid, I'd write it all down, seal it and leave the dope where it would be opened if anything happened to me. And then I'd let it be known."

She was shivering a little. There were goose bumps on her pale skin. But it was warm in the trailer. For a moment there was a glow of hope in her eyes. Then that faded.

"It wouldn't do any good," she said.

I lit a cigarette. "I ought to fire you and chase you off the lot, you know."

"Why not?"

"Damn it, can't you meet me half-way? I'm trying to give you another chance."

"If you want to."

I went to the trailer door. Wally and Ma were twenty feet away. They saw me and came over. I said, "She won't try it again."

Wally got brick-red. "Damn it, I can't take a chance on that! I won't have it. You get her the hell off the lot and get me somebody I can trust."

I'd learned a little in seven months. I looked at Ma. "The kid's in trouble."

"Lord, Jerry! We got four of our own cluttering up the trailer now and—"

"It's not any old trouble. She needs help."

Wally kicked at the trailer step. "Well . . . in that case . . . hell, I'll leave it up to Ma."

Ma looked in at the girl. "You going to do that again?"

"No. I promise."

Ma sighed. "Okay, Jerry. Maybe she helps the food concessions. The customers watch her and go away hungry. Kid, go get your face fixed. We go on again in fifteen minutes. And for the next act, how about smiling?"

She came out and tied the robe around her and I walked with her toward the Cassidy sleeping top. She said, "I know I can't ask for anything, Mr. Howard."

"What do you want?"

"Mae and her mother sleep awfully hard. The thunderstorm in the night didn't even wake them up. If I could sleep where there are more girls, I'd feel safer."

"Meet me after the next show outside the freak top on the scenic railway side and I'll see what we can do."

I went out to the gate and checked admissions, dropped in at the food top and went over inventory for a few minutes and then got back to the show top in time to catch the finale of Wally's act. He set Brenda spinning and went back to his mark with the cluster of knives in his left hand. She was spinning so fast that it made her look like one of those old-time flickering movies.

Wally's arm moved like a flash of light. Chunk, chunk, chunk. Armpit, waist, side of thigh, ankle. Four more up the right side. Ankle, thigh, waist, armpit. Chunk, chunk. So fast that the two knives seemed to be in the air at the same time. One on either side of her head. I felt faintly ill as I thought of what might have happened if she had decided to move her head instead of her body.

The last knife was over her head, the weighted hilt angled down so that it projected out over her forehead. Wally throws that one in such a manner that it doesn't quite complete its spin and the angle makes it look a lot closer than it is.

HE STOPPED the board. Brenda wore her painted smile. There was good applause. She stepped off the board, held a guy rope to kill the dizziness for a moment, bowed to the crowd and grabbed her robe. Wally started his slum pitch, selling a booklet of instructions on how to throw knives, plus one steel throwing knife. The book and knife cost him twenty-eight cents wholesale and he gets a buck for the outfit—no sales to children under fifteen. A shill made the first buy and then they started to go fast.

I caught up with Brenda and said, "Have you got any objections to sleeping with the other girls?"

"No."

"Come on, then." We went around to the back, to the little dressing top. I could hear the languid music on the phonograph inside and I recognized it as the final pose of the show, a Hawaiian number.

I stood near the flap and called Lady Bee. She runs the show and she's close to fifty. But she's kept herself in such shape that when any of her girls are sick, she can stand in by softening the lights a little. Close up she has a face that looks as though it were cut out of Vermont rock.

She came out and gave me the usual broad grin. "Boy, we got 'em drooling in there today." She glanced curiously at Brenda.

"Lady Bee, this is Brenda Hanson."

"Too damn skinny," Lady Bee said.

"No. She's Wally's new target girl. I want to bunk her down with your mob if it's okay."

"Okay by me. Get this straight, Brenda. No noise a half hour after we close up. No borrowing. Come here, and I'll show you where the cot gets set up."

They went away. I had my back near the dressing top flap. A pair of warm arms slid around my neck from the back and there was a husky giggle in my ear.

"Quit it, Maida," I said.

She giggled again.

"Damn it, are you trying to sabotage my authority?"

"You've got too much dignity, pal."

"Leggo."

"No. I'm holding on until I get a date out of this."

I sighed. "Fifteen minutes after you fold tonight. We'll go for a ride."

"Same place," she said. She kissed me on the ear and slipped back behind the flap. I walked away to tell Mae that Brenda was moving out.

The management insists that more dignity is maintained if the manager lives in town. I'd rather live on the lot. It would make life simpler. The crowd was beginning to thin. It would be very slim through the dinner hour and then pick up again in the evening, reaching a peak at about ten, tapering off until one, with the last regular shows on a little after midnight.

I drove into town in the coupe, won-

dering about Brenda all the way. She seemed honestly frightened. The way she talked indicated a certain amount of breeding, at odds with the sleazy clothes she had been wearing in the bus terminal. And, no matter how safe it is and no matter how much a person wants to stop living, it does take a respectable amount of courage to hold still while those knives arrow into the pine close to your flesh.

Markson, our advance man, was waiting for me at the hotel, back from a trip along our planned route. While I shaved, we carried on a conversation. The weather was holding and our gross was running good. On the last poop sheet from the management, we were in second place on net for the year and I could plan on a very respectable season bonus if all went well.

We had drinks together and a big dinner on the firm. He hit the sack and at ten o'clock I drove back out to the lot. My assistant, Weber, told me about a drunk who tried to tear up the penny pitch game. When I asked him how it came out, he blew softly on bruised knuckles and said,

"He listened to reason, boss."

The drum roll was loud because all the rides shut down while Mae does her loop on the bicycle. We watched her. I know the act is as safe as churches, but it never fails to give me the quivers to see her high on that platform. She uses a heavy suntan makeup to contrast with her shining white one-piece swim suit. Face to face, Mae looks as though she could break you over her knee—but high on the platform she looks very frail and feminine. The chrome-plated bike stood beside her.

She waved down and you could feel the silence settle over the crowd, over the gaping upturned faces. Even the kids let their cones melt. I knew that Mae's mother was in their sleeping top, her head buried under the pillow so that she couldn't hear the drum roll.

Mae got onto the saddle, pushed off and arrowed down the ramp, picking up speed with every fraction of a second. The way it always works, she and the bike go off the end of the jump, with the net catching the bike and Mae flattening into a dive that takes her beyond the net

and into the tank—an impressive stunt.

She whirled up and around the loop and hit the jump. My breath caught in my throat as I saw that the angle was wrong—way wrong. She was going out too flat. It seemed to take an eternity. The bike turning lazily in the spots, the hard brown body frozen against the night sky.

The bike cleared the net too. It was too close to her. The animal moan rose in the crowd and I had the fleeting thought that it was loud enough for her mother to hear even with her head under the pillow.

The moan rose to a scream as Mae, her feet high, hit the far edge of the tank with the small of her back. The tank was six feet deep, twenty feet in circumference. The husky body broke like a twig. Weber stood beside me, cursing monotonously, hoarsely. An elderly man near us bent over and was ill. She clung a moment, bent backward over the rim and then slid slowly, head down, into the water.

CHAPTER TWO

Death's Unwilling Decoy

I WANTED to turn and run. Anywhere. But I had to walk steadily down to the tank. They had her out on the grass when I got there. The bike had hit the exact center of the tank. The carnies were herding the morbidly curious away. Someone covered her over with a tarp. I sent Weber down the road to phone the police.

Mae's mother came pushing her way down through the ring that stood silently looking at the tarp. Her mouth hung open and her eyes bulged.

That was something I couldn't watch. I turned away.

Fools had left the spots on the ramp. There was something odd about it. In a moment I saw what it was. The very last board was gone, and the two steel supports curved up the last few inches, like skeletal rib bones. The missing board would have served to throw her and the bike to the right height. Without it, the trajectory was too flat. Too deathly flat.

I went under the ramp and kicked around in the tall grass looking for the

board, but I knew it wasn't there. I had seen the ramp assembled too many times. The boards were held in place by small U-bolts on either end, bolted through holes in the steel supports. And the boards themselves were made of hard thick plywood, so that there would be no danger of warping. I looked at the steel framework of the supports of the ramp. It would not take an exceptionally agile person to climb up there.

The crowd was thinning fast. They come to see an act like Mae's with the hidden hope that something horrible will happen. But when it does, it takes the heart out of them. I went down the midway and gave the signal for the games to close the moment play stopped. Sirens howled in the distance and I headed for the gate.

I made myself known to the man who seemed to be in charge. He had a flat, wedge-shaped face, bristling eyebrows and the pits remaining from bad adolescent acne.

He said that he was Lieutenant Folm, and I took him over to the body. They had gotten Mrs. Cassidy back to her sleeping top and he said that he would have to see her later to ask the routine questions.

The coroner arrived and clucked as he examined the body. He straightened up. "Instantaneous death, Lieutenant. Shattered the vertebra, smashed the pelvis, apparently, and raised general hell. Healthy specimen."

The lieutenant said, "You bill this as a dangerous stunt?"

"She kept track. I think this was somewhere in the twelve or thirteen hundred series."

"But not a good insurance risk, eh?"

"Insurance companies are touchy."

He looked at the ramp. "Lot of equipment. If it was a little out of whack—"

"She always checked it herself. They all do. Like jumpers rigging their own parachutes."

"Know anybody that would like to have her dead?"

I could answer confidently. "She didn't have an enemy in the world."

"How long will you be here, Howard?"

"I estimated another ten days. We have such heavy rides to put up that we squat as long as we can. When the gross drops

below a certain minimum limit, we move on. But this will probably drag it out longer."

"How so?"

I shrugged. "They'll come to see where it happened. And we'll get another girl to do the act in three or four days."

"Cold-blooded, aren't you?"

"Is there any point in trying to make me sore, Lieutenant?"

He grinned and I began to almost like him. "Standard procedure, Howard." He looked at the ramp again. "Anybody on the lot know anything about that act? I mean, is there anybody who could fill in for the Cassidy girl?"

"No, there isn't."

"How do they do it the first time?"

"Stretch a big net and go into it a dozen times. Then you know where to spot the tank."

"I think I'll post some men around that outfit until your new performer shows. How long will it take?"

"I'll wire tonight. But there may not be one available."

"I'll take a chance on that. I want the opinion of a pro on whether or not anybody jiggled that rig to spill her. Okay with you?"

I manufactured a shrug. "If you can spare the man and if you don't interfere with business."

"See you around," he said. "And I'd feel pretty bad if anybody all of a sudden decided to leave the show."

"Nobody will."

The stragglers were leaving. The usual gambling was starting in the G-top. For carnies only. One persistent mark accompanied by gal-friend was still heaving baseballs at milk bottles. I moved him off gently.

My car was inside the lot around the corner from the gate. I went and sat in it with the lights out. My cigarette end glowed in the dark. The car door opened and Maida slid in beside me.

"Hmm," I said. "What's the new poison?"

"Comes in a green bottle. Savage Conquest, they call it. Give up?" She snuggled close. "Baby needs bourbon," she murmured. "Bourbon and Jerry."

"In that order?"

"Start the car. I got the old creeps.

Poor Mae. I want some laughs, honey."

We stopped at the first roadside tavern with a respectable sprinkling of cars and took a maple booth in the bar. Maida drew eyes like they were fastened to strings. She has cornsilk hair, big dumb blue eyes, and the sort of exaggerated build to start a Petty girl crying into her telephone. Tonight she had the build poured into a diagonal red-and-white candy-striped dress that looked as though it was tattooed on.

There was the usual consternation over her standard drink of a double bourbon in a glass of orange pop, and the bartender made it with a pained expression.

"Here's to drinking first," she said.

I downed my shot.

"Why so grim, honey honey?" she said.

"Oh, I like to see women broken in half."

She shuddered. "Don't, Jerry. I want laughs and I want you to take me stumbling home by dawn's early light, all happy. So let's start cheery. That little Brenda you saddled us with gave me enough trouble."

"What did she do?"

"OH, SHE went into a trance after it happened. Stiff as a board and white as death. She sounded like she was choking to death. Lady Bee shoved some rye down her and she went off into hysterics. And then she was going to leave right away. We held her, and the second time that bottle really worked. My rye, too. She passed out in about ten minutes."

I waved for a refill. It bothered me. Brenda was scared. Brenda slept in the same top with Mae. Mae gets—murdered. I let the word come to the top of my mind for the first time. And when Brenda hears about it, she has a reaction that intense fear could bring.

"Say, are you glaring at me?" Maida demanded.

I focused my eyes. She grinned and gave me the parted lips, sultry eyes routine. She laughed.

"Maida," I said. "You are my favorite hobby, but right now I want to talk to Brenda. Who's home?"

She pouted. "Lady Bee, Ethel and Brenda. Stacey, Beth and Carol went on

a triple date. Say, what has she got that I haven't got more of?"

"Come and help. What's an hour out of your life?"

"I could be struck by lightning. Would not that be a terrible waste?"

We drove back fast and she was reasonably cheerful. I waited outside and she went in and talked to Lady Bee. In a few minutes they let me in. Ethel was snoring softly. Brenda slept with her mouth open, flat on her back.

We shook her for ten minutes and Lady Bee began to put a little beef behind the face-slapping before we woke her up. She was groggy. Then her face changed to a mask of fright.

"I've got to get out of here," she said.

"Shut up. Why did Mae's accident scare you so badly?"

She was off-guard from being awakened. "Last night, after the thunderstorm. I was crying. Mae heard me. I felt so alone. She sat on the edge of my cot. I—I told her what I was scared of. She said she wanted to think it over and then we'd do something about it. We were both jumpy. She thought she heard a noise. She went outside the tent but there wasn't anybody there, she said. I know there was somebody there. And they killed her because I told her." Her voice had risen to a wail. She rolled over onto her face and sobbed.

"The time has come," I said, "to tell us."

"No." Her voice was muffled.

Lady Bee rolled her over roughly. "Damn it, girl, Mae was a friend of mine. A good friend. You come around here with your troubles and get her killed. It wasn't your fault, I know. But I've got a yen to see somebody burn."

"No!" Brenda said.

I said slowly, "I think you'd have enough guts to want to help us fix whoever murdered Mae, kid."

She sat down slowly. We stood around her. "All right. My name is really Brenda Kailer. I lived with my mother in Louisville. She was a widow. Four months ago she married again. A younger man. I ran away, three months ago. I couldn't get a job. In Omaha, I was down to less than a dollar.

"I found a want ad for a nursemaid for

a small child. I wrote to the box number. A man came to the address I gave and hired me. I thought he was quite nice. He questioned me carefully and I know now that he made certain that I had no friends or relatives in Omaha and that Hanson wasn't my name. He took me to a big country place outside of town, where there was a small boy who cried all the time. On the third day I found out that he had been—kidnapped.

"Things were going wrong for them. They thought that with a woman around, the child would begin to eat again. On the fourth day, in the afternoon, they locked me in a room. I heard him scream once. I knew they killed him and I knew they'd have to kill me. I dropped out the window and hurt my ankle but I got away. With no money, I couldn't go far. A man gave me a ride all the way to Kansas City. I don't know how they managed to trace me, but they did. I had seen one of them on the street and I went into the bus terminal. I knew they couldn't kill me there.

"Then you came in, Mr. Howard. At first I thought you were—one of them . . . They must have seen the name on the truck. Today when I tried to get in front of the knife, it was because I saw one of them watching the act."

"You told Mae all this? It doesn't seem enough to warrant—"

"I told her the exact address of the house. I described the three men and I told her the name of the little boy. I'd better tell you that too. The house was—"

She was looking beyond us toward the tent flap. Her eyes widened slowly and the cords in her thin throat stood out.

As I started to turn, there was a whispering sound in the night air and then the noise that you make with the first thrust of a knife into a watermelon. The weighted hilt of one of Wally's knives protruded grotesquely from Brenda's chest.

She looked down at it as though in mild curiosity. Her hands lifted and she touched the hilt. Then blood gouted suddenly from her mouth and she folded slowly over onto the boards, rolled onto her side and lay still.

I raced out of the sleeping top to the sound of Lady Bee's metronomic screams.

The guy rope hit me across the ankles and I fell so hard that it drove mud into my mouth and dazed me. I picked myself up and saw people running toward us. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, yanked the tent flap shut as Lady Bee screamed for the last time.

To the excited questions I said, "Lady Bee was having a nightmare, kids. Go on back to sleep." I made it loud enough to be heard inside the tent.

When they cleared away, I went back inside. Ethel was sitting up. She was staring at Brenda and her lips were saying voiceless words. Lady Bee had a bottle tilted high and her hard throat was working spasmodically. Maida grabbed the bottle away and up-ended it. She solemnly handed it to me and I killed it.

We stared at each other. "Poor little gal," Lady Bee said. "You got another bottle, Ethel?"

"N-n-no."

"What the hell, Jerry?" Maida said in a taut voice. "Are we going to stand around and stare at her?"

I turned to Lady Bee. "I've heard you keep some protection around."

She opened her trunk without a word and dug out the biggest pistol I've ever seen. It was a .45 caliber Colt revolver with a barrel that looked half as long as her arm. She smiled without humor. "Some of the marks believe what they see in the show. It's loaded and at a hundred feet I can shoot the heel off a running man's shoe."

I handed it to Maida. She took it as though it might blow up in her face. "This will be some protection. Go over and wake up Wally and send him over here. Then take my car. Here're the keys. Go into town and come back here with Lieutenant Folm. Tell him that I have my own reasons to keep this quiet. I'll tell him when I see him."

"But, it's d-d-dark outside," she said.

"You're a big brave girl," I said. She gave one uncertain backward look and went out into the night. Lady Bee was spreading a blanket over Brenda.

WALLY came in. I showed him what was under the blanket. He swallowed hard. "Sure anxious to collect one of my knives, wasn't she?"

"You're sure it's yours?"

"Made it myself. I'm beginning to get the idea of Maida wandering around with that cannon. Wouldn't mind one myself."

"Wally, I don't like to say this. It is your knife. It was thrown from outside the tent. You, as far as I know, are the only knife-thrower in these parts. The police are going to have questions."

He looked at me and suddenly giggled. It was a surprising sound. "Jerry, I'm in luck. Two hours ago I met one of them cops guarding the ramp. He was a Marine in the first war too. We've been shooting the breeze ever since. That's where Maida found me. She stayed back out of the light so he wouldn't spot the artillery."

I heaved a heavy long sigh of profound relief.

We sat patiently and we didn't say much. Ethel sat up in bed and cheated at solitaire with a greasy deck of cards. Lady Bee tapped her foot. Once gases or something in the blanketed body made a small gurgling sound. We all jumped a foot.

When Folm's ugly face peered in at the tent flap, I could have kissed him. He had the coroner and a lab man with him. Maida followed them in. She looked smug. Folm took off his hat, mopped his brow and said, "Ever try to drive that car of yours with this—this girl breathing down your neck?"

"Repeatedly," I said.

"When a girl's frightened," Maida said, "she's just got to be close to a man. And when she isn't frightened, she just naturally wants to be close." She was waving the gun. I took it gingerly out of her hand and Lady Bee popped it back into the trunk.

"Who're you?" Folm asked Wally.

"Knife-thrower. Somebody threw one of my knives into her."

Folm pulled the blanket back. He seemed happy that nobody had touched her. The coroner went into his clucking act again. The lab man dusted the knife handle but there were no prints discernable. The coroner pulled the knife out. The lab man wrapped it up and put it in his bag. They covered her up again.

Folm sat down, tamped his pipe full and lit it. "Now talk."

I talked. I gave him everything, includ-

ing the one missing board on the ramp.

"Did you notice that before?"

I swallowed hard. "After you left, Lieutenant."

He checked Wally's alibi and then ordered him to go look at his knives and find out if only one was missing. Wally was back in five minutes with a gray look.

"Lock's busted on my trunk. Three knives gone, Lieutenant."

Folm studied me. "You look like a man with an idea."

"Probably a poor idea. It came to me as I was spitting out mud. The light in there is bad. The knife-thrower was outside. I don't think he really had a chance to know he got her. I don't think he's connected with the show. I'm sure he isn't. So he had a good reason to kill her. A good enough reason to try again. I don't see how else you're going to land him, unless you give him a second chance. I happened to think, while she was talking, how near alike her hair is and Maida's."

Maida stood up suddenly and started backward toward the tent flap. "Now look!" she said. "Now look! Sitting ducks are fine in the shooting gallery. Not little Maida. No sir. Not me." She had backed to the flap.

"Honey, it's dark outside," I said.

She gulped and bounded away from the flap.

She touched her hair. "I could dye it black, maybe."

"Sit down, dammit!" Folm bellowed.

Maida sat down with a surprising meekness. Folm chewed on his pipe stem. He looked at me. "You got a hospital tent?"

"Yes."

"We got to have a goat. Lemme see now. Hinkley, you can stay under cover couple days, can't you?"

"Sure."

"I can fix the papers. We'll make like we booked the knife-thrower. The girl was wounded, but not badly. We got a photographer who can make a picture of her there on the floor look like she was a toothpaste ad. We can hop it up a little. Victim of knife-thrower will be strong enough to 'tell all' in a few days. Promises startling revelation. And we can shove yon buxom lassie into the hospital bed."

"Not me!" Maida said firmly.

He beamed at her. "Let me see now.

You mentioned the little item that you don't have a driver's license. And I dimly recall some law that says something about carrying a cannon around without a license. I think we might be able to give you up to a year. That starchy food in there is terrible. I bet you'll weigh one-sixty time you get out."

Maida gently touched her very slim waist. She stuck one leg straight out and inspected the ankle. "Quack, quack," she said. "Where's the gallery?"

Wally hadn't been listening. He grumbled, "Still don't see how in hell an amateur could do so good with one of my knives. They're built for me."

"Luck," Fols said.

Wally handed him a knife. "Happened to bring one along. Give you ten to one you can't even stick it in the floor ten feet away in three tries."

"I'll take a dime of that," Fols said.

The hilt hit every time. Fols paid his dime. They sneaked the body into the basket and out under the back flap. Ethel got the stains scrubbed up just in time, just five minutes before the other three gals came home.

Maida, protesting every inch of the way, was led off to the hospital tent. She particularly objected to sharing it with one small chimp who was under an oxygen tent with a bout of pneumonia.

CHAPTER THREE

Cut to the Quick

THE next morning I bought a paper in the hotel lobby. It gave me a creepy feeling to see Brenda's face looking at me from the picture in the box on page one. She smiled wanly up from what was apparently a hospital bed. Her shoulder appeared to be bandaged.

I ate hurriedly and went out to the lot. I picked one daisy just inside the main gate and took it to Maida.

"Very funny," she snorted. "People have brought better presents."

"I thought nobody could come in here."

"Lady Bee and Wally are allowed in."

She took the pint of bourbon from under her pillow. "Lady Bee understands."

The cop sitting in the dark corner licked his chops and sighed.

Her mouth tightened. "When'll it happen, Jerry?"

"My guess is tonight."

She shivered. "I hope they got an army around me. I'm too young and luscious to die."

"Nothing can possibly happen to you."

"Nothing at all, lady," the cop said wearily. "And that's the thirty-sixth time I've said that since breakfast."

The day seemed to drag by. Crowds were good. Mae, being a trooper, would be glad to know that even in dying she'd increased the gate. Fols had come through with any number of men who managed to look not too much like the law. The lot was a-crawl with them. At two o'clock, the wire came from the agency offering a citizen complete with equipment who could dive sixty-five feet down into three feet ten inches of water—but no looper.

There was a convention in the city. Something about plumbing and heating. Everywhere I looked I saw a pudgy little man with an alcoholic waver, a paper lapel flower and his hat brim turned up all the way around. With a closer inspection I saw that it was not always the same man but rather several dozen of him, as though some duplicating machine had been set to turning him out. Fols's cops, out of pure habit, lightened my duties by stomping hard on every emotional conflagration which broke out.

Fols caught me as I came out of the eating top a little after two-thirty. He said, "Is there any *good* way to stop our decoy from singing? She's in good voice. Isn't she something, though?"

"I'll fix it."

I went in just as Maida wound up an interesting vocal dissection of one of the kings of England. She stopped when she saw me. The cop in the dark corner looked up from his notebook. "You went too damn fast," he said disgustedly.

I smiled at her. "Lambie, right now only one character, we hope, wants to put out your lights. Keep singing and they'll be standing in line to strangle you."

"You always liked my voice," she pouted.

"In a husky whisper, yes. Go to sleep."

"Honey, honey, I don't want to wake up dead."

"Bad morale," the cop said. He

scratched his chin. "I don't like this. It seems like an amateur idea. Now if it was me, I'd grab every stranger on the lot, bust every one of 'em a few times and see who starts talking."

"Our insurance doesn't cover that, friend," I said. "Will you be good, Maida?"

"If you ask me, Jerry." She sounded gay but there were shadows in the back of those big dumb blue eyes. Maida is just another dizzy blonde who keeps up her annuity payments. I smoothed the hair back off her satin forehead and kissed the bridge of her nose.

"Damn poor aim," she said.

I went out. I was restless. I went down to the far end of the midway and Mitch Lane called me over. His pitch was empty for the moment. He has a face like a gray monkey with the tummy ache.

"This outfit goes to hell fast," he said. "Naturally."

"Gets so a man's got to tie down his stuff. Nail it to the floor, yet."

A mooch and his girl came up and looked curiously at the targets. Mitch beamed and said, "Show the little lady how you would have done in the days of old, friend. Three bolts for a dime. Take three clothespins off the wire in three shots and she can take her choice of any one of those delicious boxes of candy."

"How they work?" the mooch asked.

Mitch wound the thong back with the screw and notched it, set a bolt in the groove. The mooch lifted it and aimed. He overshot the clothespin by a good two inches.

The crossbow bolt hit the backdrop with a healthy thud.

Mitch said, out of the corner of his mouth to me, "Probably kids. Got into the box and lifted one of the crossbows. Surprised they didn't take 'em all."

I grabbed one off the counter. "Right back, Mitch," I said. I heard him yell feebly after me as I galloped off down the midway.

Wally gave me a knife and I located Folm. I took him behind the G-top where there was a bale of hay. He watched curiously. I laid the knife in the groove and the thong was against the blunt handle. I tripped the trigger and the knife chunked into the hay so far I had to dig to get it.

"My, my!" he said. "Lemme try."

It worked just as well for him.

"Cute," he said. His voice was a rasp. I knew that he saw in his mind, as I did, the knife chunking into Brenda's frail chest.

At dusk I went to the Hinkley trailer. With me, Wally, Ma and the four kids in there, it wasn't exactly roomy.

"Anything new?" Ma asked.

"Not yet. But we don't think anybody could get to her with a Sherman tank."

"We've been talking," Wally said soberly to me.

"Yes?"

"This isn't much of a life for the kids, Jerry. All this going on has sort of shook us up. The grouch bag is heavy and we figure that we'll stick around until you can replace me and then try an honest living for a while."

"I'll be sorry to lose you folks."

"We'll be sorry to go. But with what we've got laid away we could get a little farm, maybe. Raise chickens. The kids would like that."

My restlessness drove me back out. Folm came up to me in the shadows. "Got something for you to chew on, friend. No such a person as Brenda Kailer in Louisville. Just came in over the tape a while back."

"Then why the hell would she—"

"Exactly. This gets screwier as it goes on."

The crowds were getting thicker. The carny noise, usually so gay, had a dry and mournful sound in my ears. A dirge for dead wooden soldiers. The moon was a pale million miles away and clouds scudded across it. Folm told me that he had twelve men in a careful perimeter around the hospital tent. He had the lot circled with enough men so that, when the attempt was made, he could close it up like a mouse trap.

I HAD a yen to see how Maida was weathering it. I cut behind the freak top, went by the dark living trailers, parked at the top of the slope and went on down to the hospital tent. A pencil flash hit me in the face and a gun barrel showed under it. I got the nod and went by. The oxygen was off the chimp and he lay on straw in a sad little heap, bright

eyes dulled, the breath harsh in his throat.

Maida said, "I'm scared, Jerry. Really scared. Something's after me."

"That's the general idea."

I sat on the edge of her bed and cupped her cold hands in mine.

"I feel better with you here, Jerry."

"Then I'll stay a while."

"Turn your back, George," she whispered to the cop. His chair scraped as he turned it around. Her arm slid around my neck and her lips were warm. I heard the hoarse shout of alarm, a muffled trundling noise, coming closer. She stiffened in my arms.

"Lookout!" a man yelled, panic in his voice.

I yanked her out of the cot, pulled her across the floor.

It was luckily in time. There was a ripping, smashing sound and the canvas fell around us in soft folds. Then there was silence. She shuddered.

This was no time to consider the property inventory. I took out my pocket knife, opened the blade and slashed the canvas above us. The stars were high overhead. A flashlight hit me as I stood up.

Folm barked, "The girl! She okay?"

"Oh, dandy!" Maida said.

Other flashlights flickered around. I saw it then, a heavy, four-wheel goods trailer turned onto its side. It lay where Maida's cot had been. I swallowed hard and tugged at my collar. The chimp was making a frightened, mournful cheeping sound.

They took care of Maida and I got on the PA system and closed the place. The rides stopped and the holiday sounds were over. The crowd stood in puzzled clots.

"There has been a murder attempt on the lot," I said, as calmly as I could. "The management regrets inconveniencing you. Police will interview each person as he or she leaves the lot. Families with children will be given preference."

At ten o'clock they had finished. With Mrs. Cassidy in the city being treated for shock, we had set up headquarters in their empty living top, with a table for a desk. Folm's face was gray with fatigue.

"Stupid!" he said. "That's what we were. Any fool could have seen that one trailer was lined up to hit the hospital tent. All they had to do was kick the

chocks away. And whoever did it got out of here through the gate, all nice and orderly, with a cover story that we didn't even get suspicious about. Damn it to hell and gone!"

I stretched out on Mae's cot and lit a cigarette. I said, "We're off somewhere. We started wrong somewhere along the line."

His voice was nasty. "Go on, Brain."

"I should have seen it in the beginning. This is a specialized business. Now listen to me cut my throat from ear to ear. It all smells to me like somebody in the family, some carny."

He waited a long time. "Proceed."

"Okay. Starting on that premise, Lieutenant, we have to forget our idea of motive. That raises questions. Was Brenda killed to smokescreen the real victim? Did the murderer want to kill Mae all along?"

He grunted. "I don't like that angle. It doesn't take care of how frightened Brenda was."

"Another switch. Maybe she handed us the wrong yarn. Maybe she was frightened for another reason."

"What carny type would want to kill her? What did she have?"

"Maybe something of value, Folm. Maybe she had something somebody wanted."

Maida, wearing blue jeans that would have stopped the roundup at the Bar X, and a white fuzzy sweater, pushed the flap aside and said, "Can anybody play?"

"What are you doing wandering around alone?" Folm roared.

"Don't be silly. Three of your nice men walked me over here."

"The question before the house," I said, "is what Brenda could have had that anybody might want."

She sat down. "If I wondered about that, I'd take a look in her suitcase."

Folm and I gave each other disgusted looks. He sent a man over to Lady Bee's tent. The man came back with the big cheap suitcase.

We opened it under the light. Folm said, "This is pretty big to jump out a window with."

Maida handled the clothes. She said, "This stuff doesn't come out of chain stores. Why did she wear the cheap stuff and carry the good stuff?"

The lining in the inside of the lid had

been badly torn and re-mended. "Now how would you go about making a tear like that?" Folm asked.

"By ripping it to take something out, of course," Maida said, very demure.

Folm cut it open without disturbing the neat stitches. He laid the triangular flap back. Then he held his nose close to the inside. He straightened up with a funny expression. "Money! Keep money in an enclosed place and you can always smell the ink. Sort of acid smell."

I checked and he was right.

We talked. Ideas began to come faster. We began interrupting each other. Then Folm stood up and said grimly, "It's worth a try."

We found Wally in the show top, practising by the light of a gasoline lantern. He nodded, smiled, and said, "Got something new?"

"Could be. I suppose you and your wife like to check on the new girls," Folm said.

"Sure."

"That first day Mae and her mother went into town after Mae's afternoon show. During one of your shows your wife could go over and take a quick look through Brenda's stuff."

"Now Ma wouldn't do a thing like that." He yanked the knives out of the board and stepped back. *Chunk, chunk, chunk.*

"But if she had, she'd have found some money inside the lining. A nice wad of money, Mr. Hinkley."

"That right?"

"And then that would have given you a problem. Brenda was in on the kidnapping. She double-crossed her friends and took off with the money, wearing cheap clothes to be inconspicuous. She was afraid she had been traced by her playmates. They'd be very angry with her. You would suspect she was outside the law. Ma could have lifted the money and you could have tried to put a knife right through her.

"But the training of years, the subconscious conditioning, would have deflected your hand at the last moment. You just creased her a little, and then you told her it was a warning and that you had the dough. Be good and be quiet and maybe you'd give her back a share of it. Actually, it was hijacking."

"Man, you can sure dream," Wally said.

"SHE was afraid to trust you. She moved to Lady Bee's tent, not knowing that the night before you tried to put a knife in her during the act, you'd listened outside hoping for a chance to kill her in her bed. But you heard her talk to Mae. You heard her tell Mae that if anything happened to her, it would be because Wally Hinkley wanted it to happen.

"You lifted that dough the first day she worked and either you or your wife let her know you had it. You heard Mae say that she'd go to the cops, and heard Brenda talk her out of it. On second thought, maybe that creasing was just to frighten her. You couldn't risk puncturing her good with Mae knowing the score. It wasn't hard, early in the evening, to take the board off Mae's ramp."

Wally threw three more knives. He didn't answer.

Folm went on. "The best way to kill Brenda was with one of your own knives. But you really stretched yourself to give yourself an alibi. It had to be a carry who lifted one of the crossbows. Your wife did the shooting, I imagine. She stood out there and heard Brenda giving Jerry here a song-and-dance. She was still so greedy for a share of that money that she didn't quite dare name you. But I think she might have been working her way up to it. The knife put an end to the conversation."

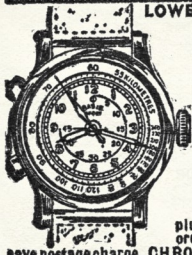
Wally went up to the board and yanked the knives out. "Okay, smart guy. I knew Brenda was dead. Why that trailer running loose then to kill Maida, who was just a decoy?"

Folm's smile wasn't pretty. "The odds were that it would miss her. But any attempt against her, successful or unsuccessful, would be the best way to prove that you and your wife had nothing to do with it."

Wally yawned. "It's a pretty story, Lieutenant. Good imagination. But you ought to be out rounding up the killer instead of wasting my time and yours."

"We can waste just a little more time, Hinkley. We can go through that trailer of yours with a fine-tooth comb. The money will be there. It's the money you were going to live on after you left us."

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It hit home. I saw the slow disintegration of Hinkley's face, saw the animal look come over it. His big hand reversed one of the knives and held the blade in a practised grip.

He said, "So the killer was hiding on the lot. Don't forget he stole three knives. That leaves one for you, Lieutenant, and one for you, Jerry. No! I wouldn't do that Lieutenant. I can have a knife in your heart before you touch the butt of that popgun. Now turn around slow, Lieutenant. You get it first and in the back. Your guessing was too good. Forty thousand dollars worth of guessing."

Folm was pale. He began to turn slowly. I watched Wally's big hand. I knew that it would flash up and down again, almost quicker than the eye could follow. As it started to lift, I jumped toward him in one great bound. I saw his arm swerve toward me and a hard, hot pain thudded into my chest. My right fist, with the force of the spring behind it, hit him flush on the jaw. The jolt felt as though it tore my shoulder loose.

He went down to the ground like a tree in the wind.

Folm put the pretty bracelets on him and then straightened up. A drop of sweat fell from the tip of his nose. "Did you go nuts?" he asked weakly.

"A knife-thrower holds the blade. At fifteen feet, the knife makes a half turn. I had to get close so fast that it couldn't complete its turn. That's why it hit me flat."

He looked at my chest.

"Flat, eh."

I looked down. It had made just enough of its turn so that when it hit the keen edge of the blade had slashed my suit, my shirt, and very shallowly into my hide. Great bells rang and darkness swooped around me. I sat down hard.

* * *

The tape on my chest itched. My knuckles throbbed steadily. The little man from the management had just left my hotel room, muttering about proper hiring methods. Folm had phoned me to report that the forty thousand was on the way

Blood on the Midway

back to the parents of the kid who had been returned after the payoff, whimpering but otherwise okay.

Brenda's identity was giving the FBI a lead on the other characters in the gang who had taken the kid. Folm told me that Brenda was a graduate pickpocket who was taking a post-graduate course in the bigger time.

I yawned. A hot shower and then to bed. I called room service and had some ice and soda sent up. I left the door unlocked and went into the bathroom, stripped down and adjusted the water. Above its roar I heard the tap on the door. The boy with the ice and soda, undoubtedly.

I yelled that I was in the shower. It felt good. Then I turned around and peeked through the gap in the curtains. There was a nicely rounded arm coming through the doorway.

"Go away!" I yelled.

"Come on out, honey honey."

I shouted. "I have prestige to maintain, dammit!"

"You got nice bourbon, too. Come on out. You saved my life. I want to be grateful."

"You—you—you carnival madcap!"

"Are you coming out, or aren't you?"

"Please, Maida. Go away."

"All right," she said firmly. "If you aren't coming out, I'm coming in. This coy act has gone on long enough."

"Maida," I pleaded, "will you marry me?"

"What else did you think I was going to do? Be a mother to you?"

"Tomorrow we get the license?"

"At nine in the morning, honey honey. There! Got it?"

A strange woman said, "Yes, all of it."

"Who's that?" I yelled.

"Just the hotel stenographer, honey honey. She'll have it typed up by the time you get out of there. And you'll have a drink waiting for you. I like to have things written down in black and white, honey honey."

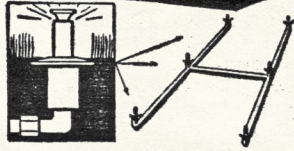
The door shut. The only thing left to do was to be certain to read the small print on the marriage license. Dear, simple, ingenious little Maida!

THE END

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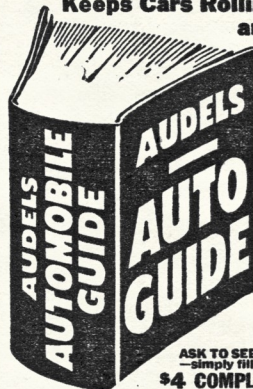
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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

As an example, let me tell you about my recent experience. I have a typewriter and wanted to earn a little personal money. Naturally I scanned the help-wanted ads in our local paper and was very pleased to find an advertisement calling for women to address envelopes at home.

I answered and soon received a letter telling me to fill in the enclosed coupon and mail it together with one dollar. In return I would receive full instructions for the work, as well as a jar of triple pine cleaner.

Well, as a constant reader of your magazine, I did not do this until I first called my better business bureau, and was told by them that several complaints had been made to them. But as the firm claimed that it was not necessary to send the dollar to get the work, they were unable to do anything. However, I sent the coupon without the dollar and while that was early in the spring, I have not heard from them.

The bureau also said that women had complained that when they had sent money, they had to furnish the envelopes and the pay was so low they had to give it up. I was advised to keep my dollar, which, as I told you, I did. I thank your magazine for I would have been a pushover for a nasty type of salesmanship.

Please don't print my address as I don't want people to know I almost fell for that one. I hope this will be a warning to always check your B.B.B. before doing any work at home.

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Dear Sir:

Some years ago an insurance company was organized in the anthracite coal fields. After insuring the majority of the coal miners, it failed and went into bankruptcy.

Today a well-dressed man calls upon the family of a miner, who has recently died, and informed them he represents that company, and that their father has a claim with them. He explains the insurance company has some money left and that his law firm has been appointed to close the business at once.

For \$25.00, his firm will petition the court to release \$500.00 to satisfy the claim. The \$25.00 is to be used to pay court costs, etc.; as his firm will be paid from the remaining funds of the company, and this must be done at once as there are only a few claims which can be met.

Once the \$25.00 is paid and a lot of papers signed, the stranger says he will be back in 60 days with a check. But he and the check never turn up.

Investigation shows there is no law firm and that that company had been liquidated.

Name Withheld

That's the windup on the current ruses for this month, detective fans. Keep prepared—and keep us informed about the swindle schemes you come up against.

The Editor

Rock-A-Bye Killer

(Continued from page 47)

into the storeroom. He walked toward the huge packing cases and beyond them, toward the stacked baseball bats, his ears picking out the sounds of the men's feet behind him.

Now, he thought, *you get one chance, and it has to be good.*

"In here," he said as casually as he could, leaning without eagerness, spreading the pile of bats with his sweaty hands. He touched the taped handles, then his fingers closed about one of them and his lean body jack-knifed erect, the bat swinging in a quick arc.

The gunman screamed as it caught him just below the throat. He never got a chance to fire. Farther back, Honest Harry Hanson squealed in rage, pumping off one shot. Dooley felt the explosion burst within his shoulder, and it staggered him, but his forward impetus was such that the slug did not drive him out of range.

The return stroke of the bat found the frantic alderman within its deadly path. There was the queerly muted *thwack!* as the bat struck Hanson's skull, mashing the ear into the bone; and Hanson catapulted across the room, out of the ball game.

* * *

It was sometime later, after the police had taken notes and the ambulance interne had patched up Dooley's shoulder, that he took Marcy Williams home. They walked the silent, empty street of the neighborhood until they reached the brownstone where she lived.

"Mom and Pop'll probably have the Titans' ball game on the television set," she said. "Come on up." She grinned impishly. "It's Pop's favorite theory that pitchers can't hit worth a damn. Wait'll I tell him how you did with that willow tonight!"

With his good arm, Dooley held her close in the dim hallway. "Gotta watch us southpaws," he said. "We're full of hidden talent."

She looked at him. "Start pitchin', Dooley, me boy."

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R. M. F. Jones

(Continued from page 60)

stare went farther, beyond to the little glass cage where they strap you in a chair and drop a cyanide egg and the gas licks up to kill you.

"It's going to be a beautiful day," he said without moving. "I think I'll take a swim. I never was much good, but I think I'll try to make the other side. Maybe I'm short on guts, too."

He turned and I wondered how to stop him. Fallen Leaf was nearly a mile across and the pull from the float to shore winded Reiger. He didn't look as if anything short of a bullet in the leg would make him change his mind, and I was picking a spot to put it when George Andrus spoke again.

"Warren."

Reiger half-turned at the door, glancing back over his shoulder, and George Andrus threw up the revolver. Both his hands were tight around the butt and his eyes were nearly closed. He pulled the trigger six times and the last two were empty clicks. The first four shots were rolled into a hammering roar that jarred the whole room.

Reiger slapped both his hands against his belly and his brown face screwed up into a pucker of pain. He took one dragging step in the direction of the door and then went down against the panel without a sound.

He didn't move again.

* * *

A coroner's jury took fifteen minutes to clear Andrus with a verdict of justifiable homicide. Afterwards, each man on it shook George's hand. No one shook mine, either then or the next day when I left for Los Angeles.

Miles Rand is still working at Pacific Home. He and I are the only ones who know he's an ex-con, unless another blonde has wormed it out of him. It's more than possible. A few weeks ago I read that Avis Dunbar had married George Andrus.

Sometimes I wish I had thirty thousand dollars, but that happens not more than once a day.

THE END

All Burned Up

(Continued from page 68)

ground beside it. As I climbed its warm strands, the sharp barbs tore at my fingers and clothes. I got to the top, wondering what I would do if the electricity suddenly came back on. Then I jumped to the inside wooden fence and from there to the grass—just as the wires began to hum again.

My knees folded and my chin dug up divots. Like an animal, I scrambled on my hands and knees toward the Magnum. Natalie got there first—half a tick before me. She raised the gun.

It was no time for any Sir Galahad stuff. My shoulder struck her trim waist. As she went over, I wrenched the gun from her long fingers.

I was glad I'd been rough. The language she used on me would've sizzled Sir Galahad's ears.

Charley was rubbing his eyebrows and moaning something about stars and pinwheels. Natalie sat on the grass, staring up at me with eyes as dark and angry as hot obsidian.

About a minute later, Hughie came strolling along, whistling, his grimy little hands stuck in the pockets of his blue jeans.

"I gather," I said, "that it was you who shut the fence off. How long've you known where the control was?"

Hughie stopped whistling long enough to explain that he'd discovered it several weeks ago by spying on his grandfather. "All you have to do," he added importantly, "is pull out one of the knobs on the radio."

"Nice going, kid," I replied, my voice sober. "You saved my life."

The corners of Hughie's mouth lifted impishly. "Jee-miny! Mr. Richardson, I wasn't trying to save your life or anything! I kept trying to give you a hot foot with the fence, but you jumped off every time before I could get from the window to the radio to turn the juice back on!"

I didn't say anything. Abruptly, I grew very cold inside.

It wasn't until later, when the sheriff's men had arrived and taken over, that I placed Hughie tenderly across my knee—and whaled the hell out of him.



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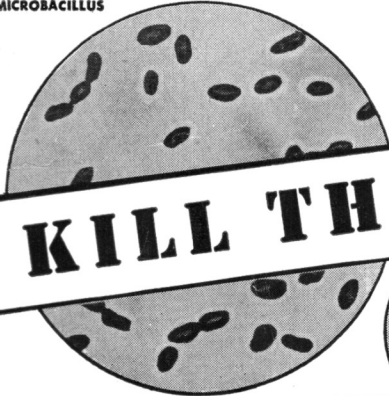
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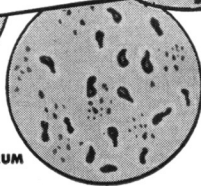
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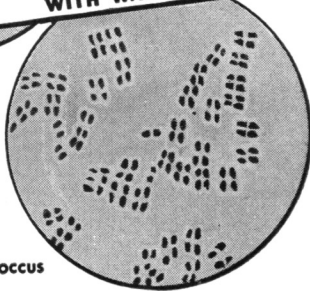
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