

25¢

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



JULY

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S FIVE FICTION

**IF THE
NOOSE
FITS...**

by **FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**

**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

**RUSSELL
BRANCH
AND OTHERS**

PLUS

**COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL \$2.50 VALUE
FIVE-STAR FUGITIVE** by **SCOTT O'HARA**

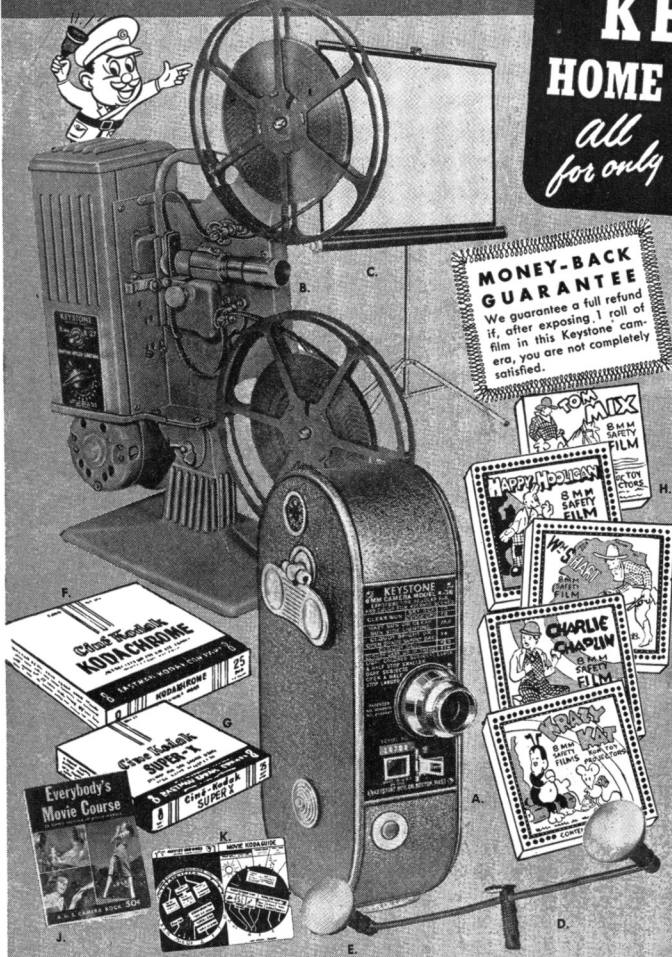
SPECIAL OFFER TO READERS OF THIS MAGAZINE!

BUY NOW—PAY LATER!

The General makes buying extra easy with the convenient "PAY-AS-YOU-SHOOT" Plan!



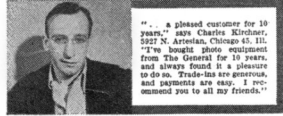
Complete 13-piece NATIONALLY FAMOUS
KEYSTONE
HOME MOVIE OUTFIT
all for only **\$129⁵⁰** \$12 Down
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- E. 2 RFL-2 REFLECTOR BULBS (\$1.65 ea.)**
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 Gives you loads of movie making tips. Tells where, and how to shoot movies you'll be proud to show. **25¢** when purchased with camera.
- K. MOVIE KODAGUIDE**
 Instantly tells you the correct lens opening for all films and lighting conditions. Insures better results every time. **25¢**



"... a pleased customer for 10 years," says Charlie Kirshner, 3827 N. Arroyo, Chicago 45, Ill. "I've bought photo equipment from The General for 10 years, and always found it a pleasure to do so. Trade-ins are generous, and payments are easy. I recommend you to all my friends."

It's easy to buy on The General's "PAY-AS-YOU-SHOOT" PLAN
 Your credit is good with The General! Mail coupon with down payment and note telling about yourself, occupation and two references.



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\$12 Down — \$10 per Month

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Keystone 8mm Camera at \$49.95
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Add to My Open Account

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Name (If married give husband's first name) _____
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 My _____ Or Nearby _____
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 If you have or have had an account with us give No. _____

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2304 Devon Ave., Chicago 45, Ill.

CHICAGO VISITORS: See our huge camera store **IN THE MERCHANDISE MART PLAZA, Chicago**

JERRY RECAPTURED THE LION AND THEN...



HEY, LOOK!
RAJAH'S LOOSE!

ON AN OVERNIGHT HOP TO THE NEXT TOWN, YOUNG JERRY HUNTER'S SMALL TRAVELING CIRCUS SUDDENLY LOSES ONE OF ITS MAJOR ATTRactions...

NEXT MORNING



MARY PETERS HAD HEARD THAT ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN ON OPENING DAY OF BASS SEASON. BUT THIS IS TOO MUCH!



RAJAH, YOU TOOTHLESS OLD FRAUD! WHAT'S THE IDEA SCARING FOLKS?

HE'S HARMLESS, MISS. GOT AWAY FROM OUR CIRCUS

I'M STILL ALLERGIC TO LIONS!



OUR GARAGE WILL HOLD HIM UNTIL YOU CAN GET HIS CAGE

I'LL SEND FOR IT NOW IF I MAY USE YOUR PHONE

CERTAINLY



YOU MUST BE STARVED AFTER TRAMPING AROUND ALL NIGHT. MAY I GET YOU A SNACK?

SOUNDS GREAT! WOULD YOU MIND IF WE CLEAN UP, TOO?



HERE IS MY BROTHER'S RAZOR AND SOME BLADES!



WHAT A SMOOTH SHAVING BLADE! MY FACE NEVER FELT BETTER

A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE ALWAYS GIVES ME A LIFT!



THEN YOU'LL COME TO OUR SHOW TONIGHT?

I'D LOVE TO!

HE'S BETTER LOOKING THAN I THOUGHT!

YOU GET EASY, REFRESHING SHAVES IN JIGTIME WITH **THIN GILLETTES**. FAR KEENER THAN ORDINARY LOW-PRICED BLADES, **THIN GILLETTES** LAST LONGER, SO YOU SAVE MONEY. WHAT'S MORE, THEY FIT YOUR **GILLETTE RAZOR** TO A 'T'... PROTECT YOU FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR **THIN GILLETTES** IN THE 10-BLADE PACK WITH USED BLADE COMPARTMENT

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25¢ **DIME**
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE
 COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION



Vol. 63

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Complete Book-Length Novel—\$2.50 Value

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The August issue will be out July 5th

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

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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

There's a sure way you readers can foil many of the slick schemers who plan to swindle you or rob you outright—and that's by checking up on the man to whom you hand your check. Know with whom you're dealing. Don't pay for merchandise sight unseen.

And always remember to be prepared for the smooth tricks that might be pulled on you by keeping up with the rackets. That's why we try to help you, by printing each month as many of the latest *modus operandi* of the eager cheaters as we have room for.

Each month we print the current and chronic rackets that petty chiselers pull so that you can be forewarned and fore-armed. Besides protecting yourselves by regularly reading this column—you can help yourself to \$5.00. We'll pay you for each letter you send us, telling of your own true experiences with swindlers and racketeers of all kinds, and which we print.

Of course, you understand that we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters because of the press of mail in the office. Neither can we return any letters—unless they are accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Remember, too, we'll withhold your name from print if you wish.

Be sure to address all letters to The Rackets Editor, care of DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

And now, let's get some tips on the newest rackets:

Booby Prize

Dear Sir:

Mrs. A. F. is still waiting for her new automobile and other prizes she supposedly won, and an encyclopedia for which she paid a fast talker.

In her report to San Pedro, California, police she told of a man who called on her and told her she had been selected by a soap company to win \$5,000 in prizes. In order to qualify, however, she would have to buy an encyclopedia for \$59.50.

He accompanied her to a bank where she

cashied a \$60 check and gave him the money. He promised to bring the fifty-cents change the next day when he brought the encyclopedia and other prizes. Of course, he never again showed.

San Pedro police say they have reports of similar operations in Eastern and Southern states.

Miss B. W.
Temple City, Calif.

Close Brush

Dear Sir:

In February of 1948, I attempted to sell a shaving cream and toothpaste dispenser through a patent exchange, after reading their ad in a popular magazine.

I soon received an air mail letter marked *Urgent—Immediate Attention* and their offer to promote my invention for two percent of the sale. Thinking I stood fair chance of marketing the dispenser, I sent drawings and the material they requested.

In a few days, I received the first of four telegrams which read as this one:

HAVE INVENTION NEARLY SOLD.
POSITIVE DEAL. ACCEPT CONTRACTS IMMEDIATELY. AIRMAIL WITH COPIES AND LETTER EXPLAINING DESIRED PRICE. WIRE REPLY URGENT.

The last one asked that I phone their California office immediately—which I did. Over the phone, I was informed that four manufacturers wanted my invention and one of the offers was fifteen thousand dollars. It seemed, however, that a market report was needed before the deal could be closed and he felt certain with a little more effort he could get thirty-five thousand dollars for the dispenser. If I would send him forty dollars, he would supply the other half to cover the cost of such a report. I wired the money to him and explained that if he sold the invention for the present offer, I would give him a bonus.

In our next telephone conversation, I was told that his latest offer was an astounding sixty-five thousand dollars, but before he could complete the deal he would need an additional fifty dollars to cover the cost of a manufacturers' cost analysis. Again he stated that this was only half the price, since he was willing to assume half the expense himself.

I told him to sell the dispenser immediately for his best offer. That was the last I heard from him; letters I wrote later remained unanswered.

Chances are he still operates a similar business under another name, but I hope he chokes on the money I sent him and threw away on numerous long-distance calls and telegrams.

M. D. Weymouth
Port Huron, Michigan

(Please continue on page 8)

*Our new refrigerator
had a new fur coat in it!*



SMART WOMAN! She didn't have to go without either a fur coat or a new refrigerator. The money she saved by getting a modern air-conditioned ICE refrigerator bought a magnificent fur coat.

You can do the same! You, too, can have a new refrigerator and that new fur coat—or new furniture—or electric washer.

And when you have your new ICE refrigerator you'll enjoy the finest in complete, scientific food protection—in a beautiful, roomy refrigerator you'll be proud to own.

See your local Ice Company today. You'll be surprised to learn how much you'll save by buying a modern air-conditioned ICE refrigerator.

WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE A MODERN ICE REFRIGERATOR



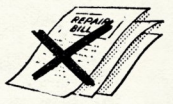
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1850 — ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ICE PROGRESS — 1950

READY FOR THE RACKETS

(Continued from page 6)

Double Trouble

Dear Sir:

Maybe this will make housewives think twice before throwing away paid-up receipts. Some time ago an out-of-town salesman knocked on my door and wanted me to buy from his firm on a weekly payment plan. I bought two articles from him, but their price was high so I stopped buying from him.

About a month later, another man from this company came around and said he wanted to collect for the things I had bought. I was very much surprised—and so was he—when I got my customer's card and showed him that I had paid. He said that the salesman had written in the company books that I was missing payments. I guess the first salesman was trusting me to throw away my card as soon as the things were paid for. Luckily, I didn't. I don't know if they caught the man or not—but at least I didn't have to pay twice for what I bought.

Mrs. Leon Douglas
Washington, Indiana

This Had Whiskers!

Dear Sir:

On several occasions through my life I've been an innocent target for petty swindling stunts. Three or four of these unhappy experiences I have revealed in recent years in this most helpful department.

One would think that having fallen prey to shysters' crooked schemes that number of times and having read the experiences of others who contribute to this column, I would be well alerted to any brand-new chiseling game that might come my way. But I guess with my experience couldn't have been the best teacher, after all; for I must confess—I've been duped again!

My latest experience took place a few months back. I answered the door bell and found a neatly dressed, personable-enough young man confronting me. He said he was an authorized dealer for a certain well-known food and toiletry concern and was calling on new prospects in our rural section. He showed me his salesman's card first before he tried to sell me anything.

It so happened I had sold for the company myself years ago and recognized the familiar dealer's certification and felt confident of the fellow's integrity. When I told him I used to be a "peddler" for the company too, the chap laughed heartily, seemed pleased to know it and even asked me a few questions concerning my experience with the work.

He seemed new at the art of selling, however, for he acted embarrassed when I looked over his kit of labeled products and deliberately asked him questions about them, questions that I already knew the answers to. His sales talk was awkward and amateurish, but otherwise he seemed so sincere I wanted to give him an order to help him out.

(Please continue on page 10)



SAVE WITH

Authorized

RECONDITIONED FORD ENGINE ACCESSORIES

• When you see this emblem on the reconditioned engine accessories and reconditioned engines you buy, it is the reconditioner's assurance of quality, performance, long life and value.

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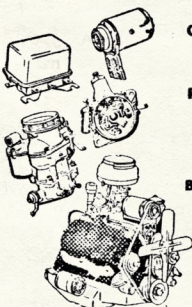
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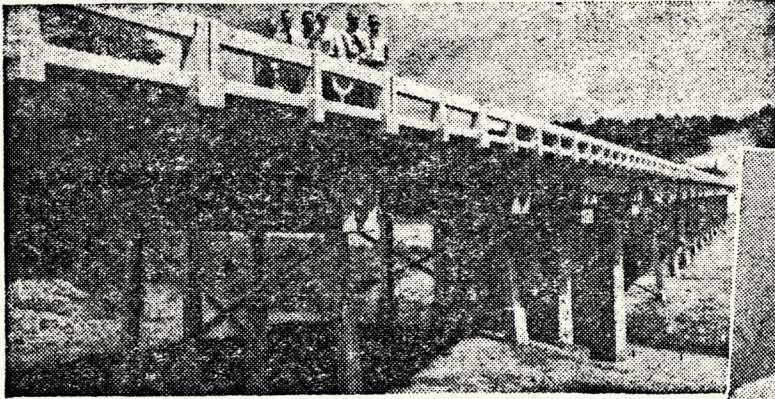
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He is now County Engineer of Franklin County, Alabama. Last year Mr. Hargett designed 27 homes, two theaters, a bus station and three bridges. He supervised fifty miles of highway construction and the paving of one hundred thousand square yards of city streets.

Mr. Hargett recently enrolled for another I. C. S. course

Listen to what he has to say about I. C. S. training: "It's more practical—more flexible than any training I've had. I can't speak highly enough of my I. C. S. training."

Mr. Hargett says his first I. C. S. course was his "bridge to success." "There might not have been much of a career," he said, "if it hadn't been for that first I. C. S. course."

I. C. S. training can be your "bridge to success." Mail the coupon today!

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<input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints
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Length of Service in World War II _____ Enrollment under G. I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

(Continued from page 8)

He opened a shaving combination that I was also acquainted with, which consisted of a tube of shaving cream, a bar of shaving soap, a bottle of after-shave lotion and a can of talcum powder. He said the company was featuring a special sale price on this particular item to encourage new customers.

The regular list price for one of these sets was one dollar, but the "special sale price" enabled the customer to purchase *two* identical sets for only one dollar and fifty cents. He explained that such an unusual offer was limited, of course. But liking a bargain as well as the next customer—or should I say sucker?—I told him I would order two sets.

But then the fellow surprised me. Instead of writing down the order in his book and delivering the products at a later date, which I knew was the customary routine for dealers of this company, the young man handed me the shaving set from his case of samples, ran out to his car and took another from what looked to me like an ample supply of the same sets.

Rushing back, he handed me the second box, wrote out a sales slip and I paid him the required one dollar and fifty cents cash on the spot. He thanked me politely, not showing any further desire to sell me more, and hurried off in his car.

I stood holding the two identical boxes for quite a few moments after the salesman had gone, while a feeling that something was wrong slowly came over me. The shaving set he had brought from his supply in the car didn't weigh within a half pound as much as the one he had taken from his sample case.

Before I opened the box I realized that I would find under the cover bearing the reputable trade-mark four blocks of wood neatly wrapped in tissue paper to resemble the original products the swindler had cleverly substituted!

This time I had let myself be gyped for only fifty cents. No great loss, to be sure, but it that conniving fellow succeeded in unloading that big stock of "make-believe" shaving sets on as many unwitting prospects as I had proven myself to be—why, he must have made quite a "side line" profit for himself.

Will I ever learn?

G. H. M.
Hyannis Port, Mass.

Really Fast Moving

Dear Sir:

It is a wonder to me that more people have not been stung by the following racket in this day of hard-to-get houses.

A nice home in the Park Hill section of Denver was advertised in the leading newspaper at what I thought was a very reasonable rent—\$100.00 per month. I gave the owner my check for one month in advance and received the keys, but I was told that I could not move in for one week as the former tenant still had a week to go before his lease expired. He had moved because he had purchased his own home and did not wait for expiration of lease before moving. As he had

been paying more rent than I was asked, this sounded reasonable.

A week later I took my furniture out of storage and arrived with the moving van at the Park Hill house—only to find that it was already occupied.

On inquiry, I learned that the man I had considered the owner had purchased the property a day or two before he advertised it for rent and had given a check for the down payment. He had asked the seller to hold his check for a week while he completed transfer of his bank account to a Denver bank from another city. His trick worked.

In the ten days that elapsed before the real owner learned that the check was no good, the racketeer had rented the house to three different people at \$100.00 advance rent from each. At a cost of three sets of keys and one advertisement, he got \$300.00.

To date this really smooth operator has not been caught.

Ed. Becker
Denver, Colo.

No Puzzle at All

Dear Sir:

I would like to tell of my experience with swindlers in order that it may keep someone from making the same mistake.

Probably most of you readers saw the map puzzle in several of the most popular magazines.

The map puzzle was to be filled in and sent to a "church" in La Grange, Ill. Well, I sent it in and immediately received a reply. Well, what do you know?

They wrote me that I was first in line for the first prize of \$250. But here was the catch. (Which I realized too late.) Enclosed was another puzzle to be completed for a much larger prize.

They claimed they were now trying to raise enough money to erect a new church and in order to enter the contest you had to send an entry fee as a donation towards the building of the church. So I sent a donation of \$3.00 with the completed puzzle. I waited one month and hadn't heard from them so I wrote them a letter about it.

To my great surprise and disillusion, as I never thought anyone would ever use the excuse of erecting a church as a means of swindling, my letter came back to me with "Fraudulent!" written in great big black letters across the envelope.

Believe me, that was the last time that I've fallen for any such line.

Mrs. Doris Burnes
Hammond, La.

That's the lowdown for this month, detective fans. Keep sending us letters about your own personal experiences with brazen breakers of the law, so that we can all be protected.

The Editor

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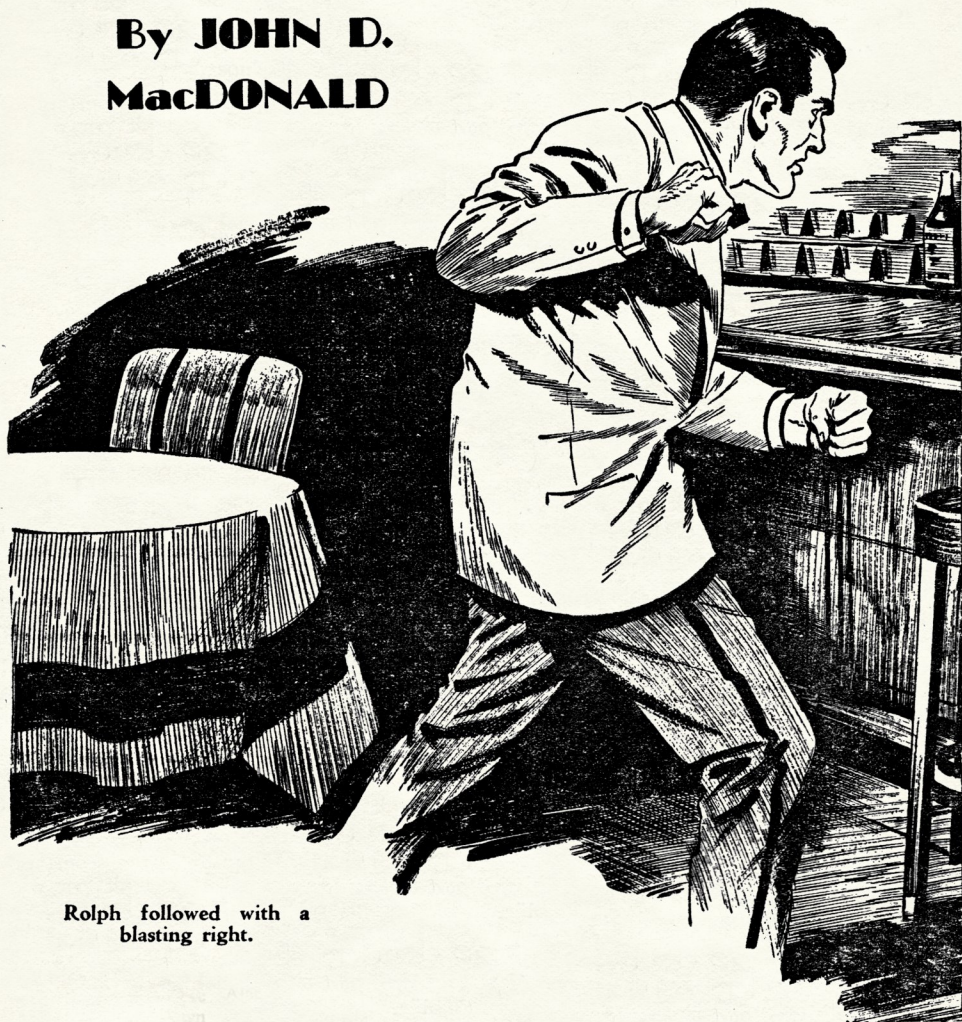
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*Ex-army intelligence officer Kestrick had nothing to live for—
until he got baited by a trouble-bent beauty,
mauled by the tin-god politico's musclemen
. . . and railroaded to jail.*

**By JOHN D.
MacDONALD**



Rolph followed with a
blasting right.

CHAPTER ONE

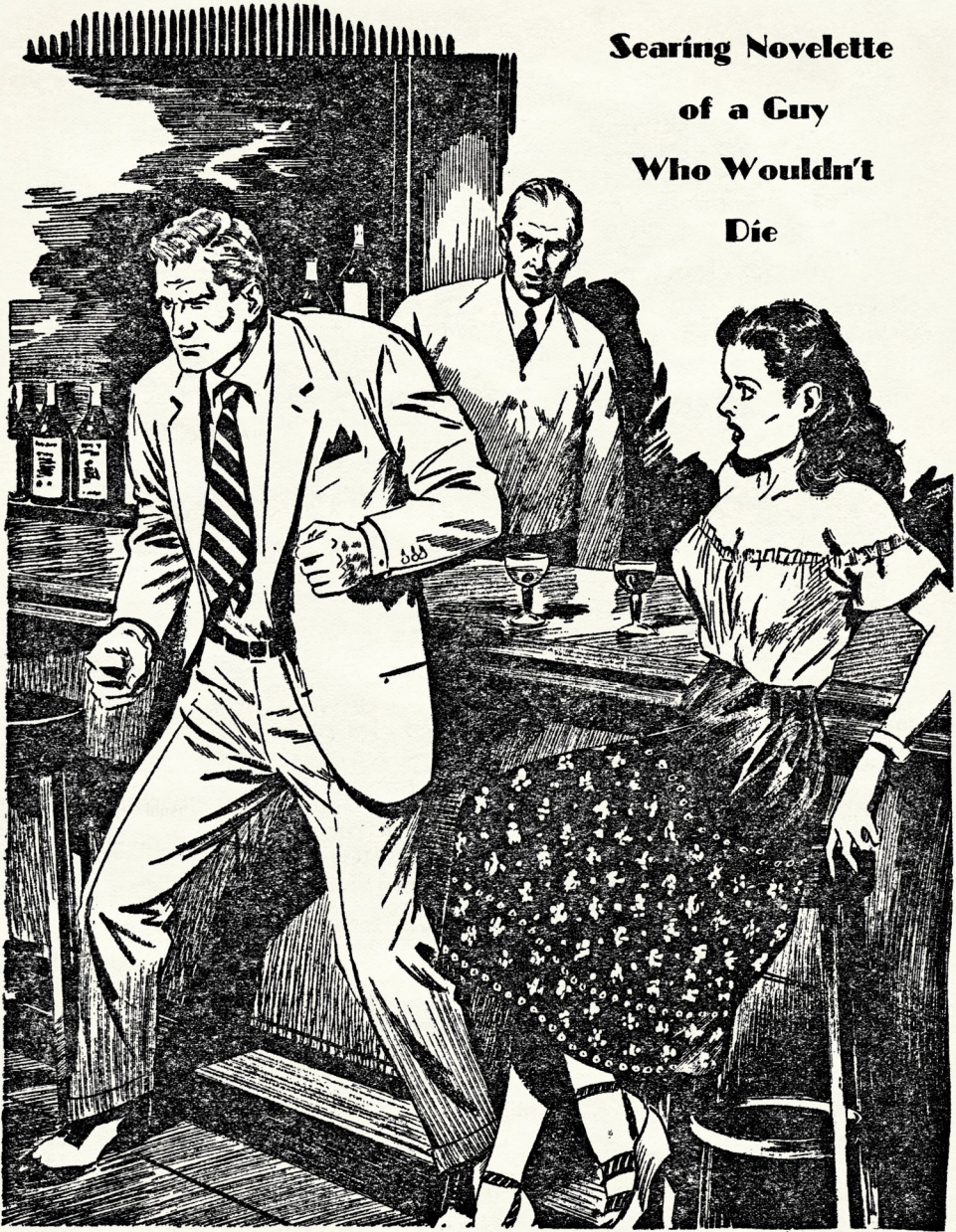
Skulduggery

EACH morning he would sleep until he could not close his eyes again. Then he would roll out of bed, pull on the yellow swimming trunks, push the bedroom door open. Down across the soft hot sand he would walk, to the hard damp packed sand, until the surf was pulling at

him, waking him up. He would swim past the line of breakers and float out there for a time on his back, his eyes squinting against the sun glare.

He knew that he was watched from the hotel because, each morning as he started to swim back in, he saw the white-coated waiter bringing his breakfast down to the cabaña. Each morning he showered quickly in fresh cold water, rubbed himself

**Searing Novelette
of a Guy
Who Wouldn't
Die**



**DEAD MEN
DON'T SCARE**

glowing with a coarse towel. He breakfasted alone on the tiny private patio built in the corner of the L of the cabaña, an opened book at his elbow from which he glanced up from time to time to watch the sea.

Every day was exactly the same and that was the way he wanted it, because coming back to life is a slow thing and a delicate one.

After breakfast he oiled his body and lay in the sun, swimming when the heat grew too strong. In mid-afternoon he walked far down the beach and bought a sandwich at the public beach pavilion. And, as the sun began to dip toward the horizon, he showered again, dressed carefully in one of the brand new lightweight suits, and climbed the stone steps to the hotel.

He took exactly twenty minutes for each martini, and each night he drank four before dinner. He drank alone at the end of the bar, watching the reflection of the customers in the back bar mirror. When he saw his own reflection he found that it had long ago lost the faculty of disturbing him. He saw a smooth, expressionless, thirtyish face, too bland, too good-looking in a stylized way, a spare body with more breadth than thickness.

The eyes, of course, were dead. Eight years. Four years slowly dying and four years quite dead.

Each night he had dinner at seven, one benedictine and brandy at the bar, and then went back to the cabaña. He would sit alone on the small patio, unthinking in the soft night. Later he would read in bed for a time, and then go to sleep. Sometimes he awakened drenched in cold sweat, his pulses pounding, his eyes open so wide that the lids hurt. But it was happening less often.

Coming back to life is slow. Sometimes it is impossible.

Behind the dead eyes there was a hardness that he could feel and taste. It was a hardness that had been acquired, had been built up in tiny layers. Once there had been room in him for love and pity and joy. Once upon a time he had been able to feel the sting of tears at just the right bars of music, or right lines of a poem, or the look in the eyes of a woman. He had to find out if it was gone forever.

Part of trying to live again was the strange sound of his own name on his lips. Ryan Kestrick. Who was Ryan Kestrick? There was a small boy of that name, running and whooping across the red brick playground of a coaltown school. There was another Ryan Kestrick, a glib college kid with a tongue too fast, belligerence balanced too precariously on a strong shoulder.

But they were dead, and all the other incarnations of that name were dead and now it was time to take up that name again in a new, forgotten way.

Each day the endless sea thrummed softly against the shore. The stars were low each night. Between the swells there was the sound of the music from the hotel where they danced out on the terrace high over the sea.

He had come down from the hotel and he sat with his chair turned so that he could look up the pale beach, silver-touched with moonlight. He had loosened his tie and he sat there, his body pleasantly tired with the swimming, glowing with the heat of the sun that had been gone for four hours.

He saw her come down the stone steps, alone, slowly, holding up the hem of the white evening dress. He watched her in the way that one watches any creature that moves in a neat, balanced fashion, taking pleasure from the integration of movement. When she reached the bottom, she took off her high-heeled slippers and put them neatly side by side on the bottom step. He knew how the sand, still faintly warm from the departed sun, would feel against the soles of her feet.

SHE looked tall, but he had no point of comparison. Her tanned shoulders were dark against the white dress, the moonlit sand. She was forty feet from him. She seemed to look in his direction, but he knew that she could not see him where he sat in the angled shadow of the roof edge. Her hair was a black hole in the night.

She walked to the very edge of the water, to where each wave sent tongues of foam up the slanting sand. She stood and looked out across the black sea. She stood with her shoulders back. Ryan

thought that she looked a bit like those figureheads they had once used on ships.

He frowned as she walked forward three steps and stopped again. The sea soaked the hem of the dress, splashing dampness up to her knees. *Drunken fool*, he thought. *None of my business*. She took another step.

It seemed to be a waste. He sighed, reluctant at this destruction of the evening, and walked across the sand. The water smashed across her, driving her back a step.

"You!" he called sharply over the sound of the sea.

She turned quickly. Against the pale oval of her face the brows were vivid black. "You spoiled it!" she said. Her voice was low but he heard it. She walked back up out of the water and stood in front of him. He looked down into her face. She was tall.

"Go ahead, if you want to. I thought you were drunk."

"That's psychology, isn't it? Like telling the child to go ahead and break the window." There was an angry edge in her voice.

He smiled. He said placidly, "Psychology? That's beyond me. It's simpler than that. As long as you aren't drunk I don't care what you do or why." He turned back toward his chair.

"I don't want to be treated like a child," she said, following him.

He turned. "Please go drown yourself, honey."

"You don't think I have a good reason, do you?"

"Sure you have a good reason. Your man done let you down. Or your beloved is snuffing at the wrong front door. Or you lost the money for your poor sick old mother's operation. You dropped it on that crooked wheel in the hotel basement. I don't care what your reasons are. I told you that."

She bit her lip as she swung hard at his mouth. He caught her wrist, stared at her for a moment. Her eyes glowed with her fury. "Mind your own business," she said.

"I will," he answered gently. He released her wrist and backhanded her solidly across the cheek. It knocked her down into the sand.

She lay where she fell, her hand against her cheek, her eyes wide. "You aren't even mad!" she said in an awed tone.

"Should I be?" He walked back to his chair and sat down. She was on her knees, sitting on her heels, her shoulders slumped, her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook, but the sea muffled any sound of weeping.

Ryan watched her for a long time. "If you need a drink," he said, "there's a bottle inside."

She made no sign that she had heard. He didn't repeat it. After a long time she stood up and walked toward him. "Where is it?"

"On the shelf by the kitchen sink. Glasses in the cupboard. The light's on your left as you go in."

The living room light clicked on. It shone out the windows onto the sand, dimming the moon. After a long time she spoke at his elbow. "I fixed you one too. Here."

Ice clinked against the side of the glass. She pulled the other chair away from the shadows into the moonlight and sat down.

She sipped her drink. "My face hurts," she said.

"Does it?"

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What sort of man are you?"

"The sort of man who wishes I'd let you alone when I first saw you."

"Why does your voice sound so tired?"

"I am tired. You've had your drink. Now go put your shoes on."

He saw the broad-shouldered man in the white dinner jacket reach the bottom of the steps. The man bent over and picked up the shoes. The girl was plainly visible in the moonlight. He came slowly across the sand toward them.

"What do you want, Rolph?" she snapped.

"Sam is ready to leave, Gria. It makes him nervous to be held up. I've been looking for you for a half hour."

"Suppose I don't want to leave," she said.

The stranger had a wide, heavy-boned face, a small black mustache. His voice was metallic, as though it came through an amplifier. He threw the shoes at her feet. "Put those on, Gria."

"I'm not going. I've met this nice man

and he wants me to stay here with him."

Rolph moved two slow steps closer to Ryan's chair. "You aren't very smart, friend," he said.

Ryan looked up at him and yawned. "Please go away and take the silly little girl with you, Rolph. You're both tire-some."

"I ought to drag you out of that chair and punch your mouth."

"Go ahead!" Gria said eagerly. "Do it, Rolph."

Ryan felt the first stirring of legitimate anger. He said, "Let me promise you something, Rolph. And listen carefully, because you'll never hear it any straighter. I would like to have you start something. I would enjoy it. You wouldn't enjoy any part of it. That, I promise."

"Pretty boy," Rolph said sullenly.

He stood and stared down at Ryan for the space of five waves breaking on the beach. Then he turned and took Gria's wrist and pulled her out of the chair, picked up her shoes with his other hand. Halfway to the stone steps he turned and said, "I don't want to find her down here again."

"Then put a ring in her nose. I'm irresistible," Ryan called.

"Good night, darling," Gria called.

Later he tried to go to bed. It was no good. Something had made him restless. He thought of the shape of her mouth. He swam out, far and hard and fast. He thought of the process of learning to live again. Maybe a woman would hasten that process. The right woman. A wild, crazy kid like Gria. Odd name. Maybe some of the adolescent anguish would rub off on him.

After he had showered and toweled himself dry he found it easy to drop into the measureless chasm of sleep.

HE LAY on his back with the sun burning into him, his forearm across his eyes. Gulls dipped at the surf, croaking their complaints, their endless disappointments.

"Good morning, Ryan," she said.

He sat up abruptly. Gria knelt beside him. She wore a pale green two-piece suit. She was taut and brown, yet modeled with the clean and perfect lines that sculptors seek for. In the sunlight her

hair picked up odd bluish, greenish glints.

"Oh. You got the name from the desk."

"Ryan Kestrick. I like the name. I'm Gria Baidee."

He looked at her dark eyes. "You're older than I thought."

"I wouldn't call that flattering. I'm twenty-four."

"You acted about eighteen."

"I suppose I did," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. He liked her better for it. "Rolph was furious. At himself, mostly, I think."

"Because he backed down?"

"Yes. I told Sam about it and Sam laughed. You see, Rolph used to be a fighter. He keeps himself in good shape. He could have licked you, you know."

"Did Rolph send you down here to build up his reputation?"

"Damn you, Ryan! You make me mad with everything you say."

He lay back and covered his eyes. "Then go away."

"I wish he had licked you."

Ryan propped himself up on one elbow and smiled at her. "You are a nice kid. You live in a nice world where everybody fights with rules. I had one leg crossed over the other, with my ankle on my knee. If your ridiculous friend had taken one more step toward me I would have smashed his kneecap with my heel. They'd have had to carry him up those steps. I don't play any games according to the rule book."

The deep blush altered first her throat and then her face. "I was a little crazy last night."

"Go play your games with people who know your rules."

She laughed. It had a sound of heart-break in it. It didn't go with the sun, sand and sea. "Oh, Ryan. If I could tell you. If I could only tell you."

"We now raise the curtain on scene three, act two. What do I have to do to convince you that I want to be left alone? You're a very pretty and obviously healthy young girl with all the normal impulses of your position, background and education. Your experience has taught you that your combination of talents is irresistible to males of your own station. But, lambie, I don't want any."

"I once knew a very homely young

woman who was older, at fifteen, than you'll ever be. She died at fifteen and she was worth uncounted dozens of you. I'm sorry to be blunt, but I've got to chase you away somehow. Whatever you are faced with, I know that I would find it more than dull. Now go away and try to grow up. It might become you."

She jumped to her feet. Her face was contorted. "You—you pig!" she shouted. Scooping up a handful of sand, Gria flung it at him. She turned and walked down the beach. She walked with her head up, but with damp sand incongruously clinging to her. She walked with all the dignity of a spanked child. He blinked the last grains of sand out of his eyes. He laughed when she was out of earshot. The laugh wasn't very satisfying.

It hadn't been good to tell her of Paulette, because it made him remember Paulette. Poor little Paulette of the stringy blonde hair and the face like a dumpling. A century old at fifteen, with sadness that would never leave her colorless eyes.

At the border they found the packet on her. If someone hadn't tipped them, it wouldn't have been found. The group had heard later how she died, defiance in her eyes, the mouth tightly shut in the ruined face. . . .

He waited and tried to feel something for the dead Paulette. But there was nothing. No warmth, no pity. Just a black, bitter-hard numbness.

CHAPTER TWO

Trained Seal

THE dumpy bartender filled his tall glass to the brim, shaking the last few drops from the black container. Then he twisted the strand of lemon peel expertly.

"Hello," a soft voice said at his side.

He turned. She wore a pale yellow blouse and a peasant skirt. "Die-hard?" he said.

She looked at him, then touched the back of his hand. Her fingertips were cool. "I walked and walked," she said. "And while I walked I thought about you. Ryan, I don't care what it was. But whatever it was, it's done horrible things to

you. Ryan, I really want to help you."

"Should I understand what you're talking about?"

She smiled. "You can't push me away like that. Not any more, Ryan."

He held the tension within him for long seconds and then slowly let it drift away. He smiled. "I give up. Completely."

"Then buy me a sidecar."

He ordered it for her. As she sipped it, he studied her with the care he had learned. A man learns care when he is staking his life. The black hair and the high cheekbones spoke of a trace of Latin blood. The mouth was too young and too soft, but the jaw had a firm line to it. Unstable, emotional, feminine. But with a capacity for intense loyalty. Idealism, probably. And a lot of warmth.

"Did you love her very much?" she asked.

"Huh? Who?"

"The fifteen-year old, of course."

He threw his head back and laughed. He could not remember the last time he had laughed as thoroughly. "Love her? Lord, no!" He gasped. She was staring at him with hurt eyes. "Please don't take me off guard like that again, Gria."

"Is it so absurd to be in love with someone?"

He sobered. "Why, not at all! I've been desperately in love. She ignored me. I brought her flowers. Still she flunked me in arithmetic. That was in the sixth grade."

"You fool!" she said.

He saw her eyes change as she looked beyond him. He flicked his glance at the bar mirror. Out of old habit, he moved his weight inconspicuously onto the balls of his feet. Rolph was moving toward them. Ryan turned casually.

Rolph said, "Didn't I tell you once?"

"Isn't this script a little tired, mate?"

Ryan looked beyond Rolph and saw the worried expression on the bartender's face. But the man made no move toward them.

Rolph hunched his shoulders and stabbed with a very competent left toward Ryan's eyes, following it with a blasting right. Ryan caught the left hand in both of his, his thumbs pressing against the back of it, his fingers across the heel of

the palm. He pivoted it quickly enough to twist the right hand blow wild. The back of the hand was toward him after the pivot, Rolph's spread fingers pointing toward the ceiling. Ryan bent the hand back quickly. Rolph grunted with pain and dropped to his knees.

Ryan kicked him precisely in the solar plexus. Rolph's face whitened and his eyes rolled up almost out of sight. Ryan said loudly, "You must have tripped, old man. Here, let me help you." He lifted Rolph, turned him toward the bar, brushed him off in a friendly fashion. Rolph sagged against the bar, barely managing to hold himself upright.

Ryan clapped his shoulder, said jovially, "See you here and about, old man."

He took Gria's arm. "Let's have a drink out at a table on the terrace."

She didn't say a word. He sat opposite her and was amazed at the pallor of her face, the frightened look in her eyes.

"You—you . . ."

"I guess I did. He'll be all right when he gets his wind back. A little shaky, of course."

"I wasn't worried about Rolph. You'll have to get out of here, Ryan."

"Don't talk nonsense."

"I'm not. Please, Ryan. There are other places along the coast. Why don't you leave tonight and drive over into Florida?"

He ordered their drinks. "You baffle me, Gria."

"I can't explain. It just wasn't a good thing to do. At least not to Rolph Essta. Not in this place, in this town."

He studied her. "You are frightened, aren't you?"

"Please, Ryan."

"What on earth can be so ominous about anything or anybody in this little seacoast town? I've done a lot of running in my life. I'm not going to run from something that doesn't make sense."

She leaned across the table and spoke through almost bloodless lips. "They'll take your fingerprints, you know, when they take you to jail."

"What! Wait a minute! A light begins to dawn. Ryan Kestrick, famous criminal. Is that it?"

"They'll hurt you," she said sullenly.

"Darling," he said, "I have been in a

great many jails. I have been hurt quite badly a great many times. But I am not a criminal. At least not in the common definition of the word."

"You'll go away?"

"Don't be silly!"

She stood up, leaving her drink untouched. She walked away rapidly. He smiled and added another facet to his analysis. A great yen for drama. Probably the product of boredom.

He was on his way toward the dining room a half hour later when they stopped him. Two of them. One was small and neat and gray, the spokesman. The other was hulking and dull-looking.

"Kestrick?"

"Come along."

"Not quite so fast. What seems to be the trouble?"

"We'll do our talking in the manager's office, Kestrick."

"Let's make it Mr. Kestrick, shall we?"

The neat little gray man smiled without humor. "Mr. Kestrick. Please come and chat with us if you please."

The hotel manager, a nervous and myopic type named Mr. Riverside, sat behind his pale gray desk. Rolph Essta sat beside the desk, scowling.

"Sit over there, Kestrick," the gray man said.

Ryan shrugged, crossed to the chair and sat down, crossing his knees. The gray man took the only vacant chair. The hulking one leaned against the closed door. The office was small.

"You have some sort of authority, I assume?" Ryan asked politely.

"Lieutenant on the police force here. We're asking the questions. You answer them."

"I might and I might not. Just what is Essta's capacity here? Patrolman?"

"Mr. Essta is representing the owner of this hotel," Riverside said in a fussy tone. "I have heard that—"

"Shut up, Earl," Rolph Essta said harshly. Riverside swallowed and closed his mouth. "Go ahead, Charlie," Rolph said to the gray man.

"First, what is your business, Kestrick. How do you make a living?"

"Just say I'm retired."

"That isn't good enough, Kestrick."

"It happens to be the truth. I don't

care how good you think it is, Charlie."

"I love 'em wise," the hulk by the door said. He picked his teeth with his thumb-nail and grinned.

"What are you doing here?"

"Resting."

"What's your home address?"

"Go look at the register."

"I did. It just says New York City."

"Then that must be my home address."

"Everything you own is brand new. Car, clothes, everything."

"Are you asking me where I stole them?"

"You admit it, eh?" Charlie said triumphantly.

"**Y**OU'RE turning me sick to my stomach," Ryan said. "What kind of a schoolgirl game is this? So Essta is a big shot. He thinks I'm bothering his girl. He gets rough and I quiet him in the bar without any fuss. Now I'm a criminal."

Charlie sighed as though he were a man of great patience. "We don't like your type around here, Kestrick. This town caters to a good tourist trade." He glanced at his watch and said, "So we're giving you one hour to pack, get in your car and get the hell out of here. Anything over a hundred miles is far enough."

"And if I don't?"

Rolph answered. "Mr. Riverside and I witnessed these two police officers when they took from your possession the bill clip containing forty dollars that you lifted out of the side pocket of my jacket after kicking me in the stomach in the bar. I don't want trouble. I'd just as soon forget it all." He shrugged. "But, on the other hand, if you want to make an issue of it . . ."

Ryan slouched in the chair. He frowned. "You're a great little bunch. You ought to put this act on the road."

"The bartender saw you take the money," Rolph said. "He called my attention to it."

Ryan rubbed his chin. "I wonder if you could make a thing like this stick."

Rolph's smile was wolfish. "Want to try us? We like people who go overboard for the principle of the thing."

"That's the only thing you shouldn't have said," Ryan said softly. "I was about

to take a trip. All right, Charlie. Let's go look at the inside of your jail."

Charlie glanced at Rolph. Rolph nodded his permission.

"Don't you think this guy is resisting arrest?" the hulk said.

"Not in here he isn't," Earl Riverside said firmly.

"Maybe he'll resist arrest when you get him downtown," Rolph said.

"He might, at that," Charlie said.

Ryan grinned. "No dice, gentlemen. I'm still insisting that you take me downtown."

They drove down in silence, with the hulking one at the wheel of the police sedan. They drove through a stone arch into the courtyard of a gray stone, U-shaped building.

The car stopped. "You're not smart," Charlie said.

"Agreed."

The hulk hauled Ryan out of the back seat, held him by the front of his suit coat and slapped him, backhand and forehand. Ryan smiled placidly.

The man slapped him again. "Come on! You're tough enough to take Essta. Don't you want to try me?"

"Not quite yet, friend."

He was booked, relieved of his possessions, shoved into a small dark cell midway down the single cell block. . . .

The turnkey had taken the breakfast tray away when Ryan Kestrick looked up—and saw the big man outside the cell staring incredulously at him.

"Lord, Ryan," he said. "You've—they killed you years ago. I saw the name and . . ."

Ryan stood up. "McCloud," he said softly. "Major McCloud! What are you doing here?"

McCloud, a slow-moving man with a mobile pendulous face and enormous hands, unlocked the cell and came in. They shook hands as though it were the most solemn of ceremonies. They sat side by side on the bunk.

"What am I doing here?" McCloud said. "I guess you never did know my home town. This is it. I got out in—let me see—early '46. I tried to make a go of a private investigation business but there wasn't enough call for it. So I went on the cops here. The medals impressed

'em, I guess. I'm a lieutenant." He sighed. "It isn't a bad life I guess." He shook off the mild depression and his voice hardened. "But you, in here. What the hell is this all about?"

"I can ask you that. I finally got out a month ago. The last operation was a daisy. Out of touch for fourteen months. I came down here to get my blood pressure down and figure out some good thing to do with my life."

McCloud stared at him. "You've been . . . hell, eight years of it. No man can take that!"

"I learned to stop thinking."

McCloud laced his thick fingers and stared down at his knuckles, white with pressure. "I had four operations and even now I get nightmares. Remember Stevenson and Lowery?"

Ryan laughed flatly. "It's funny, McCloud. Real funny. I can't even remember their names any more."

"You're booked for assault and battery, plus a little pocket-picking, Ryan. I don't get it."

Ryan gave him the story.

McCloud listened soberly. "I can fix it," he said. "I'll have you out of here in a half hour. But you got to promise me to get in that car of yours and get away from this town."

Ryan stood up. His voice was harsh. "No dice, McCloud. I had my face slapped. These local comics need some enlightening. I want to go right back to the hotel and stay there just as long as I want to."

McCloud stood up too. His voice was pleading. "What difference does it make to you, Ryan? Forget this town. It isn't something you can clean up."

"How do you mean?"

"I'll give you the picture. This whole town was laid out by a man named Sam Baidee, back in the middle twenties. Sam was in his late thirties then. A smart, honest guy. He put every dime into construction of the two big hotels. He owned the town. The depression wiped him out and he didn't have a dime. His wife died right about then and the daughter, that crazy Gria, was a little bit of a kid. Sam lived in a shack down the coast and did commercial fishing. Brutal work.

"The girl got old enough to go away

to school and I guess Sam got the money by doing a little smuggling. The girl didn't know anything about it. While she was away, he began to pyramid the smuggling money. He got into the gambling business, first in a small way. Slots in the back rooms of local bars. There was an army camp near here and he did well. He put the profits into plush establishments. The army took over the two hotels. When the army auctioned off the hotels Sam had the money to buy them back at the auctions. He'd owned them in the first place.

"Ever since the war he's been getting more powerful. He owns the town again, but it isn't the Sam Baidee who owned it back before the depression. He managed to keep the girl in the dark. She's been back here two years and now she knows just what her pop is. She's been taking it hard because she thought the old man could do no evil. Essta is the old man's right hand. Essta controls a pretty rough bunch of boys. The rumor is that the old man wants the girl to marry Essta and keep the empire intact. That's the combination you walked into."

"He owns the town?"

"That's right."

"And the police?"

"City and county."

Ryan lowered his voice. "And he owns you, McCloud?"

McCloud glanced at him and looked away. "I sort of wish you hadn't asked that, Ryan."

"I'd like to hear you say it."

McCloud's tone was angry. "What the hell am I going to do? You know what I learned to do. Parachute in from three hundred feet at night. Kill a man before he can make a sound. What kind of talent is that to put on the market? I got a wife and two kids, Ryan. Little kids."

"The violins will now play Hearts and Flowers."

"I should have remembered how much heart you've got."

"Who is Lieutenant Charlie?"

"Charlie Parish. Errand boy for Essta."

"And the big one with the yellow teeth and the dumb look?"

"Sergeant DuBrie."

"What's their usual procedure?"

"In a case like this? If you keep trying to beat your head on the wall, Kestrick, they'll convict you and give you a year. In this state that means a year working on the county roads."

"Have they done that to other people when they didn't like the hair style?"

"Quite a few."

"Have you helped them convict any of those people, McCloud?"

McCloud stared at him. "I don't know why I have to answer that. You stopped giving me orders four years ago, Kestrick."

Ryan smiled warmly. With those who knew him best, it was the danger signal. "And do you know why I stopped giving you orders?"

"Huh? No."

"Because I watched you for a long time. In some ways, McCloud, you're a nice guy. In our work you were making a good impression. But there are little tip-offs. I had to make a decision. I know now I was right. Under that competent look, McCloud, there's a streak of mush. You're an angle boy, whether you admit

it to yourself or not. If you'd been taken on any of those missions we went on, you'd have spilled your guts as soon as they started to pry on your fingernails.

"You picture yourself as a big rugged man. In the war you were making like a hero because the pressure was never really on you. Now you're getting pot-bellied and that softness is beginning to show in your face. You're going to give those two kids of yours a dandy heritage. My daddy's a crooked cop. What're you going to tell them when they're old enough to find out about you?"

All expression left McCloud's face. "All right, Kestrick. I was going to go along with you for old time's sake. I hope you stay in until you rot."

Ryan laughed sardonically. "The truth comes out."

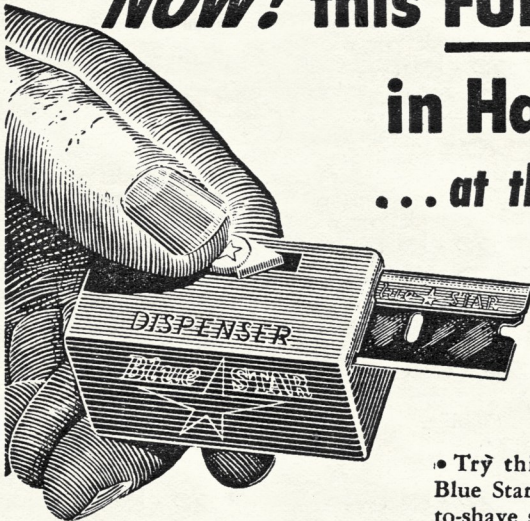
McCloud balled a heavy fist.

Ryan lifted his chin. "Okay. I'll give you a clean shot at me. Then you can go home to lunch and tell how daddy hit the nasty criminal."

McCloud left, banging the cell door behind him.

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CHAPTER THREE

A Monkey's Uncle

GRIA BAIDEE came late in the afternoon. She stood outside the cell. "Ryan, Ryan! Why didn't you leave when Essta gave you the chance?"

"Just stupid, I guess. How did you get in here?"

"Bluff. They're probably calling Sam now and he'll tell them to get me out of here."

He moved close to her. "Then how much can I trust you, Gria?"

"All the way, Ryan. All the way . . . forever."

He studied her. She could be loyal. She could fight. "Listen hard then, and remember. Remember this address. XYZ Novelty Company. Box 1200. Washington, D. C. Repeat that. Again. Good. Get an airmail special off to that address. All you have to say is that Kestrick is being held here on false charges and requests assistance. You don't even have to sign your name."

"But—"

"Just do it, honey. That's all you have to do. But I'll tell you one thing. To be fair, I'll tell you. It might turn out that when the dust dies down, one Sam Baidee could be the man on the inside, instead of me."

Her eyes narrowed. "Would that be bad?"

"You're the one to answer that."

The turnkey called down the corridor, "You're wanted on the phone, Miss Baidee. Right away."

He folded his hand over hers and said, very softly, "Good girl. . . ."

The young lawyer was casual, business-like. "Well, we'll have to get you out on bail, Mr. Kestrick. I'm positive that it won't be set so high that your car won't be ample security for the bond."

"When am I going to be tried?"

"Four days from now."

Ryan yawned. "I think I'll stay right here."

"But I think you should be released."

"I like it here."

"That's a very strange attitude for you to take."

"Isn't it?"

"I must insist that you permit me to make arrangements to have you released."

"Or you'll refuse to handle the case?"

"Quite right."

"Then refuse, lad. I feel that it is safer and healthier in here. Baidee has some reason for wanting me out. So I stay. You're taking my money and working for him. Not exactly ethical, but I suppose if a young lawyer wants to eat in this town, he has to pick up some nasty habits."

The lawyer flushed and then turned pale. "I don't understand you. You're in a very bad position. You refuse to plead guilty as I have advised you, and you refuse to let me look out for your interests. I can almost guarantee a suspended sentence and no more than one-year probation if you plead guilty."

"You boys really have this thing sewed up, don't you?"

The lawyer lowered his voice. "How stupid can a man get?"

"Everybody is giving me advice. What's yours?"

"If you plead guilty maybe other evidence won't be brought up."

Ryan sat up on the bunk. "What other evidence, Greer?"

"The unlicensed automatic in your suitcase."

"Unlicensed? How interesting?"

"You may think it was licensed. It may turn out that it isn't."

Ryan smiled. "You, Greer, are a blundering little punk. You're playing bad man with all the other bad men. If you keep on this way, I'm going to have to laugh in your face and then your feelings will be hurt. Go away, please. . . ."

The cell door was unlocked in mid-morning of the next day. A florid, white-haired man with tiny bright blue eyes and thick shoulders came in, smiling.

"How do you do, Kestrick. I'm Sam Baidee. Things seem to have gotten a little out of hand while I was looking the other way." Baidee sat down on the edge of the bunk and smiled. He looked like a shaven Santa. Ryan leaned against the concrete wall by the window, his hands in his pockets.

Baidee waited, then continued. "Rolph

Essta becomes a bit too hasty sometimes."

"He certainly is."

"No hard feelings?"

Ryan shrugged. "I'm not mad."

"Then we'll forget the whole incident. Please consider yourself the guest of the hotel for the rest of your stay."

"You're a smart man, Baidee. Smarter than your little friends."

Baidee smiled broadly. "I try to avoid trouble."

"You didn't try hard enough this time."

The smile faded. "What does that mean?"

"You came down here because you checked with McCloud and Greer and decided I might be too much of a package to try to railroad. I might have important connections. Now I'm supposed to shrug it off and let you buy me a drink."

Baidee's face turned purple. "Watch your mouth, Kestrick."

"Sometimes people are big shots too long. They get careless. When you let me out of here, Baidee, I'm going to pull your little castle right down around your ears."

"You're big enough to do that?"

"I think so. I came down here for a rest. I've been working hard for a long time. You've annoyed me."

"The little man can talk big."

"And back it up."

Baidee stared at the floor for a long time. His lips were pursed. He spoke at last, in a reasonable tone. "I admit, Kestrick, that you have every right to be unhappy about this. It's been handled clumsily. And you're right when you assume that I'm not anxious to find out just how far we can go with you. Rolph is sometimes a fool. It's only fair to give you some return for this . . . ah . . . indignity. Give me the receipt for your personal possessions. I'll have it corrected at the desk. They counted your cash wrong. You had a thousand dollars more than you thought you had."

"Would you go for five?"

"That's a lot of money."

"One slot machine, quarter variety, will return that in a year in a good spot."

"Since you put it that way, Kestrick, I might be able to—"

"Thank you, no. Not for five or ten or fifty. I just wanted to see how uneasy

you are about this stew of Rolph Essta."

Baidee sighed. "I find idealists pretty dull, frankly."

"So I guess I stay right here, eh?"

Baidee stood up. "I guess you do. I have to protect myself, in any way that I can. If I have to have you killed, I can arrange that, too. I'm not being melodramatic."

"I'll give you that much."

Baidee stepped outside the cell. He frowned as he turned and looked at Ryan. "My daughter gave me some interesting information, Kestrick. I've been wondering ever since just what the XYZ Novelty Company might be."

He walked away. For the first time Ryan felt disturbed. He felt uneasy. No one knew where he was. It began to look as though Baidee might be able to arrange it. The wrong guess about Gria shook him. He was seldom as wrong about a person. The instability had outweighed her loyalty to him. Or else her loyalty to her father had been stronger than he had imagined.

It all required a revision of plan. The Baidee Comic Opera Association was no longer quite as comic as in the beginning. He had no doubt that he would come to trial and be convicted. And he had no doubt of his ability to escape after the conviction. He had, through his training, evolved three good methods of escape from this particular cell. It was most odd to find this little citadel of amateur fascism in his own country.

And it was at that moment that he decided his future. He decided to accept the offer of that peculiar and particular agency in Washington that had informed him, through devious channels, that they could put to use his experience in war and post-war espionage. Ryan Kestrick had felt, in the beginning, when the offer had first been received, that domestic police work would be dull. Now he began to realize that it could not only be exciting, but quite constructive.

THE high desk of the judge was at the end of the narrow courtroom. The spectators were behind a semi-circular railing at the judge's right, the jury behind a smaller railing at his left. The witness chair, with no railing in front of

it, was on a small raised dais between judge and jury. The long table in the center of the court room accommodated both defense and prosecution.

Ryan was amused at the tactic which had prevented his shaving for the past three days. He imagined that he looked thoroughly desperate.

Greer doodled idly. There was no real defense. The trial was a farce. The witnesses for the prosecution were the bartender, Earl Riverside, Rolph Essta. Lieutenant Parish appeared as the arresting officer. Parish and DuBrie testified as to taking the exhibit, Essta's initialed bill clip, from the person of the defendant. Jurors yawned.

Greer was cross-examining the bartender with no show of enthusiasm. He finished, and McCloud stood up among the spectators.

"If it please the court," he said in a strained voice, "I wish to appear as a witness for the defence."

There was a buzz of conversation. The judge rapped on his desk and said, "Do you have anything to add to the evidence in this case, Lieutenant McCloud?"

"I have, Your Honor."

"Take the stand. Will the attorney for the defence question this witness?"

Greer was pale. He licked his lips. "Your Honor, this is highly irregular. I had no knowledge that the lieutenant had any—"

"The court will decide what constitutes irregularity. I might add that the defence thus far has been conducted with a notable lack of enthusiasm. You have been sworn in, Lieutenant. Now please tell us, in your own words, what you have to offer the court."

McCloud's face was a greasy gray. He said in an almost inaudible voice. "I have known the defendant for eight years. He served in army intelligence during the war, on loan to OSS and after the war transferred to another agency. I—"

"Is it your intention to appear here solely as a character witness, McCloud?"

"No, Your Honor. The defendant made the mistake of becoming friendly with Miss Baidee while he was at the hotel. Essta thought he was just another wise guy. So Essta attacked Kestrick in the bar—"

"Objection," the prosecuting attorney said. "The witness was in no position to know who attacked who. I—"

"Under normal conditions I would sustain the objection. But this case has aroused a certain odd curiosity in the mind of the court. Continue, McCloud."

"I know all these things, Your Honor, because Lieutenant Parish and Sergeant DuBrie told me. Kestrick was framed because he had annoyed Rolph Essta. Essta didn't know he was picking on the wrong man. They've done it to a lot of other guys. This is a dirty mess of a town. Baidee owns everything and Essta is his boy. I can tell you name after name of people who were framed by Parish and DuBrie.

"I'm hanging myself when I pop off like this, and I know it. Greer has his orders not to be too sharp defending Kestrick. Earl Riverside and Hymie, the bartender, they have to play ball or lose their jobs. Ryan Kestrick was nice to Baidee's daughter and that's what burned Essta. Trials like this are a big farce. This town is rotten through and through. . . ." McCloud's voice died away and he stared down at his knuckles.

There was silence in the court. A heavy, enduring silence.

The judge stared at Kestrick. "Do you have anything to say?"

"I want to applogize to McCloud. I'd thought he'd forgotten how to be a man. What he says is true. But how far would I have gotten alone trying to tell that to the court? Sam Baidee was so worried about me he was willing to buy me off for five thousand dollars. He thought Rolph Essta had pulled a boner this time. Apparently he has."

The judge looked at Earl Riverside. The man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Ryan smiled, inside himself. The judge was going to hammer at the weakest spot.

The judge said, "So long as we have deviated this far from procedure, let me say that I am going to make it my business to see that there is a complete Grand Jury investigation of this affair." He glanced at Greer. "There may be a few disbarments."

He looked again at Riverside. "There may be a few perjury convictions. That

is, unless someone is willing to reverse his testimony at this time."

Riverside jumped up. "I had to say what they told me to say! I had to say that I saw Charlie Parish take the bill clip away from Kestrick. Actually I saw Rolph Essta hand the bill clip to Charlie. Kestrick never had it. They made Hymie lie too. I was lying to keep my job. But if I go to jail for it, I'd better start telling the truth."

The reporter, who had expected to cover a routine morning, dashed for a phone.

The judge said, "The case against the defendant is dismissed. The court compliments Lieutenant McCloud on his actions."

The prosecuting attorney said, "I assure the court that I had no knowledge of what was transpiring here. I believe I can speak for the District Attorney when I say that the most positive action will be taken against all parties to the conspiracy. . . ."

Ryan was shaving before going up to the hotel for lunch when he heard the cabaña door open. He looked into the

other room and saw Gria standing there. Her eyes were puffy and reddened.

"Oh, Ryan," she said. "He . . . he . . ."

He turned back to the mirror. "Close the door gently on leaving, honey."

"What's the matter with you?"

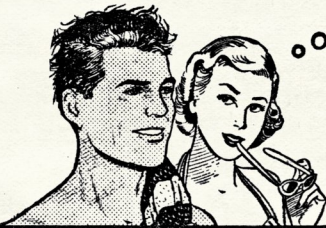
"Nothing. Nothing at all. I'm affectionate toward all double-crossing women."

"Ryan, I don't know what you're talking about." He looked at her again. She spoke as though her lips were stiff. "I came here because they told me you'd moved back in here and I didn't know where else I could go. Rolph Essta went right to dad. He—he died. They say it was his heart. I—"

He smiled at her. "Congratulations, honey. Now you own a couple of hotels."

She gave him a long incredulous look. Her eyes flooded with tears. She turned blindly toward the door.

Ryan looked back toward the mirror. She pulled the door open. He heard her gasp, heard her stumble. He turned quickly, to see her fall awkwardly. DuBrie stood tall in the doorway.



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"Wise," he whispered, like an incantation. "Wise, wise."

He shut the door gently. He reached out and, with a flip of his big hand, sent the table lamp by the door spinning toward Ryan's head. Ryan ducked and heard it smash into the shower stall.

"Use your head!" Ryan snapped. "This isn't going to do you any good."

"You neither." He moved slowly toward Ryan, his big hands low, his fingers opening and closing. "You used tricks on Essta, I heard. I got tricks too, Kestrick."

He was big and the brutality in his face was clear and purposeful. The brown hair was tufted and curled on the backs of his hands. Ryan felt ridiculous, his face half-lathered. He hurled the razor at DuBrie's face. The big man ducked, but not enough. The metal edge of the guard cut him over the eyebrow.

DuBrie grunted. "Come on. Throw something else."

RYAN let him move close enough, let the big arms reach for him. He was standing in the bathroom doorway. He snapped his hands down onto the wrists, let himself fall backward, pulling the man toward him. DuBrie grunted as Ryan got his feet against BuBrie. Swiftly, Ryan tried to roll backward and throw DuBrie over his head.

DuBrie thrust himself to one side against the door frame. He twisted his right wrist free, drove the big fist down at Ryan's face. Ryan blocked it with his arm, thrust hard with his feet and drove DuBrie back a few steps. It gave him time to scramble to his feet as DuBrie dived at him. He met DuBrie with a knee in the face. He felt the nose gristle give under the impact.

Then DuBrie got his heavy arms around Ryan and yanked him down. He moved up, locking his arms around Ryan, nestling his face under Ryan's neck, grunting and adjusting himself before applying the pressure. When the big arms tightened down, the blood rushed to Ryan's head, half blinding him. His ribs creaked alarmingly. DuBrie had all the blind purposefulness of any creature trying to kill.

Ryan got his hand under his throat, slid

it across DuBrie's face, found the eye with his thumb and tried to slip it up under the bone of the brow. DuBrie grunted and twisted his head violently. His teeth clamped the loose skin at the edge of Ryan's hand. Ryan tore his hand free, went for the eye again. As he got the eyeball firmly under his thumb, DuBrie broke his hold and lunged up onto his feet.

He stamped down at Ryan with a heavy heel. Ryan writhed so that the heel grazed his hip painfully. He caught the pipe under the sink and yanked himself away from DuBrie. DuBrie, the lower half of his face masked in blood, moved over to try to kick down again. Ryan hooked his left foot around the back of DuBrie's ankle, kicked hard at the knee.

DuBrie grunted in pain and fell onto his hands and knees. His eyes were small and dulled. Ryan rolled up onto his knees and hit the man in the mouth with his right fist, twice, as hard as he could swing. DuBrie shook off the blows. He slid back onto his haunches, his back against the door frame, and his big hand came out of the front of his coat with the police revolver in it. He could not miss at that range.

Gria, standing outside the bathroom, swung the metal base of the bedside lamp with both hands. It hit DuBrie on the crown of his head. He gave Ryan a puzzled look, the look of a man who has forgotten something. Gria, sobbing aloud, hit him again. DuBrie sighed wearily and toppled over onto his side, his cheek against the tile floor. Ryan reached out and took the revolver out of the slack hand. He broke it, ejected the shells onto the floor.

"Thanks," he said.

She was close to hysteria. "I win your stupid fights and mail your stupid letters. All you do is—"

"Did you say mail my letters?"

"Of course!"

"Your father told me you went directly to him with the information."

Her eyes widened. "But I—I wrote it right away. I gave Richardson the money to send it airmail special!"

"And Richardson, whoever he might be, gave it to your father." Ryan held his torn hand under the cold water. "I'm sorry, Gria," he said. "I should have

realized that your father was lying."

Her voice had a far-away sound. "He wanted too much, you know. They took it all away from him once and he decided that this time nobody would take it away from him. Nobody did. He died before they could."

"Sit down," he said. "I still have half a face to shave."

He pushed DuBrie out of the way with his foot so that he could stand in front of the sink. He shaved quickly. When he went out, she turned toward the window. He put his fingertips under her chin, gently turned her face up, then bent and kissed her. Her lips were delicately warm, unresisting.

"I'm sorry that I had to be the one to blow your world up in your face, Gria."

"Except for you, I might not have been around to see it blow up."

"Come on. We'll have to send somebody down for that unconscious animal."

He ordered food for her and made her eat it. Then he walked her for long miles up and down the beach. He was inwardly amused at the tenderness he felt toward her. She was a misguided and wounded child. Nothing more. But, he could not forget, a child who had had the nerve to put DuBrie out of action.

Dusk was blue and the sea was black and the sunset was an impossible cerise. The wind came up.

"Better now?"

She held his hand. "A lot better, Ryan. A lot."

He took her up to the hotel. A uniformed policeman stopped him in the lobby. "You're not to leave the hotel, sir."

"Isn't this getting a little tiresome?"

"I can't help that, sir. Lieutenant McCloud was shot and killed an hour ago. Mr. Riverside was killed on his way here."

Gria's fingernails bit into Ryan's wrist. "Not—not—"

The patrolman shuffled his feet and blushed. "Yes, Miss Baidee. It was Essta all right. Mrs. McCloud saw him. He shot McCloud three times in the back as McCloud was walking up his own front steps."

Gria swayed and Ryan caught her. She pushed his hands away. "No. Let me

go. I'm all right," she protested loudly.

"Do you know if Essta is alone?" Ryan asked.

The patrolman nodded. "He sure is. He's flipped his wig. Everything blowing up in his face did it, I guess. Old Baidee kicking off that way and . . . Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Baidee. I didn't . . ."

"Go ahead, please," she said.

"Well, there were a bunch of us who never were on the inside. We've rounded up most of Essta's boys. They say he's gone crazy. They're glad to be rounded up before he picks one of them. Every car is out hunting for him. They thought he might try to get you, Mr. Kestrick, or even Miss Baidee. You can't tell what they'll do once they get trigger-happy."

Gria said in a low tone, "That was the only thing dad never liked about Rolph. That horrible temper of his. It—it's close to madness when it gets into him."

"You can't go home, now," Ryan said.

She shuddered. "I didn't want to, anyway. I was going to get a room here. I don't ever want to go back to that house."

"Come on. You need a drink."

The patrolman said reassuringly, "You don't have to worry. We've got everything blocked off. He can't get anywhere near the hotel. They'll let me know just as soon as they grab him."

They had drinks at the bar. They went out to the terrace dining room, overlooking the sea. The lights were soft. A small group played dinner music. The candle between them flickered in the wind. She shivered and her smile was a grimace.

"I'm not supposed to be out in public, I guess."

He frowned. "I've been stupid. It would have been better to take a room and have dinner served there. We can have the rest of the meal served in the room."

"No. No, please. I'm all right. I think I like having people around me."

The music played and the breeze died down, and the surf, far below, was a soft murmuring. In candlelight she looked very young and very lovely.

He said, "You'll have a great deal of money, Gria."

"Why do you say that?"

"I was thinking of Mrs. McCloud. There are two children. You have no

legal responsibility, of course, but—”

HER eyes had a stricken look. “Thinking about myself. Like a fool. How awful she must feel! Ryan, darling, I’ll see that she never wants for anything as long as I have a penny left.”

“You *are* a child! You just don’t do that for people. You make a job for her and give her the feeling of earning the money. I rather imagine, without ever having met her, that she’d throw any present right back in your face.”

“But—”

Their table was a dozen feet from the rough wall of the terrace. A slow movement caught his eye. He saw a hand reach up over the wall, grasp the inside edge. Even as his racing mind realized, from memory of the cliff face, that it was dangerous but surmountable, the other hand appeared with the automatic in it and Rolph Essta’s mad eyes, wide and staring, appeared over the edge of the wall, turning slowly toward them.

Ryan hooked his foot around her chair leg, pulled it violently toward him. Even in that moment of fear, he almost laughed at the look on her face as she dropped abruptly below the surface of the table.

He reached down, found a slim ankle, pulled her toward him as he tipped the round table over toward Essta.

The dishes made a loud crash. On the heels of the crash came the whip-crack sound that an automatic makes in the open air. Wood splinters from the table stung Ryan’s cheek. Two guests sat transfixed at a neighboring table. Ryan scrambled over, keeping low. He snatched the water pitcher from the serving table, whirled and threw it.

Rolph Essta, just climbing over the wall, saw it coming. He straightened up and the pitcher thudded against his chest. It dropped and shattered on the wall. Rolph tried to lift the automatic to fire at Ryan. But the instinctive desire to save himself carried his arm high in a struggle for balance.

He toppled over backwards in slow motion fashion. His hoarse cry diminished as he fell away from them. The sea covered the sound of his body striking the rocks below.

A shrill voice carried clearly across the

terrace dining room. “I must say that if this is some childish attempt at entertainment on the part of the management of this hotel. . . .”

At that, Gria, crosslegged on the floor by the overturned table, went into one of the most profound demonstrations of hysteria that Ryan Kestrick had ever witnessed.

* * *

Ryan drove with the top down. He hummed softly to himself. The Grand Jury had taken his testimony in secret session and the indictments had been issued in satisfactory fashion. His plans were clear. Drive along the coast in leisurely fashion and then head up to Washington for all the necessary interviews.

It was good to think that Gria had gotten hold of herself. She had made Ryan sit in when she had interviewed applicants for the manager’s job so abruptly vacated by Earl Riverside. The businesslike mannerisms she had begun to pick up were cute. He grinned. In a year or so it might be interesting to take a vacation.

The town was forty miles behind him. A big blue bus was approaching when the warm lips lightly touched him under the left ear.

The new car swerved wildly, tires screaming. He fought it back under control, steered it over onto the shoulder and cut the engine, his mouth dry and his knees shaking. Just one more coat of paint on that bus and—

“How do I look?” Gria said gayly. “What a dusty old blanket I had to hide under!”

He regarded her somberly. There were spots of high color in her cheeks. The suit was light, the blouse frilly, the hat silly.

“You look as welcome as a traffic ticket.”

“How do you think up all those nice things to say to me? Well, am I going to get to sit up there beside you?”

“You are. For the forty fastest miles you ever traveled. Right back to where you started from.”

She pouted. “But, Ryan, darling.”

(Please continue on page 129)

MURDER IN HER WAKE



She said, "You know too much about the murder."



By
**ROBERT
TURNER**

*Clerk Trask tried to play hero
when a sultry model got bumped off—
forgetting that chivalry is dead-ly.*

THE subway was rush-hour jammed with Harold Trask wedged in the center of the car between solid rows of strap-hangers. Everybody was reading newspapers or magazines except Trask. He never read anything going to and from the office. Working with figures all day long on the job was strain enough on a man's eyesight. Trask liked to save his whenever possible. Sometimes on subway or bus, though, he'd catch himself cheating. While his eyes roved, they would en-

counter a fascinating headline. First thing he knew, he'd be reading over somebody's shoulder.

For a few moments Trask would be intrigued but then he'd come to the end of a column and become aware of what he was doing. Guilt thrusting at him, he'd jerk his pale blue eyes away.

It wasn't fair to read a paper somebody else had purchased. It was almost like stealing. And sometimes people caught you at it and treated you like a thief. They'd indignantly twist the paper away, fix you with a baleful glare. So when Harold Trask would catch himself reading somebody else's paper, he'd stop and jerk his gaze to the car's display ads, although he knew them by heart.

But this morning the headline that caught Trask's eyes said in banner letters: *MODEL SLAIN!* The whole front page under the headline was taken up with an almost life-size photograph of the girl he'd been with the night before. Even though it was a flattering, professionally glamorized shot, Trask right away knew it was she. He stared dumfounded, goggle-eyed, at the heart-shaped face with the almost too-large, sad, brooding eyes and the deep-lipped sullen mouth. He half fell against the stout woman in front of him who was holding the paper.

His eyes flicked over the caption under the photograph that said:

Early this morning, Lola Lawrence, twenty-two year old cover girl, was found dead in her West Side apartment. A nylon stocking was looped about her throat. Police Medical Examiner certified that death was caused by strangulation. No motive for the murder has yet been discovered but police are seeking a man who (continued on page 3)

Trask was breathing hard down the fat lady's neck, wild with impatience for her to turn the page, when she suddenly rammed an elbow back into his chest. She twisted her head, her doughy, thin-lipped face scowling, her beady, fat-embedded eyes glowering at him.

"Stop leaning all over me, you!" she bawled in a hog-calling contralto that carried clearly above the roar of the train. "It's gettin' so a woman ain't even safe in a crowd any more!"

Harold Trask managed to hold onto his

breakfast, fought for breath, his face green, his eyes rolling, while other passengers stared hostilely at him. After a few seconds he managed to pipe: "I—I beg your pardon, madam. I—well—I was just reading the paper over your shoulder and I—"

"Buy your own paper!" the woman snapped. "Don't you have three cents?"

"But you see, it—it was the picture on the front page," Trask gasped. "I—I know that girl. I was out with her last night. When I saw her picture there, read that she'd been murdered, the shock—"

The woman snorted. Several other passengers sniggered as their eyes went quickly over Harold Trask, took in his narrow-shouldered frame, his balding head with the massive forehead, the frightened rabbit expression on his pinched face.

"You—out with that—that glamor gal?" the woman sneered. "Why you pipsqueak, who do you think you're kidding?"

Laughter rippled among the passengers and Trask felt color heating his face. He gulped and his Adam's apple pogo-sticked in his long throat. As the train squealed into a station, Trask turned and wriggled his way toward the door, the taunts and jibes of the fat woman following him.

On the station platform he weakly walked to a newsstand and bought a copy of the paper he'd been reading over the fat woman's shoulder. He tremblingly turned to page three, flopped down on a station bench to finish the yarn. On the inside page was another photograph of the dead girl, posed for a lingerie ad. Trask had trouble pulling his eyes from the girl's tantalizing loveliness to concentrate on the main news story continued from the front page.

It reported that the police were searching for an unknown man who had been Lola Lawrence's companion on a drinking bout just before she was murdered. This man was described by a bartender who had seen him with the model earlier in the evening as being "a short, thin character on the quiet and prissy side." The barkeep had recognized Lola immediately from her picture on the cover of a girlie magazine. It had puzzled him as to what she was doing in a small, out-of-the-way tavern with a man of that description.

There was a lot more to the story, but Harold Trask's vision blurred. He couldn't seem to get past those first few paragraphs. His mind kept jumping back to the previous night, remembering the little tavern in Washington Heights where he'd taken Lola and the way the fat bartender had kept staring at them both.

Getting up numbly from the bench, Trask walked to a penny gum-vending machine and studied himself in the narrow mirror. He had to admit that the bartender's description fitted.

"But we weren't on any drinking bout," he told himself indignantly. "She had two martinis and I had a small glass of port."

HE GULPED hard, thinking about Lola, remembering the night before. The way her big, dark eyes looked at him over the rim of the martini glass had made him dizzy and for a moment feel as though he was diving right into their liquid depths. He remembered the soft huskiness of her voice as she told him: "Don't ever let anybody kid you, Hal. You're a swell little guy!"

Hardly anybody ever called him Hal unless it was someone in the office who wanted to borrow five bucks until payday. He had never known a girl like Lola. He'd dreamed about her last night after he'd gotten home. And now she was dead—and the police were looking for him, Harold Trask, to question him about the crime.

That last thought came screaming into his mind. He backed away from the gum machine. For a moment he considered keeping quiet, staying out of the whole mess and going on to the office as if nothing had happened. But when the next train roared into the station, he didn't get on it. He realized that he couldn't keep a thing like that to himself. He'd be jumpy as a coot all day. From now on he'd never be able to look a policeman in the eye. He'd be bound to give himself away somehow.

No matter what kind of complications it might lead to, even if it meant losing his job and perhaps his wife, Theo, when she heard, he had to go to the police and tell them his story. In the first place he reminded himself, the girl was alive when he left her. In the second place, perhaps

some of the things she had told him in their talk last night might help the police to pin down the killer.

With his small chin trying to jut in a determined fashion, with his knees feeling as though they were unhinged, Harold Trask walked the few blocks from the downtown subway station toward the big, grim gray building that housed Headquarters. The desk cop directed him to Lieutenant Hoffman's office in Homicide Bureau.

The lieutenant was a tired-looking, stoop-shouldered man with a shaggy mop of iron-gray hair. His funereal face held bored eyes and a thin, disillusioned mouth. He wore a neatly tailored blue suit and a dark bow-tie. His fingers, drumming the desk, were long and sensitive, with well-kept nails. Trask was surprised. He'd expected to deal with a bellowing, bull-faced, cigar-chewing individual.

Hoffman said quietly: "What can I do for you?"

Trask cleared his throat, jumped at the sound. "I—well—you see, I'm the man who was with Miss Lawrence—that is Lola Lawrence—last night. I—I believe you wanted to talk to me."

Hoffman's fingers stopped drumming, picked up a pencil and a pad of printed forms. "You're the third one this morning," he said. He shook his head. "It happens everytime we get a case like this. Everybody wants to see his name in the papers. But at least you fit the description." His eyes darted over Trask and his lips worked up a faint smile.

Trask remembered the uncomplimentary description of the bartender. He drew himself up: "Sir," he said. "I'm no different than any other man. I take a drink now and then. I smoke a good cigar on payday. I play poker with friends on Saturday nights. I shoot golf in the low nineties. I—"

"All right," Hoffman cut him short. "What's your name?"

"And I *am* the man, not just a—*a* crank," Trask persisted. "Harold Haliburton Trask, Four-Sixteen Mitchell Way, Ford Leeds, New Jersey. That's just over the George Washington Bridge."

"I know," Hoffman said, scribbling. "Age? Occupation? Business address?"

"Forty one. I—uh—are you booking

me, sir?" Trask's moment of indignation wafted away like blown smoke.

"Not yet," Hoffman said. "What's the rest of that information?"

"I'm an accountant with Bellingham, Bellingham and Gee, Accountants, Miramar Building, Forty-second Street. Been with them sixteen years."

Hoffman looked up. His slate-colored eyes held Trask's firmly. "How long you know this Lola?"

"Miss Lawrence? I only met her last night. You see, our friendship was rather—uh—unusual." Trask looked past Hoffman and out the window as he talked. "I worked late at the office last night, which isn't unusual. When I got to the bus stop this side of the bridge, there wasn't any bus in sight so I started to walk across. That isn't unusual, either. I like to walk across the bridge at night."

"Even in bad weather?" Hoffman interrupted. "It was foggy and cold last night."

"I've walked across the bridge in driving rains and once in a blizzard. It's, well, sort of an adventure for me. Anyhow, last night, as you say, it was very foggy. Near the center of the bridge the stuff hung so thick it was like gray wool. You couldn't see more than a few yards. All of a sudden, right ahead of me I saw a woman climbing up onto the railing of the bridge. I yelled. She stopped, looked toward me and then climbed back down. She leaned weakly against the railing, started crying."

Trask found himself breathing hard. His fists were clenching and unclenching at his sides as he relived the excitement of that moment. He hadn't told the lieutenant but often when he walked across the bridge late at night like that, he'd amuse himself by imagining just such a situation.

The girl would always be beautiful and possibly rich. She would make a big hero out of him, give him a handsome reward. Well, this girl hadn't been rich but she'd been more beautiful than any dream girl. And she'd been alive, real. This had *happened!*

Hoffman's voice brought him out of his reverie: "So you talked her out of it?"

"**Y**ES," Trask said. "I walked back to the Manhattan side of the bridge with her. We found a tavern and went in

for a couple of drinks. She was still very upset and I thought it might help her. She seemed glad to have somebody to tell her troubles to. She was in a much more optimistic mood when I finally took her home."

"Did she say anything to indicate that someone might want to kill her?" Hoffman wanted to know. "Why was she taking the brody?"

"I'll tell you," Trask said proudly. "I'm something of an amateur psychologist and—"

"Of course," Hoffman said dryly. "Everybody is these days."

"Well, I figured this poor girl had a— a defeatist complex," Trask went on, a little miffed. "She was born and raised in a poor Pennsylvania steel town. Her father was a mill puddler who got drunk every night and kicked her and her mother around. Lola was always taught that she'd never have a chance at anything in life, that some people are born into failure and poverty and might as well accept it.

"Finally, to get away from her troubles—she thought—she married a local boy. She was only sixteen. On her wedding night he robbed a filling station to get money for their honeymoon. He got caught, implicated Lola. She served a year in a penal institution."

"How come she told you all this?" Hoffman cut in. "You just meet the girl and she tells you her life story?"

"You don't understand, sir," Trask said. "This girl *needed* somebody to talk to. She *had* to pour all this out, get it off her mind. It did her good." He started to blush. "She told me I was the first man she'd ever met that she felt she could talk to. She said she felt relaxed with me. Every other guy she ever went out with was always—"

"What else did she tell you?" Hoffman stopped him, impatiently. "What made her finally decide that she should kill herself?"

"I was coming to that," Trask told him, injured. "When she got out of prison, Lola came to New York, worked at all kinds of jobs to pay her way through modeling school. Then she tied up with a top agency, got a few breaks and was starting to climb into the big money. But then life came up and, well, sort of kicked her

in the face again. It was too much."

Hoffman was leaning forward now. "Let me finish it," he said. "The husband cropped up suddenly to spoil everything."

Trask's wispy brows rose. Admiringly, he said, "Acute perception, sir. I can see why you are a Lieutenant of Detectives."

Hoffman frowned, suspecting sarcasm, but then he looked into Trask's guileless blue eyes and smiled faintly instead. "It was a natural. A guy who would involve a dame in a holdup on the first night of their honeymoon would be sure to turn up as soon as he heard she had a few bucks. Go on."

"That's exactly what he did," Trask continued. "He came to her and started blackmailing her for every cent he could get. She knew that if the model agency found out about her prison record they might drop her from their lists. And then there was the business of their marriage. He—"

"You mean she never got a divorce from this guy?" Hoffman interrupted.

"No." Trask shook his head. "He'd pulled a dirty deal with her on that, too, Lieutenant. About a year ago he wrote to her from Nevada and told her that if she'd send him a couple of hundred dollars, he'd get a divorce and she'd be free of him. Lola borrowed the money and sent it to him. But when he turned up a little while ago, he politely informed her that he'd never gotten that divorce. She was still married to him.

"He also used that for blackmail, because he'd found out that she was engaged to Carl Cameron, the head of the big advertising agency. Anyhow, she put up with her husband Mike's bleeding her for about three weeks, but last night it got her down. She decided there was no use fighting any more. She figured fate was against her. She—"

"So she hit for the bridge," Hoffman finished for him. "How did you talk her out of it?"

"Talked common sense to her," Trask said. "Told her that this was no time to give up, just when things were going good for her. I told her that a blackmailer's only weapon is his victim's fear. Once that's gone, the blackmailer is powerless. I said she should refuse to pay out any-

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thing more to this man, defy him and if he got tough about it, to threaten to have him arrested for blackmail."

Hoffman winced. "You meant well, Trask," he said. "But following your advice may have caused her death. A black-mailer is a rat. A cornered rat will fight—and kill—if he has to."

"You mean—you think her husband Mike killed her when she defied him?" Trask went white, put his hand up to his forehead. "That would make me responsible for her death."

"It might have happened eventually anyhow," Hoffman said. "But Trask, we deal in fact. There's another possible angle—that maybe you killed Lola Lawrence, are trying to cover up with this elaborate yarn. What time was it when you left the girl and where did you go after that?"

Trask jolted his mind back to the night before. "It was shortly after two when I left Lola at her apartment. It took me about half an hour to get to the bridge. I'd say I reached Fort Leeds about three o'clock in the morning. I took a cab home from the bus depot."

"Anyway, we can check the time you got into that cab? The M. E. fixed the time of Lola's death at approximately three a. m. Prove you were in Jersey at that time and it will pretty well clear you."

"I—I think I can do it," Trask said. "The local cab company keeps records of all calls." He gave Hoffman the name and telephone number, waited nervously, his sweating fingers twining and untwining, while the other man put through the call. He wondered what Scotty, the cab company dispatcher, would think, having the New York Homicide Bureau checking on him. It would certainly start talk. Trask felt a little sick, realizing how deep he was getting into this thing.

But then the lieutenant hung up, turned to him, smiling. "They have a record of taking you home at three-five this morning, Trask." He swung around on his swivel chair, stared out the window for a moment, his fingers combing through his shaggy hair. When he wheeled around to face Trask again, Hoffman's bony face held a grimly speculative look.

"Sit tight a moment," he said, "while I check on a few things."

WONDERINGLY Trask listened to Hoffman call the Pennsylvania county courthouse to verify that Lola had married a man named Mike Dewald. Another call to the police department of Lola's hometown checked on the story of their arrest the night of the honeymoon. When he hung up, Hoffman said:

"Your story's okay. That makes this thing open and shut as far as I'm concerned. Carl Cameron, her fiancé, is a respectable business man. He's out."

"You shouldn't be too sure about that," Trask said. "Come to think of it, Lola told me that he was terribly jealous. Flew into terrible rages if she even looked at another man. He—"

"Wouldn't you," Hoffman stopped him, "if you had priority on a beautiful number like Lola? No, he's all right, Trask. We checked on him. He has an alibi. Mike Dewald looks like the guy. Only we're going to have a hell of a time rounding him up. It might take months. You understand?"

"On a case getting publicity like this one we have to do something smart and fast. If we wait for routine to pick him up somewhere, the public will be hollering for police heads. But I've got an idea how we can grab him quick. How would you like to help, Trask, play detective with us for awhile?"

Harold Trask's mild blue eyes widened. He gulped. Visions swam through his head, visions of himself casually holding a big plug-ugly at bay with an automatic, saying: "*You haven't got a chance, Mike. You might as well spill the whole thing.*" He could see all the famous dicks moving over to make room for Hal Trask, Private Eye.

He could hear the boys in the office as they stared awe-struck toward his desk, whispered: "*That Hal Trask, they say he was hardboiled as a ten-minute egg when he nabbed the Lola Lawrence killer!*" And Theo, his wife—maybe she'd show a little respect for him.

"Sure, Lieutenant," he finally managed, clawing back to reality. "What do you want me to do?"

"Let's go over to the D. A.'s office and see if we can get his okay on it."

Leaving Police Headquarters with Hoffman, Harold Trask jammed his hands

into the pockets of his coat. He accepted a cigarette from the lieutenant, though he rarely smoked them, and let the thing hang from his lower lip. His thin shoulders were squared back and there was a touch of swagger to his walk. He practised cutting his eyes to the corners to look at people instead of turning his head. With a little choking in his throat, he wished that Lola Lawrence could know that he was being assigned by the police to route out and run down her slayer. He thought that she would like that. . . .

Two hours later, though, when he left the District Attorney's office, Harold Trask no longer felt like the gumshoe in a feature production. He felt scared silly and wondered why he'd let himself be talked into such a fool stunt.

Looking back over his shoulder and seeing the plainclothes man unobtrusively following him, he realized once again that Hoffman and the D. A. weren't helping him to be a hero. They were merely using him as a sitting duck, a decoy to trap Mike Dewald so that they could capture him.

"You can't get hurt," they told him. "It's simple. You'll be guarded every single moment. Dewald won't have a chance of getting to you—but when he tries, then we grab him. You understand?"

He understood all right. He'd been a little leary at first when they'd told him their plan. They were going to give out his story to the newspapers just as he had told it to Hoffman, only omitting all mention of Lola's husband. They would add to it a little.

They'd say that after he'd left Lola, Harold Trask had forgotten that he'd loaned her his cigarette lighter and had

gone back to her apartment to get it. He had seen a man leaving, had gotten a good look at him. Trask would be, according to the papers, the man who had actually seen the murderer leaving the girl's apartment.

"That will do it," Hoffman had said. "He'll go after you, Trask. He can't let a man live who can positively identify him as having left the scene of the crime at the exact time the murder was committed. That will bring Mike Dewald out of his hiding place. You don't know how much we appreciate your help, Trask. And we'll do our part by keeping you well covered every minute until he shows up."

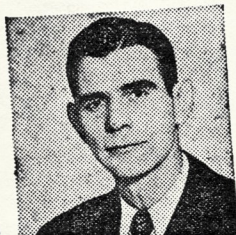
They told him to go back to his office, then, follow through his usual day-by-day routine, just as though everything was normal. They would get in touch with the Jersey police to take over the assignment when Trask left the office to go home. They said that Mike Dewald might try to strike this very night, since the late afternoon editions of all the papers would carry the story, with details about Harold Trask to make it easier for the killer to find him.

When they'd finished outlining this plan, Harold Trask had been too stunned to realize the enormity of the thing, the very possible danger. He'd meekly acquiesced.

It was noontime when Trask reached the office. The staff looked at him in astonishment. It was the first time they'd seen him come in late in sixteen years. An office wit shouted:

"Wot happened, Trasky? They knock down the Washington Bridge and you had to swim the Hudson? No gold star on your desk this month!"

MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!



**And He Was!
Carl W. Rau Has
Now Switched to
Calvert Because
it Tastes Better.**

ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

Trask didn't answer. He hung up his coat, went to his desk and plunged into his work. He had no appetite for lunch. He spent half an hour trying to add a column of figures that he could ordinarily do in his head. He kept thinking of all the things that could go wrong with Hoffman's plan. Suppose this Mike Dewald decided to pick him off from a distance? How could the cops prevent that? He shuddered. He wondered if Theo would cry at his funeral.

About three o'clock, when he went out to the outer office, though, Trask saw two sturdy, stolid-faced individuals sitting on a bench in the reception room, where they could hear whom visitors asked to see. One of them winked at him.

He felt better then. The police were on the ball. They even had men assigned up here before the newspapers broke the story, just to be on the safe side.

ABOUT quarter to five that afternoon all work ceased in the offices of Bellingham, Bellingham and Gee, Accountants. There was more excitement than the time Mr. Bellingham had passed out a midyear bonus without warning. It started when Charlie Sykes, the office manager, came in with old man Bellingham's late afternoon edition of the paper. He came in waving the thing wildly, headed straight for Harold Trask's desk, shouting:

"Hey, look at this, guys and gals! Guess who's right up to his neck in the middle of that model murder business? None other than old Harold Haliburton Trask, that's who! What do you think of that? Hey, Trasky, was she really as luscious as those newspaper photos? Come on, you sly dog, give us the lowdown!"

They all crowded around and Trask was forced to go over his story for them again and again, sticking to the newspaper version. For the first time in his life, he knew how heroes feel. For the first time he was not only one of the office gang, he was the biggest shot in the place.

Even the Bellinghams, Senior and Junior—Mr. Gee was away on a field trip—came out of their sanctums and pushed through the jam around Trask's desk and smilingly asked for first-hand details. Even Trudy Monohan, the office siren, rolled her eyes at him and cooed: "Oh,

Hal, honey, how awfully thril-l-ling!"

After all that, at five-thirty, Harold Trask left the office walking on air. He grinned up at the two hulking plainclothes men who got into the crowded elevator on either side of him, but right then he didn't feel that he needed them. He felt as though he could handle Mr. Mike Dewald all by himself. They stuck close by him on the subway ride. They got on the interstate bus that went across the bridge. On the other side they were relieved by a couple of Jersey detectives who studied him curiously.

When he got into the cab at the bus terminal in Fort Leeds Gus, the driver, opened the door for him, grinned and ducked his head as though he were chauffeuring a visiting potentate.

But Harold Trask paid little attention to him. He couldn't wait to get home now. He knew that Theo would have heard the whole story by this time. He couldn't wait to see the expression on her cherubic face. Theo never missed a crime movie at the theatre, nor a detective novel. To have her own husband the central figure in a sensational, headline-splashed murder case would be beyond her wildest dreams. He was now only slightly worried about how she might react over his having bought the Lawrence girl a couple of drinks.

The night before when he'd gotten home so late, Theo had demanded in her usual truculent manner where he'd been. On the spur of the moment he'd snapped:

"Out wining and dining with a beautiful girl!"

A second afterward he could have bitten off his tongue. But Theo had thought it was very funny. She'd pointed her finger at him derisively, snorted: "You? That'll be the day! Maybe it would be better if you did something like that once in awhile instead of working your fool self to death overtime and not getting paid for it."

Well, Theo would eat those words tonight. He couldn't wait to see her do it.

The cab dropped him off in front of the small frame bungalow in the little development where Trask lived. As he paid Gus, he saw the police sedan that had been following them pull into some shadows under trees a few yards from his driveway, where they could have a clear view of the house

and anybody who tried approaching it.

Trask stepped cockily up the walk toward the back door, that led in off the breezeway. Hoffman had been right. There was nothing to worry about. Those cops out there would intercept anybody who even made a motion toward his house tonight. He and Theo could sit in there safe and sound and not have a thing to worry about.

The back door was open and Trask stepped into the kitchen, wondering why Theo wasn't getting dinner ready. He hollered:

"Hey, Theo! Where are you?"

The answer came from the living room, accompanied by a giggle. "In here, honey. Come on in."

Trask swung through the kitchen into the hall—and stopped at the living room door. Theo was in there, sitting in the club chair, smoking a cigarette and grinning idiotically at him. All the shades were down, only one lamp was lit.

Two men were sitting on the settee. One was big, ruddy-faced, with sleek black, silver-templed hair. A good-looking man in a heavy-featured sort of way.

The other man was almost as small as Trask. His thin, bony face had the emaciated look of a man who has been long sick. He coughed hollowly every few seconds. His eyes were watery and colorless. Even though it was warm in the room, he kept the collar of his thin, frayed topcoat turned up. He held a battered snap-brim fedora in one hand, covering the other fist with it.

"Honey!" Theo gushed. "I heard all about it. It's just thrilling. I can hardly believe that my Harold—"

She stopped as Trask swiveled his gaze back and forth between his wife and the two men sitting on the couch. The big man was smiling at him benignly. The little one just stared, his eyes squeezing together every once in awhile in a nervous squinch.

THEO said. "These men are detectives, Harold. They've been assigned to guard us—because you know too much about the murder." She clasped her hands together and shivered, closing her eyes.

"It's simply the most thrilling experience. I can't wait to tell the girls in the

Literary Society. These detectives wouldn't even let me come to the door to meet you. They won't let me go near the windows, either. They say it isn't safe."

"Detectives?" Trask looked at the two men. Somewhere deep inside of his brain a strange, brooding, somehow insidious music began to play. Trask knew at once, instinctively, that these men weren't detectives. He said: "Oh, I see. Uh—listen—if you'll excuse me a minute, I left something outside that I've got to get. I—"

The skinny little man on the couch stood up. He stopped spinning the fedora over his left hand, flipped it off. His small fist was clenching an incongruously large revolver.

"Sit down, Trask," the little man said. "You're just not as dumb as your fat blonde wife."

Theo squealed, began to babble indignantly and then stopped as though someone had rammed a fist into her mouth when she saw the gun.

Harold Trask didn't move. He kept staring at the ugly black muzzle of the revolver. He wanted to get to a chair and sit down, like the man said. But his legs wouldn't move for him. They felt as though they weren't even there.

The big man, still sitting on the couch, smiled a real big board-meeting smile, said cheerfully: "Beaumont's got a very nervous hand. When people irritate him, his hand starts to shake and the gun goes off. You really had better sit down, Trask."

Trask saw Beaumont's skinny trigger finger whiten. Somehow he managed to make his legs move rubber-like toward a chair. He fell into it. The big man on the couch said:

"So you saw me leaving Lola's flat last night, Trask? That's too bad. If you hadn't been quite so observant—and big-mouthed about it—this unpleasantness might not have been necessary."

"Harold!" Theo screamed, her plump features working in terror and bewilderment. "How dare these men come in here and—and insult me and threaten us and—and— Do something, Harold! Call the police! They can't do this to respectable, law-abiding citizens!"

Little Beaumont swung the revolver to-

ward her, said savagely: "Shut your big yap!"

Theo made gurgling noises, stared at him in horror, stiffened all over and half slid down out of the chair in a dead faint. Beaumont spat on the rug, swung the gun back toward Trask. He said:

"Let's get goin' on this thing, chief. I get nervous hanging around talking. Let's get the job done."

"What—what are you going to do?" Trask demanded. He thought about the cops sitting outside in their sedan only a few yards from the house. He wished there was some way to get to them, to send them an S. O. S.—and at the same time he knew there was none. He was stuck.

Anger boiled in him, thinking of Hoffman and the D. A., sitting comfortably in their homes without any thugs waving cannons at them, probably reading the newspaper stories about Harold Trask and chuckling at their own cleverness. What a dolt he'd been to fall in with their stupid scheme! He took all the risk while they grabbed the glory—if there was going to be any. Only there wouldn't be. The killer had outsmarted them all by going straight to Trask's house and waiting there for him.

When neither of the two men answered his question, Trask tried again. "Look, whatever you've got in mind, why don't you forget it? None of this was my idea in the first place. The New York police made me do it. Listen, I know where the local cops watching this place are stationed. Why don't you just slip out a window on the other side and beat it? I won't sound any alarm. I'll let you get away safely. It won't do you any good to kill me and my wife. The police know who you are, anyhow. They—"

"They do?" the big fellow said. "How could they? You may have seen me leaving that cheap little two-timing Lola's flat, but you didn't know who I was." The good-looking features darkened with the rising blood of anger as he spoke. A vein stood out like a blue cord in his thick throat. His amber-colored eyes grew muddy and mean.

"The news story was a fake," Trask said. "They purposely avoided mentioning your name in order to draw you into

this trap—but they know you're the one who killed your wife, Mike Dewald."

Beaumont started in surprise. His watery eyes shifted for a moment to the man with him. "Hey, you hear that, boss?" He laughed, but the effort brought on a coughing spell. Even though he bent over in a choking paroxysm, he didn't take his eyes from Trask and the revolver never wavered.

"It's a strange thing," Trask said. "You don't look anything like I pictured Mike Dewald to look. I had an idea you'd be a sort of crude, tough-talking mug."

"Is that so?" The killer's lips twisted in a faint smile. "Lola had the wrong idea about me, too. Just because I speak softly and wear good clothes, she thought I was easy-going. She thought she could put anything over on me. Well, she found out different. A lot of people are fooled by appearances.

"For instance, some guys wouldn't have thought anything about Lola taking up with a harmless-looking little character like yourself. But you Caspar Milquetoasts are often the most deceptive. And a girl like Lola, as long as you had the money to spend on her—"

"Wait a minute." Trask stopped him, a frown knitting between his pale brows. "What are you talking about? I only met Lola last night. We had no—uh—romantic interest in each other. We are just—"

He broke off abruptly as realization dawned on him. The whole trend of this man's conversation had baffled him. It was as though they'd been speaking on two different planes. Suddenly Trask knew why. He said:

"You—you're not Mike Dewald, are you?"

Too quickly, too eagerly, little Beaumont said: "Sure he is, chump. You said so yourself. Who else would he be?"

"CARL CAMERON, that's who," Trask told him. "Lola's fiancé the advertising big-shot, the legitimate business man that the police couldn't see as a suspect. Lola told me you were jealous. She said that sometimes you almost frightened her with your suspicions and your threats."

"Yes," Cameron admitted. His fists clenched against his sides. The big vein

in his neck seemed to swell. "But the little idiot didn't believe me. She kept trying to fool me, giving me that wild cock-and-bull story about her ex-husband trying to blackmail me, expecting me to swallow that. I knew damned well what the truth was.

"She was still crazy about him. A dame with a background like hers never changes. Last night when I saw her come home with you, that put the finishing touches on it. Going out and picking up a little punk like you."

"But you were wrong!" Trask said. "Don't you see! She wasn't lying. She was telling the truth."

"Shut up!" Cameron's muddy eyes narrowed. His mouth thinned against his teeth. His whole face was livid with insane fury. "That's what she kept telling me! If she'd only admitted it, hadn't tried to make a fool out of me, maybe I wouldn't have lost my head and killed her. . . . Beaumont! Give me that gun and go out in the kitchen and get the stuff. Get busy."

He took the blue-steel revolver from Beaumont while the little man scurried in the direction of the kitchen. Trask got up from the chair. "Please, Mr. Cameron," he pleaded. "Why don't you give yourself up? With a good lawyer, you could plead insanity, get away with—"

"I'm not insane!" Cameron yelled. "Just because I wouldn't let a cheap little doll like Lola put things over on me doesn't mean I'm crazy."

Trask didn't say any more. He stared fascinated at the big, well-dressed man. He realized now that there was no use trying to reason with Cameron. The

man's jealous mania was too far advanced.

He glanced toward his wife, Theo, still slumped in a faint at the foot of the chair where she'd been sitting. He wished she'd come to. Maybe she could help him out of this spot. Maybe she could use one of the tricks that the fictional heroes in her precious detective stories always used. But at the same time the thought came to Trask, he knew it was silly. Cameron wasn't the common garden variety of murderer.

Beaumont came out of the kitchen lug-ging two five-gallon cans. "We'll start it in here, chief. Then we'll be sure they're out of the way, even if the rest of the house doesn't go." Unscrewing the cap on one of the cans, he started to spill the fluid from the can over the bottom of the window drapes.

The heavy fumes of kerosene filled the room. Trask gasped in horror. "You're going to set fire to the house? What good will that do, Cameron, aren't you even human?"

"Yes," he said. "But not at the expense of cleverness. You see, Trask, this is going to just be one of those unfortunate things. A flash fire breaks out in the house. You and your wife get caught. A tough break for the police to have something like that happen to their star witness, isn't it?" He shrugged. "Beaumont and I escape in the excitement. When they see the flames, your police guard outside will be so busy trying to break into the house to rescue you, sending alarms, that they won't bother chasing us, even if they do spot us leaving the place."

Beaumont was spreading the kerosene over the sofa now, being very thorough.



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Trask watched the preparations being made for their funeral pyre. He remembered when he and Theo had bought this furniture, this house. He thought about all the long hours, days, weeks, bent over the big ledgers at the office that it had taken to pay for all this. And these two were going to burn it all up like tinder. It meant nothing to them. Trask felt anger begin to build up within him. Anger greater than he'd ever felt before.

"Damn you!" he said. "You won't get away with this." He fumbled a hand into his jacket pocket, brought out a book of matches. He said: "Maybe Theo and I'll die in the fire—but one of you will burn with us!"

Swiftly, he struck one of the matches, held it to the rest until the whole packet burst into flame. He flung it sideways toward Beaumont. The flaming booklet fell into the spilled kerosene around the little man. The whole sofa instantly became a solid blue and white sheet of flame. Beaumont leaped back away from it, screaming.

Carl Cameron stared at the flames in surprised terror. "You fool!" he shouted.

Trask knocked the forgotten revolver from Cameron's hand. Swinging, he hit the big man a glancing blow on the cheek, staggering him. He turned then toward Beaumont, who was streaking toward the door, squealing in fright. Trask caught him by the shoulder, spun him around.

Little Beaumont turned on him in desperate fury, beat at Trask with his small fists. But Trask didn't even feel the rain of blows. He suddenly felt very big, much bigger than the man who was fighting with him. He had never before engaged in physical combat. The very idea of it had always unnerved him. But not now.

Suddenly he gloried in it. All that he had been through boiled over in his mind and he rebelled against it, concentrated his rebellion and his fury on the man before him. They stood toe to toe trading punches for several moments. Then Trask connected with a wild bolo blow straight to Beaumont's thin jaw. The little man flipped over backward like a tenpin.

Trask shook himself. Theo now stood over Carl Cameron, who was sprawled

face down on the floor. Theo held the blue steel revolver by the barrel end, hefting it like a club.

"Oh, Harold!" she squealed. "I was conscious, but afraid to let them know. When you started fighting, I just had to do something."

"You surely did, honey," Trask told her. "See if you can drag him out of here. I'll take Beaumont."

Quickly, they dragged the unconscious men out of the room, out of the house, with the help of the two detectives in the parked car, who had come running when they saw the flames through the window.

They stood outside with the fast-gathering crowd and watched the firemen from town battling the flames a little later.

Theo told him, "I kind of wanted some new furniture, Harold. . . ."

Late that night, after all the details with the police had been taken care of, Harold and Theo Trask were safely in the guest bedroom in a neighbor's home, Theo mumbled pettishly:

"I still don't think it was very fair of you not to tell me about that girl."

He didn't say anything. He lay there, staring into the darkness and listening to the sound of Theo's breathing. He knew better than to answer. That would only lead to an argument which might last well into the night.

But Theo wasn't ready to let the matter drop there. Sharply she persisted: "Well, for heaven's sake, answer me, Harold."

That was a bad mistake. Theo Trask had forgotten the things her husband had been through today. But he hadn't. A vision came into his mind of a snarling little hoodlum called Beaumont, who, if nothing else, knew how to handle a gabby woman. With great vehemence, Trask snapped:

"Shut your big yap!"

Theo gasped once in surprise and then snuggled closer to him. "Yes, Harold, darling," she said meekly. "Anything you say, honey."

Trask grinned into the darkness, quite pleased with himself. That had worked beautifully. That had been the new Harold Trask talking, who was going to see that things were different from now on, a man who wasn't going to take anybody's lip.



Into the glare of television-man Trex' headlights ran a dainty doll . . . with a Dracula cape shielding her face—and blood on her hands.



She'd scampered from Gaylord's house. So into it went Trex—to find the wolfish producer hacked to death . . . with a Boy Scout hatchet.



Now Trex tried to cover up his own tracks. But his luscious and ambitious girl-friend began tripping him up. Then the dicks began adding up clues.

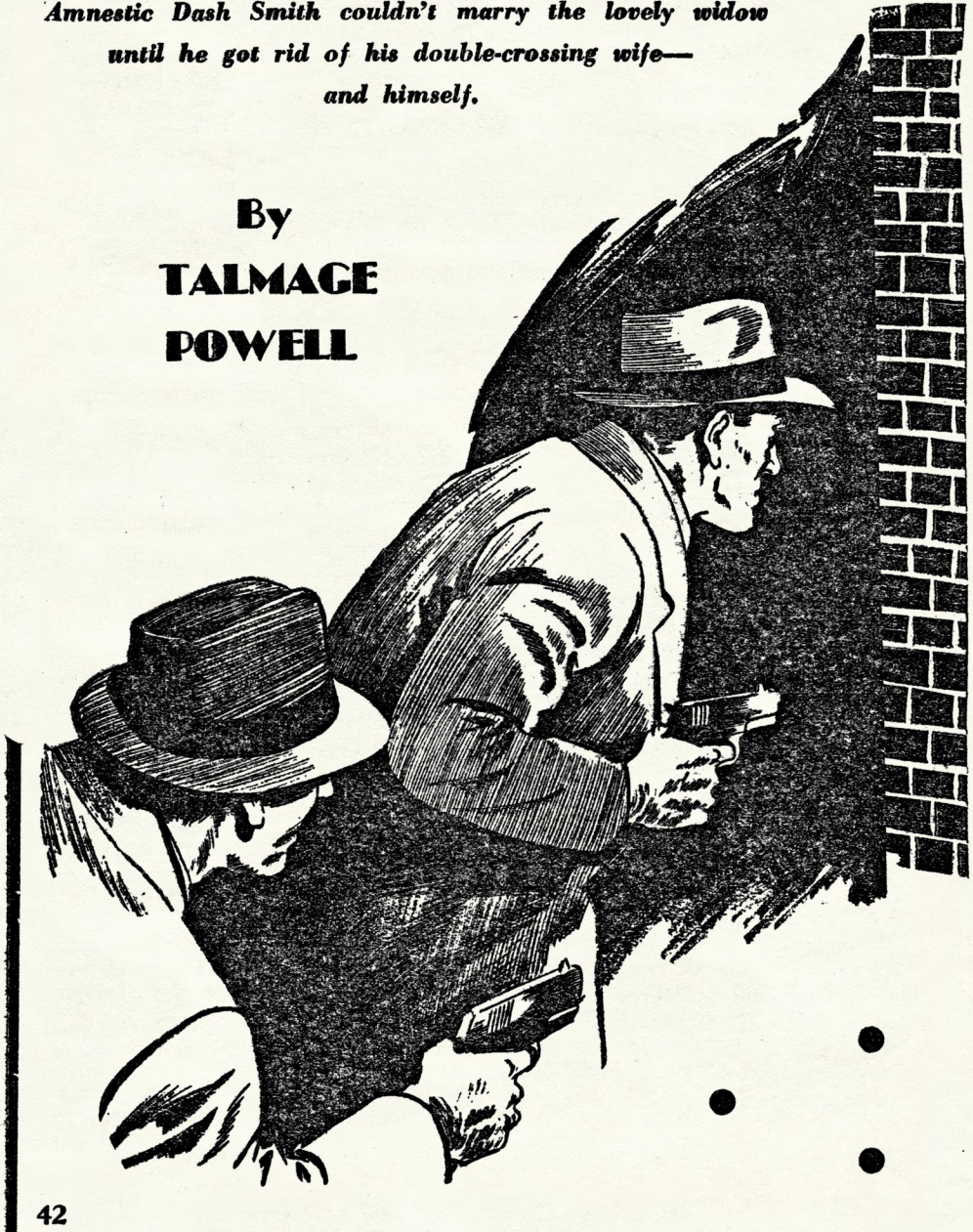


A lovely writer knew too much, and so did Trex . . . in Frederick C. Davis' breathless novel—"Kill Me, Kate!"—in the August issue, published July 5th.

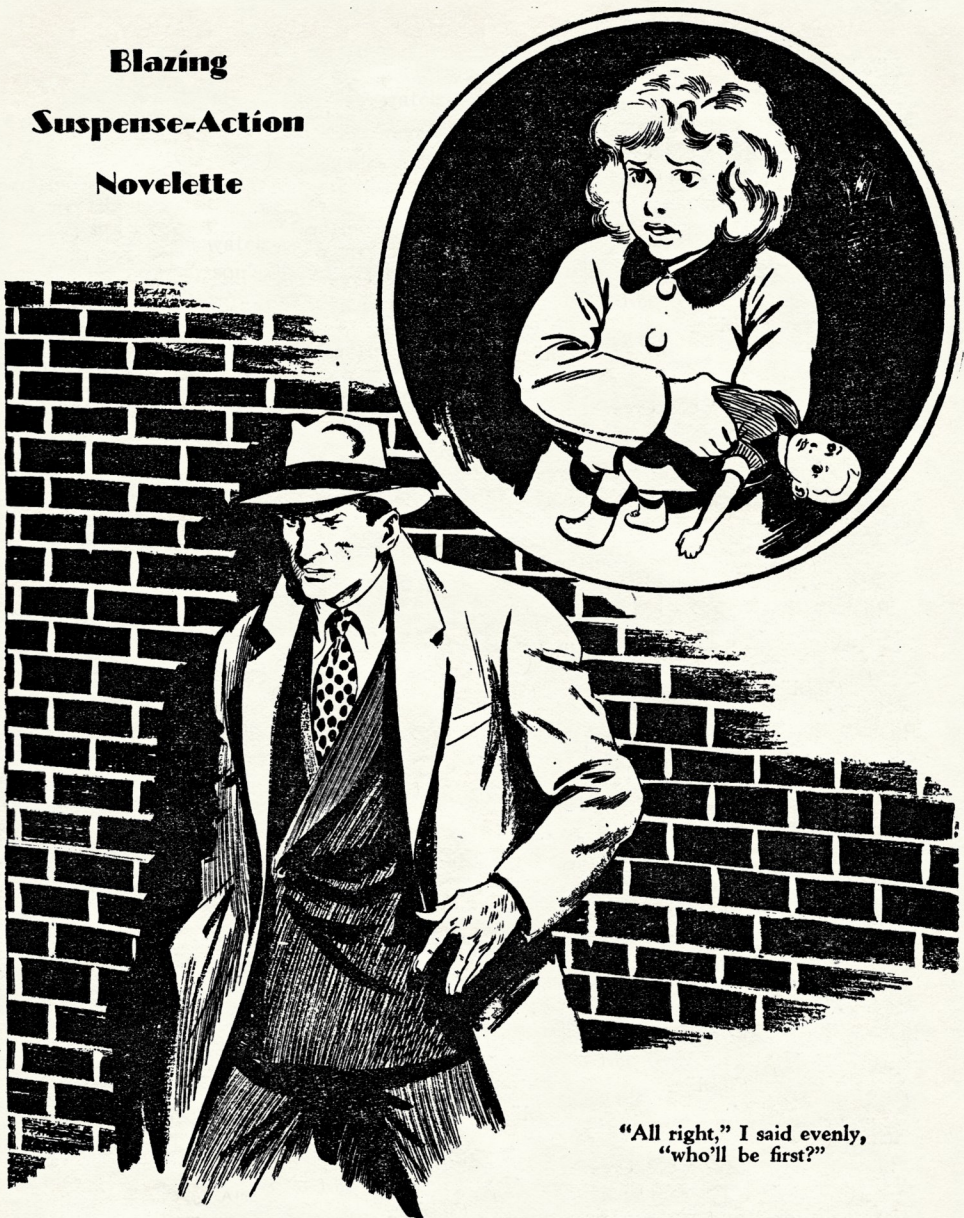
FORGET-ME-NOT KILLER

*Amnestic Dash Smith couldn't marry the lovely widow
until he got rid of his double-crossing wife—
and himself.*

By
**TALMAGE
POWELL**



**Blazing
Suspense-Action
Novelette**



"All right," I said evenly,
"who'll be first?"

CHAPTER ONE
Out of the World

WAKING again was like swimming in a sea of dull pain. My head felt hot, my limbs heavy. I tried to open my eyes, and couldn't. For a moment it struck me only as being queer. Then I realized my face and head were heavily bandaged. I could feel the

strips of gauze by raising my leaden hands and touching the cloth with my fingertips.

I had no way of knowing whether it was night or day, winter or summer. I hadn't the least idea of where I was. I had come from—where? Slowly, a horrible coldness started waving up over me, shaking me so that I wanted to scream.

In the name of mercy, who was I?

I was lying on a bed. I heard the springs creak as I tried to rear up, to tear the bandages from my face in sudden terror. Two hands gripped my shoulders, forcing me back. A voice called:

"Doctor Maddigan! Doctor Maddigan, please!"

The sound that followed the woman's crisp, professional voice was that of softly clicking heels. Then other hands were added to the woman's, pushing me against the mattress.

"Let's behave now, Mr. Smith!" a man's voice commanded.

"Where am I?" I said hoarsely, my voice muffled by the bandages.

"In Asbury Hospital. I'm Doctor Maddigan, and Miss Phillips, your nurse, is right beside you in case you want anything. There is really no reason for you to begin acting up again."

"Again?"

"Almost every time you awake. You don't remember? Well, that isn't uncommon. Lie quietly and it will all come back to you. Physically, you're just about ready for discharge, and I'm glad to say this waking is the most normal so far."

"But I . . ." I flinched a little as I felt a needle bite my arm. Gasping, I tried to get this Doctor Maddigan to talk to me, to answer my questions. But he uttered only soothing nothings, and gradually I felt the drug taking effect, dragging me back into that awful maw of blackness. I wanted to scream again. This clammy coldness that gripped me seemed as if it would never leave me.

"Quiet now, Mr. Smith. . . that's it. . . it'll all come back . . . come back. . ."

When I woke again, I had the feeling I had been dreaming. I lay in sheets wet from the sweat of my body and tried to remember the dream. But it stayed just beyond the edge of my mind. Then, as I became fully conscious, the terror returned greater than ever, for I knew it was no dream I was trying to recall. It was my past. It was I! That was it—I was trying to remember me!

Smith, they had said. Doctor Maddigan and Miss Phillips. Asbury Hospital. At least my mind would function. I could remember that much of it, the last awakening. But behind that awakening was a thick, black curtain that I could not

penetrate. I—as I—had never existed!

I tried to keep a strong grip on myself. I lined up all the facts I did know. The name was Smith. I had obviously been in an accident of some kind, evidenced by bandages and hospital. I knew I spoke English. My mind seized on the fact that I knew somehow that Asbury Hospital was in the city of Wiltonville.

Beyond that, memory was a myriad of tantalizing wraiths. Like a terrier, my mind pursued each memory as it boiled over into my consciousness; then memory would flee down the rathole of forgetfulness.

The third awakening found me calmer, conditioned to the fact that I remembered nothing. It also found me feeling much stronger, and I knew even before I touched my face or opened my eyes that the bandages were gone.

"Hello, darling!"

I had only to turn my head a little to see her. She was standing right beside the bed. Tall, sleek, a creature with cool blue eyes, heavy red lips that would pout easily, and blonde hair flowing down to the silver fox neckpiece about her shoulders. Darling, she had said. *Smith*, I thought, *you're some boy*.

From the woman, I shifted my gaze to the man beside her. He was average height. His face was narrow and cold, his eyes a cruel slate-gray. All in all, he looked dapper and deadly, a fit companion for the woman.

He asked her: "Is his new face handsome enough, Marlene?"

"Hasn't he always been?" She gathered my hand up in both of hers, pressed my palm against her cheek. "Darling, it's been such a fearful time! I was afraid I had lost a husband."

THAT cut it. I almost fell off the bed.

I was too numbed, staring at her, to speak. She used a long, carmine-tipped finger to trace the outline of my cheek and jaw. "I'll have to get used to the new face, being near you, darling. They've done a good job, don't you think, Felix?" She looked up at the man.

Felix was regarding me with his slaty eyes. "He doesn't look much like the old Dash Smith, but you can't kick, Chief. When the lake cottage burned, it was a

miracle the young people in the parked car got you out of the place. This Doctor Maddigan worked a couple of miracles himself, saving your eyes, and giving you any kind of face at all."

"The face," I creaked. "Could I see it?"

Marlene held a purse mirror out to me. I took it, stared at the image of me. There were still pink scars of surgery around the jaws and forehead. A rather ordinary face aside from that, but completely strange to me.

Doctor Maddigan came in with the remark that I should rest now. Marlene rose. "Don't worry about a thing, Dash. Mr. Varden is attending to everything."

I watched Felix Varden and Marlene go, with a mixture of feeling. One had called me boss, the other—husband. . . .

The next morning I was up and around in my room a little. Doctor Maddigan seemed worried that I still remembered nothing.

"I'm sure everything will come back to you in time. A familiar face, sound, or smell might bring memory flooding back when you least expect it."

"The newspapers reported the fire I was in?"

"Yes," he admitted, "there was a great deal in the papers about you."

"If I should read that?" I suggested.

He pondered a moment. "It might help at that. I'll have Miss Phillips bring them in."

That day I got acquainted with myself through a pile of back issues of the local papers. It was all there, the account of the fire that had burned me about the head and shoulders so nearly to a cinder, the rehash of a good bit of my past:

LOCAL RACKETS BOSS ESCAPES DEATH IN FLAMES

The writer of that piece had a droll sense of humor, implying that the inferno itself had rejected me. It spoke of the crocodile tears of Marlene's grief when news of her husband's mishap had reached her. She had been located that night at a swank nightspot in the company of Felix Varden.

I let the papers fall slowly to the floor beside my chair. I sat looking out into the golden sunlight. I tried to feel the personality of Dash Smith. I couldn't. I

knew I did not like the man I had met in the papers. Yet I was that man. Obviously, I was wealthy, feared and reviled. I slumped, feeling tired, wondering why the flames hadn't finished their job. . . .

My hair still had not begun to grow back the day I left the hospital. Marlene came for me, with Felix Varden. I slipped my arms about her, kissed her because she seemed to expect it. I felt nothing for her. I wondered if this lack of feeling had sent me to that lonely lakeside cabin the night of the fire?

Varden drove a heavy, rich black sedan, obviously mine. We passed through streets that were strange and yet that had an aching familiarity about them. Varden drove with quick, abrupt gestures. I suspected he could move with the speed of a striking snake. I knew he must be one of my most valuable men.

Marlene sat beside me, sheathed in black silk and jewels, chatting about friends who had called, the redecorating she'd done on the apartment, anything that came to her mind. There was an air of tension between the three of us.

Varden stopped the sedan before an ornate apartment building of cream-colored brick. A doorman hopped to the curb, opened the car door. He gave me an odd look, and Marlene whispered:

"It's Mr. Smith!"

The doorman practically brushed the carpet with his palms to the elevator for us. As we rode up, Varden said.

"Some of our business associates are chaffing to see you. Shall I bring them around tonight?"

"No," I said, "later. I'm tired."

I didn't miss the expression in Varden's eyes, nor the glance he swapped with Marlene. For the first time I wondered why that fire had started in the lake cottage that night, and what was behind it. Varden's own innate coldness caused my skin to prickle in his presence. A keen sense of warning told me not to let Felix Varden know how really helpless I was.

I let Marlene precede me into the apartment. There was a long living room, a sunken dining room with windows banked at one end. Like a Hollywood movie set, I thought.

"I'm sure we could all use a drink," Marlene suggested.

I cut my eyes, helplessly lost, about the room. "You play hostess, Marlene."

I watched her swing a section of the wall out to form a miniature bar. Felix Varden raised his glass in a toast:

"To the suckers!"

IT TOOK me a moment to echo it, and I saw the puzzlement deepen in his eyes. He set his glass down, drink finished. "Look, Chief, you're acting spooky. You must be all in. I'll chase myself now, see you tomorrow."

As soon as the door closed, I turned to look at Marlene. How did Marlene and I live?

But I needn't have wondered. Turning to her, I found her face was cold, as if she had dropped a mask of pretense.

"I saw the way you were looking at Felix—and he noticed it, too. I suppose now it will start all over again."

"What will start, Marlene?"

"That's like you, Dash. Pretending everything is just fine when thoughts are crawling through your mind. I warn you, Dash. I didn't know what an utter ego-maniac you were when I married you, but I won't take any more of your persecution."

I looked at her. "What if I just got out of the whole thing?"

Her full, red lips curled. "Even Dash Smith would know better than that. The organization never lets a man go. Especially a man in your position. You wouldn't want to land in the bottom of the river, your feet in a tub of cement, any more than I would! But I'm not afraid of what you can do to me any longer! I made up my mind while you were in the hospital that I was through taking your persecution!"

"You got any more to say?"

"No." Her voice dropped. She sagged in a big club chair, tired, not half so beautiful under her heavy make-up. "That's all I have to say."

"Then I think I'll take a walk," I said.

I had to get out in the fresh, clean air. I was certainly jammed up in a lot of things I needed to remember. I recalled the newspaper stories about Dash Smith. They said I'd come from the wrong side of the tracks, from Eastland Street. There should be plenty of the familiar over there,

perhaps something that would bring back my memory. I climbed in a taxi.

I found nothing to help my memory on Eastland Street, only that tantalizing familiarity of the teeming streets, crowded tenement buildings. I walked all the way to the end of the street, where they had torn down a block of buildings and transformed the area into a small park. I was tired from my long, slow walk down Eastland. I sank on a bench, lighting a cigarette and watching squealing kids splash in a wading pool.

A little girl came wobbling down the cement walk on roller skates. She was clutching a doll in the crook of one arm, waving her other frantically to keep her balance. I grinned at her serious efforts.

As she neared my bench, she lost her battle, each skate going in opposite directions at once. She pitched forward full length on the walk.

Rushing to her, I scooped her up and set her on the bench. She was trying hard not to cry. I shook out my handkerchief to wipe the ugly cement-burn on her palm and cheek.

"Thank you so much for helping her! I'll take her to the Park Supervisor to get the skinned places dressed right away."

I looked up. A young woman, small, with aburn hair, hazel eyes and a chin that was nice and firm. She bent to the six-year old tot. "Now, hadn't you better let mommy hold your hand again?"

"But I almost made it, Mommy. Didn't I, mister?"

"A little more practice, with your mommy's hand, and I'm sure you'll skate rings around those other kids."

"Mister," she said candidly, "you broke my dolly."

"Peggy!" her mother said.

I followed Peggy's glance. There was the doll on the walk where my heel had crushed it in my haste to get to her. I picked up the broken toy.

Peggy's chin quivered. "I guess I'll have to have a dolly funeral. She was only learning her ABC's, too."

Over her mother's objections, we three took Peggy's dolly to the park supervisor for repairs. As we left his office, Peggy looked up at me. "Is he like my daddy, Mommy?"

"Peggy, you should never—"

"My daddy's gone away for ever and ever, asleep," Peggy told me gravely.

I shot a glance at the woman walking beside me. Her glance met mine, and there was an old pain and cold anger, a helpless anger she had not learned to accept and live with.

"We'd been married a year," she said quietly. "Bill had a small shop. He refused to pay protection and—" she spread her hands—"the hired hoodlums of a man called Dash Smith shot Bill down inside—inside his shop."

CHAPTER TWO

Mind Over Mayhem

DASH SMITH. Cold inside, I looked at her. But even if Sally Blanchard had ever seen Dash Smith, she wouldn't recognize me now after Dr. Maddigan's surgery had given me a new face.

There wasn't anything to do, but go on trying to be natural with Sally and her daughter. I spent the afternoon with them. I wondered if in my old life, I'd ever known a time as nice.

They lived near the park with an aunt who cared for Peggy while Sally worked. I knew that I was the cause of all their heartbreak. I was behind it, my orders had caused the death of Sally's husband. I had no right even to want to see Sally again. But I knew I did want to, more than anything in the world.

"My name is Green," I lied. "Eddie Green."

What would she say if I told her my name was Dash Smith? I looked at her.

I knew only that the accident had changed this man they called Dash Smith, racketeer. I was already making up my mind to right the terrible wrong I had done Sally and Peggy Blanchard, even if I had no idea of how I could accomplish such a thing.

Sally put out her hand. As I held it, I took off my hat. Peggy said. "You don't have any hair, Mr. Green!"

I felt color seep in my face. "Like your dolly," I said. "I had an accident, too." Until then, I hadn't thought of the hair-line scars on my face, the missing hair.

Sally smiled. "We've had fun, Mr. Green, and you look very distinguished." "Eddie," I said.

"A very real pleasure, Eddie."

She agreed I could come back and I spent the rest of the day thinking about Sally. I made up my mind to look up the records on Bill Blanchard, and find out what I could do—even if it meant bucking the organization.

That night, Marlene came in our Hollywood-set living room all dressed up to go out. I made the excuse of being tired. Marlene said sullenly, "I was cooped up here all day while you were out—"

"Look," I broke in, "go out and have some fun."

"And take a beating when I get in?" she snarled.

I saw the hatred she couldn't quite keep masked in her eyes. And the greed, too, I saw that. Greed for pleasure, excitement, for riches around her. For that she stayed married to Dash Smith.

"I promise—no beating. Because it happens I don't care where you go."

Her eyes went icy. For an instant

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HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH - JUMPY NERVES

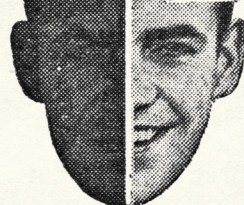
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there was a deadly challenge unspoken between us. Then, with a toss of her hair, she turned, left the room.

Alone in the apartment, I prowled it. Nothing brought back memory. There were no records of Dash Smith's protection rackets.

The buzzing at the door brought me back to the living room. I opened the door. A short, stocky man in a rumpled gray suit let a look of contempt grow on his face as he brushed by me into the living room. He had a heavy, tired face, but his eyes were cold, reflecting strength and purpose.

"Alone, Smith."

"Do I know you?" Something stirred in me, I knew him! But it remained just beyond the rim of consciousness!

"Don't hand me that, wise guy! As Detective-Sergeant Saul Levine, I'm calling officially about the disappearance of Lieutenant Les Quincy. Better you should have fried in that cottage, Smith. Because you've tangled with something too big this time. Always before it's been dirty nightclubs, crooked gambling, protection rackets, and numbers rackets milking the poor. You got a nice new face—you should have stayed hidden behind it, Smith—and run for your life!"

He moved up to me, his eyes so cold they were burning, and jabbed his words at me with a finger in my chest. "You think you've played it smart. Les Quincy was working on you, and disappears, like that!" He snapped his fingers sharply. "But we know you killed him, don't we, Smith? Just as you killed a lot of other guys that got in your way. Did you plant him in the river? Bury him deep someplace?"

"Stop it!" I was shaking all over.

Saul Levine laughed coldly. "You're going soft, Smith! You don't look like yourself, hairless and changed with that new skin. Maybe that fire did something to your insides. Maybe I should run you in and grill the truth out of you—but your crooked lawyer wouldn't let you stay in five minutes, would he?"

Sergeant Levine strode toward the door. "But I'll be back, Smith! I'll be back and when I get you, no lawyer will be crooked or smart enough to get you off!"

When the door had slammed behind the

short, heavy cop, I sank slowly in a chair. Dash Smith, racketeer, murderer. I buried my face in my palms. The skeins of the web were too many, too strong. I must never see Sally Blanchard again. . . .

THE group that gathered in my apartment the next day might have been smooth business men. Strange faces to me, mention of strange places and strange names. I mumbled greetings, shook hands, mentioned I was still woozy from the long hospitalization. As they spoke to each other, I gradually learned to identify the three or four key men.

Tony Morales who spoke of the profits of the Gilded Lily Club. Brian Connell who boasted of the speed with which he could obtain a writ of habeas corpus from old Judge McCloud. Blackie, a little man who mentioned having hired two more out-of-town men on the protection squad. And Felix Varden. He was very much there, speaking in a whisper to Marlene in a corner.

I let Varden do all the talking. It was easy. He enjoyed taking over. He chuckled with understanding when I said, "I'm naturally behind on things. I'll listen until I get up to date."

I listened, sickened to the things these men had been accomplishing in my name. Saul Levine had spoken the truth—and Marlene and Varden were guessing it. Thousands from the numbers. More from the protection rackets of Blackie. A young man beaten when he accused the Gilded Lily of running crooked gambling.

I wondered how long before all of them knew that Dash Smith was going soft. What would happen to me then? It must be mighty lonely at the bottom of the river, your feet in a tub of cement. . . .

When there was a lull, I said directly to Blackie down the table from me: "On this Blanchard killing, Blackie. I want restitution made to the widow. In full. I don't care how you do it."

I heard sharp gasps along the table. Blackie came forward on his chair. "Boss, are you crazy?"

I tried to remain cold. "It'll take the heat off," I said. "That thing never was done right."

"There are easier ways to take the heat off than payin' out money!"

I came up out of that chair and snarled down the table. "Lay off that stuff, Blackie. Whatever you'll do, you'll do when I order it, and not before."

My anger was real enough, because I knew I had said too much. Now, I'd put Sally in danger. If Dash Smith's name still stood for anything, I was going to use it for her protection. My anger had the effect I desired. I could see it in their faces. Even Varden looked a little white, and he sank back in his chair, watching me. I knew he was thinking, the old Dash Smith is back, and he's still on top as boss. . . .

"All right, Boss," Blackie said soothing, "Okay, Dash. What you say goes."

I nodded. I sat there while business was concluded. There was respect in their voices when they filed out. But I was trembling down in my gats. I knew something was going to break and it was going to break fast.

"Coming to the cocktail party?" Marlene said. Varden was waiting, coat across his arm, at the door.

"I've had all of them I can stand for a little while," I said. "You go ahead—with Felix."

I could feel their eyes wondering and uncertain as I turned my back on them and walked to the window. I heard the door close and click locked. I stood looking down at the wide street below.

Standing there, with the last rays of the sun bathing the street below redly, I felt a memory beating against the dark wall of my mind. I clenched my hands, trying to will the memory into my conscious mind. I closed my eyes, and felt sweat break across my forehead. I could sense the memory of a dark alley, feet running, panting of breath. Then the memory was gone.

I sank on a chair, shaken, exhausted. Dr. Maddigan had tried to cheer me up when I left the hospital, but I sensed from his words that he was thinking of amnesia victims that remained that way for years, for life.

I left the apartment. I began to walk along the darkening street, moving without direction, I told myself. I knew I had no right to see Sally. . . .

It must have been the way the black sedan cruised slowly past me that was the

warning. I felt the hackles rising along my neck. I stepped in closer against the wall, and took longer steps. Instinctively, I felt in my pockets. I was unarmed.

I kept moving. I turned a corner. It was Eastland Street. At the end, near the park, was the apartment where Sally lived with her daughter and her aunt. I told myself savagely I wasn't carrying any more horror to them, and I wheeled about on the walk.

At that instant the big car pulled into the curb, and two hoodlums leaped to the sidewalk. As they came in upon me, they tried to conceal their automatics against their sides.

"All right," I said evenly, "who'll be first?" I had backed against the brick wall in the darkness. I had shoved my hand in my topcoat pocket. I was pulling a bluff. But suddenly, with the blood pounding in my veins, I wasn't afraid. I felt nothing for these two gunsels but old contempt—contempt that came from somewhere deep inside me.

They stopped. With the guns in their hands, these hoods stopped. The squat dark one moved a little to the left. I could see they were trying to crowd me, and yet neither wanted to make the first move.

"Now wait a minute, Boss," the slender one said. "We just got a message."

"From Blackie?" I said, watching them still edging toward me.

"Yeah. Yeah." He nodded. "That's it, a message from Blackie. He said—"

His eyes telegraphed his movements. As the gun came up, I leaped for him. I brought the side of my hand down across his wrist. At the same time, I pulled his body between me and his squat friend.

His gun hit the walk as Squatty fired. I felt the impact of the bullet drive Skinny back against me. Shoving his body hard into his companion, I clutched up the fallen automatic and leaped across the walk to the protection of the sedan.

Squatty fired again. I felt my shoulder go on fire, and I spun about and snapped off a shot. I heard the bullet splat against the brick wall, but it took the fight out of Squatty. He moved back against the brick wall, gun level.

I could feel the hot stream of sticky blood under my coat. I moved away, my

head dizzy as I lurched along the darkened street. So they were out to get me. Blackie thought he was big enough now to send hired gunsels to cut down Dash Smith in the street.

My head was spinning. I knew I had to get back to the apartment and call a doctor. I had to get fixed up before I could face Felix Varden again, or even Marlene.

I stumbled into an apartment house, and painfully climbed the stairs. I knocked on the door, but that was all I could do. A black curtain slid down over my eyes and I was out cold.

CHAPTER THREE

Cold-Deck Showdown

I CAME out of it in a clean white bed. I was looking up into Sally's face. "It's all right, Eddie," she was saying. "I called in little Doctor Conway from downstairs. He's a tired little man who has seen a lot of things. He turned in a report you shot yourself in the shoulder while cleaning a gun."

"But we want to know the truth, young man. What really happened?" I looked at Peggy's Aunt Lettie. Small and wrinkled, she wore a vinegary expression, but you learned that expression hid a heart as big as a mellow pumpkin.

I had no idea if I'd been seen entering Sally's apartment. All I could think was I had to get out of there before I caused her any more trouble.

But at the moment, I had no choice. I was too weak to move. I could only lie there being cared for by Sally and her aunt, or looking over all Peggy's playthings that she brought in to cheer me up.

I felt like I was resting on a keg of lighted dynamite. I made up my mind to tell Sally the truth about who I was. But the longer I stayed there, being cared for and loved as Eddie Green, it made telling the simple truth more impossible.

The second day, while Sally was at work, I slipped out of the apartment. I grabbed a taxi and went to Dr. Maddigan. He wasn't hopeful about my lack of memory. He even suggested further treatment. But I had no time now for doctors.

When I left the doctor's office, I was

sure I recognized fat Saul Levine, the detective-sergeant. *So he's tailing me, shadowing me doggedly*, I thought, *probably even knowing that I am staying with Sally and her aunt.*

I caught a taxi and rode to my own apartment. I used my key and when I walked into the front room, Felix and Marlene were there, as casual as though I'd been out for five-minutes stroll. But I didn't miss the quick look of caution that passed between them.

"I've been looking things over," I told them evenly. "I figure now that not many of the boys recognize me, it would be a good time to check up on things."

I saw the color seep from Varden's face. His slate eyes flashed. I smiled grimly to myself. I knew a warning would go out as soon as Varden got away from me.

"There's one other thing," I told Varden. "A couple of Blackie's out-of-town hoods tried to jump me. One of them is dead. If it happens again, Blackie will be one of the dead. Will you tell him that for me, Felix?"

Felix nodded numbly. "I'll tell him, Chief," he said. "But Blackie's in line. There musta been some mix-up."

I just looked at him. His gaze fell away under mine.

"I'm going out for a while," I told Marlene. Then I turned back to Varden. "I don't want to be followed, Felix. I've been pretty nice to you since I got out of the hospital. But get this. If I'm followed, I'll hold you responsible."

He only nodded, without speaking.

As I left the apartment, I knew that Marlene and Felix Varden were hatching some plan. But it wasn't ready yet. Felix was still afraid of Dash Smith, and the plan had to be perfect, fool-proof and final before Felix Varden would touch it. Meantime, he would nod and yes me.

Sergeant Saul Levine, in a taxi, pulled away from the curb as my own cab left it. I knew what I had to do. Whether it lived in my memory or not, my past was catching up with me. Saul Levine trailing me, Blackie daring to make a move, Marlene and Varden watching. I had to tell Sally the truth, and it would be the last time I would ever see her. . . .

I bought some trinkets at a store on

the corner near Sally's place. Dropping them in my pocket, I made a few false trails to throw off anyone who might be trailing me. When I thought it was clear, I hurried up the back way and rang Sally's doorbell.

You'd have thought I was somebody, the reception I got there. Aunt Lettie managed a vinegary smile and hoped I was stronger. Peggy squealed with delight. I tossed her in the air and let her fish inside my coat pockets for the trinkets, a toy wrist watch, a packet of balloons that blew up into funny-looking men.

Only Sally didn't speak. She only smiled at me, and that was enough. It ripped me to pieces inside.

"Come on, Sally," I said. "Get your hat. We're going to an Italian restaurant for supper."

We were half through our meal when Saul Levine came in without even looking at us. He sat alone at a table across the room.

I looked at her. My throat was dry, my palms were sweaty. "There's something I have to tell you, Sally. I can't put it off any longer."

"Tell me," she smiled.

I looked about the place and shook my head. "When we get home," I said. She nodded and patted my hand. I never felt lonelier in my life. . . .

WE ENTERED the darkened front room of her apartment. From the street outside enough light flowed in from corner lamps and neon signs to suffuse the room in a hushed, unearthly glow.

"We'll be real quiet," Sally whispered. "We won't wake Peggy or Aunt Lettie."

"Don't even turn on the lights," I said, catching Sally's arm as she reached for the lamp switch. I wanted the darkness of the room to hide me from my own words. "Sally, there's something I have to say to you."

She turned. The dim, soft oval of her face was very close to mine. "Eddie!" she whispered softly. Her arms were soft about my neck, her lips sweet against my mouth. "I never believed it could happen to me again, Eddie, until I met you!"

She misunderstood! She thought I was asking her to marry me!

I was trembling. My lips felt parched. I was thinking, never tell her! Take her and run. As Levine had said, run for your life! For what life would I have without Sally, no matter how long I lived? But I knew better. I knew it had to be right for Sally. I had to have the courage to make it right, no matter how much it hurt her at first, or what it cost me.

"Sally." My voice was so hoarse I hardly recognized it. "Did you ever see the man who caused your husband to be killed—did you ever see Dash Smith?"

She looked up at me wonderingly, and nodded. "But, Eddie, what has that to do—"

"I'm Dash Smith," I broke in. "Sally, I never meant for it to be like this. I love you, deeply, with all my heart. You've got to believe that."

She spun away, snapped on the lights. The sudden white blinded me. When I could see, her face was a stranger's. I put my hands on her arms. I felt her go taut, move away from me. The way she shrugged away twisted my insides. There were no tears, recriminations, accusations. There was only that stark stillness in her face as she stared at me.

"Sally. . . ."

"Don't speak, Eddie. There's nothing to say."

"You love me, Sally."

"I love a boy named Eddie Green. With all my heart and soul. And with all of me I loathe Dash Smith who wrecked my life. Please. Just go. I've dreamed of killing you. Now I know I can't do that. But I never want to see you again!"

There was nothing left for me to do but turn and go. Woodenly. Like a walking dead man.

* * *

Marlene and Felix were in the apartment when I got back there. They were having a drink together. The gayness in Felix Varden's smile should have warned me.

Varden stood up as I crossed the room. I stood over Marlene. "You like this guy pretty well, don't you?"

"Dash, whatever—"

"I'm not blind! Well, take him! I'm through, understand? Finished."

"There's only one way to quit," Varden said in a cold, dead voice.

I spun. He had slipped a gun from his shoulder holster, was holding it on me.

"The talk of the mob has been Dash Smith going soft," he said. "You were right. I found out tonight. Even Blackie wasn't afraid to step out of line against you. He did try to have you killed. Ever since the fire, the talk has been you're through. Well, that fire saved you then, Smith. I guess you knew that? Yes, I'm sure you suspected. I thought we—Marlene and I—would have to kill you at the first chance when you came from the hospital. But with Smith going soft, I decided to play a wait-and-see game."

"You want control? And Marlene?"

"I want everything," he said simply. "I started in your organization as a numbers runner. I set my eyes on the top. Even before that cottage fire, I was about ready to move in and take over, with key men in the mob seeing things my way. I figured you were beginning to suspect when I discovered you were quietly salting money away in secret before the fire. Well, none of it will do you any good, Smith. You're finished all right. But not the way you mean!"

Under the prodding of his gun, I moved toward the door of the apartment. For the second time, a discovery hit me hard. So hard it almost toppled the blank wall to my memory. With the gun in his hand, Felix Varden was no longer fearful to me. He was just another hood, and for him, I felt only contempt.

I heard him speak to Marlene. "My car is in the alley. When I'm through with this, I'll be back. I never left here tonight, understand?"

Marlene's face was white, her lips like blood. She said, "You can depend on me to alibi you, Felix!"

I guess her one aim in life was always to be sure she picked the winner.

The stairs were long, the alley dark. I saw the hulk of Varden's car before us.

"Here are the keys," he ordered. "You'll unlock the heap."

IT WAS my last chance. I reached for the keys, but caught his wrist instead, spun his body with a snap, my other

hand stabbing for his gun. Lithe and quick, he jumped back, slashed my forehead with his gun barrel. I shouted in hoarse rage, trying to close in on him. My shoulder was on fire from the bullet wound.

But Felix Varden was cautious, too. He was afraid of the noise of gunfire here in the confines of the alley.

He struck me again, and I staggered back. The next blow of the gun barrel across my temple knocked me nearly senseless.

Then I was waking again. Waking with an urgency, with lights blurred and flitting against my closed lids. But there were no lights. My eyes snapped open to darkness, the darkness of the alley. The scrape of feet, the gasping for breath came from two men locked in struggle near me. I pushed my way up the wall. In the dim light of the alley, I saw the shadowy figures sway.

One of them fell. It was Sergeant Saul Levine.

As Varden brought up his gun, I lunged against him. I carried him back hard against his car. I saw his gun coming in a sweeping arc. I threw up my hand to ward it off. Then Levine was moving behind me. Varden groaned and doubled from Levine's blow.

Levine looked at me. "I heard a man shout in here, the sounds of a struggle. I was covering your apartment, Smith. But I don't want any thanks for coming to your rescue."

Through the blinding pain in my head, only one thing was clear, a fact that wrung my throat. I said thankfully, "The name isn't Smith, Sarge. It's Quincy. Lieutenant Les Quincy."

He snorted. "You'll have to think up a better one than that!"

"No," I said quietly. "We'll just go to headquarters and check my fingerprints against those of Les Quincy on the civil service records."

It took some explaining, but when it was over, the boys at headquarters threw a party for me. I'd been hot on some of Dash Smith's rackets. I'd cornered a stoolie who would talk and had gone out to his lake cottage to pick up Smith that night.

But he'd known he'd just about played

out his rope, known too that Marlene and Varden were going to take over his organization.

He'd salted away nearly a hundred grand for a rainy day. And it was raining plenty in his life. He'd slugged me that night as I had approached his lake cottage.

Then and there, he'd seen what he believed a safe and sure way out. Dash Smith would die, and he would be free forever with a hundred grand. Free from the long shadow of the law and the vile shadow of intrigue in his own organization.

It was so simple and logical, a far lesser brain that Smith's could have thought it out. We were the same build, the same coloring. He'd loaded me with his identification, watch, ring, clothes, removing all trace of Lieutenant Les Quincy. He'd seared the prints from my fingers, which accounted for the bad burns I'd suffered, then he'd set the dry, flimsy lake cottage afire, sure that the flames would finish his work.

When the young couple had pulled me out of the burning cottage, no one who knew Smith saw my face until it came through the ordeal of skin grafting, surgery, and from under the heavy pile of bandages.

I had looked different, but they had

expected that, and hairless and changed, I had looked nothing at all like Les Quincy, the lieutenant of the Rackets Squad.

It was a face that belonged to no man. But it belonged to me now, and I was proud of it. I was glad too that memory had been trying to come back, that the doctors said it would have returned in time.

Felix Varden's blows to the head there in the alley had only hastened things, brought memory back at once.

Levine said, "We'll get Smith, Les, and when his organization starts cracking, it'll go like a rotten melon." He smoked thoughtfully a moment. "And Marlene—attempting to pick only winners will end up an also-ran. She'll be lucky to get a job singing her blues in a cheap club after this."

That night I went back to Sally's place. I saw that she had been reading the papers. They were scattered over the couch. We stood a little awkwardly for a moment in the living room. Tears brimmed on her lids, and then a smile broke on her lovely face.

"There is only one question," she said. "Does Lieutenant Les Quincy have a wife?"

I laughed. "He does not. But he will have shortly," I said.

THE END



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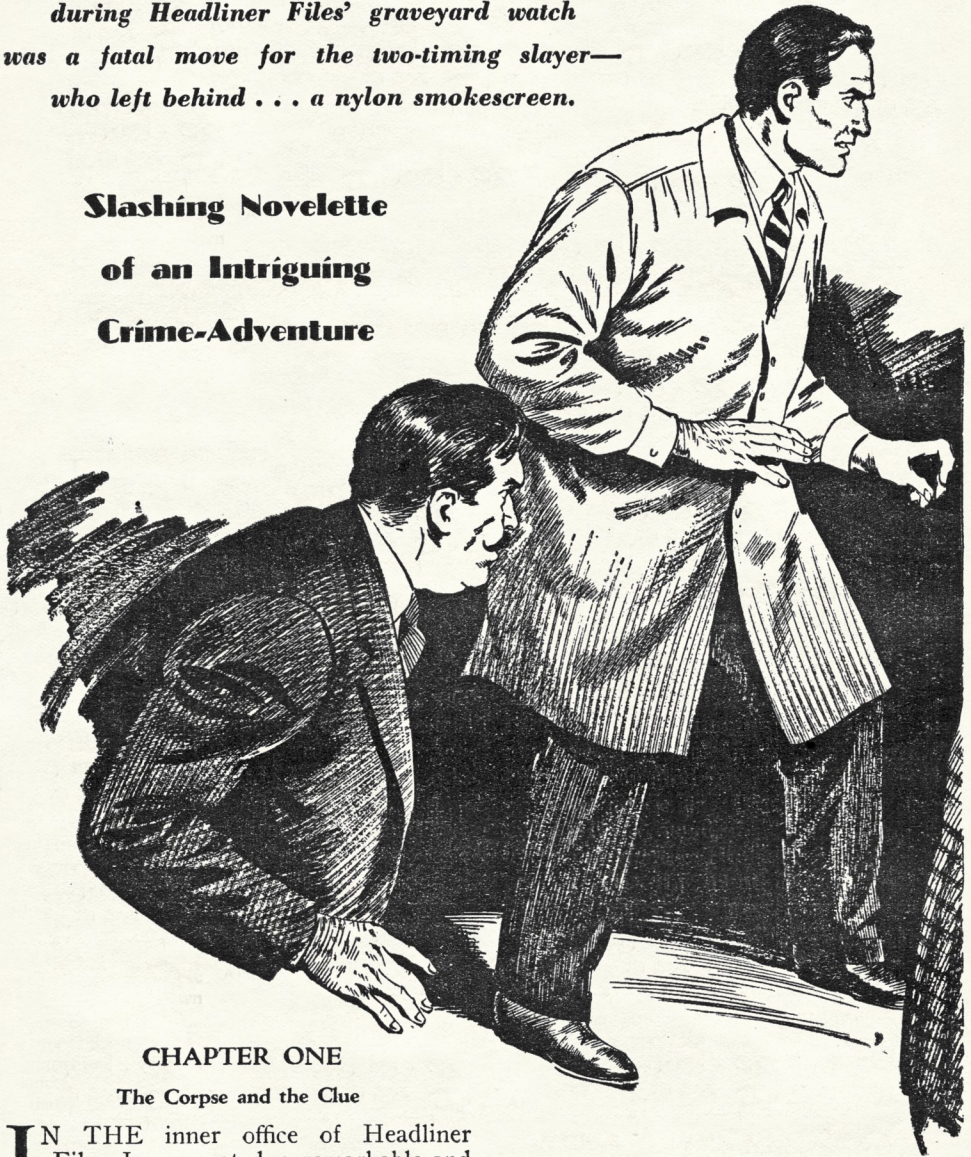
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IF THE NOOSE

The slugging of ex-shamus Thackeray Hackett during Headliner Files' graveyard watch was a fatal move for the two-timing slayer—who left behind . . . a nylon smokescreen.

**Slashing Novelette
of an Intriguing
Crime-Adventure**



CHAPTER ONE

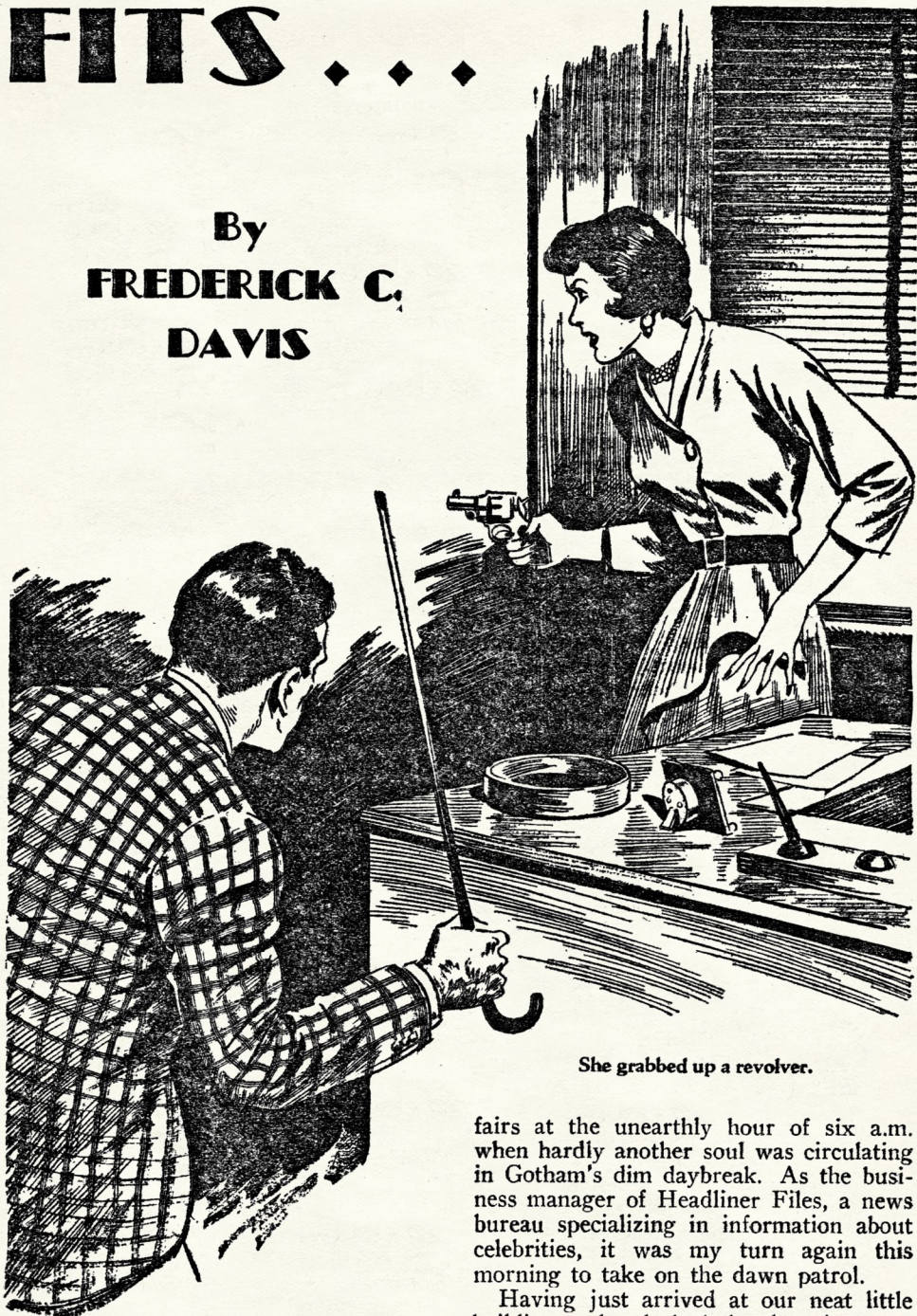
The Corpse and the Clue

IN THE inner office of Headliner Files, Incorporated, a remarkable and terrible thing was happening. One of our twelve telephones was ringing and nobody was answering it.

I discovered this unnatural state of af-

FITS . . .

By
**FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**



She grabbed up a revolver.

fairs at the unearthly hour of six a.m. when hardly another soul was circulating in Gotham's dim daybreak. As the business manager of Headliner Files, a news bureau specializing in information about celebrities, it was my turn again this morning to take on the dawn patrol.

Having just arrived at our neat little building and unlocked the door into our classy waiting room, I could hear the phone bell back in the main office jangling steadily in the quiet, all unnoticed.

"Snap into it, Thack!" I called.

This order was meant for the ears of Thackeray Hackett, a peculiar character employed by us as a researcher. Hackett was supposed to be on duty, having been assigned the graveyard watch from ten p.m. till now. I had come to relieve him.

Hackett didn't answer my shout. The phone went on ringing in an office that felt as deserted as a haunted house. I hustled into it with a darkening frown on my face.

"Headliner Files, Incorporated," I blurted into the instrument. Glancing all around as I spoke, I found no sign of Hackett. "C. Walter Preston speaking. May I help you?"

The voice that answered was not sharp with impatience, as I had reason to expect. Instead it was as smooth as butter, and familiar. It was the courteous voice—the *ominously* courteous voice—of Lieutenant Blackley, the balloon-shaped police detective who headed the commission's own special squad.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Preston. It is always most pleasant to converse with you again." Blackley habitually talked in this slightly stilted way. "I'm sorry to say, however, that I'm calling you on a professional matter which distracts from the pleasure of the moment. In fact it's a rather raw case of murder."

"Anybody I know?" I said.

"The victim I believe is not one of your celebrities, Mr. Preston," Blackley answered soberly. "He is a business man named Sterling, Allen Sterling, from Cleveland, Ohio."

"I'm sure we don't have him on file," I agreed.

"No. But as for the murderess, it has occurred to me that you may be able to help us learn her identity."

"A woman killer?"

"Quite, to judge from the evidence she left on the scene of her crime. It is, I may say, strictly feminine evidence."

"My heart is warmed by the thought of a gal who loves a guy enough to slay him. There are worse ways to die."

Blackley went on in a tone of reproof, "On my part, Mr. Preston, I deplore all murders without exception. They're so—ah—deadly. At any rate I want you to see this evidence. I'm sure it's of such shape as to interest you doubly. Could

you come here to the Hotel Pacific, Room 413, as soon as convenient?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant. I'm on my way right now."

Lieutenant Blackley thanked me and disconnected politely. Not me. I put the phone down with a loud thump, feeling plenty sore at Thackeray Hackett. Blackley's summons was top priority stuff and Thackeray Hackett had chosen a sweet time to fall asleep on the job.

I prowled around the office looking for him. He wasn't in the washroom. He had no office of his own, but he wasn't in mine, where he usually hangs his hat, or in Clarabelle's either. He wasn't anywhere at all.

I GOT busy on the phone and called Polly Digby, our secretary general. Arousing her from a sound sleep, I urged her to hustle down here as fast as possible so as to free me to join Lieut. Blackley and his interesting evidence. I then sat back, gazing at the large photos of the world's most gorgeous girls which adorn our walls and calling Hackett a number of dirty names.

Gradually it dawned on me that I must be misjudging Hackett. It wasn't like him willingly to abandon a post of duty.

Feeling apologetic toward the guy already, I scouted around the office again and this time found Hackett's hat on the hook in my office. I did not find his cane leaning in its accustomed place in the corner—that rapier-thin hickory stick which Hackett was almost never without. The combination of these two facts sent me back to our street door.

The cross-street was still full of murk. It was early December, a snowless winter so far, but there was a raw, icy sting in the air that kept pedestrians indoors and milkmen hustling. As I peered east and west a sound of pain reached me—a groan that pulled me over to the gutter behind a big green mail-box.

Thackeray Hackett lay there squirming in an effort to get himself to his feet. I helped him up. As he steadied himself he gripped his cane in one hand and with the other felt gingerly of the back of his head, where his hair was matted with wet blood.

"Thanks, Pres," he muttered. Then

he fished dizzily into his pants pocket for something which he didn't find. "Key's gone," he groaned, looking thoroughly disgusted with himself.

He pushed clear of me and tottered toward Headliner Files' door. The lock was set on the night latch and I had to use my key to let him in. Still unsteady on his pins, Hackett negotiated a course back to our regiment of file cabinets. He glared at them, trying to find something amiss, then went forward to glare more closely at one of the drawers that had been pulled out about half an inch. The tab on it read: *Far to Fos*.

He pulled it out all the way and frowned over it, but it was so tightly crammed with folders, publicity handouts, news clipping and similar minutia that he was discouraged from delving deeper. He shook his punished head and sank into a chair, still looking exasperated with himself.

"I was suckered, Pres." He was actually apologizing for getting himself conked out in the line of duty. "But I don't know what for."

I went to my desk where I keep a supply of pain-killer on hand and brought him a stiff dose. He sipped it as he frowned all around.

"When you feel up to it, Thack," I said, "tell papa how-come you wound up in the gutter."

After a few more sips of the nerve balm Hackett began to explain. "I was sitting at the desk in your office, Pres. Everything quiet and normal. Then, just outside the street window, a cry. A soft, high-pitched scream. Then the same voice said, 'No, no, Lew, please!'"

"A lady in distress almost at your very elbow," I said.

"Sounded like a struggle," Hackett continued. "I beat it right out to the sidewalk. Didn't see anything at all in the dark. No woman, no attacker, no nothing—so I headed down the block. Just as I passed the big mail-box something whammed me on the back of the skull. It felt like a suitcase full of brick."

"It must've hit you plenty fast if you didn't have time to get your cane going," I said. Having seen Hackett whip that cane about with the swift technique of an expert single-sticker, I knew it to be a weapon of terrifying potentialities. "Must've knocked you out for a while too. Why was somebody laying for you behind that box? Did you billfold get snatched?"

"No, just my key. It was a trick to get in here." Hackett searched my face with his baby blue eyes. "Did you notice that anything was wrong when you came in?"

"Just a phone ringing. It was Blackley. Murder seems to have reared its ugly head over at the Hotel Pacific. An intriguing bit of feminine evidence was left at the scene and Blackley feels we may be able to help him."

Hackett's ears pricked up. "Who got killed?"

"Man I never heard of, Allen Sterling. Supposedly knocked off in very hot blood by an unidentified dame."

THIS answer seemed to disappoint Hackett. Evidently he had expected to see some sort of tie-up between Blackley's call and the illegal entry at Head-



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liner Files; but if there was one it escaped him.

"Polly's on her way here now," I said. "As soon as she takes over I'll go connect with Blackley. You'd better hop a taxi home and put your head to bed."

He gave no sign of having heard me. He was frowning around the office with his brain hard at work inside his beat-up skull. Having learned how tenacious this unfrocked sleuth could be, I knew then and there that when I connected with Blackley at the Pacific, Hackett would be right at my side, frayed cuffs, hickory stick, lacerated scalp and all. . . .

When I knocked, Lieutenant Blackley himself answered. Standing there, practically as wide as the door he had opened, he bowed to me and ignored Hackett.

Blackley parts his gray-black hair in the middle, slicks it down and tops it off with a derby. A heavy gold chain is invariably festooned across his paunch, and his high-top shoes are mirror-bright and his black suit always speckless. His black mustache, although not quite a "handlebar" is luxuriant enough to complete his resemblance to a gentleman officer of the gaslight era.

"Good morning again, Mr. Preston. Please come in, sir."

I stepped in and Hackett stepped in with me. Lieutenant Blackley took no more notice of him than he might take of a stray cockroach. In Blackley's opinion, in fact, private eyes are a lower form of life than the cockroach. Hackett, having been excommunicated from the breed was too low even to classify.

"We have here, Mr. Preston," Blackley went on, "a scene of love and its frequent product, sudden death."

I had noticed the house dick chain-smoking in the hall. Here, inside the murder room, the only other live person was a self-effacing little dick, one of the lieutenant's subordinates on the commissioner's special squad.

The victim lay beside the bed in his shirt-sleeves, very messy. There wasn't much left of his face. The weapon of murder lay beside him—an empty scotch bottle.

"Truly deplorable, Mr. Preston," Blackley said. "He was found by the maid on her regular early rounds. It would

appear that he was left in this condition sometime during last evening by a female visitor."

I glanced around for indications of the visitor's gender, but saw none. There were no rouge-stained cigarette ends in the ash tray.

"The remains are those of Allen Sterling of Cleveland," Blackley went on. "A—"

Hackett put in quietly, "Do men always rent hotel rooms under their real names, lieutenant?"

I frowned at Hackett, feeling that no good could come of needling the lieutenant. Blackley seemed not to have heard. He went on.

"A quick check by long distance phone tells me that Allen Sterling of Cleveland was the owner and manager of a specialty shop there. The shop is in danger of bankruptcy. Sterling came here on frequent buying trips and this time his purpose was to add some new, especially attractive merchandise and services to help improve his business. All that seems to be outside the murder picture. Mr. Sterling's sudden death appears to be less a business than a personal matter."

Hackett, lips wryly twisted, watched intently as Blackley turned ponderously and pointed to something lying partially concealed under the victim's body. This was the evidence he had mentioned to me over the phone.

I now understood why Blackley felt no reasonable doubt of the sex of the dead man's visitor. It was a brassiere.

HACKETT and I bent forward to inspect the evidence more closely. In color it was a soft, pleasing blue. In some of its parts the material was shiny-smooth and in other parts it was a lacy gossamer.

"On the basis of this—ah—garment," Blackley said, "we may reconstruct the murder with a fair degree of certainty. Sterling and his companion evidently drank heavily and worked themselves up to a raging quarrel."

I turned my gaze from the evidence to look hard at Blackley. It struck me that he was omitting many details, but he appeared to be satisfied with his theory as he saw it.

"At any rate," he went on, "the woman

in her fury beat Sterling brutally and fatally—perhaps in self-defense.”

Hackett was listening to this with a wryly amused twisting of his mouth.

I visualized it, appreciating the unusual value of this evidence. It would automatically concentrate our suspicions by eliminating the obviously unqualified suspects.

“We need only to find the woman who belongs inside this circumferential evidence,” Blackley said.

Blackley still stonily ignored him. “I come now, Mr. Preston, to my reason for asking your help. I notice that this specimen is carefully made of quality materials, which suggests a woman of means, possibly one of position, or even fame. Moreover, it bears here, as you can see, an unusual mark—the name Bonny formed in fine stitches of gold thread.”

It did indeed.

“From this,” Blackley continued confidently, “I deduce that the woman we want for murder is one named Bonny who shares an apartment with one or more other women. Perhaps she is a nurse in a hospital or a college student, or perhaps one of a group of young actresses living together for purposes of economy. At any rate it seems reasonable to assume that her name is marked on her clothing in this way as a convenience in laundering.”

Hackett started to say something but a quick frown from me kept him quiet.

“As soon as I saw this, Mr. Preston,” Blackley continued, “it struck me that the logical step to take toward catching our murderer would be to examine your list of celebrities for any who may be named Bonny. If we find one or more, the rest will be simplicity itself. Indeed, we will have a noose ready for her in jig-time.”

Hackett, his sardonic blue eyes fixed on Blackley, chose this moment to laugh to himself. Considering that I had been trying for many months to cultivate Blackley’s good will, it was an ill-advised noise for Hackett to make. Fortunately Blackley persisted in ignoring Hackett.

“Shall we proceed to your office, Mr. Preston?” Blackley suggested.

“Let’s get at it by all means, Lieutenant.”

CHAPTER TWO

What’s Become of Sally?

EVEN before we could get started on the job of searching for Bonny in our files, Hackett began showing dangerous signs of ferment.

On our way back to Headliner Files in Blackley’s official limousine, he twisted his cane about and shot sourly amused glances at Blackley. Several times I discovered him staring hard at me, as if in an effort to transmit a message via thought transference. He acted like a man trying his best to restrain a growing impatience while dealing with a pair of myopic morons.

Inside Headliner Files our staff had just begun a typically hectic day. Our phones were clamoring and our pretty clerks were catching swarms of questions on the fly. There was a constant rumbling like distant thunder as our heavily loaded file drawers were rolled in and out. This was the peculiar nut-house which, in the absence of Clarabelle Brown, who had hustled off to Hollywood to see about enlarging our branch there, it was my task to keep functioning in something resembling an efficient manner.

I conducted Blackley into my office, noticing on the way that Hackett was heading immediately for our library of telephone directories. Blackley had brought along the evidence in his briefcase. He hung the case on my hat-tree before lowering his 255 pounds carefully into my desk chair. I called in Polly Digby, who possesses a gorgeous chassis, a face that would wring a groan from a wooden Indian and a memory so remarkably retentive as to make an elephant seem absent-minded by comparison.

“What we want,” I instructed her, “is a certain woman whose first name is Bonny. Give Lieutenant Blackley a list of all the Bonnys we have on file, plus any others who may occur to you. Among them he hopes to find a murderess.”

A dubious expression settled on Polly’s homely face, but she turned back to our files. While waiting Blackley used my phone for his official purposes.

At the first opportunity I went over and buttonholed Hackett. The phone

book he had looked into was the Manhattan classified directory, and I could not understand how it might be helpful to our present objective. I had almost decided it must be the blow on Hackett's head that was making him seem a little addled this morning.

"Are you holding out on me, Thack?" I asked. "Do you know who that woman is?"

"I can't begin to guess who she could be," Hackett said sourly.

"Then please stop acting so damn itchy. Blackley's beginning to notice you."

"Blackley's having an off day, putting it charitably," Hackett said. "He's wasting his time and our too."

"I don't see how. Seems to me he's off on a hot trail. At any rate, it's not our part to criticize. If he's off on the wrong track, it's no headache of ours."

"Oh, no?" Hackett gingerly felt of the back of his head. "There may be something you've overlooked, Pres. The guy who hit me with the suitcase full of bricks, I mean. He still has my key to this office."

He turned and disappeared among our wilderness of file cabinets, presumably to help Polly and the other girls find Bonny. I also pitched in, hoping for quick results. Presently Polly came over with a look straining her face and reported that Bonnys were proving to be surprisingly scarce.

While we all continued to dig, Blackley emerged from my office and came like a schooner under full sail into the main file section, eager for news.

"No real cause for discouragement, Lieutenant," I said uneasily. "It's just coincidence that we haven't turned up a single Bonny so far."

"Odd," Blackley said.

HIS frown reminded me again that he was a vastly suspicious man. Ever since the founding of Headliner Files he had suspected us of using it as a front for some kind of shakedown racket. Right now he evidently doubted that we were really eager to identify the murderess for him.

"Odd indeed," he commented. "Mr. Preston, in such a case as this, quick action is essential to the apprehension of the culprit. I am forced to rely on your

cooperation, but I must remind you that police work is for the police only."

The quietness of his warning brought a chill. "What do you mean, Lieutenant?"

Blackley looked significantly past me. Hackett was just then appearing from the hallway separating Clarabelle's private office from mine. He was wearing sardonic glint in his eye.

"Simply permit me to remind you, Mr. Preston," Blackley went on in an ominously quiet tone, "that should this apprentice of yours undertake to function as a private investigator without a license—which of course he lacks—he will be committing a criminal offense."

Blackley thereupon sank magestically into the nearest chair. Despite Hackett's scathing opinion of him, he was nobody's fool, this Blackley. He had read the signs of unrest in Hackett and knew as well as I did that they signaled possible complications. His loathing for private dicks made him a bit touchy about it, but undoubtedly he had a point.

"You can count on us for exactly the degree of help you want, Lieutenant," I agreed quickly. "No more and no less." I backed it up by shooting a warning look at Hackett.

Hackett stood there with his lips twisted acridly. Blackley went back to ignoring him. Polly and the girls went on trying to find a needle named Bonny in the mountainous haystack of our files.

I got in there again, diligently helping, under Blackley's watchful, darkening gaze. I concentrated on it so hard that when I looked around again Hackett was gone.

I said quickly, "Excuse me, Lieutenant—important call to make," and on a hunch hurried into Clarabelle's office. A look out the window showed me, sure enough, Hackett on the move. He had quietly slipped out and now he was using his cane to flag a taxi.

I went out after him, fast, by way of Clarabelle's private entrance, but not quite fast enough. The taxi was already carrying Hackett away.

Just when I needed a break Lady Luck smiled—another unengaged taxi came cruising along. Within seconds I was urging the driver not to lose the other cab that was whisking Hackett off on his

secret, illegal, trouble-bound mission.

The race lasted only a few blocks. It ended on Fifty-Seventh Street, that rich and glamorous street of internationally famous jewelers and couturières where, it is said, people who don't need anything pay exorbitant prices for things they didn't know they wanted. By the time my taxi bounced to a stop behind Hackett's he had hustled into a classy little building of snow-white stone, and when I hurried into the lobby after him he had already disappeared inside the elevator.

I hustled up the stairway that spiraled around the elevator shaft. In such elegant establishments as this the elevators ascend with aristocratic deliberation and I was able to keep up with this one. I arrived breathless at the four-floor landing just as the car stopped and Hackett stepped out.

"Hold it, Thack!" I said, gulping air. "You heard Blackley. Whatever you're up to—this is as far as—you're going."

Hackett smiled his wry smile. He pointed to a door. I turned and stared at it. The golden lettering on the white pane read: *Bonny—Custom-Molded Foundations.*

It was like a great light flashing on in my mind.

Of course the foundations referred to here were not the kind that buildings are built on.

I could begin to understand Hackett's annoyance with us.

"It's hard to believe that a presumably adult male can be as naive as Blackley has shown himself to be, Pres," he said. "The name on that bra isn't the owner's, of course, but the maker's. Bonny is well

known as leader in this special field."

Hackett might be right, but the designer's name didn't rate a folder in Headliner Files. I still felt that Blackley's error was entirely understandable. I also felt chagrined, though, and too short of breath to stop Hackett's next move. Before I could grab him he had opened Bonny's door and was walking in.

I WENT in after him with the intention of pulling him right out again. Once inside, I paused to look around Bonny's reception room. In its special way it was fascinating.

In the walls were a series of little alcoves each resembling the corner of a dainty boudoir, half-concealed by filmy curtains, and in each of these a mannikin, life-size and enchantingly lifelike, was wearing one of Bonny's curvaceous products. Between these charming tableaux were large, misty photographs of real live lovelies snugly encased in more of Bonny's trade mark was a duplicate of the name stitched in gold thread which Blackley had misconstrued on the evidence. Instead of using an ordinary tag with the name woven in by machine, Bonny signed each creation individually, like a work of art.

While I studied this room a woman appeared from an inner doorway. She was obviously a fine example of what Bonny could achieve. As for the inner woman, she carried a watch-your-step glint in her dark eyes. By nature she was peppery stuff, I judged—very tasty but also petulant, proud and tough to handle.

"Good morning," Hackett greeted her. "We're from Headliner Files. We've had

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a request for certain information that you can give us. Are you Bonny?"

She laughed deep in her throat, and, I thought, a trifle bitterly. "Oh, no, I'm not Bonny. I'm Mrs. Dayn, in charge of the business office. If you'd like to meet Bonny, come with me."

She beckoned us through portieres into a richly carpeted hallway. We next entered a large room like an artist's studio lavishly decorated in the best modern manner. In the center of it a tall, thin, poetic-looking man wearing a white silk smock was standing at an easel. He was sketching with a charcoal stick on a fresh sheet of illustrator's board.

"Here you are," the sultry brunette said. "This is Bonny."

We stared at him and he gazed back at us in a subtly challenging way.

"My husband, Paul Dayn, whose professional name is Bonny," our escort added. To him she explained further, "These gentlemen need certain information for Headliner Files, darling. I'm sure you won't mind—darling."

I sensed that Mrs. Paul Dayn felt a certain contempt for her husband's choice of vocation. Also she was very probably jealous. A scrappy glance passed between them as she turned on one high heel and walked out of the studio with a graceful swaying of her well-sheathed hips.

This left us alone with Bonny, to whom I was having a little difficulty adjusting myself.

"Well?"

He eyed us. No doubt having heard and suffered a thousand ornery cracks about himself, he was cringing inwardly in anticipation of another. He beat us to the punch.

He turned and opened a door. In the next room stood scores of female forms on pedestals, each a three-dimensional reproduction of a living torso. Each bore the name of the customer it duplicated. In the front ranks of this astounding collection I spotted the names of a top-bracket movie cutie, a famous career woman and the wife of our Ambassador to Somewhere.

"These," Paul Dayn explained, "are molded directly on the client's figure by my wife. Then I custom-fashion the under-costume on the plastic form."

"I imagine each client presents special problems?" I said.

"Quite."

"I don't understand how Headliner Files ever overlooked you," I said.

"Please!" Dayn said quickly. "I must be very careful of my publicity. Unless women know they can trust me with their little secrets, they will not come." Smiling, he closed the door. "You need certain information, Mona said?"

Hackett's response to the question threw a chill into me. He reached inside his coat and pulled out a brassière. It appeared as a flow of glistening blue and it hovered in the air like a shining cloud as he dangled it from thumb and forefinger—Blackley's evidence!

CHAPTER THREE

The Color of Murder

I STARED at it and felt panic. This thing that Hackett had done might prove disastrous. He had snatched the evidence from Blackley's briefcase. As soon as Blackley learned of this he would have no trouble at all nailing Hackett on at least eight or ten criminal charges.

That bra was pure dynamite. I watched Dayn examine it with a paternal sort of affection.

"You wish to know to whom this brassière belongs?" he inquired.

"That's exactly it," Hackett said. "You ought to be able to tell us the name of the woman you made it for."

Paul Dayn shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. This I cannot do. To embarrass a client by betraying her confidence—"

"You'll embarrass yourself worse by not doing it," Hackett told him. "If you don't tell us, then we'll have to turn it over to the cops. You want your customers to find the joint full of flatfeet? Want your name mixed up in a criminal case in all the papers?"

Dayn frowned delicately and stroked the bridge of his nose with a fingertip. Appearing to decide, he took the bra from Hackett for a closer look. His eyes lighted; he seemed to recognize it. For a few moments he busied himself with a tape measure, then he turned to a small

file cabinet. From it he plucked a card. Certain notations on it caused him to nod emphatically.

"So, gentlemen! I would rather not tell you this. But if justice demands it I have no choice. Besides, I must say, this woman—after all, it is not too surprising for one of her kind to get into trouble. She is Sally Florell."

"Sally Florell," I echoed. "The stripper?"

"She does her act with a flaming torch and calls herself a revelationist," Dayn said. "This one I made for her is not for use on the stage, of course."

"Well enough," Hackett said. "What's her address?"

Dayn read her address from the file card—one on the West Side, handy to the strip-tease zone on Fifty-Second. Hackett took the evidence back, rolled it and stuffed it inside his coat. We thanked Dayn and hurried from the studio.

Hackett was already starting down the stairs. I caught up with him in the lobby, grasped his arm and stopped him.

"There's only one move we can sensibly make now, Thack. Back to Headliner Files. We've got to get that evidence back into Blackley's briefcase before he discovers it's missing—if he hasn't already."

"Sally Florell's apartment is only a few blocks from here," Hackett reminded me.

"You're doing exactly what Blackley warned you against. You're begging him to hit you with every statute in the books. It'll smear Headliner Files and break Clarabelle's heart."

"Look at the other side of it, Pres," Hackett answered. "One of the biggest wheels in the New York City Police Department is relying on us for help. We can't give it to him in the regular way because we don't have it on file. It would be bad business to let him down, so—"

"Now that we've done our field work for him, we're hustling right back to the office," I put in. "We'll tell Blackley where to find his Bonny and the rest will be up to him."

A peculiar penetrating shine came into Hackett's eyes as he answered, "Headliner Files is mixed up in this homicide deeper than we realize, Pres. It started

when somebody slugged me as a way of sneaking into our office. We found one of our file drawers molested—the one tagged *Far to Fos*. Well, the name of Blackley's prime murder suspect—Sally Florell—belongs in that very drawer."

So it did.

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," Hackett added, "or maybe somebody's getting us fouled up in something that's really cute."

The tie-up stopped me. It even reminded me of another angle.

"You went out and got slugged because you'd heard a woman's voice outside the window. Decoy. Could've been Sally Florell herself."

Hackett nodded. "Before turning her name over to Blackley we'd better find out, if we can, just what kind of a fast one has been pulled on us. We'd be chumps not to protect ourselves the best way we can."

Not waiting for any further argument, Hackett hustled off. I strode along, half persuaded. Blackley probably was already waiting for us with a fistful of warrants anyway.

So I hustled around corners at Hackett's side and wound up at a door in a brownstone front not far east of Fifth Avenue. It was the private entrance of a ground-floor apartment, and a card tacked above the bell-button bore the engraved name of Sally Florell.

Hackett thumbed the button twice without getting an answer. He turned the knob. His eyebrows went up a notch. He pushed the door open and called, "Miss Flor-rell!" There still wasn't any response, so we went in.

She wasn't in the living room or in the bedroom or in the kitchenette. We found her in the bathroom.

On the white tile wall, slashed on with thick red strokes of a lipstick, were the words: *I loved you too much, Lew, dearest. Sally.*

She was wearing a loose robe of red silk. Her small bare feet dangled six inches off the floor and her lovely red head was bent sharply over one shoulder. She was hanging from the chromium rod of the shower curtain. The thing knotted tightly around the rod and tightly around her neck too was a shiny black bra.

FOR a long, cold moment we stared at Sally Florell hanging there. Her pretty face, formerly so serenely sweet, was ugly now, bloated and frog-eyed. I was stunned to think that a young woman with so lusciously much to offer had withdrawn it from exhibition so soon.

I recoiled from the bath while Hackett stepped closer for a better look at the black bra. Then, having found the same golden signature that we had learned to know, he came out after me, looking grim.

"She loved Lew too much," he said. "Lew—the same name I heard outside your office window, Pres, just before I went out and got slugged."

"Never mind it now, Thack."

"But it raises an important question—who's Lew?"

I felt the question could well be left until later in the day.

"Lord, Thack, this really cooks us. We scouted out after Blackley's murderess and turned her up a suicide. We'll have ourselves one sweet time convincing Blackley we weren't really investigating anything when we did it."

Hackett stepped into the dead stripper's bedroom.

"The other way," I urged him. "Out. We can't get back to the office fast enough now."

Hackett began poking into drawers. He paused over the second. The wistful expression that crossed his face drew me to his side. Together we gazed at the items he had come upon. Although few in number they evidently comprised Sally's professional wardrobe.

"Thack—"

I pulled at him but he resisted and opened the next drawer. Its contents belonged to Sally's off-stage life. Here were more of Bonny's products, each signed in gold by its creator. Hackett began fishing them up in an astonishing variety of colors. The blue one found under the corpse in the Hotel Pacific was more conservative than any of these. Included in this collection was one in chartreuse, another in burgundy, others in apricot, jade and cerise.

"Come on, Thack," I said.

This time I succeeded in drawing him away. As we crossed the living room he glanced sharply all around. At the door

he halted as if with a sudden thought.

"Go ahead, Pres," he said quickly. "Wait for me outside. I'll be right with you."

It was a relief to get myself on the innocent side of Sally's door. I had waited there on the sidewalk less than thirty seconds when Hackett sidled out. He shook his head, signifying something uncertain, then wagged his cane at a passing cab.

When we were inside the taxi, heading for Headliner Files, I found a better grip on myself. "If Blackley's waiting to crack down on us, we'll just have to take it, Thack. We're certainly guilty of doing exactly the thing he warned us not to do. On the other hand, I don't intend to volunteer any information beyond the fact that we have picked up the name of the woman who fits his evidence. Just her name. Blackley will have to go over there and find her dead for himself." I added, "I don't like to think of her hanging there like that, all alone, though."

"She doesn't mind," Hackett said. "She'll be found before long, probably as soon as her maid comes in." He thoughtfully tapped his pencil-thin cane. "It's a fairly easy guess what Blackley's theory will be."

"Suicide, of course. First Sally goes over to the Pacific for a drinking bout with Sterling. They break into a furious wrangle which ends with her beating his brains out. She then goes back home and in a fit of remorse hangs herself."

Hackett nodded. "And thereby winds up the case for Blackley too, very conveniently for him."

Disturbed a little by Hackett's tone of voice, I went on, "It shows that love is indeed a very strange thing. Sally was lovely, famous, making good dough in a career she enjoyed. She was surrounded by adoring men, or at least by drooling wolves. She could have practically any guy she might choose—the handsomest, the richest, the most devoted. Yet as it works out she knocks herself off over the small-time proprietor of a shaky specialty shop in Cleveland. Does it make sense?"

"No," said Hackett.

That odd quality in his voice worried me, but there was no chance to question him because our taxi stopped at that mo-

ment right in front of Headliner Files.

We went in quietly. Telephones were ringing in their normal ceaseless way. Beyond the counter we glimpsed Lieutenant Blackley still seated facing the file cabinets. We shifted aside into Clara-belle's office and crossed into the hallway. On the hat-tree in my office Blackley's briefcase was still hanging.

"Get that evidence back in there fast!" I whispered into Hackett's ear. "And pray!"

HE NODDED and reached for the leather case as I went on. Blackley was still seated, all 255 pounds of him, in the same chair at the same desk as when I had last seen him. Was it possible that Blackley had remained there all this while? I moved in to sound out the situation.

"Sorry to be so long, Lieutenant. That was Clarabelle on the phone, calling from Hollywood. Charming woman, Lieutenant, if a little long-winded at times. And how are we making out here?"

Blackley gazed at me, unnervingly poker-faced. "Your apprentice had also been talking at length to Miss Brown on the phone?"

"Oh, no, Lieutenant. Hackett went out on a small errand. I think he's back now. Well, how is your crop of Bonnys?"

Blackley continued to sit there like an all-knowing, imperturbable Buddha as Polly came over to make a report.

"We've found two Bonnys, Mr. Preston," she informed me in harrassed tones, "but one is a figure-skater in Switzerland and the other is a Scottish actress who's never been in this country. The lieutenant

says neither of them is the right Bonny for him."

"That exhausts our files, does it, Polly?"

"Yes, *sir*?" Polly said emphatically. "It exhausts me too."

"Well, then, Lieutenant—"

Blackley was gazing past me. I turned to see Hackett appearing from the hallway. He idly swung his cane and again he had in his eyes that dangerous sardonic gleam. Blackley said nothing—said nothing in a way that caused me to swallow a hard lump of uncertainty. This silent clash went on for several moments and then Blackley turned to speak levelly to me.

"I will now take up the Bonny lead in my own manner, Mr. Preston," he said. "You may be interested to hear that while you were so busy talking to Miss Brown on the phone, a new development occurred."

I looked hard at him and played it along. "Progress, I hope, Lieutenant?"

"To be sure. The fingerprints of the murder victim have been checked. They reveal that his name is not Allen Sterling at all. His real name was Lewis Arcomb."

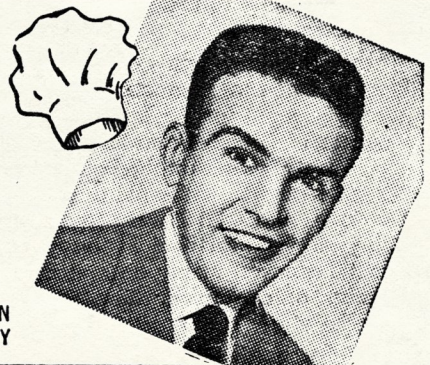
Lewis Arcomb—Lew! The gleam in Hackett's eyes flashed brighter and an electrical tingle chased along my nerves. I heard myself saying with amazing indifference, "Oh?"

"Lewis Arcomb had a prison record," Blackley continued evenly. "In fact, he was an escaped convict. Some eighteen years ago he and two other prisoners tunnelled out of Eastern State Pen in Philadelphia. One of the others, Joseph Gice by name, was killed a few weeks

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thereafter in a shooting brawl. The other, Peter Lilling, has remained unaccounted for. Lewis Arcomb adopted the false name of Allen Sterling and attempted to make a comeback in a legitimate business. I have made phone calls to his friends and associates in Cleveland and they tell me that none of them knew about his criminal background. All this may mean something, Mr. Preston, but more probably not."

"How so?"

"There is no indication so far that the woman who killed Arcomb alias Sterling had any connection with his criminal past. I'm inclined to believe the murder was just what it appears to be, and would have occurred in precisely the same way had Arcomb-Sterling never seen the inside of a prison cell. However that may actually be, my task is still to find the woman."

He rose ponderously. For me it was a moment of teeter-tottering indecision. This was a point at which I might tip Blackley off to the real identity of Bonny. On the other hand, to tell Blackley now would let us in for trouble at just the time when we appeared to be getting away with it. Besides, as Hackett had said, the discovery of Sally Florell's dead body would come at any minute now and her collection of bras would reveal the tie-up clearly enough. Altogether, the temptation to stay clammed up was too strong to resist.

"That's all, then—for now, Mr. Preston," Blackley said with ominous quiet. "You may hear from me again shortly. Good-day sir."

He cruised past Hackett like a triple-stack steamer past a canoe. We watched him in a silence of foreboding as he steered himself out without a backward glance.

Once Blackley was gone Hackett and I each made a characteristic move. I headed straight for the little bar built into a corner of Clarabelle's office and poured myself a stiff drink on the house. Hackett headed straight for the file drawer tabbed *Far* to *Fos*. When I went into my office feeling slightly fortified against dire fate, I found Hackett at my desk studying the contents of our folder devoted to Sally Florell.

"We've hardly any more on her here

than she usually wore on the job," Hackett informed me. "She was born in St. Joseph, Mo., went to school there, got her first job in a burlesque road show, and so on. If the guy who slugged me added anything to this folder, or took anything out of it, there's no way of telling now. None of the information here seems to have any bearing." He looked up. "One sad detail—she was only twenty-two, but a rather grown-up girl for her age."

He then did something that made me feel a sudden gripping need for another drink. He reached inside his coat and in the same way as before pulled out a bra. There followed in rapid succession the cerise, the burgundy, the chartreuse, the jade and the apricot.

I had persuaded Hackett to return one bit of stolen evidence at a time when, unknown to me, he had already filched many more—a whole collection of them. What he expected to learn from them I didn't try to guess. At that point I despaired of the whole lunatic affair and stood back in numb resignation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Comes Double

FEELING that a change of scene would be beneficial, I was absent from the office for an hour or so. That is, I shifted the scene from Clarabelle's ladylike bar to a man-size taproom around the corner. When I returned, feeling very little happier about the future, I was greeted by wild wigwag signals from Polly signifying an important message on the phone. I caught the call at the nearest desk.

"Mr. Preston." It was Lieutenant Blackley again, so smoothly courteous as to sober me in a flash. "Our homicide case has now reached a crucial stage. You're still willing to cooperate with me, I presume?"

"More than ever before, Lieutenant."

Blackley answered that with a moment of ominous silence before going on, "Do you have in your file, Mr. Preston, information concerning one Leon Johns?"

"Leon Johns the M.C.?" Johns was a comer in his own special field of comedy—the subtle kind that gets lost on a coast-

to-coast hookup but at close range in night clubs really kills the customers. "Certainly, Lieutenant. Anything you may wish to know about young Mr. Johns, I'll be only too glad—"

Blackley interrupted in his buttery tones, "I must examine all the material you have on him, Mr. Preston. Here, if you please, at the Seventeenth Precinct Station, as early as possible." And he added, "Please instruct that apprentice of yours to bring it directly to me."

With that startling request the lieutenant broke the connection. It could mean only one thing—he was getting set to crack down.

Immediately I fished up the file folder tabbed with the name of Leon Johns. Next I went in search of Hackett and found him still where I had last seen him, poring over the garments he had shamelessly stolen from the dead peeler.

Apparently Hackett had also been out and had just gotten back. His hat was still on his head and his cane was leaning against the desk. He was busy stuffing bras into a large envelope—one imprinted with our firm's name.

I placed the Johns folder on the desk in front of him. "Blackley wants you to take this over to him at the Fifty-First Street precinct station pronto."

Hackett frowned at me. "Why?"

"If you mean why does he want the dope on Leon Johns, I wouldn't know. If you mean why does he want it delivered by you, I think he wants you handy for putting in the pokey."

Hackett narrowed his eyes. "That's like him—more interested in nailing me on harmless technicalities than in finding a murderer."

"The murderer in this case has already been found, hanging by the neck. Remember?"

Hackett made an impatient noise. "If Blackley imagines that that's the answer to this case his head is full of Swiss cheese. Sally didn't hang herself."

I stared at him. "What makes you think she didn't?"

If Hackett heard me he wasn't ready to answer just yet. He straightened and walked out the street door. A moment later he was striding down Park Avenue. I was still with him.

"What makes you think Sally didn't hang herself?" I repeated.

"When a pretty woman kills herself she is almost certain to do it in a way that won't mar her good looks. She wants to go on being pretty after she's dead. That's why she avoids guns, daggers, and razors at the throat, and almost invariably prefers poison."

I remembered several Hollywood lovelies to back up Hackett's point; they had done it with sleeping pills. As for Sally specifically, my first thought had been that for this chick to kill herself over a guy simply didn't make sense when there was a long line waiting eagerly on the right.

"That message scrawled on the bathroom wall in lipstick," Hackett added, "could easily be a phony. It was done in loose, slashing strokes. There's no way of proving that Sally did or didn't write it herself. I think it was a plant."

"You mean somebody came in, knocked Sally out somehow, then hung her up there and scrawled that phony message? Is that a guess or can you back it up?"

"The whole picture's cockeyed, Pres," Hackett insisted. "For example, the time element's all off. It was a little before six o'clock this morning when I heard the voice in the street outside Headliner Files saying, 'No, no, Lew!' That cry seems to be part of a night of hard-drinking strife between Sally and Lew. But it couldn't have been Sally saying that. At that point she was already dead. And so was Lew Arcomb."

It hit me in a shower of sparks.

"So Sally didn't kill Lew and then commit suicide," Hackett said. "Lew was killed by someone else who next killed Sally and rigged it to make her look guilty. It may turn out that Lew and Sally didn't even know each other."

IT WAS coming at me pretty fast but I let Hackett hustle on with it uninterrupted. "Blackley said Arcomb broke out of prison in Philadelphia eighteen years ago. At that time Sally was four years old, back in St. Joe, Mo. She stayed there, went on through school. So when and where did Sally and Lew meet, if they ever did?"

"It could have been in Cleveland when

Sally, was stripping for a road show. Or it could have been here in New York during one of Lew's buying trips."

"But at either of those times he was living under the firmly established identity of Allen Sterling. If Sally knew him at all, she would know him as Allen."

"And even if in some way she had learned his real name she certainly wouldn't have called him by it so freely," I said, feeling that things had a way of seeming wonderfully simple after Hackett had explained them.

"So this business of using Lew's real name was a trick." Hackett said. "Part of the build-up of a phony murder picture."

"And all this ties in with the way you got slugged down?"

Hackett nodded. "The real killer knew about Headliner Files—knew that we would be called on for information about Sally. He had to get a look at her file, secretly, before she was found dead. The idea most probably was to pull out any tie-ups between Sally and the real killer, and also anything that might show up the falseness of the murder picture that was being rigged."

"I'll be damned," I said. "There was one little dangerous detail that the real killer had to leave there. It couldn't be gotten rid of because it's on record in other places too. Sally's age."

He smiled. "So, as I said a couple of blocks back, if Blackley still imagines that this is a case of murder and suicide, he is going to take a hard fall right on his fat face—and I am human enough to admit I'll enjoy watching him do it."

We had now arrived at the entrance of the precinct station. It seemed to be a busy place. Several official cars and taxies were parked at the curb and a group of plainclothes men were in a huddle nearby. Inside the station house were more dicks who stopped talking and eyed us. A uniformed sergeant intercepted us and led us down a hallway to a door. It was a drab, austere place and it did not grow more pleasant for us to find Lieutenant Blackley on the other side of the door, waiting for us.

Hackett entered with a jaunty swing of his stick. Unlike a man going to his doom, he seemed actually to welcome this encounter. Blackley went so far as to look

at him. The lieutenant's face remained sober under its well-scrubbed shine and I felt certain now that the worst had caught up with us.

"How do you do, Lieutenant," Hackett said genially, placing the Johns folder before him. "It's strictly against our office rules to remove any of our filed material from the premises but in your case we're happy to stretch a point."

Blackley did not glance at the folder. Seeming disinclined to stretch a point in return, he turned his dark gaze on me.

"Mr. Preston," he began with deceptive calmness, "are you able to confirm my understanding that Leon Johns was the latest flame, as they say, of Miss Sally Florell?"

So. It was now officially known that Sally had stripped her last. Blackley had moved in rapidly—so rapidly, in fact, that even Hackett was disconcerted. He frowned and focused his whole attention on Blackley in that tenacious, searching way of his.

"You want to know what's between Leon Johns and Sally Florell?" I repeated quickly. "That sort of chaff is strictly for gossip columnists, Lieutenant. We don't file the romantic fevers and chills that sweep up and down the main stem. There are too many and they usually change too fast."

Blackley tapped the folder with a plumb finger. "Be that as it may, Mr. Preston, can you, unofficially then, confirm my information to the effect that Sally Florell and Leon Johns have been carrying mutual torches?"

"I seem to have heard somewhere that Sally had been carrying a torch for some married man or other, but I really couldn't say for sure, Lieutenant."

"Ah." He sounded regretful. "I was rather afraid you might prefer to keep those details to yourselves. You will regret it, Mr. Preston."

"Lieutenant Blackley! On my word of honor—"

He had risen like a blimp taking off and had turned his back. Hackett watched him with face set, realizing that this time Blackley meant to give us the business. The lieutenant opened a connecting door and gestured with a fat, well-manicured hand that we were to follow.

IN THE adjoining office sat a young man named Leon Johns who looked no happier than we felt. His well-known, handsome face was drawn into an expression of anxiety. His red-shot eyes indicated a hard night and a lousy hang-over. I felt sorry for him. He sat slumped in an unomfortable straight-backed chair and kept his aching eyes fixed apprehensively on the massive Blackley.

"What I am about to tell you, Mr. Preston," Blackley began, "may convince you that I am not quite the fool you and your apprentice believe me to be. It will at least persuade you that you will have no future use for any information you may attempt to withhold from me. . . . Please, Mr. Preston, no interruptions."

I stared in silence. A sideward glance showed me that Hackett was beginning to worry. Blackley continued in a manner of deadly self-confidence.

"If it is actually news to you, Mr. Preston, you may add to your fund of information concerning Mr. Johns the fact that for some months he has been in ardent pursuit, shall we say, of Sally Florell. Although she liked him well enough, her affection for him did not equal his for her. On this basis I can now make a realistic revision in my theory of the murder of Lewis Arcomb alias Allen Sterling."

"Realistic, hell," Johns said suddenly. "This guy's full of soup."

Ignoring him, Blackley continued, "This, then, is what actually happened. Mr. Johns, extremely jealous of Miss Florell, had been trailing her around. He fed the fires of his jealousy by watching her meeting another man, dining, dancing and drinking with him. I haven't yet made certain of the identity of this man with whom Miss Florell was so much in love, but evidently he was Arcomb. It is enough to know that she was deeply interested in another man and that Mr. Johns was eating his heart out over her."

Blackley continued ponderously, "Last night Mr. Johns trailed Miss Florell when she went to the Hotel Pacific to join Lew Arcomb in his room. Mr. Johns was seen in the bar there, drinking heavily, watching the elevators and waiting for Miss Florell to come down. The hour grew very late and still Miss Florell did not

appear. Mr. Johns left the bar in a surly mood around midnight. I have found no witnesses to his actions immediately following that time, and he, on his part, has no alibi for the rest of the night. However, it is easy to imagine him going up to Arcomb's room and strong-arming his way in.

"Mr. Johns attacked and killed Arcomb in a drunken rage. Miss Florell, naturally terrified, fled the room as quickly as possible. She rushed to her own apartment and Mr. Johns, still possessed with drunken jealousy, followed her there. He choked her to death and then attempted to make it appear that she had hung herself in remorse after having killed Arcomb. However, that false picture failed to deceive me. Instead, I soon found an eye-witness—the janitor of Miss Florell's apartment—who swears he saw Mr. Johns leaving Miss Florell's apartment in fearful haste at an early hour this morning."

There it was, then. To me it sounded open and shut. It had also impressed Hackett. His face was pale and set. I told myself regretfully that if Hackett had had any hopes of outfoxing Blackley this trip, they were wrecked now. Blackley had arrived at the answer well ahead of him.

Leon Johns stood up suddenly and said, "Now I'll tell it. I never heard of this guy Arcomb, never saw him dead or alive. Last night I was drinking, sure. I'd just lost my job. I was broke, needed dough. When I sat there in that bar, keeping an eye on the elevators, I wasn't watching for Sally. I wanted to connect with a friend who owes me money." He added disgustedly, "He was out of town last night, but I didn't know that."

Having no time for denials, Blackley had turned to the door. In earnest tones Johns continued to defend himself to us.

"After I left the Pacific I spent most of the night dragging bars, looking for a soft touch. Finally I decided to ask Sally. Her front door was unlocked—thought it was an oversight, so I went in. Then—in the bath—" Johns swallowed twice. His red-shot eyes appealed to us for belief. "Naturally I blew out of there fast!"

All this could very well be, but I

wouldn't give a dime for his chances against Blackley's solid case.

In the hallway Blackley beckoned to an harrassed-looking young man, evidently an assistant on the D.A.'s staff. "You may prepare a statement for the press to the effect that Leon Johns will be charged with the first degree homicides of both Lewis Arcomb and Sally Florell. I will release it for publication as soon as I return. First I must dispose of a matter involving the erring ways of the Messrs. Preston and Hackett."

The look he gave us over his shoulder was like a touch of doom. This was it, all right. Blackley had been calmly paying out rope to us and now he was ready to pull the noose tight.

Blackley turned to us. "You are both free to go—but of course not too far. I suggest you wait for me at your office. I will take you into custody there as soon as I have completed collecting the evidence against you."

A fearful darkness had settled on Hackett's face. He went doggedly after Blackley, the plump envelopes still under one arm, his cane in his other hand. When I reached the sidewalk close behind Hackett, Blackley had stopped to confer with two dicks and two other men who were the drivers of two taxies parked at the curb. Blackley received from them two long, narrow cards that had lists written on them in lead pencil. He looked up at us gravely.

"In taking his illegal actions this morning, Mr. Preston, your wayward apprentice overlooked the fact that in New York City all taxi trips are made a matter of record. Each time a driver picks up a passenger he is required to enter the origin and the destination on his daily trip card. You are realizing, I see—a little late—that I had no need to follow you this morning. Instead, I called on my assistants to single out the hack-drivers you hired—the first for a journey from Headliner Files to a certain interesting address on Fifty-Seventh Street, and the second from Sally Florell's address back to Headliner Files."

Blackley stepped like a graceful mastodon into his official car. We stood still, staring after it as it cruised off with him, realizing now why he had seemed so

super-confident of results. Having pulled a murderer from his derby, he was about to round out a big day's work by nailing Hackett and Preston also. When he came back he would undoubtedly bring all the evidence he would need to polish us off fast.

CHAPTER FIVE

Noose to Order

AMONG the group on the sidewalk were several semi-dishevelled characters who looked like reporters. Their news-hungry eyes were taking an interest in us. They could add the final touch to our special disaster. A few loud headlines would ruin Headliner Files and shatter Clarabelle's career.

Blackley's car had not yet reached the corner when Hackett suddenly headed out into the street. With his cane he wagged an approaching taxi to a stop. I ducked into it after him, but without any real hope of improving our predicament. He directed our driver to follow Blackley's car. As we tooted on I looked back and saw three reporters piling into still another taxi and starting after us.

Within a few minutes Hackett and I were hustling into the white stone building on Fifty-Seventh Street where we had called once before, earlier today. The elevator was already carrying Blackley's great weight upward.

I chugged up the stairs as before, but this time with Hackett. We heard the reporters come into the lobby below and knew they would wait there to button-hole Blackley when he reappeared.

When we reached the fourth floor landing Blackley was opening Bonny's door. Hackett followed him closely into the reception room and I kept at Hackett's heels. Blackley halted, momentarily disconcerted by the displays all around him, then turned a cold eye on me.

"It's well you've both come along. It will save me considerable time in getting you identified by the eye-witnesses along your illegal ways. Really, Mr. Preston, you have been even more flagrant than I had supposed in obstructing justice, concealing evidence and various related crimes."

Mona Dayn, dark and spicy in her sullen way, had appeared from the adjoining business office.

"Ah-h," Blackley said in a flattering murmur of appreciation, and bowed. He told the lady who he was and added, "I am here merely to check on the movements of these two men. They were here earlier this morning, were they not?"

"Yes," Mrs. Dayn answered.

"May I ask what their purpose was?"

"They talked to my husband, not to me. Want to ask him about it? He's right here."

She led Blackley through the doorway connecting with an office decorated in gray and orange. Paul Dayn, still wearing his silk artist's smock, looked up from a ledger with a frown.

"The biggest one," Mona Dayn informed him, again with that note of edged cynicism in her voice, "is a cop on the job."

Dayn closed the ledger with a slap. "Well?"

Blackley said smoothly, "I would merely like your verification of the fact that these two men came here this morning with the purpose of identifying one of your clients as a Miss Sally Florell."

Before her husband could answer, Mona Dayn asked sourly, "Sally Florell? A fine dish of paprika. What about her?"

"She is dead, madam," Blackley answered courteously. "A victim of murder."

The answer made Mrs. Dayn quiet and thoughtful. It caused Paul Dayn's face to darken with anger.

"They didn't tell me that!" he snapped.

"They *are* a rather devious pair," Blackley agreed. "You see, the blue brassiere they brought to you for identification is evidence in the case."

It seemed to me that there was nothing left for us but to take the rap. Blackley knew that Hackett had filched the blue bra from his briefcase. That alone was enough to sink us for sure.

"Now," Blackley added to Dayn, "if you will simply confirm this—"

"But why stop there, Lieutenant?" This was Hackett, stepping forward with a slightly twisted smile. "Why stop there? Why not really go to town with your charge of removing and concealing

evidence? Here's all you need for a first-rate, bang-up case."

Hackett's actions while he spoke were enough to leave me paralyzed with dismay. He opened the mouth of the big envelope he had been carrying and dumped out Sally Florell's collection of bras. All of them—the burgundy, the cerise, the chartreuse, the jade, the apricot.

"I sneaked the whole lot of them out of the murder victim's apartment, Lieutenant," Hackett confessed.

BLACKLEY'S cheeks lost a shade of pink. Hackett's eyes were narrowed, sharpened as he watched the effect of his startling revelation. Paul Dayn sat stiff before his handiwork and his wife looked down on the assortment with a puzzled frown.

"Wait a minute," Mrs. Dayn said. "Something's wrong here. Sally Florell never wore these."

Hackett said quietly, "I'd noticed that. None of them shows any signs of wear. In fact, none of them has ever been washed. The fabric of every one is still shiny-new, with the sizing still on it."

While the others of us listened in growing amazement Mrs. Dayn said, "Sally Florell not only never wore these. She never put on a bra of any kind for ordinary wear. On the stage, yes, naturally—but under her street clothes, never. She prided herself on it."

A light twinkled in my mind. If Sally Florell owned no off-stage bras, then definitely she had not had one on hand with which to hang herself. Also, it accounted for the raid on our files. It was exactly the sort of personal detail that Headliner Files hoards. If that bit of information had been included in Sally's folder, then the murderer had taken desperate measures to remove it so that it wouldn't conflict with the abundance of evidence to the contrary which he had planted in her apartment.

Hackett's wry smile was growing. "You see, Lieutenant, your theory of an evening of debauchery in Arcomb's room at the Pacific is a little off the beam. Sally didn't go there. In fact, there was no woman in at the kill, no woman at all. It was strictly stag."

Remembering the original evidence, I stared at Hackett as he fished a note out of his pocket.

"Doing a little illegal detecting this morning, Lieutenant, I obtained from the head switchboard operator at the Pacific a list of all the numbers Allen Sterling called yesterday. One he called was that of Bonny's Custom-Fashioned Foundations."

Mrs. Dayn said shortly, "Sterling? Yes, he phoned here. Said he wanted his specialty shop to act as agent for us in Cleveland. Paul went over to talk to him about it, that's all."

Paul Dayn was looking whiter.

"Paul went over to talk to him," Hackett repeated, "but that wasn't quite all. The meeting was explosive. Allen Sterling alias Lewis Arcomb took one look at Paul Dayn alias Bonny and forgot all about foundations in favor of a deal that shaped up even better for him."

Mona Dayn asked sharply, "What kind of deal?"

"A deal whereby Lewis Arcomb, for certain considerations, would refrain from noising it around that Paul Dayn's real name is Peter Lilling."

Peter Lilling? Where had I heard that name before? Peter Lilling. . . Suddenly it clicked. I had heard it from Blackley. Peter Lilling was the third member of the trio that had escaped from prison in Philadelphia eighteen years ago. One of the three had soon died in a brawl; the second had tried a new life under the name of Allen Sterling; and the third, Peter Lilling, had remained unaccounted for—until yesterday, when chance had brought the two surviving ex-convicts face to face.

Hackett was saying that Arcomb, facing bankruptcy, had suddenly found a gold mine in the shape of his old cellmate who was running a lush business on swank Fifty-Seventh Street.

"Easy to prove this man's identity, Lieutenant," Hackett said while Blackley stood blankly still. "His fingerprints will do it."

Mona Dayn was staring white-faced at her husband.

"Peter Lilling, alias Paul Dayne, alias Bonny, objected to being blackmailed," Hackett went on. "He objected to it so

strongly that he beat Arcomb's brains out in order to silence him. Then he scrambled out fast, only to discover that he had left one of his samples behind. The sky-blue one was missing from his case. It was back there in the murder room and he didn't dare go back for it."

I recalled suddenly too Hackett's saying he had been slugged by something that felt like a suitcase full of bricks. Actually it had been a sample case—empty, true, but heavy enough.

HACKETT went on, "His one desperate way out was to plant the rest of his samples in a convincing place. As to women to frame, he didn't have much choice, but one he had looked good. He pulled a two-bird play by getting Sally out of his life and framing her for Arcomb's murder at the same time. She was so nuts about Dayn she was threatening to make trouble with Mona—and between the two of them they really could whip up some trouble for you, couldn't they, Paul?"

Mona's eyes were turning fiery. "Sally—and you?"

Hackett followed through. "You said yourself, Lieutenant, that Leon Johns was eating his heart out because Sally was so much in love with another man. You said it hardly mattered who he was. But it does matter, because he's your two-time killer—and here he is, with my compliments."

With nightmarish swiftness, Mona uttered a shrill cry, jerked open a desk drawer and grabbed up a revolver. She turned the gun on her husband. Dayn dove for it. As he forced it downward it fired. Mona screamed and let go of it.

Dayn whirled away, waving the gun at us all. He cried, "Stay back, stay back!"

Hackett stalked after him out of the office, then shifted suddenly to block Dayn's way to the entrance. Dayn jabbed his gun out to shoot. At that instant Hackett began doing startling things with his cane—whirled it, swished it downward with invisible speed and shattering force.

Dayn stiffened to a stop in stunned confusion. Something painful and bloody had happened to his gun hand. It was numb and dripping red and the revolver

was uselessly falling down and out of it.

Dayn quickly grabbed the weapon into his left hand. At the same time Hackett caused his hickory stick to go swish-swish again. This time a cut appeared across Dayn's forehead.

Dayn cried out again and fired once, wildly, as he whirled away from the horrible punishment of Hackett's cane. He ran crazily out of the reception room. With Hackett racing after him, Dayn went on a wavering dash down the hall, across his studio and into the adjoining storeroom. A slammed door stopped Hackett.

For a moment, then, quiet. Massively Blackley came to Hackett's side facing the closed door that separated them from the killer. Blackley had reached deep within the folds of his clothing and had brought up an automatic that looked absurdly tiny in his fat fist.

"With your permission, my dear lieutenant," Hackett said softly.

A gentle swipe of his cane slapped the little automatic from Blackley's hand. Blackley jerked back. At the same instant Hackett opened the door and pressed through. The next moments really capped the nightmare.

Hackett faced Dayn's platoon of still female torsos. They stood there at attention on their pedestals like Wacs or Waves. Dayn was not in sight. His position somewhere in that weird company of inanimate women was concealed until suddenly he began firing from an ambush in the shape of a top-bracket society matron.

Hackett bounced aside, then forward,

his cane whipping. The nearest of the figures suddenly began to disintegrate into ragged fragments. It was fantastic—stuffing flying about like a blizzard, Hackett's cane slashing, the gun blasting.

Suddenly it was all over. Dayn lay still among toppled torsos, his gun empty in his limp hand. He was sprawled unconscious with one arm drooping around the waist of a fallen stage actress of international reputation who usually kept better company.

Blackley stood there looking wordlessly at the shambles with a strange expression of regret. The gunfire had reverberated as far as the street. It had brought up the reporters at top speed. They crowded to stare in at the defeated killer lying helpless in the midst of his battered harem. The foremost of them lifted his unbelieving stare to Hackett.

"Did you do that?"

"Certainly not," Hackett said. "I have had nothing to do with this case. Lieutenant Blackley alone handled it from the start. He deserves the full credit for the unmasking and the capture of the murderer. I refer you to the lieutenant himself."

Until that moment I could not have believed we would ever walk out of Bonny's as free men. But Blackley was left with no other choice and, all thanks to Thackeray Hackett, we did.

The case, however, has had a lasting effect on my private life. Formerly I rather enjoyed browsing through the back pages of the women's magazines. But now, when I glimpse a picture of lingeree, I cringe and hurry on.

THE END

For thrilling mayhem in your motion pictures, detective fans, look for these two United Artists' releases in your neighborhood theatres!

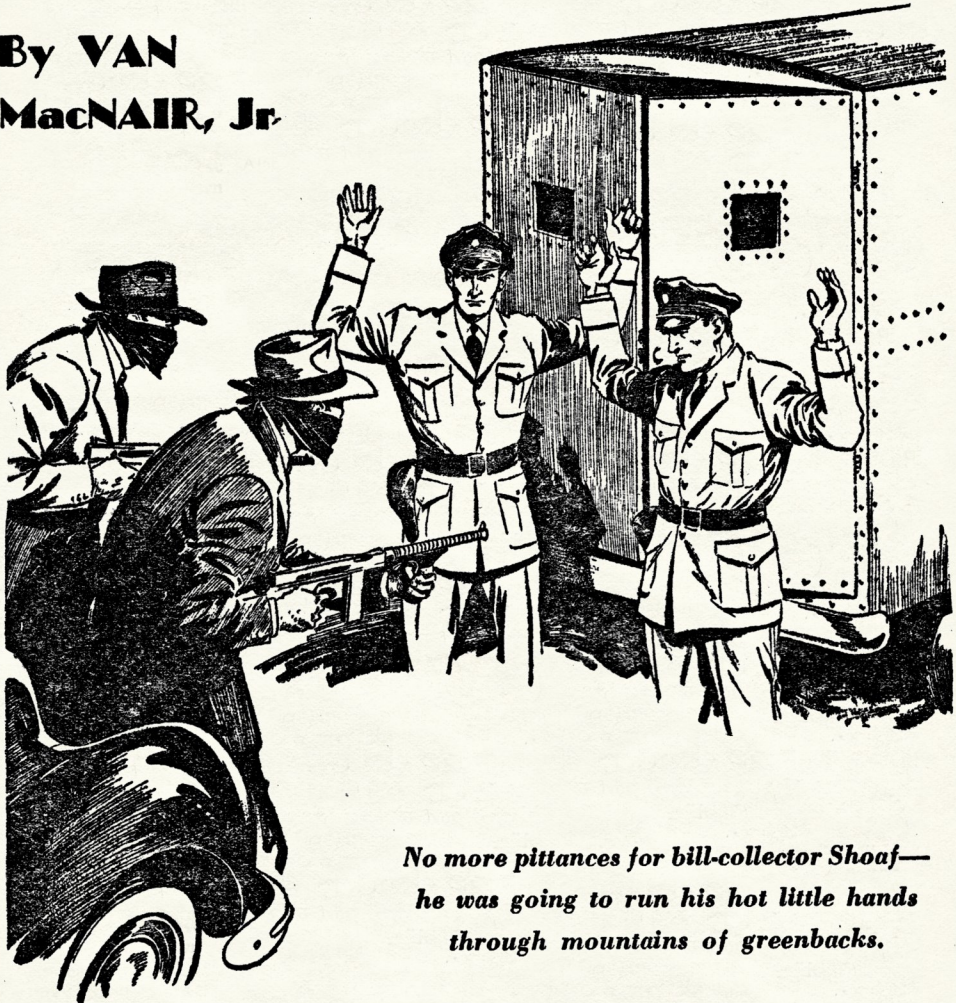
"Quicksand" is a jolting movie of a wild kid's fiasco. Mickey Rooney plays the young hotshot who chisels pin-money for a date with enticing Jeanne Cagney—and finds that he's put the squeeze on murder.

Edmond O'Brien and Pamela Britton star in the second film, "D. O. A."—Dead On Arrival. Sleuth O'Brien calls Homicide to report his own killing! But this cool character doesn't take it lying down... in this suspense-crammed screen adventure.

WHITE-COLLAR STIFF

Too late, he sees the masked
men. . . .

By VAN
MacNAIR, Jr.



*No more pittance for bill-collector Shoaf—
he was going to run his hot little hands
through mountains of greenbacks.*

YOU'VE seen us. A hundred times a day you've seen and never noticed us. We live alone in remodeled brownstones—one or two rooms and a kitchenette. We go our way alone; our interests are narrow, our few friends casual office acquaintances. We keep to a beaten path—office to home to unappetiz-

ing restaurant, to neighborhood movie to library. Occasionally we stop by the corner saloon.

Our clothes are plain, our hair graying around a bald spot, our faces inconspicuous, drab. Our reactions are seldom spontaneous. We are the nobodies, the unnoticed, the anonymous football in the

million-legged life of the city. You would never expect one of us to commit murder, or to get away with \$100,000 of a looted payroll.

So it is that the macabre insistence of circumstance in the case of Arthur Huneker and me—the turning of what should have been a joke into tragedy—had about it an air of evil predestination.

It begins with me, Glen Shoaf, waiting for Huneker at the rear entrance to the Star Building on a clean-swept blue autumn day. Huneker, a very ordinary little man who worked as an order clerk for Star Packing Company, was just another head bent over a desk on the fourth floor of the Star Building.

I am a collector for the Miracle Credit Company, and every Thursday at exactly 11:56 a.m. I meet Huneker at this back door of the building where he turns over the weekly payment on the second-hand sedan which he financed through Miracle. It is an odd sort of arrangement—furtive almost—this rear-door rendezvous.

The Star Building is a city block square, twenty stories high, and the front lobby is a bustling vaulted place—but the rear entrance is different. There is a green steel door which opens onto a private parking lot for executives of the company. Beyond that there is an alley. Except during the morning and evening rush hours, there is little activity there.

It was typical of Huneker to choose this quite deserted place to pay his debts. He had that nagging shame of indebtedness common to respectable middle class. So we met where no one could see us, and it was an arrangement that suited me. This clandestine handling of a perfectly normal affair was, in truth, symptomatic.

We were both ashamed and resentful of the fact that we had never made enough money to live more than humdrum lives. Money was our tyrant. It was something both awesome and sinister; there was a fascinating and secret quality in its power.

Those were the first qualities which I discovered Arthur Huneker and I had in common.

So I was waiting for him in the usual place the day they knocked over the Star Packing payroll. You remember it. It was a thrilling sensation, even as such things go. . . .

THE armored truck rolls to a stop in front of the Star Building. Two guards get down from the driver's seat, open the rear door of the truck. Two more guards, one holding the payroll bag, step blinking into the sun.

Too late, the cop a half block away at High Street Plaza sees the powerful black job parked in the restricted zone behind the truck with its nose pointing at an angle out from the curb. Too late, he sees the masked, well-dressed men standing beside the car. Too late, the cop sees the face under the low hat behind the wheel.

The cop is running, tugging for his revolver, his wrist caught in the folds of his heavy blue coat when the shooting begins. A Tommy gun pounds. The cop stops, aims, squeezes off at a running figure in a black overcoat. There is the heavy report of the Police Special fired at the big man in the black overcoat who has grabbed the money bag from the Star Building.

Blam! The cop firing again at the running figure, the big guy staggering, running on. A whistle shrilling, sirens already wailing across town. Another traffic cop sprinting from the Logan Street intersection. Another from the direction of the plaza. People, screaming, screaming.

I heard the noise, muffled as it was by the massive width of the Star Building. I remember wishing that Huneker would hurry up so I could go see what the excitement was about. I looked at my watch. 11:44. He would just be slipping away from his desk on the way down to meet me. I debated whether to smoke another cigarette on an empty stomach, and propped a thin shoulder against the building, crossed my legs and stared out at the empty lot and the alley beyond through the thick-lensed glasses I wear.

Five minutes passed. Ten. It was strange. Huneker had always been on the dot before.

On the other side of the building I could hear the police cars converging, the sirens growling to a stop. At a quarter past noon, I gave it up. Maybe he hadn't come to work that day. I guessed he was sick at home.

I pushed open the narrow green door and went through the corridor where the back stairway gave out on the ground

floor, and entered the lobby of the building. It was packed with cops, newspapermen, ambulance attendants, women who had fainted, a gabbling herd of witnesses, gawking curiosity-seekers. Sweating cops shoved us all out. A cordon was thrown around the building.

Nobody was sure what had happened.

Somebody said one of the bandits was found dead in the hallway on the fourth floor. But the money bag wasn't with him. Somebody said the cops were searching the building for the hood that got away with the loot.

And so it went. Teletypes clacked. Detectives arrived. The street was blocked off. The dead were carted away. All four guards. Three gunmen. One bandit was still alive despite a .45 slug in his stomach.

After that, there wasn't much to be seen. I had a sandwich and a milk shake standing up at a drug store counter, and spent the rest of the afternoon collecting payments from old women who had bought refrigerators they could not afford, old men with wispy mustaches with radios too big for the shabby flats they lived in. You know. One foot in the door stuff.

My mild appearance helps. I look anything but tough. But I am hard to shake. A snobbishness, a contempt for others in the same dreary station of life as mine helps to keep me from feeling sorry for my victims. I tracked down a man who had skipped with a second-hand furniture suite, cowered him with legal threats, collected half, and began to think of quitting for the afternoon.

Then I remembered Arthur Huneker. I invested a nickel in a telephone call at a corner candy store. It was wasted time. Nobody answered at his home number. It was queer. He must have gone to the office after all. Yet he hadn't showed up for our appointment. I decided to let it ride until tomorrow.

It was then close to five o'clock. The fine autumn day had gone. A cold wind was coming off the river and it was mixed with the damp threat of snow. On the street newsboys were shouting extras. I bought a paper and caught a bus home, reading of the hold-up. Three of the bandits were killed outright and another died in the hospital. The paper's story

said that one of the bandits had run into the Star Building carrying the money bag.

Witnesses differed. Some said two men ran into the building. Some said three. Some maintained that only one—the one who was found dead on the fourth floor of bullet wounds from the cop's gun—ran into the building in an apparent effort to throw off pursuers.

Nevertheless, police believed at least two of the gunmen got into the building, and that one of them had gone down the back stairs from the fourth floor and out the back way with the haul after his buddy had died. There were no witnesses to that, but the corridor probably had been empty at the time. There *must* have been another bandit. The disappearance of the money bag testified to that.

For a while I just sat there thinking. It was crazy. It was a wild idea. But it kept running in my mind, fading sometimes but always coming back strong enough to make the hair on the back of my neck tickle. My eye glasses fogged. I rode three blocks past my stop.

The police were looking for a bandit—a hard-faced, dangerous man. Suppose there hadn't been a fifth hold-up man. Suppose somebody had stepped into the corridor as the gunman coughed his way down to the floor and died. The money bag would be in his hand. Suppose this somebody just picked up the bag and stepped into the washroom, and waited for the confusion to die down.

Suppose this somebody then went calmly to the elevator—an inconspicuous little guy in a shabby overcoat, one of the thousands going in and out of the Star Building every day. Suppose this somebody was a nobody, like, say—Arthur Huneker.

The time was right. The paper put it as 11:43. Give the bandit a minute or so to get to the fourth floor in his flight. A minute to die. Just right for Huneker to be in the hallway. Just right for his greedy little eyes to take in the scene. I could picture him snatching up the black bag—the one instinctive movement of his life, his heart beating in terror and anticipation.

I LAUGHED. The thought of the whole city being scoured for a desperate bandit and Arthur Huneker walking right

out through the crowd unmolested, unnoticed, a mild-looking little man. It was just fantastic enough to be possible. And right now where would he be? At home, ripping open the bag. I licked my lips as I thought of the green bills bursting forth.

A hundred grand! All the money in the world!

I shoved my supper away untasted. Outside, the wind had died and I walked through the miasma of fog that rose from the river. It must have been a couple of hours later when I realized I was standing before the remodeled brownstone, looking up at the third-floor apartment where Huneker lived. Lights were on behind drawn shades.

I made as little noise as possible going up the dimly lighted stairway. My eye at the keyhole met only darkness. Of course, it could have been the key on the inside blocking out vision. But I had a hunch it was a towel hung over the doorknob. Someone was moving around inside.

Then the movement stopped. I became acutely aware of silence. I sucked in my breath, kneeling with my ear to the keyhole. I could picture him standing behind the door in a swirl of panic. One, two minutes passed. The cat and mouse play continued. I could almost hear his breath grating as he tried to control it.

Next he did a dumb thing. He should have snatched the door open in one swoop. Instead, he turned the knob carefully. I was gone when he did jerk it open. I went down the steps as fast and as softly as if I'd been running on greenbacks. One hundred thousand soft greenbacks.

For a while I fought down the idea that I was losing my mind. It could still be a combination of coincidence and my wild imagination. Somewhere in the park I sat on a bench. Cigarette after cigarette glowed with an eerie yellow light in the whispering fog. At last I knew that I had to find out, once and for all.

The bar was nearly empty. Going to the phone booth at the rear, I saw by the wall clock that it was after midnight.

He took a long time answering but I knew he wasn't asleep. With all that money, he wouldn't close his eyes for a minute. I pictured his face staring at the phone in white shock.

I let it ring for a while, hung up, waited,

dialled again. This time he snatched up the receiver on the first ring, as though he had been standing over it, waiting.

I barely could hear his voice.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Arthur," I said.

"Who's that? What do you want?" He spoke a little louder.

"Oh, just a friend," I said.

"Listen, I don't like jokes. I don't like to get up in the middle of the night for jokes."

Lying, of course. He was wide awake. Had been, for hours.

"What do you want?" His voice rose, grated. I let him breathe a minute into the phone. He sounded like he was standing right beside my ear.

"Nothing, Huneker," I said at last. "You don't have to tell me anything you'd rather keep quiet about. I'm no cop."

"Cop!" It was almost a scream. Then he said more calmly, "I don't know what you're talking about. Good night."

But I stopped him. "I was just wondering what happens when an ordinary guy manages to get away with stealing a hundred thousand bucks. For instance," I said slowly, "he couldn't start spending it. The cops would grab a sucker like that right off. Cops always look for that first thing." I gave it to him slow and easy.

"He'd want to count it, run his hands through it, throw it up in the air. He'd think of all the things it could buy—women, luxury, idleness, everything. But he can't spend it, eh? A dead giveaway. People would get suspicious. There's too much of it. Enough to frighten an ordinary guy. That makes it hard to hide, too. A thousand, five thousand, even, would be easy. But that chunk—"

"You're crazy!" Did I imagine the hoarse crack in his voice?

"Who could he trust?" I kept on in a monotonous tone. "Everybody becomes a potential enemy. Where can he turn? The banks? They're inquisitive. They would be as dangerous as spending it, wouldn't it now, Huneker?"

His breath seemed to rattle over the wire.

"You're mad, whoever you are. You're a madman. Crazy, crazy, crazy!" The phone receiver crashed down.

I hung up slowly. A new thought

pounded into my brain with each throb of my temples. At the bar I ordered a double rye. I had to wipe my hands on the lapels of my topcoat, and even so, I slobbered half the shot trying to get it to my mouth.

"You sick?" the barman asked.

I snapped at him, "No." In sudden panic I wondered if he could have heard me through the telephone booth glass. He looked at me curiously as I threw a buck on the bar and hurried out without my change. Outside I forced myself to walk slowly in the cold damp air to clear my head. This was no time to be making wrong moves. . . .

The next morning, I was waiting across the street when Huneker came out of his apartment and headed for the subway. He was carrying a bundle wrapped in brown paper. I let him get on a downtown train before I went up to him.

"Why, hello, Huneker," I said casually. "Where were you yesterday?"

He looked like he hadn't slept at all. Bloodshot eyes darted at me from behind his steel-rimmed glasses.

"Oh, Shoaf. It's you. Listen, I was—I was tied up. Busy. Look—I want to get rid of that damned debt. I can pay you now. I—" He stopped.

"All of it?" I smiled, then whistled. "You must have made a pile overnight. Strike oil?"

"Yes. No. I mean . . ." He began to fumble in his suit-coat pocket with one hand. "My wallet. Must be here some where. Listen, I'll pay you for this week. You'll get the rest of it—all of it—tomorrow. I'll mail you a check—no, a money order."

He was shifting the bundle from arm to arm, running through his pockets.

"Here," I said, "let me hold this." I reached for the bundle.

"Leave it alone!" He hugged it to his chest, jerking back from my hand.

"Okay." I shrugged. "Just trying to help."

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I don't feel well. It's only my laundry." He paused. "I seem to have forgotten my wallet," he said. "But I'll mail you the check for it tomorrow. I promise. Please excuse me now, I'm getting off here." He turned and shoved his way to the door. The station was a half-dozen stops before his reg-

ular one, I knew. He went out through the middle doors. I went out through the rear.

I thumbed my way through a second-hand book store across the street from the Star Building. Through the plate glass window I could see him walking up and down clutching the bundle. Once or twice his eyes went to the spot in the street where yesterday dead men had sprawled bloodily. Twice he started through the revolving doors of the building. No soap. At nine-thirty he turned and went up the street, and into a drug store. Then he came out and hopped an uptown train.

By ten o'clock I was posted in a doorway half a block from his place. The switchboard girl at Star Packing had been chatty enough.

"Mr. Huneker? He's no longer with us. As of this morning. Queer, it was. Just phoned up and quit. After fifteen years. You a friend of his?"

The blinds remained drawn all day. . . .

BY SEVEN I felt like I was in the deep freeze. It was dark, cold and drizzly. I was dizzy from hunger. The street was empty.

Then, very suddenly, he was standing in front of the vestibule door across from me. He had the brown bundle and a suitcase. I wondered quickly what he had told the landlady when he paid up and got out. Then I was too busy slipping along behind the fast click of his heels to think of anything else.

Two blocks away he found a cab stand—and the thing that had worried me happened. There was only one cab at the stand. I went through a couple of deductions of hell in as many seconds. If he slipped me now. . . .

I slid into the shadows as close to the cab as I dared while he put the bag in with one hand and climbed in after it. Then I sprinted. I still might not have made it, but the traffic light on the corner turned red. When it was green again I was riding the spare tire on the back.

He holed up at a cheap hotel in the theater district. He didn't even think to sign a false name.

"Huneker?" said the voice of the night clerk. "Yeah. Room 315. I'll put you on."

"Hello, Arthur," I said. "You've made your first mistake now, haven't you? Quitting your job and checking out of the apartment was wrong wasn't it, Arthur? If somebody comes poking around, that will look funny, won't it, Arthur?"

"You've got the wrong number." He managed a light laugh.

"Now, Arthur, that won't do any good. You've started running. You've started and you'll have to keep on running, running. You can't put down that money for a second. You can't leave it in your room even while you eat. Suppose there was a fire. Think of thieves. Why, anybody might get curious about that bundle. The desk clerk, for instance. Did he notice how suspiciously you held on to it? Think, Arthur, try to remember. You can't trust anybody now."

"Wrong number, wrong number," he screamed into the phone.

I went into a bar across the street. I was halfway through my steak when the thought hit me. If he couldn't rest for a minute, then neither could I. We were two dancers licked in a crazy whirl of—death.

For the first time I let the word come out.

Time blurred, became a maelstrom. It was hard to tell if I was sane or not. At the aching end of the next twenty-four hours I knew I had to risk it. A ten-dollar bill extracted from the desk clerk a promise to let me know whenever room 315 went out. I flopped into a bed in the hotel and slept. It worked, and became a pattern. We stayed there a week.

I phoned him two more times—but I put off reporting to my office. Hell, the few pennies I had collected for them could wait. I had bigger things on my mind.

On the train to Philadelphia, I could see him beginning to crack. I couldn't risk riding the same car, but I cased him occasionally through the vestibule window. A doughy, tired face. A nervous jerk of the hands and head. The bundle wasn't with him any more. But he had an over-size brief case along with his bag. I figured that was the packet.

In Philly we moved faster. He changed his rooms every day, sometimes oftener. I had the impression of running all the time. Twice he approached the door of banks but it was as if his legs wouldn't carry him through with it. The fear of parting with the money must have paralyzed him, the fishy inquiring eye of

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FIVE-STAR FUGITIVE

By SCOTT
O'HARA



bankers, linked to his natural discomfort in the presence of those austere figures, unnerved him.

I telephoned him nightly.

Detroit. Columbus. St. Louis.

In Baltimore the crack widened. I no longer recognized his voice when he said, "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to find you. I'll kill you."

"Yes, Arthur," I said. "That's the last step. Murder. One. Then another, and another. Buying time with bullets. Murdering and running." I stopped.

Rasping breath. Mine or his?

I plunged on. "Don't you see, Arthur, you're doomed. Get it over with, Arthur. Get that fearful burden off your neck. The misery of it . . . end it, Arthur . . . get a gun . . ."

It might have gone on indefinitely. I could wait. I was stronger, smarter. I could wait for his mentality to collapse, for him to waste away. But I had overlooked one thing.

His days had followed a senseless routine. Walking up one street, down another, zigzagging across town, sitting in parks, hotel lobbies, dark movie houses. Then one morning he varied it. The thing happened that I hadn't foreseen. On a side street off North Avenue he stopped, and began to pace back and forth before one building. One minute I thought it just a sign of his imminent crack-up.

The next minute I felt the sweat sprout on my face, and I was suddenly cold. The building was the fourth precinct police station. He walked, absurdly, on tiptoe to the entrance, hesitated with one foot on the steps. Then, clutching the bag to his chest in a convulsive movement, he hurried away. Halfway down the block he slowed, looked back, and finally walked thoughtfully on.

The cops! Why not? He could give himself up, be rid of the damned money. His chance of getting a light sentence and a quick parole was good.

So the cat and mouse play was over. I couldn't chance it. I had to move, and now it was I who changed—my voice that was unrecognizable, my face that twitched. And it was I who walked aimlessly that afternoon, at times half sobbing, at times in a blinding intensity of thought. I

drank somewhere, tried to eat somewhere. And somewhere I bought the knife. . . .

* * *

Wet flakes of snow fell in a windless night. Inside the hallway, it smelled damp and old. Out of old habit I went up the stairs close to the wall, silently. But now I didn't really care. I wonder if he heard me coming. Was there some unfathomable human relation between us that allowed him to sense my coming or told him that the final moment had arrived?

At the landing on the third floor, I flicked the wall switch. The dust-covered globe light went out. The blackness throbbed, the sense of closeness increased. I slid along the wall. Number three. I stopped. I'm quite sure he was waiting on the other side of the door, listening.

"Arthur." Strange how pleasant my voice sounded.

Again, "Arthur." Like the Lorelei. And, "Arthur," once more.

Slowly, the door opened. The crack of yellow light widened, became a wide square on the floor. His figure moved into it, turned. For a moment Arthur Huneker and I stood face to face. His arms were lax, his face resigned, more terrible in peace than agony. He stared in dumb recognition. Even then he didn't move.

My right arm went around his throat. The knife slid up under his ribs and into his heart with incredible ease.

I dragged him through the door, began to search the room. The brief case was in a closet, and I plunged my hands into the packed green bills. They came halfway to my elbow. I spilled a wad of them on the floor, but I didn't care. I had all the money in the world. And nobody would get it from me. Huneker had been a fool. I was too smart, too clever. Nobody would—

The phone rang. It rang for a couple of minutes. Three. I couldn't move. Its shrillness in that lonely room was horrible. It stopped, then began again. Somehow I got the receiver to my ear.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

The voice was dry, flat, monotonous.

"Oh, just a friend, Shoaf, just a friend. I was wondering what a man would do with. . . ."

SO SORRY— SO DEAD

By RUSSELL
BRANCH



"Be sensible, and I'll take her with me."

*When importer Holmquist got an invite to join his ancestors,
he passed it on to his gunsel—
with a headstone . . . gratis.*

IN PLAIN English, he wanted a guy rubbed out and he wanted me to do the rubbing. But Augustus Holmquist never put anything in plain English. Not if he could help it.

He began by handing me a note done in Chinese. It could have been done by pigeons, for all of me.

"What is it, your laundry?"

"An invitation, Nickie. An invitation to join my dishonorable ancestors, come Tuesday next."

"A . . . huh? You mean it's a warning, a threat?"

He shook his head. "Let's call it a statement of fact. Advance notice of my own funeral. I am expected to attend, of course."

"Nothing like letting a guy in on it," I said, incredulous.

Holmquist sighed, as if my stupidity and his funeral announcement were both too much to take. "It's an old Chinese custom. A matter of courtesy . . . and in this case, a mark of deference to my position and my long association with the Orient. I'm afraid, though, that's a bit subtle for your practical mind."

It was; just like Holmquist himself. He was built along the same lines as that big fat Buddha on the teak stand behind his desk, and as usual he had the same sort of a superior smirk on his greasy face. But he also had a bead of sweat under his nose, now, and his hand trembled as he held out his fancy gold cigarette case. Scared—so scared I could almost smell it as I leaned across with a match.

"Any idea who sent it?"

His eyes narrowed at me behind a stream of smoke. "I *know* who sent it, Nickie. A merchant named Wong Po, who . . . well, we've had some disagreement on a business matter. Apparently he feels his own honor is at stake."

"That old boy who runs the little joint down on Pell Street?"

He nodded, and I could have laughed in his face. Wong Po was a little ancient character who looked like he should have been buried a hundred years ago. A husky sneeze would have blown him away. I would have said as much, except that Holmquist seemed to be taking it so hard.

"Turn it over to the cops," I suggested stupidly.

My answer was a cold, fishy stare.

"Okay, so there's always this," I said, patting the loose side of my nice new tweed jacket. "That is, if he *does* make a serious pass at you."

"Don't be stupid, Nickie."

"All I know is what you hired me for," I shrugged. "Protection, Mr. Holmquist—that's me."

"An ounce of prevention," he said softly, "is worth a pound of protection."

And there it was. Subtle—like a couple ounces of lead. I didn't get it. I was too dumb. "Okay, Holmquist, I'll go down and tell this Wong Po to lay off. If he gets tough about it, I might even slap his wrist for him. Don't you worry."

"I thought I could depend on you, Nickie," he said. Only it was an argument instead of a compliment.

"You *can* depend on me. Anybody starts anything, I finish it. I'm just as fast as the next guy, if I do say so myself."

"Damn it, Nickie!" He leaned forward and Buddha leered at me over his sloping shoulders. It was the first time either of us had heard him cuss, I'm sure. "Damn it, you may not be able to understand Oriental customs and psychology, but you ought to be able at least to understand ordinary loyalty. I pulled you up out of the gutter."

"Thought it was the other way around," I grinned.

He didn't like that crack, one little bit. "You've had your reward, and more too. Now you can show your appreciation."

"By putting the slug on an old man just because you're afraid he may have something on you?"

Pain and sorrow showed in Holmquist's face. "Protection, my boy, a clear-cut matter of self-protection. This little announcement means just what it says, unfortunately."

"It could still be a laundry list, for all I know. The word you want is murder, and I didn't hire out for that."

His eyes went bleak, but his voice still purred. "I doubt that you could find another position as pleasant or as well paid, Nickie."

"I can start looking," I said, and got up.

HE SHRUGGED and reached for his phone. Then he stopped me, just as I reached for the door. "The gun, Nickie."

I went back and laid it on his desk, on top of that "funeral invitation" that had cost me my job. It was just like Holmquist, I thought, to be worrying about a pawnshop Colt even while he was telling his secretary to make out a check for a hundred and twenty-five bucks I hadn't earned.

You may have gathered that I didn't much like Augustus Holmquist, and you're probably right. He was an importer, a dealer in Oriental art objects, and he spent as much time traveling as he did in this plushy Madison Avenue office of his.

We had met one night in Havana, where I had landed on the beach in a wave of rum. In the tough section of Havana, south of Calle Zanja near Chinatown. Three gutter bums had ganged up on Holmquist, and to make a short story even shorter, I had saved his star sapphire and his wallet. Maybe even his life. This "position" as chauffeur-bodyguard-traveling companion had been my reward.

Until now I had managed to get along with Holmquist, because I liked everything else about the job, including the salary and his secretary. Now . . . well, now I knew.

Mary Welscu was already rolling that last check into her typewriter, and I suddenly realized that I had been counting on a few more checks like that, mostly because of Mary.

Small and slender, Mary, with soft dark hair. Her eyes were also dark and soft. And sort of sad, like they couldn't forget the things they had seen in Europe at the beginning of the war. There was more than that in them now—actual tears. It occurred to me that maybe somebody else had been counting on those checks, too.

"You have resigned, Nickie?"

"Uncle Gus would say he had fired me. Same difference."

She slowly pecked out the date, hiding her face. "Why, Nickie?"

"One of those things. But I'll find me another job, honey, and then you too can tell Uncle Gus to go—"

"Mr. Holmquist is very kind to me," she interrupted indignantly. "I owe him very much to be thankful for."

"Yeah?" I couldn't help it; it came out with a nasty insinuation on the end of it.

She gave the space lever a hard shove. "Yes. He is a kind and courteous gentleman, and that is more than one can say for you, Nick Grant!"

She was mad, just as mad as she always was when I took a crack at Uncle Gus. But that still didn't explain those tears.

"Look, honey. Take my word for it, the man is poison. I just found it out myself, and you could do a lot worse than walk out that door with me right now."

She looked away and shook her head furiously. I grabbed her shoulder and

faced her around. "I didn't want to tell you this, for your own good—but I guess it's necessary. You want to know what our argument was about? You want to know what sort of a proposition the kind and courteous Mr. Holmquist just handed me?"

Mary didn't say anything, her eyes just went past me. I whirled, and saw Holmquist standing looking at us in the open doorway to his office. How long he had been standing there, or how much he had heard, I didn't know. All I knew was that familiar expression of his. Like being patted on the back by a hand with a knife in it.

"Mary," he said, "I do hope you can persuade our hasty young friend here to change his mind. It's to his own advantage, and . . . well, you might make out that check for an extra few days. Say until next Tuesday. Perhaps Nickie will reconsider before then and make both of us happy, eh?"

He beamed fondly, and Mary looked up at me appealingly. What can an ordinary mug do against a set-up like that? I pulled my usual bonehead move, I just turned on my heel and walked out of there without even the check.

SO HE told himself he was crazy. Holmquist might be up to his neck in something dirty, but Mary was still a nice kid. An innocent kid, but naturally loyal to her employer. After all, he had hired her while she was still learning to type and speak her quaint version of the American language.

He also told himself it was none of his affair any more, since he was through—but even after his third drink my friend in the bar mirror couldn't convince himself it was true.

In the first place, Mary must have learned something of Holmquist's mysterious business affairs; Mary was no fool. And as for me—well, I was smart enough at least to know that I couldn't just say no, thanks and forget it. Not after hearing a proposition like that from a guy like that.

All of which left me still looking at myself, and wishing I had stalled Holmquist along for a while at least. I could still catch him when he returned to his apart-

ment, for that matter, so I walked slowly down Fifth toward Washington Square with that in mind.

We all lived in the Village. Holmquist in one of those shabby old brownstones that are shabby only as far as the front door, Mary and I in the new apartment house next door. It was all very convenient and Holmquist could afford convenience: he liked to have his helpers close at hand.

But his windows were dark now as I walked past, and Mary didn't answer when I knocked on her third-floor room. I went back down to my own room and dumped myself in the easy chair by the corner, where I could watch for Holmquist's return.

I guess I finally dozed off, because the knock on my door startled me. I got up automatically, and then hesitated. There was another knock, but it was too quiet and furtive. Almost as if the person on the other side were only making sure I was asleep.

I glanced at my watch; after midnight, Holmquist wouldn't have been so considerate; Holmquist would have used the phone. And Mary—well, Mary wasn't the sort of girl who went calling on young men at this hour, and I was the young man who knew it.

I reached for the knob, wishing that old Colt was back in its clip under my arm. Then I hesitated again. There was a soft sliding sound at my feet, the sound of something being slipped in through the crack under the door.

It was a folded sheet of thin, silky paper with black pigeon tracks on it. I didn't have to read Chinese to know that it was a duplicate of the "funeral invitation" which Holmquist had received! . . .

I yanked the door open, and caught a glimpse of a brand new green felt hat just disappearing below the level of the bannisters. By the time I reached the stairwell, the hat was disappearing toward the front entrance.

The street was empty, except for one lonely figure running east. He disappeared around the corner and I cursed, because around that corner were bright lights and crowded night clubs.

But my visitor was still in sight when I got there. When he saw me, he piled

hastily into a cab in front of the first gin mill and this time I got a better glimpse—of a slender young Oriental face.

The door slammed and the taxi rolled, but another cab swerved into the curb directly behind. My driver didn't even have to be told: not any more than the color of the bill I shoved across the front seat.

When we hit the Bowery, I knew the cab ahead was rolling straight for Chinatown, and I knew I'd probably lose him there. I took a long chance. I stopped my driver at Canal and cut down a back street straight toward Wong Po's store, where I had driven Holmquist on several occasions.

The chance paid off. The cab had just discharged its passenger in front of Wong Po's, and there was my friend, just putting his wallet away.

He whirled as I grabbed for him. He also did a quick backward shuffle, and made some sort of magic gesture, and came up with the ace of spades. The ace of spades was black and stubby—like a .25 automatic.

He used it to gesture toward his wallet, which had fallen to the sidewalk. "Help yourself, my friend—if you think it's worth it."

"Pick it up yourself," I muttered, feeling like a chump. "All I want from you is talk—an explanation for that note you just shoved under my door."

He grinned politely, stooping for his wallet. "You're Nicholas Grant?"

"Maybe I am. Why pick on me?"

"I'm just the errand boy," he shrugged.

"For an errand boy, you sure run fast."

He gave me the teeth again. "My instructions were to avoid being seen. I guess I was too careless."

I hauled out the note and shoved it at him, trying to ignore the gun. "Read, pal. Tell me what it says."

"So sorry. I'm just as curious as you are, but unfortunately I failed to take the Chinese course at Columbia. You'll have to ask Wong Po himself."

He nodded up over the store, where there was a light showing. I glanced up, and that was all he needed. He made a dive for the dark narrow alleyway which ran between Wong Po's shop and the chop-suey joint next door. Chasing him

there would be as useless as looking for chicken in a dish of chicken chow mein; I headed up the stairs instead.

THERE were a number of doors on the landing, but only one showed light underneath. I knocked, but no one answered. Then the floor creaked—maybe from my weight, or maybe from another door being opened?

The answer slammed at me from the end of the dark hall. I lunged against the door, expecting a second shot and trying to crowd myself in behind two inches of door frame. I must have turned the knob too, because the next instant I was inside, and seeking another way out.

I found it in the next room, the kitchen of Wong Po's flat. I also found Wong Po. He stared back at me impassively, as if surprised to see me here but too polite to say so. He was a dried-up old shell of a man, with a face like crumpled parchment and the bald head of a scholar.

The head had a hole in it now. For a second I stood there staring stupidly.

Then quick steps sounded in the hall outside, excited voices, and the door rattled on its hinges. I took the back door on the far side of the kitchen.

That one let me out onto an outside flight of steps. The steps took me down past the garbage cans in the alley. I was six blocks away, turning north into Broadway, before the wail of a police siren reminded me I had made a bad mistake.

But it was too late now. I had gone through all the motions like a puppet on a string, and my only hope now was to find the guy at the other end of the string.

I was pretty sure who it was, but as Holmquist himself once put it: "The man who jumps at conclusions only stubs his toe." I looked up at the dark windows of his flat, but finally went on and turned in at my own apartment house. . . .

The next day was Sunday. Sunday morning usually found Mary happily puttering around her little kitchenette. But this morning her stenographer's notebook was propped open on the table, and her portable pad held a sheet of Holmquist's business stationery.

"What d'ya get out of it, besides money?" I asked nastily.

She went on typing for a moment and

then pushed back her hair with a gesture that meant she was too weary to quarrel. "Waffles, maybe? You are looking hungry, my friend."

"I am looking worried, my friend. I'm in a jam, and I need your help."

Her face darkened, that look came into her eyes again. "Mr. Holmquist?"

"Mr. Augustus Holmquist," I nodded. "What I started to tell you last night . . . he asked me to kill a guy for him. I said no, and that's why I got canned."

"Kill . . . *what?*" She shook her head incredulously. "No . . . no, Nickie. You cannot be serious. Mr. Holmquist would never—"

"No? The guy he wanted out of the way was *put* out of the way. Last night . . . with a bullet." I went on and gave her the rest of it, but all it got me was a reluctant shrug.

"It may be even as you think, Nickie. But in my own country, when the Nazis . . . Well, I was very young then, but I learned. Such things happen. Sometimes one can do nothing about it, and then perhaps it is just better to be looking in the other way."

"That's appeasement—and the cops here don't operate on that theory," I assured her. "They'll get to me eventually—fingerprints, the taxi driver, something. The question is, do I get Uncle Gus first?"

"But Mr. Holmquist was in his office all last evening. We came home together, in a taxi car, and it was nearly midnight by then."

"And he didn't leave all evening?"

She blushed. "Yes . . . but not long enough to go all the way downtown and back again."

"Long enough to line up somebody else for his dirty work," I pointed out. "That's the way Holmquist would operate. Just as sure as Wong Po is a dead Chinaman, he had a hand in it."

She started to protest again, but I shook my head. "I'm in the middle, honey. Pick your side."

"But . . . but what can I do, Nickie?"

"Tell me everything you know. Particularly all about his deal with Wong Po."

She shrugged helplessly. "You know as much as I do, Nickie. Mr. Holmquist is in the importing business and . . . well, I believe Wong Po helped him to obtain

a rare collection of celadon porcelains from Shanghai. They were sold to another Chinese merchant here in New York, a man named Sammy Toy."

"Yeah, but did you ever *see* those celadons? Or a customs declaration, or a bill of sale, or a check from this Sammy Toy?" I shook my head. "From what I've actually seen around the office, Uncle Gus couldn't pay the rent alone."

"But I am telling you, Nickie—"

"And I'm telling you something out loud!"

She didn't say anything. I still had the feeling she was hiding something—something she was trying hard to convince herself had nothing to do with my troubles.

WHEN her buzzer sounded off, we both jumped. It was Uncle Gus himself, slightly winded but complete with a little florist's bouquet for Mary and a warm smile for me. He inspected Mary's homework with approval, signed the letters and sealed them, and finally turned to meet my gloomy scowl.

"I am pleased, my boy, very pleased. Mission accomplished and all that. We shall have to arrive at a more suitable reward than flowers for you. Eh?"

"News travels fast."

"In a round-about way." He grinned suavely.

"You got it wrong. I didn't do it, and you know it."

"Of course not," he said gravely. He turned to Mary. "A very unfortunate thing has happened, Mary. Wong Po, whom you may remember I have done business with, was shot to death in Chinatown last night. Apparently Nickie was in the vicinity at the time, on some mysterious errand of his own—and now he's worried."

Holmquist paused, and then went on reassuringly. "Of course, I myself will stand by him no matter what. I think, for the sake of simplicity, that we both, you and I, might say that he remained with us at the office last night. Should we ever be questioned, I mean. But of course, that's up to you, too."

He left it up in the air like that, and what could Mary say? She didn't; she just looked at me with trouble in her dark eyes.

I said evenly, "You can't get away with it, Holmquist."

His eyes were amused and contemptuous. "*Mister* Holmquist, please, Nickie. You mean an alibi isn't enough to clear you?"

"I mean I can still go to the police."

He wagged his head at me sadly. "Before you do anything rash, my boy, perhaps you should hear the rest of the information I received. The police have found the gun which killed poor Wong, an old .38 caliber Colt. It had fingerprints on it, and . . . well, if I were you, I'd make mighty certain they aren't yours, first."

I could have killed him right there and then with my bare hands, but I didn't. I just went back to my own room and killed the rest of the morning—thinking. . . .

So Holmquist had an ace in the hole; I might have known it. And I didn't have anything, except a note I couldn't read.

Studying that now, I discovered something more. It wasn't a duplicate of Holmquist's; it was the original itself! By holding it up to the light, I could see something like a faint watermark. Traces of oil absorbed by the fine paper . . . oil from the cylinder of that old .38 Colt I had laid on top of the note when it was on Holmquist's desk!

It tied Holmquist in with my young Chinese friend—at least it did for me—but it wasn't proof. I still needed that errand boy himself, and hunting for him in Chinatown would be like looking for a particular wisp of hay in a haystack.

There was only one other straw; the Sammy Toy that Mary had mentioned. Sammy Toy was listed in the phone book, at least—but in Chinatown, on the same street as Wong Po's store. Chinatown was the place where my own rugged puss would be picked out by any detective poking around down there. . . .

I had to wait until after supper, but I finally found the solution. I rode in a rubber-neck bus, surrounded by visiting firemen and Iowa schoolteachers with pusses just as rugged as mine. They flocked through the narrow streets, and I tagged along behind, keeping an eye out for Sammy Toy's sign.

I found his place at the same time that

the two large and elderly ladies from Keokuk stopped dead ahead of me, fascinated by a display of gruesome delicacies in front of his little grocery store. The lad who had been sweeping the sidewalk stepped back out of their way—and bumped into me.

He was dressed now in a baggy costume, but when he looked around I recognized him. He recognized me too, but just like last night he moved fast and first. He made a dive for the store entrance, leaving his broom between my legs. By the time I got clear of that and had shoved the Keokuk gals out of the way, the store was empty.

However, there was a curtained doorway at the rear. The curtain was still swinging. There were sharp exclamations in Chinese as I ran toward it. Then I came to an abrupt halt against an ample belly.

He had a placid, full-moon face and it wore an apologetic expression, but there was no budging him. In the back room my friend from Columbia was still chattering away in chop-chop talk.

Moon-face snapped out something that was probably the Chinese for "Shut up!", and looked at me questioningly. "Lee not talk English. Me talk English good. Me Sammy Toy talk."

There was a fresh torrent of sing-song from behind the curtain—from the bright boy who knew no Chinese on Saturday nights and spoke nothing else the rest of the week.

I gave Sammy Toy my shoulder and an elbow, and went on through. But by now the rear room was empty too, and so was the alley beyond the open back door.

I TURNED back in. Sammy Toy got in front of me again, looking for trouble, which made two of us. I moved around quickly as he tried to smother me in a bear hug, and went to work with my open fists. I worked hard and fast, and I kept at it until Sammy Toy was willing to talk. Then I had to wait until he was able to.

The first thing he told me was that he, Sammy Toy, was velly good 'Melican and didn't know anything about this Lee because he have job only one week. He went on excitedly and I gathered that he took

me for an Immigration officer of some sort, and thought I was after Lee for illegal entry!

I told him what he could do with *that* story. His boy Lee had been around a long time on this side, and he knew it just as well as I did, and how would he like to see the inside of a jail? For aiding the murderer of Wong Po, I added.

Sammy didn't know what to make of that. Lee good boy, honorable son of an honorable cousin in China. Lee only in this count'ly soon, Lee not know Wong Po. Lee not even speak English, but Lee work hard.

"Yeah," I said. "For a joker named Holmquist."

That rang a bell. Sammy Toy looked at me sharply, then went back into his routine about Lee good boy. But he had already given me a glimmer—and the glimmer was turning into a bright idea.

I headed for the front door, and then changed my mind. Out front the gals from Keokuk were making excited gestures toward a cop walking up in the block. And Sammy Toy was still sitting on the floor thinking things over as I went out the back way. . . .

Mary Welscu looked doubtful when she opened her door. I guessed that Holmquist had been working on her. When I pushed my way in and saw the suitcase, I knew he had done a good job.

"Going somewhere?"

"Yes," she answered coldly. "Miami and then Havana. Mr. Holmquist is leaving tonight, and he asked me to go with him."

I scoffed, and she glared at me. The next second she was in my arms, sobbing. Women are the damndest . . . well, *you* figure them out. I didn't have time right then, I was too busy asking questions.

She told me Holmquist was in his apartment, likewise packing, and yes, she had a key to the office, but. . . .

Ten minutes later the key was opening the door, and then Mary's quick fingers were finding the papers I wanted to see.

"That's what you need, Nickie?"

I nodded slowly, still studying the file. "These celadon porcelains were obtained from one Lee Yen in Shanghai, right? Wong Po acted as some sort of contact

agent for Holmquist, and they were con- signed to Sammy Toy here in New York, yes?"

"Yes . . . yes, but . . ."

"There never was any celadon bowls," I said. "Sammy Toy is a grocer and he probably wouldn't know a celadon if he saw one. All he knows is that his cousin's son recently landed here from China and went to work for him. He's not even sure of that now, since I told him a few things about his boy Lee."

Her shoulders slumped, but her eyes were defiant.

"You knew all the time he was smug- gling. *Smuggling aliens into this country.*"

"All right, I knew! Mr. Holmquist himself told me. With his contacts abroad, his business as an importer, he sometimes found himself in the position to help un- fortunate people. Desperate, homeless people, Nickie, and America their last hope. Yes, I knew, and I knew it was il- legal too, and I still—"

"Illegal!" I groaned. "A racket, Mary, a horrible, vicious racket! There isn't a dirtier one."

She still wasn't convinced. "Nickie, you just don't know. You'll never know— what it's like—what it means to those people!"

"I know what it means to Holmquist. Bleed 'em for their last cent, pay off some cutthroat to run 'em in. If they make it, okay. They may even be worth black- mailing later on, if they make money them- selves or have friends.

"And if they don't make it, that's okay too. Another meal for the sharks, another skeleton rotting in some swamp along the coast. What difference does it make to the guys like Holmquist? They don't even get their hands dirty, except maybe from counting the dough."

I shook my head and she stared at me with horror. "You know these things for true, Nickie?"

"I was even offered in on it myself once. A guy with a small boat, he needed a helper. He told me there was something like forty thousand of them in Cuba alone, waiting for the chance to get across. Big money—and dirty money. I told the guy it wasn't for me, not if I starved first."

She didn't seem to be listening any more; her thoughts were miles away.

"This racket, you call it . . . it has to do with Wong Po's death, and all the rest of it?"

"It all ties in somehow," I said shortly. "Everything adds up—except *your* part in it."

"**M**AYBE I can explain that," said a quiet voice behind us. It was Au- gustus Holmquist. His face was expres- sionless, as cold and bleak as the auto- matic in his hand.

Mary gasped and moved closer; I just stood frozen, measuring the distance against that look in his face.

"Mary has a father, Nickie—an elderly father she'd like very much to see again. I promised to bring him in in return for her services, but I'm afraid you've made that impossible now. However, I'll still make a bargain. Be sensible, and I'll take her with me."

"And otherwise?"

He shrugged, and the gun moved a quarter of an inch to my left. Mary looked at me. Her lips quivered, but her eyes were steady. Slowly, deliberately, she shook her head.

It was all I needed. I even managed a grin. "Mary says no. I say go to hell."

Holmquist frowned. "I gave you credit for more sense, Nickie. One way or an- other, I'm going to make it. If it's got to be this way—" His hand tightened around the gun.

"Wait," I said desperately. "Mary goes with you—what happens to me?"

He smiled and relaxed. "You drive us to the airport. Give us a few hours, long enough to be on our way. After that . . . well, that's your worry. But if anything goes wrong, if anything happens, it hap- pens to Mary first. . . ."

It turned out to be a long drive to the airport, but Holmquist watched it every step. He made me stretch out on the floor while Mary emptied the safe into his briefcase. He kept to the rear, with Mary between us, when we went down to the car. He sat in the rear with Mary while I drove.

When he ordered me to head for the Holland Tunnel I hoped my chance would come there. But he anticipated me again; he moved suddenly behind me, and there was a little thud. When I glanced in the

mirror, Mary's head was resting on his shoulder as cozy as a bride.

There was still the Newark airport, I figured—until he directed me south, through the Jersey flats. Then my foot eased up on the throttle.

"Keep going, Nickie. I told you an air-field, and that's what it will be. A *private* one."

The lonely miles whined away under the tires. Mary groaned and stirred, finally. That's when I began talking. It was to keep her mind off her troubles, as much as anything.

"This guy Lee—how did he figure in it?"

"I thought you had everything figured out," Holmquist answered sarcastically.

"Enough," I said. "At least I know he isn't any son of any honorable cousin of Sammy Toy's. And his name probably isn't Lee."

"You can ask him when you see him. He'll be waiting for us, I trust. A very talented lad, both with a gun and a plane."

"So you contracted to smuggle in one Lee Yen?" I went on. "Or maybe it was the son of Lee Yen? Anyway, Wong Po was in on the deal too, and when it went sour he threatened you."

Holmquist sighed. "Unfortunately the Chinese aren't as simple to deal with as you, Nickie. They're clever, they have a system. They get some friend or relative in this country to put up the money; they give what amounts to slave labor in return. And it's all handled through a third party, an agent."

"Wong Po was the agent, then? For Sammy Toy, who was staking his young cousin from China?"

Holmquist's silence told me I was right. After a moment he sighed again. "My Oriental friends have another safeguards they don't pay off until actual delivery is made. I went to a lot of trouble with this young Lee, and then something happened. He got lost somewhere this side of Cuba, and that left me in a very uncomfortable position."

"Not to mention poor Lee," I said bitterly.

"We all take our chances," Holmquist said defensively. "I still had my own expenses to meet, not to mention saving my own hide."

"So you substituted this punk who was already working for you," I supplied. "He was supposed to pose as young Lee, at least long enough so that you could collect. Sammy Toy didn't know the difference. He hadn't seen the boy for years, if ever. But Wong Po got wise, yes?"

"Wong Po was too wise for his own good," Holmquist admitted. "He discovered the substitution somehow, but not until after he had paid off. He couldn't repay Sammy Toy, he couldn't even admit his error without losing face—but he *could* see that I received the funeral he felt I deserved. Either he or one of his tong brothers."

"And so you tried to make me the goat," I said bitterly. "When I turned you down, you got your other boy to do the job—and still framed me for it."

Holmquist didn't even bother to answer. In the mirror I could see that he was leaning slightly forward, watching the road. Mary began to say something unsteadily, but he cut her off with a sharp direction.

It was a dirt road leading through the scrub pines to the right. As we swung off the highway, the lights swung across a faded sign which pointed to the field.

Holmquist hadn't been joking when he called it private. It was a desolate, bumpy clearing, with one old tumbledown shed for a hangar. I wondered to myself how many aliens had been lucky enough, or wealthy enough to get this far.

The plane was waiting, with the propeller already turning over—but it was the end of the line for both Mary and me. It was a little sport job, that plane, and it only took two passengers. *One* of the passengers was already in the pilot's seat.

Holmquist nudged me sharply. "This is far enough, Nickie. Pull up!"

I slammed on the brakes and swung around, but he already had the door open and was backing out with his gun still ready. He straightened up as his feet found the ground. In the dim glow of the light I could see his face tighten.

Then my left foot came up off the clutch pedal; my right smashed down on the throttle. The car lurched ahead, and the open door caught Holmquist just as he fired.

I poured on the gas, then looked back.

(Please continue on page 128)

HOMICIDE'S BELLE



By **GREG
KENNEDY**

THE young editor of the San Francisco newspaper pointed a stubby finger at a personal ad. "Let's have a reporter look into this. There might be a story." The ad he pointed to was buried in the back pages of the paper. It read: *Blanche: No matter what has happened, come home to me. Maud.*

A reporter was assigned to the story, and his first effort was a visit to the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Noble, who lived in the Mission district of San Francisco. He learned that their niece, 21-year-old Blanche Lamont, had left home several days before, on Wednesday, April 3, 1895. The personal ad had been inserted by Blanche's youngest sister, who felt that Blanche had fallen on evil ways.

No one had had the nerve to tell the police because there were rumors to the effect that Blanche was leading a wayward life. When asked by the reporter how such an evil rumor could get started, the young sister said she didn't know, but that all the people of the neighborhood had their tongues wagging about Blanche.

The young girl, near hysterics, took some time to stammer out that Blanche was one of five children, born in Rockford, Ill. She had arrived in San Francisco in September, 1894, and was, at the time of her mysterious disappearance, a student at Normal School on Powell Street. She was a faithful church worker, and noted for her beauty.

The newspaper then prodded the police department into action. Chief of Detectives I. W. Lees quickly got on the case and learned that Miss Lamont had been last seen at 3 p.m. April 3, as she left

school with three girls. When questioned, these girls said she had met a dapper young man. They agreed he appeared around 25, that he was stockily built, and was sporting a small mustache. They had noticed him because the girls at the school were not allowed to have escorts to or from classes, and they were a little surprised to see Blanche get on a street car with him and ride off.

Two weeks later, the mystery of Blanche Lamont's disappearance was still unsolved. On Good Friday, April 12, the Mission district had another mystery. Another young girl had vanished.

Marian Elora Williams was a slender young girl of 19. She was a pretty and pert little thing, and was employed as a housemaid in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Clark H. Morgan in the Alameda section. Minnie, as she was known, left the house in Alameda with the intention of visiting some friends in the Mission district where she formerly had worked.

She told her employer she would attend a Christian Endeavour meeting in the home of Thomas A. Vogel, deacon of the Emmanuel Church on Bartlett Street. This was the same church to which Blanche Lamont belonged. Minnie had arrived at her friend's place in the Mission district early in the evening. Around eight she left for her meeting. She was never seen alive again.

Saturday following Good Friday, a group of the church women gathered to begin decorating the hall for the Easter season. When they were half through their work, one of the women entered the library near the altar to get a vase. She

noticed the door was open to a small store room off the library. She moved toward it, glanced inside. Then she screamed and fell in a dead faint.

What that woman had seen inside the little room was the mutilated body of a young woman, face up on the table, with the jagged remains of a table knife sticking out of her chest. Other fragments of knives lay beside her on the table, with still others on the floor. Her face had been hacked to ribbons, and a wad of her own clothing jammed into her mouth with a stick.

The woman, revived by her friends, rushed to the Rev. J. George Gibson. The Reverend Gibson got hold of one of the church trustees and hurried to the scene.

Blanche Lamont's library card was found only a few feet from the body, but neither of the men would vouchsafe that it was she. The pastor, in a terrible nervous state, attempted to have an undertaker remove the body from the church immediately, but the police arrived before he could carry out his plans. He explained to the blue-coats that he only wished to avoid publicity.

Soon the morbid curiosity of the neighbors had them gathering around the church. The rumor spread that it was the body of Blanche Lamont. But it wasn't Blanche—it was the pretty young domestic, Minnie Williams.

Her fight for life had been a desperate and violent one. The police said she had been dead at least 12 hours, and discovered that her purse was missing. The first person questioned by the police was the Reverend Gibson.

He said he'd arrived at the church at eight that Saturday morning and had found the rear door closed but unlocked, which was unusual. He had also noticed the lock on the vestibule door was broken, but had done nothing about it. He had returned home after picking up some reading. The janitor threw even more suspicion on the minister by quoting him as saying, "I'll have the lock investigated. Meanwhile, say nothing about it."

The police next turned to the relatives of the missing Blanche Lamont. Mrs. Noble, the aunt, finally admitted that on Saturday morning she had received a

strange package in the mail. It held three of Blanche's rings, wrapped in newspaper, and on the margin of the wrapping had been printed the names of three prominent members of Emmanuel Church. They were George King, the organist; Theodore Durrand, church librarian; and George Schoenstein, a teacher of music.

The following day, an officer was stationed by the church. As the evening shadows lengthened and the policeman's feet grew weary from his pacing to and fro, the great bell in the church tower suddenly tolled out in one mournful peal. The cop knew the bell was cracked and hadn't been rung in years, and immediately he rushed up the dusty, winding staircase that lead to the belfry.

The dusty stairs revealed footprints, and that a heavy object had been dragged up them. The footprints led to a room not over 12 feet square. And there, lying just beneath the big copper bell, grotesquely twisted by rigor mortis, was the body of Blanche Lamont. Her right arm had fallen against the bell clapper, and had forced it against the bell with sufficient force to ring out the one lugubrious note which was to be the death knell of her killer.

Police experts deduced that she had been strangled by a left-handed man with square-cut fingernails. Both murders, they believed, had taken place in the same small room.

The list of suspects narrowed down to Gibson, the minister, and to Theodore Durrand. The minister was suspect because of his peculiar action in attempting to have an undertaker remove the body before the police arrived.

Durrand was a pillar of the church and a medical student of Cooper College. He was ambidextrous and had square-cut fingernail. A search of his home brought forth Minnie Williams' pocket-book. Witnesses placed him with Minnie the day she disappeared. He was convicted of both killings on Nov. 1, 1895, after his wealthy family spent thousands in attempts to save him. He was hanged on Jan. 7, 1898.

The newspaper editor and owner had been right: There *was* quite a story behind that obscure little personal.

PLUS

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

*Newshawk Sanson staggered from a Mexican minx' arms
into the Bordertown smugglers' tea-party—
just as the gorilla with bloody mitts
started shelling out the shrouds.*



He threw it at the side of
Christy's head.

CHAPTER ONE

Bordertown Harpy

THE tall girl was restless. She had dark eyes with a hard flickering light in them, like black opals. Her mouth was wide and soft and sullen. It was ten o'clock at night in Baker, Texas.

FIVE-STAR FUGITIVE

By **SCOTT
O'HARA**



Her third-floor room in the Sage House had the hot breathlessness of the bakery she had once worked in, back when she was fourteen and had looked eighteen.

Five days in this hole. And it could be five more.

A half-block away a barn dance was in progress. She could hear the tiny whine

of the music, the resounding stomping of boots. Somebody yelled shrilly, "Eeeeh-hoo!"

"Damn silly cowhands," she muttered. She threw the movie magazine away, sat up and tapped a cigarette on a long thumbnail the color of blood. As she lighted it a heavy strand of hair swung forward. The hair was the color of wheat, so expensively and expertly dyed that it looked natural. As she sucked the smoke into her lungs, she threw the strand of hair back with a quick movement of her head.

She looked with distaste at the room. Brown and green grass rug. Wicker furniture. Metal bed painted a liverish green. The mattress sagged toward the middle from all directions. Her two suitcases were on stands by the far wall, the lids open. A stocking dangled out of one, almost to the floor.

"You're letting it get you, kid," she said softly.

In her bare feet she padded over to the biggest suitcase, took the last pint out from under the rumpled clothes. She broke her fingernail on the plastic covering and cursed bitterly. She tossed the covering into the tin wastebasket by the bureau, poured three inches of the rye into the heavy tumbler which stood on the bureau.

She stood in front of the bureau staring down into the glass, hating the loneliness, the fear, the tension. The heavy rope of hair swung forward again. She stood in an ugly way, feet spread, shoulders slumped forward.

"How, kid," she whispered. She tossed off the tepid liquor, gagged slightly on it, poured some more in the glass and left it on the bureau top.

She went into the bathroom. The big old tub stood on feet cast to resemble claws. She put the plug in and started the water running. The pipes were so clogged that the water came out in a thin stream. She went back to get her glass, and went to the front window. Starlight glinted off the Rio Grande. Across the way she could see the lights of small, dirty, turbulent Piedras Chicas.

A faint night breeze swayed the dusty curtains and cooled her. She looked hard at the distant lights as though trying to see down into the streets, to see the man

who would bring the package across the river.

While the tub was filling with tepid water, she sprawled on the bed, finished the second drink, yawned and closed her eyes.

A flabby moon-faced middle-aged man came quietly down the hall. He wore a sports shirt loudly decorated with rodeo scenes. He listened outside her door, then slipped a paper-thin strip of tool steel out of his trouser pocket. He slid it along the jam, his small pink mouth pursed in concentration.

When it touched the latch, he pressed down hard, pulling slightly toward himself. There was a thin grating sound. He turned the knob slowly and pulled the door open a crack. He looked in, then looked up and down the hall.

He stepped lightly into the room and shut the door silently behind him. He drifted, soundless as smoke, across the room, stopped, looked at her cautiously.

For a long time he studied her. He wore an expression seen on the face of any person who intends to perform a difficult act with practised confidence. He slipped his shirt off and threw it behind him. Rubbery muscles moved underneath the flaccid white skin. In two quick steps he reached her. She heaved up as his stubby white thumbs dug into the pressure points at the base of her throat. Her eyes rolled back into her head so that only two narrow slits of white showed.

Shaymen watched her for a moment and then began an expert search of the room. He slit the linings of the two suitcases, wrenched the high heels from five pair of shoes, looked under the rugs, in the backs of the two pictures. He found it in a leg of the metal bed. The roller wheel had been pulled out of the leg and what he wanted had been shoved up inside the hollow metal, the roller wheel replaced.

He slipped off the rubber band and the oil cloth. The tightly rolled bills expanded. Shaymen riffled the corners with his thumb. Hundreds, five hundreds and thousands. He frowned. He didn't like the thousands. They called for a fencing operation and a discount. The recent activities of the Bureau of Internal Revenue had made the discount a big one.

He tucked the roll into his pocket, put

the shirt back on, looked at the girl. There was a swift sensation of regret in his mind, gone almost as soon as it arrived. He left the room after making certain that the hallway was empty. On his way down the stairs he nibbled the thin coating of glass cement from his finger tips. It had an acid taste. He spat out the hard flakes with small soft explosive sounds. It was always better than gloves. Didn't arouse suspicion. Didn't smother the cleverness of the hands.

In the lobby he bought a pack of cigarettes from the girl who was just closing the counter for the night. He smiled inside himself as he saw her staring at the shirt. It was so flamboyant that no one looked beyond it to the negative face.

Out on the sidewalk which still gave off the remembered heat of the sun, he took a deep drag on his cigarette and walked west. The tourist court was a quarter mile beyond the city limits. Travelers sat out in the lawn chairs escaping the heat. They talked and laughed softly. Shaymen accepted the invitation to sit with them and have a cold beer. He was sleepy. He yawned a great deal.

LANE SANSON supported himself precariously against the bar in one of the cheaper cantinas of Piedras Chicas. A wandering mariachi with guitar was singing in a hard nasal voice. His income depended on his nuisance value. A peso would keep that nerve-twanging voice at a safe distance.

Lane Sanson cupped his big hand around the small glass of mescal on the bar in front of him. The solution of all eternal mysteries was on the tip of his mind, ready to be jolted off with this drink, or the next, or the next.

An absent smile touched his big, hard-lipped mouth and he thought, "*You better start finding some answers quick, Sanson. A lot of good answers.*"

That was the trouble with the world. No answers. All questions. How did Sandy put it that night she left for good? "Lane, you've spent six years feeling sorry for yourself. Frankly, you've turned into a bore." Her bright eyes had crackled with angry flame.

"So?" he had said, as insolently as he could manage.

"Good-by, Lane." Just like that. Clunk. Gone.

Oh, that Lane Sanson, he's going places. Yessiree. That's what they said, isn't it? A hell of a good reporter, that Sanson. You've read his book? *Battalion Front*, it was called. Remember the reviews. "This one has guts." "A war book with integrity." The magazine serial rights brought in forty thousand and the book club edition added fifty to that and the movies had donated a neat sixty-two five.

If the agent hadn't been on the ball, taxes would have creamed him. But the movie deal spread the take over five years and the book and magazine take were prorated backward over the previous three tax years.

One day you're a member of the working press. A day later you're a cocktail party lion.

And Lane Sanson, the man of the hour, spends the next five years breaking Sandy's heart. This was the last year of income from the book. Where did it go, that integrity they yaked about? Diluted over a thousand bar tops, spread in sweet-talk to half-a-hundred women.

Sooner or later you hit bottom. The inevitable bottom. Three weeks ago he got the papers in Mexico City. He signed them. Good-by, Sandy. There was a party that night. What a party! It lasted four days.

When the hangover was gone he had written the letters. Ten of them. Eight had answered and of the eight, seven had said, "So sorry, pal." The eighth had said, "Come on up for a try. Leg man. Guild rates."

He had driven out of Mexico City in the convertible that was beginning to be a shambling relic of the big money year. Six hundred miles of Mexican sun with the top down had put a false look of health on top of the pale dissipation green of the two years in Mexico City—two years with nothing to show for it but fifty pages of manuscript so foul that on that last cool night he'd used it to get the fire burning in the apartment out Chapultepec way.

Yes, he had driven right up to the border full of false courage and when he had seen the bridge across the Rio Grande, the bottom had fallen out. On this side

of the bridge a man could drift along. Over on that side he had to produce. And Lane Sanson was grievously afraid that, at thirty-four, his producing days were over for keeps.

One bridge to cross, and he couldn't make it. He'd parked the car, wolfed enchiladas for a base, and embarked on a mescal project.

So far he had arrived at one great truth. Up to the age of twenty-eight everything he had done had turned out right. And then the gods had switched the dice. How long can a man go on alienating his friends, forgetting his skills, fouling up his marriage.

The loss of Sandy was a pain that rattled around in his heart. Sandy of the gamin smile, the eyes that could go solemn on you. Sunday mornings with Sandy, Sandy whom he had struck, hearing her emit a low soft note of pain that stung his drunken heart because it was the same soft sound that she made when ecstasy was too much to bear silently.

He doubled his fist and struck the edge of the bar. Damn a man who rolls endlessly down a bottomless slope and cannot save himself.

An Indio girl moved close beside him. She had a flat broad brown face, obsidian-black expressionless eyes and a wide, mechanical, inviting smile.

"Por favor, buy Felicia a dreenk, señor," she wheedled.

She wore a cheap cotton dress, pale blue plaid, too small for her, and pulled to a dangerous tightness. Her feet were bare and broad.

"Your ancestors were kings," he said, his words slurred. "They had a great civilization."

"Just wan leetle dreenk for Felicia?"

"They sacrificed young girls to the sun god, Felicia. At dawn from the top of mighty pyramids."

"Here the tequila ees good. I like."

He pushed two pesos across the bar top. The bartender filled a small glass for Felicia. "Muchas gracias," she said.

"*Salud*," said Sanson. He touched her glass with his glass of mescal and they drank.

"Wan more now?" Felicia said.

"No more now, darling."

There was a thin flare of contempt far

back in the depths of the shining eyes. "You buy Felicia more, Felicia make you happy."

"That is the terrible goal of mankind. To be happy. I wonder if it is a good thing. This pursuit of happiness. What do you think, Felicia?"

"No unnerstand." Her shining black hair had been frizzed into a cheap permanent.

"Happiness?" he said, "I no unnerstand either."

"Wat your name? How called you?"

"Lane."

She repeated it twice. He bought her another tequila. It disappeared like magic. Her eyes had a brighter glow.

"I luff Lane. Lane luff Felicia. Good?"

"That, my dear, is the ultimate simplification."

"No big words. Too much big word. No unnerstand. We go now?"

"Where do we go?"

"Other cantina. How you say? Mas barrato."

"Cheaper."

"Ah, si! Cheepair!"

He shoved the change from the bar top into his pocket. It no longer mattered what he did or why, where he went or for what. He staggered heavily when he got away from the support of the bar. She grabbed him with a strength quite astonishing and steadied him. A group of Mexicans looked at him and chortled. Sanson was perfectly certain that disaster lay ahead. With luck, all they would do was roll him for what cash he had. Somehow, it didn't matter.

The cantina lights revolved sickeningly and he struck the side of his face against the door jamb. She pulled him erect and steered him out into the furnace air of the night. She held his arm clasped against her and he felt the roil and writhe of her muscles under the taut brown hide as she struggled with him, trying to steer him down the sidewalk.

"Not far. Not long way," she panted.

They came to the dark mouth of a narrow fetid alley, full of the stink of decay. She looked behind them and then shoved him hard into the alley. He stumbled and fell heavily on one elbow and his hip. He smiled almost casually. It was coming a lot sooner than he expected.

He was slammed against the adobe wall.



If his luck was good, his throat would be slit. That was something Lane Sanson had thought of doing for himself, standing, looking into his own bathroom mirror.

He was yanked to his feet and slammed against the adobe wall, hard. Felicia stood out on the sidewalk looking in the other direction. He could make out the wavering figures of two men.

"Where is it?" a man demanded in whispering, metallic English.

"Hip pocket," Lane said.

"Hands high." He obeyed. His wallet was taken out of his hip pocket. A pencil flashlight flicked on, pointed at the sheaf of bills. Suddenly the wallet was slapped hard against his mouth. He felt the blood run between his teeth.

"This is just money. Where is the package?"

"I don't know what you're talking

about," Sanson said with drunken dignity.

"You are the one. We know you are the one. No one else has come. Please don't try to play games."

"You've got the wrong guy," Sanson said querulously.

There was a sudden pin-prick pain against his belly. The light flicked on again, just long enough for him to see the six-inch length of steel gleam.

"Now you stop talking foolish, my friend, or I swear I'll spill your blood around your shoes."

"I would consider that a great favor," Sanson said huskily.

Then the two men talked to each other in rattling Spanish so fast that Sanson could only catch a word here and there.

"You talk," the man said. The knife pain was stronger, deeper. Sanson involuntarily sucked his stomach away from the point of the blade.

The anger was a long time in coming, but suddenly it throbbled behind his eyes. "I haven't the faintest damn idea what you want. I'm a newspaperman on my way to Houston. I don't know anything about any package. Now take that knife out of me or I'll feed it to you."

"Big talk. Big talk," the man muttered, but he seemed a little less positive. Again they talked together. The wallet was shoved back into the side pocket of Sanson's jacket. His car keys were taken out. He caught the words "auto" and "azul". So they had watched him long enough to know that his car was the blue one parked in the zocolo.

"And there isn't any package in," Sanson started. He heard the faint swish and the adobe wall behind him seemed to explode and drive the side of his head off into the hot night sky. There was no sensation of falling. Just an explosive boiling blackness. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Murder-Magnet

IT WAS an odd dream. She dreamed she had fallen out of bed onto the cool floor and in such a way that her head was cramped back at an awkward position against the baseboard. It made her neck hurt.

She moaned as she awakened, opened her stunned eyes. Then memory flooded back. She sat up with a great gasp. She was dizzy and her neck throbbled with pain. She could remember dozing off, then hard hands that gouged at her, the knowledge of death. . . .

Diana knew that a long time had passed. Some of the heat had faded. She climbed stiffly to her feet, stood for a moment, her hands braced against the wall, breathing deeply. She pushed herself away, nauseated with weakness.

It took all her strength to lift the bottom corner of the bed and pull out the caster. She poked a finger up the hollow metal leg and sobbed aloud as she felt the emptiness. She looked at her wrist-watch. Three in the morning. Five hours had passed. The town was still. All she could hear was a truck droning in the distance. She looked at the ruined shoes,

the slashed suitcases, the pictures crooked on the walls.

She shivered. Again she stretched out across the bed and picked up the room phone. The sleepy desk clerk intimated by the tone of his voice that this was a hell of a time to make a long distance phone call.

She lit a cigarette, waited for the phone to ring. It took twenty minutes.

There was no sleep in his voice. The name of the town from which the call was coming had alerted him. She sensed his anger at this violation of the rules he had made.

"George, honey? This is Diana. I just got lonesome and had to call you up."

"That's interesting."

"I had hard luck today, George. You know I planned on buying you a present down here. Well, I put the money in a special place and darn if somebody didn't steal it. Now what am I going to do?"

There was a long silence. "Maybe you were careless," he said.

"No, George. I was real careful. It was just one of those things, I guess."

"Any idea who took it?"

"Not the slightest."

Again there was a long silence. He laughed harshly. "I'd hate to think, kid, that you just decided to spend the money on yourself and give up buying me a present."

Her hand tightened on the phone. "Gee, George, I'm not dumb enough to make you mad at me."

"I hope not. Having a good time?"

"As good as I can have away from you, George. Do you still want a present?"

"It would be nice."

"You know, George, wouldn't it be funny if you told somebody that I had the money with me to buy you a present and it turned out they decided to steal it?"

"Very funny, kid. Look, I'm glad you called. A friend of mine will be down that way tomorrow late or the next day. I've told him to look you up."

"Who, George?"

"Christy."

"Please, George. No!"

"He's a nice guy, kid. I know you don't like him, but he's a nice guy. Show him a good time for me." The line clicked as he hung up.

Diana walked the floor for an hour. She walked with her fists clenched and tears in the corners of her eyes. If she packed and ran, it would indicate to George that she had crossed him. George had a special way of dealing with such persons.

If she stayed—it meant Christy. George's tone had indicated clearly that he was angry enough with her to throw her to Christy. Christy, with his queer twisted mind. She remembered how she and George had laughed about Christy.

George had kidded her, she thought, when he said, "If you ever make me mad, kid, I'll hand you over to Christy."

Now, suddenly, horribly, she knew that he hadn't been joking. She realized what a fool she had been to think that because she had lasted longer with George than any previous girl, it was for keeps. With all her heart she wished she were back at Club Tempo, doing the five a night, whispering lyrics into the mike, swaying with the beat of Kits Nooden's Midnight Five.

She turned out the lights and smothered her weeping with the pillow. Maybe George had spoken out of anger. Maybe he'd regret it, change his mind, call her back.

"George," she called softly into the night. "Please, George." For a long time she had felt that she was hard enough to bounce back from any blow. But now she felt like a frightened child, alone in the crawling dark.

LANE SANSON opened his eyes. The right eye felt clotted and stuck together. He raised trembling fingers and touched it, found that it was swollen shut, the skin around it taut and painful. It was daylight, and he looked at an adobe brick wall inches from his face. He felt extraordinarily weak, far too weak for it to be the result of a garden-type hangover. He sensed that he was indoors. When he moved he felt and heard a rustle underneath him.

There was an evil taste in his mouth. He listened, attempting to identify an odd sound. A drip and slosh of water and then silence. Then another drip and slosh of water. It came from behind him. With enormous effort he rolled over. He was in

some sort of small shed effect with a sloping roof. He could see the blue sky through holes in the roof.

A large, sturdy girl stood by a pail made of a five-gallon gasoline tin and an improvised wire handle, scrubbing clothes. He stared at her with alarm. Her back was to him. In one corner was a wooden crate of clothes. In the other corner he could see, under a flat piece of metal, the red glow of coals atop a stove improvised of cinder blocks and bricks. The sun came through the roof holes and made golden coins on the packed dirt of the floor. The light gave her skin coppery glints.

He started to think that this was certainly one part of Mexico City that he had not seen before—and then he remembered that this was Piedras Chicas, the border town. He vaguely remembered a girl in a cantina, two men in an alley and a great explosion against his head. He dug down into the disjointed memories and came up with a name.

"Felicia," he said in a half whisper. She turned sharply. "Bueno!" she said, "momentito." She dried her hands, came and sat beside him, cross-legged. Leaning forward, she put her hand on his forehead. "Ai!" she said. "Hot!"

He coughed, said in Spanish, "If you speak slowly, *chica*, I can understand. How do I come to be in this place?"

"Truly, it is like this. I was in the zocolo. Two strangers came to me and asked if I would wish to earn twenty pesos. They promised you would not be hurt. They wished me to bring you outside to the alley and hand you over to them. They talked to you and then they hit you a great blow and came out of the alley. They gave me ten pesos and said it was enough—and I spit on their feet. It appeared you were dead from the great blow and I knew that there would be much trouble.

"But I put my ear on your chest in the darkness and heard the poom, poom of your heart. You are truly heavy, Lane. But I am very strong because I worked in the fields. I dragged you through the alleys to this place, my casita. It is a question of pride, as they promised you would not be hurt. This, it is my fault and something I must do. There is a great wound in the side of your head,

Lane. But I have prodded it with my fingers and I do not feel any looseness of the bone, so I think it is not broken.

"I washed it and poured in much of the dark red thing which is for bad wounds so that they do not rot. On it I have put clean cloth. This morning at dawn I lit a candle for you at the Iglesia and said many small prayers. Now I shall buy food for us. See?"

She reached under the edge of the serape on which he lay and pulled out his wallet. "Nothing is gone, Lane. I am not a thief. May I take pesos for food?"

"Of course!"

She took a five-peso note and put the wallet back under him. He tried to sit up and a great wave of weakness struck him. He sagged back and the flushed feeling went away. His teeth began to chatter violently.

She brought an ancient torn blanket and covered him. He tried to grin at her.

"Pobrecito!" she said. "Pobre gringo!"

The great shudders began to diminish in violence. He felt as though he were a pendulum swinging more and more slowly, as it sunk with each swing further down into a restful darkness.

When next he awakened, there was a flickering light of one candle in the shack. He craned his neck and stared over at her. She sat near the stove fashioning tortillas from masa, her hands slapping rhythmically. She smiled, and he saw the glint of her eyes and teeth in the candle-light.

"Tortillas con pollo. You hungry?"

"And thirsty. Take some more money and get me cold beer. Two bottles."

She took the money and left. He staggered weakly across the floor and then back to his bed. His head throbbed so violently that he thought it would break open.

The icy beer made him a little tight. He wolfed down the food until she gasped in amazement. He wiped the grease from his mouth with the back of his hand and grinned over at her. "How many years do you have, Felicia?"

"Eighteen, I think."

"Where's your family?"

Her mouth puckered up. "Mi padre, he drowned in the river trying to cross

to the Estados Unidos. Mi madre, she dies of the choking trouble in the lungs, here."

At last his hunger was satisfied. He lay back. Sleep rolled toward him like a dark wave.

"Lane?"

"Yes, *chica*."

"I forgot to say. Today a man was killed in the Calle Cinco de Mayo. Stabbed to the heart. It was one of the two men who talked with you in the alley and struck the great blow."

"Who killed him?"

"That is not known. It is said that a tall gringo, tall like you, did that thing," she replied.

"Yes?"

"Also I heard in the market that the tall gringo is hiding somewhere in Piedras Chicas. It might be that those two thought you were he."

"That makes sense."

"What did they want of you?" the girl asked.

"They thought I had a package of some kind."

"Then it would appear, Lane, that the other gringo must have the package," she said.

"You are smart."

"No, it is a part of living here. This is a town of much violence, much smuggling. One learns how these things happen. It gives me to think," Felicia insisted.

"How so?"

"You came up from the south. It is said the other gringo did the same. So it is a matter of importance for him to get the package across the river, no? He hides. It is thought he has killed a man.

"Those who seek him and the package now know that they were mistaken in approaching you. Thus you could take the package across with perfect safety and possibly much profit, no? They would not think you had it."

"Now wait a minute! I don't want anything to do with the police any more than you do." Lane added, "I'm no smuggler."

"We do not know if it is a police matter, estúpido! Sleep, Lane. Felicia must think. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

A Daughter of Many Kings

HE AWOKE at dawn as Felicia came in with the stranger, whose size shrunk the shack. He could not stand erect in it. He was wary. Lane found he was much stronger as he sat up.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The man sat on his heels and offered a cigarette. Lane took two and handed one to Felicia. The stranger lit all three gravely. "You," he said, "were the little man in the middle."

"If this busted head was supposed to be for you, where were you?"

"I wasn't in a cantina swilling up the local poison, that's for sure. You got a smart little girl here, friend."

"How long do we keep on fencing?"

"I had a little trouble yesterday. It cramps my style, Lane. That your last name?"

"First name."

"Okay, play cute. It's contagious. Yesterday they towed your car into the courtyard of the police station. Somebody did a good job of going through it. What they left, the kids stole. But I think it still runs."

"That's nice."

"They're about to report you missing. They got the name by a cross check on the motor vehicle entry permission. I think they'll probably wait until noon."

"You get around, don't you?"

"Friends keep me informed, Lane. I've got some instructions for you. Go and get your car this morning. Get it out of that courtyard. Are your papers in order?"

"They are, but if you think I'm going to—"

"Please shut up, Lane. Get your car and drive it to a little garage at the end of Cinco de Mayo. There's a big red-and-yellow sign in front which says, "*Me-chanico*". Tell them you want it checked over. Leave it there while you have lunch. Then get it and drive it across into Baker, Texas. Put it in the parking lot behind the Sage House. Register in the Sage House. Is that clear?"

"Damn you, I have no intention of—"

"You run off at the mouth, Lane. You ought to take lessons from this little girl

you got. She's got a head on her. She could tell you what will happen if you don't play."

Lane looked quickly at Felicia.

"Don't bother," the stranger said. "We've been talking too fast for her to catch on. I'll give it to you straight. If you don't play ball, some friends of mine are going to give the most careful description of you to the police you ever heard. And they're going to tell just how you shived that citizen yesterday. You won't get any help from the American Consul on a deal like that. You'll rot in the prison in Monterrey for twenty years. Beans and tortillas, friend."

The big man smiled broadly. He was close to forty. He had a big long face, small colorless eyes and hulking shoulders. He was well dressed.

"That's a bluff," Lane Sanson said loudly.

"Ssssh!" Felicia said.

"Try me," the big man said. His tone removed the last suspicion Lane had.

"Why are you picking on me?"

"Laddy, you're still the man in the middle. Park your car behind the Sage House and leave it there. Take a look at it the following morning. That'll be tomorrow morning. If everything has gone well, laddy, there'll be a little present for you behind the sun visor on the driver's side. Then you're your own man. But if there's no present there, you'll go and see a girl named Diana Saybree—at least she'll be registered that way in the Sage House. Now memorize what you're going to say to her."

"Look, I—"

"Friend, you're in. If you don't play on the other side of the river, there're friends over there too. This is what you say to Diana: 'Charlie says you might like to buy my car. He recommends it. You can send him a payment through the other channel. No payment, no more favors.'"

He repeated it until Lane was able to say it tonelessly after him.

The big man took a fifty-dollar bill, folded it lengthwise and laid it on the floor beside Lane's hand. "That'll cover expenses. Now go over to the police barracks as soon as they open. It's nearly six. You've got three hours."

As the stranger ducked for the low doorway, he said, "Just follow orders and chances are, by tomorrow afternoon, you can be on your way wherever you're going with a little dough to boot."

He was gone. Sanson's head was aching again. He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "He is not a nice man, no?" Felicia said.

"He is not a nice man, yes," answered Lane, "It is a bad thing that you should bring him here."

"That shows what you know." Her eyes flashed. "It was all planned by them for you to be taken by the police for the murder yesterday. Children saw you sleeping here yesterday. In the market a thing is soon known all over town. But for me you would be in prison for murder."

"I am truly sorry, *chica*."

Her anger left and her smile was warm. "It is nothing."

He pushed the bill toward her. "Here. This is yours."

"No, it is much. It is more than four hundred pesos. You see, I know the value of dollars. What could I do with it? If I try to change it, the police will have me. Better you should give me some of your pesos if you wish to make a gift to me."

He handed her his pesos. She took them without looking up into his face. She seemed suddenly shy.

"*Muchas gracias, Felicia.*"

"It is nothing, señor."

He touched her cheek, slipped his hand under her chin and lifted her face until he could look into the deep wild gleam of the black eyes.

"Truly a daughter of many great kings," he whispered.

She took his hand and kissed it. "Go with the Lord, Señor Lane."

AFTER lunch he walked back to the garage where he had left the car. The small man with large pimples charged him ten pesos for the work on the car.

To get to the bridge he had to circle the zocolo with its bandstand in the center, with the paths and rows of iron benches. Curio shops, churches and public buildings faced the square. As he turned the corner to head along the fourth and

last side, he saw two uniformed policemen armed with rifles standing on the walk. A crowd had gathered but they stayed well back from the policemen, staring avidly at the crumpled form on the walk. Others came running up to join the crowd.

As Sanson drove slowly by, he saw the body of the stranger who had come to Felicia's shack. His cheek rested in a spreading pool of blood. Blue flies buzzed in a cloud around his face. The skull was subtly distorted by the impact of slugs against the brain tissue. Sanson set his jaw, clamped his hands on the wheel and resisted the impulse to tramp hard on the gas.

At the Mexican end of the bridge he surrendered the tourist card, which he had renewed three times during the two years in Mexico. He signed it in the presence of the guard and was waved on. In the middle of the bridge he paid the fifty centavo toll.

At the American end, a brisk man in kahki stepped forward and said, "American citizen? Where are you coming from? Please bring your luggage inside for customs inspection."

Lane made himself grin. "I wish I could. I did too much celebrating the other night. Somebody broke into my car and took everything. The only thing they left was the car itself."

The man stared at him. "Have an accident?"

"Fell and hit my head."

"Have you got proof of citizenship?"

Lane dug out his birth certificate. "This do?"

"Fine. Now open up the trunk, please."

The man shone a flashlight around inside the trunk, then climbed into the car and looked down into the well, where the top folded.

He turned around. "I have the idea I ought to know that name. Lane Sanson."

"There was a book, six years ago. *Battalion Front.*"

The customs man grinned. "Hell, yes! I read that thing five times. I was a dough, an old infantry paddlefoot, so it meant something to me." He backed out of the car. "You haven't written something since that I missed, have you?"

"Nothing."

"Okay, that's all the red tape, Mr. Sanson. Good luck to you."

"Thanks."

He drove down into the main street of Baker. Directly ahead, on the right, he saw the Sage House, a three-story frame building painted a blinding white. The entrance was dark green. He parked in front and went in. People stared at him. He was conscious of his heavy beard, the badly rumpled suit.

"I'd like a room, please," he said.

The clerk looked at him with obvious distaste. "I'll have to see if there are any vacancies."

Sanson slipped the traveler checks out of the inside pocket of his wallet. "While you're looking, tell your cashier I want some of these cashed. If you have a room, I want a barber sent up in thirty minutes. And I'll want a portable typewriter, and my car put in your parking lot in the rear. I have no baggage. It was stolen over in Piedras Chicas. So, I'll pay you in advance."

Under the impact of the flow of imperious demands, the clerk's dubious look faded away. "As a matter of fact, I notice that we do have a quite pleasant room on the second-floor front. It'll come to..."

"I'll take it. Send the boy up to open it up and wait for me while I cash my traveler checks."

"Number 202, Mr.—ah—Sanson," the clerk said, reading his signature as he wrote it. "If you'll leave your keys here—"

"They're in the car."

"I'll have a typewriter sent up, sir."

"With a twenty-weight bond, black record carbon and glazed second sheets."

"Yes, sir," the clerk said, thoroughly quelled.

Once in the room, Lane threw his jacket on the bed. He stripped off his trousers and emptied the pockets onto the bureau top. He said to the boy, "Go over to the desk and write this down." The bellhop shrugged and sat down. "Waist 32, inseam 33. That's for the slacks. Now for the shirts. 16 collar, 34 sleeve. Go buy me two pair of slacks, gabardine if you can get them. Pale gray or natural. And two sport shirts, plain white, short sleeves.

"Take my suit along and leave it to be cleaned. Fastest possible service. I want a doctor as soon as he can get up here and, exactly one hour from now, a good barber to give me a shave and haircut. Oh, yes. Get some underwear shorts and some dark socks, plain colors, three pair, blue or green, size twelve. This ought to cover it."

The bellhop scribbled some more. "Three pair shorts?"

"That'll do it. Any questions?"

"You give me a fifty. How high you want to go on the pants and shirts?"

"Fifteen for the slacks, three and a half for the shirts. With what you have left over, get some fair rye. Bring up ice and soda."

"This town is dry, sir."

"It doesn't have to be the best rye."

"I'll see what I can do."

The doctor arrived when the bathtub was almost ready. He inspected the cut, sighed, rebanded it. "If you'd called me when it happened I could have put clamps in it and it wouldn't have left much of a scar. Five dollars please."

When he finished washing, the barber



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had spread newspapers and put a straight chair near the windows. Just as he finished, the bellhop arrived, laden with packages. Lane checked the purchases and tipped the boy. Ten minutes later, as he was dressing, the typewriter arrived, ice and soda following soon afterward. Lane sent the boy back for cigarettes.

When the door was shut and he was alone, Lane Sanson unwrapped the paper, rolled a sheet into the machine. He made a drink and set it near him. He lit a cigarette.

Across the top of the first sheet he typed:

A DAUGHTER OF MANY KINGS

He sat for a long time, sipping the drink. When the glass was empty, he began to work. The words came, and they were the right words. After six years—the right words. He forgot time and place and fear.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kill-Boy's Double-Cross

THE C-47 run by the feeder line to Baker was a tired old plane. Inside, it had the smell and the flavor commonly associated with old smoking cars on marginal railroads. It had sagged and blundered its way through storm and hail, freezing cold and blistering heat. It had fishtailed into a thousand inferior runways. The original motors were five changes back. The air-frame was like the uppers of a pair of shoes resoled once too often.

The bored pilot cut the corners off the standard approach pattern and slipped into the Baker strip. The tires leaped and squealed on the cracked concrete and he cursed it for being a weary recalcitrant old lady as he yanked it around and taxied it over to the cinderblock terminal building. Attendants came trotting across the baked cement. The little line prided itself on a ninety-second turnaround. The poop sheet said two off and one on at Baker.

The pilot squatted on his haunches under the wing, a cigarette squeezed between his yellowed fingers. The co-pilot had gone into the building for the initialing of the manifest

The pilot looked at the two passengers

who got off. One of them was easy. Local cattleman, right from the cream-colored Stetson down to the hand-sewn boots. The other one was harder to figure. The pilot decided he wasn't the sort you'd want to strike up any casual conversations with. Brute shoulders on him. Stocky, bowed legs. Long arms. Damned if he wasn't built like one of them apes.

But it wasn't an ape's face. Rimless glasses and that half-bald head. Some crack-pot probably. The zaney little blue eyes beamed around at the world and the mouth was wide and wet-lipped, set in the kind of smile that made you think of the time the high school psychology class went over to the state farm and got a look at the real funny ones.

Only, the pilot decided, you wouldn't want to laugh at this one. He wasn't dressed right for the climate in that heavy, dark, wool suit, but you wouldn't want to laugh at him.

The two suitcases were off-loaded and the new passenger was put aboard. The pilot flipped away his cigarette and went aboard. The steps were wheeled away. The hot motors caught immediately and he goosed it a few times. He trundled old Bertha down to the end of the runway. He glanced back. The funny-looking stranger was just getting into a cab. He looked like a big dark beetle, or like a hole in the sunlight. . . .

Inside the cab, Christy leaned back. The trip from New York had been like walking across a dark room toward one of those little tinfoil wrapped chocolate buds on the far side of the room. You wanted it and you knew it was there and you were thinking about it so you didn't see anything in the room or think of anything except feeling it between your fingers and picking it up and peeling off the tinfoil and putting it in your mouth.

And Christy was never without chocolate buds in his side pocket. He took one out, but already the climate had gotten to it. It pulped a little between his fingers. He got a look on his face like a child about to cry. All the others were soft too. He dropped them out the window of the cab. His hands were very large, hairless and very white. The network of veins under the skin had a blue-purple tint.

He thought of Diana and he thought of

George. He threw his head back and laughed. It was a high, gasping, whinnying sound. George was done. You could see that coming for a long time. So, when it looked right, you gave him a push.

And the push just happened to shake Diana loose, right into his hands—after looking at her so long, and taking her lip, and seeing that contempt in her eyes.

Without realizing it, he had grasped the handle on the inside of the cab door. When he remembered how she had looked at him, his jaw clamped shut and he gave an almost effortless twist of his big wrist. The screws tore out of the metal and the handle came out in his hand.

The driver gave a quick look back. "Hey, what the hell!"

"It was loose."

The driver met his glance in the rear vision mirror. "Brother, that thing was on there solid and it'll cost me at least three bucks to get it fixed."

Christy hunched forward. He put his hand casually on the driver's shoulder. He smiled wetly. "I said, friend, it was loose."

"Watch whacha doin'!" the driver said shrilly.

"It was loose."

"Okay, okay. It was loose. Leggo! Are you nuts?"

Christy leaned back and laughed again. The gutless human race. Always ready to start something and always fast to back down. The best would be George. He had decided to save that until last. Maybe at the last minute George would find out why everything was going wrong lately. It was good to think of that last minute. He knew how he'd do it.

Knock George out and take him down to the boat and wire a couple of cinderblocks to his ankles. Take the boat out and sit and eat chocolates until George came around. Then say, nice and easy, that it was time George joined a lot of his old buddies. Hoist him over the side.

Hold him there with his face above water and the cinderblocks pulling hard on his legs and listen to George talk and beg and promise and scream and slobber. Watch his eyes go mad. Hold him there until there wasn't any man left, just a struggling animal. Hold him and think of him and then spit in his face and let go.

It would be night and the white face would be yanked down out of sight as though something from underneath had grabbed it. Maybe bubbles would come up like with the others. Then George would be down there, doing a dance in the river current, dancing right along in the chorus with all the guys who'd tried to cut a piece of the big pie and had run into Christy instead.

The cab pulled up in front of the Sage House. Christy paid him the buck and a half rate, tipped him a solemn dime, and carried his bag inside.

"You got a reservation for me," he said. "A. Christy."

"Yes, Mr. Christy."

He had hurried all the way and now he wanted to go slow. Nice and slow. "There's a friend of mine here, I think. Miss Saybree. Is she in?"

"I believe she's in her room. Three-eighteen, sir. Shall I phone her?" the clerk asked.

"Skip it. I'll surprise her." Nice and slow and easy. The running was over. The girl was smart. She knew what was coming, but she hadn't tried to run out on it.

HE BARELY noticed the room they gave him. When he was alone, he stretched until the great shoulders popped and crackled. This was a hell of a long way from the carnny, the garish midway, the thronging marks paying their two bits to see the Mighty Christy drive spikes with his fists, bend crowbars across his shoulders, twist horseshoes until they broke in his hands.

George had seen him in the carnny and seen his possibilities and had jumped in with smart expensive lawyers when there was that trouble about the girl. Temporary insanity they called it, and cleared him, and from then on he'd done everything George said, up until a month ago.

He sat on the bed, wishing he had some chocolate, and thinking about Diana. When you want something bad enough and long enough, you get it.

When the thickness in his throat and the flame behind his eyes was too much to bear, he left the room and went up the stairs to the third floor, passing a second-floor room where a typewriter rattled

busily. He rattled his fingernails on the door panel of three-eighteen.

"Who is it?"

"An old pal, sweetness."

She opened the door. He grinned at her. He'd almost forgotten what a very classy dish she was. She was pale and she spoke without moving her lips.

"Come on in, Christy." She walked away from him. She walked as though she were on eggs and if she stepped too hard they'd break.

He shut the door. She had gone to sit in a straight chair. She sat with her ankles and her knees together, her hands folded in her lap. Like a new girl at school.

Christy smiled placidly at her. "George is sore," he said.

"I didn't want to do this in the first place," she snapped.

"George figured nobody would be looking for you. Anyway, he wanted you out of town."

"Why?" she asked, white-lipped.

"You've moved. You aren't living there any more. He had your stuff packed up and put in storage. You can get the claim check from him."

"Is—is anyone—"

"You ever meet old Bill Duneen? The horse player? He died of a stroke last year. Now George and Bill were great pals. George feels a sort of obligation to look out for Bill's daughter. Cute kid. Nineteen, I'd say. You could call her a kind of protégé. Did I get the right word?"

It surprised him that she smiled. "If that's the case, then I can get out of here. If you don't mind, I have to pack now."

Christy picked his teeth with a blunt thumbnail. "Sweetness, it ain't quite that easy. George said to me, he said, 'Christy, you and Diana are two of the best friends I got. I'd be real hurt if you two didn't team up.'"

"He said no such thing!"

"Sweetness, I'd take it bad if you tried to run out. If you ran out, I'd have to go up to that jerk town you come from and see how those kid sisters of yours look. What's the name of it? Oneonta."

"You—you dirty—"

"Ah, ah, ah! No bad words, sweetness.

George just happened to mention to me where you come from. He wants us to get along." He smiled placidly and watched the spirit slowly drain out of her. Her mouth went lax and she lowered her head.

"How come," he said, "you let some guy take the roll?"

Her head snapped up and her eyes narrowed. "How would you know it was some guy? Why not two or three, or even a woman?"

He knew he'd said the wrong thing. It confused him. When he was confused he acquired a dull ache at the crown of his head. It made him angry.

"George told me he thought it was a guy."

"George never guessed at anything."

The idea was growing in her mind. He shrugged. "Maybe friend George knows."

She smiled at him and he didn't like her smile. "Christy, it wouldn't be possible that you're crossing up George? I never thought of that before. He trusts you. Maybe he's wrong."

"Come here, sweetness."

The color drained out of her face. She didn't move.

"Come here or I'll come and get you."

She stood up as though she were eighty years old. She came to him, one slow step after another.

"Closer, sweetness."

"There's something wrong in your head," she whispered. "Something wrong and dirty and twisted and—"

He moved like a cat. He snatched her right wrist in his left hand and pulled her forward down into the smashing, open-handed blow against her jaw. He hit angrily and watched her go backward, her face going blank as she fell. She landed on her left side and rolled over twice, ending up on her face, one arm cramped under her. The fall had torn one shoe off.

Christy sat, breathing hard, waiting for the mist to clear away from his eyes. Then he began to wonder if he'd hit too hard. He watched her narrowly and sighed as he saw the lift of her breathing. He got up, took the key off the bureau and carefully locked her door behind him as he left.

THE blue Texas dusk was settling over the land. A lurid and impossible sunset flamed in the west. Christy walked slowly down the main street to the nearest drugstore, warm satisfaction filling him. He bought some chocolates, looked up the tourist court number and shut himself in the phone booth.

He asked for Mr. Brown and the woman said she'd get him to the phone. In a few minutes he heard Shaymen say cautiously, "Brown speaking."

"Drop the guard, junior. This is that man."

"You just get in?"

"I've been talking to the pigeon. You did good."

"Thanks."

"You got it to turn over?"

Shaymen hesitated. "If I feel like it."

Christy's throat began to swell. "Look, Shaymen. I steered you into this. You know your fee. Let's not get coy."

"Right now I'm in the driver's seat. If I wanted to cross you all the way, I wouldn't even be here. And the phone is no place to talk about it."

"Drive in and pick me up then. In front of the theater."

"Right away."

It was almost dark by the time Shaymen pulled up in front of the theater. The door swung open. Christy climbed in and sat back with a sigh. "Just drive out of town always and park, Shaymen."

They did not speak again until Shaymen had pulled off the road. He offered Christy a cigarette, used the dash lighter.

Christy chuckled. "I know you can't cross me on the amount, Shaymen. She had George's twenty-eight thousand bucks. And I got the second twenty-eight thousand."

"I don't like those thousand dollar bills."

"I'll handle those. I know a guy. Now why the coy act?"

Shaymen lifted his cigarette slowly to his lips. "You tipped me a week in advance where she'd be staying so I could lift the roll. You tell me a little. But not enough. I'm not a hired man—I told you that before. You want me working, I've got to be on the inside. Call it a partnership."

"You're a greedy guy, aren't you? It

worked the way I figured. George sent me down with cash to replace what you took off Diana. The purchase has to go through because he needs the merchandise. Even paying double for it, he makes a small profit once the stuff is cut. Four kilograms. That's a little over a hundred and forty ounces. The retailers have to make their end, you know, but even so George clears fifty-six thousand bucks at least. Plus two times twenty-eight thousand is a hundred and twelve thousand bucks."

Shaymen started. "Are you going to try to grab the stuff without paying what you brought down?"

"Right. Those boys from across the line are supposed to be rough, but the Mexican government is cracking down on them. George has been busy lining up a new source. I got all the dope on that. So if this source is going to dry up anyway, all we got to do is freeze them out and grab the stuff without paying."

"How about George? Won't they let him know they didn't get paid?"

Christy laughed his high whinnying laugh. "You kill me, Shaymen. This isn't hit and run. They may try to tell George, but maybe he won't be around to listen."

Shaymen whistled. "The works, eh?"

Christy slapped his shoulder. "You and me are in, kid. We start in with capital of a hundred and twelve thousand, with a brand new source of stuff, with the retailers in line and with George out of the way. Now give me that dough."

"It's in a safe place," Shaymen said. "Let's just leave it there, huh?"

"I don't like your attitude, Shaymen."

Shaymen flipped his cigarette out the window. "I don't care what you like and what you don't like. So far we both got twenty-eight thousand apiece. If what you say is right, I think we'll have fifty-six thousand apiece. That makes a partnership, doesn't it?"

"I've been taking orders too long," Christy said. "From now on I'm giving orders."

"If that's the way you want it, Christy, you can kiss that twenty-eight thousand good-by."

Christy reached over and clamped his left hand on Shaymen's closed right fist. He slowly closed his hand. Shaymen made

one futile, feeble effort to slam his left fist toward Christy's face but pain brought it to a faltering stop.

Christy eased off on the pressure and said, "Where's the money?"

"Damn you, Christy! In my suitcase." His tone was angry and sullen.

Christy re-applied the pressure. Again Shaymen screamed, falling forward across the wheel, half-fainting, his weight against the horn ring. Christy pushed him back and blare of the horn ceased.

"Tell me where," he demanded softly.

Shaymen was panting as though he had run a long distance. "All right . . . all right. I'll . . . tell you . . . it's buried under . . . third flagstone from the front door of . . . the tourist court . . . put it there at night . . ."

"You tried to lie to me, Shaymen. You tried to be a partner."

Now the mist was thick in Christy's eyes. He ground down with all his strength. Shaymen made a damp bleating sound and slumped over against the door.

The mist receded. Christy took a chocolate out of his pocket, picked off the tinfoil and put it in his mouth. He sucked at it.

When his mind was made up, he pulled the dying Shaymen into the passenger's seat, went around and got behind the wheel. He drove back to Baker and then over toward the river to the Mexican settlement. He found a sagging warehouse without lights, and turned out the car lights as he drove behind it.

He stood outside the car for a long time, listening. Shaymen's breath whistled once and stopped. Again Christy listened. He turned Shaymen's pockets inside out, emptied the wallet, threw it aside. He smudged his hands around the wheel and over the door handles.

Death of one Mr. Brown—commercial traveler.

Back in the hotel dining room Christy ate a large steak. He went to his room and napped until eleven. At half-past twelve, moving through the darkness like a shadow, he pulled up the flagstone, found the roll of bills in oilcloth under the packed dirt, dropped the stone back and melted off into the shadows. He was in the hotel a little after one.

He paused at the foot of the stairs lead-

ing up to the third floor. The damn fool nearby was still typing furiously. Christy felt a thick tiredness inside himself. He turned to his own room, lay heavy in the darkness, the last chocolate melting on his tongue as he fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lorelei and the Newshawk

AT SEVEN o'clock Lane Sanson went down to the parking lot behind the hotel. He looked behind the sun visor on his side of the car. Nothing. He walked into the lobby and inquired at the desk for Miss Saybree's room number.

This was something to do quickly, to get out of the way. He had been up at six to read the manuscript. There were crudities in it, he knew. But there were also places in it that had the deep tone of a great bell.

In it was something of the flavor of Mexico, the preoccupation with death, the sun and the dust and the ancient faces. The patience and the hopelessness. He wanted Sandy to read it. He wanted to watch her face while she read it because it was not only confession and acknowledgement, it was hope and promise.

But Sandy was forever gone. And everything he read, saw, did, touched, heard for the rest of his life would be but half an experience because it was unshared by the only one who had ever counted and would ever count.

Sandy was so much on the surface of his mind that when the tall girl with the blonde hair opened the room door and stared at him with an odd mixture of surprise and relief, he couldn't think for a moment who she was and why he stood there.

It was not easier to remember while looking at her. There was a deep illness of the soul in her black eyes. But in the wide soft mouth, faintly sullen, there was a hard, demanding savagery that made the impact of her as frank as a quick word said in the moving darkness.

"I have a message for you."

"Come in," she said. She pushed the door shut behind him. He knew at once that it was a singer's voice.

He smiled. "I know this sounds silly. Maybe it won't sound as silly to you."

"What is it?"

"Charlie says you might like to buy my car. He recommends it. You can send him a payment through the other channel. No payment, no more favors."

"Sit down, please," she said.

He sat in the wicker chair. She went over and stood by the windows, her back to him. "Where is your car?" she asked without turning.

"Behind the hotel. In the lot. I got it last night. I was supposed to look at it this morning. If there was a present for me behind the visor, I was to go on my way. But there wasn't. So I suppose that whatever Charlie is selling you is still in the car someplace."

"You don't know what he's selling me?"

"I don't think I want to know."

"Then you're smart."

"I didn't expect anybody like you on the other end of this deal."

She spun around. He noticed for the first time that the left side of her mouth was swollen. Tears squeezed out of her eyes. "Shut up! Please shut up! I'm trying to think."

"Pardon me," he said indignantly. He added, "By the way, Charlie is very dead."

"What!"

"Oh yes. And from the protective attitude of the police guarding his body, I rather imagine they shot him down. That was yesterday, early in the afternoon. Got him in the back of the head from all appearances."

The quick look of interest faded from her face. She stared at him. "You don't owe me a thing. Not a damn thing, do you?"

"Not that I can think of at the moment. Why?"

"Skip it. You don't want in on this. You look decent. You know what that means? A mark. That's Christy's word for people like you." Her tone hinted of hysteria.

"A babe in the wood?" he asked gently.

"Exactly." She looked hard at him for a long moment and then came toward him. Her face had a frozen look and she walked in a way that showed off the lines of the long, lovely body. She stopped inches from the arm of the wicker chair.

She said with calculated throatiness, "But if you could help me. . . ."

He looked her up and down very closely, very coldly. "Darling, if you're in trouble—I'll try to help. Just because marks are like that."

She sat down, her face in her hands. He realized that she was crying silently. He went over and put his arm around her.

"Okay," he whispered. "I'm a recruit. Attired in my shining armor, I'm riding to the rescue."

She laughed through her tears. "You fool!"

"Spill it."

The door swung open. Lane looked up and saw a remarkably unappealing man. He had a body like an ape, rimless glasses and a white, oddly distorted face. The girl looked up at him and Lane felt the sudden rigidity of great fear in her.

The stranger planted his feet. "Friend of yours, Diana?" he asked mildly.

"That's right."

"How'd he get in?"

"I phoned the desk last night when I got hungry. They brought up another key."

Lane kept his arm around the girl's shoulders. It was petty defiance. The stranger acted a bit uncertain.

The stranger jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the door. "Out," he said.

The girl spoke quickly. "Oh, Christy can get away with little gestures like that." She laughed nervously. "He used to be a strong man in a circus, you know. He's never gotten over it. Once he gets his hands on you, brother, you're all through."

Lane got the impression that the girl was warning him and yet trying to tell him something. He stood up and said mildly, "Well then, it looks like I better shove off. By the way, Diana. That little matter we were just talking about. I haven't changed my mind. But I ought to know if your friend here is it."

"What the hell is this?" Christy demanded.

"He's it," Diana said quickly, "but I've changed my mind. Please don't."

Lane hesitated. Diana stood up, too. Christy pushed between them and shoved Diana away from him so brutally that

she staggered and nearly fell. She looked with white face, tearing, meaningful eyes, at Lane.

"Now get out, mister. Real fast," Christy said.

Lane smiled broadly and said, "Let me get my cigarettes, if you don't mind." He had seen cigarettes on the bureau. He stepped quickly around Christy and went to the bureau. His back was to Christy. Instead of picking up the cigarettes, he picked up the heavy glass tumbler. He glanced in the mirror and saw that Christy was looking at the girl.

HE SPUN with the tumbler in his hand, his right arm coming up and over. He threw it at the side of Christy's head. It hit with a solid and sickening thud. The tumbler fell to the rug, bounced and rolled away. Christy stood, his eyes filled with an inward bemused expression. Lane reached him in two steps. Christy was shaking his head slowly.

Lane hit him in the jaw with all his strength. Christy rocked but he didn't go down. He reached his hands slowly toward Lane. As Lane moved to the side to avoid them, he saw the girl standing off to the side, her hands clenched.

He hit Christy again and again. The only sound in the room was the thick, dead impact of bone on flesh. The little blue eyes were glazed and the glasses were jolted off so that they hung by one bow from the left ear. The big hands worked and there was something almost like a smile on Christy's face. He could no longer lift his arms.

Lane swung, and the glasses bounced away and broke on the floor. A vast pain ran up his right arm from his knuckles. He had the horrifying feeling that Christy was slowly recovering from the blow from the tumbler. Lane grunted with the effort as he swung. Christy's mouth was losing shape.

Suddenly he dropped to his knees, one hand on the bed to hold himself erect. Lane, knowing that he was too arm-weary to punch the man again, swung the side of his shoe up against the point of Christy's chin. The big head tilted back sharply. He was poised for a moment in that position. Then, with a sigh, he went over onto his side, tugging the spread from

the bed in his left hand so that it fell across his short stocky legs.

Lane stood, trembling with weakness. "Good Lord!" he gasped. "I was beginning . . . to think . . . he couldn't be knocked . . . out."

The girl was walking toward Christy with short steps. He called her, and she turned into his arms, laughing and crying and trembling from head to foot.

He slapped her twice. Bright color appeared in her cheeks and the sounds stopped as though a switch had been pulled.

"We'll have to tie him. With something strong, I imagine. Coat hangers ought to do it. The wire kind."

She brought a handful of hangers. Lane rolled the man onto his face and wired the wrists together behind him, and then the ankles. He used three hangers on the wrists and three on the ankles, twisting the ends of each tight. Then he soaked a hand towel, jammed most of it into Christy's mouth, and tied it in place with one of Diana's nylons.

Only then did they sit down, utterly exhausted from the physical and emotional strain. As Lane sat in the stupor that comes after violent action, Diana went and knelt beside Christy. Numbly he watched her take a fat sheaf of large bills from an inside pocket. From another pocket she took a tight roll of bills wrapped in oilcloth and fastened with a rubber band. She sat very still with a curious expression on her face.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm busy adding two and two."

"From here that looks like a lot of money."

"It is."

"Is that the money to pay for whatever is hidden in my car?"

"Yes."

"Would it be too much trouble to brief me? Or would you rather not?"

She smiled at him. "Maybe some day I'll be able to tell you how much I owe you." She laughed. "I don't even know your name."

"Sanson. Lane Sanson."

"I've got a phone call to make, Lane. I don't want you to hear what I say."

"That's blunt enough." He stood up. "I'll wait outside."

"Wait until I get my party. It may take some time."

It had happened so quickly, so finally, leaving the big man grotesquely on the floor, that Sanson had a strong sense of unreality, a feeling that his violence had no relationship to actuality—indeed, that this had not happened. Now that it had happened, he knew at once that it was a commitment he did not care to make.

Once an act is performed there is no handy way to sidestep the immutable flow of events that stem from that act. With this act, a strong flow of events had been initiated. He did not know where they would carry him. But he did know, and there was fright in his realization, that through his act he had ceased to function in any way as a free agent. Thus he would be carried along with the events, a reluctant passenger.

He heard the murmur of Diana's voice as she placed the phone call and it seemed to come from a great distance.

She hung the phone up and turned to smile almost shyly at him. She was one of those women about whom hung an indescribable muskiness, not something which could be scented, but rather felt.

"Sorry?" she asked.

"I don't know how to answer that. I am and I'm not. I never did anything like this before. Lord, I could have killed him with that glass!"

"I would have been glad!"

"That's nice. You could have sent cookies to my cell."

She came to him and put her palms flat against his cheeks. When she kissed him, her lips had a faint sting, like candle wax that drops on the back of a hand.

"Thank you again, Lane," she said.

He smiled very wryly. "Oh, it was nothing, really." She stood so close to him that he could see the dark roots of her hair where it was growing out.

She turned away. "You're a strange one, Lane Sanson."

"Do you know chess?"

"No."

"There's something called a forcing mate. Your opponent makes a series of moves and you only have one possible response to each move. After the series of moves, you're cooked. The first move was when a little gal came up to me in a

bar in Piedras Chicas. Nothing I've done since then has been on my own."

She looked at Christy. "Baby's awake."

The small blue eyes were open. He looked up at the two of them without expression. Diana sat on her heels in front of Christy's face. She bounced the oilskin package up and down in her hand and her voice had a hard teasing note.

"This is going to make George happy, isn't it?"

Christy didn't answer. He was curiously immobile. Lane suddenly realized that the man was straining against the twisted wire. He bent over the wrists. The hands looked bloodless. As he watched, the wire cut into the flesh of the left wrist and the blood began to flow. The wire was taut, but it did not slip.

Diana laughed. The phone rang. She motioned to Lane and he went outside, closing the door.

PATTON and Ricardo were on duty. It was a small basement room near the boilers, furnished with a chair, a table, a cot, one lamp, a phone, a washstand and a jumble of recording equipment. Ricardo snored on the couch.

Patton smiled tightly, lowered a cutting arm onto a fresh record, went over and shook Ricardo awake.

"This one you should hear, I hope, Rick," Patton said.

Ricardo sat up groggily. He shook himself awake. Patton stood up and turned up the volume on the amplifier.

"Live like a coupla moles for half your life and—" Ricardo began.

"Shh!" Patton said.

"Here is your party," the operator said.

"George! This is Diana."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to—"

"Shut up, George, please!"

"Aren't you getting a little bold, Sis?"

"I've got your present, George."

"By heaven, you should have it! I gave Christy the money."

"Christy, my love, happens to be tied up at the moment. With wire. Know what he had in his pocket? That little item that was stolen from me. Now I've got enough to buy it twice. Doesn't that make you think, George?"

There was a long silence. The record

revolved under the cutting arm, recording the hum on the phone wire.

"Kid," George said, "maybe I jumped a little too fast. Maybe I got sore a little too easy."

"Wouldn't you say it was a little late for that? I would."

"Kid, who clobbered Christy? That's a good trick."

"A new friend. You see, George, I need new friends. Seems like I can't depend on the old ones."

"Couldn't we skip a little misunderstanding?"

"No, George. And speaking of little misunderstandings, the salesman met with a small, unimportant fatal accident."

"It was expected. There's a new deal lined up."

"I don't think I like you any more, George. I don't think I like you handing me over to Christy."

"Kid, did he say that? He was lying to you. Believe me. I wouldn't think of a thing like that."

"I've got a present for you, George, but maybe I'll give it to somebody else."

"Now hold on!"

"Squirm, George. Squirm nice."

"Diana, don't play games with me."

"How's your new protégé?"

"Kid, look! Here's an angle. Give me the present and keep the double fee for yourself. It's a nice wad."

She laughed. "You know what, George? I kept myself from thinking about what a foul stinking business this is—just on account of you. And now I wish you were dead, George. Do you hear me? So maybe nobody will get the present."

"Hello! . . . Hello! . . . Diana!" He rattled the hook. "Diana!" There was a sharp click as the phone was hung up.

Patton lifted the cutting arm off the record, picked it tenderly from the spindle and kissed it. "I love you, I love you," he said.

Ricardo had already picked up the direct line. He made his report.

"Yes sir. That's what the Saybree girl said. I can't help what Tomkinton reported. He must have missed the transfer. That's right, sir. She's got it. Well, if she hadn't gone out, she has to be calling from the hotel, doesn't she? So that's where

Christy is." Ricardo listened for a long time, unconsciously nodding as though his superior were talking to him face to face. "Right away, sir," he said and hung up.

"Something new?" Patton asked.

"Tomkinton sent Clavna over this morning, down there in Texas, to look at some guy that got it during the night. Turns out it was an old friend of ours. Shaymen. Traveling under the name of Brown. Now that other phone call makes sense. The call when the girl reported the dough had been lifted. Christy must have sent Shaymen on ahead. He lifted the dough and then Christy must have killed him, since the body looks like Christy's handiwork.

"We got word from our friends south of the border that they cleaned up the whole mob down there, but couldn't find any sign of the last shipment. They got it across somehow. They're going to flash Tomkinton and Clavna to pick up the little tea party down there. I got to take the record over. A car's on the way to grab Georgie."

Patton grinned. "End of the road, Boy, I'm going to rent me a cellar apartment. I won't feel at home living above ground."

"After the pinch, Pat, and after we report, would you be morally or ethically opposed to an evening of fermented juices, women and some nostalgic cantos?"

"I'm your boy."

Ricardo opened the door. "I just happen to know a nice cellar bar . . ."

He dodged out as Patton snapped his cigarette at him.

As the door closed, Patton heard the warning dial tone. He shrugged and slipped a record on the spindle, put the cutting arm back in place. Odds were against any last-minute information, but you couldn't be sure.

"Yes?"

"Al? This is George. I got to make a quick trip. Think you can hold the fort?"

"Maybe nobody's told you, George, but without any merchandise there won't be any fort to hold."

"That's all set. And you've got too much mouth over the phone, Al. Now get me a plane reservation to Houston and . . . hold on a minute. Somebody at the door. Hey, get the door for me, Delicious.

I'm on the phone. And look, Al, I want to be sure to get down there no later than . . ."

Patton grinned and whispered, "Son, you ain't goin' noplacé nohow."

There was a mumble of voices and then he heard George say, his voice pitched high, "*But there's some mistake!*" There was a click on the line.

"George!" Al said sharply. "Hey, George! What happened? George!"

A heavy voice came faintly over the line. "*You can hang up now, Al. George'll be busy for a long, long time.*"

There was the clatter of the phone dropping from Al's hand, several hoarse grunts, a scuffling sound, a padded blow and a moan. The phone was quietly replaced on the cradle.

Patton grinned with delight. He made a quick movement and changed the equipment over so that he could use the hand mike to record. He cut it right into the same record following that last conversation.

"And thus, friends, we bring to a close this concluding episode of our exciting drama entitled 'The Snow Birds' or, 'Georgie Porgie goes to Atlanta'. This thrilling series has come to you through the courtesy of the Narcotics Division. Run, do not walk, to your nearest recruiting station and some day soon maybe you, too, can live in a cellar."

It was all right. If the office didn't think it funny, they could erase it from the record. Only one thing left to do now. Grab Christy and the gal. The retailers were being picked up in droves by now. Too bad about the gal. Nice husky voice. A looker, too.

But that's what happens to little girls who run with the wrong crowd. A couple of years of that starchy prison food and nobody'd bother to look twice at her on the street.

The phone rang and Patton quickly grabbed it.

"Yes, I'll unhook and pack up the stuff. About an hour and a half. Yes, I got one more. Just George calling Al and asking him to get him a plane ticket. The pinch came right in the middle of the conversation. Thanks a lot. Good-by."

He hung up and, whistling softly, began to unhook the apparatus.

CHAPTER SIX

No Place to Run

SURPRISED, Lane Sanson looked at Diana. She held his hand with both of hers. "I can't stay here! And I can't tell you why now, but I can't have the police take him. I have to go with you. Please."

He looked at her. Christy had stopped struggling against the wire. He followed them with his eyes.

"I'll pay you, Lane. I'll pay you well."

"That's nice, but it isn't important. If there's something you have to run from, can't you do your own running? I'm up to my neck in this, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't like out. I've got a job to do. I'm scared of the job, afraid I can't handle it."

"Please," she said.

"No, thanks. I'm afraid to even think of what it is that was hidden in my car. I want it out of there. And then I want to say good-by."

Her face changed. "Okay. But you can do a little bit, can't you? He nodded. "Then wait here while I pack. I don't want to be left alone with him. I'll come down to your room while you pack. We'll both check out. We can leave separately so nobody will think of us as being together. I can pack what I need into one bag and leave the other here. I'll tell you the rest where he can't hear us. It won't be much for you to do."

"I'll go along with you that far, Diana."

She took fresh clothes into the other room and changed quickly. She seemed to grow more nervous as she packed. She neither spoke to nor looked at Christy as they left the room. Lane told her his room number, went on ahead and unlocked the door, leaving it ajar. She came in behind him as he started to pack.

"Look, my suit isn't back from the cleaners yet."

"I'll pay you for one twice as good."

He shrugged. He put the new manuscript in the bottom of the replacement suitcase he had purchased, when he had gone down to eat the evening before. She stood near the door. It was open a few inches.

"Where do you want me to . . ."

"Sssh!" she said. He looked at her in surprise. She stared tensely out at the hallway. He came quietly up behind her. Three men were just heading up to the third floor. One of them wore a Ranger uniform.

"What is it?" he asked in a low tone.

"We've got to get out of here!"

"Now look, honey. Let's just say *you* have to get out of here. I think I'd welcome a nice warm friendly cop at this point."

She turned on him. Her face had gone feline. "You would, eh? Listen, friend. They'll grab me and you and your car. They know where you came from. And there's no power in the world that'll keep you from doing time for it."

"I've done nothing wrong!"

"No? Lane, there's a hundred forty ounces of heroin in your car. Refined diacetyl-morphine worth a quarter of a million dollars in the retail market, and you brought it in from Mexico. Do you still want to play innocent?"

"But you could explain how I happened to . . ."

"Either I get help from you right now, or what I'll tell them about you will be something you won't want to hear."

"That's a filthy trick!"

"Do you help me?"

"Just until I can get that damn stuff out of my car."

"Come on, then." She ran ahead of him down the corridor. She yanked open a broom closet and shoved her suitcase inside. She slammed the door. The back window was open. The outside fire escape reached down to the yard behind the hotel.

Diana looked out cautiously. "Okay. Come on." She went down first. He followed her. A kitchen helper stood out by the garbage cans, a cigarette between his fingers, his mouth open in surprise.

"Which one?" she said.

"Over there. The blue car."

They both ran to it. He threw his bag into the back seat, slid behind the wheel. She jumped in beside him and slammed the door. He fumbled with the key, got the motor started and stalled it.

"Come on! Come on!" she said.

The back tires skidded and threw gravel. He drove down the alley beside the hotel. Evidently the kitchen helper had

run in to the desk. The clerk came along the sidewalk and jumped into the alley mouth, waving his arms, his face red and angry, blocking the way.

Lane lifted his foot from the gas. Diana reached her foot over and trod down on his. The car leaped forward. The clerk made a frantic dive for his life. Lane got a quick glance at the man rolling over and over on the sidewalk as they shot out into traffic. He wrenched the wheel hard to avoid a big truck. The tires screamed, horns blew and people shouted angrily at him.

The mid-morning sun beat hotly down on the town.

"Now slow and easy," Diana said.

"Oh, fine," he said bitterly.

"Head east out of town. Step it up once you're outside the city limits."

"Yessir, boss."

He stepped it up to seventy. The two-lane concrete rushed at them and was whipped under the wheels.

"Can't you make it faster?"

"Take a look at the heat guage, boss. The radiator needs flushing. Any faster and I burn up the motor."

They sped through country full of reddish stone, cactus and sparse dry grass. Far ahead the road disappeared into a shimmer of heat waves.

After a full hour in which neither of them spoke, Lane saw a side road far ahead. It led over to a grove of live oaks that were livid green in the sun-baked expanse. It was a dirt road and he could only hope that the live oaks did not screen a house.

He stepped hard on the brakes, corrected a tendency to skid, and shot down the dirt road, the car bouncing high.

"What are you doing?" she shouted.

"Shut up, angel. There's been a shift of authority. You've been deposed."

She tried to grab the wheel. He slapped her hand away. The road turned sharply to the left once it reached the grove. A dry creek bed ran through the grove. There was no house. He pulled the car under the biggest tree and cut off the motor.

"What kind of a bright idea is this?"

"Please shut up." He took the keys out of the switch and put them in his pocket. The world seemed silent after the roar

of the motor. In the distance a mourning dove cried softly. On the highway three hundred yards away, a car sped by with an odd whistling drone, fading off into the distance.

He unlocked the back end and took out a screwdriver and an adjustable wrench. "Would you know where they hide stuff on a car?"

Diana didn't answer him. He shrugged, released the hood catch and shoved the hood up. The wave of motor heat struck him. He stared at the motor for a time. He didn't know the characteristics of the drug, but he imagined it was a crystalline substance. Motor heat wouldn't do it much good, probably. It was probably somewhere in the body of the car.

He told her to get out of the car. She didn't move, didn't look at him. He took her wrist and pulled her out. She walked woodenly over to a patch of grass under one of the trees and sat down, her back to him.

Lane began to sweat from exertion as he yanked the seats out. He examined them carefully and could see no evidence that they had been tampered with. He lay on his back and peered up under the dash.

It took him an hour to find the answer. The simplicity of it made him angry. They had merely removed the inside panel from the left-hand door. The long sausage-like package wrapped in pale yellow oilskin was against the bottom of the door below the window mechanism.

He took it out and held it in his hands, trying to guess its weight. Close to ten pounds. Nine, probably. He remembered the figure for the number of grains in a pound. Seven thousand sixteen. Nine pounds would be about sixty-three thousand grains. That would be about four dollars a grain retail to the addict, if the girl hadn't lied about its value.

HE PUT the package aside and replaced the panel. Then he put the seats back in. He tossed the package in onto the front seat, went over to Diana and offered her a cigarette. She took it silently, and he lit hers and his own. He sat down near her.

"Now I'll tell you why this was a damn fool stunt," he said.

"Don't strain yourself."

"In the first place it's easy to recognize the car. Look over at the plates."

She looked. "Why, they're out-of-date!"

"Sure they are. It doesn't make any difference in Mexico. I was going to buy Texas plates. That makes the car stand out like a sore thumb. How far could we get? Do you think the hotel hasn't given the cops that license? I wrote it on the register when I checked in. Now here's the second pitch. In this area you're either on the main roads or you're a dead duck. The secondary roads just aren't there. It makes it awfully easy to block off a whole area. If we'd kept going, we wouldn't have gotten out. Radio goes a lot faster than my blue wagon."

"What can we do?" she asked hopelessly.

"I've been giving that a lot of thought. And I forgot about a witness across the border who can clear me. I was all kinds of a damn fool to let you stampede me into running. Running is always the worst thing you can do. I know. I've done too much running in the past. This is my first experience running from the law, though."

"Do you expect me to go back there?"

"How can I say that? Lady, I don't even know what your problems are. All I know about you is that you were in trouble, that in a weak moment I helped you out, that you're mixed up in what I think is the most vicious business in the world, and that when the squeeze came you dropped your Lorelei role and switched to blackmail. That covers the information. The only other thing I know about you is that you're probably the most provocative-looking item I've ever seen in my life."

"You say such sweet things."

"I'm going to wait for dark and then I'm going back to Baker. You can do what you feel like doing. Come with me, stay here, hitch-hike or drop dead. I want to get all the way back into town and into the hotel before being stopped. That's the only way I'm going to clear myself of running out on a hotel bill. Then I'm turning that package over to the law and telling them everything I know."

"No, Lane. No, please."

He pushed her hand away. "No more

of that, sugar. It doesn't work any more."

She grew as solemn as a child. "But I have to get to New York with that package. While you were driving, I was planning on what I would do, too. You see, it won't do any good for me to be picked up and for that package to be taken. It won't stop anything or cure anything. There's a man in New York. I want to go to him. And I want to make a phone call so that after I take the package to him, they'll come for him and find it there. He laughs about them. They've been trying to get him for years. But he's clever."

"Then," said Lane, "Little Lord Fauntleroy told the fairy princess that he believed every last word that dripped from her dainty lips."

"It's the truth!"

He lay back and locked his hands behind his head. He squinted up at the blue sky through the live oak leaves. "Darling," he said lazily, "I wouldn't believe you if you were on your deathbed and I was your only child."

She called him a name. He turned and grinned at her. "Now you're in character again."

Tears filled her eyes and overflowed down her cheeks. She said in a small voice, "I'll tell you a story. I suppose it happens a lot. I wouldn't know. It isn't a pretty story and it has the corniest possible beginning. It started five years ago in one of those little up-state New York towns, the ones with the elms and the white houses. When I say corny, Lane, I really mean it. I sang in the church choir."

He turned up onto one elbow. "Oh, come now!" But he looked at her face and saw that it was true.

"You know how it is," she said, "You're full of wanting and wanting and yet you don't really know exactly what it is you want or how to go about getting it. Everything seems dull and you keep imagining yourself as a movie actress or a famous newspaper girl or something. Everybody say you're pretty. I was a brunette then. And you think of the kind of a man you want to marry, and all of them in the town that aren't married, they seem so young and dumb. Nothing to them."

"So a band came to town to play for a big dance. I went with a boy and there was a fellow in the band. He played a

trumpet. Wherever I was on the floor I could feel him watching me. In his eyes it was like we shared some kind of secret we couldn't talk about. It made me crazy to find out what the secret was. Oh, he wasn't good-looking. He was nearly bald and he wasn't tall, but there was something about him.

"When the band left I followed them, on a coach. It was like that. They let me sing with them and they didn't pay much because I was green and I had a lot to learn. When we were in New York, the regular girl singer who had been sick came back to work. I couldn't go home then. The trumpet player went with another band and they went out to the coast and I didn't have enough money to follow them. I guess he didn't want me to anyway.

"You learn a lot when you have to learn fast. And the biggest thing I learned was that my voice was really no good. No good at all. That's a hard thing to learn, Lane. Then George came along. He was the sort of man I'd dreamed about back in the small town. Tall and dark, with a nice crooked smile. He could order wines and he drove a big car and everybody gave him a table as soon as he went into a place. When it was too late, I found out what kind of a business he was in. By then I couldn't leave him. And just the other day I found out that there isn't any goodness in him. Nothing but cruelty. Now I want to hurt him."

"This George," Lane asked, "he sent you down here to pick up that package? Why?"

"He's been a little worried for a long time. He was afraid that one of the regular people might be trapped by the law. He thought they might not think of me as to be trusted for a thing like this. All I want to do is frame George. I don't care what happens after that."

Lane Sanson shut his eyes against the sun-glare. He could hear the soft metro-nome of her weeping.

"There's a better way," he said, "We'll both go back and you tell those people what you want to do. Let them rig it for you. If they want the goods on this George character, they'll play ball with you."

"They won't trust me," she said in a small voice.

"That's a chance you have to take."

"I'm frightened, Lane."

"In what way?"

"Prison. I dream of it sometimes. All gray walls and it's always raining and gray cotton and big bells ringing. Do this, do that. Years and years, Lane."

She flung herself toward him, her head under his chin. The sobs shook her and her tears scalded his throat. He put his arm around her and tried to comfort her.

When at last the tempo of the sobs decreased, until they were only great shuddering breaths that came at long intervals, he said, "So we'll go back as soon as it's dark?"

Her voice was muffled. "Anything you say, Lane."

"To keep you amused," he said bitterly, "I shall now tell you a long story of a promising young citizen named Lane Sanson who, as far as all reports go, apparently dropped dead several years ago. It is a long amusing story about a book and a blonde wife and a problem involving integrity."

"Tell me," she whispered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ambush

WHEN Tomkinton, Clavna and the Ranger named Vance came into the third-floor room, all Christy could do was look at them with his small, alert, blue eyes. Tomkinton came quickly back from the bathroom. He checked the top drawers of the bureau. He whistled softly.

"Bad, bad news, Clav. The boid has flown."

Clavna cursed with great feeling. "Oh, that's fine! That's great! We can probably get jobs as ribbon clerks. You had to be the one to say we didn't have to cover the whole joint because there was no reason for her to run."

"Don't try to pass the buck to me," Tomkinton said hotly.

"No need to get in a fuss," Vance said. "This is a tough town to run away from. I'll put the lid on." He picked up the room phone.

As he picked it up, there was a loud scream of rubber in front of the hotel.

Tomkinton ran to the window. A blue convertible, several years old, rocked down through traffic. He squinted but the license was already too far away for him to read.

"Go down to the lobby and see what you can find out about the car, Clav," he directed.

Vance, on the phone, was saying, "You already got the description. The Saybree woman. Yeah. Give them the word at the bridge and tell Hall that I think it's hot enough to radio up the line for the usual road blocks. That leaves the airport and the bus station."

He hung up and grinned at Tomkinton. He was a lean man with a saddle-leather face and the Ranger uniform sat well on his shoulders. "Least we got us a murderer—if you boys got the right dope on this guy on the floor. He is the one you called Christy, isn't he?"

"That's him," Tomkinton said. Tomkinton was a young, round-faced man with the look of an affable bank teller. He walked over to Christy. He said softly, "Killing Shaymen was a mistake, friend. A bad mistake. Not up to your usual style."

He took out his knife and cut the nylon. He yanked the towel from Christy's mouth. Christy coughed and moistened his lips with his tongue.

"My wrists are killing me," he muttered.

"Where did the girl go?"

"I don't know. She left with a guy. Tall fella with a little bandage on his head. I never saw him before. The two of them busted me with a glass when I wasn't looking. How about these wrists?"

Clavna trotted through the open door. "Hey, she left with a guy named Lane Sanson. He had a room on the second floor. They went down the fire escape and took off in a blue convertible. Here's the license number. I wrote it down."

Vance took the slip of paper and picked up the phone again. As he waited he said, "This'll make it easier."

Tomkinton frowned. "Lane Sanson. Lane Sanson. I've heard that name before. Wait a minute. Newspaper guy. War correspondent. Hey, he wrote a book! I saw the movie."

Vance was talking softly over the phone.

Clavna grinned. "A newspaper screwball. Boy, that's all we need. What the hell do you think he thought he was doing, to leave here with the Saybree woman?"

"Maybe chivalry isn't dead," Tomkinton said.

"He'll get chivalried all right," Clavna said, his thin dark face alight with wry amusement. "He'll get a belly-full."

"Especially if they have the junk with them," Tomkinton said.

Vance hung up. "All over but the shouting," he said. "That car'll be grabbed within two hours unless it sprouts wings. Already they got a report on it heading east."

"How about taking this wire off me?" Christy whined.

Tomkinton knelt by him and untwisted the wire around his ankles first. Christy sighed and worked his thick legs. Finally the wrists were free. Christy got onto his hands and knees, then lumbered up onto his feet. He massaged his big white hands, inspected the wire cuts on his wrists.

"You guys are confusing me, talking about Shaymen," he said. "I know the guy. I saw him in New York maybe three weeks ago. If somebody bumped him, it wasn't me."

"You killed him last night," Tomkinton said.

"Nuts! Last night I was here, in Texas. How can I kill a guy in New York?"

"You killed him here."

Christy looked at Tomkinton with blank amazement. "Here? Shaymen here? Well, I'll be damned! What do you suppose he was doing here? Spying on me or something?"

"What did you come here for, Christy?" Clavna asked. "As if we didn't know."

"Well, boys, it's like this. Miss Saybree run out on the boss. He was worried about her. He found out she was here. So he sent me down to talk her into coming back. He couldn't get away himself. You know how it is."

"He won't be getting away for some time," Clavna said.

Christy was motionless for long seconds. "What do you mean by that?" he asked in a low voice.

"You should keep up on these things, Christy," Tomkinton said, smiling cheerfully. "The whole crew has been picked

up. George, Al, Denny, Myron, Looba, Stace. Every one of them. And this isn't just one of those suspicion deals. This is the works. Right down the line. They haven't got a million to one chance of squeaking out. And neither have you. We'll let the state of Texas take care of you for the murder, though. That'll be the simplest, cleanest way."

"I don't know anything about no murder," Christy said.

"Not even," Tomkinton said, "with Clavna here tailing you. He saw you get picked up in front of a movie house in a car and noted down the license number. Vance told us it was Shaymen's car, found this morning with his body beside it?"

Vance jingled the cuffs. He walked over to Christy. "Hold 'em out," he said mildly.

Christy numbly stuck his big hands out. Vance started to snap the open cuffs down on the thick wrists. Christy's hands flicked wide apart, then clamped down onto Vance's wrists. The white wet-lipped face had gone completely mad. He flung Vance like an awkward doll directly at Clavna. The flying body smashed Clavna against the wall and, as they slid down in a heap, Christy reached Tomkinton in one bear-like bound.

Tomkinton was trying to scuttle backward and snatch the Police Positive from its awkward place in his right hip pocket at the same time. As he yanked it free, tearing the pocket, Christy's right fist clubbed against the side of his head like an oak knot. The blow that knocked Tomkinton cleanly through the open bathroom door and sent him sliding across the tile to stop against the tub, fractured consciousness the way a piece of string is broken.

Vance, prone across the legs of the unconscious Clavna, was groggily shifting his revolver to his left hand, having found that there was no life in the right one. He fired once as he saw the heavy shoe swinging toward his eyes, swinging in slow motion, blotting out all the light in the world.

THE slug tore through the top of Christy's right shoulder, just above the collarbone. As an after-echo of the shot, he heard it smack into the wall behind him. A warmth and wetness ran down

his chest and his back under the dark wool suitcoat. It drove him back a half step. His right arm still functioned. He snatched up the revolver from beside Vance's hand and stuffed it inside his belt. He had never carried or used a gun. It always made him feel weak and sick to even look at one.

He opened the door, went quickly out into the hall and shut it. He was halfway down to the second floor when he heard steps along the second floor to the stairway, running steps.

Christy turned and stared up at the third floor. As the steps came up behind him, he said excitedly, "I heard a shot up there!"

The Ranger ran by him without a word. Christy turned and went down to the second floor, then down the next flight. He slowed his step as he reached the lobby. He walked out the front door onto the sidewalk. A state car was parked near the entrance. It was empty and the door was open.

Christy walked steadily down toward the bridge. The mid-morning sun was hot on the back of his neck. He could feel his shirt sticking to him.

He made himself smile and nod at the U. S. officials. "Just going over for a coupla hours," he called.

The man waved him on. He paid the pedestrian toll to the Mexican guard in the middle of the bridge. The sun was a hot weight behind him, pushing him along. He touched his shirt pocket and felt the crispness of the bills he had taken from Shaymen's billfold. Not much, but maybe it would be enough.

The guards at the Mexican end were checking cars as he walked by. They paid no attention to him. Barefooted women sat on the sidewalk, their backs against the wall, little piles of fruit and eggs in front of them. Christy felt weakness. The blood soaked the right side of his waistline.

A half block from the public square on the opposite side from the bridge he saw the sign. He climbed the dark stairway. There was one man in the waiting room. The nurse was a cute little thing in starched white. She spoke to him in rapid Spanish.

Christy sighed and took the revolver

out. The waiting patient's eyes widened and he crossed himself. The nurse gave a little cry of fear. He motioned them both toward the other door. The nurse opened it and backed in. The man slipped around her. The doctor looked up from the boy, whose infected leg he was treating, with sharp annoyance. His eyes narrowed as he saw the gun but the annoyance remained on his slim olive face.

"What do you want?" the doctor snapped.

"I'm shot. I want help."

"Put the gun away."

"Nuts. Tell the kid and the man and your nurse to go over into that corner and face the wall and keep their mouths shut. Hurry it up."

The doctor spoke to the three. They meekly did as they were told. Christy put the gun in his left hand, shrugged his right arm out of the coat. He unbuttoned his shirt, pulled the cloth away from the wound and got his right arm out of the sleeve. Then he transferred the gun to his right hand and got his left arm out of the coat and shirt. He dropped them to the floor. The doctor watched him calmly.

Christy said, "Now fix me up, Doc. That's a pretty little nurse. You try anything funny with me and I shoot her right in the small of the back."

"You are a stupid man, señor. I can work easier if you sit down. There."

"Is it bad?"

"No. It tore the muscle very little. Hit no bone. Hold still."

Antiseptic burned through the wound. Christy sucked in his breath sharply. The doctor applied folded bandages to the entrance wound and the exit wound and bound them tightly in place with gauze, wrapping it over the shoulder, under the armpit and around the great chest. He anchored the bandages more securely in place with wide strips of adhesive.

"Done," the doctor said.

"Now have the girl wash out my shirt in that sink over there and wring it as dry as she can get it." He took the money from the shirt pocket and threw it toward the girl. She did as she was directed. The doctor spoke to the boy and he came timidly over. The doctor began to finish his work on the infected leg, while the boy watched the gun with wide eyes.

Christy put the damp white shirt on, and then the coat. The doctor looked up. "That will be twenty American dollars, señor."

Christy laughed. "You make good jokes."

The doctor turned white around the mouth. "This is my profession and I get paid for my profession, señor. Pay me or I shall go to that window and call to the police." The dark eyes looked at Christy with contempt, without fear.

"Are you completely nuts?"

The doctor turned his back on the gun and walked steadily to the window.

"All right, all right," Christy shouted. He threw two tens on the floor. The doctor spoke to the nurse. She picked them up and handed them to him.

"Do you want a receipt, señor?" the doctor asked mildly, amusement in his eyes.

"No," Christy said thickly. He hurried out. In the waiting room he turned and called back, "None of you leave here for a half hour."

The doctor and the nurse turned and stared at him as though he were already forgotten. The nurse handed the doctor a roll of adhesive tape and he once again bent over the infected leg.

Halfway down the stairway Christy stopped and tried to plan the next move. It would be wise to wait until nightfall. In some bar he could find a tourist. The tourist would have a car. A car would get him to Vera Cruz or Tampico. Somehow he would get on a ship. He wondered if he'd killed the Ranger. The man had slumped with his head at a funny angle.

Soon they'd check up and find he'd crossed the bridge. They'd be looking for him. The Piedras Chicas police would be looking. They'd have his description. He turned down another side street. It was empty. He found a barred wooden door set into a cement wall. He got his thick fingers around the edge of it, braced his feet and wrenched it open, hearing the squeal as the nails tore free. He went inside and pushed the door shut.

He was in a quiet garden patio. He stood and listened. He fitted the nails back into the holes, wrapped a handkerchief around his knuckles and drove them in. Again he listened. A small fountain

tinkled in the middle of the patio. Christy crawled back into a place where the shrubbery was dense. He lay down with his back against the wall.

The torn shoulder throbbed. After an hour had passed, a stocky blonde woman with a ravaged face came out to the flagstones near the fountain. Christy watched her from the shadows. She spread a blanket, returned a few minutes later with a tall bottle and a tiny glass, and lay face down under the brute sun.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Snowbirds' Social

IT WAS blue dusk when Lane Sanson awoke. He sat up with a start, feeling for the car keys in his pocket as he turned, feeling the keys at the same instant as he saw the car, as he saw Diana sleeping in the back. He exhaled slowly. There was a tang of burning cedar scrub in the air and he heard the distant tank-tankle of goat bells.

Sleep had ironed out the torment in her face. It was almost the face of a child. She lay on her left side, facing him, both hands with the palms together under her cheek. A thick rope of the blonde hair lay forward across her throat. He lit a cigarette and watched her in the gathering darkness as he smoked, thinking that few things in the world are more beautiful than the line of a sleeping woman.

His watch had stopped at four. The car clock would still be operating. Soon it would be time to turn back to town. He wondered if he had made a mistake by not insisting that they turn back as soon as she had agreed that it was the thing to do. But if they had been picked up on the road, it might have appeared that they were doubling back, still in flight. Darkness would give them a good chance to reach the hotel without being stopped.

He wondered if Diana could go free by giving evidence. He hoped so.

She began to make small crying sounds in her sleep. Her shoulder twitched. He butted his cigarette against his shoe-sole. She awoke with a start and a frightened cry.

"Oh, Lane!" she said. "I was fright-

ened. I was running and running and the ground was going by under my feet, carrying me backwards no matter how hard I ran and Christy was standing and grinning and waiting for me."

"We've got to go, kitten."

She stood up and smoothed her dress down with the palms of her hands. "Gee, I'm messy," she said.

"Still think I'm wrong to take you back?" He stood beside her.

She smiled up into his face. "You gave me a chance to make that decision. I watched you while you slept. There was the car and I knew the keys were in your pocket. There was even a rock. See it over there? As big as a baseball. If I hadn't decided you were right, you'd have a terrible headache by now, Lane."

"A little trusting of me to go to sleep, wasn't it?"

"Maybe that's why I couldn't hit you."

"Well, get in the car. Let's get this over with."

He turned the lights on and backed the car around, drove slowly down to the highway. She said, "While you were asleep, a plane was cruising around. I think maybe it was looking for us."

"We're important people."

"Aren't we though! Oh, Lane. This is so silly. I feel excited, as though I were going to my first dance or something. Why is that?"

"Relief. You don't know how terribly afraid and guilty you've felt ever since you found out what you were mixed up in. Now the decision is made and you aren't afraid any more."

"Is it that simple?"

"Why not?"

"Maybe part of it is you, Lane."

He glanced over at her. "How do you mean?"

She looked straight ahead at the road. "Maybe I love you."

"I don't think you should. I mean it's something that I can't return."

"Sandy?"

"I guess so. One-woman man."

"I thought that might be the way it is. I don't care." She moved over close to him. Her shoulder touched his arm. "We'll pretend we're driving to a dance or something, shall we?"

"They're having a good band. And a

multi-colored tent for refreshments."

"There won't be too many of those square dances, will there?"

"We'll sit those out, kitten."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. She sang the rest of the way into Baker. Old songs. The good ones. Her voice was husky and true. He had the feeling that she was singing not to him but to the past and that this was, for her, a sort of farewell.

Then there were the lights of Baker ahead, the neon on the tourist courts, the cars flanked outside the drive-ins, the floodlights on the bridge. As soon as they were in the town she moved away from him, sat huddled and silent.

He parked a hundred feet beyond the hotel entrance. The space was short and it took him a long time to work the car in next to the curb.

"You stay right here," he said. "Let me handle it."

He had by habit taken the keys from the ignition. He saw her looking at him. Beyond her he could see through the open door of a drugstore. It all looked so completely sane and ordinary that for the passing of several seconds he had the feeling that all this was a masquerade of some sort, that there was no truth in what Diana had told him, that it was a cleverly planned fantasy and any moment now a group of friends from the old days would leap from the shadows, laughing, confessing, explaining.

He threw the keys over into her lap, got out and chunked the door shut. He walked with long strides to the hotel entrance and, with his head high, he went in, wearing what he fervently hoped was a confident and optimistic smile.

AT DUSK the chunky blonde woman stood up and stretched. During the long afternoon she had repeatedly filled the small glass and drank it. Christy was tortured with thirst. And there was a new fear in him. The shoulder now felt hot and swollen and the pulsing was worse. He had felt the heat creep up from the base of his neck, flushing his right cheek, extending the throb to the heavy jaw bone and his right ear.

It was hard to remember just where he was, and why he was hiding. He would

remember perfectly—and then there would be a funny aching twist in his head, and he would be back in the carny days. He'd missed the afternoon performances. Big Mike would be sore. He had to get out of here and get back to the lot.

He lay and he could hear his heart beating. A heavy frightening beat. Thrum, thrum, thrum. Then there would be a subtle change of rhythm. Ta-thum, ta-thum, ta-thum.

His mind dipped and sped back to here and now. The carny was years ago. Why had George sent him here? No, it wasn't George. The cops had George. Unless that guy was bluffing, they had him good. Nailed. Along with the rest of the mob.

That Diana had been the cause of this. He created her image in his mind, the sneering mouth and the contemptuous eyes. Figured she was too good for Christy. He'd show her. He'd do a good job of showing her. He grinned as he remembered how she'd fallen when he'd hit her. He'd waited a long, long time for Diana. Patient waiting. And there she was, just thirty feet away. The great ropery fibrous muscles tightened and his breath came short and fast.

Then Diana turned and he saw that it was the other woman, the one who had laid under the whip of the afternoon sun.

He held his breath as she started directly toward him. She walked uncertainly. She had filled the empty bottle in the fountain and she paused to pick flowers and shove them clumsily into the neck of the bottle. She talked to herself.

Christy tried to make himself smaller. Now she stood close to him, so close that he could have reached out under the bush and touched her foot.

When she gasped and jumped back, Christy lunged up, through the brush, clamped his hand on her throat and pulled her back down to the dark place where he had been hiding. She fell like a fat sawdust doll.

He whispered, "When I let go your throat, I don't want no screaming."

He took his hand away. Even in the dusk and the shadows he could see that her throat had a funny, smashed look. Her face was slowly darkening, the eyes

protruding, the swelling tongue growing between the lips.

One hand slapped the ground weakly and her heels hammered the dark damp soil at the base of a bush. She lay still. It took him quite a while to realize that she was dead. Something funny had happened to her throat.

"Diana!" he said. He shook her. "Diana!"

But it wasn't Diana, of course. He rolled his big head from side to side like a wounded bear. He crouched over her until it was full night.

Then he crawled on his hands and knees to the fountain. He lay on his face, put his mouth into the water and drank deeply, as an animal will drink. Then he stood up. His right shoulder was a great pulsating fire. The fingers of his right hand felt swollen and stiff.

"Infection," he said aloud. He frowned and tried to puzzle it out. Then, like a blow across the mouth, came the vision of the suppering leg of the boy the doctor had been working on.

"Didn't wash his damn hands," Christy mumbled. "Didn't wash his dirty damn hands. Did it on purpose."

He went to the gate and broke it open again. As he pulled it shut behind him, he had another one of those moments when he couldn't remember what city this was, what year it was, where he was supposed to go. He leaned against the wall with the warm breeze against his face. He shuddered.

He remembered that he had to get a car. He went toward the zocolo in a lurching, ungainly walk. The zocolo was brightly lighted. He pulled back into the shadows as he saw the policeman standing sixty feet away.

A small boy tugged at his pant leg. "Geeve me money, meester. Geeve me money, meester."

Christy slapped at him and missed. The child danced off into the darkness, screaming at him in Spanish. The policeman turned and looked toward the mouth of the dark street.

Christy turned and went back down the street, running heavily, the breath whistling in his throat, his mouth open and straining for air. The child danced along behind him, chanting, "Geeve money,

geeve money meester, geeve money."

After two blocks the street was no longer paved. He could see the flame flicker inside the open shacks of the poor. Other children had joined the first one. They followed him, making a game of it, making a song of it. Then there was no street and dogs snapped at his heels. He tripped, fell, rolled among the filth and excited yammerings of chickens. People watched him from the doorways.

The group of dogs and children grew. This was as much fun as a fiesta. Look at the big burro! Down he goes again! Now up again and running. Come on, amigos! Faster! Geeve money, Joe. Hey, Joe! Geeve money. Ai, he's down again. He runs for the rio.

Each breath that Christy took was a sob. His side was one vast pain and his legs were leaden. Suddenly there was a steep pitch of bank. He saw the evil shine of the water and, too late, he tried to stop. He rolled heavily, helplessly down the bank. He rolled into the water. It was inches deep.

He stood up, dripping, and saw the line of screaming pointing children at the crest of the bank, outlined against the last thin light of the night sky. Dogs leaned over the edge of the bank and barked bravely, boldly.

The shock of the water had cleared his head. Christy looked down-river and saw the lighted bridge. He turned and plodded out into the river. The yells of the children grew more faint. The water came up to his knees. Walking became more difficult. Then it was midway up his thighs. The river seemed impossibly wide. It reached his waist and for the first time he felt the gentle tug of the current.

Ahead, suspended in the air, a blue neon sign high over the town clicked on, brilliant against the blackness. The Sage House.

With his eyes fixed on the sign, he moved steadily forward.

TOMKINTON sat grimly behind the desk of the hotel manager. Lane Sanson sat in a chair planted squarely in front of the wide desk. A Ranger stood stolidly behind Lane's chair.

"Look," said Lane, "I just want to . . ."

"Please shut up," Tomkinton said emotionlessly. "You've told your story. We've made arrangements to have your 'character' witness brought over, if they can find her. In the meantime there's nothing you can say."

"You can't treat me like a criminal." Tomkinton smiled without humor. "We're not, so far. We're treating you like what you are. A fool. You're one of those people who think they can apply their own set of special moral standards to the world. Yesterday night a man was killed in this town. This morning a Ranger was killed and my co-worker was badly injured. We're in no mood to play patty-cake with the likes of you, Sanson. You're just a damn dilettante with so little sense you got mixed up in this mess."

"Where's Miss Saybree?"

"She's under guard. You can't see her. We have plans for her."

"She came in of her own free will, remember."

"That's something for the court to take into consideration, Sanson. We're going to clear you if we can, just so we can get you out of the way. And if we can't clear you, we're going to see that you pay the maximum penalty the law allows. So don't waste your breath and my patience trying to tell us our business."

"I only . . ."

"For heaven sake, shut up, can't you?"

Sanson looked down at his knuckles. He flushed. What this Tomkinton person said was unfortunately true. He had been the worst sort of fool. The Ranger behind Sanson stirred restlessly.

The door burst open and Felicia was pushed in. Her face was at once sullen and angry. She turned and tried to spit at the kakhi-clad Mexican official who had pushed her. He slapped her effortlessly and turned her around so that she faced Tomkinton.

She saw Lane at once. She ran to him, her eyes dancing. "Lane! I see again. I think never."

"Get her away from him, Stan," Tomkinton said to the Ranger. "You handle it."

The Ranger pulled Felicia away gently. He questioned her in Spanish so fluent that Lane couldn't follow it. She nodded

energetically and answered in kind, pointing first to Lane and then to herself. He could almost follow what she was saying by her gestures. As she spoke she turned often to smile at him.

At last the Ranger held up both hands to stop the flow. He turned to Tomkinton. "It checks out. He got busted in the head because some of the boys over there working on the case mistook him for Charlie Denton and got over enthusiastic. This babe took care of him. Denton killed one of their plainclothes cops with a knife, visited this girl's shack and made certain Sanson understood that unless he brought his car across the bridge, he could be framed for the killing of the cop.

"The girl says Sanson had to leave his car at a certain garage. Just about the time Sanson was leaving to cross the bridge they got Charlie, as we know. I can see how this fella wouldn't want to take a chance on trying to cross Denton."

Felicia gave out another long spate of Spanish. The Ranger nodded.

"She says that neither she nor Sanson knew what was in the package the men wanted. She says that Sanson is a good and honest man, but not very bright." He grinned.

"Have her sit down over there and keep her mouth shut," Tomkinton said. "It looks, Sanson, as though you might turn out to be lucky after all. Now get the Saybree woman down here and we'll check her end of it again. Then you can take statements from Sanson and we can let him go."

Lane turned and smiled back over his shoulder at Felicia. "*Muchas gracias,*" he said.

"Shut up, mister," the Ranger said mildly.

CHAPTER NINE

Hamstrung!

HEAT had gone from Christy. Now he had a chill so intense that he had to keep his jaw tightly shut to keep his teeth from chattering. When he had swum the narrow channel in the river, the cool water had felt good against the fire in his shoulder. But now he had the idea that it had done little good.

He moved through narrow stinking alleys, guided always by the blue letters in the sky which said The Sage House. The gun had been lost in the river, or else while he was running from the children. He couldn't remember.

The river had washed away much of the filth, but his clothes still had a fetid odor. The swelling had spread down to his hand. It was visibly larger than the left hand, and of a darker shade.

He waited in doorways to avoid being seen. He was finding it hard to remember why he had to get to the hotel. It was all tangled in his mind. The girl was there, with the money. Shaymen had let him down. Then it seemed like he'd killed the girl back there near a fountain. It made his head hurt to try to straighten it all out. The only thing he was absolutely certain of was the great need to get to the hotel. He decided several times that when he reached the hotel he would remember why it was important.

And he wondered if he would ever be warm again.

It took time and planning to cross the main street. He had to go four blocks from the hotel and then wait a long time before he knew it was safe. Once he sat down in a doorway and, before he knew it, his eyes had closed. He awakened when he fell out of the doorway, his cheek against cinders.

Again there was the network of alleys and small streets. At last he came out into an open place which he recognized as the parking lot behind the hotel. He could not risk the alley entrance to the parking lot. Too much danger of a car coming in or going out, fixing him in its lights. The other wall of the hotel was separated from the wall of a store by a space so narrow that he had to turn his shoulders to get into it. He sidestepped along.

Soon there was a lighted window above his head. He jumped up and grabbed the sill and with effortless strength pulled his heavy body up to where he could look in. It was the dining room. He clung there, looking at the people at the tables. He knew none of them. He wanted to remember why he had come back here. Puzzled, he dropped back, continued his slow movement.

The next window was dark. The next window was lighted. It was a bit higher than the last one. He missed the sill the first jump.

On the second jump his fingers locked on the sill. He wondered vaguely why his right shoulder was so sore. He chinned himself on the sill and looked in.

It was a small room. An office. He saw her at once. Diana. Now he knew that she wasn't dead. But her face had a funny dead look about it. The window was open from the top but he couldn't hear what she was saying to the young



The red-bladed knife gleamed in her hand.

round-faced man behind the desk because of the funny roaring sound in his ears.

And that man sitting beside her. Now it was becoming more clear. Diana and that man. He remembered the man throwing something at him. A great blow against his head. There was a Ranger, a Mexican girl and a Mexican official of some kind in the room. Christy gave them one quick glance. He wasn't interested in them.

He dropped back to the ground to give himself time to think. George stood beside him, smiling the funny crooked smile.

"What the hell are you doing here, George?" he whispered.

George's voice came from far away. It had a hollow sound. "I thought you might forget what I told you to do,

Christy. I hear you've been crossing me up."

"I wouldn't do a thing like that, George. Honest!"

"You got to get in there and kill both of them, Christy. Diana and that friend of hers. You can do that."

"There're a couple of cops in there, George," he complained.

"Remember, Christy, how strong you are? You can do it. If you don't do it, I'll know for sure you're crossing me, Christy."

"I'll try, George. I'll sure try. You know me."

He glanced down the narrow space between the buildings to see if he was unobserved. When he looked back, George was gone. He blinked a few times and de-

cided that George didn't want to hang around. Besides, it was hard to see since he'd lost his glasses. He wondered where he'd left them.

Too bad about the gun. He could hang up there on the sill and pot both of them. Now he had to do it another way. He moved to the side of the window and put his back against the store wall, his feet against the hotel wall. He began to hitch his way up. It was slow work. Finally he was on a level with the window. Then, maintaining the pressure, he hitched sideways until at last his feet, spread wide, were on the sill.

He straightened his legs and his shoulders slid up the store wall. He flattened his hands against the wall and shoved himself toward the window as hard as he could, ducking his head below the upper sill, hitting the center bar of the sash, carrying screen, sash, glass and all forward with him into the room, landing lightly on the balls of his feet, pawing at the Ranger with what looked like a foolishly light blow. Yet it dropped the man over into the corner beside the desk.

As Diana jumped up, he grabbed her with one big arm. With his raised foot he shoved hard against the front of the desk. The desk slammed Tomkinton brutally against the wall.

Grinning and laughing aloud, Christy held the kicking, struggling girl in one arm. His left hand caught Sanson by the throat as Sanson tried to come up out of the chair where he had been frozen with shock.

Then, as he laughed and yelled for George to come and look to see what he was doing, there was a pain like flame that seared across the backs of his legs just above the knees. The strength went out of his legs and he fell heavily. He saw Diana roll free and scramble over to where Sanson stood, turning in his arms to look back at Christy on the floor.

Christy leaned his head back and looked up into the broad-boned smiling face of the Mexican girl. Her dark eyes glittered like the onyx that had once been carved into knives for the use of the priests of the sun god. She showed her even white teeth as she smiled down at him, the red-bladed knife gleamed in her hand.

From an enormous distance he heard the Ranger saying in a dazed voice, "By Jupiter, she hamstrung him! She came up behind him crouched as though she were going to cut the grass, and she hamstrung him!"

The wave of darkness hung above him, a silent dark crest, and then it fell forward onto him, spinning him down into darkness.

THE letters had come to Lane's desk in the newsroom in Houston. The first two weeks had been difficult, but now he knew that he'd be able to hold his own. The first big story he had brought them, the eye-witness account on all that trouble down at Baker had helped. They'd slapped a byline on it, too.

The first one was from his agent.

Dear Lane,

It is nice to have you rise from the dead and have you say in your letter that you're going to keep on working. From this last mss, I'd say you need a lot of work. A DAUGHTER OF MANY KINGS has its moments, but it suffers from a lack of discipline and plan. Work from your carbon and see if you can send me a tighter version. And shorter. This novella form is an awkward length for that sort of thing.

He grinned and put the letter in his desk drawer. He had saved the second letter until last.

Lane, dear,

I suppose you follow the news and I suppose it is no news to you that I'm going to be a sort of house guest for a year and a day. My lawyer says I'm very lucky, and I guess I can live through it. I am writing this while waiting for the transportation to my new address. George drew twenty and it doesn't seem half long enough, somehow. Vindictive sort, aren't I?

Anyway, Lane, I wanted you to know that you straightened me out when I needed it and I'm grateful. A year and a day from now I will have decided what sort of new life I want. It will be a law-abiding and uneventful one, believe me. I hope some day to do you a favor in return—if I haven't already done it.

Always,

Diana

He shrugged. The past part of the letter seemed incoherent. Not hard to understand how a girl in her spot might be a little incoherent.

Five-Star Fugitive

He put her letter in the drawer too, stood up and clapped his hat on the back of his head. The managing editor came across the news room toward him.

"How's it going, Lane?"

"Good, thanks."

"Say, you'll have no trial to cover down the line. The infection finally killed that Christy citizen. They didn't get the arm off soon enough, I guess."

Lane sighed. "That suits me."

"By the way, that was a nice job you did on the transit squabble."

"Thanks again." He left, whistling. He went down the stairs, grinning in at the girls behind the classified ad counter.

As he reached the outside door he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a girl coming quickly toward him. He turned and gasped. "Sandy! Sandy, what . . ."

Her eyes were shining. "Don't talk, darling. Just walk with me."

Her hand was through his arm as they walked down the sidewalk. He smiled down into her face and she squeezed his arm lightly.

"I had to shut you up, you oaf," she said. "I was about to cry."

"I remember that you cry nicely. Sandy, why did you come here?"

"To see my ex," she said smugly.

He stopped and faced her. "I'm no good for you. Didn't we find that out?"

"Hush! I might give you a second chance. If you want it."

"If I want it!"

"I'll think it over, oaf."

"After what I did to you, Sandy?"

"Or what I did to you? Damn a wife who runs out when she's worst needed."

"I chased you out."

"You did *not*! I left!"

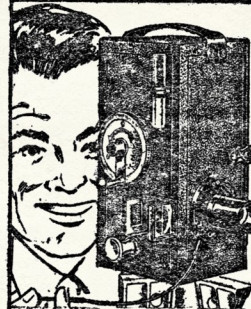
"By special request. Who cares? You're back. But how come? How did it happen? I'm confused."

She took his arm again. "Come on, keep walking. You see, I got a letter. From a girl. Quite a nice girl, I think. She mentioned that she ran into you and you seemed to be carrying a torch for one gal named Sandy, so she wormed the address out of you. It was signed Diana Saybree."

"So that's what she meant!" he said.

"What, darling?"

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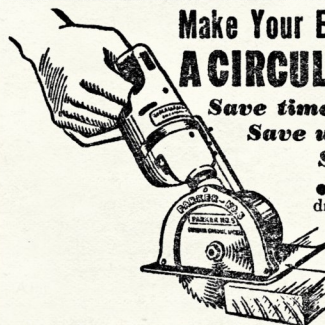
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Scott O'Hara

"Never mind. Look, I've got a small apartment just three blocks from here. There's ice, gin and vermouth. They need a woman's touch."

He quickened his pace, but she stopped and made her eyes wide. "But I can't! I just remembered."

"What? A date?"

"No, I just remembered that I'm a single woman. Heavens! I'd be compromised."

"Huh!" he said.

She laughed in the old well-remembered way. Again she took his arm. "Come on, you big mental hazard. What's your address?"

THE END

(Continued from page 89)

Mary was all right, in fact she was struggling to close the swinging door. Holmquist had already picked himself up, was scurrying toward the plane.

I yelled at Mary to get down and pulled the wheel around. The heavy limousine gathered speed. Our headlights picked up Holmquist, pinned him in the glare like a fat, frantic bug. Scrambling desperately, still clutching his precious briefcase, but his gun forgotten in his terror.

I don't know to this day how I expected to stop him. Whether I really would have run him down, if I had caught him before he reached the plane—or whether I actually intended to sideswipe the plane itself.

It was almost a tie. Holmquist was just about there, but so were we. At the last moment he looked around frantically. He stumbled . . . and dodged straight into the blur of the propeller!

I was already fighting the wheel, but it was too late. We skidded, the side of the plane loomed up, and then the sound of a crash. It sounded far away. . . .

The flames were still there, and the searing pain. But the flames were dying now over the wreckage across the field, and a man in a white coat was doing something to help the pain. There seemed to be lots of men, men in uniform and men with the firetruck and the ambulance.

But there was also Mary.

That was all I wanted to know. I closed my eyes again.

Dead Men Don't Scare

(Continued from page 28)

He imitated her tone. "Ryan, darling. Ryan, darling."

He opened the door on the far side, slid across the front seat, got out and tilted the seat back. She started to slide into the front seat.

"Now I have a new idea," he said. "A very satisfying idea." He pulled her away from the car, turned and sat on the edge of the seat with his feet on the concealed running board. "You will now please drape yourself, face down, over these knees. You need disciplining."

She backed away, her eyes wide. "No. Hey, no!"

"I can chase you and catch you. You might as well do it the easy way."

She moved forward shyly. "Like . . . uh . . . like this?"

He pulled his right sleeve up a little. "That does seem to be fine. Still, I . . . uh . . ."

She craned her head around and looked up at him. "I'm waiting, darling. What's the matter?"

"Well . . . I . . . uh . . ." And somehow she was still across his knees, but not face down, and her arms were tight around his neck and her lips were a deep steady flame that somehow managed to drive far down into his mind, softening and relaxing those dry, forgotten places, awakening emotions that had been too long dead.

It is a slow thing, coming back to life again.

She looked up at him, shifting in his misted vision.

"Why, Ryan! You . . ."

The passengers of a passing car hooted at them.

"High noon on route 81," he said. "Not the place for it." He got behind the wheel. She sat primly and quite smugly beside him.

"You can't make a U turn here, you know," she said.

"There'll be a place up the road where I can make a U turn."

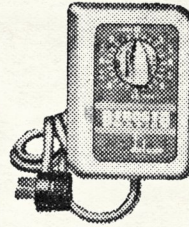
"Oh."

"Just a ways up this road. Don't think it's more than two days from here."

"Drive carefully, dear," she said.

THE END

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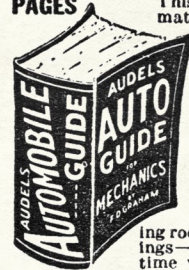
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THEY CALL IT LAW!

A local statute in North Carolina recently made it illegal for teachers to go out with young men "except when necessary to stimulate Sunday school work."

* * *

The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals in one case put itself on record as maintaining the existence of Santa Claus.

* * *

A Lebanon, Ky., garage man advertised an unpaid bill, naming the defaulting customer—and was successfully sued for libel. Amount of the unpaid bill was under fifty dollars. The court awarded the insulted customer damages of \$1000!

* * *

The Danish Parliament once passed a bill making it illegal to shoot one solitary elk—which had swum across the strait from Sweden!

* * *

An old Maine statute used to simplify the bride's trousseau considerably. According to it, a husband was immediately responsible for all her debts, if she brought some property to the merger. Since outer clothing was regarded as property—the bride often wore her scanties to the ceremony!

* * *

Our nomination for the most cautious crook of the century goes to the farsighted Chicago mailbox looter, convicted on seventy-five counts of check theft. At his trial it was brought out that, out of each check, he'd sent five bucks to the Federal Penitentiary for the improvement of prison conditions!

By Lauri Wirta

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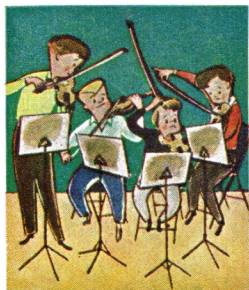
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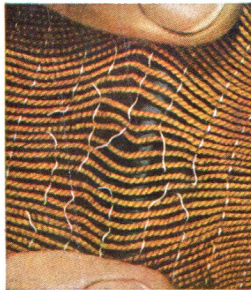
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