

SEPT.



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DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH DETECTIVE FICTION

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by DAY KEENE

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AND OTHERS**

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RIGHT. THIS
LOOKS LIKE
THE PAY-OFF



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YOU?

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AGENTS. YOU'RE
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THIS MORNING



THIN
GILLETTES,
EH? THANKS



WHAT A SWEET,
SLICK SHAVE! NO
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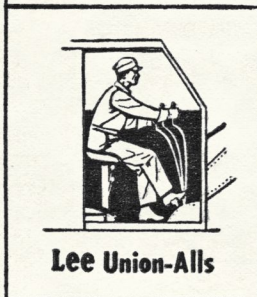
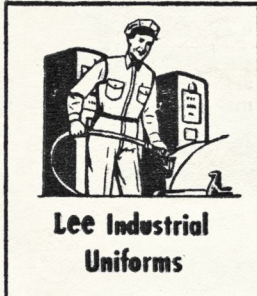
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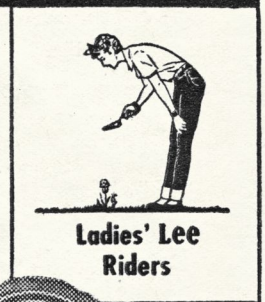
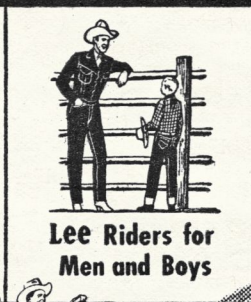
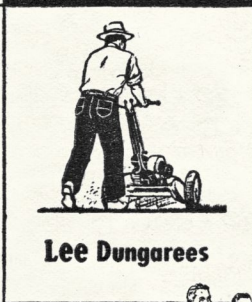
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Two sirens feuded over a skull—giving gumshoe Norton a lethal brainstorm.
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The lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

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The October issue will be out September 1st

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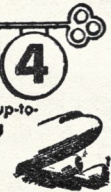
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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

The bunco artists seem to be operating from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, according to all the letters we've been getting. They're the slick specialists in the art of rooking store clerks, especially, by asking for change of a large bill and confusing the clerks; then making a quick getaway before the error is discovered.

Also, they try variations of the envelope-switch trick. This usually works in the following manner:

The stranger asks for a large bill in exchange for smaller currency, saying he wants to send the large bill to his mother (*sic*) for her birthday. He goes through the motions of putting the large bill in a stamped, addressed envelope, which he seals.

Meanwhile, the victim counts the smaller bills the chiseler has given him, finds them short. The stranger pretends surprise, takes back his bills and hands the victim the sealed envelope, telling him to hold the envelope while the stranger gets more money. Later, the victim realizes that the stranger isn't coming back, opens the envelope—and finds a piece of worthless paper . . . sometimes with the sarcastic notation: *Happy birthday.*

Beware of this kind of fast-working swindler, detective fans. And keep up-to-date on the other kinds of rackets that may be worked in your locality by reading this column every month.

Send us letters telling of your own personal experiences with swindlers and racketeers of all kinds, so that we can publicize the information you send us to warn other readers—and at the same time pay you \$5.00 for every letter we use.

Of course, we can't enter into correspondence regarding your letters because of the press of mail in the office. Also,

(Please continue on page 8)

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

we can't return your letters, unless they are accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes.

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 more tips on chicanery:

Counterfeit Copper

Dear Sir:

The inspection racket is going in great style. It works as follows:

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When going for the requested papers, the location of money is usually disclosed and it has to be examined—this fake cop says—to see that there is no counterfeit included. The racketeer then walks out with the money. One Kansas City man lost nearly \$3,500.00 in cash, while a number of others were trimmed for smaller amounts

L. J. Diehl,
 Kansas City, Mo.

Wrong Time

Dear Sir:

Walking along Broadway, one afternoon, I was attracted by a small group around a side-walk peddler. Being curious, I nosed my way in and listened to the peddler's beautiful sales talk about wrist watches he had recently purchased from a defunct manufacturer.

He was disposing of these watches for the small sum of two dollars. The watch he displayed looked as though it had some value. As he finished his sales talk, people started handing him two dollars and received their watch already wrapped.

Not wanting to overlook a bargain, I handed over two bucks. About that time, he made a remark about having to leave as there was a policeman coming and he did not have a license for side-walk peddling.

I was too engrossed in my little package to watch where he went. I walked on, tore the package open and found myself to be the lucky purchaser of a fine watch that could be purchased at any five and ten for ten cents.

Mr. E. Romeo
 Patchogue, N. Y.

Keep your letters coming.

The Editor

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BABES IN THE MORGUE

*Death-house Johnny was ready to cash in his chips . . .
until the luscious stripper tipped off shyster Edson—
how to pick up the hot two-hundred-grand.*

●
By
DAY
KEENE
●

CHAPTER ONE

Clutching at Straws

ON TUESDAY it was winter. On Wednesday it was spring. Eager green blades of grass sprouted in the rolling fields and pasture land. Swollen tree branches pregnant with shade against the heat of the coming summer gave birth to myriads of buds.

The last of the snow melted. The first of the robins arrived. The wind was from the south, sweet as a baby's kiss and filled with the promise of still more wonders.

10



Wednesday was a hell of a night for a man to have to count the few hours remaining on his rosary of life before the string was snapped and the beads of thinking and doing and hoping fell, so many unanswered prayers, to the concrete



Suddenly there was a small
gun in his hand. . . .

Exciting Novelette of Double-Crossed Double-Crossers

floor of an impersonal death house cell.

Johnny Piceno willed himself out in the corridor with Sally. He had died so many times during these last twelve months, this one last time wouldn't matter if only he could hold Sally in his arms once more, feel her fingers in his hair, as she whispered, "*I love you, Johnny. There'll never be anyone but you.*"

But such privileges weren't for him. They'd keep him caged until the end. He was a convicted cop-killer.

His knuckles white where they gripped the bars of his cell, he looked from Sally to Tobin. "Well, let's have it. So it's spring. Do I die Friday night or not?"

Sally closed her eyes. The white-haired lawyer cleared his throat. "I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am, Johnny. Out of the one hundred and ten murder cases that I have defended—"

"Okay," Piceno cut him short. "Stop thinking of your batting average. The governor refused to grant me another reprieve?"

Tobin nodded. "Your record convicted you, Johnny. It's sending you to the chair. But I want you to know I still believe in you. I still think you're innocent."

Without taking his eyes off Sally, Johnny lighted a cigarette. "Thanks. If there's any beef with the walking delegate of the coal hustler's union, I'll give you as a reference."

He made a mental calculation. Wednesday midnight subtracted from the same hour on Friday left two days of twenty-four hours each. He had forty-eight hours. Forty-eight hours of feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting, seeing. He wondered what death was really like.

"Scram, will you?" he asked Tobin. "I want to talk to Sally."

The lawyer walked to the end of the corridor. Sally pressed her cheek to the screen. "You've thought of something."

Johnny was truthful. "I don't know.

Could be. When a guy gets in a place like this, he does a lot of thinking. I know I didn't knock over that truck. I know I didn't kill Sergeant Gill."

Her eyes bright with tears, Sally nodded.

That much was true. Johnny had been with her when it had happened. They'd been alone in her apartment, talking over their wedding plans and the farm they hoped to buy. The jury had gotten a big charge out of that. Rocky Steffano's former bodyguard and a blonde strip-teaser planning to buy a farm. Even the judge had smiled.

"Thinking about what?" she now asked.

Johnny told her. "The weak link in every chain. Get Edson up here, will you, Sally?"

The blonde girl made a gesture of distaste. "That shyster."

"Even so," Johnny said. "I'm drowning, honey. The time has come to clutch at straws."

"You've some sort of a plan." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," Johnny admitted, "I have. And, Sally, stop by the old man's, will you? Tell him I didn't do it. Tell him I kept my word to him."

Sally nodded. "As soon as I get back tonight. What shall I tell Edson?"

Johnny shook his head. "Nothing. Don't tell that shyster a thing. I'll do the talking."

HERE the subtle fragrance of spring was spiced with sausage and strong cheese and rosemary and kegs of wrinkled olives. The door with its tinkling bell was propped open. Wearing a spotless white apron, the old man lay where he had fallen, back of the food-piled counter, the evening paper still clutched in one veined hand.

Sergeant Morris shook his head. The cop on the beat had made a bull. There

was nothing here for homicide. The old man's heart had merely stopped beating.

"Who found the body?" he asked.

"I did," Sally told him.

Morris lighted a cigarette. "Oh," he said finally, "it's you."

"I know," Sally forestalled him. "You didn't recognize me with so many clothes on." She shifted her smart tan polo coat to her other arm.

"Something like that," Morris said. The sight of her disturbed him. If it hadn't been for the blonde girl, Jack Gill would still be alive. And Jack had been his friend. Still, Sally was very pretty. There had been a time in his own life when—the sergeant of homicide put the thought from his mind. There had never been any time in his life when he would have knocked over an armored truck and killed a cop for the favors of any woman.

"How come you happened to come here?" he asked her.

"Johnny asked me to come," Sally told him. "He wanted me to tell his father that he had kept his word to him."

"About what?"

"Going straight."

"That," Morris said, "is a laugh. You call knocking over an armored truck for almost two hundred grand and killing a cop in the process, going straight?"

"No," Sally admitted. "I don't. But the law convicted the wrong man, Sergeant. You see, Johnny was with me when it happened."

"I'll bet. I'll just bet," Morris said.

He noticed the blonde girl's diamond rings and bracelets were gone, undoubtedly sold to finance her sweetheart's unsuccessful defense. On the other hand—that didn't make sense. None of the loot from the high-jacked truck, all of it in small, unmarked, bills, had been recovered. It seemed logical Sally had it, at least Johnny Piceno's share.

Ramsey, the medical examiner, moved a large Parmesan cheese to make room on

the counter for his blank pad. "You know the guy's name?" he asked Morris.

"Piceno," Morris told him. "Guiseppe, I think." He added, "And a damn good citizen. I wish I could say as much for his son."

Sally flushed slightly but said nothing in Johnny's defense. It wouldn't do any good. You gave a dog or a man a bad name and it stuck. Sergeant Morris, all of Chicago, with the exception of Tom Tobin and herself, and the men who had pulled the job, thought that Johnny was guilty. His good war record and the past four years had gone for nothing.

They remembered him as Rocky Steffano's cocky bodyguard. The State had called his four years of working as an automobile mechanic a cover for other nefarious and sinister activities.

"Age?" Ramsey asked.

Sergeant Morris looked at Sally. She said, "He was old. Johnny is twenty-nine and I remember hearing him say his father was in his fifties when he was born."

Ramsey wrote on his pad. "No wonder. The old man's ticker just played out. An embolism probably, or possibly cerebral thrombosis. There's nothing here for you, Sam. What the hell, a guy can't live forever."

"No," Sergeant Morris agreed with him, "he can't."

Sally looked at the headlines of the paper in the work-gnarled hand of the dead man:

*GOVERNOR REFUSES STAY
MAD-DOG KILLER MUST DIE*

She knew the truth if they didn't. *This* was murder. The law had killed old man Piceno as certainly as it intended to murder Johnny. Old man Piceno had died of a broken heart. His only living son, the prop and pride of his old age, had failed him. He thought Johnny had broken his word.

Hot tears sprang to her eyes. It was so unfair, all of it. True, Johnny had done things of which he had small reason to be proud. He had been young, hot-headed. After that first unjust prison sentence, he had foolishly decided as long as he had the name he might as well have the game.

But he hadn't robbed the armored truck. Nor had he killed the police officer for whose death he had been condemned to die. He had never robbed nor killed anyone. Johnny had been wild, not bad.

Sergeant Moris lighted a cigar. "Well, anyway, thanks for calling the precinct station, Miss—er—"

"You go to hell," Sally told him. Then, turning on her heel, she walked blindly out of the small grocery.

CHAPTER TWO

Cat's Paw

SPRING was obvious in Chicago's Loop. Despite the hour, Randolph Street was well-peopled with strolling couples. Sharply dressed wolves, their top coats over their arms, stood lolling on corners from State Street to LaSalle. The bars and restaurants were doing a thriving business.

Emerging from Jerry's Grill, Jim Edson stood picking stray bits of corned beef from his teeth, reflecting that in the spring a man's fancies were younger than he was. On the other hand, home was nice, too. He wished he was at his. The show he had seen was mediocre. The night club he'd gone to had bored him. All women were after was his money. If he invited a pretty girl up to his apartment for a drink, it invariably turned out that she owed two weeks back room rent or her poor old grandmother in Tulsa was dying of erysipelas and she wanted to borrow money for rail fare. A bottle was a better investment. It gave a man almost the same illusions, and came cheaper.

He walked leisurely down LaSalle Street towards his apartment hotel. A big, rugged, man, he looked good and kind and honest. A criminal lawyer, and a shrewd one, his looks had fooled many a jury. It was his boast no client able to afford the fees he charged had ever been convicted of a serious crime. He knew every dirty trick in the legal bag and used them all. It was rumored that in his short-beer days, to win an acquittal and a fee, he had often framed the guilt of his client on whatever stooge chanced to be handy. But those days were behind him now.

He liked being called counsellor too well to run the risk of disbarment. He was a man of position and substance. The clerk in the liquor store bowed and scraped. So did the doorman at his hotel.

Well-pleased with Jim Edson, whistling softly to himself, he unlocked the door of his suite, closed the door behind him, then froze, the short hairs on the back of his neck tingling.

The tip of a cigarette glowed in the dark like an evil eye. He wasn't alone in the suite.

Forcing his hand to the switch, he turned on the lights. Smoke curling from the cigarette between her crimson lips, Sally Evers was regarding him gravely from the depths of his favorite easy chair. Seen close up, she was even prettier than she was on the dance floor of the Golden Egret. The simple silk dress she was wearing added charm and dignity to her slim but well-rounded young figure.

His first astonishment over, Edson asked, "How did you get in here?"

Sally took her cigarette from her lips. "I told the bell boy you expected me."

Edson put his hat on the shelf and hung his topcoat in the hall closet. Sally Evers was Johnny Piceno's girl-friend. Johnny had been sentenced to die. The governor had refused to grant him a reprieve. No lawyer on earth could save him now. But

the little blonde dancer seemingly had other ideas.

He wouldn't attempt to disillusion her. Sally was too pretty. What was one man's loss was another man's gain. If he played his cards right, it should be an interesting evening.

Smiling, he turned back to Sally. "Well, that's fine. I'm glad to see you, Sally." He took the stopper from the glass decanter on the table. "What will it be? Rye or bourbon? And what mix?"

"Nothing, thank you," Sally said. "I don't drink. This is a business call."

"Oh," Edson said. "I see." He sipped his drink. "I thought Tom Tobin was Johnny's lawyer."

"He is. Rather he was," Sally said. Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "And look where Johnny is now. I wish we'd come to you."

Edson was smug about it. "I wish you had. I might have been able to do something for Johnny. Tobin is a good lawyer, but—" He shrugged and left it there.

Sally demanded, "But what?"

Edson shrugged again. "Well, Tom's not a man to cut corners. I've been known to, in defense of an innocent client, of course." He indicated the evening paper on the table. "But why come to me now? With Johnny in the death house and only a few hours left, what do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know," Sally admitted.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Johnny asked me to contact you and have you come to see him."

"About what?"

"He said he'd do the talking."

EDSON was mildly disappointed. Sally was very lovely. It was spring. But from where he sat, it didn't look as if the evening was going to go as he had planned. "I'm a busy man, Miss Evers," he said

sourly. "Stateville is some seventy miles from here. And my time and services cost money."

"You'll be paid," Sally said promptly. "Well paid."

Brightening, Edson sat on the arm of the chair in which she was sitting and put his arm around her.

Sally stood up, leaving him holding air. "In cash."

Edson's mounting pulse slowed—only to quicken again as he made the same discovery Sergeant Morris had. The last time he'd seen Sally on the dance floor of the Golden Egret, her wrists and fingers had flashed fire. Now her diamonds were gone. She'd probably sold or pawned them to pay Tobin the cost of the several appeals and for his futile defense of Johnny Piceno.

Edson's agile mind raced around the next logical corner. That could mean, it undoubtedly did, the loot from the armored truck was still intact. Not a penny of the loot had ever been recovered. It could be that money about which Johnny wanted to see him. It could be the young fool was laboring under the illusion he could trade the stolen money for his life.

Small beads of sweat glistened on Edson's cheeks and forehead. His breathing became labored. In his opinion, no woman had ever lived who was half so pretty or so desirable as the thin-faced lady on a silver dollar. And by the trucking firm's own admission, the loot consisted of one hundred and ninety-eight thousand dollars in small denomination, impossible to trace bills.

His pulse beat even faster. If only he could get his hands on that money. Added to what he'd put away, he could retire. He could live in Florida, California, Cuba, the Bahamas, anywhere he chose to live. It wouldn't do any harm to talk to Piceno. He didn't need to commit himself to anything.

Looking at Sally, he reviewed what he

knew of the case. On the night of April fifth last, four masked men had successfully high-jacked an armored truck in front of a bank. During the process of the stickup, one of the four masked men had called their leader Johnny. The same leader's mask had slipped briefly during a tussle with one of the guards.

Detective Sergeant Jack Gill, driving past the bank at the time, had attempted to come to the aid of the guards. The leader who had been called Johnny had shot him before he could draw his gun. Then, standing over him, he had earned the nickname of mad dog by emptying his gun into the fallen detective.

Picked up in the dragnet that followed, Johnny Piceno, known to the police as a minor hoodlum and former bodyguard for the dead Rocky Steffano, had been positively identified by the guard with whom he had tussled, two school teachers making a deposit at the bank, and by a local business man.

None of the other men had been apprehended. None of the loot had been recovered. With only the flimsy alibi that he had been in Sally Evers' apartment discussing their forthcoming marriage and the farm they intended to buy, a prior armed-robbery charge against him, and an ethical, if brilliant, defense attorney, it was a foregone conclusion the jury would bring in the verdict they had.

Sally looked at the clock on the mantle. "I've got to get down to the club. I've missed two shows as it is and Beau will be hopping mad. Will you drive down and see Johnny in the morning?"

"I will," Edson assured her. "Bright and early." He walked the blonde girl to the door. "How's business at the club?"

"Fine," Sally said bitterly. "Beau was ready to lock the doors until this happened. Now he's making money so fast he doesn't know where to put it. It would seem that half of Chicago's stay-up-lates want to see the sweetheart of a mad-dog

killer. And I perform for them nightly."

JOHNNY sat on the edge of his bunk, his face buried in his hands, trying to shut out the memories induced by the warm fragrance of spring that had permeated even the death house. Farmers were plowing and disking their fields. Winter wheat was beginning to spread its green carpet.

It all seemed very far away. It was only a beautiful dream he and Sally once had dreamed. A farm, and children, and a world neither of them had ever known. The old man had been even more enthusiastic than he and Sally had been. The old man had been a farmer in Italy, forty years ago, forty years before he had come to this country.

"That's a boy, John," he had approved. "I always knew you would turn out good. Once you and Sal' gotta farm and maybe a bambino or two, I sell the store and come take care of the kids. I be a hap' old man, I tell you."

The big youth's lean jaw tightened. Now the old man was dead, dead of a broken heart.

He forced his mind back to the present. He hadn't done this thing for which he was about to die. He didn't know who had. But he'd done a lot of thinking. The two school teachers and the merchant who had identified him as the man who had shot Sergeant Gill could be excused. They had been excited. They weren't trained observers.

The armored-truck guard was another matter. He had reputedly seen him face to face from a distance of a few inches. He *had* to be lying. He wasn't supposed to get excited. Guarding money was his business. The question was, *why* had he lied? Why had the guard identified him as the man the others had called Johnny, the man who had triggered Gill into his grave?

Tobin's cursory investigation of the

man had turned up nothing to his discredit, except that he drank and gambled moderately, two facts which if known to the company which employed him would earn him immediate dismissal. The guard's name was Bill Swan. He lived with his wife in a modest bungalow on the north-west side of the city.

The thing that puzzled Johnny, the fruit of almost twelve months of thinking, was a burning desire to know why the armored truck guard did his drinking and gambling in the back room of the Golden Egret? There were plenty of joints on the north and the north-west side. Why should Swan cross the city to the far south side to drink and buck a dice game that was notoriously crooked?

Johnny considered Beau Quirk, the owner of the Golden Egret. Beau had never been arrested. Beau had never tangled with the law—but only because of his connections and a hot wire into the City Hall. Beau broke more laws in an hour of operating than Johnny had ever broken. Moreover, Beau was so crazy about Sally that he couldn't sleep nights.

It was something for a man to think about. Johnny had thought of it often. Other armored-truck guards had turned crooked. What if Swan had been in with the gang that had held up the truck and Beau Quirk had paid him well to identify him as the leader of the mob?

That way, both men would be able to kill two birds with one stone. Swan had been saved from having to put the finger on the real killer. Beau Quirk had brushed him out of his hair. Come midnight Friday night, the dapper night-club owner would have a clear track with Sally. Sally was young. With him dead and in his grave, her dream of getting out of the life she was leading into something normal and decent, would be just that—a dream. Sally probably wouldn't care what happened to her. She'd probably go to hell in a bucket and one man would make just as

good a companion as another, she'd feel.

Johnny beat his fists on the edge of the metal cot. If only he could get out of where he was for just twelve hours. That, however, was impossible. The law took too good care of its cop-killers. He'd have to use a cat's paw and bait the trap with a lot of money.

Edson was the logical choice. If Swan had made an honest mistake, no damage would be done. If Swan was pulling a fast one and Edson got himself in a lot of trouble, well, Johnny didn't owe the lawyer a thing.

Johnny looked at the headline on the morning paper that the inside death house guard had brought him with his breakfast. It read:

*MAD-DOG KILLER SWITCHES
LAWYERS IN LAST MINUTE
MOVE TO CHEAT CHAIR*

Under it was a picture of Edson and a list of the men he'd snatched out of the shadow of death. It was an even more impressive list than Tobin's.

Johnny said a prayer. Now, if only Edson would bite.

CHAPTER THREE

Shyster's Shenanigans

AT THE door of the Administration Building, Edson turned and looked back at the car that had trailed him from Chicago. It, too, had parked. The men in it looked tough. They, obviously, from their scowls, didn't approve of him having been called in on the case. For the second time, he seriously considered driving back to town and forgetting the whole affair. Only the thought of so much money restrained him.

After the freshness of the countryside, the death house was hot and stuffy. The guard refused to allow him in the cell with Piceno until he'd thrown his weight around. Once inside, locked in with John-

ny, the lawyer sat, with one hip on the wash-bowl, studying the condemned man's face. It was clean-cut, intelligent.

For a fleeting moment he had an impression he had defended the big youth before. But it was probably his imagination. In his short-beer Magistrate Court days, he had defended a lot of tough young kids. They all looked alike to Edson. Six months ago Johnny Piceno's picture had been in the papers daily. It was small wonder he looked familiar.

"You're in rather a bad spot, aren't you, Johnny?" he opened the conversation.

"Yeah. A bad spot," Johnny admitted.

Edson lighted a cigarette without offering one to Johnny. "This is a hell of a time to call me in. What do you expect me to do, work a miracle?"

"No," Johnny said quietly. "I don't. I've got to die, I guess. I don't suppose anything or anyone can save me."

Edson blew smoke through his nose. "Then why call me in? Why tell your girl you want to see me?"

Johnny laid it on the line. "Because I know the kind of a lawyer you are. Because I know you'll do anything for money. That's why I sent Sally to you."

His interest quickened by the mention of money, Edson leaned back against the bowl and waited for Piceno to continue.

"And there's a lot of money involved," Johnny said. "Almost two hundred grand." He got off his cot and looked through the bars and wire mesh to make certain the guard was out of earshot. Then, leaning against the bars, he asked, "How'd you like to make a hundred grand, Edson?"

"That I wouldn't mind," the lawyer said. "And just what do I have to do for this hundred grand?" He sneered. "Get you out of here?"

Johnny shook his head. "No. Like I told you before, I suppose I've got to go. It's Sally I'm thinking of. She's sold and

hocked everything she has, trying to pry me out of this jam. And I don't want to leave her broke and a pushover for some wise-guy like Beau Quirk."

Edson nodded approval. "Now you're beginning to make sense. The way I hear it, you taking Sally away from Beau was like snatching meat from a hungry tiger."

"No," Johnny said. "I didn't take Sally away from anyone. Sally's always belonged to me, since we were kids together in Little Hell and her father was a plumber and my old man ran a grocery. Beau just got the wrong idea while I was in the army, that was all."

"To hell with all that," Edson said. "Just what do you want me to do?"

"Make a collection," Johnny said simply. "I want you to pick up the missing two hundred grand and split it half and half with Sally. It's all in small, unmarked bills. And none of it can be traced."

The veins in Edson's temples began to pound. It was difficult to breathe normally. He had been right. The armored-truck loot was back of Johnny's switching lawyers. Besides, Johnny was being more reasonable than he had dared to hope. All Johnny wanted out of the deal was to assure Sally's future.

For form's sake, Edson said, "Remember, Piceno, I'm a lawyer and, as such, an officer of the court."

"You're my lawyer," Johnny pointed out, "and this is a privileged conversation. What's more, I know you. You'd sell your mother for a dime if you could get six percent interest on it."

Edson wasn't insulted. "Where's the money, Johnny?"

"You promise you'll split with Sally?"

"I swear."

Johnny took a deep breath. This was it. "It's under a pile of coal in Bill Swan's basement," he said finally. "And it should be intact. The other two guys in the caper are dead. And Swan's been afraid to spend a dime."

His eyes narrowing in suspicion, Edson snuffed his cigarette. "If Swan was in on the caper, how come he fingered you?"

Johnny's voice was bitter. "The dirty rat wanted it all."

"And you didn't expose him, why?"

"He's out and I'm in," Johnny said. "And Bill swore that he'd kill Sally if I as much as opened my yap. What's more, he'd do it. A guy low enough to turn on his own pal wouldn't stop at killing a woman."

It was a simple but a plausible explanation. Edson lost what respect he had for Johnny. Any man willing to go to the chair to save a woman's life was a fool. The world was filled with women. His pulse quickened. All a man with two hundred grand had to do was crook a finger.

"How do I get this money?" he asked.

"That's up to you," Johnny said. "But for half of one hundred and ninety-eight thousand dollars, you ought to be able to scheme up something."

Edson nodded. "It might be I can think of something." He asked for Bill Swan's address and wrote it down. Then he banged on the bars of the cell for the guard to let him out. "Well, take care of yourself, Johnny."

The condemned man's smile was bitter. "I'll do that, Counsellor."

At the door of the death house, Edson looked back. His head bent forward against the bars, Johnny Piceno was standing in an attitude of prayer. *The fool*, Edson thought. *The fool*. . .

THE bungalow was average size and built of yellow brick. The only way it differed from its neighbors was that its lawn was neglected while those on either side were close-cropped and well cared for. Parked under a street lamp on the other side and a few houses down the street, Edson waited for Swan to come home.

He was in a mellow mood. It had been a very satisfactory afternoon. It wasn't a stall or a gag. Piceno hadn't been lying to him. Swan was the type of a man who would do just such a thing as the youth in the death house had charged.

Digging deeper than Tobin had, and whatever bonding company bonded the armored-truck company for that matter, using his own underworld connections, he had uncovered a lot of things about the armored-truck guard. For one thing, his name wasn't Swan. It was Healy. Why his fingerprints weren't on file with the F.B.I. was something he'd never know. According to his informants, Healy had taken two falls. One for assault to kill in Salem, Oregon. One for armed robbery in San Quentin. He wasn't new to crime. He was merely new to Chicago. And Johnny hadn't been lying. Healy had the money. The man had just purchased a four-thousand dollar convertible, ostensibly on the pay of an armored-truck guard.

A wave of anger swept Edson. On his money really. Healy was spending his money. There was, however, some satisfaction in the fact that the car had been the only large expenditure he had been able to trace to him. The bulk of it was still safe under the coal pile in the basement.

"*You promise you'll split with Sally?*"

Edson laughed into the wind-wing. Like hell he would. Once he had his hands on the loot from the robbery, the little dancer could strip for a living until her charms began to sag. She could be a pushover for Beau Quirk or anybody else. He didn't want the best part of her. This was his perfect score, his final jack-pot.

As soon as possible, after he'd picked up the money, he'd put his affairs in order and take off for distant places. And the best of it all was, there'd be no beef. Johnny couldn't kick. He would be dead. Healy wouldn't dare to open his mouth. To do so would be a confession of murder. Sally

was only a woman. And Johnny Piceno had told him the two other lads in the caper were dead.

It was as sweet a set-up as Edson had ever seen. He stood to pick up almost two hundred thousand dollars just for driving down to Stateville.

Leaning back in the seat, Edson glanced in the rear vision mirror. The car with the four men in it was gone. He'd shaken it hours before on his way back to Chicago. It could mean much or nothing. A lot of men didn't like him. The four men could have had a beef. They could be hesitant clients. It didn't matter either way. No crook on earth, at least none in Chicago, was smart enough to cope with him.

He made certain the gun under his arm-pit rode easily in its holster. He didn't expect any trouble with Healy but it never paid to take chances.

Five, ten more minutes passed. Then a big car purred up the street and turned in the driveway of the house that he was watching. A slightly-built man in uniform got out and let himself in the unlocked screen door.

Edson gave Healy ten more minutes to shed his uniform coat and gun and sit down to his supper. Then, crossing the street, he walked up the steps of the bungalow and into the living room.

A long hall led back to the kitchen. It smelled of fried pork chops. Slipping his gun from its holster, Edson walked down the thick runner to the kitchen.

A frizzy blonde was dishing pork chops and mashed potatoes onto a plate. Comfortable in his shirt sleeves, his coat and gun belt discarded, Healy was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a bottle of beer.

The blonde was the first to see Edson. She dropped the plate she was holding and gasped, "Oh my heavens. I knew it. Ever since I broke that mirror this morning."

Healy was bald except for a fringe of

tan hair. The top of his head turned red. He looked at his holstered gun hanging on a hook a few feet away, started to get to his feet, then tried to brazen it out.

"Who the hell are you, mister? What is this, a stick-up?"

"In a way," Edson admitted. "But a perfectly legal one." He secured Healy's gun and dropped it in his side coat pocket. "My name is Jim Edson, Swan. I'm quite a well-known local attorney. Or would you rather I called you Healy?"

The blonde twisted her apron into a rope. "I knew it. I knew it. I knew it. Things were going too well."

The color faded from the armored-guard's bald spot. "All right," he said quietly. "So you know who I am. Let's have it. What do you want?"

"The money," Edson told him.

"Ha," Healy said. "That's a laugh." He made an impatient gesture with the back of his hands. "Go away. You annoy me. I don't know what you are talking about." He took a bite of pork chop and almost choked on it.

Edson grinned his twisted grin. "That's what you get for lying. All right. Up on your feet, Healy." He used his gun to include the woman. "You, too, Mrs. Swan, or Healy, whichever you prefer. Let's go down in the basement."

Healy got to his feet slowly. "Why?"

Edson lied, "Because I'm from the Acme Insurance Company and I'm here to recover the money that was stolen last April 15th from the armored-truck on which you were one of the guards."

The blonde woman began to whimper and Healy said sharply, "Shut up." Then looking back at Edson, he said, "You're making a mistake, mister. A big one. There's no money down there."

"I'll chance that," Edson said.

HE HERDED the man and woman down the steps in front of him. It was cooler here than it had been in the

kitchen. Edson noticed with approval that all of the windows were closed. Angry voices carried. And he didn't want any interruptions before or after he'd gotten the money.

His bald spot gleaming, Healy stood under the high-watt naked bulb that lighted the basement. "All right. We're down here. Now what?"

Edson used his free hand to point to the closed door of the coal bin. "Dig," he said shortly. "I happen to know the almost two hundred grand should be under there."

Healy opened his mouth as if about to speak, then shoved aside the door of the coal bin, picked up a big scoop and began to move the small pile left from winter to one side.

"Who tipped you?" he asked the lawyer casually.

"Johnny Piceno," Edson admitted.

"Oh," Healy said. "I see." For some

reason, he seemed to be greatly relieved.

The exact sequence of events after that were never quite clear in Edson's mind. Healy stooped again as if about to resume his shoveling. Then, suddenly, there was a small gun in his hand and it was spitting at Edson while the frizzy blonde tried to beat his brains in with a heavy piece of kindling.

Pushing the blonde away from him, he heard her scream. Then the gun in his own hand came to life. Healy rose on one foot and spun like an adagio dancer. Then he plunged face down on the coal pile, a thick red substance bubbling from the big hole the mushroom bullet had torn in his back. The frizzy blonde kneeled as in prayer and her forehead smacked the concrete.

Edson's feet and hands felt icy cold. He wanted to run and be sick at the same time. He hadn't killed the woman. One of her husband's bullets had done that.



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp

IT'S GREAT! Try it! See what a big difference 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic makes in the good looks of your hair. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . spruce up your hair quickly and effectively. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients.

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
on CBS Wednesday nights.

He had killed Healy. He stood, numbed, staring at the body, thinking of the string of clients who had whimpered: *"I didn't mean to do it. . . ."* *"Everything went black. . . ."* *"He pulled a gun on me. . . ."* *"It was self-defense, Counsellor."*

Now he, too, had killed a man. Edson tiptoed up the stairs and looked out the front windows. Nothing had changed. There were no excited neighbors on the walk. If anyone had heard the muffled shots, they had dismissed them as a car back-firing.

He walked back the hall and down the stairs to the basement. The money was what mattered. No one needed to know that he had called on Healy. The police could think what they would. Tugging the body aside, he picked up the scoop and attacked the coal pile.

Twenty minutes later, panting from the exertion, his face and clothes grimed with coal dust, he threw the scoop into a corner of the bin. It all had been for nothing. Either Johnny had lied to him or Healy had moved the money.

He was inclined to the latter theory. The convertible and the fact that the man known as Swan was really an ex-con named Healy was proof of Johnny's story.

Edson sat on a box and panted. He'd never felt so frustrated. The money might be in the basement. It might be anywhere. A fortune in unmarked bills—and he'd allowed it to slip through his fingers. If only there'd been no shooting, he could have pistol-whipped its hiding place out of Healy. It would take him a good twenty-four hours to search the trash-littered basement. Getting up from the box, he wiped the scoop clean of fingerprints, pressed the handle into the dead man's hand and went upstairs to lock the doors and wash. If the money was here, he'd find it.

The phone in the kitchen tinkled as he reached the head of the stairs. Edson glowered at it sourly. An unanswered

phone had hung and burned a lot of men. In sudden decision he picked it up and grunted:

"Yeah?"

"This is Beau, Bill," the voice on the other end informed him. "You saw this morning's paper about Johnny calling in Edson?"

Edson grunted again.

"Well, just sit tight," Beau Quirk said. "It's just some screwball idea of Johnny's. Neither he nor Sally suspect a thing." The night-club owner laughed. "In fact, Sally just thanked me with tears in her eyes for offering to pay for Johnny's funeral."

Edson tried to grunt, and couldn't. He was too busy looking at a mental image. The whole thing was suddenly clear. And it had been very clever. No wonder that Tom Tobin hadn't gotten anywhere with his defense.

Beau Quirk sounded worried. "That is you, isn't it, Bill?"

"Yeah. Sure," Edson grunted, and hung up.

His twisted grin tugged the corners of his lips. Then it spread all over his face. He knew where the two hundred thousand dollars were, and more. If he'd had a vein of gold before, he'd struck the mother-lode now. All he had to do was mine it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two of a Kind

BATHED and changed into a fresh suit, Edson walked into the Golden Egret just as the lights went out and, lovely in an old-fashioned hoopskirt and bonnet, bathed in an amber spotlight, Sally danced out onto the postage-stamp-sized dance floor for her first show of the evening.

An enthusiastic burst of applause greeted her.

The headwaiter stopped him in the small foyer. "I'm sorry, sir. We haven't a single table or a stool left at the bar."

"That's fine," Edson said curtly. "It so happens I want to see Beau."

"Yes, sir," the headwaiter said. "And your name, sir?"

"Jim Edson."

"And the nature of your business, sir?"

"Is personal," Edson added. "Just tell Beau that Bill Healy sent me."

The name meant nothing to the headwaiter. He said, "Yes, sir," again and went away.

Edson leaned against the arch of the foyer, watching Sally. The kid was good. She could sing and she could dance. She had the crowd standing on their ears. He studied the young girl's face. Years of living in nightclubs had failed to mark it. She looked sweet. She probably was. A woman's face was usually the mirror of her mind.

His pulse beat a little faster. Sally was the type of a girl who loved intensely. Once Johnny Piceno walked that short last mile tomorrow night, she'd probably go to hell in a bucket. And if he could only get his hands on the money, she might as well be a pushover for him as for Beau Quirk.

The headwaiter touched Edson's arm. "Yes, sir. Right this way, sir. Mr. Quirk will see you."

Edson left reluctantly. Keeping close to the other man's heels, he followed him through the dark as he wove a path through the tables towards the rear of the club. No one looked up as they passed. No one even saw them. Most of the men were standing.

Leading the way down a narrow, dimly-lighted hall, the headwaiter opened a door without rapping and stood aside to allow Edson to enter.

The only light in the office was a lamp on the glass-topped desk. A hard-faced, well-muscled man in his middle thirties,

Beau Quirk sat tilted back in his chair, a cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth.

"Hello, Beau," Edson greeted him.

"Never mind the amenities," the nightclub owner said. "What's this about Bill Healy?"

Edson sat in a huge, leather, overstuffed chair that should prove a good receptacle for the murder gun. "He's dead," Edson said cheerfully. "And I know the whole thing, Beau. Bill did a lot of talking just before he died."

Quirk was noncommittal. "Oh."

Edson stuffed the gun with which he had killed Healy between the side of the chair and the cushion. "Yes," he continued cheerfully, "Bill told me the whole thing."

"For example?"

Edson lighted a cigarette. This was the type of a scene that he enjoyed. "Well, for one thing, about how you paid him to finger Johnny Piceno as the leader of the stick-up mob. For another thing, he told me how you had persuaded him to allow you to take care of the loot for him and how the hunk of dough for the convertible was the first real sum you'd put out."

Edson studied the other man's face. He didn't like the expression on it. Instead of being angry or frightened, Beau Quirk seemed relieved. "I might have known," the nightclub owner said finally, "that sooner or later you'd stick your dirty fingers in the pie. Okay. Let's get down to business. How much money do you want?"

Edson grinned. "One hundred and ninety-eight thousand dollars will do for a starter."

"Or what?"

The lawyer played his trump. "Or, brother, you go to the chair right along with Johnny Piceno. And believe me, Beau, I'm the boy who can send you there. How would you like that?"

The swarthy night-club owner shook

his head. "I don't think I'd like it." He snuffed his cigarette. "But tell me, Edson. How did you get wise?"

Edson smirked, "That's for me to know." His eyes turned hard. "You dealt yourself a nice hand, Beau, including Sally. But I'm cutting in. And remember, I'm holding a corpse as a kicker."

"Yeah. So you say," Quirk said. He nodded to the man standing back of the chair in which Edson was sitting. "Go ahead. Put him out, Tony. But don't make any noise about it. I don't want any of the chumps in here. With Sally dragging them in the way she is, I can't afford it."

Edson got to his feet, only to have a stunning blow knock him back into the chair again. His whole body felt paralyzed but his mind was clear. The man who had hit him was one of the four men who had followed him to Stateville. The four men had been Beau Quirk's boys.

This wasn't the way he had planned it. Something was radically wrong. Beau should have bickered, asked questions, learned the evidence against him. Instead, he had told one of his boys to put him out when what he really meant was, "*Knock the fool unconscious.*"

Putting both hands on the arms of the chair, Edson managed to push himself to his feet and croak,

"Now wait!"

"Wait, hell," Quirk said. "If you think I want the seat of *my* pants burned off, you're very much mistaken. And I'm not cutting anyone in on a dime, see? Go ahead. Hit him again, Tony. And hit him hard this time."

Edson tried to fend off the blow. His hands might have been tissue paper. Tony's fist crashed through them to his jaw.

There was a great roaring in Edson's ears. The lamp on the desk flared into sudden brilliance, then as suddenly burned out. . . .

THERE was a strong, earthy smell in Edson's nostrils when consciousness returned. For a moment he feared he had been buried alive. Then he realized where he was. He was in the unlighted cellar of the Golden Egret, lying on a pile of sacks that had contained potatoes. The choking sensation was caused by the gag in his mouth.

He tried to sit up and found his wrists had been tied behind him to his ankles. Beau wasn't taking any chances. He had the money and he meant to keep it.

The night was long and cold. Time lost all meaning. With dawn, a pale square of light framed a small, barred, window. Edson cursed himself for a fool. His long string of successes had made him overconfident. He should have known better than to think he could bluff Beau Quirk on his own grounds. He should have planted the gun and left, then invited Beau up to his office for the showdown.

Day was as long as night had been. The pale square of light faded, then was gone. By twisting his tortured body into a ludicrous angle, Edson could see the luminous dial of his watch. It was eight o'clock, Friday evening. In Stateville Johnny Piceno was sitting in his cell, waiting for the barber to come shave his hair. A few more hours and good-by, Johnny.

Edson diverted his anger to Johnny. Damn Piceno. If Johnny hadn't sent for him, he wouldn't be in this mess. If only he could talk to Beau, promise to keep his mouth shut. The money no longer mattered. A dead man couldn't spend a dime.

A door somewhere in the dark cellar opened and a low-watt yellow bulb flicked on. Edson stared at it hopefully. He knew when he was beaten. All he wanted to do was talk to Beau.

A squat man with an ugly scar on one cheek descended the cellar stairs, a small, sharp meat cleaver in one hand. Edson strained against his gag and the ropes on his wrists and ankles until the veins stood

out on his forehead in thick cords. It wasn't fair. He didn't want to die. He wasn't ready to die.

The man shuffled across the cellar towards him, raised the cleaver—and Edson fainted. When he came to, the man was using the cleaver to pry frozen chickens out of a box he had taken from the cold room. His task completed, he picked up the huge tray on which he had piled the chickens, ascended the stairs, and the yellow light winked out.

Edson lay bathed in sweat. He doubted the man had even seen him. He was nothing but a cook's assistant getting ready for the evening's business.

Then Edson thought of the cleaver. The cook hadn't taken it with him. He'd had all he could do to manage the tray. The lawyer inched himself across the floor. The cleaver was lying near the shattered box. Sweat standing out on his cheeks in great beads, Edson drew the sharp edge across the rope that arched his body into a bow. Then, slobbering with hope, he worked on his wrists and ankles.

A few minutes later, bleeding from half-a-dozen minor cuts, but unbound, he got painfully onto his feet. The cellar was a well of darkness but with the aid of his cigarette lighter he found the stairs the cook had ascended. The door at its head was framed with light.

Holding the cleaver in one hand, Edson mounted the stairs. Pushing open the door, he found himself in the kitchen of the Golden Egret. There was a savory odor of cooking meats and vegetables. A half-dozen white-aproned men were busy at their respective tasks. Several of them looked at him curiously, then looked away. When one worked at the Golden Egret, one learned to mind his own business.

Edson walked through the kitchen and found himself in the hall off which Beau Quirk's office door opened. The door was closed. It was early. There were no sounds coming from the office or from the

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club proper. Beginning to hope and plan again, Edson hobbled down the hall.

Once he was completely in the clear, back in the safety of his own apartment, he would think of some way of outwitting Quirk. He still had a powerful club. The gun that had killed Healy was still planted in Quirk's office. And the stolen money belonged to him. He'd made a deal with Johnny Piceno.

Edson hobbled between the stacked tables towards the door, then froze in the arch of the foyer as if poised for flight. The hoodlum he had called Tony standing beside him, Beau Quirk was leaning against the bar having his first one of the evening.

"Well, I will be damned," he said quietly when he saw Edson. "We were just coming down to talk to you, chum. Thanks for saving us the trouble."

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Request

EDSON'S mind was a blur of pain. The torment, it seemed, had been going on for hours. He almost wished he was back in the cellar. Beau insisted he talk. Tony hit him every time he did. His face felt like raw beefsteak.

"Stop lying," Quirk said. "How much did Healy tell you?"

Edson told the truth. "Nothing. He didn't tell me a thing."

Quirk nodded and Tony hit him. There was begrudged admiration in his voice. "The guy is tough. He can take it." He hit Edson again for good measure. "Maybe he's telling the truth."

Beau Quirk shook his head. "I don't trust the guy." He changed the trend of his questioning. "Okay. So Healy didn't blab. What did you mean last night when you inferred you could pin his corpse on me?"

Edson clung to his ace in the hole.

"Nothing. You have to believe me. I was just bluffing, Beau."

Quirk nodded and Tony hit him.

"You're the biggest liar in Chicago," Quirk said. "And you're lying now. Okay. Let that go for a minute. How did Johnny get wise?"

"Wise to what?" Edson asked.

He cringed against the expected blow. Tony had raised his fist, but the nightclub owner shook his head.

"Hold it just a minute, Tony. Maybe the guy is leveling." He looked at his watch. "Johnny takes off in four more hours. He hasn't a prayer. He knows it. Maybe he just pulled a fast one, you know, one of them stabs in the dark. Just what did he tell you?" he asked Edson.

Edson said, "That Bill Swan fingered him because he wanted all of the money. That he was afraid to finger back because Swan swore he'd kill Sally if he did. And that the money was hidden under the coal pile in Swan's basement."

Quirk stood with both hands on his hips. "I'll be damned. I will be damned." There was incredulity in his tone. "You mean to tell me, you stupe, that you still actually think it was Johnny that led that mob?"

The desk lamp was full on Quirk's face. The light made him look five years younger. With a sick sinking feeling in his stomach, Edson realized the truth. Both Johnny Piceno and Beau had black hair. Both were of a size and complexion. An excited witness might easily confuse them. Especially with Bill Healy positively identifying Johnny.

Edson's mind raced on. Sally had told him that business at the Golden Egret before the stick-up had been so bad that Beau had been thinking of closing. Edson gasped. Small wonder he hadn't been able to bluff him. It wasn't the money that bothered Beau Quirk. It was his life.

Beau belonged in the cell in which Johnny was sweating it out. It had been

Beau who had killed Sergeant Gill. It was Beau who was the mad-dog. It was Beau who had led the stick-up mob that had knocked over the armored truck.

Beau read Edson's expression correctly. "So now you know. Tony and I and two other of our boys knocked over the truck. Healy was just the inside man who fingered the job for us. But I will be damned if I know how Johnny figured it out."

"A cat's-paw," Edson swore. "That damn Johnny used me to pull his chestnuts out of the fire."

Warned by a sixth sense, Quirk walked to the door and opened it. Sally was standing, white-faced, in the hall. "I thought," Beau said quietly, "you were on your way to Stateville to say good-by to Johnny."

"I was," Sally said as quietly. "I just stopped by to ask if you had any last message for him."

"And you've been standing there how long?"

Instead of answering, Sally slapped him. "You punk. It was you who killed Sergeant Gill. And you were willing to let my darling Johnny go to the chair because of me."

She tried to slap him again but the nightclub owner caught her wrist and spun her into the room. "You talk too much. Let's keep this a secret between us, huh, sweetheart? At least until Johnny goes to the chair. Then the law won't dare to spit. They won't dare reopen the case and admit they've burned an innocent man."

Sally rubbed her wrist where he'd hurt her. "Then you admit it was you who robbed the truck? You admit it was you who killed Sergeant Gill?"

Quirk grinned. "Sure. Why not? Who's going to blab?" He turned his grin on Edson. "Especially since our shyster friend was kind enough to rub out Healy. Bill Healy was the one weak link in the chain."

THE office door opened again, seemingly of its own accord. His four-man squad backing him, Sergeant Morris stood in the doorway. "That would seem to be," he said, "where I come in."

Frantic with fear, Edson fumbled for the gun with which he had killed Bill Healy and attempted to plant on Beau Quirk as a lever.

"Uh uh," one of the detectives in the doorway stopped him. "Let's all just sit and stand as we are, Counsellor. And let's all lock our fingers behind our necks. And let's be quick about it." He emphasized his request by thumbing back the hammer of his gun.

Beau cursed softly, looking at Sally. "You witch. You dirty little witch. You've burned me."

As the members of his squad walked by him into the room to frisk Edson and Tony and Quirk, Sergeant Morris shook his head over the police positive he held leveled on Quirk's belt buckle. "No. There you're wrong, Beau. Miss Evers had nothing to do with this. It was Johnny."

The nightclub owner puzzled, "Johnny?"

"That's right," Sergeant Morris nodded. "As you may or may not know but are going to learn in a few weeks or a few months, the warden down at Stateville usually tries to grant a condemned man's last request. And Johnny Piceno's was a honey. He wanted us to find his new lawyer, said when he'd last seen Edson the guy had been headed for a talk with Bill Swan. Imagine our surprise when we find two stiffs at Swan's place and Edson still among the missing."

He scowled at the lawyer. "We look for the guy all last night and most of today, so help me. And are our faces red when we cruise by this joint and recognize his car parked right across the street. So we kinda hang around ever since."

Quirk rapped out a curse and started to

lower his arms. The sergeant thumbed the hammer of his gun.

"Go ahead. Please, Beau," Morris begged him. "Make like you're going for a belly gun. Jack Gill was my pal."

Quirk changed his mind and locked his fingers behind his head again.

One of the detectives frisked Edson, then searched the chair in which the lawyer was sitting and came up with the gun with which the lawyer had shot to death Healy.

"Here's one Edson tried to stash." He grinned.

Morris said, "Tag it for ballistics. Tell 'em I want it checked against the three slugs that killed Swan. Could be they'll find something interesting." The homicide man scowled at Edson. "Could be, at long last, if the counsellor defends himself he's going to lose a client to the chair." He looked at his watch, then nodded at his second in command.

"Take over, Harry. Run 'em all down to the Bureau and build a fire in the sweat box. I've got to get on my horse. We haven't too much time and I want to talk to the State's Attorney before I drive Miss Evers down to Stateville."

Beside himself with fear, Edson babbled, "This isn't fair. Why should Johnny pick on me?"

Sally told him. "Because if it hadn't been for you, Johnny's father would still be alive. Johnny would never have gone to prison. He'd never have had the record that caused a jury to convict of murder. You don't remember Johnny, do you, Counsellor? Back in the days when you messed up his life, my life, he was just a frightened little kid on whom you framed an armed-robbery charge to spring one of your clients and earn yourself an acquittal and a fee."

"Smart birds, chickens, eh?" Sergeant Morris added as he guided Sally out the door. "No wonder Johnny wants to raise

them. Darned if they don't come home to roost."

* * *

The prison chaplain was embarrassed. He had been called for another, grimmer, purpose. Still, the license the misty-eyed blonde girl took from her purse was in order. Both the warden and the state's attorney were beaming their consent and approval. Sergeant Morris had already taken up his position as Johnny Piceno's best man.

"Buck up," Johnny encouraged him. "You can walk the last mile with some other guy, maybe a couple of guys I know. Right now, all you have to do is ask, Do you Sally Evers take this man, Johnny Piceno, to be your lawfully wedded husband? And do you, Johnny Piceno, take this girl, Sally Evers, to be your lawfully wedded wife to love, cherish, and support, through sickness and through health, for better or for worse, as long as you both shall live? Then I'll say, 'I do.'"

"It's just like in a fairy tale, see? The wicked old king don't do so good after all." Johnny mixed his metaphors. "When the enchanted prince comes to his senses, he burns three fast ones over the plate, makes the put-out on three called strikes and gets to marry the beautiful princess who's loved him for years and years."

The chaplain got into the spirit of the affair.

"I understand, Johnny," he now chuckled. "And I can't begin to tell you how happy I am for you."

Sally's hand warm and soft in his, Johnny turned his face to the open window of the warden's office. A breath of spring, soft as a baby's kiss, and filled with promise, caressed his cheek.

"You're happy?" he said quietly. "How do you think I feel?"

THE END

*Smuggler-hunting Kempton
figured he'd hit the pay-off—
when a night-club doll
started shooting off her mouth.*

**By JOHN D.
MacDONALD**



**I pulled the .38 free of
the string. . . .**

I STOOD at the corner of the bar
of the small, gaudy club called The
Gay Lady. They had ordered me in
from the Coast because the odds were bet-
ter that no one on the other team would
recognize my face.

Ten months of the dullest sort of labor

EXIT SMILING

had unraveled all but the last strand. Some doubted that there was a last strand. They thought Jay Moon was the top man. The chief had a hunch that there was one more guy over Jay. The biggest fish. We wanted to land that big one.

Smuggling people is the second most vicious sort of smuggling there is. Florida was their base. Havana was field headquarters. Good organization had made them big time. They were fat and sassy. They didn't know that when the signal went out, we'd pick them all up at both ends.

We were in for keeps. I had more than an official interest. Tom Greydon and I had worked on cases together. Tom had been planted in Cuba on this one with fake papers, cash to buy his passage through the back door. He disappeared. We found out later that he was part of a load that had to be dumped in the Gulf twenty miles northwest of Key West. Tom was crab food with weights wired to his ankles.

So I stood in the dimness of the room, one elbow on the bar, turned so that I could watch the back of Jay Moon's head. I stood and hated him. He was handsome, I suppose. A mop of white hair and a heavy tan. A lean man who would have looked good in one of those liquor ads. The two men with him were both on our list. Haggert and Sanelle. Punks. Laughing when Moon laughed.

I comforted myself with the thought that they would sweat when we grabbed them. We could prove a murder charge. Out of the seventeen we would grab, we could prove murder on five of them. Moon was one of the five. They weren't worried. They were having a time. Drinks and laughs.

The five-piece orchestra kissed off the end of the set and the baggy-pants MC lugged a mike out to the center of the dance floor as the couples filed off.

The spotlight hit the MC and it put

Moon into the shadows. I turned with the nursed drink in my hand and moved so that I could see him better. He was smart enough to know the value of misdirection. With a floor show on, it would be the best time for his contact with the big boss—if there was one.

The job was delicate. Watch Moon carefully and yet don't blow the case and scatter them by making them aware of our interest.

The jokes at The Gay Lady were not for the family fireside. They were not even very funny. Not to a sober man. They made you feel as if you'd fallen into somebody else's bathwater. But the customers responded with high hysterical laughter. The gray-blue smoke drifted through the harsh beam of the spot. The women's shoulders were as bare as in New York, but tanner. Neckties among the males were a rarity.

After awhile, the MC gave the signal. A rose-colored spot hit the curtain behind the band stand. It slid back. Three girls stood there on a ramp above the drummer. They were beautifully formed and the rose spot made it impossible to see how much or how little they were wearing. They would stand there throughout the show.

The first act was a blowzy blonde singing songs I remembered from the little boys' room in high school. Moon applauded loudly. Then a comic adagio team. They were good. Deadpan. He'd throw her and miss her, knock himself down catching her.

My mind was full of the job and full of hate for Moon, but I had to smile at that pair. He swung her around, letting go, and she staggered over to a ringside table near Moon's and collapsed into a drunk's lap. She had a time getting loose.

On the next sling, she dropped into Moon's lap. The spot was on the two of them. Moon grinned widely. I watched her hands carefully. She ran her right

hand through his thick hair. Her partner came over and grabbed her. She clowned wanting to stay with Moon. They went into the finale and ended on the floor in a tangled heap.

The rest of the show was as sad as the MC. I kept my eyes on Moon. His head sagged until his chin rested on his chest. No wonder. He'd been knocking off high-balls with the regularity of a mechanical advertisement in a store window.

The curtain closed on the posing show above the band and, to applause, the MC dragged the mike off the floor. The spots went off and the other lights came up. Dancers went back onto the floor. There were too many of them for dancing. They clung together and swayed with the music.

I ordered a fresh drink. I could see that Haggert and Sanelle were getting restless. Probably the three of them had agreed to leave after the show. Moon seemed to be sound asleep. Sanelle reached over and nudged him. I could see Sanelle's lips and though I couldn't hear him, I knew that he was saying,

"Hey! Jay! Wake up!"

JAY MOON slumped slowly toward the dance floor. He fell off the chair onto the dance floor. A couple stumbled over his head and awkwardly sat on him, the girl screaming. She had a pair of lungs. She chopped the music off at the pockets. Screams are contagious. Some other lassies caught the disease. It sounded like Sunday morning in Bellevue.

A wide little guy thrust his way by me, saying loudly, "I'm a doctor. I'm a doctor!" They opened the crowd for him. People were storming the doors, yelling for their bills. They wanted out.

I moved in behind the doctor. I was just another goop, a nosy spectator. The little man knelt beside Moon and rolled him over onto his back. He thumbed an eye open, pulled the lower lid down. They all quieted for the words of wisdom.

"This man is dead. Off-hand, I'd say a cerebral hemorrhage. Somebody better phone the police."

I edged away. Haggert and Sanelle looked pale and nervous. A little terrier of a man, evidently the owner, was running back and forth wringing his hands.

I had paid my tab at the bar. I went out into the sultry night. I phoned the chief and reported.

"It's too pat," he said after thinking it over. "We're waiting for him to lead us to his boss and he dies. I don't like it. Get on back there quick before they lock the doors."

They were putting the long basket into the hearse when I got there. The manager had decided on business as usual. He didn't have much business left. Haggert and Sanelle still stood by the hat-check room talking to two laws, one plain and the other in his monkey suit. The four of them left together, apparently amiable, but I could detect that the law, through knowledge of their past records, wasn't using velvet gloves.

There didn't seem to be much to do. The chief had told me to go back. I had come back. The Gay Lady was—rather, had been—one of Moon's habits. A habit regular enough to make it possible that it was an information drop-off.

The bartender served me, then looked over my shoulder toward the floorshow entrance door with a questioning expression. He slid a tiny note across the bar to me, masking his action by wiping at the bar top with a towel.

I put it in my pocket, unfolded it there, covered my reading of it by holding it flat against the inside of a pack of book matches as I lit a cigarette.

*I must see you. Where and when.
Alone.*

I took it into a stall in the men's room and wrote:

One-fifteen, Room 1212, Coral Strand Hotel.

I paid for my next drink with a dollar and the answer. The barkeep didn't turn a hair. It was five of one. He had that look. If I asked him, he wouldn't know anything about anything. . . .

The Coral Strand is set three blocks in from the peanut-stand end of the public beach. It sags with the dispirited memories of a thousand drunken conventions, fifty thousand hasty women, a million early-morning retchings. My room smelled of cheap varnish, dusty rugs and hair oil. The draperies were heavy. I moved the overstuffed chair back close to the window facing the door. I sat in it and stretched my arms high over my head. My right hand touched the drapery.

Behind it, at that precise spot, I hung a .38 special by a string through the trigger guard, suspended from the drapery rod. I kept the automatic on me, in the Mexican shoulder holster. I felt like an arsenal.

At twenty after one, fingernails rattled on the door.

"Come in," I called.

She came into the room. She had to tilt her head sideways to keep from hitting the top of the door. She turned me into a doll sitting in a doll's house. Big men are often grotesque. A woman that big becomes a norm, shrinking everything around her.

Quickly she shut the door behind her, smiled, locked it.

I stood up as she came over to me. I'm six feet tall. Her lips were on a level with my eyes. She carried herself tall and proud.

"You sent the note?" I asked.

She looked down at me. "I can't believe it. A man who doesn't start off with some crack about getting a box to stand on, or digging a hole for me to stand in."

I shrugged. "You like it. Otherwise you wouldn't wear four-inch heels and six inches worth of hat on top. You're only about six three."

"Two and a half," she said. "I like it. I like looking down on the world."

Her hair, unstylishly long, was a red chestnut waterfall. Bland gray eyes. Broken fruit mouth. It could come in any size and still look good.

"You've seen me before," she said.

"No. I would have remembered."

"I saw you looking at me, friend. I'm the one in the middle. We're all big girls."

I snapped my fingers. The posing show. "Sorry. I didn't recognize you."

Her laugh was deeper than her voice.

"Sit down," I said. She took my chair. When she was sitting, you could forget the size.

"I'm Burgundy Ames," she said, waiting for my name.

"One of the Jones boys."

She leaned her head against the back of the chair and let her eyelids slide down until she was watching me through a thicket of eyelashes. It was very effective.

"You see a lot," she said, "standing up there night after night. That rose spot doesn't have any glare to it. You'd be surprised at how well I can see."

"All right, I'm surprised."

"Standing up there for the tourists to gawp at is undignified employment, Mr. Jones. I would like out."

I sat down. "This becomes very curious."

"A girl gets so she can add two and two and make a five the hard way."

"Keep talking."

"I don't know what his racket was, but it's profitable. I'm talking about Jay Moon—as if you didn't know."

I could feel the rigidity of my face. "Let's not start in the middle. Let's fill in the blanks, Burgundy."

"Sure. I watched Jay for months. He always sat in the same place. He was

nervous lately. Hazel gave him things and took things from him. Tonight I see you standing at the bar. You're a new customer. You didn't take your eyes off Jay Moon, not for a moment. You were standing near the service part of the bar. Maybe you didn't know how much you showed on your face. He dropped dead. I find it all very interesting."

"Hazel being the adagio clown."

"As if you didn't know."

"And this is in the nature of a shake-down? I'm supposed to have doctored his drink?"

"Something like that."

"And if it turned out that I did clobber him, that makes you look fine, doesn't it? This is a good healthy place for you."

SHE smiled, almost sadly. "Jonesy, when you've been looking for an angle as long as I have, you don't crumb it up so easily. The boy-friend awaits. He's interested too. And he's husky. Rumor has it that Jay Moon made big money. Whoever took care of him is in a position to take over the sources of income, no? And those sources are big enough so that a little annuity for a big girl like me wouldn't hurt very much."

"Your reasoning smells. It has holes in it."

"I know that. But big girls have big hunches, Jonesy."

Her eyes widened as I reached for the

phone. "Don't do anything hasty!" she said.

I cupped my hand so she couldn't hear and gave the chief's number. I had to give it twice before the switchboard got it.

When he came on, I raised my voice. "I've got the contact," I said. "The female half of the comedy dance team."

"Nice work," he said. "We'll cover." He hung up.

The big angel was frowning. "Say, what is this?"

She stood up as I approached her chair. I said, "Lovely, you've been talking to the law. You've got a mouth as big as the rest of you. You talk too much. Now write this down. One tiny little peep to Hazel, just one peep, and you're going to face charges of extortion and concealing evidence of a crime."

Her mouth twisted into an ugly shape and she came around with a roundhouse right, fingers crooked, that would have torn half my face away. She was too big to handle in the normal way. I stepped inside it and clubbed her on the jaw with a four-inch right. Her eyes glazed and her knees sagged. I walked her fast to the door and pushed her out into the hall before it could wear off. . . .

I went to sleep. I dreamed of a woman so big that I rode around sitting on one of her shoulders. I dreamed of Tom, also. I woke up too early, with a furry tongue and second-hand teeth. The phone was

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shrilling into my ears. Quickly I lifted it.

"That was a nice lead," the chief said.

"You got him!"

"Oh, sure. We looked in a crystal ball and there he was. One Hazel Kane was DOA at Mercy Hospital last night. They found her over by the college. Somebody slapped her with an automobile, backed over her to see if it took, then ran over her again. A thorough job."

After a few moments he said, "You still there, Kempton?"

The words came hard. "Are you going to... go ahead?"

"I already have. Don't worry about phone security. It's too late for it to do anybody any good."

"All you get is small fry, eh?"

"Can't be helped. We forced a fast autopsy on Jay Moon. Cerebral hemorrhage all right. There was a steel needle in his brain."

"What!"

"Wait a minute. We just got a radio. All five on the other end rounded up okay. Eleven here. One dead. Adds up to seventeen."

"Maybe I ought to know how he got a steel needle in his brain, eh?"

"Maybe you should, Kempton. It would be nice. Come on down and take a look at it."

It didn't look deadly. It was on top of the chief's desk. Lab was through with it.

"Phonograph needle," he said. "Got it right here." He turned his head and touched his finger just below the back bulge. With his baldness, it was easy to see the place. "Through the bone and into the brain. It took a half hour or so to kill him. Lab says it took a lot of force to drive it home."

"Could it have been shot out of something?"

"Not out of a gun with a powder charge. They would have found evidence of that." He leaned back in the chair.

"Find out who killed him and how—and maybe it isn't too late to find our man. We had to make the roundup because the murder indicates that the boss man—and now we know there is one—knew that the tail was on Moon. We had to grab them before they all ran for cover."

"I can see that."

"Ideas?"

I turned at the door. "Vague. Very vague. I'll check with you."

I WAS on a soda fountain stool, when at last he came out of headquarters across the street. He came down the wide fancy steps under the motto about obeying the law, tightening his necktie, smoothing silky blond hair back. He wore it long at the sides. It made the act funnier when it got all rumpled while he threw the girl around.

I came up with him in the middle of the block. He was bigger than he had looked during the act. He had the chest and shoulders of a Minnesota linesman, but skimpier in the legs. He looked at me. The bad night showed on his face. There were little dark pouches under his eyes.

"That was a tough break," I said mildly.

"Who are you?" he asked as if he didn't much care.

"I work for Uncle Sugar, Laporte. Your dance partner was mixed up in one of our cases."

"Hazel was my wife."

"I know that. I want to know what you know."

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Look," he said. "The cops are satisfied. They know I didn't kill her. They don't know who did. If she was mixed up in something, why don't you find out who killed her and bother them?"

I smiled. "Because I'd rather bother you."

He stared at me for long seconds. He

shrugged. "Okay. But make it real fast."

"We'll go to my hotel," I said.

When we got there, I unlocked the door and let him go in ahead of me. I shut the door behind us and locked it. He was too big to take any chances on. He turned to face me. As he turned, I hit him with an overhand right. It hit the jaw shelf and knocked his mouth open. He lifted his arms slowly, trying to shake the haze out of his brain. I kicked him in the knee cap. It turned him. I hit him under the ear. I caught him as he fell. His weight nearly pulled my arms out of the sockets.

I shoved a clean pair of socks in his mouth and tied a hand towel at the back of his neck. Then I tied his wrists and ankles with neckties I had grown a bit tired of anyway.

Putting his ankles under my arm, I dragged him into the bathroom. I dumped him in the tub and pulled the shower curtains around him.

It took five phone calls to get hold of Burgundy Ames. Her voice was thick with sleep.

"Oh, you," she said.

"Does money still interest you?"

"It does."

"You know where I live, don't you?"

"Can't you be a little more specific, Jonesy?"

"Not over the phone. Just say I've got a line on how Hazel fitted in. Maybe civil service pay is pretty low. Maybe, with help, I could improve my income."

I waited. "You still there?"

"Still here, Jonesy. Give me twenty minutes."

She made it in sixteen minutes. I locked the door behind her as she came in. She wore flats and no hat. It brought her down to people-size.

She sat down and lit a cigarette. "Give," she said.

I took her wrist and pulled her to her feet. I kept my thumb on her pulse. I led her into the bathroom and pulled the

shower curtain aside. I felt her stiffen.

"Joe Laporte!" she whispered.

"I grabbed him," I said. "He's the key to this whole thing. I had him on the verge of talking when he passed out. Low pain threshold, as the doctors say. Next time I work on him, he'll talk." I led her back into the other room.

She frowned. "I don't get it."

"Patience. Hazel killed Jay Moon. Leporte is the guy who could bring pressure to bear on her to make her do it. But he isn't smart enough to be top man. He is an order-taker from way back. Once he talks, you and I will know who is at the top of the racket."

Burgundy Ames got another cigarette out of her purse. "You and I?" she said coldly.

"I've been thinking. We could go places. I know the ropes. I'm a sucker to keep on working for pennies. We find who the top man is and turn him in. Then we sit tight a while. I'll resign. Then we'll start building up an organization. There won't be any competition. All of Moon's people have been rounded up."

I sat in the oversized chair by the draperies. She moved toward me, smiling. "Why do you need me, Jonesy?"

"You're smart. You think on your feet. And . . . there are some other reasons." I gave her a slow meaningful look from ankles to chin. "Make up your mind and then we can work on Laporte."

She came very close, touched my cheek with her fingertips and slid into my lap. She was heavy, but not too heavy, warm but not too warm. She pressed hard against me, tapped the automatic with her fingertips. "Get rid of that," she said. "It hurts."

I flipped it over onto the floor. Her arm went strongly around my neck. Her lips were insistent. Her other hand reached slowly up to the top of my head, began to slide down toward the nape of my neck. I reached my right hand high. She

couldn't see it. I pulled the .38 free of the string and laid it firmly behind her ear.

It thudded on the chestnut red hair and she went limp. When I pushed myself up, she fell onto her face on the floor. The little flesh-colored tube was five inches from her right hand. I picked it up, knowing that fingerprints didn't matter. I held the end of it against the front of the bureau and pushed the little catch out of a slot with my thumb. The powerful spring sank the needle to half its length in the hard wood.

She moved like a cat, grabbing my ankles, sinking her teeth into the side of my leg. I fell backward, tore one leg free and kicked. The sound of it against her face sickened me. I thought of Tom and didn't feel quite so bad. I phoned the chief . . .

* * *

Later I sat in his borrowed office and he asked questions.

I said, "She was the big boss. Her work was a perfect cover. That's why we couldn't locate her in the ordinary way. And that's how she found out Moon was being watched. He was nervous, dangerous to her. She could use Hazel because she had Laporte in the palm of her hand, the same way Laporte had Hazel. She was afraid I'd spotted Hazel's role—so

she told me Hazel's role. She wanted to deal herself out of the picture through the story she gave me. Meanwhile, she thought she could trust Joe, but she didn't know about Hazel. Hazel was down in the car while she talked to me. Burgandy's a husky girl. It was no trick to shove Hazel out and run her down. Laporte was glad to get rid of her.

"Hazel killed Moon with a bright spotlight on her and seventy people watching her. She did it when she ran her hand through his white hair. My guess is that Laporte told Hazel to do it or get out of his life. The last thing Burgandy wanted was Laporte talking or splitting with me."

"Laporte is talking now," the chief said. "Eagerly."

He palmed his eyes and said, "Why would that rough outfit take orders from a woman?"

"Go take a close look at her. After her face heals. If it's okay with you, I'm taking my overdue leave."

"Good idea," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere in this country is a small, plain, dull town containing one small plain dull girl who will want to do nothing but go to dull movies. I'm going to tell her I sell plumbing supplies for a living."

I needed a leave. I got into my car after I packed and headed north.

BIRD IN HAND

A San Diego, Calif., householder woke up, not long ago, to whatever noise it is that burglars make when they don't want to attract attention. He got his gun and went downstairs and got his man.

He held the gun on him while he called the police. He still held the gun when the police arrived. The police asked him for his license and—wouldn't you know it—he didn't have one. So they said for him to come down to the station.

When they looked around for the guy who had introduced the question of licenses into the general conversation, he was gone.

He was the burglar.

E. J.

ONE NIGHT OF MAYHEM



"What's the matter?"
Mona's voice was sharp
with fright.

*Detective-Lieutenant Hartra
didn't have time to complain
when he cornered a murderer—
and a babe with too much intuition.*

**By DON
JAMES**

DETEKTIVE-Lieutenant Luke Hartra finished his written report on the Matt Syno slaying and called his wife to tell her that he'd be late and would eat down town. She reminded him that the last time he'd had salami and it hadn't agreed with him. She also told him that young Luke had a runny nose and that Sarah was going to be in her class play. She talked a

few moments longer and Luke listened patiently and with some interest until she finished.

He replaced the telephone and reached under his battered desk in the cubby-hole office to take off his shoes. About this time of day his feet began to hurt. He stuffed a pipe with tobacco, lit it, and looked over the report.

On the surface it was just another racket slaying. Someone had emptied a gun into Matt Syno while he stood in a backroom telephone booth in a saloon. No one in the saloon knew anything about it. The pattern was always the same in a joint like that. Evasive eyes, stolid expressions, and no answers.

He puffed slowly at the pipe and thought about it. The chances were that Tony Schmidt or one of his lieutenants had taken care of Syno. Schmidt and Syno had been having trouble.

Luke had sent most of the squad out for a quick dinner. It gave him a few moments to himself before he started intensive work on the case, time to get oriented. It also gave him time to follow a few personal techniques.

Thoughtfully he picked up the telephone, asked for an outside line and dialed a number. A husky voice answered.

Luke said, "Is Joe Yuter there?"
"Holda line."

A few seconds later a tired voice said, "Yeah?"

"Joe? You know who this is?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to the library. The hallway by the technical room."

"I ain't so sure I'm smart to—"

"Joe, it can be a tough town."

"Yeah."

"About half an hour?"

There was the sound of a sigh. "Half an hour."

Luke hung up and smiled wryly. Joe always had a little trouble rationalizing his activities. The telephone rang and

he told Bill Lonner, his sergeant, that there wouldn't be anything doing for another hour or so.

He put on his shoes, shrugged into a topcoat, and carefully adjusted the brim of a dark brown hat. He left the office and building.

He found Joe Yuter in the hallway by the library technical room. Joe wore a frayed blue overcoat obviously too large for his thin body. He looked miserable when he saw Luke.

Luke glanced about. They were alone and he led the way to a darkened corner.

"Joe, what do you know about the Syno deal?"

"I thought it was that, Looten'nt. I don't know nothin' 'about it. Just what the papers say. Somebody bumped Matt Syno in a phone booth. That's all I know."

"The phone booth was in Timmy Hal-loran's saloon. That's your headquarters. Now don't stand there and tell me you don't know what happened in the back room where that phone booth it."

Yuter shook his head.

"Joe," Luke said gently, "you were there." He let it hang like a pronounced court sentence and watched apprehension appear in the thin man's expression. He'd guessed right.

"Not in the back room, Looten'nt. No one was—except whoever did it . . . an' Matt Syno."

LUKE agreed mentally. Syno had gone alone to use the telephone. Someone had either come in from the alley through the back door, or had followed him unobserved from the saloon. Whoever had shot Syno certainly had used the back door to escape.

"Why didn't you stay until we got there, Joe?"

"I want no part of killings. I got my own troubles."

"Is Sam Denim clamping down on

bookies?" the lieutenant now asked.

Yuter looked worried. "You got me wrong. I ain't makin' book an' —"

"I don't care whether or not you're making book. I just thought we were friends. And in this town you need a friend sometimes."

Yuter searched the hallway with furtive eyes. "Yeah," he admitted. "I ain't sayin' not."

"So you were there and you ducked out." Luke watched two college kids go into the technical room. "Was it Tony Schmidt you saw?"

Yuter's eyes became frightened. "Look, Looten'nt, I want no trouble with *him*. I owe you a favor or two, Looten'nt, but even it *was* Tony Schmidt—"

"I could take you in as a material witness. Maybe let word out that you were talking about Tony Schmidt being there." Luke clipped the words short because he didn't like them. In fact, he didn't like especially what he was doing. But, he reasoned, he had never heard of a police department that got along without stoolies.

The point was, they often sought you out with information. Who knew exactly why? The reasons were varied and many. So there were stool pigeons like Joe Yuter who had been too afraid not to talk one stormy night when a man had been knifed, and the man with the knife was reportedly angry with a bookie named Joe Yuter. Luke had handled the case efficiently from the background of Joe's information. Since then Joe seemed to have acquired the habit.

Now Joe looked as frightened as he had that stormy night. Luke pressed his advantage.

"You don't have to worry, Joe."

Yuter took a long breath. "Happy Klinger," he said.

Luke's eyes narrowed. This was unexpected. He thought back over the years. He subtracted dates. It tallied.

"He's just out of the big house. You're sure?"

Joe Yuter nodded. "I wasn't there when it happened, but I was headin' there. I seen Happy Klinger come outa the alley."

"Anyone else know about this, Joe?"

Yuter shrugged. "There's talk. A lota people think Matt framed Klinger for that rap. Lotsa talk 'bout Klinger sayin' he'd even the score."

"Any idea where Klinger is?"

Now that the information was delivered, Yuter's attitude began to change. The uneasiness faded. He glanced speculatively at Luke.

"Sam Denim *has* been around lately. It sort of slows things."

"I might tell him to forget about you for a while, Joe—providing, of course, you don't do anything to interest him for a while."

"That might help, Looten'nt. Understand—I ain't makin' book, but Sam seems to think I am."

"Okay. Now, what about Klinger?"

"He had a girl before he was sent up. Some dame singin' in a joint on Fifth. Nothin' special, but sorta."

"Name?"

"Mona Malloy."

Luke's eyes narrowed again. "Didn't Matt Syno think she was something sort of special, too?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah. So maybe Klinger was burned up about a coupla things. Like bein' framed. Like losin' his dame to Matt."

"Where's Klinger hiding out?"

Joe looked him squarely in the eye for the first time. "I don't know that, Looten'nt. But I gotta hunch Mona is worryin', too."

"Okay, Joe. That's it. I'll be seeing you."

Joe sighed in relief. "Yeah. Glad to help. You'll mention me to Sam Denim?"

"I'll tell him not to pick you up as a

vag." Lieutenant Hartra made a mental note.

"Oke. I'll be seein' ya."

Luke watched the thin figure depart. He smiled grimly and followed. On the first floor he stopped at a telephone booth and gave instructions to a desk sergeant. Five minutes later he called back.

The desk man reported, "A pick-up's out on Klinger. Mona Malloy lives at the Lennox Apartments, 307 Eighth."

Outside, Luke debated taking a taxi. It was five blocks and his feet hurt. No cab was in sight. He swore softly under his breath and began to walk.

SHE was about thirty. Her eyes were hard, her make-up too obvious, and her voice was husky-low. She admitted Luke without hesitation and was careless about the house robe she wore over a figure that still turned heads.

Luke dropped his hat beside his chair and said, "What do you know about Happy Klinger?"

"I thought that was it," she said. "And frankly I was never so glad to see a copper in my life."

"Why?"

She lifted her hands expressively. "Why? You know, or you wouldn't be here. Why? Because a girl has to live and she needs friends in my profession. I couldn't wait five years for Happy, could I? Who helps me make contacts? An entertainer needs friends, Lieutenant.

"Matt and I were friends. Maybe people thought it was more than that. I'm not saying. Happy wrote me a letter. He'd heard about it. He said when he got out he'd look us up. He found Matt, I guess. And I'm next. So for once in my life I'm glad to see a cop."

"What do you expect us to do? We haven't any evidence that it's Happy we want."

"Then why are you here?"

"Maybe you can give us evidence."

She shook her head. "I only know what the rumor is since it happened. Friends tell me to lay low. You're picking up Happy?"

"We might if we find him. Any ideas, Mona?"

"No."

"Who might be helping him? Who were his friends?"

She looked away. "I guess I can't help much."

Luke watched her fingers nervously bunch her house-robe belt. He stood and said, "Maybe it wasn't Happy. Perhaps you haven't anything to worry about. Anyhow, few men would have the heart to shoot an attractive woman like you."

"Happy would! I know Happy and—" She hesitated and frowned. "You're putting me in a spot, Lieutenant."

Luke shrugged. "Maybe someone else has put you in a worse one. If you don't help us, there isn't much we can do. We need a valid reason to offer protection."

"What can I do?"

"Who were his friends, Mona? Who might give Happy a place to stay? Or a gun? Or loan him money?"

The fingers at the cloth belt were white at the knuckles.

"Carl Titchner."

"We had him as a witness in the Tall-Boy Ehite killing. That's the one?"

"Yes."

"Where does he live?"

"At the Bellevue—over on Nineteenth."

"Where's your phone?"

"In the kitchen. I'll show you. What are—I mean, what about me now?"

"I'll stay until I can get a man on duty."

She was visibly relieved. "You understand how it is, Lieutenant. When a girl's life probably is in danger. . . ."

Luke followed her to the telephone and dialed headquarters.

"Has Lonner come in?" he asked.

Lonner had returned. Luke briefly explained to his sergeant what was happening. "I want you and Thompson to go over and pick up Klinger if he's at Titchner's. Have someone detailed over here until we have Klinger. We don't want another job on our hands. I'll wait for him."

"Right away, Luke. Your wife called. Young Luke is running a temperature. He's breaking out, too. She wanted to know should she call a doctor."

"Hell, I don't know! How much temperature?"

"Hundred and two. Our kids just had measles. I told her that's probably what young Luke has."

"Probably. I'll call her. She's always worrying herself sick about the kids. She'd better get Doc Flemninger."

"She decided to after I told her about our kids. She said for you not to bother calling if you're busy."

"Okay. Thanks, Bill. You'd better get out to Titchner's." Luke Hartra hung up.

The girl was leaning back against the stove.

"I hope no one's sick in your family, Lieutenant."

You don't give one small damn, he thought. *You're trying to get in good with me.* Aloud he said, "Just measles, I guess. One of my kids."

She smiled. "It seems kind of funny a cop having kids."

"Why?"

"I mean . . . well, cops seem different." Again she smiled at him.

"You mean you don't think they're human beings. They are. And let's skip it. I've a man coming. You're to do what he tells you—stay away from windows and doors. Don't go out. You're under our protection until we get Klinger and clean this up. I don't want any more killings."

NOW she stopped smiling. They gazed at one another and he saw interest come into her eyes. He knew that look of the predatory woman. He was six feet tall, thirty-seven, lean and hard. He dressed well and he had good features. He was content to restrict his woman interest to his wife.

She smiled again. "Can I buy you a drink while you're waiting?" She moved and the housecoat parted to reveal a slim length of hosiery.

"No, thanks."

"Coffee?"

"I'll be here only a few moments. What else can you tell me about Klinger?"

"Not much. In fact, I'd sort of . . . well, it's been five years. That's a long time. And I was awfully young when I met him."

Outside a streetcar rumbled by. Luke glanced sharply at the entrance to the living room, and then at the woman to see if she had noticed the sudden draft of cold air. She was indifferently lighting a cigarette.

There was no doubt about the cold draft, and it hadn't been there a moment before.

Outside another car passed and suddenly the draft was gone.

Luke unbuttoned his coat and moved his left shoulder, glad to feel the weight of the gun in its holster. He turned toward the living room. His muscles were tight when he stepped into the room. His eyes made a quick, comprehensive sweep. No one was there.

Outside the window he saw steel railings of a fire escape. Casually he walked to the window and looked out. The window was unlocked. A knife blade could have managed that.

The woman sat on a davenport. She put out her cigarette and said, "I'm glad you're going to pick up Harry Klinger. I'm sure he killed Matt—and he'll be looking for me. He's dangerous. You

never knew what he would do. He has a terrible temper."

Luke looked at a fourth door in the room, to one side of the double doors that obviously hid a fold-away bed. It was probably a closet door and it was slightly ajar. He thought he saw it move a fraction of an inch.

"You could have called us," he said.

"I know. I was thinking about it. Will the man you leave on guard stay right in the apartment?"

Luke felt the muscles twinge along his backbone. She was talking too much—if his hunch was right.

"Yes."

"Maybe he can stay in the kitchen. He can make coffee out there."

Silently Luke moved between her and the door. His hand slid beneath his coat.

"What's the matter?" Mona's voice was sharp with fright.

He shook his head, his eyes centered on the door. He moved forward and his left hand reached for the doorknob, his right closed over the holstered gun.

Mona Malloy's body hit him squarely at the knee bend from behind. He hadn't heard her quiet lunge. He went to the floor backwards and over her. A fingernail raked his cheek.

He caught a brief glimpse of the door opening. Something crashed down on his head. . . .

HE OPENED his eyes and was conscious of the pain and hands that were helping him up. He shut his eyes and tried to swallow sudden nausea. After a moment he felt better and looked into Tom Laster's face. The big detective showed deep concern.

"You all right, Luke?"

"When did you get here?"

"Just now. The door was partly open. You were on the floor trying to get up. What happened?"

"Anyone else here?"

"The dame."

Luke rubbed the back of his head. "Where?"

"On the kitchen floor—strangled."

The telephone rang and Luke answered it, staring at the face of the dead girl a few feet from him.

"Luke? . . . Bill Lonner. I'm at Titchner's. The janitor describes Klinger and says he went out an hour ago. Titchner won't talk. Shall I take him in?"

"Yes. Put out a general on Klinger. He left here five or ten minutes ago."

He hung up and knelt beside Mona Malloy. There was no pulse. He called headquarters and asked for the medical examiner, a wagon and his technical men. When he hung up, Laster looked at him, puzzled.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"She clipped me from behind. I had Klinger cornered in the closet. He came in through the window while we were in the kitchen. When she clipped me, he came out and finished the job—on me and her."

"I don't get it! The dame must have known that Klinger—"

Luke sighed. "It's screwy."

Sirens wailed in the distance. Luke inspected the empty closet and the window. "Prints," he said. "On the window pane and possibly on the doorknob. He wasn't careful. Probably haywire. Not thinking."

Laster shook his head. "You'd have thought she—"

"Skip it, Tom. Maybe I'll have the answer. Maybe not. You'd better get downstairs. There's a general out for Klinger."

"Sure." The big man hurried out and Luke went to a small desk. In a drawer he found a few letters and one from Klinger substantiated her story. He read the scrawling words, ". . . and I'll look you up, honey. Both of you."

He pocketed the letter. Nothing else of interest was in the drawer. Thoughtfully he went to the kitchen and picked up the telephone book. He inspected the cover. Several numbers were pencilled on it. He put a call through to headquarters and read the numbers.

"Check with the phone company—find out who's listed to those numbers. Find out if any are unlisted. Call me back here."

Sirens were in the neighborhood now. He went to the window and looked out. A squad car disgorged men. He saw Laster cross the sidewalk and talk with them. Then they dispersed in different directions.

He pictured the activity spreading through the city; radios in police cars monotonously describing Klinger; uniformed cops scanning faces; plain clothes men scouring the city. The dragnet was out.

The telephone rang again. He listened to names: a beauty operator, a liquor store, a girl, a taxi company, a man's name.

"Is the last one unlisted?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. That's why she wrote it down. Have him picked up and held for me."

He replaced the telephone and looked up to see the M.E. come in, followed by the technical men. Before Luke could

speak the telephone rang again. He snatched it up, sensing the urgency of its ring.

"Lieutenant . . . they have him cornered. A patrolman spotted him on Ninth. Shooting it out on the roof of a building at Ninth and Lotus."

"Get plenty of help there."

"It's on its way, sir."

Luke briefed the M.E. as he hurried out. A police car and driver were at the curb.

"Ninth and Lotus. Use the growler."

The ride was fast and screaming. He was out of the car before it stopped. Other cars were pulling into the street. An emergency service truck parked and men were active about it. A flood light suddenly sprayed the building.

On the roof Luke found Lonner.

"He's behind the chimney," Lonner explained briefly.

"Tear bombs?"

"Too much wind. He winged Riley in the leg."

Luke looked at the surrounding buildings. "Keep him busy," he snapped. Lonner nodded.

Luke returned to the street and the service truck. He inspected the rifle an attendant gave him and nodded for two men to join him. He handed one an electric torch.

On the building across the street they crouched behind the roof parapet and



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looked across to the opposite roof. Luke saw the man crouched behind the chimney.

"Sight him with the torch before you snap it on," he said quietly. "This has to be fast before he breaks out and goes wild with that gun."

The light beam cut the darkness. The man beside the chimney whirled. Luke lowered his aim a little and his finger squeezed the trigger.

The man beside the chimney straightened, stumbled in a small circle and fell. He was motionless. He had dropped a gun and its metal reflected the light.

Lonner raced across the roof and snatched up the gun. He bent over the man and looked up at Luke.

"He's alive," he shouted. "His thigh."

Luke sighed. Maybe the guy deserved death, but he was glad to leave that job for someone else. He didn't like to kill.

LUKE was very tired and it was cold in his office. He glanced at his watch. After midnight. The note from the lab said that the fingerprints on the window pane and doorknob were Klinger's.

He used the telephone and asked for Lonner at emergency hospital.

"Just going to call you, boss," Lonner said. "A full confession. The guy blew his top, was all. Says he's glad he did it. Followed Matt into that joint and the back room. Later he came through the window to get the girl. He heard voices in the kitchen and ducked into the closet. I guess you know the rest. Only I don't figure why she gimmicked the deal that way."

"I'm going to make sure of that now," Luke said.

For several moments he thoughtfully puffed on his pipe and then he made another call. A cop brought Tony Schmidt in.

The man sat down and lit a cigarette.

"I don't get it, Lieutenant. What's the beef? I've been here hours and—"

"Okay. I just want to know if you carry a key to Mona Malloy's apartment."

"That's none of your business."

"Take it easy—she's dead."

"Dead! What?" Color drained from the man's face. He dropped the cigarette to the floor. "You mean Mona?"

"Listen." Quickly Luke told him what had happened. He finished and said, "Now . . . do you carry a key?"

"Yeah, yes. For quite a while. We—we thought we'd get married soon."

"Take it easy, Tony. I'm sorry I had to tell you this way. But I had to know why she spoiled my play. Now I know. She felt the draft and thought you'd come in, heard us, and ducked into the closet. When I went for the door, she was afraid for you. She knew the rumor was around that you might be tabbed for the killing—and she had been Matt's girl up until a little while ago. It would make it look bad for you, hiding out there. She was afraid for you."

Schmidt nodded and stared at the floor.

"She guessed wrong, Tony. It wasn't the man she loved—it was Klinger. She saved the wrong man. . . ."

Luke watched the man leave. He wondered if he should call home. The family probably was asleep and everything was all right or there'd have been a message from his wife. He wondered if he'd ever had the measles. It'd be a hell of a note if young Luke had them and he caught them. They'd never finish razzing him at headquarters.

Luke reached down for his shoes, got up, put on his top coat and hat. He carefully adjusted the hat brim and turned out the light as he left his office.

He was tired and his head ached and sometimes he wondered why in hell he had ever decided to be a cop.



When Ramsey visited million-dollar Marcia, she said she was divorcing lawyer Carr. But Ramsey got slugged—and Marcia got . . . a cold coffin.



Ramsey dropped in at the Tavern, to see dancer Sara—whom he'd ditched for Marcia. Owner King tried to run him out—while a big-shot gambler offered him a job.



The job was dating Sara to get the dope on King's narcotic racket—or go up for Marcia's killing. Ramsey went back to see Sara . . . and met a playful knifer.



That was just the beginning for Ramsay, of —“Murder On The Make”—action-jammed novel by Robert Martin, in the October issue, published September 1st.

THE SKULL OF JUDGMENT

*With one mysterious female sending him a bullet-riddled skull
and another trying to steal it back,
it took mighty fancy headwork for gumshoe Norton
to keep his own cranium—from becoming a collector's item.*



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Detective Novelette of a Siren's Skulduggery

By
**EDWARD
PARRISH
WARE**

A groan, deep, agonized
came from the crawling
man. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Who's Got the Skull

SPECS, the office-boy, brought it into my room. A plain, white, wooden box; such a box as might have contained a one-gallon jug, in the days when jugs were not respectable. It bore my address, printed in ink, but no marks to

indicate who had sent it or whence it had come.

I placed a suspicious ear against the package, heard nothing to support the half-formed theory that some unfriendly person had presented me with a bundle of potential annihilation, and opened it. When the lid was pried off, there was exposed a thick layer of excelsior.

Nested in its wads was a human skull!

I lifted it out of its nest and placed it on the desk. It was unmistakably the skull of a man, and, unmistakably also, the life which once had animated it had escaped through a hole made by a bullet. Two inches above the left eye-socket was a splintery crack through which the lead had passed.

I gave the skull a shake. Something rattled inside. A moment later I had the thing that had rattled out on my blotter.

It was a slug of lead, flattened and battered, which must have come from the muzzle of a large-caliber revolver. Probably a forty-five.

Something else about the skull that interested me, far more than did the hole and the bullet. It was a silver plate, set in the back on the right side, which testified to the fact that a very skillful job of trepanning had once been done to the head.

If the surgeon who patched that fracture still lived, then there would be a good chance of identifying the grisly thing—in case the mysterious sender chose to leave me in the dark.

The teeth, too, several of which remained, might give up something. They would bear looking at.

There was nothing else. No note in the box, no hint concerning the identity of the man whose skull it had been, nor of the person who had sent the slug of lead on its mission of death.

Murder? Naturally, that thought occurred. But why unload the evidence on me? Or was some ghoulish-minded per-

son attempting to play a weird joke?

The door opened and Jim Steel, my chief assistant, sauntered in. He stopped dead for an instant, stared at me fingering the dome, then permitted himself a wide grin. Nothing ever fazes Steel, even human skulls.

"'Alas, poor Yorick!'" he quoted in deep, melancholy tones.

"Hamlet knew his skulls," I came back. "Had the advantage of me, there. This doesn't happen to be the dome of one of my acquaintances, Jim—"

"Nor of a victim, either," Jim cut in. "The hole is a bit too far off-center, Tug. You didn't drill it. But you've got it. What are you going to do with it?"

I buzzed for Specs. He gave me the name of the local city-express agency whose man had left the box. I got the agency on the phone immediately.

Nothing gained there. One of their delivery trucks had been flagged down on Gladstone Boulevard, and a man had given the box to the driver, along with a bill large enough to cover express charges. The agency had checked the box in and delivered it to me.

"What did the man look like?" I asked.

The manager didn't know, and the expressman who received the package was out on a trip. Would I call up later?

All I learned was that the box had been sent by somebody in the city, but even that did not mean that the sender belonged there, or that the skull had not come from some other place.

Specs came in with the mail, and I opened the letters hurriedly in the hope of getting a line on the box. There was nothing, however. Then the phone rang.

"Kaw Valley Detective Agency, Norton speaking."

No one responded. I repeated myself.

Then, very faintly: "You are a private agency? You are not connected with the police?" It was the voice of a woman.

"Our investigations are private affairs

between us and our clients," I assured her. "But we don't promise to conceal crimes, or to withhold evidence of crime. You may consult us about anything you wish, though, and know that your confidences will not be abused, whether we take your case or not."

SHE hesitated one very long moment. "I want you to investigate a—a crime—I think," she said. "But I am not sure. In case it is, then it must be handled with absolute secrecy until you are quite certain of your ground. Where can I see you for a consultation?"

"Here at my office would be best," I told her. "Or I can send one of my assistants to your home—"

"No, no!" There was sudden alarm in the voice. "Let's meet somewhere else. And I don't want to consult with an assistant. It is Mr. Tug Norton I wish to see, and no other."

"Certainly. Just designate any place you wish, and I'll see you there. What name, please?"

She dodged that one.

"If you take the case, then you'll know my name. The Lone Jack Inn, where the Lone Jack Road crosses Highway Forty? Would that suit you?"

"Perfectly. At what time? How shall I recognize you?"

"Ten o'clock tonight. At exactly ten o'clock, get up from your table—please have one as private as possible—walk to the front door, look at your watch, nod your head three times, then return to your table. I'll join you there immediately. Is that clear?"

"It is. I'll follow instructions. But, if you have no objections, I'd like at least to know something of the nature of the matter—"

"Good-by," she interrupted, and hung up.

"The lady of the skull," Steel said as I turned from the phone. "I'll bet a

month's salary on that. Two months'!"

"What makes you so certain?" I asked.

"Who but a woman would send a thing like that to a man, with no word or letter to prepare him for it? Tell me that, will you?"

"Granting you're right," I said, "it's no cinch that the lady who just called me up is the one who sent the box."

"You'll find out that they are the same." Jim was positive. "And I'm advising you to watch your step, Tug, because when a woman gets mysterious she's dangerous—to others."

Jim has fixed ideas about women, and likes to air them. I was saved by the phone.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Norton," came a cultured voice to my ear, "but a mistake has occurred in the delivery of an express package, and I'm trying to correct it. A small, white box was sent out bearing the wrong address. Did you receive such a box? One for which you cannot account?"

"I didn't get your name," I came back. "Would you mind repeating it?"

"Pardon me, I did forget to mention my name. I am Professor James Donovan, late of the Central College of Medicine and Surgery, Chicago. My secretary intended sending the box to Jacob Minturn, a taxidemist in your building. The number was 624, Sandstone Building. After the box had gone he recalled that he had addressed it to 424, which is the number of your suite. Did you receive such a box?"

"Didn't your secretary know that Jake Minturn moved out of his quarters here a month ago?" I countered, while Jim was busy tracing the call.

"He found that out a trifle late." The voice had become edged with heat, charged with growing impatience. "Surely you can answer my question without so much evasion? A simple mistake was made, and to rectify it should also be simple.

Have you such a box? You must have!" he insisted.

I began jiggling the receiver hook up and down, talking all the while. The professor started shouting at the top of his voice. What he said came in fragments—just as my remarks were reaching him.

"Shake up your receiver!" I bawled. "Can't get you!"

"Aw-gaw-guggle-damn—it-to—gugg—gwork—"

I hung up. Two minutes passed, and the bell rang again. I repeated my jiggling of the receiver, got a lot of gibberish over the wire, sent out some myself, and hung up again.

Another five minutes passed, but the phone did not ring a third time. I turned to Jim.

"If I'm not badly off," I said, grinning, "the professor or a representative will be with us presently. Just step into the back room, Jim, and take the skull with you. Lock it in the vault, then tail the professor when he goes out."

"What kind of line are you going to hand him?" Jim wanted to know.

"I'm going to hand him his box, all neatly nailed up—but with a couple of old books in it to add some weight," I returned.

"It occurs to me we are about to engage in something extremely interesting, Jim—and that whoever possesses that trepanned skull has an ace in the hole. So lock our ace up safely, old man, until we need it."

Steel took the skull out with him, and I carefully renailed the lid on the box. A couple of books on criminology, utterly useless in the detecting business, gave it the required weight. Then I parked back of my desk to await the coming of Professor James Donovan of Chicago or his messenger.

It was his messenger who called, an hour later.

CHAPTER TWO

Heading for Trouble

SPECS opened the door, and Frog Scanlon crowded in past him. Frog is another private dick operating in Kansas City—but he wouldn't be if crooks got their dues.

"Fine morning, Tug," he exclaimed, with a grin that exposed his wisdom teeth.

"It was," I told him. "But you've spoiled it. Under what false pretense did you manage to break in here?"

"Ha, ha, ha! You will have your little joke, eh, Tug?" he breezed. "Fair question, though, deserves a fair answer. I didn't get in on false pretenses, old-timer. I just walked through to your door, with a good grip on the collar of Specs' coat, and here I am."

"But won't be shortly," I told him. "Let's have it. What do you want?"

I already knew. His bulging eyes had discovered the white box, and a look of satisfaction on his face at sight of it gave his game away.

"I have a client, Tug," he said pompously.

"Most unusual," I cut in. "Who misdirected him to your joint?"

"Aw, go to hell!" he snapped, the red of anger dying his fat face. "I want that box! Talking about false pretense, you're holding it that way. Got no right to it, because it was sent here by mistake. I've come to get it."

"Oh," I said indifferently, "the box. Well, take it along, Frog. It came a short while ago, and I wasn't expecting anything like it. Meant to open it, however, but haven't got around to it yet. You won't mind, I'm sure, identifying your client's property—if it is his—by describing the contents? We'll open it after you do, and make sure there is not another mistake. Just name the contents, Frog,

and then you can take it and leave."

Scanlon shot me a venomous glance, and his teeth showed in a snarl. "Some day, Norton," he grated menacingly, "you and me are going to hook up good and proper—and then I'll pay you off for a lot!"

"Name the contents—or get out," I insisted.

"I can't, and you know it," he bleated. "I understand you. You want some dough for turning the box over. All right. How much?"

"How much have you got?"

"A half-c."

"Too much. It makes me suspicious. If you'd mentioned a fiver, now, I'd have thought nothing of it. Fifty bucks though—that tells me the box is valuable. You keep the fifty, Frog, and I'll keep the box."

Scanlon glared his rage, but past experience served to help him restrain himself. We had come up against each other before.

"A hundred!" he offered like it hurt him.

I declared. "Gosh, but that box must be loaded with money—or maybe it has the Rajah's favorite emerald? Couldn't think of parting with it, Frog—unless you can name what it holds."

"Go to hell!" Frog stormed out.

But I knew that he was not done. Not by a long shot. I'd hear more from him.

Frog could hardly have cleared the front office when my phone bell jangled again. This time the voice was that of a very excited man.

"Mr. Tug Norton?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You received a small, white, wooden box by express this morning," he stated.

"How did you know I did?" I came back.

"I do know it," he said. "It was handed to an expressman on Gladstone Boulevard at exactly nine minutes after eight o'clock

this morning, sir, and the address was plain on it. The express agency informed the sender, not more than ten minutes ago, that delivery was made to your office. Sir, I assure you that it is important that you keep the box."

One wanted to take the box from me. Another urged me to keep it!

"I intend to," I told him. "And the skull that came in it. You sent the box. Why?"

"No, no! I didn't send it!"

"You're lying. So I'll hang up—"

"For heaven's sake!" came pleadingly. "Don't hang up yet! I'll admit that I sent the box— Only, hear what I want to say!"

"Then say it—quickly."

"KEEP that box and its contents, no matter who tries to get it from you! Tonight, at the Lone Jack Inn, things will be cleared up for you, sir. Please guard the box closely—it's a matter of life and death."

"Listen!" I snapped. "You people are only clouding matters by shrouding this thing in so much mystery! Why don't you come out in the open and let me get busy?"

"We don't, because to do that would mean death, sir," came agitatedly. "And we do not want to die, naturally. At least, not until justice is done. After it is, if it ever is, I don't so much care, sir. We are depending on you, sir, to see that it is!"

All those "sirs" identified the speaker as of the serving class. His accent, too, was fairly British, and I tagged him as being somebody's butler. Maybe a valet.

"I'll hold the deal, Hopkins," I told him. "But no longer than ten o'clock tonight. If somebody doesn't wise me up by then, the box goes to the city cops. And that's that!"

"For heaven's sake, sir, don't do that!" he cried. "You will know about it when you see her at the inn! Can we count on

your discretion, sir? It's *very* important."

"Absolutely—until ten o'clock tonight. Good-by!"

Things were getting hot. I looked up to find Jim Steel at my elbow.

"No need for me to tag Frog Scanlon," he said, grimacing his distaste. "You still expecting Professor So-and-so?"

"I'm expecting nothing," I told him. "From the way this case is developing, Jim, most anything may happen. Imagine sending Frog after something in this office?"

The phone again.

"Norton," said a voice I recognized as belonging to the professor, "Scanlon has just reported your refusal to deliver my box to him. What do you want, anyhow?"

"To be let alone, more than anything else I can mention off-hand," I told him.

"You won't be," he assured me threateningly, "unless you listen to reason. That box does not belong to you. Still, I'll pay you well to return it to me—and keep your mouth shut about it. Would five hundred meet your price?"

"For what?" I asked.

"For the box, damn it!"

"Hardly. You see, professor, the more that's bid for the box, the more unwilling I become to part with it. Tell you what I'll do, however. I'll turn it over to you in person, and without taking a cent of your money—but it must be to you direct. What say?"

I knew from the time expiring between Frog's exit and the call on the phone that the professor must have been parked close at hand. While I stalled, Jim Steel was on his way down to the street. Jim would locate the professor, provided he still had Frog with him.

"Your idea being to have a man tail me from your office, eh?" came back to me. "That informs me that you have opened the box—and no wonder you're holding it high. But let me assure you,

Norton, that the skull in that box is of absolutely no importance, except to me. It is part of a skeleton I wish to have mounted, and I came by it legitimately—"

"Tell that to Scanlon," I broke in. "Maybe he'll believe it. I don't. Are you coming after the skull, or not?"

Silence. Then: "I will call at one o'clock this afternoon—"

"Then you won't get it," I interrupted. "At one o'clock this afternoon you mean to send somebody after the skull. As I don't know you, it would be easy to send a sub. But it won't work."

"My final offer!" the professor, now in a cold rage, spat at me. "One thousand dollars—and you keep mum. A morgue slab if you refuse."

"Now you're speaking my language, professor!" I declared. "But why do it by phone? Why not in person? I'm not hard to see!"

I began, with that, to jiggle the hook again, bawling incoherently into the transmitter as I did so. If that failed to start him on a rampage, then it was hopeless. It failed. He hung up.

FIVE minutes later Jim Steel returned. He had not been able to spot the professor.

"Nothing to do, now, I suppose, but wait for my date at the inn."

Jim's face became serious. "I'm thinking that there's going to be something hot at that inn tonight," he said. "Better have me along, eh?"

I nodded, for the same thought had crossed my mind.

"You'll be outside, Jim," I told him. "When I come to the front door, you'll make certain that I don't get a slug from somewhere. That stunt of identifying myself is dumb. I wonder, now, if the sultry-voiced lady of the phone call is framing me for the spot?"

"Once in a while you do use your head, old-timer," Jim applauded.

There was nothing more about the skull during the rest of the day. When I left my office for the night, I left two good tailors on the spot. If anybody should try a little job of burglary, it was all right with me.

I'd be pleased to say that I entered the Lone Jack Inn that evening with genuine nonchalance, but I didn't.

It was nine-thirty, and I had gone early in order to look the gathering over. The tables in the big dining room were plentiful and the place was well filled with diners. I secured a place near the kitchen entrance, sat down and scanned the crowd.

Nowhere did I locate a lone woman diner. They were there in parties, by twos, threes and fours. All had male escorts. If my prospective client had arrived, then she certainly had not come alone. I ordered something to eat and drink, kept my eyes open.

Steel was outside in a darkened motorcar. At exactly one minute of ten, he would be hanging around the front door. If anybody tried to pot me when I appeared, it would be just too bad for the potter. In that respect, I felt safe.

And I rather thought somebody would try it. Thought that in nodding my head three times, I would be in reality kowtowing to death. But, as I have said, with Steel on the job I felt safe.

As I sat there waiting, I ran over the strange case in my mind, but could make

nothing of it. That the box containing the skull had been deliberately addressed to me I never doubted. The so-called Professor James Donovan had not sent it, of course, but knew it had been sent and was anxious to get it in his hands.

The skull constituted positive evidence of a murder. It was possible that it could be made to point conclusively to the murderer. And that was as far as I could get.

People came and went, but no lone woman showed up, nor could I see anybody, male or female, who seemed interested in me. But I was pretty certain that the woman was somewhere in the room.

Ten o'clock approached. Precisely at that hour I arose, walked to the door, glanced at my watch, nodded my head three times. Nothing happened.

I might have been a mechanical toy doing a stunt there in the doorway, for all the attention I attracted. But as I started to return to my table, I was stopped.

"A telephone call has just come for a Mister Norton," a waiter said. "Is that you?"

"Were you told to watch for my little stint?"

"Yes, sir. And it is a lady calling. Will you follow me, please?"

You bet I'd follow him! The booth was right at hand. I went in and closed the door.

"Well?" I called.
 "Mr. Tug Norton?" was the query.

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Was it the same voice that had called me that morning? I couldn't be certain, although it sounded the same. I took a chance.

"Norton, yes," I replied. "You wish to speak to me?"

"Yes, indeed!" she exclaimed. "Something has prevented me from seeing you at the Lone Jack Inn. Will you come to me instead?"

"Certainly," I replied. "You are buying my time, you know. Where shall I come?"

"I am at a friend's house, so there is no risk. Come to 3329 Independence Boulevard. It's a large house. I will answer the door. And please hurry!"

I left the booth puzzled. Was I being stalled? Was the woman just on the phone the same who had made the appointment for Lone Jack Inn? The voices certainly were similar, if not identical—but I was suspicious, nevertheless. I decided to return to my table, sit down and see what happened.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullets in the Night

NO SOONER had I taken my seat than I became aware of somebody at my elbow. I glanced back and up and looked into the face of a cigarette girl. A lovely face in which was set brown eyes looking large and frightened.

"Cigarettes, sir?" she asked, extending her tray.

"Yes," I said, feeling for a coin with one hand and choosing a pack with the other.

"Drive your car to the cross-road!" she whispered, bending over towards me. "I'll join you there in five minutes!"

She was gone, working her way toward the entrance at the rear. I got up and went out to where my car was parked, meeting Steel there in the darkness.

"Follow my car," I whispered. "If you lose me, drive to 3329 Independence Boulevard and wait outside."

The Lone Jack Road and Highway Forty crossed about one hundred yards east of the inn. I pulled up there and stopped. Not another car was nearer to me than the inn, and nobody was in sight. I shut off my lights, opened a door and waited. A pair of minutes later, the cigarette girl, her scant costume covered with a light cloak, slid in beside me.

"Drive toward town!" she whispered excitedly. "I think I am being followed!"

She was. As I stepped on the starter, a big sedan started up back at the inn and a spotlight covered my machine. The car came toward us. At that instant Jim Steel swung his boat across the road and killed his engine.

"Get th' hell out of th' way!" bellowed a voice angrily.

"Go to the devil!" was Jim's prompt reply.

"You're blocking the road!"

"Tell me something I don't know—Frog!"

I stepped on the gas and left both Frog Scanlon and Jim behind.

"Someone tried to follow us," the girl exclaimed anxiously.

"Sure. But don't worry about that," I reassured her. "Where to, now?"

"Any place," she replied. "Drive out where we can talk."

I headed my car down a by-road that would take us up to Independence Boulevard by the shortest route, and gave it the gas.

"So you're a cigarette girl at the Lone Jack?" I queried.

"No," was the answer. "I paid the regular girl to let me take her place tonight. You see, I had no one I could trust as an escort, and unescorted women are not admitted there. It worked nicely."

"And fooled me nicely," I told her. "Suppose you shed a little light on that

skull matter while we drive? Let's get down to business. Do you know, to start with, the identity of the man whose skull was in the box?"

"I do not," was the surprising answer. "I know only that it was sent to the house of my uncle by an unknown person. A card was in the box containing it, and on the card was printed in ink: *The Skull of Judgment.*"

"Addressed to whom?" I asked.

"Andrew Larrimore, my uncle."

"How did he react to it?"

"He has never seen the ghastly thing!" she exclaimed. "Knows nothing whatever about it—and, I hope, never will!"

"Who besides yourself knows?" I asked.

"Briggs, the butler. He received the box and opened it. When he discovered what it contained he concealed it in his room, and after a week had passed he told me about it, cautioning me to say nothing to Uncle Andrew. Briggs has been with my family for many years—since before we came here—and I have every confidence in him. I obeyed his suggestion, and kept still."

"Funny that he should take that attitude in the matter," I commented. "Did he offer any explanation?"

The girl was silent for a moment, then replied: "He told me that the sight of the skull had roused in him a horrible suspicion. That if what the skull suggested proved true, our lives, his and mine, depended upon our silence. The skull meant certain death to the possessor, once its possession was known. That, Mr. Norton, may sound melodramatic and foolish—but, knowing Briggs, I believe it to be true!"

WE TURNED into Independence Boulevard then, and fifteen minutes later I was driving slowly past number 3329. It was a large house well back in extensive grounds. All the windows were

dark, but through the fan-light above the entrance door a faint yellow showed.

A block farther on I parked against the curb. I had a hunch that there was something to be learned in that house, and I meant to find out whether the hunch was false or true.

My companion had been so occupied with her own thoughts that she had not moved or spoken for some time, but when I parked she sat up and looked around:

"Why," she said, "this is our neighborhood! Why did you come here?"

"What is your number?" I demanded quickly.

She hesitated, then answered: "It is 3329 Independence Boulevard, a large place in the middle of the block just above here. But you must not go there!"

"On the contrary," I corrected, "I must go there. Is there another woman in your household?"

"Yes. Uncle Andrew has a secretary—Or did you mean a relative?"

"No. And you've answered my question. I'll leave you here for the present, while I keep an appointment with you at Number 3329 Independence—"

"With me!" she broke in, looking at me like she thought I had gone batty. "What do you mean?"

"That a woman called me up, in your name, broke the date at the Lone Jack and asked me to come to the Independence number," I explained. "And I wouldn't for the world miss seeing her."

At that moment a car showed up in the block above, prowled along slowly and when abreast of us, was brought to a stop.

"What's doing, Tug?" Steel asked, as he got out and came around to my side.

"Park ahead, Jim, and then keep this young lady company," I instructed. "I've got to keep a date."

Jim got in beside the girl, taking my place under the wheel.

"But you are only wasting time, Mr.

Norton," the girl declared. "Briggs knows only what I have told you, and Uncle Andrew knows nothing at all."

I told her, "I'm going in just the same. Anyhow, you remain with Mr. Steel, and leave the rest to me. That's what you are paying me for, you know."

I walked down the street, turned into 36th, slipped into an alley and backtracked until I reached the rear of 3329 Independence. I was going to keep my appointment with the unknown who had made it—but by the back door.

There was no light in the rear of the house, and as I stole across the grounds from the garage no dog challenged me. Very likely the woman waiting inside for me to show up would have no suspicion that I had tumbled to her ruse, but I used just as much caution as if there might be alert eyes watching from every window.

The door of the latticed back porch was not locked, but the one to the kitchen was. The second key on my ring shot the tumbler back. I left the rear door unlocked, wandered through the kitchen, feeling my way into the butler's pantry, and through to the dining room. In the dining room I stopped and listened.

The house was quiet. Very dimly came a sheen of light from the front hallway, visible through the partly opened door which gave into what I surmised was the drawing room.

Passing into the drawing room I risked a shot from my flashlight, and saw that the room was deserted. Then I went into the hall, found nobody there.

Carefully I opened the front door, jabbed a thumb against a button, heard a bell ring upstairs, then closed the door and darted back into the drawing room. There, concealed by a voluminous drape over the hallway arch, I waited.

A floor board squeaked above me; a door opened. Silence. Then I heard a soft tread on the stairway, the swish of a

garment, and a brunette in a flame-colored dinner-gown appeared abruptly in the dim light of the hall. I had only a bare glimpse of her as she hastened to the front door and opened it.

SILENCE, followed by an exclamation of surprise. A long moment, and the door was very softly closed. The bolt clicked home. The woman started back to the stairs. I prepared to step out and announce myself, assured, now, that no trap had been set for me—downstairs, at least.

As I started to draw the drapery aside, a deafening report from above filled the house with stunning suddenness, rattling the windows. An inarticulate cry broke from the lips of the brunette in the hall. Something heavy thudded upon the floor above.

I leaped forward, plunged into the darkened hall, then stopped dead while a shiver played up and down my spine.

From the blackness above the stairhead a cry came shivering down. It began as a low, gurgling plaint, and ended in shrill agony!

At that instant, and before I had taken another step, a soft, perfumed body hurled itself against mine, and the woman's frightened scream cut into the diminishing wail from above. That wail with the grim note of death in it!

My arms went about her small waist, pinioning her arms at her sides. She screamed again, and I heard a door open upstairs, saw a shaft of light cross the blackness.

"Who—who are you?" my captive gasped shakily. "Take your arms away."

"Steady," I cautioned her. "What's the trouble here, anyhow—"

"I don't know," she denied fiercely. "Take your arms off me!"

"You snapped off the hall light when that shot was fired," I said. "You were covering up for somebody. Don't lie."

"You're doing the lying," she shot back.

"Release me—and run, you fool! Do you want to stay here and be killed?"

A slow, dragging noise above caught my attention, and I shot a glance upward. The opening of the door had let out enough light to show me something on the stairs. A dark huddle of something that moved slowly downward. A groan, deep, agonized, came from the crawling man, and he ceased to move.

Clasping the woman with my left arm, I clapped a hand against her right hand—and grabbed the little automatic she was holding.

"You—you beast!"

She hadn't time to say more. I thrust her into the drawing room, yanked down the heavy drapes from the arch, rolled her in them and then rolled her across the floor. Then I sprang up the stairway toward that dark huddle on the landing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Company for a Corpse

AS I reached him, the dying man groaned hollowly and strove to pull himself up by clutching the balustrade with his hands. He failed, and dropped back to the landing again. I reached for my flash with my left hand.

Before my flash was going, a switch snapped above, light flooded the hall and made a bright path down the stairs. I

looked up to see a man standing just above me. A tall man in dressing gown and pajamas, graying hair mussed and tangled—an automatic in his right hand.

"Hold it," I warned him, and had him covered before he could raise his gun. "Drop the cannon—carefully."

"Who are you? What has happened? Who is that on the landing?" he demanded, standing there like a frozen image.

"Drop that gun," I snapped at him. "Else you'll be down too."

Quickly, he lowered the automatic, dropped it to the thickly carpeted tread at his feet.

"That's better," I approved. "Just come down here to the landing, and tell me who the injured man is. And move like you had life in you!" I said sharply, seeing him hesitate.

He started as though he had been prodded from behind, and came half stumbling down toward me. Before he reached the landing, however, heavy footsteps beat upon the front porch, and a gun butt began a loud, peremptory tattoo on the door.

"Go down and open it," I ordered.

"Good grief," he muttered, obeying me at the same time. "What is all this?"

He swung the door open, and Jim Steel stepped inside. Back of him was the girl.

"Heard a shot in here, Tug," Jim called. "What happened?"

"Plenty," I answered. "Unwrap a



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bundle you'll see in the drawing room, and hold tight to what you find. You, in the robe, get a doctor here as quick as you can—"

The girl was no longer behind Jim. With a sharp cry she darted past him and up the stairs, fell to her knees beside the injured man and cried: "Briggs! Oh, Briggs—what has happened? Quick, tell me!"

"Miss—Anne—I—I—"

The effort proved too great. He ceased trying to talk. His right hand raised feebly toward a pocket of his vest, faltered, lowered, then his palsied fingers rose again and clutched at the pocket. Anne thrust her hand into it—and drew out a small brass key.

"This, Briggs?" she whispered. "You wanted me to have this?"

"Yes!" came a whisper. "Give—it—to—Norton! Tell him—tell him—" He shuddered, gasped—and death stifled the whisper in his throat.

"Briggs! Briggs! You—you can't go this way! Tell me what you meant—"

She ceased, turned her tear-stained face up to me.

"He is dead," she cried, her voice filled with grief and awe.

"What is all this, anyhow?"

The man in the dressing gown, standing at the foot of the stairs, asked the question just as Steel appeared from the drawing room with the woman I had wrapped in the drape. She walked beside him, devilishly attractive and strangely composed.

"Somebody had better do some quick explaining," she said coldly, her deep blue eyes flashing. "Or shall I call the police? What is all this about? What has happened?"

"Well," I answered, "judging from what I have seen and heard, I'd say a pretty fair job of murder has happened—and, if I'm not badly off, it is about a skull. A certain trepanned skull. The Skull of Judgment. Ever hear of it?"

The face of the man in the gown, clearly revealed in the light which Steel had switched on, presented an utter blank. He turned inquiring eyes toward the brunette, then, with a startled gasp, leaped toward her.

STEEL was quicker, however. He caught her slender body as it sagged to the floor. Steel carried her into the drawing room and placed her on a divan while Anne hastened to her.

"Uncle Andrew, call a doctor," she said. "Isobel is ill from fright. No wonder, poor girl."

The man in the dressing robe blinked his eyes rapidly, hesitated, then glanced at me.

"You seem to have taken charge here," he said. "I don't know who you are, but my niece seems to be acquainted with you—"

"Slightly," I interrupted. "As for calling a doctor, I think that won't be necessary. Isobel has merely fainted, and it won't be long until she comes out of it. Get some water, Jim, and sprinkle her face."

Jim departed for the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Uncle Andrew turned to me again.

"Will you explain what you are doing here, and what you meant when you spoke of a skull?" he demanded, beginning to show anger. "You must admit that your presence in my house at such a time is suspicious; to say the least. How did you get here, and what do you know about the killing of poor Briggs?"

"I came by appointment, and knowing nothing about Briggs—except that he was shot by somebody upstairs," I answered, while watching Isobel come out of her faint. "You will have all your questions answered, but not just yet."

Steel came with the water, and Isobel opened her long-fringed lids before a drop touched her.

"What has happened?" she asked moaningly. "I feel very ill. Something terrible has happened. Oh, I remember."

"I thought you would," I commented. "Jim," I instructed, "keep Uncle Andrew and Isobel here with you, while I have a look through the rooms upstairs—"

"If you go up those stairs," Andrew broke in sharply, "I go with you."

"You'll sit down and stay there," Jim snapped, walking toward him.

"Come with me, Anne," I told the girl. "I'll want to ask you a question or two."

"But, Mr. Norton," she exclaimed. "You should not allow your man to treat uncle so. I don't understand."

"I merely do not want him with me when I go upstairs," I told her. "I do want you. Come, please."

Anne followed me up the stairs, and at the top I paused to ask her, "How many servants?"

"Only poor Briggs lived here," she answered. "A cook and maid come in by the day."

"Any other members of your household except those I have seen?"

"None. Just uncle, Isobel and myself."

"How did you come to send that skull to me?"

"I didn't. Briggs did that. He felt that he could not handle the matter himself, so consulted with me. We agreed to send it to a detective, and found your name in the telephone book—"

"Why send it?" I broke in. "Why didn't he come with it in person?"

"I do not know, only he said he believed he should get it away quickly, that it would be safe with you, and he would call you up and arrange an appointment. Then, when uncle became ill—yesterday—and Briggs could not get off, he told me to arrange an appointment for myself. But he insisted that the place of meeting be somewhere outside of this house. I do not know why, except that he wanted the matter kept from Uncle Andrew, as it

would worry him needlessly, Briggs said.

"Uncle is something of a recluse, I should tell you, and devoted to literary work. That is why Isobel—Miss Hollis—came as secretary. I made the appointment, and now all this has happened. Poor Briggs, I'm sure he knew something of great value."

"Two of us are sure about that," I told her. "What did Briggs tell you to say to me?"

"I was to give you a note from him, sealed in an envelope, after I was certain I could trust you fully," was the surprising answer. "And here is the note—"

She reached into a pocket in the scant skirt she wore, and stopped speaking, a look of surprise in her eyes.

"The note!" she exclaimed. "It is gone!"

I grinned. "Don't worry about the note," I told her. "Isobel, dead to the world though she was, took it out of your pocket while you were bending over her on the divan. A smooth article, Isobel—but she was a trifle slow on the job. We'll go down, now, and Mr. Steel will persuade her to give up the note. Come."

WE REENTERED the drawing room, and I said to Steel: "Isobel hooked an envelope out of Anne's pocket just before, Jim. See if you can get her to produce it. I'm going up to look for the bird who killed Briggs—knowing beforehand that I won't find him. Still, the usual thing must be done. I'll hurry the job, and be back with you before long."

Isobel smiled sweetly at me—which aroused my suspicions. Andrew gave me a sour look that might mean anything or nothing. I didn't try to analyze the look, but went back up the stairs. There were four bedrooms which appeared to be in use. Three on the second floor and one on the third. The one on the third was unmistakably that of the butler.

On my way up to the butler's room, I

observed an open window at the end of the second-story hall, and, thrusting my head out, found a sloping roof beneath it. Clearly, the killer had escaped that way—or, perhaps, it was intended that an investigator should think he had.

The butler's room, where I had expected to find something vital, proved to be disappointing. His trunk gave up nothing, and the rest of the room was as barren. One thing I came across lying upon a table, and which did not strike me as important, was a Kansas City Southern time-table, quite new.

Then I began to wonder what Briggs would be doing with a railway time-table in his room. I looked the thing over. I found that the butler had either made a trip on the K. C. S. lately, or contemplated making one.

The time of departure of the Red Bird, crack passenger train, was checked in pencil. Turning to the map, I found a circle drawn around the name of a town. Hanging Rock. Briggs had been to Hanging Rock, Arkansas, or had planned to go. I put the time-table in my pocket and went down to the lower floor.

At the front of the house was Andrew's room, but I found nothing there to interest me—except a concealed telephone set. For some reason or other, Andrew had hooked up a special set for himself, and had hidden it back of a row of books on a shelf.

Anne's room gave up nothing, which was not disappointing, as I had expected nothing. I then entered a bedroom directly across the corridor from Andrew's. The bedroom of the pretty secretary, Isobel Hollis.

All the time, I had been searching for something to explain the little brass key which Briggs had wanted me to have. Nowhere had there appeared a box, casket or other locked receptacle that the key would fit.

But there was a lock in existence which

that key would open—and it held the solution of the mystery of the trepanned skull. I was certain of that. Maybe it would be in the attic, possibly in the basement—but I knew that it must be somewhere on the premises.

I was right. I found the box in Isobel's room. Had she not been carelessly hasty, I should not have found the hiding place so easily. Maybe not at all. It was a cunningly conceived and executed hiding place, and one new to me.

I had known of hiding places being arranged beneath the hearth-bricks of a fireplace, but never before had I found tile, if you please, but forming a section of the surface itself.

Isobel, however, had betrayed herself by failing to see that the all-important section was pushed down far enough to correspond with the level of the rest of the hearth.

Her hiding place proved to be a shallow metal box, the lid overlaid with tile. The little key fitted the box, and when I raised the lid I saw that the shallow receptacle was filled with papers.

"She stole the papers from Briggs and hid them here. Briggs then stole the key, or secured a duplicate—" I started checking up, unconsciously speaking out loud.

"And you can hand over both the key and the box to me—pronto!"

The man who interrupted my speculations was Frog Scanlon standing in the doorway—and he had the drop on me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lethal Brainstorm

I FACED Scanlon—but he was a different Scanlon than I had ever seen before. Now he was primed to kill, and no mistake about it.

"As usual, Frog," I said, "I'm not glad to see you. Put that gun in your pocket, before it frightens the neighbors."

"Put that box down on the table," he snarled. "Put it down, Norton, or I'll slug you."

"Every time I get hold of a box, Frog," I complained, "you try to take it away from me. This morning it was a wooden box—"

"On the table," he broke in. "Cut the chatter."

I placed it on the table. Frog took a step or two into the room.

"Raise your hands," he ordered.

I obeyed, and his gasp of relief when he had both my guns in his possession was quite flattering to me. It was flattery I could have easily foregone, I'll add.

He backed to the door, stuck his head into the hall and called down the stairs: "O. K. Chimp. Got him cornered. Keep everybody covered down there until I call you."

"Gotcha, boss," Chimp called back.

"Chimp surprised Steel?" I asked when Frog drew his head back and closed the door.

"You reckon right," he crowed. "Steel blocked me once tonight, damn him, but I returned the compliment—with the honors all mine. Thanks to whoever left the back door open, Chimp and I were able to get the drop on your pal. He won't give us any trouble, either, because he's got a pair of cuffs on his wrists and a pair around his ankles. And you're going to do what I tell you to, aren't you?"

"Sure. Fire when ready, Frog, chum. I know when I'm licked."

"All right. Sit down in the chair by the table," Frog directed, "and take out the first paper in that box. Read it out loud."

"Why, Frog," I exclaimed, obeying the order. "I thought you knew how to read."

"Cut the comedy," he gritted. "I don't trust you, Norton—not by a damned sight. You read to me, while I watch you—and remember, I've got my gun handy."

He drew a chair up to the door and sat in it, his sixgun lying in his lap.

"Read that first paper," he ordered again, pointing to a legal-size envelope, lying on top of the pile. I first read the direction penned thereon: "To whom it may concern."

"Never mind that!" Frog snapped. "Read what's inside!"

I withdrew some sheets of letter-head-size bond, all covered with neat penmanship, and began reading aloud.

"My name is Arthur Goss, although I have been using that of Briggs for a number of years. I was once a builder in England, but couldn't keep straight, so I came to America and entered the service of Mr. Ronald Larrimore. Five years ago he moved from New York City to Kansas City, bringing me with him.

"He had a brother whom he had not seen for fifteen years, his only living relative save his daughter. The brother held mining interests in the southwest part of Missouri. One week after Mr. Larrimore reached the city and located at 3329 Independence Avenue, he died. Death was unquestionably due to heart disease.

"He left one child, Miss Anne, then thirteen years old, she being his heir. The brother, Andrew Larrimore, was appointed guardian of Miss Anne, and executor of the estate, without bond.

"Mr. Andrew Larrimore was notified, and came on to take charge. I do not know when it was I became suspicious of him, but do recall that my suspicions were confirmed about a year ago. I happened to mention an old injury to Mr. Andrew which Mr. Ronald had spoken of to me. Something in the paper about a trepanning operation called it to my mind.

"He looked at me blankly, asked me to what I referred. I told him I was referring to the wound he had received in the back of his head, years before, which had been covered with a silver plate. He then told me that he had never had any trouble because of the wound, and the trepanning was a complete success. But it was too late to fool me.

"The man calling himself Andrew Larrimore is an impostor, and was, until I mentioned it, unaware that the real Andrew Larrimore had had such an operation performed.

"I puzzled over the matter a great deal, and came to see how easily the imposture had been effected. There was nobody else in the family except Miss Anne. She had never seen Mr. Andrew, and there were no friends of the family who knew him. The purpose of the fraud was clear. Ronald Larrimore left an estate valued at two million dollars.

"Having become satisfied that the man posing as Andrew was an impostor, I began making investigations. He had, two years before, brought a young woman into the house as his secretary, never telling anyone that he had known her previously. But their familiarity with each other when they thought themselves unobserved soon told a different tale.

"Also, by listening to their talk when unobserved; I gathered that Andrew had been slowly converting the estate into ready cash and negotiable securities, and that he meant to have the estate for his own. Either he would abscond with the bulk of it—else inherit it as next of kin—first removing Miss Anne.

"I take my oath that I have heard the killing of Miss Anne discussed as cold-bloodedly as a couple of butchers would have discussed the slaughter of a calf!

"I'm not trying to cover up for myself. When I started investigating this matter, it was with the intention of profiting richly by what I discovered. By reading old letters from Mr. Andrew to Mr. Ronald, I learned that the trepanning operation had been done at a place called New Nadrid, in southwest Missouri. The doctor's name was Woods. I got him to send me a sworn copy of his records—telling in detail about the trepanning operation.

"Andrew had lived on his mining land near Hanging Rock, and I went down there while pretending to be in St. Louis to see a sick sister. After two days search, I found a skeleton at the bottom of a shallow prospect-hole, dug it up—and saw, by the skull, that it was of Andrew Larrimore.

"I took the head—that tell-tale plate of silver being enough for my purpose—and returned to the village. There I learned that a man named Kinsley had been working with Andrew and had not been seen since Andrew left the section.

"I packed the skull in a box and sent it to myself at the Kansas City address. I intended to blackmail this man Kinsley, sell him the damning skull for a big sum of money.

"But since the day I mentioned the trepanning to him, he had been deeply suspicious of me. Through Isobel, he'd spied on me—and there was little I had done that remained unknown to him. And he had been busy, too, tracing me back to England. When I approached him about the skull, he showed me that he had enough on me to send me back to England to answer for a serious crime! He had me helpless!

"But I was determined that he must pay. He did not know that I really possessed the skull, since I had it well hidden. When I told him that I had been bluffing about it, he appeared satisfied. Whether or not he really is, I do not know.

"I decided finally to take Miss Anne partly into my confidence, place the skull along with all the evidence, in the hands of a competent detective—and then disappear. If I could not get a slice of that big fortune, I'd

save it for Miss Anne. For that reason I am writing this true account, and attaching the documentary evidence to it.

(Signed)

Arthur Goss, alias
Arthur Briggs."

FOLDING the document, I looked up at Scanlon. He was sitting forward in his chair, drinking in my words.

"How does that affect your fortunes, Frog? From your looks, a fellow would think it was water on your wheel."

"It is," he snapped. "That crook downstairs is going to pay through his nose. And I'm the boy he's due to pay!"

"What will I be doing, Frog, while you're collecting your blackmail?"

"You?" He laughed—and I didn't like the sound of it. "I hate you and Steel like poison already. Do you think I'd let the lives of a pair of skunks like you stand between me and two million? Hell, no. Tonight you two disappear for good. Read the other papers."

There was nothing for it but to obey, and I lifted another long envelope from the box. Lifted it—and stared down at something that made my heart leap into my throat. Something that caused me to bless Isobel, crook though she was.

A small automatic, little sister to the one I had taken from her garter holster, was there. It lay in the box, a deadly invitation to get busy.

"You're a nut, Scanlon," I told him, "to think you can get away with a thing like that. There's not a chance in the world of—"

"Never mind," he growled. "Read the paper."

I had taken the box on my lap when I took the second envelope out of it, and my right hand lay upon its edge. I began reading. The thing was not important to the murder, but that made no difference. I went right on, making up what I pretended to read—until I saw Frog's concentration was again causing him to become careless. It was my move.

Was the little gun loaded? I'd soon find out!

"Reach for the ceiling, Frog!" I snapped him out of his state of abstraction—and let him look into the muzzle of the gun.

Scanlon leaped in his chair as though he had been shot—but he froze immediately thereafter. For I was walking toward him, and maybe he didn't like what he saw in my eyes.

Frog wilted. It took two minutes to snap cuffs on his wrists, bind him with a strip of bed-sheet, and gag him good and proper. By then, he was the sickest looking man I ever saw.

With my old reliables once more in their holster, I closed the door on Scanlon and crept softly down the stairs.

When I stepped into the drawing room, with those same old dependables prominently displayed, the atmosphere became instantly charged.

Andrew sat very still, his face white, jaw sagging. Isobel calmly took a cigarette from a box near her and lit it. As for Chimp, he released Steel.

"What does all this mean?" Andrew finally found his voice and demanded.

"It means that the skull now sits in judgment, Kinsley," I answered. "The murder of Andrew Larrimore, fraud, false pretense, attempted embezzlement—and the second murder which was committed here tonight. The murder of Briggs."

"Mr. Norton," Anne cried, getting slowly to her feet. "What in the world do you mean? He's my uncle, Andrew Larrimore! Have you lost your mind?"

"I should like to know the answer to that question myself," Andrew exclaimed. "Of all the fool stunts I ever heard of—"

"Shut up," I interrupted. "Isobel," I went on, turning to the woman. "Did you read that confession of Briggs' before you locked it in the little box in the hearth?"

"I knew you had found it," she informed me calmly, "when you mentioned the name of Kinsley. Of course I read it. I stole it from Briggs' trunk and locked it up.

"Frank Kinsley has been a crook all his life," Isobel went on in a cold voice. "And I'm his wife. One of them. Frank has been rather absent-minded in marital matters, and I doubt whether he knows himself how many women he had led to the altar.

"Frank killed Andrew—which was safe enough in that out-of-the-way place.

"Briggs fooled Frank and me about the skull, claiming he did not really have it. After it was too late, and Briggs had smuggled the thing out of hiding early this morning, we got wise. Frank's secret telephone set, connected with the set downstairs, wised him up. He hired Scanlon.

"Then, just before, when Frank discovered that Briggs had stolen the key in order to get possession of the confession he had written, he shot him. We—"

At that Frank Kinsley jumped up out of his chair suddenly, and, with a blistering oath, leaped for Isobel, his long fingers groping for her throat.

Steel, alert as always, leaped at the same time he did—and the barrel of his sixgun dropped neatly onto the crown of Kinsley's head. When Kinsley came back to consciousness, he was on his way to jail.

Isobel's testimony, plus the mute evidence of the trepanned skull, put a rope around Frank Kinsley's neck. Whether it was because of her evidence or her beauty, she went free.

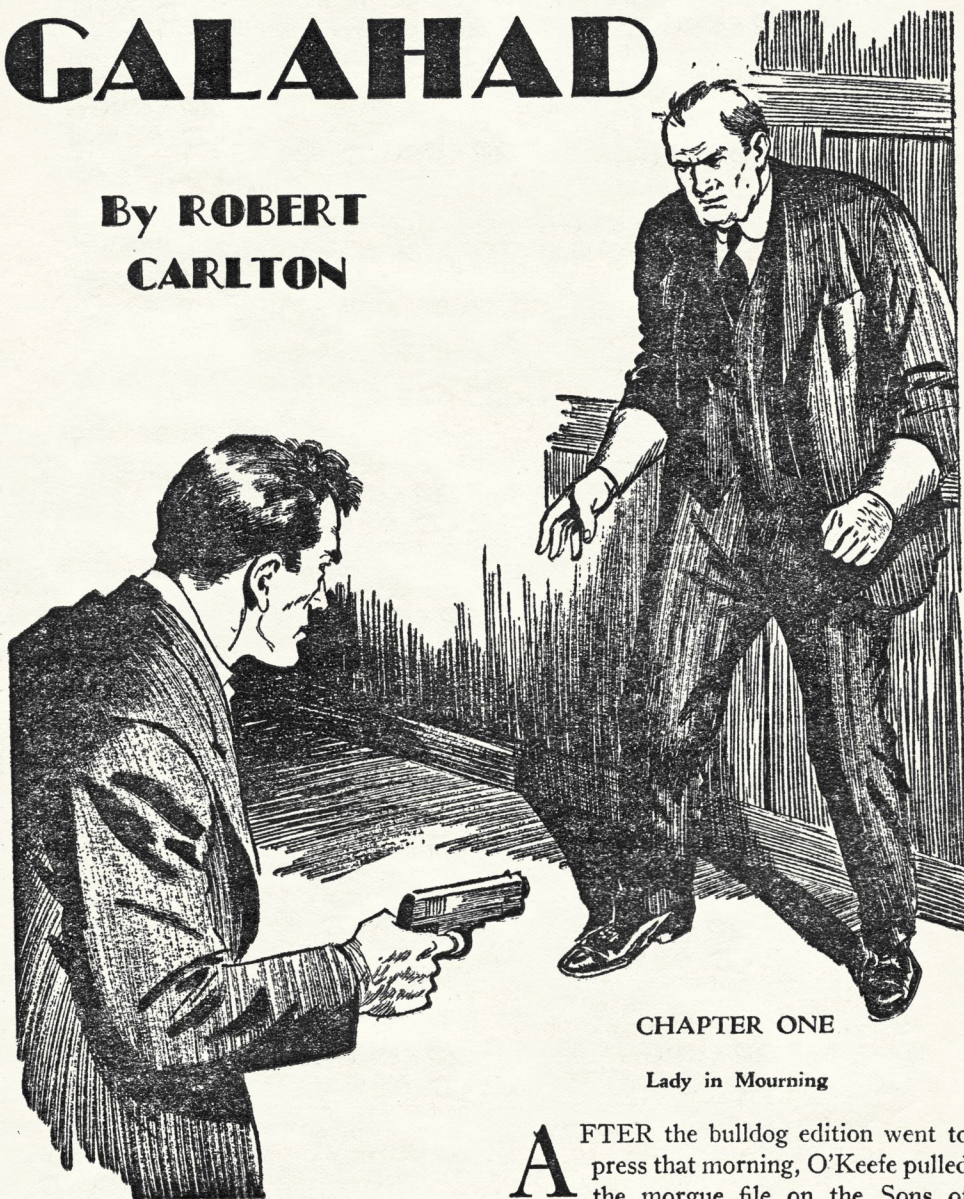
There wasn't much on Scanlon, and he wasn't bothered. He's still running his detective agency. Anne, too tender-hearted for her own good, made me let the rat go.

Still, she's shown her tenderness in other ways too, so who's complaining!

*Because reporter O'Keefe bagged
the stacked sweetie's hot G-notes—
a slay-syndicate tried to rush him into . . .*

A GRAVE FOR GALAHAD

By **ROBERT
CARLTON**



CHAPTER ONE

Lady in Mourning

AFTER the bulldog edition went to press that morning, O'Keefe pulled the morgue file on the Sons of Cortez robbery. The years had faded the

**Gripping
Crime-Adventure
Novelette**

**"You shoot me—I'll shoot
her."**



newsprint, and the flag bore the date May 8, 1939. It told him little he didn't already know.

According to the police, it had been the work of master crackmen. They'd filled the burglar alarm with crankcase oil and sand.

They had hung black curtains over the vault room windows and burned through

twelve inches of solid steel. They'd taken a hundred thousand dollars and had left no clues that could identify them.

He phoned Elaine. "If anyone breaks into your apartment and ransacks the place, don't report it to the police. And be careful when you go out. Stay near people."

"Why?" she asked. "Is something wrong, Bill?"

"I'll tell you about it tonight. How about dinner? I know a little French cafe on Vermont that serves wonderful meals."

He arranged to meet her at eight, then drove down to Santa Monica. The Sons of Cortez headquarters occupied a three-story graystone, perched on the Palisades overlooking the Pacific. A wall ten feet high circled the building.

Inside the gate, a trimmed hedge outlined the initials S.O.C. on a green lawn. The girl in the mahogany-panelled reception room wore horn-rimmed glasses and a severe black dress.

"Do I look like a darned fool?" O'Keefe asked.

She stared, and her expression plainly stated it was no way to begin a conversation.

"Well, skip it," O'Keefe said. "Who are the Sons of Cortez?"

She looked relieved, on firmer ground. "Cortez was a Spanish *conquistador*—a *hildago* and captain from Castile. He defeated Montezuma and conquered Mexico. The Sons of Cortez are people of Spanish extraction who have lived in California many years."

"How interesting," Bill said. "Are there many of you?"

"Thousands. Are you interested in joining?"

"I'm an Irishman from New York." He handed her his card. "I'm writing a series of articles on unsolved crimes for the *Globe*. I'd like to see Juan Batista, your *Supreme Conquistador*."

She talked into an inter-com, motioned

him toward a thick door marked private.

The Supreme Conquistador operated from a carved walnut chair behind an ornate desk. He wore an alpaca business coat and cuff protectors. Flabby jowls overhung a high starched collar and he was nearly bald. O'Keefe thought he looked like a 1912 lawyer, and noted the wall etchings ran to galleons and gentlemen in armor.

"We're glad to welcome the press," Batista said formally. "But this was so long ago. What can I tell you that wasn't in the papers?"

"In writing up these old cases we try for a new angle," Bill said. "Some bit of information you might think unimportant, or recall after all these years."

Batista's brown eyes glistened. "We're not anxious to see such an article printed. The lodge's financial situation is strong, but—these things are not good publicity."

O'Keefe ignored the objection. "The police thought the robbery a well-planned and well-cased job. Do you remember anyone looking over your headquarters just prior to the robbery?"

"No, nothing." Batista looked thoughtfully past O'Keefe's shoulder. "They came in packing crates delivered in the late afternoon. I thought the crates contained records from our San Francisco office. Instead the police said they held the thieves and tanks of gas and oxygen. They ruined our big new safe."

Bill consulted his notebook. "Our files disclose you told the police you showed a strange gentleman through the building earlier that week."

"That one?" Batista blinked. "Yes. He called to tell me about investments for our surplus. He was very cordial and smoked good cigars. We were not interested in investing our money, but I showed him around."

"Can you describe this man?"

"He was stout and wore very fine clothes. He had a pink face."

"Thanks." Bill rose from the chair. "With millions of well-dressed fat men in the world, he shouldn't be hard to find after twelve years."

The Supreme Conquistador showed him to the door and bid him a polite good-bye. He watched from the window until O'Keefe drove away, then went to his phone and dialed a Hollywood number. He waited until a man's voice answered the ring.

"Jake?" he said. "He was here."

O'KEEFE drove slowly back to Los Angeles, wondering how dumb you could get. Two days ago he'd been an overworked reporter, with a yen to retire. Now. . . .

It began a half-hour before the three-star deadline. Deep in the *Globe* building's heart, the presses throbbed like a mighty pulse. A copy boy opened the composing room door and a vast clattering roar filled the city room. At a line of oak desks, re-write men typed with feverish intensity. A bell clamored over the slot, and a battery of teletypes clicked and jingled inside the wire room. A phone rang harshly at O'Keefe's elbow, added to bedlam.

O'Keefe stared at the phone. His problem was simple. Save another seven hundred and fifty and the *Globe* job could go to hell. With the fifteen hundred already in the bank, he could have his year in France. He'd have to live cheaply, but he could tour the South of France on a bicycle, see the chateau country along the Loire, and Mont St. Michel on the Brittany coast.

"*Garçon, porte moi une verre du vin,*" he said.

The words had a fine rolling sound, even with the phone ringing incessantly. They meant escape from this madhouse called a newspaper—peaceful days pedaling through the French countryside, rubbernecking at medieval castles, studying Gothic cathedrals. He counted on his

fingers. Cutting out lunches and hockey games saved seventy-five a month. This was August. He could sail next June.

The damned phone refused to be ignored. Bill pushed his eyeshade back, revealed a shock of black hair and a pair of bright blue eyes. In unguarded moments men called him a black Irishman. Whether or not they got socked depended on their smile.

Bill lifted the receiver. "Yeah," he said. "What do you want?"

"O'Keefe?" The man's voice sounded muffled, distant. "This is Dan Conklin. Remember me?"

Bill thought a moment. "I believe so. It's been a long time, Dan—over ten years."

"It's been eleven years, two months, and three days. Up at San Quentin we keep track of time."

"I can imagine," Bill said.

"I want to see you." There was an odd, strained note in Conklin's voice. "It's important, and it may mean a big story."

Bill frowned. Conklin had taken a five-to-life jolt for the Gray's Market job. Perhaps because Bill had been young and still had the shine on his nose when they nailed Dan, Conklin—a mild-mannered man, who wore glasses and talked like a grocery clerk—hadn't been the cub reporter's idea of a big-time safecracker.

"I have a four-thirty deadline," Bill said. "After that I'll be free."

"How about the Westlake Park boat-house at ten? We can cruise around the lagoon and talk without being overheard."

"Why the privacy? Is this something the cops shouldn't know?"

"Maybe," Conklin said. "I'll see you at ten."

O'Keefe arrived early and sprawled on a park bench. He stretched his long legs and watched a white swan swim gracefully through the reeds fringing the lagoon. A warm, spiced breeze rustled the palms and softened the city noises. Peace. Quiet. He

smoked and dreamed about France. . . .

Conklin looked much older. They shook hands under the colored lights overhanging the boathouse. His hair had thinned and grayed, and weary lines pencilled his pale face. The attendant hooked a canvas-canopied boat into the slip. Conklin tossed a bulging briefcase on the seat and they climbed in.

The electric-powered propeller threshed softly as they rode out on the lagoon. "Upstate the boys speak well of you," Conklin said. "They say you're one guy who can be trusted."

Bill smiled wryly. "That's nice. If I ever make the joint, I'll have friends."

Conklin removed his glasses, polished the lenses. His blue suit shone with newness and in the cockpit's gloom his eyes were somehow wistful, sad. "Do you remember the Sons of Cortez robbery, O'Keefe?"

"It was my first assignment as a police reporter," Bill said.

Conklin returned the glasses to his humped nose. "I was the peteman on that job. There were four of us, including Square John. One of the boys is dead now. He ran into a bullet five years ago. The other two are alive and here in Los Angeles."

"Is this for the record?" Bill asked.

"Not yet. We were buzzed on the getaway and had to break up. I had the money. I took it to a safe spot and buried it deep. Before I could meet the other boys for a split, the cops nailed me for the Gray's Market job."

Bill glanced at the briefcase between them.

"**Y**ES," Conklin said. "All these years it's been underground. The other boys wanted to know where. But don't believe that old saw about honor among thieves. They were sore when I told them they'd have to wait. Now I'm glad for another reason."

He paused while a boat cruised by, its radio playing softly. "In the joint you have time to think. You find out who your friends are. The last three years Elaine came to see me."

"Elaine?"

"My daughter. She was twelve when I fell. For eight years I had no word from her. She lived with my sister, and my sister is a righteous woman who thinks all criminals should be shot, then hung. When Elaine moved out on her own, she came to me. My wife died years ago. Elaine came every month, all the way to San Francisco. She saved her money, went without things." His voice softened. "She said when I was paroled, she'd make us a home."

"Not a bad idea," Bill said.

"So," Conklin said soberly, "I want to return the Sons of Cortez money and break with the past."

Bill studied the ex-con carefully. It was part of his job to receive confidences from crooks. A dangerous part. For some reason they liked to bring their problems to newspapermen, and he enjoyed a certain informal immunity where the cops were concerned. Still, it was a touchy business.

"You'll need a good lawyer," he said. "You might talk them out of prosecuting, but it's doubtful. A watchman was hurt in the getaway and that makes it bad."

"That's why I need help," Conklin said quietly. "I need time to see the right people and make arrangements. Meanwhile—I'd like you to keep this briefcase for me."

O'Keefe had sensed the request and his face deepened. "No," he said. "Absolutely no, Dan. Holding hot money is out of my line. The cops go along with reporters but they have their limits. Hide it again, until you're ready to return it."

"It's asking a lot," Conklin admitted. "But if anything happens to me, this way the money will be returned. That would please Elaine."

"You think something might happen to you?"

"I'm walking the edge," Conklin said. "The other boys know I'm out of stir. So far I've avoided them."

He wanted to tell Conklin he wasn't living his life to please Elaine, but the words stuck in his throat. She probably had buck teeth and acquired inhibitions; still, she sounded human. Bill's face got lean and hungry. It was no time for sentiment, not with a bon voyage coming up in June.

"Does your daughter know about this money?" he asked.

"Not yet," Conklin said. "I wanted to clear myself before I told her."

All right, so it means an exclusive story and a bonus, if Conklin works the deal out. I'll get away from the Globe sooner and enjoy those Parisienne nights. Only—he warned himself—don't be a damned fool, the other two will find out and then—

But he'd been a damned fool. He'd taken the money and Elaine's address, just in case. He'd agreed to meet Conklin the following night in the park.

But Conklin hadn't kept the date. They'd found him the next morning under an Eastside culvert, shot to death.

Reluctantly, he'd gone to see Elaine Conklin. He hated sad scenes, tears. But she hadn't cried. She had taken it quietly, with a tight-drawn expression that haunted his soul. In her face he saw the years she'd struggled with her pride, and her incredible loneliness.

That's when his troubles really began. She didn't have buck teeth and acquired inhibitions. Her hair was like the velvet Irish night, and her eyes blue as Killarney lakes. He took a deep breath and tried to remember she could be dangerous to a man's travel plans.

Anyway, he couldn't tell her about the Sons of Cortez robbery, not with her father's death still aching in her deep blue eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsel With the Gimmes

SOMETIMES, O'Keefe thought Detective-Lieutenant Ed Gleason part Indian. His high cheekbones, black eyes, and coarse black hair suggested a Cherokee or Chippewa strain. It was part of the lieutenant's stock in trade to look unlike a detective—so he wore a plaid sports coat and creased gabardine slacks, glossy brogues and pastel shirt. He pushed his Panama back and regarded O'Keefe narrowly.

"You newsguys lead a soft life," he said. "All day you sit around here, play cards, drink beer, and wait for something to break. You get paid for it, too."

"Yeah," O'Keefe said.

They were alone in the press room. Gleason had asked the other reporters to leave. The big homicide detective faced O'Keefe across a long oak table, scarred by the butts of countless forgotten cigarettes. His blunt fingers riffled a dog-eared deck of cards.

"Now and then I get the idea you don't like me," he said. "You smear me in your write-ups. You don't treat me good. Like the time last winter when you suggested I beat up suspects."

"Glory-hunting cops are not in my department," Bill said. "Talk to the guy that runs the mug sheet."

"See what I mean?" Gleason tossed the cards aside. "You don't cooperate. And here I was about to give you a break."

Bill's eyes got a darker shade of blue. Any time Gleason gave a guy a break, it would be a thirty-hour day. Gleason looked to his record and counted his arrests. He'd sent more men to prison than any man on the force. It was a job he loved.

"Yeah," O'Keefe said again.

Gleason smiled crookedly. "So how come you're so thick with Elaine Conklin?"

Since when is she a friend of yours?"

"You know everything," O'Keefe said. "Where did you buy your crystal ball?"

"We were watching her house. And we had a tail on you."

Bill's throat tightened. "On me?"

Gleason reached inside his coat and extracted a leather wallet. He pushed a sheet of notepaper across the table. One corner was stained red. Bill scanned it swiftly.

My name is Dan Conklin. In case of illness or death, notify William O'Keefe, care of the Evening Globe, Los Angeles.

"We found it on his body. Now why," Gleason asked softly, "would Conklin want you notified? And why would a con two days out of Quentin be murdered? What's your interest in his daughter?"

O'Keefe got up and walked to the window. The afternoon sunlight glistened on an acre of automobiles parked in the headquarters lot. Eastward, in the clear bright air, the Sierra Madre lifted purple peaks to a cloudless sky. A nice backdrop, he thought bitterly. As close as he might get to the Pyrennes, now that the cops had the scent.

"I went to tell her of her father's death," he said.

There was a sneer in Gleason's voice. "You must like jailbirds and their relatives."

Bill turned, squelched his sudden, aching desire to smash the detective's sardonic face.

"He's paid his debt," O'Keefe said. "I gave him a helping hand, if that's any of your damned business."

"I'm making it my business." Gleason kicked his chair back, knotted his fist. "And don't give me any lip, you two-bit newsbum, or I'll beat your head in. Tell me things."

"I'll tell you nothing," O'Keefe said. "Get your information the hard way, or read it in the *Globe*. And we won't be running any of your pictures."

Gleason's knuckles whitened. His mouth thinned and he walked around the table. He loomed in front of O'Keefe, hunched his shoulders. Bill smiled grimly.

"Try it," he suggested. "It won't look good in the papers. Detective beats up reporter. Or maybe reporter beats up detective. You're getting soft in the belly taking cumshaw from the night spots in Hollywood."

Gleason stood a moment, face mottled with rage. Then he unclenched his fists and went to the door. "It can wait," he said harshly. "But get this, O'Keefe. You know plenty about the Conklin murder and I'll be around. Don't cover yourself with press immunity or expect a break. You won't get it."

"Yeah," Bill said.

Gleason slammed the door and Bill turned to the window again. He thought about the briefcase hidden under his apartment refrigerator. If Gleason found that money, he'd have a perfect murder motive. And Gleason might make it stick, with his skill at picking evidence out of thin air. Bill stared bitterly at the Sierra Madre. How dumb could a guy get?

THE Wexley Arms was a small Wilshire district apartment house. A pair of clipped cedars and a sidewalk canopy gave the entrance a mild quality tone. O'Keefe rode the automatic elevator to the fourth floor and rang Elaine's bell. The girl who opened the door was a synthetic blonde. Gold rings dangled from her ears and her long fingers held a highball glass. She wore a deep-V blouse, a printed dirndl, sandals, and little else.

Arching a pencilled eyebrow, she said: "Look who's here—the answer to a maiden's prayer. Come in and join the party, lean and handsome. We were just cheering up your girl friend." He'd met Betty the night before. She lived down the hall.

He pushed into the apartment. It was a pleasant room, bright with flowers and

window knick-knack shelves. He liked the gingham curtains and the shag rug. They reflected Elaine's personality, casual and unpretending. A man rose from a divan as Bill entered — a humpty-dumpty man whose stomach overflowed his belt, and who smelled of bay rum and bourbon. Betty strolled across the room, chucked him under his second chin.

"Bill, meet Honest Jake Pringle. He just moved into the house yesterday," she cooed. "He uses twenty-dollar bills for napkins and has his own toothpicks minted. He's going to buy me a sable coat lined with mink."

Bill took Honest Jake's hand and his fingers felt engulfed in flabby flesh. He noted Honest Jake's square-cut diamond ring and ruby-studded wristwatch. Pringle smiled, and his tubby face broadened. He flicked an ash off his hand-painted necktie.

"I buy them low and sell them high," he announced. "I tell people the truth. If you want a better gyp, come to my used car lots. What we ain't got we'll get, one way or another. I'm the West Coast distributor of Confederate money. How are you, O'Keefe?"

"Where's Elaine?" Bill asked.

"Dressing." Betty waved her highball glass. "Putting on powder for her new flame. She'll be out in a minute."

"It's too bad." Jake's eyes rolled in their sagging pouches. "About her old man, I mean. We all gotta die, but—"

"Look," Bill said. "Why don't you two go to the nearest bar. I don't care for wet wakes, and I'd like to talk to Elaine alone."

Betty bristled at the chill in his voice, then tucked her arm in Jake's. "Come, my plum," she said loftily. "This newsguy ain't social. We'll go to mama's apartment and get something for your poor tummy."

Elaine came into the living room as Betty slammed the door. Bill took a deep, steadying breath. She looked wonderful in black. The dress clung to a nice figure,

gave her dark hair a blue sheen. He tried to remember she was a lady in mourning, but his heart thumped vigorously. She smiled, soft, red lips parted gravely.

"They just wandered in," she said. "Betty is the kind who doesn't wait for an invitation."

He noted some of the strain had left her face, but she was still pale under her make-up. "The fat guy got my goat," he said. "I didn't like the way he rolled his eyes."

She frowned. "I've seen him somewhere before. His face is familiar."

"It should be," Bill said dryly. "He's got it plastered on a thousand billboards. Honest Jake Pringle is the world's best advertised moron. Strictly a glorified extrovert."

"No," she said thoughtfully. "It was a long time ago."

They dined at Rene's. A white-coated waiter showed them to a candlelit table, handed Bill a menu printed in French. He took out his French-English pocket dictionary. He ran his finger down the translations. "*Le capon vin*," he said. "That must be chicken cooked in wine. Now, let's see. *Garçon, portons-nous le capon vin avec vin ordinaire, s'il vous plait.*"

Elaine stared. "What's all this business with dictionaries?" she asked. "Do you carry them in Spanish and Italian, too?"

He laughed and told her about his projected trip. "Does it sound screwy?"

"You're a surprising person," she said. "I think I like you."

They ate leisurely. The candlelight threw faint shadows on her face and throat, framed her loveliness. He talked cheerfully, wanting to ease her loneliness. He told her stories of newspaper business, experiences he'd been through. He waited until the waiter served the coffee, then spoke about the Sons of Cortez robbery.

She took it calmly, looking down at her cup. When he'd finished, her eyes were misty. "So dad meant it," she said.

"You'll have to return the money, Bill, right away. It's dangerous."

"Not yet," he said. "Whoever killed your father saw that note with my name on it. The murderer didn't have enough sense to destroy it. By now he has connected me with the money. I'll have to wait until he makes a move. It's my only chance to draw him into the open."

She reached across the table, took his hand. Her fingers were warm, gentle.

"You're doing a lot for me," she said. "Why?"

He wondered about that. He wondered why he was finding it difficult to think about anything except her problem.

IT WAS after two when O'Keefe keyed his apartment door open. They'd driven up the coast, past campfires winking like fireflies on the dark beaches. They'd talked, drawn closer. He still felt the glow of her nearness. Just inside the foyer, O'Keefe froze.

He lolled in O'Keefe's favorite chair. His shoes were off and his sock feet were cocked on a table. He'd shed his coat, too, and an automatic dangled in a holster under his left arm. He had fuzzy brown hair and eyes like weatherbeaten slate. Slender without being thin, he was pint-sized, and his baggy tweed pants hadn't been to the cleaners in a coon's age.

O'Keefe walked into the room. "You comfortable?" he asked. "There's some cold beer in the refrigerator."

He yawned, but didn't take his feet off the table. "Sit down over there and put your hands on your knees."

O'Keefe sat down on the divan and put his hands on his knees. His uninvited guest flicked him a searching glance.

"You rodded?"

"I never carry a gun," O'Keefe said. "It might go off and hurt somebody."

"Uh-huh." The gunsel fished a cigarette from a crumpled pack. He fumbled over his vest for matches, then used the lighter

on the coffee table. "They call me Sammy. You're O'Keefe?"

Bill nodded. He studied the man intently, wondered what chance he had if he dived for the gun.

"Let's get one thing straight." Sammy dribbled smoke from his thin nose. "I'm not afraid to use a gun. I been using them since I was nine, lived with a heater in my hands. And someday I'll probably die that way."

"You could be telling the truth," O'Keefe said.

"Another thing." Sammy wiggled his toes. "I don't like to shoot a guy. I like it better if he's reasonable. I never shot a guy yet, but that I didn't feel bad about it. Sometimes, afterward, I don't eat good for a week."

"You're a new one," O'Keefe said dryly. "A killer with a conscience. What hole did you crawl out of?"

"Stop talking," Sammy said. "Where's the dough, O'Keefe?"

"What dough? If you want money, try a bank."

Sammy's face hardened. "Cut the cute stuff, O'Keefe. I been getting phone reports on you all evening. You saw Elaine Conklin."

"So," O'Keefe said softly. "We turn up a trump."

Sammy's lips twisted. "You've still got the lovelight in your eyes, and the girl needs help. Come clean, O'Keefe. We're shooting for keeps. You tell us where the dough is, everybody's happy."

"Except me," O'Keefe said. "I don't like murder."

He lunged across the room. The small gunsel slipped out of the chair, sidestepped deftly. He lifted the gun from its holster as O'Keefe banged into the wall. "Naughty, naughty," he said mockingly. "Don't try to play hero with Sammy or you'll get hurt."

O'Keefe gritted his teeth. The guy had a way about him. He got to a man through

his goat. He choked his anger down and flexed his fingers. Sammy's throat was skinny, but it would make a satisfactory handful.

"The hundred grand," Sammy repeated. "Where is it, pal?"

O'Keefe braced himself and swung. He swung hard, but his fist swished empty air. The pint-sized gunman was fast. He ducked back and the gun flashed up. He laid the barrel across O'Keefe's forehead. Hot pain blinded the reporter and he sagged into the wall.

"Talk!" Sammy ordered thinly. "A pistol-whipping hurts you more than it does me."

O'Keefe's tongue felt thick and his arms weighed tons. His legs were soft, India rubber. They wouldn't obey orders and hold him up. He slid slowly down the wall, sat on the floor. His head rolled.

"Go to hell," he muttered.

Sammy reversed the automatic and took the cigarette from his thin lips. He slammed the gun down again. No pain. Numbness. The room blurred and the walls got buttery. Then all the light drained out the windows.

CHAPTER THREE

Stoolie's Deadline

A KIND of white anger raged in O'Keefe's mind. He tried to lift himself from the floor and fell back again. Just a minute, he told himself. Give yourself a chance. Get a little strength. He turned his head, caught the glitter of highly-polished shoes. His gaze traveled up perfectly creased slacks, over a plaid sport coat and rested on Lieutenant Ed Gleason's unsmiling face.

Gleason leaned forward from the easy chair, sneered: "Who put the crease in your skull?"

O'Keefe pushed himself up, felt his forehead. His hand came away smeared red.

He wondered how Gleason had replaced Sammy, but it could wait. Staggering into the bathroom, he washed his face, daubed the cut with iodine.

The iodine stung, and so did the knowledge he'd taken a beating. Gleason eyed the adhesive patches as he returned to the living room.

"Pretty," Gleason said. "I envy the guy who put them there."

"How did you get here?" O'Keefe asked.

"In a car supplied by the City of Los Angeles, equipped with two-way radio. I found the door open and you sprawled on the rug. Now tell me you were taking a sun bath and forgot to bring out the infra-red lamp."

It explained Sammy's absence. O'Keefe went to the kitchen, poured a drink with shaky fingers. He explored swiftly behind the refrigerator, found the briefcase still tied over the motor.

Gleason knocked cigar ashes on O'Keefe's floor. His black eyes glittered. "You don't know a thing about Dan Conklin's murder," he said. "Yet we find a note addressed to you in his pocket. Now you're squiring his daughter around. You get beat up by unknown parties. You're clean as a hound's tooth—like hell."

"So you've got a tail on Elaine?" O'Keefe got a fresh suit from the closet. "That's good, Gleason—very good. She might need protection."

"I'll do my own thinking," Gleason growled. "Maybe I'll put a tail on you, too. You're in up to your neck. That would make a good headline—reporter guilty of convict's murder."

"You couldn't write it," O'Keefe said thinly. "That's fifth-grade prose and over your head."

He put on a clean shirt and changed suits. With a different necktie and a supply of aspirin, he felt almost new.

Gleason mangled his cigar, looked sour.

"These doings are damned funny," he said bluntly. "A peteman just out of Quentin gets bumped. Right away things get active. We get reports of strange lobos in town. Reporters get beat up. Our pigeons clam and we don't get the usual information. I don't like it. If you give me the run-around any longer, you go to jail, *Globe* reporter or no *Globe* reporter."

"That ought to get you on the front page," Bill said. "Use your brains."

Gleason crushed the cigar out. "Listen you," he rasped. "One more crack and I'll toss you in on general principles."

Bill switched out the floor lamp. He was anxious to get the detective out of the apartment before Gleason developed an official interest in his refrigerator.

"Quit talking through your hat, Gleason. If you arrest me without a charge, you'd have the chief on your ears in five minutes. Let's go."

"Where you going?" Gleason demanded.

"Downtown—to work. Since when did a newspaperman have hours?"

He left the brooding and silent detective on the sidewalk. A few reluctant stars showed through the hazy night. He drove fast down the empty streets, parked outside the *Globe's* chrome façade, and pushed through the revolving doors.

O'Keefe didn't go upstairs to the editorial rooms. They were closed anyhow, except for the night men and the wire service boys. After waiting ten minutes, leaning on the marble classified counter in the lobby, he went out the side door. He looked up and down the sidewalk. Misty halos hung over the street lamps and the parked cars seemed deserted.

Satisfied, he glanced at his wrist watch. Ten after three. With luck, he might find Soupy.

LLOUD, brassy music filled the Hard Rock Inn, churned over ribald voices and blaring laughter. O'Keefe paused in-

side the door, his eyes searching the smoke-filled room. Sawdust littered the floor and seedy-looking men and women lined the bar. The after-hours joint smelled dank, sour with the odor of cheap whiskey.

It was the third place O'Keefe had looked, and discouragement sagged his mouth. Then he smiled. He walked rapidly down the bar, past the juke box and slid into the end booth.

The man across the table was past sixty. The ragged ends of his sandy mustache overhung his lips. He wore a nondescript coat and a white shirt that needed laundering. His pale blue eyes blinked owlishly at O'Keefe.

"The press," he said. "I have nothing to say for publication."

His voice was cultured, came from a remote region in a deep basso. O'Keefe grinned. He'd known Soupy Smith a long time. After thirty years as a shed man and race track conster, Soupy had retired. He wasn't in the rackets anymore, not the big rackets, just a little painless shoplifting and short-changing.

O'Keefe ordered drinks, and decided on the direct route. "Soupy," he said. "You know most everything that goes on around Skid Row. I've done you a couple of favors, now I'd like to ask one."

"Shoot," Soupy said.

"You got out of San Quentin two years ago. Did you know a man up there named Dan Conklin?"

Soupy's eyes filmed over. He picked up his beer and drank noisily. He wiped the foam from his mustache. He got interested in his hands, rubbed his knuckles vigorously. Then he inspected the adhesive patch on O'Keefe's forehead.

"Did you walk into a door?" he asked.

"Let's not change the subject," Bill said. "Conklin was a friend of mine. He had a daughter, remember?"

"My memory's bad," Soupy said. "Old age."

"All right, I'll give it to you straight. I know about the Sons of Cortez robbery."

"Lord Almighty!" Soupy breathed. The color drained from his leathery face. He put his beer down and started to get up. "Let me out of here!"

O'Keefe pushed him back in the seat. "This is a matter of life or death, Soupy, or I wouldn't be here. You have to help me."

Soupy had one of O'Keefe's cigarettes. He looked furtively around the cafe. The waiter was a safe distance away at the bar. He glanced into the next booth. It was empty. He leaned across the table. His eyes were solemn.

"Drop it," he said. "I like you, Mr. O'Keefe. You're a good boy, but this is a hot potato. There's big money involved. You'll get hurt if you don't drop it."

"I'm already damaged," O'Keefe said. "Three other guys were on that job with Dan. Just mention their names and I'll be on my way."

"I don't know," Soupy said, "and that's the truth. I can't tell you much about it. One of the guys got a slug in the neck five years ago. You might ask around San Berdoo. A sheriff's deputy shot him. Sam Jones was his name. We called him Sad Sam. Who the other guys were, nobody knows. One of them was evidently the front man, who set the job up."

"Was he called Square John?" Bill asked.

"Are you kidding?" Soupy lifted his bushy brows. "A Square John is a guy who earns an honest living."

"Thanks," Bill said. He left a twenty-dollar bill on the table, started for the door. Soupy called him back, handed him the money.

"This one is for a pal," he said. "Tell Dan's daughter I send my sympathy, and watch your step, boy."

Outside, the haze had thickened, hung over the ugly unpainted slums buildings like a dirty yellow blanket. He walked up

the murky street toward the P.E. station.

Paper and debris littered the sidewalk, and empty wine bottles lay in the gutters. This was Lower Five—the street to nowhere—a region of black alleys and blacker doorways, shunning the light, where a man could get his throat cut for a quarter, no box-tops needed.

A bum lurched by, bound for a flop-house on the corner. Bill passed a seedy all-night cafe, saw a line of men at the counter buying the inevitable coffee and doughnuts. Banner-carriers. Guys without the price of a flop, walking the street. He walked through a cone of yellow light under a street lamp, drifted into the haze again, past a hock shop its windows barred and shuttered.

Instinct, or maybe a foot scraping the pavement, whirled him around.

The man rushed him from the shadows, swung the sap viciously. Bill glimpsed a warped face and a hulking body as he retreated into a pawnshop doorway. He didn't have time for a second look. The man crowded into the doorway, whipped the sap again. There was no getting away. Pain ate into Bill and his arm went numb.

It was close, deadly work. The man pressed against him hard, and the door's steel shutter dug into Bill's shoulders. O'Keefe chopped his fist down and his knuckles crunched on bone. The man grunted and backed up a step. Bill slammed his elbow across the man's neck, a combat trick he'd learned in the army. The guy gurgled, grabbed his throat, and staggered out of the doorway.

BILL followed him to the sidewalk. The rage strained in him now—a cold anger that whitened his mouth and leaned his cheeks. He'd taken a beating and had no intention of taking another. He grabbed Warp-Face's arm and spun him around. The thug buried his head in his arms, tried to cover.

Stepping in, Bill sank his fist into the man. The guard dropped. For just an instant, he looked at the man's face—at his broken nose, lantern chin, and thick mouth. Then his hand whipped up.

The blow cracked like a snapped stick. Warp-Face's head rolled back and his eyes got glassy. He half-turned, grabbed at the pawnshop wall and slipped to the sidewalk. Bill got a handful of lapel and dragged his attacker into the doorway. He knelt down. Warp-Face's hat had fallen off, revealing coarse brown hair that smelled loudly of pomade. Bill slapped him hard.

"All right," he said grimly. "Who are you and who are you working for?"

Warp-Face groaned. "Go to hell," he said.

Bill wiped his knuckles backhand across the man's mouth. "Maybe you think I like guys sapping me. Maybe you'd like to spend a month in the hospital. Speak up!"

"Take it easy," Warp-Nose whined. "I was just cooling you off for a ride. I got a car parked in the alley."

"A ride where?" Bill demanded.

Warp-Face sat up. He drew his coat sleeve across his mouth, wiped the blood away. In the murky darkness, his eyes glittered like polished coal. He sniffed, like a man with a bad cold. Then he rolled out of the doorway.

He got to his feet fast. He whirled around the pawnshop and into an alley as Bill dived after him. It was like running into a wall of darkness. A strip of yellow sky showed above the buildings, and far down the block canyon a pale neon marked the alley exit on the next street. Warp-Face's feet thudded the uneven concrete, echoed hollowly.

Then silence—sudden, hard silence. Bill froze against the damp wall, breathing hard. The thug couldn't be far away, crouched somewhere in the darkness. He strained his eyes, but it was like looking into a cave. He edged along the wall, and

his knee banged into a big packing crate.

Flame spurted directly across the alley, and chips flew from the bricks near Bill's head, stung his cheek. He flattened out behind the packing crate. It offered little protection, but a certain amount of concealment.

If he ran for it, he'd be limmed against the alley entrance, and Warp-Nose would have a perfect target. He told himself next time he'd search a guy for a gun.

It was no moment for second-guessing. He crawled carefully away from the packing case, and his hand closed over a loose slat. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it might create a diversion. He tossed the slat up the alley, and the gun flamed again.

As the flat report shattered the night, he jumped across the alley. He banged into the wall opposite, knelt down again, his mouth dry. Nobody but a damn fool would rush a man with a gun. But he had little choice. If he didn't stalk Warp-Face—the thug would hunt him.

Somewhere in the distance an owl car rattled and clanged. Bill caught a furtive movement up the alley. He tensed to spring again, then feet thudded the pavement. He straightened up and waited. He remembered they thought he knew the money's location. Maybe Warp-Face had orders to deliver him alive. The feet receded into distance, and a black shadow passed under the neon at the alley's far end.

Rubbing his numb arm, he went back to the Hard Rock Inn. He needed to warn Soupy, tell him he'd been tailed. The waiter was mopping the booth table. He shook his head. Soupy was gone.

Bill didn't return to his apartment. He drove to San Bernardino and was waiting at the courthouse when the sheriff arrived. The sheriff was helpful. He had the Jones file brought into his office. Bill studied the papers.

Jones had been killed trying to break into a finance company's offices. His pic-

ture revealed a long-faced man with sagging skin under the eyes, like an underfed cocker spaniel. Those features made the cut on Bill's forehead burn.

"Is it possible?" he asked absently. "Sam—Sammy. They look alike. Do you know if Jones could read?"

The sheriff's eyes said plainly he thought the reporter had a touch of desert sun.

"I don't think so. He couldn't write his own name. That X is his mark."

"What about his associates? Anyone else with him at the time he was shot?" the reporter asked.

"No one. We checked as a matter of routine. He ran with a gang of safecrackers headed by Dan Conklin, but Conklin was doing time."

"He got out a few days ago," Bill said. "Somebody killed him."

"We know. These two tied up in any way?"

"I'm thinking about the angles," Bill said.

"It would have to be a good one. A man dead five years could hardly have killed Conklin. And I can assure you, Jones was plenty dead. I saw his body in the morgue."

"It is puzzling," Bill O'Keefe said, left the courthouse.

He drove slowly through the orange groves back to Los Angeles. It was more than puzzling. It was like sifting the haystack to find the needle. In Alhambra, he bought the *Globe* bulldog edition. It was all there on page one. They'd found Soupy Smith face down in a gutter, a bullet in his back. The police thought it just another slum crime, they said. The anger tightened O'Keefe's hands and rode in his eyes as he tossed the paper aside.

So Soupy had paid the price of friendship. The killer had spoken and Soupy was a dead pigeon. He gunned the car down the highway. Next it might be Elaine.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sons of Crime

DETECTIVE - LIEUTENANT Gleason took it slow and easy. The big swivel chair felt comfortable and a fresh cigar glowed in his mouth. He flicked an ash off his pastel shirt and caressed the lapel of his imported tweed coat. He opened the window behind his desk and breathed deeply of the fragrant afternoon air. Then he gave O'Keefe a chilly glance and nodded to a chair.

"Sit down," he ordered. "You're under arrest."

Bill remained standing. "I gathered as much," he said. "When two cops pick you up outside your apartment and bring you to headquarters, you're usually pinched. I'd like to call my editor."

"You're a big-wheel newspaperman. You know all the answers. You can call your editor when I'm finished with you. Meanwhile, it's a nice day and the flowers outside smell good."

"That means I'm going upstairs," Bill said. "That's supposed to make the stink of disinfectants and stale food in the cells smell worse."

"You got it." Gleason's black eyes gleamed maliciously. "Maybe you'll think about the smell in Quentin's gas chamber, too."

"That bad? Come to the point, Gleason."

"The point is, we know you saw Soupy Smith at the Hard Rock last night. We think you were involved in a reported shooting scrape. So I got a warrant and looked through your apartment this morning. What do you think I found?"

"Don't tell me," Bill said. "Let me spend the rest of my life guessing."

"Cooling hot money under a refrigerator." Gleason laughed thinly. "You're some boy. We investigated further and

found some of the bills checked with the Sons of Cortez loot taken twelve years ago. It's not hard to figure. Dan Conklin engineered that heist. When he got out of prison, he dug up the money. You killed him for it. And you've got a nerve—squirring the girl around with her old man's money."

O'Keefe flushed and stepped up to the desk. "One more remark like that and I take a poke at you. Maybe you'll beat hell out of me, this being your office, but it won't look good in the papers."

"Shut up," Gleason growled. "Why did you kill Soupy?"

"Don't be a damned fool," O'Keefe said. "I didn't kill Soupy or anyone else. You know my record as well as the next cop on the force. Underworld contacts are part of my job."

"Yeah," Gleason sneered. "A nice juicy profitable part. I think we'll take a look in your safe deposit vault. I told you not to claim any press immunity."

"You want to hear this or don't you?" O'Keefe demanded.

"Let's hear it," Gleason said.

O'Keefe started at the beginning and gave it to him fast. Gleason's beefy face didn't change expression. "You expect me to believe that? It's a cock-and-bull story you invented to cover. If I swallowed it, they'd take me off the squad."

"They may take you off anyhow," O'Keefe said. "You belong on the traffic detail where you can't do much harm. I'm telling you the truth."

Gleason got up. "A few hours in a tank upstairs will change your name. Come on."

The detective reached for the handcuffs in his hip pocket and O'Keefe acted instinctively. He couldn't afford hours in a lockup—not with Conklin's killer on the loose and Elaine unprotected.

Grabbing the cuffs from Gleason's hand, he slammed them across the detective's thick neck. Gleason grimaced with pain and reached for his gun. His hand got to

the holster, then a fist battered him to the floor.

O'Keefe went out the window, but fast. He crossed city hall park and beat it into the traffic-clogged downtown streets. A few blocks away, he phoned Elaine. He told her to meet him on Sunset. Then he grabbed a cab.

She arrived in a half hour. She wore something soft, cool, white; and looked like all a man could want in life. O'Keefe climbed in the cab and his blood froze. Sammy, who worked with his shoes off, sat beside her. He carried his right hand in his pocket.

Elaine's eyes were frightened. "I couldn't help it, Bill. He was in the apartment when you called. He listened—"

"Take it easy, and you'll live longer." Sammy grinned out of the corner of his mouth. "And don't worry about the cop who was watching her place. He went to sleep suddenly."

He gave the cabby the address and settled back in the seat. "You been carrying a four-leaf clover, O'Keefe," he said. "But now you're out of luck—this is the payoff."

Elaine gave the gunman a bittersweet smile. "You're quite a character," she said. "Looking at you, I understand what my father meant. He told me once, crooks were ordinary people without souls. I think I feel sorry for you."

An hour's ride brought them to the twilight-shadowed Palisades. O'Keefe looked back as Sammy rang the doorbell. He felt more than surprised. It was the last place he'd expected—but holding the money had forced their hand. The geraniums in the flower beds were thick and blood red, and the trimmed hedges stood out in startling bas-relief. They spelled the initials S.O.C.—the Sons of Cortez.

HONEST Jake Pringle's fat body cast a bulging shadow on the drawn window shade. He stuck a toothpick in his

mouth and regarded his newly-arrived guests. He beamed at Sammy.

"Have any trouble?"

"They came like lambs," Sammy said. "Not a peep. Just the way I like it."

Jake's chuckle quivered his belly. "Like lambs to the slaughter. Well, kids, we meet again. Miss Conklin, you're looking good this evening."

Her eyes widened slowly. "I remember you now. You were thinner when you came to see dad years ago, but you're the same man."

Jake's square-cut diamond glittered as he spread his hands. "A lot of us gain weight with the years. I've developed a fondness for food. For money, too."

O'Keefe leaned against the panelled mahogany wall and studied the used-car dealer. Pringle had evidently moved into Elaine's apartment house to watch her, and to get information. He admired the man's resourcefulness. Honest Jake didn't put all his eggs in one basket.

"So you were the front man," he said. "The guy who set up the robbery for the gang. Congratulations. As a dishonest used-car dealer, you've come far in the world."

"We handle a hot one now and then," Jake admitted. "A buck is a buck. That's why I've developed a big interest in you, O'Keefe. My cut of a hundred grand is over thirty-three thousand."

"Only a third?" O'Keefe asked. "A big man like you should rate a half, at least. You're slipping."

O'Keefe glanced at the others in the office. Sammy sat on the leather divan, dangling the automatic loosely. Warp-Face, evidently a hired hand, had his back to the door. Juan Batista sat stiffly in his carved walnut chair behind the desk. The Supreme Conquistador wore his alpaca coat.

O'Keefe wondered if it might be impossible for the man to enter his office, even on illegal business, without donning

the coat. Habit was always a hard master.

"The Square John," he said. "A lot of things get clear. The robbery was a big job and rated an inside man. The talk about a gentleman casing the place was a smokescreen. That chair must have been uncomfortable the past twelve years, Batista, waiting for the Quentin gates to open.

"And you." He turned to Sammy. "Now it makes sense—the likeness. Sammy Jones, son and heir apparent of Sad Sam Jones, who ran into a sheriff's bullet five years ago. A fine bunch of thieves, a nice loose cartel of crime incorporated to recover a hundred thousand hot dollars. We're all here—except Dan Conklin and Soupy Smith."

"A long speech," Sammy said. "I hate long speeches."

"They'll read you a short one just before the execution," Bill said. "Merely a formality. A court order for your death."

Honest Jake waved Sammy into silence. "I'll do the talking. Where is the dough, O'Keefe?"

"You'll have to talk to the cops. To Lieutenant Ed Gleason of the Homicide Squad. But let me warn you. Gleason is a hard man to do business with."

"That's a lie!" Batista jumped to his feet. "He's got the money or he wouldn't have come smelling around. I can't wait any longer. I'm short in my accounts, and the auditors are due. I need money."

Jake's eyes lingered on Elaine's figure. He grunted approval. "Not bad. As I get it, O'Keefe, you're soft on the girl."

Bill saw Elaine lift her chin. It was a bad moment, and he knew what it meant. If he wouldn't talk, they'd wring it out of her. Not gently. He kept his voice level.

"Not me," he said. "I'm a confirmed bachelor. I was planning a monastery tour of Europe."

"We'll talk to the girl," Jake decided. "Take him down the hall, Clift."

He had no choice, not with a **gun in his**

back. He walked stiffly past Elaine. "Stall," he whispered. "Tell them anything."

He preceded Warp-Face down the corridor. His legs felt sheathed in steel. He wanted to turn back, take the consequences. But it was four-to-one. This way he had a chance, a slim, one-in-a-million chance.

Clift flung a door open at the hall's end. He jammed the gun into O'Keefe's ribs. "Inside. And no cute business. I'm aching to put lead in your britches."

IT WAS a board-meeting room. A bronze bust of Cortez occupied the seat of honor on the fireplace mantel. Screened windows opened onto a side lawn. Clift kicked a chair out and sat down at the end of a long table. He faced O'Keefe across ten feet of polished oak.

"She'll talk," he said, "or lose her good looks."

O'Keefe clenched his fists. They wouldn't give her too much time. He stared through the fading light at Clift. The warped-faced thug sat slackly in his chair, the automatic on the table in front of him. O'Keefe put his hands in his lap and tensed his legs.

He kicked the chair back and shoved the table violently forward. The sudden movement pinned Clift's arms and body to his chair. O'Keefe dived down the table, belly-sliding its polished surface. His outstretched hands grabbed Clift's neck as the hoodlum struggled to free himself from the trap. He twisted Clift to the floor.

Straddling the man, O'Keefe dug his fingers in and bore down, to choke off any cry. One yell from Clift would bring the house—and that meant Sammy and his gun. Clift flailed and clawed his arms. Still, O'Keefe hung on.

The man was strong and clever, probably the veteran of a hundred rough-and-tumbles. His finger found Bill's eyes,

gouged. Sudden, blinding pain ran into Bill's brain, loosened his grip. Clift scrambled to his feet, gasping for air.

Bill swept the Cortez bust from the mantel. He'd take no second chances this time. The statue thudded sickeningly on bone, and Clift crumpled without a sound.

O'Keefe scooped up Clift's gun. The window was the best bet. He couldn't storm the office. Elaine would be Sammy's first target. He slid over the sill and dropped to the lawn. He had to manage it somehow. He had to get Sammy out of that office. And he needed some cops.

It was full darkness now. Night had stained the ocean black, blotted the last wisp of daylight from the western horizon. Surf pounded the Palisades, threw a thin mist in the air that dampened O'Keefe's face and gave the shrubbery a lacquered greenness.

He hugged the ivy-covered wall and circled the building. The graystone's turrets loomed against the sky, like medieval ramparts. He crouched under the office windows, heard the faint stir of voices, knew he had a few more precious moments.

The front door might be open, but even with the advantage of surprise, he could hardly cow the three armed men inside. He couldn't leave Elaine alone, hunt a phone, and call the police. Any minute, Sammy or his cohorts might decide to look into the board-meeting room.

He pushed through the shrubbery to the rear. Here the lower floor windows were barred and shuttered. He recalled the Sons of Cortez had a vault room. This was evidently it.

The shutters were securely locked. He peered through the bars. A glass window pane gleamed behind the steel guards. At the bottom, the pane showed a faint band of silver. O'Keefe's pulse leaped. It could be the answer—the burgler alarm band!

The vault room might be individually wired on a circuit of its own. He hurried

back to the front of the building. He was in luck. High on the wall, two alarm boxes nested in the ivy. O'Keefe smiled grimly. Being burglars themselves, burglars were the last thing they'd expect. He searched among the shrubs until he found a stout limb. He stripped it of twigs and returned to the vault room window.

Praying, he rammed the limb through the shutters. The glass panel shattered and hell broke loose.

It sounded like a hundred fire engines trying to outdo a chorus of banshees. O'Keefe had never heard such a wonderful loud racket. The burglar alarm rang loud enough to wake the dead. He ran back to the front lawn, flopped behind the trimmed hedge, right behind the letter S. He cocked his elbows on the turf, aimed the automatic at the front door. He waited.

The alarm clamored and clanged. It startled a flock of gulls into flight over the beach. And far down the Palisades, it turned a police car at a traffic light. Then suddenly it was silent—a high throbbing silence, that rung in O'Keefe's ears like the sound of doom. The light in the office window went out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hearses Coming Up

THE front door opened slowly. O'Keefe shifted behind the hedge and strained his eyes. Mist drifted across the lawn, drew an iridescent curtain across the Sons of Cortez' building. Looking like no more than a shadow, a wraith floating in mist, someone glided from the door, melted into darkness behind a porch pillar.

O'Keefe lifted his gun to fire, but had nothing to shoot at. He dug his elbows into the turf. That would be Sammy. Sammy knew his way around in the night. The others would wait in the office's comparative safety for Sammy to report. Juan

Batista had probably pulled the switch and disconnected the alarm. They'd wait with a gun on Elaine, while Sammy did the dirty work.

O'Keefe felt a grudging respect for Sammy. The gunsel would kill without hesitation, was the more dangerous because he took his own chances.

He watched the porch carefully, all his senses alert. He was sure he saw no movement, heard no sound—but Sammy's voice spoke to him from a shrub ten feet from the building.

"O'Keefe," he said softly. "Don't be stupid and get yourself killed. Tell me where the dough is and I promise the girl and you can walk out of this without a hair harmed. Where are you?"

A cunning ancestor who'd played tag with ice-age wolves in the Irish highlands told O'Keefe it was a trick. Sammy wasn't the type to let anybody walk out. He wanted to know O'Keefe's whereabouts, and once located, he'd start blasting. O'Keefe edged away from the initial S and got behind the letter O—it brought him closer to Sammy's shrub.

"O'Keefe," Sammy called again. "You hear me?"

O'Keefe swore under his breath. He couldn't see anything for the damned mist. The surf pounded and throbbed the night like Druid drums. He dug a clod out of the flower bed and tossed it toward the porch.

It thumped softly on the bricks and orange flame lanced the darkness. The shots ripped from the shrubs, revealed a crouched figure framed in hibiscus blossoms. O'Keefe depressed the trigger twice. The gun leapt in his hand, and the figure dropped to the ground.

Silence—livid, bright silence. Crickets droned monotonously over the lawn, and somewhere a dog yapped shrilly. O'Keefe flattened himself on the turf, pressed his ear to the ground and listened for the slightest movement. His ancestor was delivering the goods. He was vividly alive

with a primitive instinct, his blood running rich and his nerves tingling. He was living in the swamps, in the dangerous dawn of time.

"Smart." Sammy's voice cut through the mist, yards from the hibiscus bush. "You know a couple of angles, but you're going out of here in a basket, O'Keefe. Where's the money? Tell me, or the girl gets it, too."

O'Keefe dug his toes in the turf. *Attack, his ancestor said, was always the best defense. Give the guy something to think about. Don't wait for a slug.* He edged up, got his knees under him.

"The cops have it," he yelled.

He jumped away from the hedge as the first word left his lips. The shot came from a shadow near the porch. Standing straight to aim better, he blasted two more shots at the wraithlike figure. He found time to wish he knew guns better. The first shot ricocheted off stone, the second thudded into a flower bed.

Diving for the blackness under the wall, O'Keefe scrambled on his hands and knees to a cedar with low-hanging branches. He crouched behind its broad trunk, aware his face was cold and damp with more than mist.

A groan sounded from the porch. It was a good authentic groan, full of pain and suffering. It didn't fool O'Keefe's forebearer. O'Keefe kept behind the tree trunk. He waited, his spine in an ice pack.

Sammy groaned again, and there came a threshing sound, like an animal beating the shrubbery in agony. O'Keefe snapped a shot at the sound. He got an instant whining reply. The bullet clipped bark from the cedar, whacked into the wall.

A HIGH, thin wail sounded down the Palisades. O'Keefe looked over his shoulder, through the ornate iron gate. Climbing the hill, a pair of red lights shone around a curve. He thrilled in his fingertips, but he saw it would be minutes

yet before they reached the crest—time which could decide his life, Sammy's, Elaine's, and the others. He spoke from the doubtful safety of his tree.

"Cops, Sammy," he called. "The show is over. Come away from the porch with your hands up. If you take it on the lam, you won't get far. This way, you'll have a few more months of life."

Silence again—a hot, debatable silence that asked questions. Where was the slippery gusel? Had Sammy gone back into the building? What about Elaine . . . was she still all right?

O'Keefe waited through a couple of eternities, huddled against the tree. He heard a dozen rustling sounds, each loaded with death. He had to get into the building, find out about Elaine. He couldn't play tag with Sammy any longer. The police siren wailed louder, was muffled against a turn.

Then Sammy spoke from the shadows behind O'Keefe. "Turn around," he said. "I'll give it to you in the face. It makes more work for the undertaker, but I don't like square apples who give my dough to the police."

O'Keefe threw himself sideways, sprawled on the ground. The gun flash lighted Sammy's twisted features, and pain ate into O'Keefe's ribs. He shot at the face and it looked funny, distorted, like a disembodied head in a cubist landscape.

Clutching his side, O'Keefe stumbled across the lawn. The mist fell like silver rain over the graystone mansion, and the world wanted to turn topsy-turvy. He wrenched the front door open. The effort shot hot lances of pain into his side.

He fumbled along the wall toward the office. His fingers found a light switch, flipped it. Fluorescent tubes gave the panelled hall a bluish cast. He paused beside the open office door.

"All right," he ordered. "Come out of there. One by one. You, Batista, first. Don't make any false moves, or I'll kill

you. The police are on the way, and this is your only chance to save your hides. Come on."

Batista's swarty face loomed in the door. He slithered around the jamb like a fat tarantula in a black alpaca coat. He pressed himself against the wall, his eyes white with fear.

"The *Supreme Conquistador*." O'Keefe had trouble with his words. They were thick, wanted to stick in his throat. "You'll look good in jail denims. Are you all right, Elaine?"

"I was all right." Her clear voice came from the office darkness. "Now this fat Jake has a half-nelson on me."

"Let go of her," Bill ordered. "You can't wiggle out of this, Pringle. Come out here and take your chances in a courtroom."

"What guarantee have I got?" Honest Jake's voice boomed from the office. "How do I know you won't plug me, or the cops will give me a break? I'm in a bad jam."

"You said it." O'Keefe shook his head groggily. The light wouldn't behave, skittered over the ceiling like a water bug. "You have the same guarantee you give your customers. You'll run all right for a few days."

The words sounded silly and inane, but his body felt light and giddy. He weaved beside the door, saw Batista's eyes narrow.

"I'm coming out," Honest Jake said. "I'm bringing the girl with me. I've got a gun in her back. You shoot me—I'll shoot her. That won't get us anywhere, so keep out of my way."

O'Keefe braced himself against the wall as Honest Jake bulked in the door. The Confederate Money Distributor had one arm wrapped around Elaine's waist. She was pale, but walked erect. Her face wanted to dissolve. Her dark hair shimmered and her figure receded into distance. O'Keefe fought for consciousness, saw the gun in Honest Jake's hand.

The used-car dealer held Elaine as a shield, backed toward the door. O'Keefe weaved after them. His knees sagged and his body weighed tons. He tried to lift the gun but his arms wouldn't move. Honest Jake's diamond shot shafts of multicolor fire, like the flame from Sammy's gun, along the corridor.

O'Keefe blinked. Honest Jake yanked the door open, pushed Elaine aside. He blasted a shot down the hall and ran across the porch.

The used-car dealer ran into the muzzle of a cop's pistol. O'Keefe fell forward, into the shot's echo and darkness.

THE cop had a nice face. Crisp brown hair grew to a widow's peak on his tanned forehead. His fingers probed Bill's wound gently. "I got one like that on Guam," he said cheerfully. "It just nicked the rib. You'll be all right in a few days. Lucky."

"Somebody said I was out of luck." Bill grinned. Elaine had her arm under his shoulder. Her hand caressed his forehead. "I'll have to get shot more often. It has compensations. A little more to the left, Elaine. There—right over the eye. Ummm, tender fingers. Can you cook chocolate cake?"

Her eyes were misty blue, like the Killarney lakes Grandpa described in his cups. She smiled.

"I'm glad you're not badly hurt, Bill. Perhaps you shouldn't talk."

"He's doing all right," the cop said. "He's pitching good for a man flat on his back in what could carelessly be called a shambles. The lady gave us the details, pal, and we've radioed Santa Monica for detectives. You'll have to go down to headquarters and fill out a report. Meanwhile, you can get up. There's a guy outside who's really out of luck. He's asking for you."

"I don't want to get up," Bill said. "I'm too comfortable."

"The guy is dying," the cop said.

Elaine removed her arm. "It's Sammy. I—I think you'd better go alone."

He walked with the young cop to the door. Batista was handcuffed to the porch railing, his fat body quivering like an aspic salad.

"He talked," the cop said. "He was kind of incoherent, but we got the general idea."

Sammy sat on the ground, his back slumped against the cedar. The young cop's partner was older, grim-visaged. In his flashlight's cone, Sammy's face had a white waxy sheen. Blood stained his gabardine shirt front, from an ugly blue hole in his neck. He glanced up at O'Keefe.

"I'm out of cigarettes," he said, "and this cop smokes cigars. I never liked cigars. My old man used to smoke them. They stunk up the house something terrible."

O'Keefe stuck a cigarette in the gungsel's mouth, held his lighter. Sammy inhaled with difficulty, coughed. It was a hell of a sight, O'Keefe thought.

"Thanks," Sammy said weakly. "Maybe you're all right, but you were a damned poor shot until that last one."

"It's okay," O'Keefe said. He'd seen them die before. Right to the last they wanted to preserve their bravado, their illusion of courage. He went along. It might make it easier, and in his last moments a man had a right to a gesture. "You're paying off, Sammy. In my book, that rates you a cigarette."

"Live with a heater, die with a heater." Sammy coughed again. "You had it right, O'Keefe. I gave it to Conklin when he tried to fight back. Soupy was a pigeon. Honest Jake was supposed to furnish the brains, but what the hell—"

"Sure," O'Keefe said. "What the hell."

The cigarette drooped in Sammy's fingers. His voice choked. "I didn't want to be a bad guy. I wanted—"

What Sammy wanted no longer mattered, O'Keefe saw. The gungsel's head dropped forward and he fell sideways from the tree. The cop crushed the cigarette under his heel, flashed the light toward the gate.

"The boys are here," he said. "Let's go."

* * *

O'Keefe took Elaine's arm as they walked out of the Santa Monica police station. It was nine-thirty by the clock in the jeweler's window across the street. They'd taped his side, told him to go home under his own power. He motioned to the neon over a corner café.

"I could use some coffee. How about it?"

She nodded and fell into step beside him. It was nice to have her near. Somehow it made the world a better and bigger place. But he looked straight ahead. It was too dangerous to look at her. She'd land him in a San Fernando cottage, planting dahlias and mowing the lawn.

He had until tomorrow at nine, until the deadline for the bulldog. He'd have to write the story. And there'd be a bonus.

"I've made up my mind," he said. "I'm leaving the *Globe*, quitting newspaper business. I've had all I can take. A boat sails for Le Harve from San Pedro next week. I'll be aboard."

"France?" Her voice was a caress. "That's a long way from Los Angeles."

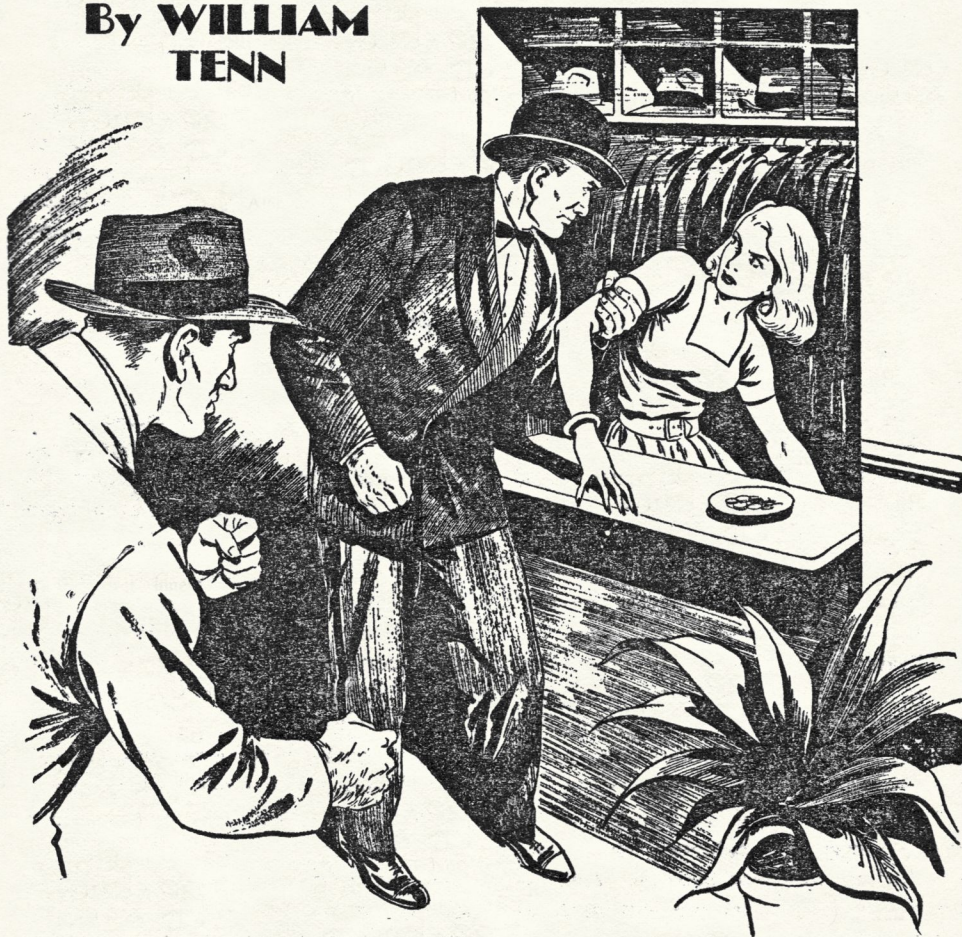
It was inevitable. He had to look. There it was in the blue depths, that wonderful warm fire.

"I suppose you think I'm nuts," he said thickly. "I suppose you want a house and kids and a garden."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "How you talk," she said. "I've got lots of time, and I'm just a tourist at heart. I want to see France—on a bicycle built for two."

SAFE AS ANY SAP

By **WILLIAM
TENN**



ME, I'D just as well have stayed out of the whole thing. When they made me a political columnist, I kissed the boys on the police beat good-by, chucked the city editor under the chin and hoped he'd still be this side of the green grass the day they got the city washed clean of the prohibition-style gangs the previous, corrupt administration had left behind.

He pulled her roughly against the counter.

When the mayhem maestro ruffled the hatcheck girl's feathers, Frankie boy heroically stepped up—to make like a punching bag.

I was through with corpses and cops, with bodies that hadn't quite made it to the morgue in one hunk and with hoods who weren't quite complete in the head. I was through with murder.

I thought.

Don't blame me: a newly-married guy likes to forget his past. He forgets his past can have a wonderful memory of its own.

"You're just being self-conscious, Frank," Louise laughed at me. "Nobody remembers Carlyle, the crime reporter, any more. You've stopped drinking, you wear your pants with a noticeable crease and you have a shiny, brand-new wife. What's wrong in taking me to an old haunt like the *Red Devil*, even if it is a dive? I want to see that hatcheck girl you used to date."

"Only saw Ginnie when her boy friend was patrolling his beat, just helped fill in her spare time. She was an occasionally valuable source of tips on this and that. No more."

Louise curled a mischievous grin out of sight. "No more?"

"That's what I said. Besides Regg makes the *Red Devil* his squirming ground. And he feels sorta unhappy over the way I suggested his name in the Daniels killing."

"That was over a month ago, before you'd started your column—why it was even before we were married. And we needn't get a table; we can just sit at the bar and peek inside."

So we went and just sat at the bar and peeked inside.

Louise leaned over and whispered, "That dumpy little brunette who took our coats—was *she* Ginnie?"

"No," I answered over my soda water. I still felt uncomfortable at the way the bartender was staring at me and shaking his head. He had welcomed me effusively and set out my regular—gin with just a dash of lemon. When I had ordered soda

water instead, his face dropped like a man hearing a singing commercial in a church. "No, Ginnie is as blonde as you. But not one-third as pretty," I added hastily. "She takes over for the heavy-spenders' part of the evening. That's her, now."

As the girl in the short satin skirt replaced her friend in the ornate niche of the hatcheck concession, Louise slipped off her red stool and moved toward her. I followed, glad to get away from the transparent soda water which only looked like gin. Behind us, people danced under bad lights to choppy music.

A large, impeccably dressed man detached himself from the group of large and small impeccably dressed men with whom he had been lounging near the entrance. He cut ahead of Louise to the checking counter. My wife stopped and waited patiently as he leaned over the counter, speaking to Ginnie in a rapid undertone.

I stopped too. My fingers curved into fists. I recognized that shiny bald head, that ugly face—loose and hard at the same time—leering out over the stiff white lawn of shirt-front. Mumbles Regg—and all his Regglets!

The sensible thing to do was to pluck Louise's sleeve and move back quietly to the bar. But I had to see how Ginnie fitted into Regg's affairs. I waited.

She evidently didn't. Fit into Regg's affairs, that is. She answered his mumbling suggestion with a slight shudder and a disgusted exclamation. She retreated from the counter to the patiently hanging rows of hats and coats.

Regg reached out, seized her arm and pulled her back to him. I heard my wife gasp as Ginnie's lipsticked mouth contorted in pain. Regg mumbled again, more insistently, more angrily. Ginnie was half-twisted on her side as he pulled her roughly against the hatcheck counter.

There were lots of people watching,

lots of big, broad-shouldered men bigger than me, bigger even than Mumbles. But most of them knew the gangster's reputation. None of them seemed willing to risk their tuxedos.

So up stepped little Frankie.

I grabbed Mumbles's shoulder, feeling uncomfortably like a private who has volunteered to draw the enemy's fire—and is immediately astonished at the too-brave words he has heard issue from his own big mouth. I swung the large man around and down, so that I could get at him. Then I pumped my fists, fast, once solidly at the chest, once in solid cracking connection with his jaw.

His back slammed against the opposite wall.

I CAME up quickly to finish the job, reassured by the stupid daze in his eyes. Then I came to a halt. I took a long deep breath as the two women sounded off behind me.

"Oh, Frank!"

"Be careful!"

The bunch of darkly dressed men who had been lounging around the entrance were now lounging around me. Only, I knew they weren't lounging. They had quickly formed a tight little circle, closing me off from Regg. Maybe even from life; I didn't know.

Every one of the men, tall or short, thin or stout, had the same consciously vacant expression as they stared easily at me. Every one of them had a right hand inside a left breast pocket. And every breast pocket had a bulge.

I straightened my hands and rubbed the pain off my knuckles as Regg shook himself free of the wall. I had no plans at the moment, beyond standing still—very, very still.

Anyone who thinks I should have done something else, that those highly experienced assassins might have hesitated to shoot me in front of so many witnesses,

has never been to the *Red Devil*, that's all. Though come to think of it, anyone who has never been inside the *Red Devil* is smart enough for all normal purposes. . . .

The gangster had recognized me. "Little Frankie Carlyle," he whispered, "the nosiest newshound of them all! Still nosy, Frankie? Don't you know a married guy shouldn't be so nosy?"

Perspiration began to roll down my forehead, piled up against my eyelids. It trickled past my eyes, making me blink.

"I thought you were going to settle down now, Frankie, and concentrate on Washington. I thought you weren't going to make me mad at you any more, like you did in the Daniels killing. I still haven't forgiven you for saying around that I carved Steve Daniels up and dumped him into that barrel of concrete. Steve Daniels was my friend, Frankie. And now you hurt my feelings again."

He grinned at me out of his terribly marked face. I stood there and sweated, trying not to hear his almost inaudible voice. I looked at the streak of powder on the top of his bald head. Around me, his friends watched imperturbably.

The mocking whisper flowed on, "Stand still, Frankie—I'm going to hit you."

I couldn't have moved right then if anyone had jabbed a nail into me. I saw his right hand flailing up; I heard Louise plunge forward and scream, "No! Don't!" I wondered vaguely why he didn't use a better grade of powder on his head to cover the shine, the stuff he had on hardly stuck at all.

Then his open palm crashed into my mouth and my teeth seemed to bend. I staggered back, through the opening ring of gangsters. I crashed into Louise and carried her back with me.

After a while, I got to my feet and helped Louise up. I noticed there was blood going down my white dickey.

"That's all for now, little man," Mumbles' voice seemed to be floating against the brightly lit ceiling. He laughed. "Give my regards to the missus. I'll be seeing you." He turned and moved toward the bar, his hired hands trailing compactly.

Suddenly I felt there wasn't anything more important than killing him right there and then. The night club seemed to have dissolved away, leaving only Mumbles Regg and myself. Between us there was no empty space—the need for murder filled it completely. I surged forward.

Ginnie had slipped out of the concession booth. She was holding my right arm; my wife tugged at my left. Both of them were babbling incoherently, pleading with me to forget it, to keep still, to sit down. I saw their begging, beautiful faces and grew quiet. I allowed them to lead me to a chair in the shadows and seat me there.

"His lip—oh, his lip!" Ginnie cried. "Wait a minute, I'll be right back."

She slipped off, came back with a couple of gauze pads soaked in ice-water. Louise took one from her and applied it to my mouth with a touch of the expert that surprised me.

"I had two kid brothers who were always in trouble, darling," she reminded me. "I'm accustomed to this sort of thing."

"I'm sorry this had to happen, Mrs. Carlyle," Ginnie broke in. "Mumbles has been bothering me for a week. If Tony heard about it, he'd run amuck and get kicked off the police force. We're going to be married Tuesday."

"Congratulations." My wife smiled at her. "We'll come and dance at your wedding. Meanwhile, do you think you could get us out of here?"

Ginnie nodded and returned in a moment with our wraps. Despite the smart in my mouth and the pain in my soul, I was proud of Louise for knowing and re-

membering to tip Ginnie lavishly. We moved out, water seeping down my chin from the gauze pad. I felt the bump beginning on my cut lip.

In the taxi, my humiliation forced me into a corner. Louise chattered as if we had just emerged from a bridge party.

"So that was Ginnie. Nice girl. Only she isn't a real blonde, Frank. She bleaches her hair."

I grinned, though the effort agonized my lip. "Here, pussy. Pretty pussy," I said.

"I'm *not* being catty, darling. She does bleach her hair—I can tell. With her coloring, she'd make a very beautiful brunette; I think she's foolish."

"Tony Pirotti doesn't think so."

"She said he's a cop."

"That's right. He's studying to be a detective. His beat is near the *Red Devil*. If he knew Mumbles had laid his paws on Ginnie, Regg would be a brand-new corpse by tomorrow morning. Which is more than I can say for my capabilities," I added morosely.

Louise protested, told me very vividly that I was being silly. I leaned back against the seat as the street lights whipped past the cab and enjoyed her voice.

All very well for Louise to say I was silly. I knew Regg. He wouldn't let the matter drop. And, neither could I. . . .

TONY PIROTTI had discovered Steve Daniels' shoe sticking out of a barrel of concrete near the new south highway that was under construction a month ago. Since I was a friend of Ginnie's, Tony let me have a beat on the killing, and I was the first reporter to get to the morgue and the only one to see the body.

Everyone knew who had done the job, or at least ordered it, but there was no proof. Daniels had been Regg's chief lieutenant, handling the narcotics end of

his vice empire. He had altered a few entries in the books, held back a few receipts. He had thought he was one clever fellow. He wasn't.

I couldn't say anything direct, of course, but with the help of the few facts Pirotti and some other policemen dug up, I pounded at Regg day after day with insinuation, unspoken accusation and involved hinting. There was investigation after publicized investigation, but nothing was found that could be pushed at a jury successfully.

The matter was dropped. For my efforts, I earned Regg's personal interest in my welfare and a crack at a column. Maybe I also earned Louise that way; I don't know.

But when I thought of Regg slapping me in front of my wife, of the personal museum he was reputed to keep containing souvenirs of all his killings—I knew I would have to find some way of settling the matter. Either that, or he'd come calling on me.

"There's one thing I can't understand," Louise marveled as the hotel elevator shot us up to our room. "Why nobody—*nobody*—stepped forward to lift a finger to help you or Ginnie. Everyone must have known that all those men were carrying guns."

"Everyone also knew that any interference would earn them a short life, but not a merry one." I unlocked the door. Louise rustled in, her head half-turned to me. "The *Red Devil* is that sort of place. A man was kicked to death in the alley outside last year."

"Then that's why you didn't want to take me. I thought it was because you were afraid of my meeting Ginnie. Tell me, if it's as bad as you say, how does a girl like Ginnie come to work there?" She moved into the other room.

I picked up the ringing telephone. "Ginnie can usually take care of herself," I called after her. "Besides, it pays well,

she and Tony have a sizeable nest-egg by now. He wanted her to quit right away, but she held out until after the wedding. Hello," to the phone. "Mr. Carlyle speaking."

"Mr. Carlyle," the clerk's voice said, "A Mr. Harlow Dexter to see you about an item for your column. Shall I send him up?"

"Sure, send him up." I dropped the telephone and went over to a mirror. I couldn't remember the guy, but since I'd been doing a political column, I'd become accustomed to people with first names like Harlow instead of Joe or Louie or Mac.

My upper lip was doing nicely, thank you. I felt it tenderly and wondered what it was about a guy getting away with a sock at you that made you burn?

I called into the other room. "Somebody by the name of Harlow Dexter coming up to see me about my column, honey."

"Don't stay up too long with him." She closed the door; I went to see him in.

There was something very familiar about him that I could not place. Mr. Harlow Dexter did not look like his name. He wore one of those light hats with a colored bandanna band that were already going out of general style. He was dressed in light sport clothes and perforated shoes, like a movie-styled Californian. But his hard face was not tanned. It was white, very white.

"Seat?" I asked. "Sorry I can't offer you a drink; my wife's put her wedgie down as far as alcohol is concerned."

He nodded, looked around slowly and sat down with his hat on. I started to sit on a chair, wishing that I could remember what he reminded me of, when my legs got stiff and my knees went weak. I completed the motion and sat down very carefully.

This Harlow Dexter was carrying a gun. It was a sizable weapon—a .38 or

.45—from the looks of the bulge in his coat pocket. He must be a Western hood at that: no one in this town let his criminal intention be that obvious. But he couldn't be a Regg yegg. Regg used much smoother characters. And their eyes were always straight and deadly, not wild and shifting like this boy's.

I leaned back in the chair and lit a cigarette. After I'd dropped the match in the ash stand beside me, I kept my hand there idly. The ash stand had a long metal base, it would make a useful weapon if necessary.

I hoped it wouldn't come to a scuffle. This man was about my height, but he had broad and terrifically powerful shoulders. Besides, he had a gun. And after what had happened tonight, I wasn't sure of anything, including myself.

He stopped looking around the room and stared over my shoulder. I tried desperately to catch whatever it was that was teasing my memory.

"Got your name from the hatcheck girl," he said suddenly in a rather high voice, still staring over my shoulder. "Saw the fight, saw what you took. Heard you and Regg. That right about you believing Regg killed Daniels?"

"Now, Mr. Dexter," I expostulated, getting a good grip on the ash stand handle. "I don't want to discuss the matter. I understood you had some political item, something I could use in my—"

"**D**ROP that!" he screamed, tearing the gun out of his pocket. It was a .38 caliber revolver with a sawed-off barrel. I took my hand off the ashstand and placed it gently on the arm of my chair. "Don't try anything! Name ain't really Dexter. Name's Daniels, Harry Daniels."

Daniels! That was what my mind had been fumbling at: the resemblance between this wild-eyed person and the body in the morgue.

"I'm Steve Daniels's kid brother. I want to find out things. True Regg put the finger on him? True he used a knife on him first?" The voice was mad and wavering. Even the gun wobbled as it pointed at me. Again I debated the value of a fast rush, again decided against it. Those powerful shoulders were one factor; the knowledge that I was dealing with an extremely off-base mind was another. "Speak up, damn you! Don't care how scared you are of Regg!"

"Who's afraid of Regg?" I blustered. "It's common gossip that he killed your brother, though I wouldn't advise you personally—"

"That's all. Save the rest." Daniels rose and backed to the door, the gun waving back and forth at me. "Sit easy for a while. Don't move."

He reached behind him with his free hand and turned the doorknob. Then he opened the door and moved out backwards. The moment the door slammed, I heard his feet running down the stairs.

I walked unsteadily to the telephone. Louise piled out of the other room and into my arms.

"I heard it all, Frank, I heard it all," she cried. "That lunatic! I didn't know what to do—afraid if I made a noise he'd shoot. What are you doing, having him stopped downstairs?"

I soothed her shoulder and kissed her. After that, we both felt better. "No sense in stopping him. He'll be out of the lobby in a few seconds. Besides, I'm not so sure I don't like the idea of that character trailing Mumbles. It's sort of poetic justice to have him wind Regg up. Probably will work the other way, though."

"Room service," I said into the phone. "Send up a crock of gin—no, better make that rye. A quart of rye. Don't bother about ice or glasses, just hurry. Room 311."

"Frank, do you think that's necessary? After all—"

"Yes, honey, I think it's necessary," I told her firmly. "There are times when a man most definitely needs a drink. Now let me think this thing out."

"I wish I'd never insisted we go to that nasty place. Frank, you don't have to justify yourself in my eyes. I know you aren't afraid of Regg. Honestly. I want you to stay out of trouble. I don't care who hits you or what you do, I love you as is."

"Sure, honey. Sure."

After I'd tipped the bellboy, I leaned against the wall and took a long swig out of the bottle. Three weeks since I'd tasted the stuff; it felt unusually strong.

So my wife was sweet, loyal and considerate. Fine. I didn't have to justify myself in her eyes. But what about my own? I'd never just stood and taken anything before.

And who knew what a woman really thought of a man who practically curtsied to the guy who'd socked him, and who allowed himself to be toddled away without so much as raising a finger?

I tilted the bottle and swallowed the fire.

It was no good consoling myself with the thought that his bodyguard would have let daylight through in a dozen different directions if I'd tried to stop him, even tried to counter the blow. On that basis, any time Mumbles and I caromed off each other, I was to make like a punching bag. The idea somehow lacked zest.

I couldn't avoid him. He'd come looking for me—he'd said so. Mumbles might be interested in acquiring some part of my anatomy for his vaunted museum. They say he began carrying the cartridge that killed Little Ruby Green as a watch-fob about a month after the D.A. lost interest in the case. There wasn't much danger then that he'd be picked up for questioning. Even if the police became suddenly inquisitive, he could always slip the gadget to one of his bully-boys.

I paused in the middle of a gurgle and lowered the bottle. Would it work? Why not? Only I needed a gimmick, a lever. Ginnie! I could do it that way!

Very regretfully, I deposited the rye on a table and got started. I looked at my wrist-watch in the cab; Ginnie wouldn't be going off duty for two hours. Perfect.

I PAID the cab driver about a block away from the *Red Devil*. Then I wedged into a drug-store telephone booth and called the night club, asked for Ginnie.

Yes, she could get relieved for ten minutes. What was it all about? Oh, all right, then, she wouldn't tell anybody; she'd be right over.

She came trotting into the drug store, an old gabardine coat thrown over her black satin costume, her eyes small with anxiety. I gave her the pitch, assured her it would work.

"Think you can make up to Mumbles convincingly enough in a half hour or so?"

"Ye-es. The way he's been chasing me. But Frank—Mr. Carlyle, I mean—are you sure Tony won't get into any trouble? False arrest would be very bad for him. And if you haven't found out anything, he may have to arrest you on complaint of Mumbles. Besides, it's so dangerous."

"Don't worry. Just call Tony after Mumbles leaves. I hope you can get him. Give me the key to your place. It isn't far, is it?"

She fumbled in her purse. Her hair *was* dark at the roots. "No. About three blocks east. Same section, but not so ritzy. Nine seventy-two, eighth. After Mumbles gets interested, I tell him to go to my room and wait for me? Right?"

"Check. Say the door's unlocked. You always keep it unlocked."

"Please be careful," she called after me. "I wouldn't want Mrs. Carlyle to think I was responsible for anything."

Her room wasn't ritzy. It was drab as

a dirty apron. It's only advantage was that it was close to the two most important things in Ginnie's life: her job at the *Red Devil* and Tony Pirotti's beat.

I let myself in, made sure the door was unlocked behind me and took the place in. Studio couch, two chairs, a dresser and a gas range. Bathroom in the hall. Cheap store-bought cedar closets.

I crossed to the window as I heard the motor of a powerful car stop in the street. Mumbles Regg got out, whispered something to his friends inside.

This was faster work than I'd expected. But Ginnie was cuddlesome when she wanted to be. And I'd walked over: that had taken some time.

Mumbles put an additional fold into his gleaming white silk scarf and started for the street door. My knees felt as if they were going to fold any minute now. I licked the sore cut on my lip nervously.

"Aw," I said. "Who's afraid?" Then I grinned at myself.

I jerked the window shade down and went to a cedar closet. I tore a flimsy pink dress off a coat hanger and hefted the triangular piece of wood in my hands. Not heavy enough. I wished I'd brought the bottle along. I also wished I'd never drunk from that bottle. I wished I was home.

There were heavy steps approaching from the landing. I flattened myself against the wall near the door hinges.

Mumbles came in, exhaling a deep sigh of anticipation. The sigh became something like "*Gloosh*," when I splintered the wooden hanger over his head.

Then, as he stumbled forward, holding his head with both hands, I slammed the door shut and flipped the bolt over. It meant I'd lose part of the jump; but I'd worked this item out—I couldn't stand to be interrupted while Mumbles and I were debating.

He was facing me when I turned around. The only sign of my blow was a

thin line of red going past his left ear.

"Little Frankie again?" he snarled in a low voice. "Still wants to get hurt." His hand twitched toward a breast pocket.

I came at him so fast that my feet only touched the floor twice. I smashed one satisfying crack at his jaw. The force of my rush carried us both to the dresser in one pile of arms and legs and grunts. He drove an elbow into my ribs and brought a knee up sharp into me.

As I doubled, his huge right hand, balled into a murderous fist, came tearing around at my face. I twitched my head and the fist bounced off my eye. I butted him with my head. He grunted. He was soft.

I brought my fist back with every ounce of energy I had and hit him hard. He started to scream. I jabbed a fist wrist-deep into his jaw. Then, as he started to slide to the floor, I went to work on his face. I must have hit him ten times before he lit. He was out colder than dry ice.

My lip had opened again; but then, so had my ego. My fists hurt, my back ached, my eye was a patch of numbness—but I felt fine.

I dropped to one knee and began to search him.

After a while I stood up, feeling sick. I'd found everything from brass knuckles to foreign picture postcards but no souvenir of Daniels or anyone else. Mumbles must have felt the case was still too hot to indulge his hobby.

He stirred and groaned. I put him back to sleep.

I was in a fine spot. If Tony Pirotti came sweeping in, he was likely to be very embarrassed. I didn't have a thing to show him, a shred of proof against Mumbles. And Mumbles could very easily prefer charges against me for assault and battery. Which, under the peculiar circumstances, wouldn't do Ginnie very much good. Or Louise. Or myself.

What time was it? I flipped my sleeve back. I had broken my watch in the scuffle. Mumbles was wearing a pocket watch. I bent over and pulled it out of his vest.

I put my fingernail under the cover of the watch and opened it. Then I let out a gulp. There, pasted to the inside of the watch cover, was a human ear. Daniels's body was missing it when they found him. An expert could identify it.

I turned the watch over. On the back, engraved into the gold, was a rather ornately lettered *Regg*.

There were shots downstairs, under the noise of a police siren. Feet made large from patrolling a beat were pounding up the stairs. I unlocked the door and leaned hazily against a wall. Tony Pirotti and another cop came in with drawn revolvers.

"This is good." Pirotti grinned as he snapped his handcuffs on Regg. "Well, well," he said with relish, after I had told my story and given him the grisly memento of Steve Daniels. "Headquarters will be awfully glad to see this guy. You've had quite a night."

I nodded. I felt as if I'd eaten two whole lobsters in one gulp. The room was beginning to quiver and melt.

"Hey, Joe," Tony called. "Get Mr.

Carlyle home. I heard all about what happened at the *Red Devil*," he told me. "But here's something you don't know—we picked up another one of Regg's hoods, a new boy. Calls himself Harlow Dexter. Yeah, that one.

"The room clerk noticed he was carrying a gun and phoned us. We grabbed him as he left your hotel, holding him on a charge of—Hey, Joe, get this guy home! He's ready to pass out!"

As Joe began to lead me out, Mumbles woke up. He took it all in fast: me, the police, the watch in Tony Pirotti's hand. He began yelling—not mumbling anymore—but *yelling*: "This isn't over yet, Frankie! They won't make this rap stick. We have a date when I get out."

That's what I was worrying about, back in the hotel, with Louise bathing my cuts.

I said to myself: *What will happen to Louise, to me, to Ginnie, when Mumbles gets out?* Even in prison, Regg could still give an order to an outside hood . . .

Maybe. But the law made a terrific mistake when Mumbles was booked and shoved into an overnight cell with a characted named Harry Daniels, alias Harlow Dexter. There wasn't much left of Daniels's mind the next morning.

And not much of Mumbles's throat.



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"You three will have
to eat lead."



CHAPTER ONE

Booby-Trap Blonde

I LIKED Wally Wells too much to see him go up for murder. But the guy was starting to crack apart from wife-trouble heartburn. Even though I was one of his best friends—at least for this particular day, which was something as Hollywood friendships go—I couldn't figure how to head him off.

In the past hour I had seen homicide spread all over the florid muscles of Wally's face. Even his voice had a deadly acid bite as he gave directions for the scene that had almost caused me to cash in my life for a mere studio pay-check.

I should have been chilled, standing at the back of that drafty motion picture set

in clothes heavy with soaked-up water. But I wasn't. I was ablaze with fury. My neck had been risked like a toy to be broken by a spiteful child, and I didn't like it. Didn't like it one bit.

The great Wallace Wells was jiggling

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOMICIDE

By
**MICHAEL
MORGAN**



*When the Hollywood producer's missus got stabbed,
stunt-man Ryan wanted to run like hell—
but a slumming beauty had other plans.*

hurriedly toward me. Before he could speak, I seized him and yanked him back of the set, out of the sight of curious eyes. "I ought to poke my fist through your spine, you fool. Why take it out on me just because you'd like to slit your wife's throat—or her boy-friend's? I near drowned in that ship's cabin."

His chin quivered moronically. It's pitiful what a shrewd babe can do to even a genius. Wallace Wells may have been a much-honored and tremendously wealthy director and producer of epic motion pictures. But that day he was reduced to a soft mass of frustrated rage.

He clutched my sodden clothes as though he were a sobbing child seeking a mother's comfort. "What's wrong with me?" he managed to ask.

A psychiatrist might have answered him. I didn't try. Instead, I jostled him from me. "Get hold of yourself, pal. You don't want people to see you sniveling. We both need a drink."

His body attained as much rigidity as ever could be effected by an oversized marshmallow with a reddish sun lamp and steam bath complexion. "No! Not that. I need a shot. Of vitamins." He was striving to speak normally. "I'll go to Dr. Xavier. I've got time. More than an hour between set-ups."

He hustled away into the darkness at the rear of the sound stage. I signalled the assistant director, who'd been hovering in the background. "Better send someone with the boss."

"Huh?"

"I said—Lord, man, you mean you can't you see he's ready to blow his top? He needs a guardian. With strong arms and sticky fingers."

"Oh, yes. Yes, I see. I'll send Jerry. He played guard last year for U.S.C."

He went away quickly. Someone tossed a heavy blanket across my shoulders. It was the property man. Even a stunt man gets attention on a Wally Wells set.

Slightly belated, perhaps, but still he gets it.

Yes, movie stunting is my racket. I'm one of the lads who flirt with danger to provide thrills for audiences.

Not too long before, I'd been trying to explain that part of my life to Miss Merna Powers. That was before all this mad business about Wally Wells and his wife and his wife's boy-friend had been crammed down my gullet, along with a few gallons of dirty water.

Because of the blond wig I wore and the fact that my one hundred and ninety-eight pounds fitted neatly into a duplicate of star Sidney Burke's seaman wardrobe, Merna Powers had mistaken me for the star of the picture.

"I'm doubling for Sidney," I'd explained to Miss Powers. Then, with hastily formed intentions, I added, "The name is Bill Ryan."

She'd never been on a set before, she explained with a voice that had the same sort of ripe promise which comes from thumping a cool mid-summer watermelon. She was working with Mrs. Wallace Wells on a charity campaign for the Fund For Needy Children, which the Wells female was heading locally. Mrs. Wells was on the set with two national campaign officers and they wanted to shoot some publicity pictures with Sidney Burke. Merna Powers was my honey's name.

She didn't look like a working girl to me. She acted more like one of those smooth polish jobs the co-ed colleges graduate. And she obviously had it, although, for some unfathomable reason, she seemed trying to hide the fact in a severely tailored blue suit and an open-necked white blouse.

Her facial features were balanced in a soft oval with brown hair cropped in ultra-smart contours. But her skin lacked make-up and her lips held only the trace of cosmetics. The surface had been cooled

off, but there were warm pools beneath her unbeaded lashes.

She was a mystery I yearned to solve, and I was glad I was to have a breather after completing my next stunt, and would soon be free to pursue my favorite recreation.

AFTER that brief session of eye intoxication, I pigeon-holed Miss Powers neatly among prospective business and began concentrating on a compensation I could put in the bank. When your life or good health depends on a few important details being right, you don't scatter attentions.

Fool courage is no part of a stunt man's assets. We plan every move, try to foresee every possibility. I never even hovered around a thought of anything outside of business until Wally distracted me. It was a half hour later.

He stood beside me at the edge of the set, garbed in a flashy yellow polo shirt, beige slacks, a redish plaid sports jacket and a green eyeshade. Anyone seeing us talking would believe he was giving me instructions on the scene.

"This tops everything, Bill," he choked. "What a wife Arlene is. Face of an angel. Soul of a dame who's inviting a slit throat."

A person to whom a big shot like Wally Wells unburdens his soul this way merits flattery. That's one of the standards of rating in Hollywood. It meant we were close friends. He was honoring me—but I couldn't afford to accept the honor. He was trying to carve a niche in my attention and I wanted to choke him. No stunt man likes distraction before a job.

He went on jabbering softly. "Bringing her boy-friend onto my set with her. Brazenly. Look at them. Behind you. Now."

It was easier to look than protest. She was talking with Burke. A pretty doll, Mrs. Wells. Arlene Wells to Hollywood.

Blonde Arlene. Hair, skin, garments—all immaculately creamy. She looked bubble-bath clean. Smelling like a rose garden in July.

Arlene Wells would never be well-groomed without a man at her side. Two were with her now. She wore them like accessories; you never noticed them at all.

Wally's breath was warm on my cheek. "The broad-shouldered handsome geek! Randolph Grant. Her latest. Frustrated actor, no doubt. Phony as a pair of make-up department eyelashes. Playing up to the women. Now it's Arlene."

I wanted to remind him he hadn't ranted over the ones who had preceded Mr. Grant. Instead I said lightly, "You're working yourself into a state, building things up."

"Building up! Look at him smirk. And who'll believe what's going on between them while she's being benevolent with this campaign for—"

His yowling had become a needle in my flesh, and I spouted so loudly I felt people turning toward me. "Oh, hell, who ever kicks in to her Needy Children set-up? It's a phony if I ever heard of one."

He clutched my arm, whispering moisture into my ear until he had all my attention. "Think so, Bill?" He panted with eagerness. "Maybe it's a blind so she can carry on with the other man. The dark-skinned—"

"Quit stewing, Wally."

The assistant director announced loudly, "We're ready, Mr. Wells."

I took that opportunity to get away from him. Nothing was going to calm him, and I didn't want to join him in a set of the jitters. I wanted to get at this stunt before he could become excited enough to start messing up directions and toss a few hazards at my welfare.

The set was the fo'castle of a period freighter. It was built inside the studio's tank stage, a big hollow concrete-sided pool in the floor of the stage which is used

whenever water is needed, whether it be anything from a swimming pool to floating space for an entire yacht.

Sets usually are only three-sided, with the camera shooting from the open end. This cabin was a complete box because it had to hold water during the scene I was about to do. The camera hung from the end of a boom which stood on the stage level to let the camera cage dangle slightly inside the set. Overhead lamps directed light down upon the table and chairs, the wooden lockers and the bunks along the sides of the cabin.

I went into the cabin by jumping to its floor from the concrete edge of the tank.

Wally Wells' face was a sad man-in-the-moon as he stared at me and asked, "Got everything straight, Bill? Let's hope for a one-take."

"That's why you hired me, isn't it?" I was more than half in earnest, although I smiled. The stunt men who work most regularly are those who spoil no action scenes. It would take hours of work to prepare this stunt again if my first attempt failed. That would cost four times what I was being paid. So long as I stayed a one-take expert, I'd work often; hence, a little cockiness now was patting the pocketbook rather than the back.

The scene demanded that Sidney Burke regain consciousness in a bunk at the left hand wall to find himself deserted and the ship tossing wildly in a storm. This reaction had been recorded in a close-up of the real star.

Now I was Sid. Once the camera motor turned, I was to swing out of that bunk, stagger a bit to indicate a half-stunned man within a lurching cabin. The set was on rockers and a hydraulic lift would bounce the whole thing from side to side, all at the command of an engineer who sat by the controls off to the right. Then I was to start up the stairs through the cabin door—and that's when the Pacific Ocean was to hit me.

High within the stage were two big vats of water and a trip lock, loosened on cue, would drop the bottom from one of them and send the water hurtling down a long chute and into the cabin.

After that, it was up to me, excepting that the script said Sidney was to fight his way out and up to the deck. I'd better do just that or stop boasting about my one-take record.

Wally said, "Fine, let's get set." He waved me a hand and shut his mouth. No wishes of good luck. He knew better. He'd worked with stunt men before. Maybe we're half-cracked, but we have certain superstitions. One is that if you're wished good luck, you won't get it.

I went to the bunk and sat on it. Then I saw the Powers creature again. She was over at the right, well back from the edge of the tank, standing beside a dark, oily male character whom I half recalled as one of the men on the set with Arlene Wells.

So they were staying to watch the fun. I liked that. It meant she would be around the stage later.

I lay back on the bunk and waited. A bright object always catches an eye and my orbs went to something on the wall—a mirror. I looked at it for a stretched-out moment, surprised that the angle of the mirror had caught two little figures. I didn't like what I saw, because the action of the two characters was an insult to my friend, Wally Wells.

Arlene and her boy-friend, Randy Grant, were out of sight of everybody but Bill Ryan's mirror, and the sort of smooching going on told me how right were Wally's suspicions. Grant was a handsome blond, polo-type giant of around thirty-two, I estimated.

Then, the ship began to rock. The creaking of the rockers was violent but no one would care, so long as I heard instructions. This was what film people call a "sync" shot, with cameras synchro-

nized but no sound being recorded. It was being photographel silently, and the sound would be added later in a "dubbing" room.

Wally's voice boomed through a public address microphone: "Action!" The scene was starting.

I told myself this was it!

CHAPTER TWO

Double Danger

TO THE stimulus of Wally Wells' loudly-barked orders, I rolled out of the bunk and reached the heaving floor. Back and forth it went, once... twice. Then Wally told me to get on my feet.

I stood erect and began to weave. The hydraulic lift was doing a neat job of tossing the ship. The effect was startlingly realistic.

The stage was all mine and I played it to the hilt for Sid Burke. I let the lurching motions throw me off balance, falling against the bunks to my left. Gradually, I made my way to the stairs. My body tensed as I started to climb.

There was still time to halt the scene and begin all over again. Any time up to the mighty descent of ten thousand gallons of water, Wally Wells could end the action. Already it was too late for other technicians to call it quits, because I was half way up the ladder and Wally might give the signal for the water at any minute now.

His signal would be a mere "keep-going" order. The actual order which would open the trap would come from an expert who would time the drop of the water to meet me at the perfect second.

Well, it had to be soon, because I was past half-way.

"Let 'er go!" Charlie, the effects man, shouted.

I heard the water coming. It was

snapping its teeth against the wooden sides of the chute like a growling, savage animal.

I started counting. "One . . . two . . . three." Then it hit me.

It struck with the driving force of a Michigan tackle opening a hole on the one-yard line. Giant, wet, cold hands caught hold of me and lifted my body off the steps. The power of a half ton of water falling from the top of the stage shoved against my chest and sent me over backwards.

Holding my breath, I kicked my feet up so the water could catch them and start me tumbling head over heels. I executed a good turn-and-a-half before I struck the floor of the cabin in a seated position. I flailed my arms, striving to create the action effect which Wally Wells was buying.

Then I quit acting. The water scooted me rapidly across the rough planks and shoved me firmly under the lower bunk. All this, I'd counted on. Now I would withhold breathing and wait for the pressure of the water to slacken enough, to permit me to heave myself clear and struggle to the surface of the water inside the room. Ten thousand gallons ought to about fill the cabin a quarter full.

The rumbling of the water had begun to ease toward quiet, when another giant roar penetrated the cushion of water around me and slammed against my ear drums. I was being pushed farther beneath the bunk, crowded violently against the wall.

A great ramrod was tamping the water downward against me. I knew that I wasn't going to fight myself out from under that bunk against an added pressure I hadn't expected. There's a lot of malarkey about how many minutes a man can hold his breath without dying, but nobody excepting a fool would flirt with the edge of the blackening-out point. I wasn't taking that chance now.

Twisting violently, I curled up slightly and pulled my body around until I had my stomach downward and my hands and knees against the floor. Then, savagely, I nudged forward until my knees bent and my feet touched the floor.

With my back, I shoved upward. I strained until my jawbone was quivering. I couldn't suck in breath to gain power. All I could do was shove with every ounce of strength I possessed.

Suddenly, the pressure was off my back and there was a sharp splintering as the end of the bunk nearest my head gave way. I kept on heaving upward and stood erect, letting the bunk slip off my back like a shell shed by a turtle.

That hadn't been brain work. That had amounted solely to sheer brute power impelled by the panic of desperation. But I was out where I could breathe. I gulped in air and, stepping on the shattered bunk, I pulled myself up to the higher bunk.

Water was still pouring through the opening at the head of the ladder, but it wasn't an angry gushing now. It was the tapering-off portion of what should look like a giant deck-washing wave.

But water shouldn't still be coming through. And there should be only about half as much water in that crude swimming pool of mine. It was obvious what had happened.

For some reason, the second tank at the top of the stage had been opened—in addition to the first tank. The second tank was there originally in case something went wrong on the release of the other, or should a second “take” of the scene be needed.

I was raging with anger. I wasted no time. I finished up Sidney Burke's scene in a jiffy by leaping over the stair and sloshing up the steps and through the hatch in spite of the water which flowed gently down the chute.

A couple of pairs of strong hands caught me as I came out into the open. Someone

asked, “You okay, Ryan?” It was Charlie, the effects man.

I coughed. “No fault of yours if I am.”

“You mean that second tank wasn't? You didn't?” He had frowns all over his face. The stage laborer who also had helped me just looked blank.

“I almost drowned.”

“I'm sorry. I thought something was screwy, but after Wells yelled the second time . . .”

I shook water from me and started breathing deeply. “Wells asked you to cut loose that other tank?”

“He kept shouting, ‘More! More! More waves. Open the other.’”

I growled to myself, then patted Charlie's arm. “Forget it. I'll buy you a case of hooch out of the extra dough I make Wells cough up for this fool stunt. Hell, he must really have blown his top.”

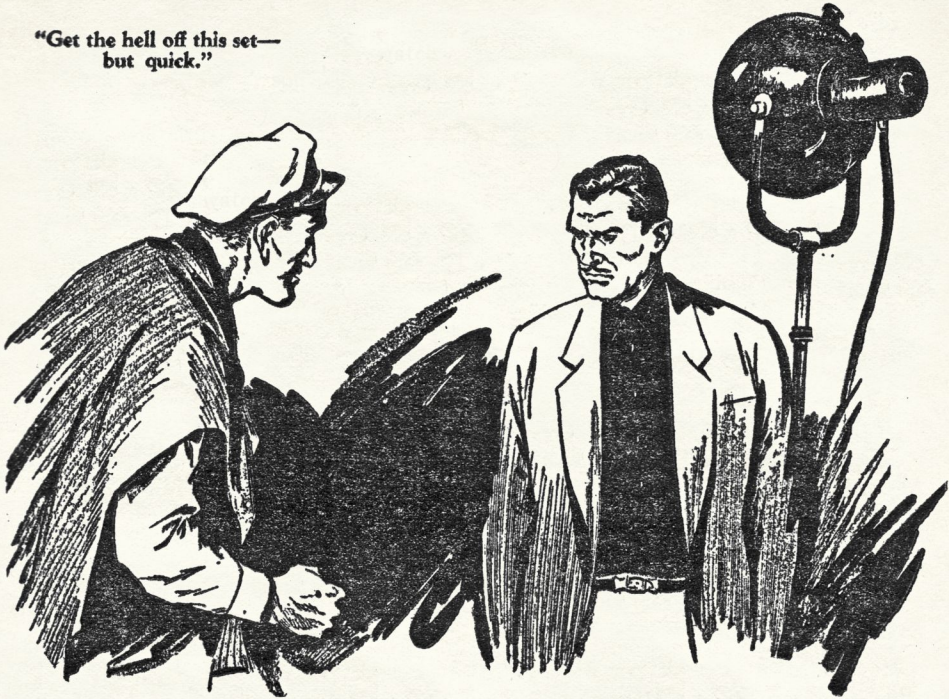
I started around the set to find Wally. I went rapidly because, even in my soppy clothes, I was hotter under the collar than a kerosene lamp chimney. Just as I turned the corner from the back of the set, I stopped abruptly. The sight of Merna Powers braked me.

SHE was a few steps away and her eyes were rounded and she was breathing deeply from the aftermath of excitement. She'd been completely carried away with the savagery of my brute-strength escape from drowning. If the girl and I had been alone at that instant, I'd have had her in my water-dripping arms.

But that was when Wally Wells had bounced toward me with those shocking signs of murder in his eyes. I'd had to park Miss Merna Powers once more among my neglected intentions, until I'd taken care of the director's ragged nerves.

Now that Wally had gone bustling away in quest of a hip full of vitamins, I pulled the blanket around my shoulders and splashed around the end of the set toward where I'd seen Merna.

"Get the hell off this set—
but quick."



A big dark man stepped in front of me and stayed there. "Just a minute," he said. His voice was so oily it would repulse water.

This was the first time I'd had a close-up of the second man whom Arlene had brought onto the set. He had a black, waxed mustache and heavy eyebrows and thick lips. The corners of those lips seemed perpetually turned up at the ends. If I was a newsboy with a piggy bank or a widow with savings in a sugar bowl, I'd keep my eye on those containers when this character was around.

"Yeah," I groused.

"I'm Thomas Moore." The name sounded like it belonged to a hardware merchant, but he told me differently. "I'm national chairman of the campaign for needy children."

I was in no mood for a sales pitch. "So what?"

A scowl dipped into his brow. "Miss Powers and I were—"

"Where is Miss Powers?"

He gestured to his left and she filled the focus of my eyes. But our romance boat—Merna's and mine—had sailed. She had regained composure.

She nodded with politeness. But I had a surge of encouragement. There seemed to be a glint of warm interest in her eyes.

Moore took my attention from the girl. "I want you to know that I resent the remark you made earlier about our campaign."

His voice grated on my ear drums. It tried to pry my interest away from Merna. I was irritable.

"You *what?*"

"Your remark was unfair and obviously the blabbing of someone mentally incapable of finding out the truth."

"Hold on, chum."

The Powers girl said quickly, "I don't think—"

I put forth a foot and placed it on top of Moore's. In case I decided to pop this

individual, I didn't want to have to reach far.

"You mean you overheard me say your charity is a phony? Well, it still goes. I think anything connected with a guy like you smells. You look to me like a bird who'd steal pennies off a corpse's eyes. I may be wrong. But if I am, you can sue me. Or start swinging at me right here and now."

He yanked his foot from under mine. "I prefer to let Mrs. Wells handle your case. I'm sure her husband would like to know what—"

I moved forward and stepped on his foot again. "And as long as you've brought up that subject, let me give you some good, sound advice. Get the hell off this set—but quick. And take that pretty boy, Randy Grant, along with you."

I put on pressure when he attempted to jerk loose his foot. He said, "So you're giving orders? I didn't know you had any authority."

"I don't. I'm just an unimportant guy. But Wally Wells is my friend and I'd hate to see him get in trouble because. . . . Oh, hell, what's the use of all this? You bore me."

I lifted my foot and he turned away, his lips glued tightly together and his cheeks puffed.

Merna Powers hadn't moved. "You can stay as long as you wish, sister," I told her.

She flushed. "No, thanks. I was mistaken, Mr. Ryan. I had thought you were a smart man."

I still was riding the crest of indignation. "What I said to that jerk is nothing. You should hear me when I'm telling off *important* heels."

"I must confess, though, that you *are* a strong brute."

"Okay, sister. At least, I'm being myself. Why don't you try that awhile and stop slumming around muscle guys with a come-on glint in your eyes? You can

get burned badly that way, you know."

She inhaled so sharply that her nostrils contracted entirely shut in that pert nose of hers. "You're insolent, too."

I smiled wryly. "Good-by, Miss Powers. Better hurry or you'll be left by your *friends*. And, don't look now, but your Bel Air society manners are starting to show beneath that common-touch act of your."

She shook her head with an air of hopelessness and, turning, went away from me at a pace which was almost a trot.

I told myself that I really had done things up fine. I ought to be quite pleased. I'd blown even higher than Wally Wells with all his justification. I certainly had done a neat job of losing friends and alienating people.

"*Bill Ryan*," I said bitterly, "*why don't you get your brains counted? You see a girl with real class whom you want to know so badly that your saliva glands pain. And she shows a bit of interest. So what do you do but insult her and send her out of your life even before she's at the threshold of being in it.*" I sighed deeply, reminding myself I'd never see Merna Powers again.

I was wrong, however. Two hours later, I walked into her office unexpected and uninvited.

CHAPTER THREE

Slaughtering the Lamb

IT WAS an apartment on the fourth floor of one of those semi-business apartment hotels in Beverly Hills. This was the headquarters which Arlene Wells and Thomas Moore had set up for the current drive on behalf of the Needy Children.

Two reasons took me to that swanky spot, and Miss Merna Powers was at least one-and-a-half of them. Once I had slipped into dry clothes and around

three fingers of bourbon and then cashed my stunt check, I was mad at practically nobody. So I decided to stretch my luck, lean heavily upon my innate judgment of feminine nature—and go make a treaty.

The other reason was that Arlene Wells needed some advice and I was not one of those persons to whom she'd listen. Merna might be.

I knocked lightly on the door. It was Merna who opened it. Once she saw who it was, she flushed and thinned out her plump lips. She might have shut the door in my face, but I gave her no chance; I pushed past her into the living room of the apartment.

It was fitted out as only a dame with money would equip a fashionable office. There were two vast lounges with stuffing deep enough to smother a man and a pair of overstuffed chairs were large enough and comfortable enough to cure an insomniac.

On the more practical side were two desks and a four-drawer filing cabinet. One of the desks was flat-topped and ornately carved. Its glass top bore up under all the gold knick-knacks which stationery stores display for those who would play at being business folk. The second desk held a typewriter.

Merna had been working at the flat-topped desk. Papers were in scattered piles on it. She had removed the coat of her blue tailored suit and hung it on a clothes tree; it was the only garment on the hooks. She wore a white silk blouse with sleeves which went all the way down to her wrists where gold links fastened the cuffs.

Turning, I faced her as she stepped away from the door, now closed behind her.

"My name is Bill Ryan." I delivered it as a straight line, with no indication of humor.

She played it back at me the same way. "Mrs. Wells can't be disturbed. She's

resting in the adjoining apartment." She tossed her head lightly to the right and the graceful movement made the brown curls of her hair dance. I forcibly held my hands behind me. "Please keep your voice down, as she may hear you through the ventilator up there on the wall."

"What makes you think I came to see Mrs. Wells?"

Her brows made little tents above her eyes. "Who else? Surely, you haven't decided to do a little slumming yourself."

If sarcasm was molasses, I'd have been covered with goo.

"Gee, you recognize me. I thought I could fool you with clean—"

"Don't look, Mr. Ryan, but your rough-neck shows."

Promptly I stretched forth a hand and caught her bicep and spun her around to face me. "Don't kick me out, honey."

Her arm tensed beneath my grasp. She was no powder puff, and the lack of softness surprised me. The suddenness with which I'd halted her movement had thrown her off balance and, momentarily, she leaned toward me. Then, she straightened herself with aid from my grasp.

Her eyes were kicking off sparks like the flint of an automatic lighter, and I noticed that she could stare into my eyes without tilting her head backward very far. She was, I estimated, slightly over five-five. Her jaw line began to flex and I admired the firm, strong chin which she wore below the softness of her face. She had the sort of chin which goes with plenty of giblets.

Her lips went to fighting with themselves because she was trying desperately to make them curl and such an expression was so utterly foreign to her make-up that the muscles of her face refused to obey. She said, "So you must show how strong you are. Flex your muscles, Mr. Ryan."

"Yeah, I guess you'd like that. You really would. Sure, I'll flex them."

I pulled her toward me.

She didn't submit like a limp towel. There was a long moment of healthy tussling, but she was no match for my determination. When I got her head straightened out properly and had worked my lips down to hers, she was giving an imitation of a woman biting nails. I held my relaxed lips against her mouth for the slow count of ten.

THEN, just as I was ready to call it quits and was about to withdraw my lips, she relaxed suddenly. Her lips were warm and soft and responsive and her hands pressed against the muscles of my back.

I let her decide to break it up. When she unglued our lips, she turned out of my arms and I didn't try to hold her. With her back toward me, she bent her head and her hands fumbled briefly at her sides for pockets which weren't there. She was crying.

I slid my handkerchief over her shoulder into her hands, then placed my palms on her arms. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take advantage."

She turned toward me, dabbing at her eyes, and blurted out: "Oh, no! You didn't. . . . But you did a good job breaking me down. I could never beat you. Don't you ever lose?"

I held her closely. "You'll never know, Sugar. I'm sorry I made you cry."

Her eyes smiled through moisture. "But that was from relief. Because I was happy you'd broken through my defense. I need you, Bill. I'm glad you came today."

"I couldn't stay away."

"But we snapped at each other. Insults and— Why, Bill?"

"The nature of the beasts, maybe—" I said.

Her hands gripped my coat. "I've been upset ever since I left the studio. You said something there that set me thinking. Remembering a lot of little things. Sus-

picious things. About this charity drive. You said it was phony. You said Thomas Moore was a fraud."

"I was peeved. I spouted off."

Her fingers dug into my back. "Things *are* strange. Too strange. I—I can't be definite about anything, but I've been feeling them."

"Maybe that feeling is understandable. Strange things have been going on. A lot more serious than a phony campaign. There was murder in the air on that set today—and the undertow from it nearly sucked me under. Murder's still on the prowl. You've got an important job.

"Tell Mrs. Wells to get out of town . . . until Wally Wells cools off. Go anywhere, but don't stay here. You'll have to make her see her danger. And Randolph Grant, too. That gigolo will have to beat it. I'll handle him. You talk to Arlene. This silly little campaign can get along without her, or wait until she returns."

She was breathing rapidly. "You're really serious! All right! I'll talk to her. But this campaign isn't silly and it isn't little. We've raised nearly a quarter million already. And it may not survive if she leaves. If it's a fraud, it can't keep going."

"Then, we'd better move fast and clip it short. There're plenty of ways to investigate. Call the police, the bunco squad. Why, the movie industry has the Permanent Charities Committee, which has to clear things before workers could canvas on studio lots."

"But we haven't gone on the lots for contributions. We've campaigned outside. To movie people. And . . . and society circles."

"Oh, brother. Little Red Riding Hood. Where've you been all your life? You mean nobody has checked?"

She didn't answer. And I didn't continue. In fact, she forgot to answer and I forgot what I was asking.

A shrill, muffled voice said, "No! No!"

loudly. Then it said, "Help!" After that it screamed. Then it stopped screaming or saying anything. There was no sound at all.

Merna and I bounced apart as though a giant spring had flung itself open between us.

She called loudly, "Mrs. Wells."

I said, "Wally!" whispering it hoarsely.

We both turned toward the room in which Merna had said Arlene was taking her afternoon nap. The voice had come through the ventilation shaft.

I knew I had to get in there—fast. Wally Wells had to be prevented from killing his wife. He *could* be stopped, too, because he would be strangling her. He'd resort to choking because he would never think to take along a weapon.

The door to the room was four good strides away. I made it in two. I turned the knob and leaned forcibly toward the room. My face was nearly buried in the wooden surface and my wrist had bent toward the breaking point before I realized the door was locked.

GRUNTING, I moved back a step and charged. My shoulders struck solidly. The door didn't give a fraction of an inch and I felt the jolt clear through to the other side of my body.

"What kind of steel vault is this thing?" I complained.

"The door's solid oak."

I kicked twice at the lock without success, then ran out into the corridor. The locked room had a hall door. It was a mate to the other. There wasn't even a transom. I couldn't budge it an inch.

She had followed me into the corridor. "This door is always locked," she breathed.

I was running back into the office room. "But not the other?"

"Mrs. Wells locked it before."

Merna couldn't keep up with me. I ran to the windows, shoved up the one near-

est the locked room and looked out. There were individual awnings on every window. They looked comparatively new. The closest window of the other room was some ten feet away.

I made a quick appraisal of the situation, turned and took off my coat, tossed it toward a chair and then stepped through the window and straddled the sill. It was a narrow sill and there was no outside ledge to afford footing.

Merna was at the window. "What are you going to do?"

"I could make it if—" I saw the cord and handed it to her. "Here! Pull! Quick! Keep this awning up until I jump."

She didn't ask any more questions. The awning zipped up.

I got to my feet on the sill, then called to Merna. "Keep pulling on the cord. I'll have to steady myself for a minute on the frame."

Easing along the sill toward the edge of the window, I worked myself into a balance on the sill with one foot slightly behind the other. A couple of test knee bends worked up a rhythm. Then I started the upper part of my body falling along the side of the building. At the moment when my head had reached the farthest forward point, I shoved off with my feet and reached forward.

I caught the frame of the awning at Arlene Wells' window all right, but my weight was too great. After the first jolt of my jump, there was a stomach-sinking drop followed by another jolt.

I heard Merna's pained gasp from the window I'd left.

The frame held, as I'd figured it would. Expecting the top to remain intact had been a long chance I hadn't been surprised that my one hundred and ninety-eight pounds of falling weight had torn it loose from above the window frame.

The colored canvas flapped down in front of me. I was like an acrobat hang-

ing to an iron trapeze, except that my body touched the wall of the building. This was an asset. With one leg against the building, I shoved outward and hooked my other knee over the frame.

Then it was only a minor matter to stand in that trapeze effect. My chest reached the window sill. I looked into the room but could see nothing but the farther inside wall. I tried the window. It was locked.

Holding to the sill, I yanked my elbow around against the pane just above the window hatch. The glass splintered and a piece fell into the room. I reached through and unlocked the latch, shoved it up, chinned myself on the sill and rolled through onto the floor.

Once inside that room, I didn't stay immobile. I hadn't expected to loiter. First, if it was Wally Wells at Arlene's throat, I'd have to stop him quickly. If it wasn't Wally, then the assailant might tangle with me. I didn't want to be a standing target. There was only one kind of deadly weapon I knew was not in the room. There would be no gun. Had there been, it would have been used on Arlene long before this.

When I hit the floor, I curled up and tumbled across the rug until I bounced onto my feet, set for defensive action. Nobody charged me. So far as I could see, there was only one other person in the room with me. That was Arlene. She lay motionless on a bed, her blonde head lolled to one side and her body tossed slightly in the direction the head had taken.

I gave her only a glance before I began brushing out all of the nooks and crannies of that room in a fast research. I wasn't stepping into any trap. But neither Wally Wells nor anyone else was in that room. I looked behind furniture, under the bed, back of drapes, within the one clothes closet and through the bedroom.

Then I went to Arlene. Even before I

reached her, I knew Wally Wells had his freedom, whether or not he had effected it personally. Arlene was dead. The handle of an ice pick said so. It was all that showed above her body. The remainder of it was buried in her chest. The presence of it protruding from the cool flesh had an appearance of finality.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trapeze Artist

SHE'D been resting on top of the bedspread, fully dressed except for her shoes. That lovely blonde head of hers had been lying on two pillows, one atop the other. It had slipped off toward the right and her chin was jammed against the chest so that her mouth was closed tightly.

Both arms, with hands clenched into fists, were crooked at the elbows. It was simple to deduce that she had reached upward toward something—either to ward off the ice pick or to intercept arms which were plunging downward. The action had ceased when the transfixed heart had ceased thumping. Her knees too were bent, as though they'd jerked spasmodically.

Even in death, Arlene Wells was lovely. The quick fleeting of life had left no trace of the years which had touched that shapely body.

"Bill!"

The voice lifted me out of my deep study of inert beauty. Merna had called from the next room, the sound coming through the high ventilator with surprising clarity. The voice was saturated with anxiety.

"I'm okay. I'll let you in right away."

I hurried to the door between the rooms. It was locked. That I expected, but I hadn't anticipated the absence of a key. It was an old-fashioned lock, staunch and powerfully sturdy, in which the tum-

bler could be shot home either from the inside or outside.

Once locked with key, even from within, it could not be unlocked without key. And there was no key left in the lock. Nor was one anywhere near by.

"The key's gone," I called.

Her voice bounced with the shakes. "Bill, I'm locked in."

I refused to believe what I heard. "You're what?"

"Someone locked the door from the hall. While I was at the window. And I haven't a key. I gave mine to Randy Grant a few days ago."

"Hell!"

I hurried to the door leading into the hall, but I knew it would be a futile gesture. A killer who locks two doors doesn't overlook a third. The pattern was too plain. It all pointed to something I didn't like—a frame-up.

The door *was* locked and the key gone. I went to the other door. "Merna!"

"Yes?"

"We're locked in!"

"Oh!" There was a short silence. Then: "Mrs. Wells . . . is she—?"

"Yes! Dead! We're in a spot."

"I—I know." It was almost a whisper and seemed to float down from the ventilator. "The police will think we . . . won't they?"

"They might for awhile. That is, if someone is trying to dump a body in our laps."

"Bill! I've got to get out of here. Before the . . . police come. For only an hour. Maybe less. If I don't, this whole mess will crash down around our ears."

"Okay! Relax a minute and let me figure this out. We might not have time enough. The cops might already have been called."

"Oh, no!" It was a moan.

Rapidly, I walked around the room, combing every angle with probing eyes. The set-up was plain. The apartment

building was well built. Walls were heavy I might hammer on the far wall and perhaps rouse someone in the adjoining apartment, but that was the last thing I wanted to do. If I yelled, the sound would penetrate to Merna through that ventilator. But I doubted if anyone else beside Merna and I had heard Arlene's scream. The bedroom window, now open, had been closed.

Something else was pretty obvious. Arlene's murder had not been premeditated. The killer had seized a ready weapon, and struck. The ice pick must have lain at the murderer's elbow as he stood talking to Arlene—or listening to the voices of Merna and me from the other room.

There were two half-filled glasses, an opened bottle of scotch and a bowl of ice cubes on the night stand beside the bed. The pick would have been resting in that bowl. Well, it was a cinch Arlene had known the killer. Perhaps she'd held the killer in such contempt and lack of fear that she never had suspected he would strike.

THAT was hard to believe. Arlene Wells had been smart. All Hollywood knew that. She'd proved it a decade earlier when she'd given up a screen career to marry Wally. Unlike a lot of other untalented lucky beauties whose sole assets were pretty faces, she had foreseen her gradual decline from mild stardom to secondary parts. Arlene was not equipped to sit in a position lower than throne level.

So she had married Wally. But she had become too fond of her position as Mrs. Wells financially and socially to agree to a divorce. Naturally, Wally was deeply hurt. No Hollywood genius can be happy or successful when he is being cuckolded and booby-trapped at the same time.

Now Wally was free. And Merna and I were unwilling prisoners. She said she

had to escape—even if only for an hour.

I needed no slide-rule to figure out that there was only one way to get her out of the apartment building for that precious time she needed. The door had to be unlocked.

Either of us could pick up a telephone and call the office downstairs and ask someone to hustle up with a pass-key. The simple way. But also the impossible way. I might just as well stick my head out the window and yell, "Police!" and then try to answer a lot of embarrassing questions.

For myself, I wouldn't mind; I thought I could talk my way out of the jam. But Merna made everything different. She ought to be ejected entirely from this murder picture. She just didn't belong in a bloody mess.

Well, there was one way to get a pass-key. The *only* way. I would have to go for it. I knew how to get out of the apartment. I hurried to the window. I looked to my left, then my right. The awnings between apartments were too widely spaced.

I called softly to Merna and she appeared in the window.

"I'm going after a pass-key. Say some prayers that I get back before we hear police sirens."

"H-how?"

The apartment faced west, looking out upon the alley at the rear of the building. I pointed downward. There were four floors between us and street level. I didn't look at her.

"No matter what happens, don't yell." Then I went into action.

If I'd paused to think beyond the quick analysis of my next set of actions, I'd have smiled at the way I was buying myself some of my own handiwork. What I was doing for free would have brought me a neat piece of Hollywood change on a movie set.

In the film business I'm one of the boys in the department of the impossible. We'll

do anything—for a price. Rolling jeeps down the side of a mountain, getting blown into the air with an army truck by a land mine, riding a motorcycle into the sea off the end of a pier, falling through a skylight onto a huge printing press, sitting astride a horse plunging from a sixty-foot cliff into a river. I'd done them, and all their variations, time and again. So what I was about to do fazed me none at all.

It took scarcely no time—barely more than one needed to bat out four periods on a typewriter. I swung out of the window and lowered myself into the trapeze effect of the broken awning. I stood on the bar, heels against the building. I faced outward. That was safest. Kicking my legs forward, I sat on air a few feet above the awning to the third floor room.

The awning gave way and I rode it down, slipping from that to the second-floor awning. That one collapsed to bounce me onto the ground-floor shade which I used to break the fall. By the time I hit the ground, however, I was dropping with gathering momentum.

I had to dip my knees to cushion the shock and then catch myself on the flat of my palms. I looked up. Merna was leaning far out of the window. I blew her a kiss and scurried for the front of the building.

A middle-aged woman sat in the alcove which took the place of the apartment hotel's office. A switchboard was at her elbow. It was as silent as a senator's wife; she was reading a magazine.

"The pass-key," I whispered into her face. "Quick!"

She looked startled. "What was that?"

"The pass-key. Don't waste time. Gimme!"

Her hand moved automatically into and out of a drawer. I reached for the key it held.

Briefly, she drew back. "Who're you?"

I leaned toward her. "The girl's hus-

band kicked me out of the second-story room. I've got to go back for my coat."

I snatched the key as her mouth fell open.

"Let's don't have a scandal," I snapped. "Bad for business."

Dodging the elevator man, I ran up four flights of stair. Merna was just within the living room door when I'd unlatched it. "What happened in there?" Her head dipped toward the bedroom.

"She was stabbed. It isn't pretty. Let's make a fast duck out of here."

"I've got something to do, first. Let me have that pass-key." I'd left it in the door. She removed it.

"Don't go in that room. Tell me what you want."

She ran to the door. "I can save time." She went into the death room and I followed to the door. I saw her take a quick look at Arlene's body, watched her body jerk in brief shock, and then followed her tense, rapid progress across the room to the bureau. She snatched the blonde-colored suede purse from it and returned toward me.

"It's horrible." Her face was pasty. She locked the door behind her and we went into the hall. She locked that door, too. Then we hurried down the back steps and out the rear door into the alley. I told her we'd take my car.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blue-Blooded Safe-Cracker

MERNA didn't answer, but permitted me to steer her at almost a trot around to where my long, yellow convertible stood on a side street. I gunned the machine away with a neck-snapping spurt and twisted around the next corner. I stared into the rear-vision mirror.

"That won't help," she said. "If anyone saw us leave, they'll have no trouble

following this car. We might as well carry a brass band with us. Turn left at the next block."

I didn't reply until I'd made the turn. "You're a cool cookie. You certainly fooled me."

She had Arlene's purse open and was probing into it. "I've got things to do. I've thought it all out. Say, there's money in her purse. Four twenties and some change."

"Whew! That's good. Anything under \$200 is only petty larceny."

"Don't be funny. We'll give it back. To Mr. Wells—or somebody."

"Just like that. Okay! Do I stay right on this street, boss?"

"We're heading for Brentwood." She gave me an address.

I reacted sharply. "That's Wally Wells' house—and Arlene's."

"We've got to get there. Mrs. Wells' death upsets everything. Now there will be investigation and, if this charity drive is a racket, there'll be scandal for a lot of innocent people."

"I don't get you, honey."

She was emptying articles from the purse, bending her head to look into it, holding the dispossessed items between her legs so the papers wouldn't be blown away.

"My friends will be made ridiculous dupes," she explained. "If this charity is a fraud, I know Moore drew me in just to use my connections. I—I was so eager to take the job because I've wanted a practical job instead of the way I was brought up. I've heard that conducting charity drives is a thrilling business. Worthy effort, too. That's why I took the job. And . . ."

Her head bounced up. "So that's why Thomas Moore was so attentive. And I thought—"

"Attentive? You mean aggressive, don't you?"

She flushed again. "But he was only

interested in the needy children, in showing us how—”

“Don’t be naive. Haven’t you tried looking at yourself in a bathing suit lately?”

She pretended not to have heard, but the flush was rising. “Still, he did get me to entice my friends in. We’ve used them as sponsors. They’ve loaned their names, made contributions.”

“So they lose a few hundred or thousand bucks.”

“It’s not the money. It’s what their association with a fraud in the charity field will do to their reputations.”

“So they’ll learn to be careful.”

“Bill, you don’t understand. My friends are real blue-bloods. I hate that word, but it’s the only way you’ll understand.” Her eyes were pleading.

“Why didn’t you just kick me?”

“I’m sorry, Bill.”

“So you’re a blue-blood, too? What’ll this do to your standing?”

“That doesn’t matter! But my family will suffer. I’m not using my family name. Powers is my mother’s maiden name. They all will be crucified if the names of the society people I drew into this are revealed. My father is highly important in this state and he might be ruined by a scandal.”

“Okay! But why beat it for Wally’s place?”

“I’ve got to get that official list of names out of the wall safe. I have to destroy it before the news of Mrs. Wells’ murder breaks.”

“I take it we’re not doing a soup job on the safe.”

She was boring into the purse again. It was empty. “The combination is in this purse. She carried it in here because she never could remember it. She didn’t always want to be asking Mr. Moore—”

“Yipes! Moore has the combination?”

“He had to have it to put collections there between bankings.”

I GROANED loudly. “Lambs to slaughter. Sweetheart, you need the guiding hand of a strong man. You’re lucky a gold-brick salesman didn’t come along.”

“You make it sound worse than it was. Really, it wasn’t. Here’s a little slit in the lining. Held down by tape.” I could feel her hand fumbling excitedly. “Here it is. The safe combination. On this slip of paper.”

“Okay, sugar, relax. You’ve accomplished your little chore. I hope I have as much luck.”

“Doing what?”

“Finding Wally Wells. If only that assistant stuck to him like glue to a postage stamp’s back until they returned to the set, I’ll know he didn’t do that ice-pick job. I’d hate to think of him taking the big whiff of gas on account of a two-timer like Arlene.”

“What about us? Isn’t it a crime not to report a murder?”

“Supposing we don’t answer that question.” I’d had to stop at a signal and a titter irritated me. I cast a scowl at two college kids in a cut-down job and drew wide smiles. “What’s so funny?” I muttered to Merna.

“There’s . . . lipstick on your lips.”

“No wonder I got by with that wild story to the lady at the apartment hotel desk.”

“What story? Better wipe your lips.”

“Oh, no! With you in this car with me, that lipstick is a badge of achievement. Let them envy me!”

I wished I was as chirp as I was trying to sound. I even wished I could make myself believe that I was cracking wise to relax *her* muscle-taut tension only.

I was still trying to kid myself when, after we had reached the Wells mansion, I pulled a short distance up the street and explained that we would have to be extremely cautious entering the house because the Beverly Hills police would swoop down at any slightly unusual sign.

I didn't want to admit that there was the fear within me that we might run into a man who had blown his top until he'd become a homicidal maniac.

Merna nodded with understanding and eased shut the automobile door. "I know," she said. "We'll have to break in and not let the servants see us. It's the library at the rear of the house."

I trotted along with her, the ends of my lips turning upward into a stiff, insincere smile: I was thinking that this lovely daughter of social importance was learning fast. First, she had freely entered into a conspiracy to withhold evidence that murder had been done. And now she was glibly suggesting forced entry and safe-cracking. Self-preservation is indeed the strongest of human instincts.

Already it was dusk. The hour was barely a few minutes past five on this early December day, but when the sun dips behind the Santa Monica mountains as it had done more than a half hour earlier, shadows start gathering around these hillside estates.

As Merna and I approached the rambling, two-storied house, I was puzzled by the absence of lights. Servants, unless they were stealing a late-afternoon nap, should have the house partially-lighted by now. Yet, I knew that Wally would not be home until eight, at least; directors usually are kept at the studio planning for the following day long after players have been dismissed. Perhaps Arlene, too, was always late in arriving for dinner these days.

The driveway gate was open. That was not unusual; gates rarely were bolted tightly and electrically against burglars until darkness had shrouded the estate. Merna and I slipped through the gate silently and made our way across the spacious lawns toward the rear. We moved, whenever possible, with the aid of shrubs and trees to hide our actions.

It was easy to see why Arlene had clung

tenaciously to the position of mistress of this estate. Only an important man would find it necessary to maintain such a home and only a highly wealthy man could do so. I'd been there before and was familiar with the formal gardens, the one hundred-foot swimming pool at a cost of \$35,000.

One more thing was easy for me to understand—why I was risking my neck and reputation to help Merna when I could just as easily have been relaxing smugly in some bar with gay companions pretending I'd never been near Arlene Wells' stiffening body.

MERNA was walking close to me. That was enough, brother. I'd been played as a sucker before by women and had warned myself to be cautious. But I knew now that, even if I discovered Merna was a two-timer, I'd have few regrets. She had none of the earmarks of the treacherous vixen. I told myself if she was playing me for a chump, I'd be the most surprised guy on earth.

A patio adjoined the library, the outer side of which was glass. As we stepped into the patio, we could see the flickering of a wood fire in the library. The drapes were not drawn across the glass doors. There was no other light within the room.

Moving cautiously to the glass doors, we peered inside. Nobody was in evidence. I tried the doorknob. The door was locked. I tried the other glass sections without success. I would have to crack the glass. To do so with a minimum of noise would take a bit of improvising.

I hustled out of the patio and found a water faucet. Scooping up several handfulls of the clay earth, I worked it into a paste and, after spreading my handkerchief on the ground, I smeared the mud onto the cloth and went back to the door. A mustard plaster or some adhesive tape would have been better, but this makeshift job had to suffice.

Flapping the muddy surface against the glass section just above the door knob, I pressed it firmly and then did a fast search for a stone. You can't walk far in those hills without finding a piece of rock suitable for any purpose. I came back with the one and knocked a hole in the glass. The mud deadened the sound and held most of the glass slivers from tumbling to the floor inside.

Gently, I pulled off my home-made plaster, and picked chunks of glass out of the frame until I had an opening large enough so I could insert my hand and reach the lock. We went inside.

We stood inside the room and held breaths for the count of ten. No hurrying footsteps could be heard. Then Merna moved away from me, toward the safe built into the wall just beyond the fireplace and disclosed only after a small section of book shelves was swung outward.

She went to work on the safe while I edged farther into the library so I could watch for any approach from either the outside or another part of the house. The fire had burned down to a dull glow. It hadn't been built-up or stirred for hours.

There was barely enough light to see the dark shapes of furniture. A pair of divans were before the fireplace and a larger one was against the opposite wall, on the far side of a wide entrance into the library. I could make out a small desk, several large chairs and plenty of book shelves.

Merna's face was within inches of the wall safe as she strained to see the numbers while she worked the combination. A soft fog of silence lay around us. Not even the fire made crackling noises.

Suddenly, a doorknob turned. There was the sharp squeak of an opening door. The sound came from my left. As I spun in that direction, I was conscious that Merna had turned quickly away from the safe and moved so her body would cover

the opening in the section of book shelves.

CHAPTER SIX

Take a Powder

THERE was movement in the corner of the room, a slow blur of black upon black. A dark shape was projected into the room. It wavered bulkily, propelling itself with a soft, sliding sound.

Tensing myself to meet attack, I remembered that there was a bathroom in that corner.

The figure, however, did not spring toward me. It shuffled uncertainly toward the fire. I saw that it was a man. Then I recognized him. Wally Wells was home!

I whispered his name, hoarsely.

He halted jerkily and turned toward me.

"It's Bill Ryan," I said. Then he fell. He toppled forward onto his face, flinging up his arms to break the fall.

I thought: *My Lord, not you, too, Wally. Not an ice pick in your back.*

He was trying to shove himself from the floor. The instant I leaned forth to help him, I knew what had tumbled Wally to the floor. He smelled like the dregs of a moonshiner's still.

I hoisted him to his feet, a slippery, sagging weight. He waved his head several times and said, "Bill Ryan! Why, it's Bill."

When I'd guided him a few steps to a leather chair, I said, "This makes things different, Merna. We need a little light." I found the desk lamp and turned it on. It gave just enough light. I went to the glass doors and pulled the drapes.

Wally Wells was staring at Merna. "Who's the girl?" His speech was thick and there was an "h" tacked onto the "s" when he spoke.

I stood over him. "Arlene's secretary in the charity drive. Forget her, and look

at me. Why aren't you at the studio?"

He twisted in the chair and stared up at my face. The moment his attention was away from her, Merna went back to working at the safe. The light from the desk lamp now permitted her to twist the dial quickly.

"T'hell with the studio. T'hell with the picture. T'hell with ev'yone. I'm gonna get drunk."

"Brother, you've arrived. What happened, Wally? When you went to the doctor? I've got to know."

"Nothin' happen'. I decided to get drunk, tha's all."

"You're a liar. You just don't get drunk for nothing. You've been on the wagon for—"

"Three years. But I fell off. Boy, how I fell."

"So you fell. But why? What happened to the assistant director who drove you to the doc's? The husky one went with you, didn't he?"

He giggled. "I ditched him. Boy, how I ditched him. Went out side door at doc's, an' left him sittin' in . . . in . . . what you call it, Bill?"

"Reception room. Why'd you ditch him?"

"I wanted to get dr—"

I interrupted him by swinging a palm into his fat face. The slap rocked his head as though it was a blown-up toy balloon. I had to find out a few things.

First, was he faking drunkenness? His quick reaction to that slap might give me the answer.

Next, was he alone in the house? If he called for help after that sock, I'd know the servants were on the job.

And I had to have the truth about why he'd shaken the assistant; a slap can cure the most persistent liar.

He reacted quickly. I'd barely pulled my hand away after the slap when he was sitting erect, teeth bared and spitting, "Don't hit me, damn you." Then, he

slumped back into what was either real or affected intoxication. I didn't have time to further test its genuineness.

He didn't call for help. He decided to talk. "Okay, so I didn't tend to get drunk. But I did."

"Where are the servants?"

"I sent 'em away. Take the night off, I says."

"Even though Arlene will be home for dinner?"

"W-will she?"

"Well, won't she?"

"How'd I know? Who t'hell cares? She's got her boy-friend. Got eve'ything she wants, damn her."

"Okay! So you didn't shake the assistant so you could get drunk. Why, then?"

"Don't make me say it. I'm 'shamed."

"Oh, act your age. Why'd you . . .?"

"'Cause I wanted to catch Arlene. Only I didn't. I couldn't. They were too smart. It was mortifying."

"You shadowed them?"

HE BOBBED his head, lowering his eyes. "But they must have got wise. Hell, I'm no 'tective. I'm just a dumb kluck. They didn't go anyplace. They sep'rated. They knew I was spying, and they were laughing at me. I couldn't take it, Bill. I came home, and got drunk alone. Fast as hell. Drink and forget, Bill. Fast as hell."

"You didn't follow Arlene?"

"I came home, and got drunk. Quick as hell. Quick . . ."

Merna gave a faint gurgle of triumph and I looked her way. She had the safe open. The hole in the wall was surprisingly large. For an instant before she thrust her hand into the safe, I caught a glimpse of its immediate contents.

I saw the flash of steel, obviously from a revolver which lay in the mouth of the hole. But more surprising was the sight of currency. Stacks of greenbacks, bound together.

I took one step toward her. "Is that real dough?"

She spoke without turning her head. "Yes! Mrs. Wells kept it here until she had a large amount, then turned it over to Mr. Moore to deposit."

"Kept the charity money in bills?"

She was fumbling around in the safe. "Why not? Moore said that made it easier. She turned in over a hundred thousand a few days ago. There was about sixty or sixty five thousand from previous—"

"My Lord! What a pair of babies Moore played with."

Wally was on his feet, suddenly steady. "Hey, wha's she doin' in 'at safe? Whose money's 'at?"

"Shut up. Sit down."

"I won't!"

Merna evidently had found what she'd been seeking. She had moved to the fireplace with a sheaf of papers in her hand and was leaning forward so that, as she studied the typing on the papers, she could feed them into the fire.

Wally tried to push past me. "She can't do that. Arlene won't like it. She never even let me in that safe. What's in there?"

I shoved him backward, and this time he staggered. "Arlene is through objecting to anything. She's dead, Wally. Murdered!"

He had floundered against the divan at the far wall and steadied himself there. "Arlene's what? You're joking, Bill. Don't make jokes with things like that."

I narrowed my eyes. Wally had been a bad actor when he was trying to make a living as a fat boy comedian many years ago. It would be ironical if, now that he didn't have to act for a living, he could be putting on a great performance.

There was an insistent burring sound somewhere deep within the house. I paused to listen. The sound came three times. It came with mechanical regularity.

No one could buzz a doorbell like that. The telephone was ringing. I listened to it rattle three more times.

"We ought to answer it," I said.

Wally had slouched upon the divan. "On the desk," he said.

I went to the desk and saw the hand-set extension there. Merna was still burning papers, unmindful of anything else in the room. The safe stood open. The glint of steel and the green color of money were still there. I picked up the telephone.

The voice asked, "Mr. Wallace Wells?"

My heart went down to thump around in my stomach. It was the voice of the law. A homicide dick. I don't know what it is about a murder detective's gravel harsh tones that carry the mark of his profession. But it's always there.

I debated for two fast counts. "It is."

"This is the Beverly Hills police department."

"Y-yes?" I did a bit of acting myself.

"We tried to reach you at the studio. Mr. Wells, I'm leaving right now to see you. Please stay there."

"Of—of course. But why?"

"I'll tell you when I arrive. It's about your wife. There's been an accident. I want to discuss it with you. Stay there, Mr. Wells." He broke the connection.

I put the instrument in the cradle. "The cops," I told Merna without actually looking at her. They've found the body, and are heading this way."

"That makes my job a rush one," a deep male voice said.

I looked at Wally, but he was staring at me with limpid moon eyes. Then, I turned to face the door.

RANDOLPH GRANT was there. He was big and broad-shouldered enough so he might be a problem, even without the .45 he held in his hand.

He said, "Get away from that safe, Miss Powers."

I turned my head and saw that Merna had returned to the safe. Her back was toward us, but she looked over her shoulder and then she shrugged and lowered her hands and moved out into the room.

Grant said, "I hope nobody's fool enough to get cute. I'm strictly on the hustle since the law is heading this way." He walked toward the safe. "Thanks for handing me things on a platter. The boodle, I mean."

Not one of us said a word. Wally's silence surprised me. His intoxication should have broken down all of his caution. Here was the man who had been keeping his wife busy and who only a few hours ago, if Wally's story had been true, had made Wally look like a bungling boob.

Once at the safe, Grant paused and gave us a crisp order. "Get together over by the desk, you two." He was speaking to Merna and me. "Stay on the couch, Wells." When Merna had moved to my side, he took a darting glance toward the safe. He could see the money there, but the safe was almost shoulder high and deep inside the wall. This made the reach longer.

I studied him while he tossed the situation over in his mind. I knew he'd never risk taking his eyes from us. Reaching into the safe to bring out that money was going to be an awkward and difficult chore.

He bit his lip. He'd made up his mind. He said, hollowly, "I didn't bargain on doing a heavy job tonight, but I've got to cop a heel fast, so you three will have to eat lead."

Merna was standing at my left. Now, with a brief, sharp cry, she turned her body and clutched my left shoulder with her left hand as though trying to ward off the impending rain of lead.

I shoved her from me, hurling her to the floor behind the desk. Her right hand, hidden from Grant's view, had

touched my left hand and there had been the cold feel of steel. A small revolver had been thrust into my palm. The revolver from the safe!

The movement had been so sudden that Grant was bewildered for an instant. In that flash of time, he refrained from bending finger around trigger. And that split moment was enough because, as Merna went over, she thrust out her arm and swept the desk lamp onto the floor. The room blanked into a crash of darkness.

Grant and I both fired. We shot even before the light had been blotted out. He was a trace of a second ahead of me. I was falling when he let go. I had seen his gun tense and knew he was pressing the trigger.

My fall saved me because he tried, too late, to correct his aim when he realized I was ducking. For myself, I had little hope of clipping him with a first shot. I was moving too rapidly to be accurate. And I had to fire with my left hand. I only wanted to let him know I had a rod, too.

I had the sensation of a tugging at my hair as I went down in the darkness. The warm nearness of it convinced me it was a .45 slug coursing above my head. The lead crashed into the wall, smacking as though it was a mortar shell.

He sent one more hunk of lead after me in the dark, directing his fire at the spot toward which I was falling. But I had twisted in the air, curling myself into a ball so that I struck the floor in front of, instead of alongside, the place where I'd stood. Now I slid across the floor, knowing that the sound would not betray my position, particularly when he, too, was moving. He was anxious to get out of the range of the firelight.

I edged toward the dark drapes and crouched beside one of the large leather chairs. There was no way for him to know where I was unless I moved, spoke or fired. He, too, was hidden from my

sight by the blackness of the room away from the dying embers of the fire. But I had the advantage. I was between him and the exit from that room. He would have to approach me to escape. Also, he would have to pass in front of the fire. Time was in my favor. The first move must be his, because we both knew that the police were headed toward the Wells home. At any minute, a squad car, siren screaming, might come up the street.

I DECIDED to crouch and wait. I needed to slow down, anyway. Stunt men try to take breathers between action. This was a double-value period of time. Moments for easing up myself and putting tension on Randy Grant. Tension is a man's worst enemy, even in physical combat.

Let Grant taste it. I'd take a few counts of relaxation . . . and an opportunity to weigh my immediate future. I've been hunting wild game for years but this business of gun-fighting with humans was a new profession for me.

I kept on waiting. I breathed softly. The silence of the room was the coldest, most foreboding void I'd ever known. I thought of Merna, lying on the floor beside the desk. She could remain there for hours. I wondered about Wally. He would be sweating it out. The situation was enough to sober the worst alcoholic. He would be reminding himself that should he stir, Grant might mistake it for a sound from me and blast away.

So we waited. Four persons in a room. Three against one. Yet only one against one actually. Randolph Grant and Bill Ryan. Each with a revolver. I'd seen his .45.

Now I was feeling the one Merna had thrust into my hands and I knew Grant had the advantage in firearms. My weapon was a woman's firearm, probably a .22. It would do damage if it struck perfectly. His rod could tear my head off

with even a near-hit. I had to chance it.

We went on waiting. I could almost hear the minutes ticking away. To Randy, they would be fleeting. Yet we had crouched in the dark barely two minutes. I knew that the break must come soon. He was going to have to shoot first. Because of that, he would gamble on trickery.

Suddenly, an atomic bomb landed. I cringed and shuddered. The blast of his gun had rocked the quiet room. A spurt of fire hissed out darkness. Behind me there was the spitting crash of glass.

I fired three rapid shots. I knew he must have fired with the .45 held far away from his body, hoping that I'd automatically direct fire at that mark and then he'd know where I was. I shot first two feet to the right of that fire spurt, then two feet to the left and then a couple of feet below. He had to be in one of those spots, and he could be above his firing point.

I was rolling behind the chair while I turned loose those three shots, and I barely made it. A pair of blistering shots went off across the room and there was a splintering in the arm of the chair above me. Both of his shots hit the chair. The force of the .45 rocked the entire chair and shoved it backward to the left.

By that time, however, I was at the other side, and I spotted the flash of his heater on the second shot. Now I knew definitely where he was. I pumped two shots at that spot. If they didn't get him, I was sunk.

Those were my fifth and sixth shots—the capacity of the little gun. I was banking that he'd been hit three times, depending on one of that first trio going home. That should be enough, even from a .22, to stop him. He still had one unfired shell, I knew.

He didn't fire again. He groaned. It was more of a low gasp for breath. I knew I'd won.

I tucked my legs under me to rise and sneak across the room to him.

I never moved further. A million violins screeched on one horribly high note and the house blew up inside my skull. After that, there was neither sound nor sight. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Merna's Gone!

A COUPLE of very dark and cold centuries later, I started climbing out of a deep pit. I climbed slowly and frantically, gasping and panting. I had help. Someone was pulling me upward. Fingers were tugging at the top of my skull and my entire body was following, a dead weight upon the bones of my skull.

It made the top of my head hurt as though a hive of yellow jackets were trying to escape all at once through one tiny hole. I wanted to get out of the pit fast because there was a stinging, mustardy odor in it and my body was absorbing the smelly vapor.

Then, suddenly, the odor itself projected me out of the black pit. It took hold of the inside of my head and lifted me. I lay on the floor of a room. I could see the ceiling and it was made of knotty pine with redwood beams stretching from wall to wall. I had no sustained view of the ceiling because a white ball was floating back and forth above my face. I had a quick recollection of Poe's pit and the pendulum and instinctively I shrank away. The ball disappeared.

A voice asked, "Hey, fella, you conscious?"

I moved my head and stared into a round face. It was the face of the law. I wouldn't have known only it had a policeman's cap on its head. I said, "How do I know?"

The mouth moved in the face. "This

stuff brought him around okay, Lieutenant." He held up the ball. It was a damp rag in his hand.

I started to sit up and got halfway to my elbows when the whole house turned ninety degrees to the right and wavered. Then it snapped back to the point from which it had started. I blinked and shook my head. I shook it only once. I didn't want to stir up that much sharp pain a second time. My head had been stepped on by an elephant.

A pair of hands helped me sit erect. Then things became clearer. I was in the library of Wally Wells' home. Lights were on in every corner. Three strangers were in the room—three beside Roundface, who was at my side. One of them wore the uniform of a Beverly Hills policeman. The two others were in blue serge suits. I didn't see them all at once, because, when I sat up, part of the room was obliterated by the huge leather chair behind which I'd crouched right after I'd fired the .22's last shots at Randy Grant.

The first stranger I saw was a short, stocky plainclothes man. He was using the telephone on the desk. I'd seen him before. I'd seen him ten thousand times. He was just like any average citizen of medium build, stature, complexion or all the other items which are employed to describe a person.

He wasn't fat, he wasn't skinny; he was neither short nor tall; he had no long nose, jutting chin, flapping ears, bobbing Adam's apple or distinguishable eyes. You could easily forget him after a long, concentrated study. He was the lieutenant. He put down the telephone, after winding up his conversation, and moved toward me.

I struggled to my feet, went slightly dizzy for an instant, and asked him, "What happened?"

"Shut up!" he said. I took him at his word, narrowing my eyes. So his voice was the *one* thing about him. By his

voice he could be identified from a few billion other persons. The sound of it was like two pieces of fine, oiled leather, being slapped together.

You reacted to it as though you'd been whacked across the mouth with the back of a soft hand. It didn't bite you and it didn't pat caressingly. It merely startled you and told you not to try either physical or verbal argument with the man. His was the voice of well-informed authority.

He said to the policeman who now was holding my arm: "He clean?"

"Yes! I frisked him good before he came to."

"We'll go into another room." He looked me in the eye. "Guess you're smart enough not to try any funny stuff." He didn't wait for me to reply. Over his shoulder, he ordered, "Stay here, boys. The doc should be here shortly. Let me know when he's here."

We moved toward the door leading to other parts of the house. I saw the two coppers then. The one in uniform was kneeling beside a body on the floor alongside the wall across the room. Randy Grant was stretched out there.

The other plainclothes man was sitting with one half of his haunches—and they were big ones—on the davenport. He sat that way so he could partially face Wally Wells. He was a match for Wally in size. They looked like two plumb Oriental idols. Neither was a happy idol. Wally was weeping. Genuine tears were riding the roller-coaster curves of his fat face.

HE BLUBBERED as he looked at me. "I couldn't do a thing, Bill. I was just a useless hunk."

"Shut up!" said the lieutenant.

When we were in an adjoining room, which probably was called a solarium, the lieutenant said, "Sit down, Ryan." I found a chair and eased into it gently. My head felt slightly better. "I'm Dan

Larkin, head of Homicide in Beverly Hills. I presume you're the one who shot up the lad in there."

"Lad? Why, he was getting ready to shoot the three of us down in cold blood just so's he could snatch the hunk of dough."

"Dough?"

"In the safe. A big stack of green stuff. Maybe two hundred Gees. Don't tell me—"

"It's gone."

"Gone?" I shrugged. "T'hell with it. What about Miss Powers? Merna! Where's she?"

"Gone, too."

"Gone?"

"If there *was* a girl, she's gone."

Oh, he was a *great* conversationalist, all right. That voice of his kept smacking me in the face and yet never revealed a damned thing. Until he was ready, that is.

Finally, he got around to being ready. By that time, he had me ready to chew up ten-penny nails and spit them in his face.

It was after about ten minutes of slinging questions at me that he said, "I guess things jell okay. I believe your story. I had to talk to you away from that babbling brook of confusion, Wells. He can't remember much.

"He was sitting on the divan, holding his breath, during the fighting. Maybe that's when you got popped over the head. I'll admit you didn't do it yourself. But you could have had the girl conk you so you could build an alibi."

"Don't kid about things like that."

"I never kid, Ryan."

"You're no fool, either, Larkin. You know that statement couldn't be true."

"Do I? Then why'd the girl take a powder."

"Who says she did? Wells?"

"The drunken geek doesn't know what happened to her. He heard this ruckus

and he managed to get onto his feet and crawled in back of the divan. He was still there when we arrived."

"He didn't see who came in . . . doesn't know what happened to Merna . . . never saw the money disappear?"

"Supposing nobody came in—that nothing happened to the girl?"

"Quite needling me. I've told you the truth."

"I'm serious, Ryan. When we got here, the place was dark. And quiet. We never passed any car."

"One could have swung on up the road out of the canyon above here."

"I know. We found the door to the library open and came in. You were on the floor conked out cold. The bump on your head showed you weren't faking. Grant groaned and we spotted him. The safe was open. Saw Wells' feet sticking from back of the couch and thought we'd found a stiff."

"What does Randy Grant say?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?"

"Nothing!"

A swell bit of brilliant repartee that. I asked, "Why not?"

"He's clammed up for some reason. Won't spill anything."

"Maybe he murdered Arlene Wells, that's why he won't talk."

His voice went back to slapping my head from one side to another. "So?" he said. When he decided to continue, he asked, "How'd you know about the murder?"

There was no use lying to a man like Lieutenant Larkin. I told him the truth from the start. It felt good spilling the whole story to him. When I'd finished, I said:

"That proves Merna wouldn't have taken it on the lam. Something's happened to her." The impact of this assertion hit me. Why I hadn't grown deeply concerned before I don't know. I sup-

pose that sock on the head had kept me more stunned than I'd realized. I stood quickly. "Larkin, we've got to find that girl."

"Take it easy, Ryan."

"Easy? With her in danger! Someone's murdered Arlene Wells, robbed the safe in there, knocked me out—and you talk about taking it easy."

"Okay! Okay, we'll get going. But one question! If a murderer was loose, why just rap you over the head? Why not rub out Wells, too?"

"Maybe he thought there'd been too much shooting already—with the police headed this way. Maybe he didn't have a gun."

"Yeah! Let it lie. But we ought to have a lead, if we're going to find a girl."

"Randy Grant! Make him talk. He'll know what happened."

"That may be next Christmas. He's a wounded man."

"Wounded! You mean— If he was dying. . . . How bad is he?"

"Hit three times. Once in the neck. And one shot went through him and probably hit the base of his spine. That knocked him off his feet. The gun was only a .22."

"If he was dying, he might spill something. It's a cinch that whoever came in and conked me and took the dough and nabbed Merna could have helped him in a getaway and didn't. That guy's bitter. Bitter to start with. He'll be ripe to talk."

Larkin sucked in a long breath. "I'll say one thing. You sure hold a conviction. I hope the girl *was* dragged away."

"You *hope* so."

"You wouldn't like it if she *walked* away—with the dough or some other guy."

My lips felt stiff. "I still don't like that kind of talk."

"Save it." He turned away. "Stay with Martin. The doc ought to be here now. We'll try out your idea."

I sat down and watched the minutes tick away and the blackness of a wintery night fall around the Bel Air hills. I'd lost all account of time. I couldn't even remember when Merna and I had arrived at the Wells' home. I had no idea how long it had been since Grant and I had tried to shoot it out. I only knew that time was passing and somewhere Merna was someone's prisoner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Floating Hideout

BEFORE I could begin running things over in my mind I heard the arrival of someone and listened to Larkin's greeting of the police doctor. After that, there was a moderate silence. Although I edged close to the door, with the policeman, Martin, breathing down my neck, I could hear only mumbling voices and some stirrings.

Then Larkin's voice came sharply. "Okay, Yates, arrest Bill Ryan. Charge him with murder. We can at least make manslaughter stick."

Someone muttered a few words with a rising inflection and Larkin's voice smacked again. "He admits he shot Grant, doesn't he? With Grant dying, that makes a crime, doesn't it? Get moving."

The other policeman in uniform came into my room just as we heard Larkin once more. "While you're at it, doc, send for the morgue wagon for that guy there. He might as well die in the stiff buggy as in a nice clean ambulance."

The two policemen took me by the arms then and we went quickly into the library, through it and out onto the patio. On the driveway we waited. We waited less than five minutes before Larkin joined us.

"You're a lucky bird, Ryan. Or a smart one."

"Save the compliments. Was I right?"

"Yeah! It worked. Grant's scared. And

spiteful, now he thinks he's dying. Talked plenty. Our man is Thomas Moore, the brains of a neat little ring of con men. He was the inside man on this big con and Grant was a roper."

"You've lost me, pal. What's the gimmick on such lingo?"

He smiled. "I'm quoting Grant almost verbatim. A big con is a confidence racket for big dough. A roper sets up the apples, as they call them. Hollywood terms 'em suckers. Grant had been with Moore several years. The crowd of con men with Moore is small and compact and they work out of a yacht, always ready to scam. They've pulled this charity swindle before. It's Moore's specialty.

"Grant moved in ahead, acted like a small-time actor and set Mrs. Wells up as mark—another term for sucker. Then Moore appeared. Grant says he was afraid of the set-up from the first, on account of Mrs. Wells. With con men, women are dynamite. Too hysterical and likely to start a rumble—get excited, that is. But Moore was a sucker for a skirt and Mrs. Wells was soft for the golden touch."

"Then Grant wasn't her boy? It was Moore?"

"Yeah. Grant only took the gossip rap. Today the big gamble blew up—prematurely. For some reason, Moore had to kill Mrs. Wells quickly."

"He overheard Merna and me talking in the next room. Arlene heard, too."

"So he killed her and that put him in the heavy racket—a touch of violence. Con men never tote guns, so he had to use an ice-pick. It was Moore's first killing and he got panicky. Decided to blow town. The big con here was finished, anyway. But he wanted to take all the loot possible.

"Grant was assigned to knock off the safe here. When Grant was late in meeting him, Moore came around to see what was wrong. Got here in time to hear the shots, take a peek inside, see what had

happened. . . and now you know the rest."

I felt like jumping up and down with impatience. "But what about Merna?"

For what must have been one of the few times in his life, Larkin wore a worry mask. "Moore took her. Left Grant here to die and took her along. Of course, he thought Grant was dying. He was alone and couldn't take both, so. . ."

I wanted to shake him like a mother prodding a little boy. "Quit stalling. *How'd* he take Merna? Why?"

"She saw him enter the room, heard him knock you out and tried to rush him. He stunned her. Carried her out with him after he'd taken the money. He could carry only one person—so he left Grant."

I was chewing my teeth. "I get it, Larkin. He *could* have left her. . . ." I refused to finish.

He told me to take it easy. Then the other plainclothesman came to the door and said his call had gone through. Larkin went inside. When he came back, he was with the homicide detective. He told the uniformed coppers to stay and clean up things. "Doc will instruct the men with the ambulance."

"What're Grant's chances?" I asked.

"He won't die from these slugs unless they give him lead poisoning. Ryan, I'm letting you go with me. I wish I could leave you behind, but Wells says you'd stick to our tails anyway. Come on."

HE STARTED running down the driveway. The tubby detective waddled after him. I passed the latter in the third stride.

We had to wait for Pudgy, however. He was the driver.

I said, "I can drive. Handling cars is my specialty."

Fatso was puffing. "That's my *department*. I drove at Indianapolis until 1946."

We got off in a hurry. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"San Pedro. The harbor. Moore is heading for Mexico on a yacht named the Tippy-Lou. That's his floating hideout."

"Think we can get there in time?"

"We're already too late."

"The yacht on its way?"

"Cleared the harbor ten minutes ago. How Moore got there so quickly is beyond me. We're heading there to find out."

We drove for two blocks before I came in on the conversation again. "You've been holding out something, Larkin. Grant must have told you *why* Moore took Merna along."

"Can't you guess?"

"I'm asking you."

"Grant says Moore likes the girl. To snatch her during a getaway means he must think she's worth the gamble."

My hands clenched so tightly my nails dug into my palms. "You haven't seen her, Larkin. And what's Moore got to lose? What's a kidnapping on top of a murder he's already committed? They both take the death rap—and he's only got one life."

"If he's taken her on that yacht, we're up against a toughie. I told the harbor boys not to try stopping the yacht."

I groaned. "I know, Larkin. Moore really isn't running a risk after he's got the girl on board. We close in on the boat, he goes to work with another ice pick and she goes over the side, weighted down."

"And we prove nothing. We've got to get that girl, Ryan."

I leaned forward to peer into his face. I didn't think he was capable of so much human concern.

"Sure," I said. "Sure! But what's put the needle in you?"

"Her name, Ryan. Powers isn't her name. Wells just told me who her father is. I'm not telling you, Ryan. I'll say this much. He's so important in this state, my name is Hog-Wash if anything happens to her."

The man who ran the little private water taxi was willing to talk. We had been at the dock waiting for his return when he chugged out of the darkness. Once we had arrived at the harbor, Larkin had gone into action. It hadn't taken more than a half hour for him to discover that one water taxi had headed out to sea with a man and a pretty young girl.

"They'd missed connections and the girl was drunk," the harbor man had said.

Now the taxi operator was corroborating the story. His boat had bounced out of the night on choppy waters. He said it had taken a hell of a lot of doing to make it back to the dock.

"The wind's blowin' terrible an' I wouldn't of made the trip exceptin' for the big price the guy gimme."

I asked about his passengers, describing Moore and Merna.

"That's them all right," the man said. "Lord, she was tipsy. He practically had to carry her from the car onto the boat. She got sick a time or two. He kept givin' her something to sniff an' it quieted her."

Despite the wind, the odor of that "something" clung faintly around the boat. A bit of chloroform!

"Yes," the man said. "I put 'em on the Tippy-Lou. The yacht was waitin' for 'em. Must of had it planned."

"What happened after they boarded the yacht?"

"I dunno. I beat it fast once we was there. I'd collected my dough 'fore we started."

We bid him good-by. He'd told us all we needed to know. Moore must have telephoned ahead for the boat to head out into the harbor and he'd board it there.

Larkin grunted. "We can overtake them in the morning."

"By that time, I may be too late."

"We can swoop down on them from above. The Coast Guard uses helicopters for rescue work. We can hover above

them and make sure he doesn't try dumping her overboard."

I sucked air through my teeth. "She'll fight. He'll find that out before daylight. And if she spits in his eye, he'll chuck her overboard."

"And if we order the Coast Guard to intercept the yacht tonight, it's the same as signing the girl's death order."

I was looking into the night sky's blackness. I was hearing wings which weren't flapping. I said softly, "Shut up, Larkin."

"Huh?"

"Stop blabbing. I've got a way, pal. A Coast Guard cutter can't save Merna, capture Moore and stop that boat. But one person can. A man working alone. A man dropped out of the night onto the boat. Plunked down on that deck on a windy night."

"Who?"

"Me, brother. Bill Ryan. Danger is my racket. Stunts are my business."

"Maybe it's an idea."

"Maybe, hell. It's a cinch. As easy as laying a rose bud in a dish of water. I've done tougher stunts than that for dough. Once I jumped from the wing of an airplane into the bend of a ship's sail heavy with wind, and slid down the bulge of that canvas to the deck. I did it for a movie scene. Tonight's little fray will be duck's soup."

He asked, "Why should I let you?"

"For no official reason. Unofficially, because I'm the only bird here at the moment who can do it. Morally, because you'd like to see the life of a beautiful young girl saved."

"Let's go..."

CHAPTER NINE

Forced Landing

THE wind was strong against my body. It flattened my hair against my scalp. It whistled in my ears and made my eyes go narrow.

I sat in the rope seat at the end of twenty feet of strong rope dangling from the underside of a helicopter. That seat was merely a noose, and I would have fallen from it were I not holding the rope above it with both hands. This was the only way I could be put down on the Tippy-Lou. I couldn't have climbed down.

Above me, the blades of the helicopter went around and around. It was surprising how little the air ship rocked in the heavy wind. Nor had I expected the comparative silence; the wind made more noise than the whirring of the blades.

There were no lights on the plane. The Coast Guard boys in the small cabin would not be using flood lights. They knew the course the Tippy-Lou would be taking toward Mexican waters, and they had high expectations of spotting the yacht's lights from the air. They carried powerful night glasses.

Not a trace of moonlight paled the sky. It was the dark of the moon. Even had there been moonglow, the scurrying clouds would have cloaked any brightness.

We could have been ten thousand feet in the air, or my feet might have been slapping at leaping waves. I couldn't tell. There was neither the sensation of height nor of speed. There was only the wind in my face, and that could have been manufactured by the storm.

Now and then, we would bounce or slip to one side. Several times, I had the impression the helicopter was turning. The men in the cabin no doubt were searching the seas below. I tried to look downward, but there was nothing to see. Some minutes before, there had been the lights of the harbor and then the cloud-misted lights of San Pedro and Wilmington.

But we had lost them. We had come miles from the docks.

Suddenly, I was aware that the helicopter was slowing. It slipped to its left and hovered momentarily. I looked up-

ward. At that moment, a speck of light flickered. Once. No more. Then, I realized how the boat hunt was being conducted.

On the surface, a Coast Guard ship had been combing the ocean waters, speaking by radio to the boys in the helicopter. I knew then that once I gave the planned signal from the yacht—if I lived so long—required aid would be quick in coming.

The brief hovering of the helicopter had been the first of the arranged signals to let me know the quarry had been spotted.

The wind's whistling softened. The helicopter was gliding easily. Then it went up and down three times. That was the signal that the yacht was below and that time for the slow, gentle descent had come.

I leaned against the rope and cupped a palm over my eyes, staring downward at a slight angle. I detected the dark, moving shape. I saw the lights of the yacht as we dipped out of a bank of fast-moving, dark clouds.

This was it. I patted my hip and felt the police automatic there.

The blades of the airship were like knives sliding through cotton. We seemed to stand still in the air.

The dark shape of the boat began rising to meet me. To play it safe, we had to remain behind the boat. Once ahead of it, a sharp-eyed look-out from the bridge of the yacht could discover our arrival.

I worked backward in the loop, pulling myself upward on the rope. When I had my feet in the loop, I began letting the rope slide past my palms until I was hanging by my hands.

Now I would wait for the airship to deposit me, feet-first, on the dark deck of the yacht below. The boat loomed large and flat, with angular mounds in the center.

I upped my head to see if the helicopter was moving; it seemed to be stand-

ing serenely still. Below me two boards slapped together sharply. Or perhaps two waves rose from the sea and smacked in mid-air.

But there was no slapping, or smacking, or clapping or cracking. Something more dangerous had made the noise. A gun! After the count of three—slowly—I sensed that fact. I was being shot at!

My chin dug into my chest as I stared downward. Then I caught sight of the firearm. I saw it, and I didn't see it. There was the impression of a gun blasting away at me, even if I only saw the spurt of fire. Purple fire. Not red or yellow, as I'd expected. Purple and slender and long. A solid tube of hot color which leaped toward me. It stretched upward, then burned itself out, fading into total obscurity.

I heard the clapping of the boards again. Crack! A sharp report which, strangely, was prolonged.

Something whistled in the dark and went screeching past me. Warm waves from it fanned my cheek. They gave warmth to my face, an almost imperceptible trace of hot breath. But there was ice in my stomach.

SOMEONE was pot-shooting my way from the deck of the yacht. The deck was not stretching quietly below me, either. It was twisting to the left, curving in an arc. Slipping its nose around a bend and kicking its posterior in the opposite direction to whip itself out of a direct line.

I began to swing. I became the weight on the end of a pendulum. Not back and forth like the golden arm in a grandfather's clock, but transcribing the arc of a circle like those balls on wires twirled by hammer throwers at track meets.

The helicopter was swinging above me. It was swerving sharply to match the movement of the yacht. The pilot was trying to help me fulfill my mission of

landing on the yacht's deck. At the same time, he was doing his best to prevent me from being a stationary target.

Once more the wind was brushing cold, biting fingers against my face. I was moving more rapidly.

I was lower, too. The yacht was so near me that I could see details of the man's figure on the top deck. There was a half-sheltered cockpit on top of the boat's cabin, from which a man could both steer and stand watch in good weather. The weather this night was not good, but one man was alone in this basket. He'd been watching. And he's been steering. And he'd also been shooting at me. Triple duty.

There must be good reason why he was alone, taking care of all these duties. No reason could be *good* ones, however, so far as Merna and I were concerned. Whatever was taking the attention of Moore and his unknown number of confederates could not be conducive to Merna's welfare.

The man was aiming the rifle again. I hitched my body to the right, swinging my feet wildly, and tugging at the rope. I sought to accentuate the giant swing of the rope which dangled me from the helicopter.

I knew I was a difficult shot for the man in the cockpit because of the sway of my rope and the plunging of the yacht as it curved and dived through the choppy waters. Yes, I would be tough to hit, but I wanted more odds in my favor. I strived to become an impossible target.

Once more, the gun spat. The fire came out of a tunnel this time. I could see the walls of the tunnel. I looked directly down it. The sound of the gun was louder. A blast rather than a slap. And the whistling in my ears was more shrill and the brush of air along my cheek more pronounced. The man had come closer. And I could see that he was shooting with a rifle.

Charity Begins at Homicide

Once more, I kicked. This time to the left. I was a wild target now, swerving toward the man. The yacht had continued its circling, and the helicopter had bent slightly.

Then I knew what I must do. And how. I gathered myself into the sort of human ball I'd been trying to emulate. I aimed myself at the cockpit like a billiard ball about to dart for a corner pocket.

I would have missed the man's head by ten feet if I'd held onto the noose in the rope. I didn't hold on. I let loose and dropped. I went down an imaginary chute like a lump of coal.

When I struck, I struck solidly. I landed against the man with my side and one hip. I'd turned slightly in the air. I had sucked in my breath. And now that air exploded through my lips as though I'd drunk a pound of soda and it was exuding sharply. All the breath I had was knocked out of me. I grunted loudly.

The man did more than that. He belated with pain. One loud agonizing guttural cry. Then a sighing moan. My plunge into him used his body as a cushion for me against savage contact with the railing of the cockpit.

My hundred ninety-eight pounds of falling weight rammed him against that railing. There was a snapping of at least one bone. The collision could have broken his back. It probably had. I didn't give a damn.

He cried out once, then groaned, and slumped over the railing. For an instant, his arms dangled limply like eels flapping from a hook. Then the rifle struck the deck below and he crumpled over after it. I heard a splash. It was the rifle, because I could see his body still on the deck. Inert, but still aboard.

Leaning against the railing of the cockpit, my knees buckling under me as a reaction to that stunning crash, I pulled long, deep breaths through my wide-

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Michael Morgan

opened mouth. My lungs filled and emptied, inhaled and expelled. For a half minute, my head swam and I was woozy.

During that fraction of a minute, I was motionless and a shroud of silence was around me. Then, I was aware that I was open to attack. The man's crew partners—or Moore—might swarm over me and rap me into unconsciousness or the everlasting sleep.

Yet, I hadn't been attacked. I pulled myself erect and scanned the deck, turning my body completely around. I was absolutely alone in the cockpit. For that matter, I was alone on the entire deck. The man lying down there didn't count.

Apparently only that one man had been watching. He alone knew I had dropped onto the yacht's deck. The others might have known that overhead a helicopter was searching them out like a falcon measuring its prey. But they hadn't known I was dangling from a rope, being lowered among them.

Again I reacted to that conjecture. If they had known about the helicopter, or heard the shots, why weren't they on deck? Something important must be keeping them below.

CHAPTER TEN

Swabbing-Up Operations

A GIRL screamed then. Only once. It was Merna's voice. Even in fear and anger, it was recognizable. And her scream came from below decks. I felt for my automatic. The one the homicide lieutenant had loaned me. It wasn't there. The pocket where it had been was empty.

It undoubtedly had been whipped out of my possession at the jar when I'd struck the man with the rifle.

Well, if I had to fight without firearms, I would. That scream of Merna's had

Charity Begins at Homicide

been enough to make up my mind completely.

Quickly I leaped over the side of the upper cockpit and landed on the deck. I hesitated a brief instant before I realized that Merna and her adversaries were just below me. The commotion beneath my feet told me that.

I ran to one side of the yacht. The starboard side. This was the highest from the water's surface because the vessel still was curving to the leeward in a wide arc.

Reaching downward, I caught the frame of a porthole and then lowered my body until I was staring through that aperture.

Merna was backed against a corner. She was gasping through open mouth, fighting wildly. She was fighting two husky birds who wore dungarees and heavy sweaters. Another punk waited, holding a chain.

Moore rasped, "Anything! Do anything. We gotta shove her over."

Obviously, he was trying to get her ready for the big, cold, wet drop.

I pulled myself up onto the deck and ran toward the ladder going below. I passed the deck-level helms room. Dragging my feet to a dead halt, I swung into the pit and twisted the wheel sharply to the starboard. The yacht lurched and nearly tore the wheel from my grasp. I leaned on it and brought it sharply around so that the boat began a drastic arc in the opposite direction.

Below me, there was wild confusion and the roar of voices. I nearly went off my own feet. I knew what was happening in the cabin and I hoped it would give Merna enough of a reprieve to keep her conscious for another split minute.

I hit only one step going down the steps to the companionway below.

When I reached the door, I went right on through it. I'd have crashed that door if it had been locked and made of solid steel. It was unlocked and it was wooden.



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Michael Morgan

The savagery of my attack carried me to the opposite side of the cabin from the entrance wall. One of the men was leaning against that side. He had been thrown off-balance and he was pressed against the wall, waiting as though expecting the boat to right itself soon. He was the man with the chain.

I put up my hand to keep my body from crashing into the side of the cabin. Palm outward, it went right up against his temple and shoved his head against the wall. There was a quiver beneath my hand as though I was pressing against a giant egg, the shell of which was about to be crushed. He slid down the side of the wall to a sitting position. His eyes rolled upward.

I snatched at the chain. My right hand went forth and lifted the chain from his relaxed hand. It was a heavy chain with giant links. The kind of binding that would hold a body for a long time.

I caught it up in my right fist. Then I turned toward the other two men.

THEY were on the opposite side of the room. All four of them. Merna, and the two men, and Moore. They'd been thrown across the cabin when the yacht had made its starboard lunge. None of them had yet struggled to a position of balance. Moore was in the worst situation. He was on the floor, and a chair had fallen on top of him.

One of the other sailors had sat solidly upon the top of a writing desk which was built into the wall. He had only to kick hard and be on his feet. The third sailor now caught one of Merna's wrists in his fist and was using his other hand to steady himself against the wall.

It was a neat tableaux. It was obvious that the men had been content to pause in their murderous activities long enough to let the yacht—or their pal up in the cockpit—make up his mind about how to sail

Charity Begins at Homicide

these waters. Not expecting me, they'd seen no haste in clouting Merna into submission for a few long seconds at least.

But my entrance started the wheels of activity again. As I bounced away from the unconscious chain-bearer, with the steel flail in my hand, all three men moved rapidly.

Of the three, I hated most the one holding Merna's wrist. He released her as I stepped forward, and his hand dipped for a pocket.

I whipped the chain over my head and downward. He put up his free hand to ward off the blow and the chain broke his wrist. The injured hand dropped and his mouth opened to shout in pain. I cut short the cry with one rap on his skull with the chain.

I heard Merna say one word, and it thrilled me to my toes. "Bill!" That's all.

The remaining sailor was springing forward when I turned. He had shoved himself away from the wall and was lunging. His right hand came straight out toward me—and slightly upward. It held a knife as big as a pirate's cutlass.

Merna called my name again, but it was a scream now. "Bill!"

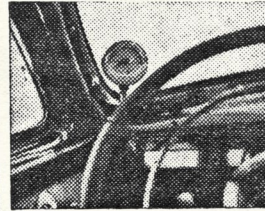
I went the only way possible—backward. Like a man being bounced off a huge rubber ball onto the base of his skull, I flipped backward. My back was bent to take the shock and my knees were tucked into my stomach. Then, with both feet off the floor, I kicked.

Fortunately, I hit with both. The kick at the inside of his right bicep shot his knife hand away from me. The other foot caught him in the face. We both struck the floor.

This was a familiar stunt fighting trick for me, and I was on my feet first. I was on top of him as he started to rise. The chain had never left my hand. I wrapped it around his skull—the top part.

Now I looked at Moore. I looked at

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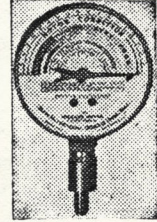
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Michael Morgan

him long and hard. He had kicked the chair away from him and was on his feet.

I've never seen a cornered mountain lion, but I no longer have to wonder what one would look like.

His eyes darted toward the open door of the cabin. I said, quietly, "Go ahead and try to make it, Moore. I'd like to see if a chain will break a man's back."

I went to the door, turned and looked at Merna. Even now, she showed all of her fine breeding. I said, "Go up and put the yacht on a straight course. Know how?"

She nodded, asked, "You staying?"

I handed her the chain. "This might prompt me to start saving my knuckles," I said. She went out and closed the door.

I got down to business. Systematically....

When I went up on deck, she was steering the yacht neatly.

I told her, "Nobody killed. Not even the one who shot at me. They're in cold storage for the cops."

"Bill, back in Wells' house..."

"I know all I care to know. Besides, that's unimportant now. What I want to know, are you—"

"Yes, Bill. I am."

"Who's reading minds? You mean—"

"Why don't you kiss me and find out, darling?"

I did. For a couple of years, we clung to one another. It would have been centuries longer if the light from the Coast Guard Cutter hadn't picked us up then.

There seemed to be a lot of whistling. Not the kind bullets make in the air. It could have been strong wind blowing through the rigging of that Coast Guard cutter.

But I doubt it. You see, they had the spotlight on Merna. Well, you can't fool the men of the Coast Guard. They're always right.

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Frank C. Schulz



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