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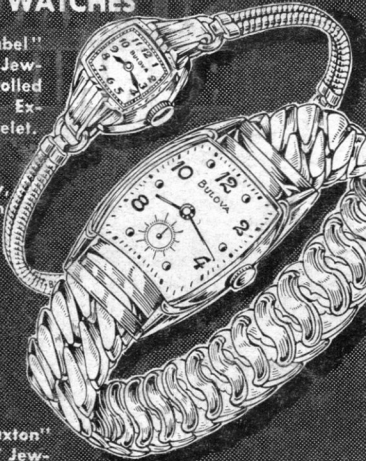
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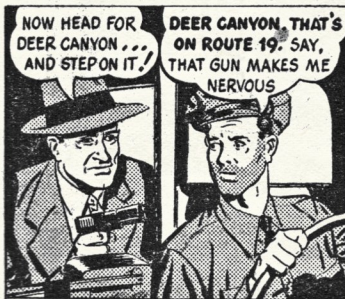
IT LOOKED LIKE TROUBLE UNTIL . . .



SHOVE OVER YOU TWO! KEEP DRIVIN', HACKY, AND NO FUNNY STUFF!

I'LL BE THERE IN TEN MIN... HOLY SMOKE! A STICK UP!

HIS TAXI NEWLY EQUIPPED WITH TWO-WAY RADIO, JOE DOUGLAS IS REPORTING TO HIS GARAGE AT THE END OF A LONG DAY BEHIND THE WHEEL WHEN HIS REAR VISION MIRROR SHOWS . . .



NOW HEAD FOR DEER CANYON... AND STEP ON IT!

DEER CANYON, THAT'S ON ROUTE 19. SAY, THAT GUN MAKES ME NERVOUS

LEAVING THE OPEN RADIO MIKE ON HIS LAP, JOE REPEATS THE UNSUSPECTING THUG'S INSTRUCTIONS . . .



... GUN MAKES ME NERVOUS

THEY'RE HEADING FOR DEER CANYON ON ROUTE 19, SERGEANT

JOE'S SURE GOT NERVE

. . . TO HIS GARAGE, WHERE THE SUPERINTENDENT RELAYS THEM TO THE POLICE



MOTHER'S QUITE UPSET. CAN'T YOU GET OUR STATEMENTS LATER?

I'LL TAKE THEM HOME AND COME DOWN TO HEADQUARTERS

CERTAINLY, MISS BARLOW



TWO HOURS LATER

YOU'RE FAMOUS, JOE! AND SAY, MR. BARLOW WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU AT HIS HOME

GOSH, I DIDN'T SHAVE TODAY. CAN YOU LEND ME A RAZOR?



WHAT A SWEET-SHAVING BLADE! MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

WHISKERS DON'T COME TOO TOUGH FOR THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



I GET MY DEGREE FROM NIGHT LAW SCHOOL NEXT MONTH

H-M-M-M, MY FIRM HAS STARTED MANY A YOUNG LAWYER UP THE LADDER . . .

I DIDN'T REALIZE HE'S SO HANDSOME

FOR SLICK, REFRESHING SHAVES AT A SAVING, GET **THIN GILLETTES**. THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING OF ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. AVOID THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. **ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES** IN THE CONVENIENT, NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT.

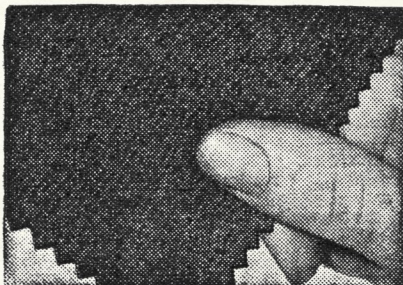
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The January issue will be out December 1st

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Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

This column is printed monthly for your benefit, to keep you up-to-date on all the chiselers' rackets so that you can be prepared in case any dishonest operators come along. Forewarned is forearmed, as we all know.

And that's why we always keep reminding you to be aware of the fact that familiarity breeds insurance when it comes to dealing with door-to-door salesmen. If you don't know the man who knocks at your door, you have to be doubly careful that he isn't trying to pull any old gags on you.

You can check up on the old gags and the new by reading every issue of this column regularly. Here we print the news you and your neighbors send in about the current swindles.

Therefore, keep sending us your letters relating your own personal experiences with racketeers and slick characters of all kinds. We'll print the letters you send us, and pay you \$5.00 for every letter we use. That way, you not only help your fellow man—we help you.

Of course, we'll withhold your name from print if you ask us to. However, no letters can be returned, unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. You'll understand that because of the press of mail in the office, we can't enter into correspondence concerning your letters.

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

Now, let's turn to the recent ruses:

Unfair Fare

Dear Sir:

I had been living in New York about a year, when it became necessary for me to make a
(Please continue on page 8)

NOW! Make Dozens of Useful Things for Your Home

SENSATIONAL NEW 4-IN-1 ELECTRIC

JIG SAW · SANDER · FILER

With Built in BLOWER AUTOMATIC BLOWER

- * Blower automatically cleans away sawdust and filings at cutting area.
- * Saw Blade assembly rotates to face any direction to cut extra-long pieces. The Selector Blade Guide adjusts to fit 4 different size blades.
- * Portable . . . this precision-engineered home power tool can be used anywhere—kitchen, study, garage or workshop. The rubber-cushioned base protects working surface and provides quiet operation.
- * Efficient saw table . . . large, rigid working surface, with one inch guide lines, tilts right or left through 45°—Angle Indicator Scale insures accurate cutting and beveling.
- * Husky built-in rotary motor produces over 3400 powerful blade strokes per minute. Self-lubricating bearings. 115-125 Volt AC.
- * Cooling fan with air vent maintains cool, efficient operating temperatures.
- * Sander disc revolves at constant high speed. Sanding table tilts up or down 45° as shown on Angle Indicator.
- * UL approved pushbutton switch, cord—fast, convenient starting and stopping.

A HIGH-GRADE SAW

IT SAWS—This amazing 4-in-1 Jig Saw cuts at more than 3400 strokes per minute in any direction. The 360° revolving saw blade guide assembly enables this compact portable power tool to make extra-long cuts. The large saw table, with accurately pressed guide lines, can be tilted 45° right or left for precision bevel cuts. Selector Blade Guide adjusts to fit 4 different size blades.



TOWEL RACK



THE DUCK-KIT



TOOTH-BRUSH HOLDER



BOOK ENDS



MAGAZINE RACK

AN EFFICIENT SANDER

ITSANDS—This replaceable garnet sanding disc revolves at constant high speed, and the sanding table tilts 45° up or down for accurate bevel sanding. Worn discs may be stripped off and replaced by cementing on a new one with ordinary household cement.

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IT FILES—It's easy to insert an ordinary 1/4 inch shank, 3 1/2 inch long standard bench machine file in the slide for fast precision filing.

A HANDY BLOWER

IT BLOWS—A steady jet of air is forced through the attached blower tube to keep the sawing edge free from sawdust and filings.



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SAVE WORK!

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or file

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(Continued from page 6)

trip back to my home town, Kansas City, Mo.

After finishing my business there, I found I had very little money left to buy a ticket back to New York. I decided to call a travel bureau in Kansas City and find out if they knew of any couples who would be driving to New York that week, as I was anxious to return.

They called me back in an hour or so, and informed me they had one car going to where I wished to go. A very nice couple, I was told, should they send them over to see me?

"Yes," I said, "that will be fine. Please do."

I was staying at a friend's house, so they came there to see me. She and I both thought they looked all right. I also assumed that since they came from the travel bureau, they were surely all right.

Mr. C. explained that he was a match salesman, and had to be in New York a few days later. He and his wife thought it would be nice to have company. Another young man was also going along as far as New Jersey. All it would cost me would be \$10.00 to help defray expenses. At that I was very pleased, since I only had about twenty to do me until I could get back to my job.

That afternoon we started on our way. I had a new fur coat and all of my best dresses in a suitcase. Mrs. C. decided the best place for my coat would be under the lap robe on the rod attached to the front seat.

We drove all evening until about eleven p.m. and got as far as Greenville, Ill. when Mr. C. said he was too sleepy to drive any farther that night. We found a hotel on the edge of the town, just a small country place.

When we went to our rooms, Mr. C. said he would call us both about seven the next morning, so we could get started very early.

I was up and dressed, waiting about an hour for the call, but none came. Then I decided to investigate. I knocked on Mr. and Mrs. C's door, thinking perhaps they had overslept. There was no answer, and the door was ajar.

Upon entering, I found that their bed hadn't been slept in. They had left the night before, evidently as soon as they thought we were asleep.

As soon as I discovered this, I went to the manager of the hotel and told him what I thought had happened, that they had left without us and taking our belongings, including my new fur coat. I valued the coat very highly, since it was my first one, and I had worked hard and really skimped on food to pay for it.

I had left it in the car with my other clothing at the suggestion of Mrs. C., who said that since the car would be locked, as would the garage, everything would be perfectly safe.

The manager called in the highway police, but as I didn't know the license number and they had already had quite a good start before we realized what had happened, there didn't seem to be much the police could do about it.

Well, there I was, stranded in a country hotel, with no money, no clothes. I didn't want to let my friend in New York know because of my pride.

The hotel people were very nice to me and

offered me work in the kitchen, for which I was very grateful. That way I could at least eat, while deciding what to do about this situation I suddenly found myself in as a result of trusting strangers too much.

The young man who was with us in the car was fortunate enough to have enough money for bus fare to continue on his journey, empty-handed.

Me, I worked until I had enough for my bus fare. I landed in New York in an cold coat I wouldn't have thought of wearing—except for this predicament.

I was pretty humiliated when I ran into my friends finally, and had to tell them what had happened, but I was much wiser person for my experience.

Maybelle Anderson
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Pandora's Package

Dear Sir:

All homemakers, beware! Don't accept C.O.D. packages for your neighbor. It's a clever new racket. And it can be worked anywhere.

The spotter sits in his car and watches your street of nice homes. When some housewife locks her house and drives up the street, he quickly radios his sleek delivery truck.

Soon the truck pulls into your neighbor's driveway. The neatly uniformed driver takes some packages to the door and rings the bell. Getting no answer, he bangs on the door . . . louder and louder. He calls your neighbor's name. In desperation he goes around to the side door and bangs and calls some more. Naturally you hear him and come to the rescue.

"Mrs. Breckenridge just drove uptown," you call.

"It's some C.O.D. packages," he says, hurrying over to you. "Would you be so kind as to accept them for her?"

"Oh, I guess so," you reply, thinking how glad your neighbor will be for your doing her this favor. "How much is it?"

"All three—add up to \$16.95," he reads from the bill.

You pay him and he leaves the neat packages. They're wrapped in paper from a local department store.

When your neighbor arrives home, your feeling of good-heartedness turns to woe. Inside the nice packages is nothing but grass feed-sacks.

The crooks can operate in my city today and in yours tomorrow. Beware of them! Investigate before you invest!

Mrs. Idean Callahan,
Box 271,
Lincoln, Nebr.

The Writer Got Rooked

Dear Sir:

So said the ad. Believing that I could write, I wrote my story, sent it in.

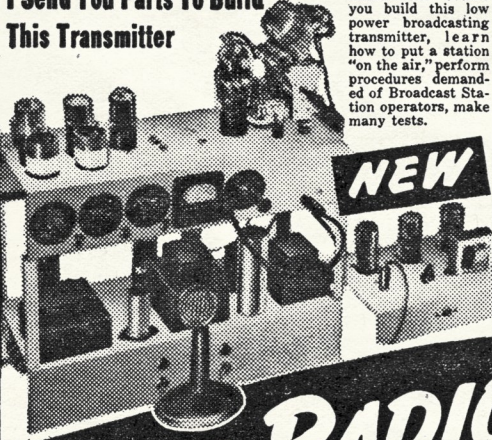
Came back a reply—I had omitted to enclose \$15.00 to cover cost of the usual "reading fee." I sent the \$15.00.

(Please continue on page 10)

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I Send You Parts To Build This Transmitter

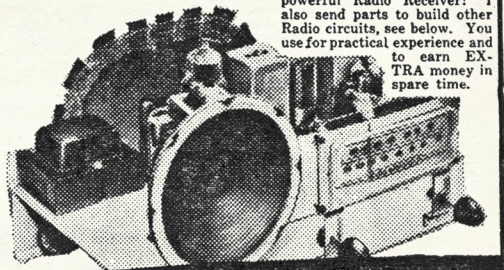
As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.



You Practice Radio SERVICING

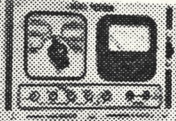
On This Modern Radio You Build With Parts I Send

As part of my Servicing Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! I also send parts to build other Radio circuits, see below. You use for practical experience and to earn EXTRA money in spare time.



BE A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

YOU BUILD this Tester with parts I send early in my Servicing Course. Helps you fix neighbors' Radios and EARN EXTRA MONEY in spare time.



YOU BUILD Vacuum Tube Power Pack as part of my Communications Course; get experience with packs of many kinds. Learn how to correct Power Pack troubles.

YOU BUILD this A. M. Signal Generator as part of my Servicing Course. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing in Spare Time with KITS OF RADIO PARTS I Send



J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute

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In 1949, almost 3,000,000 TV sets sold. By 1954, 20,000,000 TV sets estimated. 100 TV Stations now operating. Authorities predict 1,000 TV Stations. This means more jobs, good pay for qualified men all over the United States and Canada.

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Send now for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. You get actual Servicing lesson to show you how you learn at home. Also my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning; see equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dpt. ONS9, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D.C. Our 37th Year.

I TRAINED THESE MEN



"I have been operating my own Servicing business. In two years I did \$14,000 worth of business, net profit, \$6,850. Have one full time employee, an N.R.I. Student."—PHILLIP G. BROGAN, Louisville 8, Ky.



"Four years ago, I was a bookkeeper with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with a key station of the American Broadcasting Company network."—NORMAN GIER, New Boston, Ohio.



"When halfway thru the N.R.I. course, I made \$5 to \$8 a week fixing sets in my spare time. Am now selling and installing Television sets and antennas."—E. J. STREITENGER, New Boston, Ohio.



"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse N.R.I."—T. E. NORTON, Hamilton, O.

Veterans YOU MUST ACT FAST

G. I. Bill gives you valuable training benefits. For each 3 months of training eligibility, you can get a full year of N.R.I. Training. Keep your job while learning. But Act Now! Time is running out!

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MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. ONS9 National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television. Both FREE. (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

Check if Veteran Approved for training under G. I. Bill!

The ABC's OF SERVICING

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

(Continued from page 8)

Came a new reply. My story was good, interesting and the plot unique. However, there were corrections needed. For another \$15.00, they would send me a complete "criticism" of my story.

Came the criticism. I re-wrote the entire story as suggested in the criticism, and sent it back.

This time, my story was not written in professional "format" but for \$25.00 they would have the story typed by a professional typist, in desired form, to make my story look more saleable.

The story came back—as they called it—professionally typed. In my opinion it was not a good job of typing and they had used cheap paper.

With the story came a letter stating that for the usual ten percent, they would place my story on the market. Up to this point, the story had cost me \$55.00.

This all happened six months ago. I have yet to hear about my "epic" being sold. In keeping with magazine rates and a ten percent deduction, if and when it is sold, it will net me perhaps \$3.00 . . . if I fail to deduct the cost of the bond paper on which I had uselessly typed my story—\$3.50.

V. Lawrence
P. O. Box 286
Bellows Falls, Vermont

Video Swiper

Dear Sir:

As the world produces new inventions and discoveries, the swindlers and con men seem to develop new methods and procedures to keep pace. Here is how one sharp operator obtained a deluxe television set, without any cost to himself.

Late one afternoon, our television store received a phone call from a man who stated that he was interested in obtaining a television set for his wife's birthday party, to be held that very evening.

He quickly gave his name as that of a prominent merchant in a nearby town. When he was assured that we had a fine set which would meet his requirements, he said he would send his son in immediately to look at the instrument.

A short time later, a young man entered and inquired for the party who had talked to his father about a television set. He was shown various sets and selected one of the finest. At that point, the phone rang. It was the man who had previously called.

He asked if his son had arrived yet. When he was informed that the son was there at that very minute, the father stated that he had given his son a signed blank check. He instructed us to fill in the correct amount for the set selected by his son and to have his son bring the set back on a truck which he had driven into town. He wanted to be able to surprise his wife for her birthday.

The son then produced the signed blank check which the father had mentioned over the phone. After arrangements were made for our service-

man to adjust the set properly in a few days, the set was loaded on the son's truck and he drove away.

A few days later, the merchant whose name had been used walked into our store and declared that he had no knowledge of the transaction and that the check was a forgery. Subsequent investigation proved that the same gang had worked this trick to the tune of many television sets all over this unfortunate part of the state.

Somewhere video stars are peering out from a set that was never paid for at some slick swindlers.

W. Parke
Uniontown, Pa.

Taken to the Cleaners

Dear Sir:

One of the cleverest little rackets I ever heard about, and which took several hundred dollars out of my too-innocent town, was worked like this.

A neat appearing college-looking boy knocked on our door recently. When I answered the knock, he asked if he might talk to me a minute about a dry-cleaning offer he was selling. I've always made it a point to be courteous to salesmen—my husband is one, you see—so I listened to his sales effort.

His offer was that I could get two dollars worth of dry cleaning done by a reputable cleaning firm in a town fifteen miles above my city, for the price of one dollar, if I purchased a ticket from the salesman for a deposit of fifty cents.

The other fifty cents was to be paid upon the completion of the cleaning.

The tickets looked okay, since my name was to be written on the one I purchased, and since, too, I knew the cleaning firm to be all right in every way. The young man told me that the firm would call on all the purchasers of their service within the next few days, to pick up the things I wanted cleaned. Under the circumstances, I bought a ticket, deciding to try them out.

Of course, the whole thing was a gyp. Not hearing from the cleaners within the week, I dropped them a card giving details of the offer I had bought. They had never heard of it, nor had they ever employed any salesmen as they had much more local business than they could handle.

Yes, there is a sucker born every minute, but I'm going to be very careful after this experience.

It is rackets like the one I bit on that make it hard for reputable house-to-house salesmen to make a living.

Mrs. R. W. K.
Grove City, Ohio

That's the tally on rackets for this month, detective fans. Don't forget to write in and tell us of the swindles you've come up against.

The Editor

\$100⁰⁰ A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU



SAVE MONEY!

There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!

JUST LOOK
The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

This remarkable Family Hospital Policy covers you and your family for about everything—for every kind of accident—and for all the common and rare diseases, and there are thousands of them. Serious diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart diseases, diseases involving female organs, and abdominal operations are also fully covered after this policy is in force six months. Suicide, insanity, and venereal diseases are understandably excluded.

• The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. It is the kind of protection that will stand by you when emergency comes. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your \$1.00 a month!

TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

MATERNITY

Benefits At Small Extra Cost
 Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays \$50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

POLIO

Benefits At No Extra Cost
 In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
 For Hospital Bills, up to \$500.00
 For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to \$500.00
 For Orthopedic Appliances, up to \$500.00
TOTAL OF \$1,500.00



3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and licensed in other states. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

PAYS CASH BENEFITS REGARDLESS OF ANY OTHER HOSPITAL INSURANCE YOU NOW HAVE!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON

The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

The Service Life Insurance Company
 Hospital Department M-11 Omaha 2, Nebraska

Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....
 Address.....
 City or State.....



SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

Hospital Department M-11, Omaha 2, Nebraska



Before boxer Barney's ritzy wife arrived to welcome him back from the booby hatch, he got into new trouble—for there was a dead blonde in his bathroom.



When Barney told the cops he was innocent, a mysterious stranger got him released on bail. But they got no chance to talk—because a gunman killed the stranger.



That chalked up another stiff to Barney's account. Barney went back with his wife to the estate—and had a nightmare that turned into a lethal lulu.



Barney barely had time to make a getaway. . . . Day Keene's powerful novel, "Polly Wants A Killer," will appear in the January issue, published December 1st.

Earn Big Money

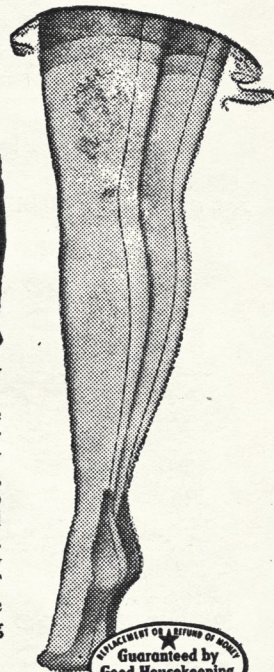
WRITING ORDERS

AMAZING NYLONS

Guaranteed Against
RUNS AND SNAGS

Regardless of Cause!

The world's ONLY complete, nationally advertised nylon hosiery line actually guaranteed against runs, snags or excessive wear, REGARDLESS OF CAUSE! It's amazing, but true! No matter what the cause—hard use or deliberate abuse—Kendex nylons are replaced FREE if they run, snag or become unfit for wear within entire guarantee period! Every weight from sheerest 15 denier to heavy 70 denier—all gauges up to luxury 60 gauge—all sizes, lengths, popular shades, fancy heels, black seams—full fashioned and seamless. Nothing is missing to make sure every woman is pleased. In spite of the amazing guarantee, retail postage prepaid prices are no higher than comparable quality national brands. Should free replacement be necessary, actual cost is cut in half! How could any woman possibly resist saving money and solving her hosiery problems? NOT SOLD IN STORES. Men and women wanted NOW, spare or full time, to write orders and earn big money. You can get orders even if you never sold a thing in your life!



**MEN'S HOSE
GUARANTEED 1 YEAR**

Kendex gives you FOUR complete lines, including sensational men's hosiery line actually guaranteed for ONE YEAR! Any pair not giving satisfactory wear within 12 months is replaced FREE without question. All styles, patterns, colors, yarns (including nylon) at lowest prices that mean steady income for you 52 weeks a year.

**LINGERIE
HOUSECOATS - ROBES**

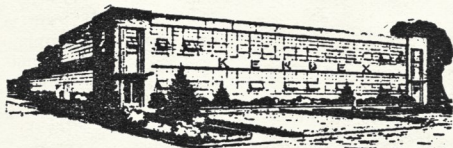
Full line of lingerie, housecoats and robes. Materials used include nylon crepe, nylon runproof tricot, multifilament rayon crepe, rayon tricot, rayon satin, etc. Nothing is lacking. Every garment at prices that defy competition and make women eager to order. Kendex values sell themselves.

**NATIONALLY
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Kendex has advertised in Life, Look, Collier's, McCall's, Saturday Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, etc. Carries the Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal. Thousands of orders shipped daily. Yearly volume in millions. A dependable responsible national organization.

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Man or woman — young or old, YOU can easily earn steady income, spare or full time. No money or experience needed. We supply EVERYTHING free and set you up in business at OUR expense. Nothing to buy or deliver. Write orders, we deliver and collect. Big advance pay plus cash bonus that increases your earnings up to 40%! Your name and address on postcard will bring you sample materials—samples of lingerie, hose, robe materials; self-selling sales books with FULL COLOR illustrations; 36-page sales manual showing you easy steps to success; color cards, free "door openers" worth \$1 each but which you give away free; special plan to have others sell for you, etc., etc. You can start making money the minute you receive the complete FREE outfits!



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SEND NO MONEY. Pay nothing now or later. No obligation. Not even a promise to return outfits. Simply write your name and address on a penny postcard and mail to us. We'll immediately rush you everything you need FREE and postage prepaid. WRITE TODAY!

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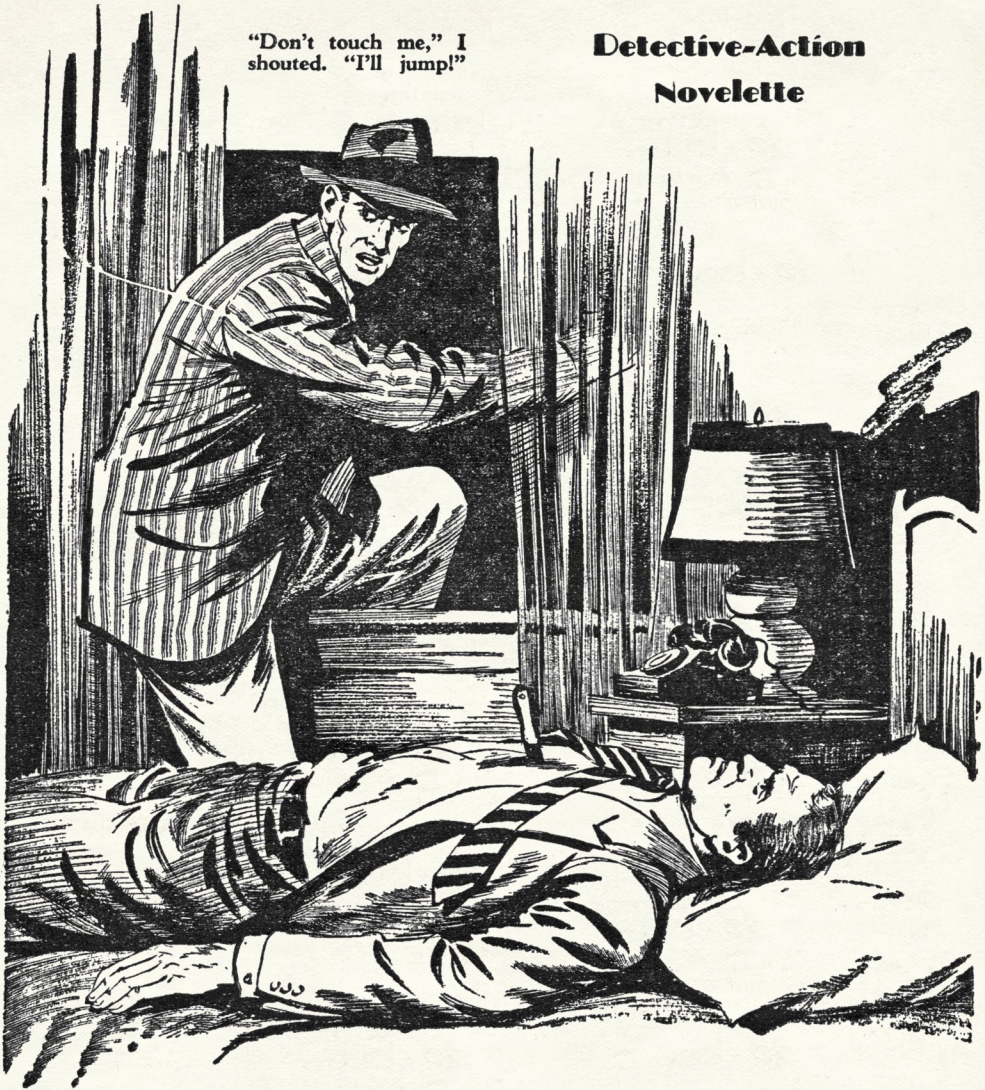
By
HANK SEARLS

*When the Blimp's lethal legmen
toasted the tinhorn Casanova into hell,
tearful Lynne coaxed Private-Eye Blair—
into crashing the fatal festivities.*

FOR AULD

"Don't touch me," I
shouted. "I'll jump!"

Detective-Action
Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Sucker Trap

I LISTENED to the voice. *No*, I thought. *No*. In the dim light I stared at the familiar bottles, the same old labels.

I tested my eyesight on the brand names. I clutched the bar. Same sticky, lacquered bar. Glasses sweating. Pools of water by every drink. A watch-your-coat-cuff bar. I was still sober. I swung around.

Leaning on the piano in the blue glare of the cheap spotlight, she was singing in

LANG CRIME

the throaty, offhand way she had, the way that made you cry inside for every woman who had ever lost a man.

It was a song she'd sung years ago, sometimes for me alone; a song that in a different place and a different time had become almost a symbol of the girl who sang it. Her hair was blonde now instead of burnished copper, and it was worn bobbed to match her sleek, shimmering dress.

But it was Lynne.

Shakily I lit a cigarette and groped behind me for my drink. *Easy, boy, I told myself. Easy. Don't get burned again.* Her eyes, sweeping the lounge languidly, rested on mine, and for a second I thought her voice quivered. Then she shifted her gaze quickly. I tore my eyes away from her and turned to the barkeep.

"New singer, Joe?"

"Yeah, Mr. Blair." He frowned as he wiped the glasses. "Christine . . . Christine something."

I almost smiled. Christine, hell. Lynne. Lynne Woodstock. A name I'd hoped I'd never remember, but a name that still thrilled me. Lynne. . . .

Now she was through and the applause was as loud as ever before. She hadn't lost her touch with an audience. I slid off the barstool, cut across the lounge, and caught her outside the manager's office.

"Hello," I said. "Hello . . . Christine."

She turned and stared at me blankly.

"Hello. I don't think—"

I shook my head. "Come on, honey, none of that stuff." I jerked my chin toward an empty table. "Sit down, Lynne."

She hesitated. "Not Lynne—Christine," she said absently. "And I'm not supposed to sit with the customers."

"Sit down."

She moved over and sat at the table. "I—"

I ordered her a drink. "Still scotch and water, I presume?"

She nodded. I looked at her curiously.

"What's the idea of the act? You didn't expect to fool *me*, did you? After all . . ."

"After all," she said sadly. "No, Mike, I didn't really expect to fool you."

"Why'd you try?"

She shook her head miserably. "I don't know. I don't know."

I tried to look cheerful. "Well, what's the difference? This is a hell of a gloomy way to meet after— How long? Five years?"

She nodded. "Five years."

My mind went back. Another bar, another time. Lynne and I together. Lynne on her way to the big time . . . Lynne with burnished hair and a smile in her eyes. Singing in a little place down south, near Los Angeles. A little bar with a gambling room in the back and Lynne the star of the show in front. Happy days, then. Until one night. . . .

"Have you heard from Rip?" I asked, casual like.

She looked up quickly. "No."

"His time," I remarked, "ought to be about up."

She shrugged.

I swished the drink in my glass. "Still in love with him?"

Her voice was dead. "Don't be silly."

"Silly? I don't know. *Some* girls have waited five years. But," I said bitterly, "you always were kind of fickle."

Her eyes flared. "Since you're so damned curious, Rip is out now. And I did wait."

My heart sank, but I gave it the old British try. I put my hand on hers and smiled. "Say, that's swell. I'm really glad."

She looked up, distracted. "Please, Mike, don't mention that he's out of jail. And don't tell anyone my name."

Well, I could understand that. A guy who's been in the cage for five years has to start all over. So does his girl. I decided to change the subject.

"HAVE you heard from Juanita, or anybody else from the Club Silver?"

She shook her head.

I said: "The Blimp is running a new place now. Up here."

She nodded. "I know," she said in a tired voice. "I know it."

My heart chilled. "Say, Rip isn't in town, is he?"

She looked up sharply. "Why?"

I shook my head. "Skip it."

Her hand grew white on her glass. "Why did you ask that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. There was a rumor . . ."

"That Rip was framed?"

"That's right."

"It isn't true. It isn't true at all."

I looked at her curiously. "That's a funny thing for you to say."

She sighed: "Oh, I don't care if he was framed. He did his time. Why can't he let it go at that?"

"Did he hear that he was framed?"

She nodded miserably. "In prison."

"Well, I don't believe it. There were too many witnesses. Of course, they were all crumbs. Even Juanita might have crossed him for enough dough. Does Rip think the Blimp framed him?"

"Yes."

"He isn't up here to get the Blimp, is he?"

"I don't know what he wants to do. I was waiting for him when he got out last week. He told me he'd heard he'd been framed. Said he was leaving L. A., that he had a job to do. I begged him to stay there. He wouldn't stay and he wouldn't take me with him. I was sure he was coming up here to get the Blimp so I came up too, alone."

"Is that why you changed your name? Is that why you're a blonde?"

"Yes," she said tensely. "If I could only find him! If I could only get him to listen."

It sounded bad. A guy can get awful mad after five years in that big iron box. Especially if he thinks he's been framed. "And you haven't been able to find him?"

She shook her head. "Oh, Mike, what'll I do?"

I thought for a while. Finally I decided to let her have it.

"Listen, Lynne, the guy isn't worth it. He's a cheap tinhorn gambler. He's a bum. If he was framed, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. If he knocks off the Blimp, there'll be one less phony in the world. When the cops get him, there'll be two less. This isn't because he took you away from me, Lynne; this isn't jealousy. Forget him and go back to Los Angeles. Let him fry in his own grease."

She lowered her eyes. "No, Mike. No, I've got to stop him." Her gray, serious eyes met mine. "Mike, you've got to help me."

Great. Swell. The crummiest character on the face of the earth steals your girl and you're supposed to take care of him like a kid brother.

Not me.

"You're talking to the wrong guy, honey. The hell with him. That guy was made for the gas chamber. How about another drink?"

The gray eyes filled with tears. "Mike, please."

"No, Lynne. I'm a private investigator—my racket is finding people. But if I found that guy, I'd probably kill him on sight and I'd be up for murder."

She started to speak and changed her mind. She stood up. "I have to sing now. And thanks for the drink."

She walked across the lounge with the easy careless stride I remembered. She had always walked as if she were swinging down a country lane in the spring-time, square shoulders set, eyes straight ahead. I felt a pang of regret. She stood by the piano, smiling stiffly at the house.

"I have an encore," she said. Then

she sang it again, the song she'd always sung for me. I toyed with my drink as chills raced up and down my spine. She sang to the past and she sang to me, and as she sang she swayed, and the vibrant voice reached deep into my memory.

I paid for my drink and left.

I hit every bar on the waterfront and consumed half a year's whiskey production, but wherever I went the song went with me. The song and a vision of Lynne, alone in the harsh blue spotlight. And finally, of course, I reeled back into the lounge where she sang, and by the time she helped me up the steps to my apartment I'd promised to find Rip if it took twenty years.

CHAPTER TWO

Clipped by a Cutie

I WOKE up with an army of little men in my head; two armies, fighting over my brain. I had a quick shot of whiskey, contemplated the day ahead, and shuddered.

People who think the private eye racket is a breeze should try to find a person who wants to stay hidden in the city. You try to put yourself in his place, and figure what you'd do if you were he—but you're not he, you're you, so you usually have to do it the hard way.

You walk until your legs are ready to fall off, and you ask questions until your tongue is ready to fall out, and you watch the passing parade until your eyeballs feel as if someone had sandpapered them. And sometimes it takes a day and sometimes it takes a week and sometimes it takes a year, and if you are doing it for free it's worse because you can't put the refreshments you need on your expense account.

So you try to figure the angles. There was one angle in this case. If Rip Torrance was looking for the Blimp, the Blimp's new gambling house might be a

good place to pick up a few angles on Rip.

Another shot of whiskey got me shaved, and the next shot got me dressed. I grabbed a cab and went to the Club Golden. The Blimp had come up in the world since the Club Silver in Los Angeles.

It was 11:30 in the morning when I walked up the stairs to the Blimp's new sucker trap, but the bar was ready for business.

You can tell a lot about a place by the bar. This bar was clean, uncomfortable, and efficient—designed to pour as much mediocre liquor into as many mediocre people as possible in the shortest time. Designed to get them drunk, away from the bar, and into the backroom where the easy money lay.

The bar reminded me of the Blimp's other bar in the Club Silver five years ago. The bartender was at the far end, his back turned, already setting up Old Fashioned glasses for the afternoon rush. His back was turned, but it was a back you never forgot.

"Tiny," I yelled. "Tiny, you old poisoner, come down here and give me one on the house."

Tiny turned like a startled elephant. His pudgy cheeks bulged and his fat eyes closed to slits. He looked as if he were going to try, or laugh, or something. It was Tiny's long-lost-friend look. He waddled toward me, his puffy hand outstretched.

"Mike," he bellowed. "You old alcoholic. Where've you been for the last five years?"

"Up here in heaven."

"How come I haven't seen you?"

"I've been living clean. That's how come, you old reprobate."

Tiny laughed. For Tiny it was almost a giggle, but my ears rang and the glasses danced on the bar.

"What'll you have, Mike? I thought you were dead. Thought some husband

of some daffy blonde had caught up with you."

"For that crack, I'll have a shot of the best scotch in the house and a beer chaser."

Tiny poured my drink and one for himself. He raised his glass. "To old times."

We clinked glasses.

"Speaking of old times," I said, "did the Blimp bring his whole rotten crew with him, or are you the only slave he imported?"

Tiny laughed again, and the windows rattled. "Well, let's see. He brought Moxie—"

"Natch. And Moxie brought his gun."

"Yeah, Moxie's here. And Kiddie LePlant, and a couple of the dealers, and Leon—remember, he was the headwaiter at the Club Silver—and you know that little girl who peddled cigarettes? The one that went for Rip Torrance?"

"Juanita?"

Tiny nodded. "Juanita. She's up here too. The rest of the gang stayed down south with the guy that bought the Club Silver."

"So Juanita's still working for the Blimp," I said slowly. "That's funny. When they jugged Rip, I thought she'd quit."

Tiny looked at me curiously. "Why should she quit?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. She was in love with him, and the way the Blimp testified in court, I didn't think she'd want to work for him any more."

Tiny began to polish a glass absently. He said: "Well, *she* testified against Rip too."

"That's right, she did. Well, I guess she had to. They had the goods on him."

"Yeah," said Tiny. "It's a funny thing, though . . ." He paused.

I waited. "What's a funny thing?"

Tiny's eyes veiled themselves. "Skip it. How about another drink?"

HE Poured me another shot and we sat in silence for a while. My mind went back through the years. . . . A hot, stuffy courtroom, with a schoolhouse smell. Lynne sitting beside me, listening to the testimony mounting like a tidal wave against the man she loved. The young District Attorney, confident and smug, riding the crest of victory. Questioning the Blimp:

"And now, Mr. Manz, tell us what transpired in your nightclub on that evening." And the Blimp's voice, suave, smooth, floating across the room:

"Rip—that's Mr. Torrance—had been drinking all night. Snowy Carroll was all hopped up with dope. He's been gambling heavily. Snowy wanted a ride back to town, but no one was leaving. He said he'd walk. About ten minutes after he left, Rip Torrance decided to drive home. We tried to talk him out of it—he was all tanked up.

"He left anyway, and about a half hour later came back. He staggered through the door to the back room and said he'd just hit Snowy Carroll and killed him. We thought he was kidding, but I sent Moxie down the road to see. He found Snowy dead."

And testifying after the Blimp, Moxie; and after Moxie, Kiddie LePlant, and then to clinch the case, Juanita. So Rip had pulled five years; not more, because Snowy was a dope fiend on a jag; not less, because the sovereign state of California doesn't like its drunks killing its hopheads.

And now the grapevine said it had all been a frame-up. Well, maybe.

I glanced at Tiny. "With good behavior, Rip ought to be out by now."

Tiny thought for a while. He nodded. "I guess so. Well, that's no great break for society."

Anyway, Tiny hadn't seen him. "Where's the Blimp?"

Tiny jerked a thumb like a sausage

back toward the rear of the dark bar.

"Back there thinking of some way to get us to work for nothing. Why don't you drop in and see him?"

"I will."

* * *

The Blimp hadn't changed. A little less hair, maybe, but the same white flaccid face, the same slim gambler's hands, and, when he stood up, the same narrow shoulders, wide hips and little feet. A build like a flour sack tied at both ends.

"Michael! I haven't seen you in years. Didn't even know you were in town. Sit down. How about a drink?"

All right, he could give me a drink—he'd taken enough money from me in the old days. "Sure, Blimp. Thanks."

He reached into his desk drawer. His private stock, no less. He settled back in his swivel chair. I looked around.

"This is quite a place you have here, Blimp. What made you sell out down south?"

The Blimp hesitated. "Well, you remember that kid Torrance . . . Rip Torrance? There was so much in the paper about that case, on account of the gambling angle, that it got pretty hot. I decided I'd do better up here."

I nodded casually. "Oh, yeah. I wonder if Rip's out yet?"

The Blimp looked at me sharply. Suddenly he said: "Are you still in the private eye game?"

"Sure," I said. "It takes all kinds to make a world."

The Blimp drummed his fingers on his desk. He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. He cleared his throat, said finally: "How'd you like to do a job for me?"

It doesn't pay to let them think you're starving to death. "Well, I don't know. I'm pretty busy now. What sort of a job is it?"

"Profitable."

"They're all profitable, or I don't take

them. It's somebody you want tailed?"

"Found."

"Who?"

The Blimp took a deep drag from his cigarette and snuffed it out.

"Rip Torrance."

I HAD to play dumb. I had to have time to think. "Rip? It ought to be easy to find him. Unless he's out of jail by now."

"He's out, all right. And I want him found."

"Why?"

He didn't answer the question. "What do you charge?"

"It depends. You're in the chips. For you, thirty bucks a day. If I take the case. Why do you want him found?"

"For thirty bucks a day you'd have to know why?"

"I always have to know why I'm on a job. Otherwise, no soap."

"I think he's out to get me."

Buddy, I thought, *you're not the only one who thinks so*. "Why should he be trying to get you?"

"He was blacked out the night he killed Snowy Carroll. Doesn't remember anything. He doesn't think he killed him. He thinks I had him framed."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "Or is it?"

"Of course."

I did some fast thinking. This was a problem in ethics. Also a problem in business. Trying to track down Rip Torrance for free wasn't doing my pocket-book any good. Thirty bucks a day was a different matter. Two birds with one stone. There was one thing, though.

"And if I find him, what happens? Do the cops find him later in a ditch somewhere?"

"Not at all," the Blimp said smoothly, "I'll give him enough money to get started somewhere else. I didn't frame him, but I don't want him getting in my hair out here."

I trusted the Blimp about as far as I could throw his bartender. On the other hand, what he said made sense. As long as Lynne and the Blimp were both interested in the same thing, there seemed to be no reason why I couldn't work for both of them at the same time. I stood up.

"Okay. But if I find him, and he's knocked off afterwards, I'm spilling the whole story to the cops."

"Don't worry."

"And that'll be five days pay in advance."

The Blimp scribbled on a piece of paper. "Give this to Tiny in the bar. And good luck."

"I'll do my best."

* * *

Tiny was talking to a girl at the end of the bar. I walked over and handed him the Blimp's note. Without a word he walked to the cash register, rang up "No Sale," and brought me back three crisp

new fifties. The girl watched with interest.

"Mr. Blair," she said, "Mike Blair?"

I squinted at her in the dim light of the lounge. Shimmering, raven hair, hazel eyes; slim, with a build that you see once in a lifetime.

"Juanita," I said. "Juanita Lorez, Mexico's gift to the tobacco industry. The cigarette girl with the mink coats. How've you been?"

"For the last few minutes, thirsty."

I bought her a drink. We talked for a while about old times, and once I asked her if she'd heard from Rip. She raised her eyebrows.

"Rip? Is he out?"

"I didn't say he was out. I asked if you'd heard from him."

"Me? Why should I hear from him? You ought to ask your old girl friend, Lynne."

"That's right. You lost a man—a kind of a man anyway—and I lost a girl."

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"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "Yes." She moved closer and looked up at me with the soft, amber eyes. "I always thought we two should get together after what happened."

The lush amber eyes had a cash-register brain behind them. I decided that it was time to leave. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Tanked-Up Hero

DOWNTOWN, the cocktail lounge was crowded with businessmen buying their secretaries a drink before they had to go home to face the ball and chain. Lynne's song floated above the babble of voices and the tinkle of glasses.

She found my eyes among all the eyes that watched her, and she smiled at me, and the old feeling for her was back. When she was through, she walked to my table and seated herself.

"Hi, Mike. How's the head?"

"Okay, considering. Nothing that another drink won't cure." I signaled a waiter. I moved closer to the table. "I've been looking for your boy friend all day."

She frowned a little. "Any luck?"

"No. Maybe he's not in town."

"He's in town, all right," she said thoughtfully. "Mike, you don't have to look for him any longer."

"What the hell," I said. "Did he turn up?"

"No." She paused. "I changed my mind, that's all."

A tiny golden ray of hope flashed through me. "Decided to give him up?"

She lit a cigarette. "No, I'm not giving him up. He phoned me this afternoon."

"He did? From where?"

"From the Hotel Traynor. He's been staying there all the time."

"Well, I wish you'd make up your mind. You owe me thirty cents for shoe

leather. I can't get rich this way."

She smiled. "Thanks anyway, Mike. Everything's going to work out all right."

Well, that was a matter of opinion. "What did he say?"

Her eyes shone happily. "He said someone was staking him to a trip back East. Somebody's setting him up in a nightclub."

I'll bet, I thought. Anybody who'd trust Rip Torrance with more than a buck at a time wouldn't have had the brains to earn a dime in the first place.

"Did he mention the guy's name? Or is it Santa Claus?"

She looked hurt. "No, he didn't say. He said it would take one more day for the deal to go through and that he was lying low until it did."

"How did he know you were here?"

"He saw my picture outside." She tinkled the ice in her glass thoughtfully, and smiled up at me.

"Don't worry, Mike. We'll make out."

I wasn't worrying, but I was wondering. Rip had something up his sleeve, and it sounded like an ace. Well, it wasn't any of my business.

But what was I supposed to do now? I could tell the Blimp where Rip was, of course, and keep my advance. But I might have a tough time convincing him that Rip and Lynne were actually leaving town.

And if I couldn't convince him, there was a good chance that Rip would leave in a casket; in my estimation not a bad idea, but a little rough on the girl with the faint, happy smile. Besides, I told myself, acting as a finger-man for the Blimp wasn't a very good job for a private eye. Unethical. A guy could lose his license.

"Okay, Lynne—Christine, I mean," I said bitterly. "Then you're going back East with him?"

She nodded, dreamy-eyed. *The hell with it*, I thought. I paid the check and

got up. "Good luck. And you'll need it."

IT WAS like old times in the Blimp's office—a gathering of the clan. Moxie Scarborough, a blank-faced little guy who looked like a bank clerk and thought with a .32 automatic, cleaning his fingernails in a corner, smiling at me, his eyes the color and hardness of slate.

Kiddie LePlant, a rugged, flashy lad with heavy eyes and a slack mouth, staring at me dully. The actors in the Blimp's road company hadn't changed.

The Blimp looked up and nodded coolly. "Sit down, Mike. What's the good word?"

"That job I was doing for you—"

For a moment he looked puzzled: "Oh, yeah," he said. "That. Have any luck?"

I shook my head and pulled out my wallet. "I decided to quit. Here's your advance."

In the old days, people who worked for the Blimp didn't quit—they waited to be fired. I braced myself for the explosion. Instead of blowing his top, he shrugged.

"All right," he said absently. "Never mind. Keep the money."

I laid it on his desk. "Just to have things straight," I said. "Okay?"

He nodded. "Well, drop in again, Mike."

And that was that. As I left, I almost asked him why he'd lost interest in the whereabouts of Rip Torrance. Later I wished I had.

I walked into the bar. It was crowded now, crowded with well-heeled citizens on their way to the gambling room in back, and poorer citizens on their way out. Juanita sat at the far end, sipping a tall, fruity drink. I slid onto the stool next to hers.

"Aren't you working tonight, Beautiful?"

She shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not."

"The cigarette industry will never recover."

"The liquor industry would appreciate it if you bought me a drink."

Always the lady, Juanita. I signalled to Tiny. "Get Juanita another of these floating gardens, and make mine a boiler-maker."

Tiny whipped them up, and left the whiskey on the bar. Juanita and I touched glasses. *I might be*, I reflected, *temporarily unemployed, but there were compensations*. "And what do you do if you don't work, Georgeous? Besides caging drinks, I mean?"

"Sometimes I let old friends buy me a dinner."

"You know," I said slowly. "I don't know why you bother peddling cigarettes. It doesn't seem to cost you anything to live."

She laughed. "I won't be peddling cigarettes any more after tomorrow. I'm quitting."

"Seriously?"

She nodded. "I'm going East."

Everybody seemed to be going East. A regular gold rush, in reverse.

"You might," I remarked, "see one of your old boy friends back there."

She raised her eyebrows. "Who?"

"Rip Torrance."

She looked away quickly. Finally she said: "Not that I give a damn, but what makes you think he's going East?"

I glanced up sharply. "I didn't say he was *going* East. How did you know he wasn't there already?"

She lit a cigarette and looked at me squarely. "He was in jail in Los Angeles the last I heard. I didn't even know he was out."

"I thought *all* you girls were counting the days," I said sarcastically. "He's out, all right. In fact he's in town. But tomorrow he's going East."

She sipped her drink. "How did you find out?"

"He called his girl friend and told her to be ready to leave," I said bitterly.

Her voice was flat. "His girl friend? Who's that?"

"Lynne Woodstock. Who else?" It slipped out before I remembered my promise. Well, what the hell . . . Lynne was leaving tomorrow.

She stared at me. "Is *she* in town?"

I nodded. "Different name, different hair. But the same girl, and still in love with her poolroom Casanova."

"Where did you see *her*?"

I'd talked enough.

"What's the difference? How about another drink and then that dinner you're trying to ace me out of."

She looked at her watch. "I just remembered. I have a date. I'm late." She smiled absently and touched my arm. "I'll take a rain-check."

AND then she was gone. I stared at the bottle moodily. I was beginning to feel like the villain in a deodorant advertisement—nobody wanted to play with me. I was also beginning to feel the drinks. I crooked a finger at Tiny.

"Tiny, ignore these apes and have a drink with your old buddy."

Tiny poured himself a small one under the bar and grunted. "Working too hard tonight. Don't know why they drink here, the kind of rot-gut we serve. Well, here's to us. Where's Juanita?"

"I mentioned Rip's name to her and she froze. Said she had a date and left."

"I heard he was in town. Maybe she went to see him."

"He's in town, yeah. But I didn't tell her where he was." I had another shot of whiskey. My head was singing. "No," I said. "All you have to do is mention that guy's name to a girl. She gets to thinking about him, and from then on you're out in the cold."

Tiny nodded ponderously, scowling down a patron who wanted a drink. "Yeah, I remember the night he ran over Snowy Carroll. Couldn't tell who took it

worse, Lynne or Juanita. Dames carrying on all over the place."

I remember the night too. Strictly a rat-race. Typical of Blimp's parties; free liquor, beautiful women, and drunks knee-deep at the bar. Lynne singing, dim in the blue haze, and me trying to forget that she was singing to Rip Torrance and not Mike Blair. A very rugged night. And ending, as the rotogravure boys would say, in tragedy. . . .

"Yeah," I said. "I remember too."

Carefully I poured another drink. My mind slipped back again to the night five years ago. Rip Torrance ignoring Lynne and heading for the crap tables in back. Lynne, after her song, sitting with me at the bar and glancing occasionally, impatiently, at the door to the gambling room.

Half an hour, an hour maybe, and then the door opening. Rip, firm in the grip of Kiddie LePlant and Moxie Scarborough. Rip, his eyes bleary and his legs rubbery, being steered toward the door. Lynne, her face taut, moving to help them, and Blimp, coming up quickly and drawing her aside. Saying:

"He's in trouble. He went out the back way. Said he wanted to drive home. We tried to get him to wait until he sobered up, but he wouldn't. I sent Moxie after him in my car, to see that he got home all right. . . ."

Lynne, her face white: "He didn't. . . ."

And the Blimp nodding. "Snowy Carroll, walking down the highway. Snowy was dead when Moxie got there; Rip must have been doing fifty. We'll have to take him to the cops. . . ."

Tiny served a customer and came back. I helped myself to another shot from the bottle in front of me.

"It's a funny thing," I remarked. "Rip was never worth a damn, and he never will be, but that was the first time I ever saw him sop up more liquor than he could hold. He was out on his feet that night, never knew what happened."

Tiny shrugged. "You can never tell. Sometimes a guy can drink all night, sometimes it only takes a couple. As a matter of fact . . ."

He moved away and jammed a glass on a mixer. I had another shot and my head cleared. There was something funny about that night five years before. Tiny came back, punched the cash register, and leaned on the bar.

"As a matter of fact, what?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, I only served Rip two drinks that night. And they must have hit him late, because he was okay when he left the bar."

He was okay when he left the bar . . . and now they said he had been framed.

"Look, Tiny," I said, moving closer to him. "Confidentially, what would happen if I suddenly got rough at the bar? Too rough to handle? Would they call Kiddie to throw me out?"

Tiny glanced around cautiously and shook his head. "No. That'd cause a scene. Bad for business."

I nodded. "I'd get a mickey, wouldn't I?"

Tiny's blue eyes met mine. "That's right."

"And if, say, instead of getting rough, I won twenty or thirty grand in the back room. What would happen then?"

TINY rubbed his chin. "Well, I hate to admit it, but you'd probably get the same treatment. Outside, they'd roll you.

You know how the Blimp feels about dough, anybody's dough."

"Yeah. I know the Blimp. Frankly, I'd hate to win too much dough around here. Snowy Carroll won a lot of money that night. It wasn't on him when the cops got to his body. Everybody thought that Moxie had lifted it. There just wasn't any proof. Right?"

"That was the general impression. But so what? That was a long time ago. Why worry about it?"

I lit a cigarette. "I'm not worrying about it. It just seems kind of funny, that's all."

Tiny's blue eyes were serious. "You think the Blimp had Snowy killed?"

I shrugged. "They say Rip was framed. It could be."

Tiny tossed his head angrily. "It's one thing to slip a guy a mickey and roll him—it's something else to run him over and rob him. The Blimp can't go around murdering everybody that wins money from him."

"Thirty grand isn't exactly peanuts. And don't forget—Snowy didn't drink. With Snowy it was purely dope. How can you slip a guy a mickey if he doesn't drink?"

Tiny shook his head doubtfully. "You can't."

"You can't. So you have to use another way, or let the money go."

"You think they slipped Rip a mickey so they could use his car for the murder,

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and then hang it on him. Is that what you think?"

"Why not?"

"Why should they pick Rip? The place was lousy with drunks that night. Rip was a good customer."

"To good a customer. Remember the night the Blimp caught him trying to bribe a dealer in the blackjack game? That would be enough, right there."

Tiny served a blonde a tall, frosted drink, and came back to wipe off the bar. He said quietly:

"Well, like I said, that was a long time ago, and nobody cares now. I'm about through with this dump anyway. I'm gonna buy me a nice, clean chicken farm somewhere and retire."

"Chicken farm," I said absently. "Tiny, if I looked like I needed a mickey, who'd slip it in my drink? Not you."

"You're damn right not me. I let 'em handle their own troubles—I just work here. No, if you'd just won thirty grand, say, pretty soon your little buddy Juanita would skip up with her little cigarette box, and when she left you'd be drinking whiskey with a sleep chaser."

So Juanita was the knockout artist. That made sense, even in Rip's case. Five years ago she'd been dropped like a hot potato for Lynne—and girls don't like that. Besides, anything you did for the Blimp was like money in the bank. And Juanita had dollar signs floating in her hazel eyes. Yes, it made sense all right. But there was something else.

Why was Rip leaving town? Why had he come in the first place, unless it was to get the Blimp? Maybe his story to Lynne was true—maybe somebody was setting him up in business. But who?

Well, the Blimp had said that if I found Rip he'd buy him off, get him out of town. Maybe the Blimp had found him without my help. Or maybe Rip had contacted the Blimp, and blackmailed him. The trouble was, you didn't blackmail the

Blimp unless you had the goods on him, and as far as I knew, there was nothing but rumor in the case of the late Snowy Carroll.

On second thought, you'd have to be pretty desperate to blackmail the Blimp, even if you had the goods on him. You'd be just as likely to end up in the bay as in the chips. Well, it was none of my business.

I helped myself to another slug out of the bottle and looked over a redhead at the far end of the bar. Very nice. But I just couldn't manage to keep my mind on her.

On the surface, it looked as if Rip expected a pay-off tonight or tomorrow. If he expected the Blimp to cough up any dough, he'd be liable to get a surprise—the Blimp was freer with slugs than cash. And the boys were gathering in the Blimp's office.

I decided that I'd hate to be in Rip's shoes, if he was really trying to get anything out of the Blimp. Anyway, I was glad that I hadn't found him for the Blimp. Whatever happened, my conscience was clear.

Just to clear my conscience a little more, I poured myself another drink. I smiled at the redhead. She smiled back. I toyed with the idea of moving down the bar.

But somehow I kept remembering Lynne's happy, glowing smile when she'd told me that she and Rip were leaving town. And a nagging little voice told me that Rip wasn't leaving anywhere if somebody didn't warn him.

I groaned and stood up. "So long, Tiny, old pal," I said thickly. "See you some time."

Tiny looked at the bottle. "You're not leaving the joint while this whiskey bottle's alive?"

I nodded and steadied myself on the bar. "Yeah," I muttered. "Gotta see a dog about a man."

CHAPTER FOUR

Leaving—in a Casket

I WAS feeling very proud of myself as I staggered to the desk of the Hotel Traynor. The desk clerk, a shoddy old rum-pot with a drooping moustache and bleary eyes, inspected me coldly.

"Look," I said. "A guy lent me some dough. Flashy character, blond hair, about thirty. Forgot his name, but he said he lived here. Know who I mean?"

"Maybe. All except his lending you some dough. There's a man named Thorne in 411 sounds like the one you mean. Thorne's probably not his name—none of our guests give their right names. Now, if you got this guy to lend you some money, tell me how you did it.

"He's a week behind in his rent, and I think his luggage if full of bricks. Say," he said, sniffing. "You ain't got that bottle with you, have you Mac? A guy gets thirsty sittin' here all day."

I waved my hand carelessly and started for the elevator.

"Never mind the elevator," the old guy yelled after me. "That's for guests. You use the stairs."

Nice place. I staggered up the stairs.

I knocked on the door to 411. There was no answer. I tried the handle and the door opened. The lights were off, but intermittently a flashing neon sign outside lit the room. I could see a dark shape on the bed.

"Rip," I shouted. "Rip, you rotten no-good tinhorn gambler, wake up. It's drinking time."

No answer.

I tried falsetto. "Rip," I squeaked. "You big handsome thing, wake up and give us girls a break. We've missed you and we want to see that nice prison tan you've got."

Still no answer. I stumbled to the bed and poked at the shape.

It was limp and warm and I had a drunken desire to roll off the mattress. But something stopped me. I lurched back to the door and flicked on the light.

The shape on the bed was Rip Torrance. His eyes were open, as if he were searching for a hole in the ceiling, and his mouth was open, as if he were about to deliver some profound commentary on the state of the nation. Buried neatly in his chest was a slim, wicked letter-opener.

I was too late. He was very, very dead.

There is something about finding a body that sobers you up. Much quicker than black coffee or tomato juice. There is also something about finding a body that makes you want to get the hell out. I almost did. Instead, I decided to look around.

I went into the bathroom and looked around. I pushed open the bathroom window and looked around. I went back into the bedroom and stuck my head under the bed and looked around. Strangely enough, there was no one there. Okay.

Now, I told myself, like any law-abiding citizen, you call the cops. I reached for the phone and paused.

Or do you call the cops? Suppose the victim stole your girl five years ago. Suppose you've been hired by one of the roughest gangsters in the state to track him down. Do you still call the cops? I hesitated.

Of course you call them. They can't do anything to an innocent man. I reached again for the phone.

"Hold it," said a voice from the door—a voice loaded with authority. "Get your hands up and don't move."

I got my hands up and I didn't move. At all. The floor behind me creaked, and a hand went over me. Very professionally, too.

"Okay, boss," said the voice. "He don't have no rod."

"Turn around, Blair," said another voice. A familiar voice—the Blimp's. I

turned around. The Blimp, Moxie and Kiddie LePlant lounged by the door, all smiling.

"Well," I said pleasantly, trying to keep my voice from cracking. "I've heard of returning to the scene of the crime, but I never saw it happen before. You guys getting sentimental about your work?"

The Blimp laughed. "You're pretty smooth, Buster. I hope you keep it up when the cops get here."

"I will," I said. "If they get here."

"They'll get here, all right. We're calling them." He nodded to the phone. Moxie looked at him strangely and picked it up. "Call the cops, Moxie," said the Blimp.

"Well, hey, boss," blurted Kiddie LePlant. "You sure you want the cops here?"

"I said call the cops, Moxie."

Moxie shrugged and asked the room clerk for the police. He covered the mouthpiece. "What'll I tell 'em, boss?"

"Tell them to get here quick, there's been a murder and we have the murderer."

MOXIE shrugged and got the police department. "Listen flatfoot," he growled. "See if you can get this straight. There's been a murder at the Traynor Hotel, room 411. Better write that number down before you forget it." He hung up.

"You," I said to the Blimp, "got a lot of guts. So *I'm* the murderer. You think the cops will go for that, when I tell them you hired me to find Rip Torrance? What'd you want to find him for? A fourth at bridge?"

The Blimp laughed.

"Never mind why I wanted to find him. He's dead, and we caught you with the body."

"How are you going to explain your being here to the cops? A social call?"

"Oh, no," said the Blimp seriously. "No, you got drunk at my place and threatened to kill Torrance. We tried to head you off, but we got here too late. I have witnesses to that."

Kiddie LePlant looked at his boss in admiration. Moxie shook his head and chuckled mirthlessly. I chilled. This movie I had seen before.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You're not pulling that Snowy Carroll deal again—Listen, that won't work with me. That poor sucker—" I nodded toward the bed—"that poor sucker was blacked out when you pulled the frame on him. *I'm* not—I *know* what I've been doing!"

"I," said the Blimp smoothly, "don't know what you're talking about." He turned to Kiddie LePlant. "Do you, Kiddie?"

Kiddie shook his head slowly, his mouth slack. "Hell, no, boss. This guy said he was gonna kill Torrance, and he did. That's all I know."

"Listen," I said, trying to keep calm. "Your boy Tiny can shoot that story as full of holes as a bachelor's socks. He knows I didn't threaten to kill Torrance."

"So he does," said the Blimp thoughtfully. "So he does."

I heard the clumping of heavy feet down the hall and the room began to fill with uniforms. A quick-eyed, nervous little man in plain clothes darted through the crowd. I recognized him from news photos—Foxy Farnsworth, of the homicide detail.

"What goes on here? Well, Blimp Manz. I figured you'd get in trouble sooner or later." He peered at the body on the bed. "And who's Lucky Louie? A friend of yours?"

"An old friend, Foxy," said the Blimp. "Rip Torrance. And I'm not in trouble. This man murdered him." He flicked his thumb at me.

Foxy's alert brown eyes traveled over me from head to toe. "This guy?"

"Mike Blair," I said. "Licensed private investigator. And your friend the Blimp is crazy as hell."

"He's not my friend," said Farnsworth. "Nobody's my friend. Suppose we start at the beginning."

"I got up here," I said evenly, "to warn Torrance about the Blimp. Torrance had evidently been trying to blackmail him, and I figured the Blimp might try to knock him off. I was too late. I started to call the police, and the Blimp and his boys came back."

"Who *did* call the police?" asked Farnsworth.

"I did," said Moxie.

"Hmm." Farnsworth turned to the Blimp. "And what's your story?"

"This man Blair has been drinking at my place all afternoon. He used to know Torrance. Torrance stole his girl, a long while back. This afternoon Blair got drunk and told us he was going to finish him off.

"Only we didn't pay any attention until he started waving that envelope cutter around." He pointed to the thing in Rip's chest. "Then we tried to follow him in the car. When we got here, it was too late."

"That's right," said Moxie. "We found him staggerin' around in here, lookin' for somethin'. I kept a gun on him and called the cops."

"Check for a license on the gun, Pete," said Farnsworth automatically. A policeman took down the number. Farnsworth turned to me. "You got anything else to say?"

"Plenty," I said. "Why don't you ask the room clerk and see who was up here first, me or them?"

"I did, on the way up. Twenty minutes ago one man came up, drunk." He darted over and sniffed at my breath. "That was you. Fifteen minutes ago three more men came up. That was apparently the Blimp and his playmates."

My heart dropped. Maybe he didn't see them come up the first time."

Farnsworth shrugged. "Maybe not. Well, I'm taking you all in, so it doesn't matter—"

"**W**AIT a minute," said the Blimp. He reached into his coat and pulled out a yellow slip of paper. "A half hour ago I was at my club. I can prove that. I'd been there all day. I can prove that, too!" He looked at his watch.

"It's 7:30 now. At 7:00 I left my club, to try to beat Blair down here. Coming in, I picked up this. Way out in the sticks."

Farnsworth took the yellow slip and studied it. "Forty miles an hour in a twenty-mile zone. Time: 7:05. Place: Steiner and Jackson Streets. Let's see—Officer's name: Rudy C. Knox. Check on that too, Pete." Farnsworth stared at me speculatively. "Well, Blair, what do you say to that?"

My mind was whirling. "I don't know," I stumbled. "It looks phony as hell to me."

"Just the same," Farnsworth said softly, "just the same, you'll admit that it'd be hard for a guy to pick up a traffic ticket way out there at 7:05, get down here to nab a man, and leave before you got here at 7:10. Wouldn't it?"

I nodded numbly. My head began to ache and my eyeballs grated when I moved them. I needed a drink, fast, or a new brain, or something. My mind was cloudy and creaky. I slumped down in a chair. With a real effort I tried to think.

The cop at the phone looked up. "Knox remembers the pinch. Says he's sure about the time, and he kept them there about five minutes."

Farnsworth shook his head sadly. "Well, I guess that clears you, Blimp. I kind of hoped. . . ." He shrugged. "Oh, well, you and your boys stay in town. Come on, Blair."

"Where?" I asked dully.

"Where do you think, Mac. Down to the station. I'm booking you on suspicion of murder."

Down to the station. The words bounced around my whirling head. Once I was there, the Blimp and his boys would have time to get rid of Tiny and fill in the weak points in their story, if there were any. When they finished with me, I'd be in the same spot as Rip Torrance five years ago.

"Come on, Blair," said Farnsworth. "Get out of the chair. Let's go."

He spoke tolerantly, as if I were drunk. Well, maybe I was, but not drunk enough to want to start on the first leg of a trip to the gas chamber. I closed my eyes, played possum, and tried to think.

I had to get away. I had to get away to do some thinking, to get hold of Tiny, maybe. I had to get away.

But how do you get away from a room full of cops on the fourth floor of a hotel? You don't. Drunk or sober, you go quietly. Drunk or sober.

Well, sometimes a drunk can get away with murder. And they thought I was drunk. Suddenly I had it. One chance in a million, and I doubted whether I had the guts to go through with it, but it was a chance. If I had enough ham in me to make it work, it was a chance.

I opened my bloodshot eyes wide. I took a deep breath and let go with the most blood-curdling yell I could muster. It was a beautiful yell. It even scared me, and the effect on Farnsworth, the Blimp, Moxie, and the cops was out of this world.

Farnsworth leaped backwards, grabbing at his coat. I screamed again, enjoying it now, and suddenly dashed for the open window. I swung one foot over the edge and yelled again, louder.

One of the cops lunged for me and I swung the other foot onto the sill.

"Don't touch me," I shouted.

"He's nuts, Foxy," muttered the cop. "Nuts. He'll jump."

"Don't touch him," said Farnsworth quietly. He jerked his head at the phone and one of the boys picked it up and began to talk, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Turkeys," I yelled. "Little turkeys with top hats." I waved my arm. "All over the floor. Keep 'em away from me. Keep em away from me!"

"He's got the DT's," whispered Farnsworth. "Leave him alone until the rescue squad gets here." And then, to me: "We won't let the turkeys get you, Blair. Now come out of the window, and we'll have a drink. Okay?"

"No," I shouted. "Keep 'em away. Keep 'em away or I'll jump!"

The Blimp stared at me from a safe distance across the room, his mouth open. Sweat started out on Farnsworth's brow. "Now, take it easy, Blair. You don't want to jump. Nothing's going to hurt you. Just take it easy."

I PUT my head out the window and looked down. The street below was crowded with movie-goers and the nightclub set. I gave them one of my better yells and almost caused a riot. White faces flashed in the light of the street-lamps and a forest of arms pointed upward.

I looked back in the room just in time. One of the cops was three feet away and edging toward me slowly. I jerked myself further out on the ledge and for a sickening moment almost lost my balance. Below me I heard a woman's shrill scream.

"Stay away," I told the cop. "Stay away, turkey. I'll jump."

In the distance I heard a siren wailing. The rescue squad. I glanced out the window again. I was playing to a full house. The street was mobbed—tense, craning bodies packed together, fascinated, wait-

ing for the leap. Directly below, a respectful clearing for my plummeting body. Windows creaked open across the street and someone shouted to a neighbor. A regular sell-out. Just what I needed.

I turned back to the room. Farnsworth and the men in uniform watched me cautiously, guns out.

"Take it easy," said Farnsworth again. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

"Turkey!" I yelled and sneaked a glance out the window. There was a bustle in the crowd below, and a movement as a well-drilled unit of men in blue shouldered through the mob. Quickly and efficiently they set up a life-net. From the fourth floor it looked like a postage stamp.

I hesitated. If I could make the net without breaking my neck, I'd be able to get into the crowd in the excitement, and no one could shoot into the bystanders. If I could hit the net. . . .

The phone rang behind me and I turned. Farnsworth picked it up, watching me carefully. He nodded and hung up.

"Okay, boys," he said quietly. "They're all set." Slowly the cops edged toward me. My heart beat wildly—it was now or never. I crossed my fingers, shot a quick glance at the net below, and jumped.

I felt the wind in my hair and heard a faint sigh go up from the crowd. White-hot needles played along my skin. I tried to relax for the impact and began to wonder if I'd ever hit.

Something that felt like the Superchief whacked my back. For a desperate second I thought I'd missed the net. Then I was in the air again, with the neon lights gyrating around me. I tensed myself. When I hit again, it was on the sidewalk, sprawling into the gutter, my neck wrenched.

But I was alive, and I could move. I scrambled to my feet, looking around wildly, trying to get my bearings. Ten feet

away, lunging at me, was a policeman, his gun half drawn. I dove into the crowd. For a fighting, squirming half-minute I battled the press of frightened bodies, and then I was free, and sprinting up an alley, with the roar of the crowd behind me. . . .

I skidded around the corner of an alley, praying for a cab. Everything on wheels was crawling up and down the street—everything but a taxi. A few blank-eyed derelicts were lined up outside a burlesque theater. They stared at me incuriously.

I looked around wildly, heard a shout from the alley, and muscled in at the head of the line. I was buying a ticket at the window as I heard the feet pounding by. I stepped inside, handed my ticket to a hard-eyed usher, and slipped into a dark seat in the back.

On the stage a tall redhead with a painted smile was giving her all for her art, but I kept thinking of another show—the Gas Chamber Follies—starring Mike Blair.

I stood it for half an hour and then I crawled over the knees of ten or twelve old guys and left by a fire exit. A squad car cruised by as I stepped outside. I waited in the shadows, my heart racing, until it turned at the end of the block, and then followed it as far as the drugstore on the corner. I squeezed into a phone booth and called the Club Golden.

CHAPTER FIVE

Too Fat to Fry

TINY was downtown in twenty minutes, still in his white uniform, driving a ridiculous miniature auto that fit him like a strait-jacket. Somehow I crammed myself in beside him.

"Let's get out of here, where I can talk. Did you tell the Blimp you were leaving?"

He shook his head, pulling away from the curb. "Nope, I just left. Always wanted to leave those customers with their tongues hanging out. What's the story?"

I briefed him on the latest adventures of Mike Blair. When I came to the suicide act, he almost burst a blood vessel. "No," he kept saying. "No. It's impossible. And they tried to frame you?"

I nodded. "Said I'd threatened to kill Torrance before I left the club."

"That's a damn lie," said Tiny. "I can clear you on that."

"That's why I phoned you," I said. "The Blimp knows you can shoot that part of his story full of holes, and I figured he might try to put you away."

Tiny swerved the impish car between a delivery van and a bus. "Where to now? The police?"

I thought it over. I still couldn't prove that the Blimp had killed Rip Torrance, but that wasn't my job—that was one for Foxy Farnsworth. At least, with Tiny's help I could prove that I hadn't left the Club Golden with murder in my mind.

"If you tell the cops," I warned, "you'll lose your job."

"I was quitting anyway. And it isn't my job I'd worry about."

I knew what he meant. Tiny's frame could hold a lot of lead, and he'd make a wonderful target. Now we were in the deserted warehouse district, driving aimlessly.

"I don't know, Tiny," I said slowly. "Maybe—" I felt his hand on my knee and glanced over. His eyes were intent, staring into the rear-view mirror.

"Wait a minute," he said hoarsely. "Wait a minute."

My blood chilled. "What's the matter?"

"That pair of lights. It's been following us." Suddenly he swung off into a side street. I craned my neck. Behind us, powerful headlights swept around the corner. I tried to get a look.

"Cops?" whispered Tiny.

"I hope so," I said. "I really hope so."

The threatening headlights moved closer, and I knew suddenly that they belonged to no squad car.

"It's the Blimp's car," I muttered. "Try to get back to the main drag."

Tiny shot around the next corner like a private in a jeep, but the headlights crept closer. Suddenly they swung out to the left and drew alongside. A horn spoke once, with authority. I caught a glimpse of Moxie's bored, ferret face, and Tiny was nudged over to the curb.

"They must have followed me when I left the club," said Tiny. "Oh, brother."

In the feeble yellow glow of Tiny's headlights two men walked back to the car, two men with blue-black badges of authority held in their right hands. Moxie Scarborough opened my door and beckoned me with his head.

"Come on, Blair," he growled. "You're going with Kiddie. I'm going with Tiny, and we're going to have a picnic all by ourselves in the country. We'll follow you."

"Why don't you kill us here and save the gas?" I asked bitterly.

"No gas shortage now," said Moxie pleasantly. He jabbed me in the ribs with the gun. "Now get goin'!"

I looked at Tiny. In the dim light his eyes were bleak and hopeless. "Well, Tiny, old pal," I began. "I guess this is it."

"Come on," said Moxie impatiently. "You boys can kiss each other good-bye later. You're going to spend a long time together. Let's go."

Reluctantly I climbed into the other car with Kiddie LePlant, my heart cold and clammy. He glanced in the rear view mirror, shifted his gun to his left hand so he could cover me as he drove, and pulled out into the darkened street.

YOU read a lot about that last long mile; the thirteen steps to the gallows; that final breathtaking second in a plummeting airplane. And I used to get a strange feeling ploughing through the Pacific on a carrier, waiting for dawn and flight quarters.

But nothing I ever read about or experienced before compares with a long automobile ride with a man you know is going to kill you. You want to argue with him—"Now, look, LePlant, we've known each other a long time." But you know it won't do any good to argue with him; he's just earning his pay.

You want to threaten him—"Listen, LePlant, you won't get away with this"—but you *know* he'll get away with it, because he's smart and he's got away with it before, and you know *he* knows it.

You want to plead with him, "I got a wife and six kids," but if you did, you know he'd express regret and knock you off anyway.

So you sit there, stiff and silent, and try to keep from showing how quaking, jelly-scared you are, and your thoughts bump against the padded cell of your brain and you promise that if you ever get out of this one you'll sell women brushes for the rest of your life.

We drove west, past the park and the zoo, and then we were cruising down the coast, with the glare of the city behind us and the black Pacific thundering on the rocks below. We came to a deserted roadside park and Kiddie swung off the road. He parked at the edge of the cliff and clicked off the lights.

I didn't feel much like joking, but at least I could try: "Why, Kiddie! I didn't know you cared."

"Very funny, wise guy. This'll be a pleasure. Get out."

I stepped outside as Tiny's midget car crunched over the gravel and stopped, facing the cliff. Moxie climbed out and motioned to me to take his seat. I be-

gan to get the idea. For a sickening moment I toyed with the thought of making a run for it, and then decided that I'd be a portable lead mine before I'd get five feet. Meekly, I squeezed into the car. Moxie closed the door.

Tiny leaned forward over the wheel. "Moxie," he said, his voice tired and low, "I got friends. You know that. And I swear, you'll never get away with this. They'll get you if it takes twenty years."

Moxie shrugged. "I don't think anybody'll ever know what happened to either one of you. Just in case your car doesn't clear the rocks, though, you can take this along."

In the darkness I saw him take something out of his overcoat. It was a whiskey bottle. He uncapped it and shoved it through the window, dousing the upholstery. He sloshed some of the stinging liquid into my face and tossed the bottle behind the seat.

"If you drink, don't drive," he said. Suddenly he stepped back from the car, braced himself, and swung with the gun. I caught the flash of blue metal in the light from the dash. I half-ducked, too late, and a searing, roaring sheet of flame exploded in my brain. . . .

I fought my way up from the dark, liquid blackness. A great weight was pressing on me. I groaned and opened my eyes.

Tiny was slumped over me, jamming me in the seat. Weakly I tried to push him away, and almost passed out from the effort. Behind me I heard an engine race. Suddenly I remembered where I was. I grabbed for the door. I was too late. There was a heavy bump and Tiny's car gathered speed, pushed from behind.

I clutched at the wheel but Tiny's mammoth body pinioned me. There was a squeal of brakes and a rumble of locked tires on gravel behind us, and then we were crashing through the rickety fence and over the cliff, soaring through the air. I saw the breakers exploding below.

For a long moment the tiny car seemed to hang nose-low in the air, and then it flipped over. The black rocks, the white foam, and the dark water flashed in front of the windshield, and then there was a deafening roar. My head banged against the dashboard and Tiny stirred and fell away from me.

Then we were plummeting to the depths, with salt water pouring into the car through the open window. I yanked at the door handle. It was jammed.

THIS was it, I figured. At last Mrs. Blair's little boy has had it. The water in the car was up to my eyes now, but I could see that Tiny was awake and struggling feebly, trapped behind the steering wheel. His eyeballs rolled toward me wildly. I twisted toward him, braced my shoulders against my own door, and jammed my feet into his side. As the last inch of air-space closed over my head, I took a deep, final breath and kicked out hard with both my feet, straining convulsively.

For an angry moment I cursed every potato that my fat friend had eaten. I kicked out once more, felt something give, and suddenly Tiny was gone. I pulled myself under the wheel, my lungs bursting, and followed him.

I shot toward the surface blindly, salt in my mouth and eyes, blood pounding in my head, clawing my way to air. My eardrums sang under the pressure and I felt as if Davy Jones were trying to squeeze out my brains with a monkey wrench.

Suddenly my head broke clear and I gulped fresh, cool air. I floundered in the surge and ebb of the tide, trying to keep away from the wicked black rocks towering above me. Automatically I kicked off my shoes.

A dozen feet away I heard a groan. In the starlight I could see a round shape bobbing with the waves. I fought my way over and grabbed at Tiny's meaty head.

"Okay, Tiny?"

I heard a hoarse gurgle that might have meant anything.

"Turn on your back," I sputtered. He heard me and relaxed. He was buoyant as all fat men are buoyant, and once on his back was more help than otherwise. I faced the shore, treading water, and sized up the situation.

There were cliffs rising from the water all along the coast, with nasty rocks jutting out of the water in plumes of spray. About fifty yards up the cliff, though, was a dark, flat object lying along the water. It looked as if it might be a pier.

I was wrong about the pier. It was a rock, covered with shells and barnacles, and slippery as a pickpocket at a county fair. But we made it, me feeling like a tug pushing an ocean liner, and Tiny gradually coming to the point where he could help a little.

I clambered onto the rock, losing half my skin and clothes in the process, and heaved Tiny up behind me. We collapsed on our backs, gulping air and feeling as if we'd just swam the English Channel. Finally Tiny gasped:

"Thanks, Mike."

"Think nothing of it. You make a good life-raft. Besides, you can do the same for me some time."

Tiny looked up at the towering cliffs. "I know what you mean. Let's get started on it now. If you think we can crawl up there at night."

I pointed at the water. "I hate to press you, but we have to. Unless you want another swim. The tide's coming in, and in another hour a seal wouldn't be able to hang on this rock. Let's go."

The climb up the cliff was rough too. I went first, following a fault in the rock, and Tiny puffed along after me, clinging to the face of the cliff with his fingertips. I heaved myself over the edge, helped Tiny, and stood up.

We were on the coast highway, and it

was a long walk back to town. I looked at my watch. It was stopped at one-twenty. About two o'clock now, I figured, and no use even trying to hitch-hike.

"Let's get started," I said to Tiny. He groaned and crawled to his feet.

"Brother," he said, "I'll bet I've lost twenty pounds in the last hour."

I thought of the trouble I'd had getting him out of his car and said: "Off you it looks good. Let's hit the road."

We walked for half an hour, and I did a lot of thinking, mainly about the ticket that the Blimp had picked up. You can't hang a murder on a man that's being pinched for speeding when the murder happens. Well, if it wasn't the Blimp, who was it? Nobody else had any particular reason to knock off Rip Torrance.

Or did somebody else have a reason? I had a sudden flash of inspiration.

SUDDENLY we were caught in the glare of headlights. For a chilling moment I thought of Moxie and Kiddie LePlant. Then I realized that their first move after they sent Tiny's car hurtling from the cliff would be to get as far away as possible. Optimistically I turned and stuck out a thumb. The car slowed to a stop, a big state police seal on its side.

"You guys lost?" asked a pleasant voice. "Hitch-hiking is against the law, you know. A flashlight shone in our faces. "Say, Joe," said the voice. "Did you know people were swimming off cliffs?"

"We weren't swimming, officer," I told him. "We were pushed. And I want to turn myself in to Foxy Farnsworth."

"It's Blair, Joe," I heard the driver mutter. "Guy that jumped out the window downtown. Cover him."

The door opened and Joe got out, trim in his khaki uniform. "Okay, Blair," he said, easing me in the back seat. "We're in a position to make your dream come true. Foxy Farnsworth is just the guy

you're going to see. You too, fat-stuff—up front. . . ."

Foxy looked up when we entered the office. He half rose from his chair and then collapsed weakly. He mopped his brow.

"Nice goin', boys," he said. "Nice goin'. Where'd you find him?"

"On the coast highway. He gave himself up."

"Gave himself up? That's not so good." Farnsworth glanced at me sharply. "What made you change your mind?"

Tiny cleared his throat. "It's a frame-up, chief. I'm the barkeep at the Club Golden. Blair was with me all afternoon, and he never threatened to kill anybody."

"That's your story," said Farnsworth. "What about these guys that tried to knock you off?"

"They shoved us off a cliff in Tiny's car," I volunteered.

"Maybe," said Farnsworth. "Maybe. And I guess you figure they killed Torrance. How about the traffic ticket?"

I shook my head. "They didn't kill Torrance. But they killed a guy named Snowy Carroll five years ago."

Farnsworth pushed a button and spoke into an intercom. "Get the Blimp, Moxie Scarbrough, and Kiddie LePlant."

"And while you're at it," I said, "See if he can't pick up the cigarette girl, Juanita Lorez."

Farnsworth looked at me quizzically. He shrugged. "Get a girl called Lorez, while you're out there. He leaned back in his swivel chair. "All right, Blair. They'll be here in half an hour. But me, I still think you killed Torrance."

I shook my head. "I didn't."

Foxy raised his eyebrows. "There's a girl in the outer office that thinks you didn't, too."

My heart surged. "Christine?"

"Christine . . . Lynne . . . whatever you want to call her. She's all broken up about her boy friend, but she swears you

couldn't have murdered her boy friend, Torrance."

I began to feel better already. "That's a woman's intuition. Can I see her?"

Farnsworth chugged. He called into the intercom: "Show Miss Woodstock in."

Lynne came in, her eyes tired and her hair ruffled. She walked over and kissed me.

"I know you didn't do it, Mike."

"Thanks, Lynne," I said. "I'm sorry he's dead."

And strangely enough, I was.

THERE was a long wait until the Blimp, Moxie and Kiddie LePlante strolled in. The Blimp faltered when he saw us, Kiddie LePlant blanched and Moxie looked at us coolly.

Juanita Lorez came in, jerking her arm away from a policeman.

"What's the idea?" she hissed.

Farnsworth nodded at me. "His idea, not mine. Okay, Blair, start talking."

"Well," I said, "This starts five years ago. A guy named Snowy Carroll won some money at the Blimp's place, and they had to get it back. He was a dope fiend—didn't drink—so they couldn't slip him a mickey, which is their standard operating procedure. They had to kill him.

"Ran him over in Rip Torrance's car, slipped Rip a mickey, and even convinced Rip himself he'd killed him. Juanita was the mickey artist. Right so far, Tiny?"

"That's right. Rip only had two drinks—he couldn't have been drunk. He was doped."

The Blimp's lips tightened. He stared at Tiny with cold, beady eyes. Tiny glared back.

"Now," I continued, "Rip heard in prison that he was framed. When he got out, he decided to come up here and blackmail the Blimp. He shook Lynne in Los Angeles, and put up here at the Tray-

nor Hotel. He needed a contact man for the Blimp—he was afraid to see him in person.

"So he looked up his old girl friend, Juanita, and told her where he was, and what to tell the Blimp. I guess he promised her she'd go with him when he left town—"

"That's a lie," whispered Juanita. "I didn't know he was in town."

"But apparently," I went on, "he still loved Lynne. Because when he found out Lynne was in town, he called her and told her to get ready to go back East. He told her to be ready a day earlier than he'd told Juanita."

"That's a lie," said Juanita, her voice rising.

I shook my head. "All I did was mention to Juanita tonight that Rip had called Lynne. Suddenly she remembered that she had a date, and had to leave. A half hour later, Rip was dead. Incidentally, she could have saved herself the trouble—apparently the Blimp had had her tailed and knew where Rip was. But the Blimp got a traffic ticket, and I took a cab, so Juanita got there first."

"All right," screamed Juanita. "All right! I killed him, I killed him, I killed him!" She lunged for Lynne. One of the state cops caught her. "I killed him," she yelled, "but *you'll* never get him. Never, never, never."

* * *

It was dawn when Lynn and I stood on the station steps. Lynne was quiet now, her eyes clear and dry. I needed a shave, a drink, and about forty-eight hours sleep; outside of that, I was feeling pretty good.

"How about coming up to my place for a drink, Lynne? Or is it Christine?"

She slipped her arm into mine and squeezed it firmly. Her clear gray eyes looked up into mine.

"Lynne, Mike," she said. "From now on, it's Lynne."

THE END

By MEL COLTON



*All the hot-shots wanted
Buster to get out of town—
except the deadpan brunette . . .
and the sulky blonde.*

*“You cheat both
ways, you black-
haired witch!”*

HER PERFECT FRAME

HER lips were full and soft and fuchsia on an expressionless face and she was a dealer in Rex Tobin's Last Chance Casino. When she smiled, it was a professional, absent smile and when she moved her slim arm and flipped a card, the rest of her body moved with the same impersonal feeling.

She had coal-black hair and the same kind of eyes. Brother, she was cold as zero morning. She wore a strapless gown of saffron and it clung for it had the places to cling too; and her name was Marcy Camp.

I slid between a fat man with a worried expression and a blonde with light blue

eyes and probably a mind to match the silly expression on her face. I took out a five spot and laid it down.

"So it's blackjack." I smiled.

"That's what it looks like," the dealer snapped, shuffled a new pack and flipped me a card in the proper line of delivery. My down card was a six of hearts. The next top one was a jack of diamonds. Her deep eyes shifted to me as she set a king down by the blonde and waited for my take. I got a deuce.

Our eyes met—for just the fraction—and her eyelashes dropped an instant. There was no more emotion than that. It didn't tell me much.

The blonde beside me giggled.

The blonde giggled again. It was hollow, vacuumish. She pushed her cards aside and up. She had overdrawn. Then she dug into a small bag, pulled out a .22, aimed it at the dealer.

"You cheat both ways, you black-haired witch!"

The gun came up and I pushed hard against her arm. I threw her off balance and against the fat man. The .22 whimpered and the fat man tumbled off his seat, the blonde and I following. I pressed her arm and moved with her as we fell to the rug. She shot once more. I snapped her wrist and the gun fell.

Two housemen and Nick, the table boss, helped us up. People at the other tables had gathered around, chips in hand, as a hard, clear and precise voice spoke out:

"What's going on here, Nick?"

A houseman with a thin hawk-face had his arms firmly around the blonde and was holding her tight, arms to her side. She didn't squirm. She stood passive, a little pooped. Everyone was staring at the blonde.

I noticed the blonde better now. Her eyes were light, like clear water, and her eyelids were heavy and drooped at the ends. She wore a white gown and it was expensive. She was loaded with rings and

they weren't glass. Her mouth was loose on a rather pretty face.

The man who spoke to Nick came sliding through the crowd. He was a tall, gray-templed, with dreamy eyes over a long nose and cleft chin. Johnny Moderno, resident manager of Rex Tobin's Last Chance Casino.

Nick had shrugged his shoulders indifferently. Johnny Moderno turned and recognized me.

He spoke sharply: "Buster Hardin, you in on this?"

I snickered: "Sure Johnny, I let blondes do my shooting for me when I don't hit twenty-one."

Johnny handed me a swift, unfriendly look.

The blonde said: "Go to hell, all of you!"

The houseman shook her. Her cheeks flushed. She whirled away from him and slapped the houseman with a surprise left hook. He caught it on the cheekbone and did a little fox-trot step backward trying to keep his feet. The blonde made a turn accented by fury and stabbed her way through the crowd. The houseman made a reach for her.

"Let her go," Johnny said in a dull voice.

I joggled my coat and settled my tie and looked for the dark-headed dealer. She was not around. She hadn't fainted under the table nor was she screaming. She simply had disappeared. I glanced at my watch. Ten-fifteen. I looked up and Johnny's cold, impenetrable eyes were on me.

"Come with me, Shamus."

JOHNNY MODERNO opened a door at the end of the roulette section. I entered a small office with a desk, two leather chairs and no windows. On the desk was a brass horse all fitted up for parade, prancing over an ash tray. A cigar was smouldering in the tray.

Johnny pushed a chair aside and went behind the desk. He didn't trust me. He wanted to be near the artillery, I guess.

He asked: "What are you doing here, Hardin?"

"I didn't shoot at her."

His face darkened. "I didn't ask you that."

"I'm telling you."

"Smart shamuses I do not like." He clipped each word off neatly.

"It's a living—like roulette and black-jack."

Johnny's fingers pressed in the top of a chair. A worried expression flitted across his dark face. His eyes took on that dreamy look.

"Keep out of this place, Shamus. And stay stuck. I don't want you here."

I flipped up a pinky. "Okay, Johnny."

I turned and left, walked in soft rugs passed the gaming tables, clicked heels on the parquet floor between the swinging frosted glass doors and the lobby and bar. On the wide, wooden porch the doorman smiled at me. I smiled back.

Everything was just dandy. The night had stars and they were a silverish-blue against a deep velvet background. A slight breeze blew up and made it crisp and fresh, and the pepper trees were hanging like spider-nets in a fairyland. And a friendly man with a slouched hat and quick sure movements came up from behind me.

"Let's go for a ride, character," he muttered. "It's a nice night."

A very friendly little town, Reno.

A black sedan was by the curb, under a high street lamp. The back door opened. I got in, next to a man in a light gray suit and hat. There was a thick-necked driver and the man who called me a character. The car drove off.

The man in the gray suit said without looking at me:

"What happened?"

I said: "Johnny gave me the brush, but permanently."

"I'm not interested in Moderno," came brusksly.

"Marcy got shot at."

The man's sharp, even features stiffened. His eyes darted to me. "I had nothing to do with that, Buster."

"A blonde with sky-eyes," I added. "Temper or drunk."

The car made a sharp turn and ended up making a U turn. "That complicates," the man murmured. Then he added: "You said shot at—"

"One miss. Then Marcy disappeared."

The car pulled up and stopped. The man reached into his inner coat pocket and brought out a wallet the size of a small briefcase. He pulled out two green bills and handed them to me. "Okay, Buster, that does it. Two C's fair enough?"

I took the two C's. "Okay." I lifted my index finger in half salute. "That's all."

"Better get out of town," he advised.

I shrugged. I got out of the car and the sedan slipped away from the curb leaving me in front of my hotel. I shoved the two C's in my pocket and shrugged again.

It was still a beautiful night.

I stopped by the cigar stand and got a pack of cigs and took a couple of swings at the one-armed bandits that lined the carpeted stairs all the way up to the second floor. They don't miss a chance in Reno. Always the chance to get even. Always.

I opened my door and snapped the switch. No light. The shades were drawn. A small red light, the end of a live cigarette, winked at me from the car corner where the one chair in the room should have been. A splash of perfume pinched my nose.

I was caught, framed in the light of the hall.

"Come in and close the door, Buster." The voice was low but nice and it purred, feminine and fetching.

I closed the door and stood trying to

accustom my eyes to the darkness. The voice came a little stronger: "I have a gun, Buster, so no funny stuff. I can see you and I'm aiming."

I said nothing. I blinked and started breathing stronger. I waited.

"Thanks for saving my life," she said. I waited again and she added: "You work for Rex, don't you?"

"Did. I got the bounce five minutes ago."

The cigarette light waned down. Then she laughed. It wasn't a gay laugh. It wasn't sweet. It was just expression. "Swell. Now you work for me."

"Double swell," I remarked. "Except, when you come off the dramatics and I can get to my suitcases, I'm taking it high for L.A."

There was hesitation. Hesitation in the dark is like holding breath under water. Then: "Thought you were supposed to have guts—"

"I have, sister, and I want to keep them."

"I just loosened the light in the wall bracket," she said. "Tighten it and have a look at your new client."

I moved to the bracket, twisted the bulb and the light went on. Marcy Camp, the black-haired dealer at the Last Chance, had moved from the chair and away from the drawn shade, and was standing by the door leading into the washroom.

SHE still had that absent smile. She was tall and proportioned like a tall girl should be, lithe and stringy with smooth curves. She was wearing a black print dress which glued to her figure and accented those proportions just right. She was putting a walnut-handled .25 away in a suede purse. She was shaking a little.

"Why the dark-room act?" I asked.

She mashed her cigarette in a glass tray on the dresser. "I was followed. They know I came into the hotel, but what room is another story—"

"Who followed you?"

"I didn't stop to ask," she said with quiet humor. "It could have been Johnny's hoodlums, or Rex. I didn't think it was you."

"Why not? I follow dames."

Those coal eyes sparkled with the first sign of life. She answered: "You saved my life, chum. Why?"

"Blood sickens me," I chided. "Women's especially."

She took two fingers and pressed them by the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes as if to release the strain. She blinked her eyes. They looked tired and the coldness in them had melted into fatigue.

"Let's quit playing around," she said acidly. "Rex hired you. Why I don't know, but it has to do with me. That I know, positively. But somebody took a pot shot at me tonight and then Rex bounces you. It doesn't make sense."

I didn't say yes or no. I was watching her and my eyes went past her to the window. The shade was blowing up from a gust of wind that cannoned up from the steep corridor which separated the hotel's two wings. There were about thirty feet between wings.

The shade blowing meant the window was open. That meant a lot of things. Most of which I did not like. I did not like Marcy coming in and twisting the bulb for darkness and pulling down a shade over an open window, especially when the window had been closed when I left the room.

I did not like the way she kept to the washroom door, out of window range and kept talking—and thirty feet across was another hotel window.

I did not like the spot in which I was standing—and I moved just in time.

A small hole tore through the shade and thudded the door behind me. I hit the floor. There was a short, cut-off cry from Marcy. I looked up to see Marcy digging

hurriedly into that suede purse of hers.

"You fingered me," I rasped. I grabbed her ankles and down she came, facing me, still struggling with her bag.

"No—no I didn't," came in stabs. "I—I didn't— You're hurting my arm."

I was mad. I had a right to be mad, but it wasn't smart to be mad in a spot like that. Her hand came out of the purse and I felt the walnut butt on my head in a quick hard slap. I got a little light-headed. She slammed again, harder and it turned heavy—all heavy and black. . . .

* * *

I was coming up in water; and my head was hitting the top layer of ice. Then everything disappeared but the water. It was all over my head and face and shirt. A white-jacket had a pitcher of water in his hand, aimed at me. As I sat up there was Johnny Moderno and two stocky men.

Johnny, dressed in a red sport shirt and gray flannels. Looking very fresh, he let his eyes roam over me. He started right in: "Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

I rubbed my face and the white-jacket threw me a towel. I wiped my head and hair. I got up shaking my head.

The two muggs grinned. Johnny didn't grin. "Marcy Camp. Where is she?"

"How in the hell do I know?"

Johnny came close. Johnny was tough. He had two muggs with him and he hadn't been hit on the head. He could afford to be tough.

"She was here last night," he snapped.

I grabbed Johnny by his red shirt and threw him roughly against his men. The white-jacket backed up. The muggs caught Johnny. Johnny spread his arms to hold them back.

"So you took a pot shot at me," I barked.

Johnny's dreamy eyes took on some interest. They had swayed over to the shade,

saw the hole and followed the imaginary line to the hole in the door. He went over and moved a manicured fingernail up and over the spot. Then he turned: "That still doesn't tell me where she is."

I tried a dead grin. "Who do you think hit me on the head?"

Johnny pressed his temples. Everyone in Reno, it seemed, pressed nerves one way or another. "I didn't take any pot shot at you, Buster," he explained. "Marcy was followed here but was lost." He turned his head to one of the muggs: "This joe here couldn't tail a truck on a desert highway."

The joe grinned. He looked happy.

Johnny fixed his shirt and tried to palm out the wrinkles. He looked worried. He looked better than that—a little scared, like a kid with jam on his fingers, jam in his mouth and not much time to hide.

"You better scram out of town," he advised.

He meant that to be tough. It was lame duck. It was warning with the sharp edges down. And it was the second time I had been told to get out of town. Rex Tobin advised me in the car and now this Johnny Moderno suggested it.

Only Marcy Camp, missing again, wanted me to stay. It made sense like a Chinaman's counting stick.

Johnny moved his head and the two muggs followed him out of the room. The white-jacket fumbled with the towel until he caught a silver buck from me, then he took the exit.

I undressed, took a shower, shaved. With a change of clothes, I tackled the packing job.

I HAD another customer. The blonde with the sky-eyes and heavy eyelids stood in a smartly tailored green wool dress and said: "Hi."

I said: "Hi," but I didn't mean it.

"Can I come in?"

"You're in. Now what?"

"Unruly this morning," she said cheerfully. When I managed to turn away from the packing and take a good look at her, I realized that my first impression at the Casino about her had been bad. She didn't look light-headed or temperamental. She looked class, and plenty and those light eyes had strength behind them. The blonde hair was taffy and shiny and very nice.

She stepped into the room and closed the door. Her perfume was strong, French, and it snagged the air. She said: "You're Buster Hardin."

I nodded.

"You work for Rex Tobin."

"Did. Right now I work for Buster Hardin, exclusively."

She slipped a gloved hand into a large side pocket and took out a gold-meshed cigarette case, took out a cigarette and flipped a light from the other end of the case. A couple of long puffs and a short laugh. "You certainly made it look swell last night," she said.

"Yeah?"

She walked around the room, came to the shade and lifted it and glanced out. Then she turned back smiling. "For your information," she said, "my gun had blanks in it."

Denmark never had an odor like this case was sprouting.

She added: "Take that schoolboy expression off your face. Sit down and let mamma tell you a story."

I sat down in the chair and 'mamma' cushioned gracefully on the edge of the bed. She dragged the ash tray over to the bed. "You know why Rex hired you to get friendly with Marcy Camp?" she asked.

Rex Tobin was still a freshly left client. I still kept the reason a secret. I shrugged.

"Then I'll tell you why," she continued. "Because you have that tough go-to-hell look with a great big kid face to match it." Her eyes lifted to mine and I saw sky, clear blue sky. "Because Marcy Camp

goes for your type, Hardin, and because Marcy was Rex's first wife."

It was coming through. I prodded: "So?"

"So ask me who I am?"

I obliged: "Who are you?"

"Mrs. Rex Tobin, the second—without portfolio."

"Which means?"

Mrs. Rex Tobin, the second drew in a long breath and exhaled a long stream of smoke. With her finger she drew circles around the ash tray. She said:

"I was born rich and with gambling blood all the way back to my pirating grandfathers. I met Rex at the Casino. I fell for the lug. More for the atmosphere around the Casino I guess than anything else. So we got tight one night and got married. I loved the life and Rex needed my money. Great. But it wears off, brother, it wears off. Rex was just a dressed-up hoodlum.

"I own the Last Chance Casino," she said quickly, "lock, stock and barrel. Rex owed Johnny Moderno and I bought Johnny out to boot."

"Which means?" I said again.

"Which means I want a divorce from Rex."

It didn't make sense. "You're in Reno. You're sitting on third base with no outs in that league."

She bent a cigarette in the tray. "Look, you can get a divorce in Reno when it's not contested. They never are. But when it *is* contested and by a guy like Rex with his connections, then it's not too easy."

It still didn't add up and I told her so. She wiped a tobacco flake from her lip. "Rex needs me and my money like Grant needed Richmond. He refused me a divorce. But I got a private agency to dig around and they came up with Marcy Camp, Rex's first wife. They came up with something better than that. Marcy Camp was still legally married to Rex Tobin when we got hitched."

It started to make sense now. I said: "So you try to scare it out of her. Is that it?"

"Yes. Where Johnny Moderno got hold of her I don't know—but there she is, working under my very nose."

"Maybe she had a reason. Maybe she was clipping Rex for plenty. Bigamy."

"She got a divorce later, but I don't know where. I had a private dick offer her a large sum to be a witness for me but she refused. Rex must have been paying plenty—of my dough. Then I figured a little scare might help. It was corny I know, but you helped it look genuine."

"It might look good," I said, "but not genuine. Why should you shoot your only possible help in getting the divorce?"

She punched the dead cigarette in the tray, nervously. "I wish you can convince the police about that."

I got up from the chair. "Police?"

She lifted her head and there was tensesness lined around her jaw. "I guess you haven't heard. Marcy Camp was found dead in her bed this morning."

The bump on my head began to ache. And like that, it suddenly hit me. Me, a perfect bull's-eye for a frame target. She got up, fast. She must have read the thoughts in my eyes. I grabbed her and she shook away and was by the door, her face washed in fright. She opened the door.

"That puts me on the seat!"

"What's eating you?" she stammered, frightened.

"Plenty. You're keeping me occupied with a lot of windy talk. Why tell me these things? Because you want me in town so I can take the rap."

She shook her head slowly and calmness came back into her face. "Relax. I came up to help. What sort of a suspect could you be, unless—" she hesitated—"unless Rex makes you one." She put a lot of meaning into that. And it jibed. I put my mad look on and patted her shoulders, fatherly.

"I'll take care of Rex," I promised.

There was sunshine in those blue eyes. She put out a glove hand and squeezed mine, thankfully. "I'll be at the Western-Ho if you need me." She put a lot of extra meaning in that, too.

When she left I finished packing and then went over and pulled the shade down again. The bullet hole was jagged. It was like a mashed thumb at a cocktail party, and it explained a lot.

I left the hotel to take care of Rex.

THE doorman smiled at me again and held the big door open. In the lobby I met Nick. Nick frowned at me. He came over and told me to get the hell out of the Last Chance.

"I see Rex's car outside," I mentioned casually.

"So what?" Nick rapped back. "He

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owns the joint. Why shouldn't it be there?"

"I work for Rex."

Nick raised his eyebrows. "I doubt it." Then he thought it over. "Just a minute. Stay in the lobby."

I stayed in the lobby. I marched over to the bar just off the lobby and took a much-needed drink and a smoke. I looked in the mirror and made faces at myself. Nick came back and motioned with his head. "Let's go to the washroom."

We went to the washroom where Nick did a thorough job of frisking. "Okay, Hardin," he said businesslike, "follow me."

I trailed Nick through the rooms and to the right, through a leatherette door which opened to a long corridor as cold as a backstage smile.

Nick made a turn and I clipped him. Nick went down to the cement. Nick wasn't very smart. Frisking a man doesn't hold him. I went through Nick's clothes and came out with a toy .32. I slipped it in my pocket and knocked on an oak door off the turn.

One of Johnny's mugs opened the door. It was the kind of a scene you see in the movies as a climax-buster. It was a square room with redwood walls and a soft black rug that squished when you walked on it. The desk was in a corner next to drapes that covered the entire wall.

On one side of the other wall was Rex Tobin, sitting in a chair with the thick-necked driver and the friendly greeter. The same two that were in the sedan. On the other side was Johnny Moderno. One of his boys was sitting on the desk, one leg swinging over, a big cigar and a grin on his face.

Rex's soft gray eyes lifted and he said: "You should have gotten out of town, Buster."

Johnny didn't say anything. His eyes were narrowed and his jaw clenched with tight-set lips.

"I'm still working for you, boss," I said quietly.

"I paid you off," Rex said.

"Marcy's dead," I added.

Silence hit the room like a gush of wind. Rex's face showed strain and Johnny's began to screw all up into wrinkles. His neck cords bulged and he shook a little.

"They're going to hang the rap on me if they can," I remarked.

Rex's eyes went small and he looked at Johnny. "I must be getting thick," he mentioned.

Johnny shifted from one foot to the other. Rex slipped his hand casually into his pocket and leaned forward, his eyes tight.

"Marcy committed suicide this morning," Rex muttered, "according to the report we got. She had her own gun in her hand and the cops are making tests. Where does that throw you, Buster?"

"It looks all right on paper," I admitted, "but there's more accident to it than that, Rex. Marcy visited me last night and kept the room dark. She kept away from the window for a reason. She was scared. Gals like Marcy with a bag of gold in their mitts—like first marriages never properly concluded—don't then go home and end it all."

The corners of Rex's mouth drew down and Johnny shifted feet again and looked sulky. The other just sat, posing.

"Besides," I continued, "last night someone took a shot from the window across the wing. I thought it was for me. I think differently now. It could have been for Marcy. It's hard to tell a figure behind a drawn shade. Okay, so the cops will make a paraffin test and examine the butt of the gun and find my blood and hair on it."

Rex stared at me as the room took on motion. The mug on the desk quit swinging his leg. I set myself firmly against the door, leaving my right arm to swing freely.

"But that's what'll save me," I rattled on. "The twisteroo, Rex that boomerangs to you. Because Johnny came up this morning—and a hotel man was dousing me with water. I had been hit with that gun. Marcy did it. I have a witness in a white-jacket and a hotel's reputation that I had been knocked out. That adds up. I didn't do it. It gives me the motive but not the time. That gives you, Rex, the motive, the time and the connections!"

"You're talking too much," Rex said impatiently. "Wind it up to just what—"

"That Johnny Moderno's putting you on the hot seat. He and—"

Rex got up and pulled a wicked .45 from his pocket. "Johnny," he said.

JOHNNY turned white and the mugg with the grin moved quickly. He ducked down and shifted and his right hand came up and roared fire. Rex twisted and rolled. His .45 kicked a chunk of wood above Johnny's head.

Nick's little .32 made a funny pipsqueak noise as it streaked fire from my pocket, and the mugg's grin spread out to a wide grimace as he slid down to the floor. Johnny made a weak try for his pocket but he quit when he saw me and the small .32 out in the open, proud as a cannon. The rest just set.

Nobody was hurt much. The black rug took a little red coloring and it looked worse than it really was. Rex picked himself up from the floor, straining his side and holding his hip as he straightened.

I said: "Maybe we oughta get some law."

Rex shook his head slowly. His jaw set hard. "I don't think that'll be necessary." His eyes were a little glassy. "I'll take care of Johnny."

I said: "Okay, boss," and I opened the door, slid out and into the corridor. Nick wasn't around. I went back through the gaming rooms. On the porch we exchanged smiles again.

An hour later I was checked out of the hotel and swinging over in a taxi to the Western-Ho. As the taxi pulled up to the canopy entrance, the black sedan pulled up behind. My bags were automatically transferred to the sedan. I didn't have much choice.

I got in the car again and the sedan drove off. Rex Tobin, breathing hard and looking woodenish from loss of blood and the taping the doctor must have done on him, said: "You dating my wife, now?"

"There's a little hole through the window shade of my last hotel room, Rex, and in a line with it a bullet-hole in the door. I meant to ask your wife about that."

Rex looked at me queerly. Outside it appeared that we were headed for the airport.

"I meant to ask her," I said, "how-come she visited me this morning, lifted the shade and didn't make a remark about the torn bullet-hole. I guess because she knew it was there. It just had to be, Rex—she fired the shot."

Rex said quietly: "Figure some more out for me, Buster."

So I sat back and figured some more out for him. I said: "It pitches this way. Your wife wanted a divorce, bad. She wanted it because she's young and rich and spoilt; and because Johnny Moderno's got those dreamy night-club eyes and smooth hands with manicures.

"I figure that Blondie catches the dope on you and Marcy and got Johnny to hire Marcy as a dealer. But Marcy still had the soft spot for you and doesn't want to cause trouble. So they scare her. At least, Blondie fires blanks at her.

"That gives Johnny the hold he wants. With Marcy dead, he's sitting pretty. He's got you for motive and he's got Blondie for motive after the Casino fracas—that is, after you fry and Blondie gets the divorce and he marries Blondie.

"So Johnny knocks Marcy off." I took

(Please continue on page 127)

THE GRAVE JOKER

*When his glamorous missus
played Russian Roulette,
meek Mr. Dolan tried to warn her—
she was a blankety-blank fool.*



Mrs. Dolan laughed and put the muzzle of the gun in her mouth.

By **MORRIS
COOPER**

MRS. DOLAN never nagged. She was just contrary, like the last match in a folder. And since her name on the bottom of a check was the only one recognized by the bank, she always had her own way.

Like the time Mr. Dolan's sister was sick. "Just plain laziness," decided Mrs. Dolan. "What she needs is to go to work. That'll straighten her up. If she's wor-

ried about her cough, tell her to cut down on cigarettes."

Everyone was sympathetic with her when Mr. Dolan's sister died of tuberculosis. "Not even a blood relative," they said, "and look at the funeral she paid for. Must have cost a thousand dollars."

And Mr. Dolan? No one noticed him tucked away behind the huge masses of flowers. He just wasn't important enough.

Mrs. Dolan was very upset by the whole affair. "You'd think it was my sister instead of yours," she complained later. "Everything on my shoulders. My friends thought it strange you said nothing."

Mr. Dolan sighed, and Mrs. Dolan snipped: "You're so—" she struggled for the right word, and finally came up with it triumphantly—"so unimportant. No one ever notices you. I'll bet even at your own funeral you'll be the least important thing there."

Mr. Dolan sighed gently again and kept quiet. He knew that she never, never, expected an answer from him.

The first time Mrs. Dolan had played poker, Mr. Dolan made the tactical error of telling her he didn't approve of gambling for high stakes. But that had been when Mr. Dolan was very, very young. And even then, she was contrary. When she had no right to, she would still win.

If someone offered to bet it would be light tomorrow noon, she'd take a gamble, and there probably would be a total eclipse of the sun.

Tonight, Mr. Dolan didn't want to go to the party; he was tired and lonely.

"I'm not going alone," Mrs. Dolan declared. "I'd be the laughing stock of everyone there."

Mr. Dolan sighed and went for his topcoat.

He offered to drive, and automatically held the door open while she got behind the wheel. He walked around the car and got in beside her. It was a little chilly, so he started to roll the window up.

She snapped, "Leave it down." And added, "There'll be a lot of smart, sophisticated people there tonight. So don't say anything. Just sit."

Mr. Dolan closed his eyes while she drove. He thought of his son—he thought of him a lot lately, and always as *his* son. Years ago he had stopped thinking of her as a mother. If it ever crossed his mind, it was only to wonder that the miracle of her becoming a mother could have transpired.

Of course his son was dead and buried with thousands of other soldiers who would never come home, but that didn't matter to Mr. Dolan. He could always close his eyes and be with him.

Mr. Dolan was sorry he hadn't been able to see his son before he went overseas. He had wired home for money to fly. All he had was a five-day leave and he couldn't make it by train.

Mrs. Dolan had decided that flying was too extravagant. "He can come home next month," she had said. But next month never came. He would never come home.

A gentle smile touched Mr. Dolan's lips. Soon he would be with his son forever. Six months, the doctor had told him. A year at the most. And Mr. Dolan had a plan for those remaining months. He was going to where his son slept. He could get a little cottage near him, and every day he would be able to have a long visit with him and his buddies.

But Mrs. Dolan must never know of this plan. This was a secret Mr. Dolan kept locked in his heart.

THE party was gay and reckless. Mr. Dolan sat in a corner chair, alone and unwatched. There was poker and dice and some threw knives at the wall. Someone offered to hold his hand up as a target. Mr. Dolan closed his eyes and dreamed.

The loud voice of a man woke Mr. Dolan. He listened.

(Please continue on page 128)



*Canned for blasting corrupt City Hall,
Newshawk Pete decided he'd better switch sides—
or pledge allegiance . . . to his corpse.*

By RICHARD E. GLENDINNING

SITTING DUCK RUNNING WILD

Blazing Novelette of a Cynical Crusader



"We're going to have a little talk with your boy-friend."

CHAPTER ONE

Jumping the Fence

THE clock in the tower of the city hall across the square was just striking ten as I stepped into Vanatta's reception room and walked over to the blonde receptionist, my hat in my hand. She looked up reluctantly from her maga-

zine and gave me a smile which had in it all the friendly warmth of a limp, damp handshake.

"I'm Pete Jeffries," I said. "I've got a ten o'clock appointment."

The blonde was window-dressing. Vanatta hired only the prettiest, and changed

the scenery often, to keep reporters amused while they waited for him. This one, new since the last time I had been in, knew my name.

"The reporter from the *Star*?" she asked, smiling now with a bit more energy.

I hated to let her down. "Ex-reporter."

"Oh," she said in a flat, suddenly disinterested tone. "Well, at least you're prompt. He'll like that."

"I know. Shall I go in?"

"Grane is in there."

Danton Grane was the mayor of our fair city and Vanatta carried that honorable gentleman in his hip pocket. Six weeks before, when I had been the *Star's* political reporter, I would have pushed right into Vanatta's office to sit in on the interview. But now things were different. Much, much different.

I walked across the reception room and sat down to wait my turn patiently. The blonde picked up her magazine and pretended to read it but she was peeking at me over the top.

"Is my nose shiny?" I asked.

"What happened to you on the *Star*?"

"I was canned," I said.

"You asked for it. You shot off your mouth too much. I used to read your stuff."

I glowered at her. I had never written anything I couldn't prove. That was the trouble. I had wanted to prove that the relationship between Vanatta and Mayor Grane was more than a beautiful friendship, and, like a modern Don Quixote, had rushed off in all directions to get my evidence. Again like the Don, I had charged windmills, winding up on my back.

"Listen, Miss What's-your-name—"

"Barnes, Lil Barnes."

"Okay. I wasn't fired for shooting off my mouth. It was for getting myself plastered while I was on the assignment."

"Tough," she smirked.

Just then, the door to Vanatta's inner office opened and Danton Grane scam-

pered out, wringing his hands. His little round face was like a lump of suet and he looked as if he were about to burst into tears. "Terrible," he moaned. "Oh, terrible. What shall I do?"

"Shoot yourself," said Lil Barnes. She looked at me and jerked her thumb at Vanatta's office. "Next."

I stood up, took one last glance at the mayor and went in to see Vanatta. Think of a talking snake and you've got Lew Vanatta. At the moment, however, he wasn't talking. He was staring blankly at the city hall across the way.

"Hi, Lew," I said.

He made no reply. I tried once again. His sharp black eyes flicked over me, then turned away. I shrugged my shoulders and sat down to wait. After five minutes, my blood began to boil, but it came to me suddenly that Vanatta was intentionally giving me the silent treatment in part payment for all the times I had kept him waiting and for all the cracks I had made about him in print.

At the end of ten minutes, he swung around in his chair and grinned at me malevolently. "My, how the mighty have fallen!"

I stood up. "It's been nice seeing you."

"Sit down," he snapped. "You can't afford to walk out of here. You're broke. You only know one business, reporting, but you'll never work on another paper as long as you live."

I sat down again and nodded grimly. "I'm listening."

"I'll hire you."

"For how much?"

"Seventy-five a week and expenses."

"You've just bought yourself a man," I said.

He stared at me in amazement for a moment. "You don't even know what the job is."

"And don't care." I shifted in my seat.

"I was a guy with a mess of crazy ideals. I even believed that graft and corruption

and racketeering had no place in politics, so I knocked myself out trying to get others to believe the same thing. Look where it got me."

"The bottle got you here."

"It gave the publisher a convenient excuse, that's all. He couldn't fire me for crusading." I took a cigarette from the pack on Vanatta's desk and lighted it. "So now I'm thinking of me, the number-one boy. Nobody else. What do you want me to do?"

"Research," said Vanatta, smiling crookedly. "Grane just left here."

"I saw him. He looked like death warmed over."

"Yeah. He found out he wasn't going to be mayor again."

"And he's the subject for research?"

Vanatta shook his head. "There's a reformer, Charles J. Kell. Know him?"

"Who doesn't? He's President of the City Council and the administration's chief critic."

"I helped put him in, too," Vanatta said somberly, "though Kell doesn't know it. I thought he'd be a nice, dignified, harmless guy. He turns out to be anything but. He could be elected easily. So Kell's your subject."

I HAD already worked on Kell. For my money, that man was the straightest shooter ever to be mixed up in local politics. A good man, respected in the community, he was a reformer without being sticky about it, and he was a candidate for mayor.

"If Grane is out," I said, "who's your man?"

"Kell."

I jerked erect in my chair. "Then why the research?"

"I want you to get something on Kell. The man never lived who didn't have something on his conscience, some sin, some mistake. I want to know what Kell's mistake was. Then, when he's elected—

and he can't miss—he'll be *my* boy. Get it?"

I got it. Political blackmail.

"And if he never made a slip, do I help him make one?"

"What do you think?" Vanatta said sharply. "I'll give you a start on him. Grane knew him in law school. They palled around together. I think Grane knows something about him, but Grane thinks he's pulling a fast one. He's keeping whatever he knows to himself, figuring it'll be better than an insurance policy."

I stood up and put on my hat. Looking down guilelessly at Vanatta, I said, "I wonder if Kell has ever been mixed up in the numbers racket or bookmaking."

Vanatta's face stiffened. "Very funny. The answer is no."

I hid my smirk and left Vanatta's office. Lil Barnes was doing things to her face, though her face needed no improvement whatsoever, when I passed her desk.

"Do you date the hired help?" I asked.

"Are you working here now?"

"In and out."

She looked me up and down, all six feet of me, and let her soft blue eyes linger on my wild thatch of red hair.

"Say about six o'clock?" she suggested.

"Say that. The Empire Room."

She nodded and picked up her magazine, to become lost once again in someone else's romance. Why she needed it second-hand was beyond me. She was all-over beautiful with a shapely body which made my blood tingle.

But I had more to think about than the shape of things to come.

I crossed the tree-shaded square to the city hall. It was a handsome building and its whitewashed bricks sparkled in the strong sunlight. You had the feeling that nothing rotten could take place in a building so pure in design, so clean in appearance—until you knew the inside on local politics.

Mike Royer, the cop on duty at the top of the steps, waved to me as I came up. "Hi, Pete," he said. "What brings you up here?"

"The mayor."

"Then you're too late. He left fifteen minutes ago, on his way home."

So, waving to Mike, I trudged down the steps again and hailed a cab to take me to Grane's house in the suburbs. His street was a quiet one of pleasant homes which sat well back from the curb on wide green lawns. I paid off the cab driver and went up the walk to the mayor's front porch.

His wife, a plump woman in her middle fifties, was rocking gently on a creaky platform sofa, an iced drink on the table beside her.

"Is the mayor in?" I asked.

"Not yet, but I'm expecting him any moment. He phoned that he would be held up for a time." She waved listlessly to a chair. "Won't you— Oh, here he comes now."

I turned and saw the mayor's official car drawing up to the curb. Grane got out of the rear, paused a moment to say something to the chauffeur, then stood on the sidewalk to watch the car drive away.

At that instant, I heard a whine of tires up the street as a black coupe sped around the corner. I don't know what made me suspicious but I hurtled the porch railing and ran toward Grane.

"Grane!" I shouted. "Look out! Down!"

But my warning came too late. The coupe was abreast of him. The ugly snout of a shotgun was poked over the sill on the passenger's side—and the quiet of the street was shattered by the gun's roar. The coupe sped away. I tried to get its number but the plate was smeared with mud. Then I ran to the mayor and bent over him.

He was dead. In death, he was unrecognizable. His face had been shot away and half his skull was gone. I turned and

saw Mrs. Grane running toward her husband.

"No," I said, holding her back. "Don't look. Please don't look."

"No," I said, holding her back. "Don't look. Please don't look."

But she tore away from me and stumbled to her knees next to the mayor. She put her arms around him and held his pulpy head against her and she rocked him as if he were a baby to whom sleep would not come.

"I'll call the police," I said. I went in the house and left her alone with the body. Mayor Grane had been a weakling and a stooge, a grafter and a disgrace, but he had been her husband and she had loved him.

I called the police and then I called Vanatta.

"You won't have to wait for the election," I told him. "Kell's the new mayor."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

I gave him the story, then said, "So, as President of the City Council, Kell automatically takes over as mayor. Acting mayor."

Vanatta cursed sulphurously.

"What's the matter?" I said. "This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"He goes in as his own boss!" Vanatta roared. "I didn't want him in office until I had him all wrapped up."

"It's too late now."

There was a brief pause at Vanatta's end. When he spoke again, his voice was pitched low and harsh. "I wonder. Suppose Kell couldn't wait to become mayor? What would be the quickest way?"

"Don't be a sap, Vanatta. Kell wouldn't pull a stunt like this. He isn't the type."

"Any man is capable of anything if there's something he wants badly enough."

Even as Vanatta was talking, I thought of something else. Perhaps Kell was afraid to wait for the election. If Danton Grane, his dander up and his pride hurt, should have decided to buck Vanatta and make

a fight of the election, he could have possibly done Kell irreparable harm.

Only by killing Grane could Kell be assured of victory. I didn't think for one moment that Kell himself had pulled the trigger, but hired guns cost little, especially when the stakes were big.

"Keep working," Vanatta ordered.

"Right," I said. I hung up and went outside.

THE police were already there and an ambulance was just arriving. Neighbors all along the street were out on their porches, staring with shaded eyes at the scene of the tragedy, and a swarm of kids was crowding close to Grane's body.

"Beat it, you kids," a leather-lunged sergeant finally bellowed. "Go on home."

The youngsters moved along reluctantly, but then came a crowd which was even worse. The reporters. I enjoyed being able to watch them impersonally. They were all a bunch of case-hardened bums, as calloused as a butcher's thumb. They were lice who should have been stepped on.

But I was lying to myself. I yearned to be one of them again.

Lieutenant Martin, out of Homicide, came over to me. "You saw the whole thing, Jeffries?"

"That's right."

"Did you get the number?"

"No, but I can describe the car."

He wrote down the description, then looked up sharply. "What about the killer?"

I don't know what came over me at that point. I wouldn't have known either the killer or the driver of the death car from Hitler's grandfather. I saw them only as blurs and, except for the fleeting impression that the driver was tall and dark-haired, had made out no details about them.

But I had to be smart.

"I can't describe them but I'd know

them for sure if I ever saw them again."

Martin seemed satisfied. He closed his black notebook with a snap and strode off to give his report to Captain of Police Stryker, who had come to handle the case personally and to pose for the press photographers.

I moved over to where Stryker was holding a press conference.

"As I see it," said he, "this is an out-of-town job."

Some of the reporters won my undying respect by laughing out loud.

"Do you think there's any connection between the mayor's assassination and gambling?" asked one reporter.

Stryker reared back indignantly. "What gambling?"

The laughter sounded sacrilegious in the presence of death.

The captain knew it was time to get himself off the pan. He turned to me. "Jeffries says he can identify the killers."

"Wait a minute!" I protested. "I didn't say I—"

But the press wasn't interested in my explanation. The boys had their leads and their headlines and they were off to the races. In fifteen seconds, the only reporters to be found were a couple of feature writers who were digging up color stories.

"Damn you, Stryker," I muttered.

He grinned at me and walked away.

I went up to the house and talked a cop into letting me into the living room where Mrs. Grane was lying on the couch.

"Mrs. Grane," I said, "I hate to bother you now but—"

"It's all right." She sat up and looked at me. "You tried to warn him. I thank you for that."

I sat down next to her. "He's dead but perhaps we can salvage some good out of it."

"He was weak," she said. "He had a lot of faults, but he was always good to me. Never a harsh word, never a raised hand. And he was true to me."

"I'm sure of that," I said uneasily. "But did he ever say anything which might have—"

"You mean about people who might have killed him? No, he never talked about his work. Just how there was gambling going on. He said he'd try to stop it some day, but he never seemed to get around to it. Now it's too late," Mrs. Grane moaned.

"What about Vanatta?" I asked.

"*Him!*" she spat, her eyes filled with loathing. "The things he made Danton do! Protect evil people. Send businessmen who wanted city contracts to Vanatta to take out their insurance. Vanatta!"

She was close to hysterics and I had to work fast. "Did he ever mention Charles Kell?"

"They were in school together."

I heard the thump of feet crossing the porch, then a mumble of voices in the hall. I picked out Lieutenant Martin's voice and knew he was on his way in to talk to Mrs. Grane.

"Tell me," I said quickly, leaning toward her, "did he ever mention anything bad about Kell?"

"Bad? No, he— Oh, just that scrape after a football game."

"What happened?"

She rubbed her forehead, trying to remember. "I can't—"

The living room door opened and Martin lumbered in. He glowered at me, his sharp gray eyes snapping. "What are you doing here, Jeffries?"

I stood up slowly. "Vanatta told me to come up here, you know. And when I just called him, he told me to stick around."

That stopped him for a moment. "Vanatta." He darted a quick look over his shoulder, then turned back to me. "Beat it, Vanatta or no Vanatta. That name cuts a lot of ice with Captain Stryker but it's just one more name in the phone book as far as I'm concerned."

"Keep that attitude." I said, "and you'll be looking for another job."

Martin laughed bitterly. "You worry me. Get out."

I shrugged my shoulders and walked to the door. Mrs. Grane followed me and caught my arm. "Please," she whispered beseechingly, "I know you're no policeman, but perhaps you can find some way to vindicate my husband."

"Sure," I said. I got out of the room in a hurry before I laughed in her face. Her husband could rot in hell for all I cared. The only thing which interested me now was to connect Kell with the murder and to pass the information along to Vanatta. What better club could Vanatta hold over a mayor's head?

CHAPTER TWO

Make 'Em Eat Dirt

IT WAS twelve-fifteen when I got back downtown. The first regular edition of the *Star* was already on the streets, following up the Extra which had reported the assassination of Mayor Grane. I picked up a copy and saw my name plastered across the front page in a banner head.

Great. Lovely. Just fine, I thought. Mrs. Jeffries' little boy Pete was now a marked man.

I had places to go but I had one important stop to make first. I jumped in a cab and went home to my bachelor diggings and got my gun. The weight of it felt good in its holster under my coat.

The cab was still waiting for me but the driver was uneasy. As he wheeled the hack toward Charles Kell's law offices, he glanced into the mirror.

"Mister," he said nervously, "I don't know what I'm letting myself in for."

"Nothing," I said reassuringly.

"No? Then why is that black coupe back there so interested in you?"

My heart in my throat, I looked through

the rear window. A black coupe was tagging along about two cars behind. "Take the next right," I told the driver.

He did. The coupe made the turn with us.

"When did you spot him?" I asked.

"At your place. He was maybe fifty yards behind me while I was waiting for you. When we started, he started."

"Okay, pal," I said. "This isn't your fight. Let me out here and I'll take my chances alone."

"Nuts." He stepped on the gas, ran through a stop light, knifed to the left across the oncoming traffic and cut into an alley, turning right at the next street.

"You shook him," I said gratefully.

"Easy."

He dropped me at the office building in which Kell had his offices and I caught an elevator to the ninth floor. A bell rang when I opened the door to the office and a diminutive blonde with a pert nose came from an inner chamber in answer to the ring.

"Good afternoon," she said affably, looking at me through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. I liked her immediately.

"Is Mr. Kell in?" I asked.

"Well—" she said dubiously. "He is and he isn't. You've read the papers, of course."

"I know this is a rough day for him but I think he'll see me. My name is Pete Jeffries."

"Oh," she said. "The man who—Just a moment." She left me but came back almost immediately. "Please go in."

"Thanks," I said and I went into Kell's office.

He was a broad-shouldered, silver-haired man with the determined jaw of a bulldog and the piercing gray eyes of a faro dealer. He studied me deliberately as I walked toward his desk, then nodded to a chair.

"Jeffries," he mused. "You used to be on the *Star*. Who are you with now?"

"Vanatta," I said, seeing no reason to stall around. "How does it feel to be a mayor?"

He grunted, then pressed a button on his desk. His secretary appeared at the door.

"Miss Wilson," he said, "you'd better sit in on this. This man is a friend of Vanatta's."

Miss Wilson glanced at me sharply and sat down with her stenographer's notebook on her lap.

She reminded me of an obedient pet which comes to heel at its master's command. Her reverence and respect, to say nothing of her protective instinct for her boss were so obvious that it was almost embarrassing to observe.

And she looked nice. I didn't want to disillusion her. "Don't you think we could talk better alone?" I said to Kell.

He glanced gently at Miss Wilson and I saw at once that all the adoration in the office was not one-sided. If worse came to worse, I thought shrewdly, I might be able to uncover the germ of a scandal right here, saving myself the trouble of going back into Kell's past.

"Grace has been with me for seven years," Kell said. "If you have anything to say, it can be said in front of her."

"Very well," I sighed. "I suppose you read in the papers that I had a good look at the killers' faces."

Kell laughed. "I read it but I don't believe it."

"No?" I said, surprised. If I had thought to worry him, I had failed completely. "Why not?"

"Your statement would have made good newspaper copy, Jeffries, and would have been dramatic in quotes." He smiled at me over steeped fingers. "But not a single paper quoted you directly. All of them skirted it very carefully. So I deduce you never said it."

"You're smart, Kell."

"I have to be. Now, if that's all you

came up to this office to say to—”

“No, not all.” The guy’s shrewdness was beginning to make me mad, and no man’s thinking is at its best when he speaks from anger. “I’ve been doing some research,” I lied. “A little checking into the background of our new *pro tem* mayor.”

Kell stiffened in his swivel chair and his rugged face turned crimson, then white. “And?”

I spread my hands in a noncommittal gesture which could have meant anything. “You’re a cinch to win the election, *provided . . .*” I left the rest unsaid. I had nothing else to say because I was swinging in the dark.

He came up out of his chair and glared at me. “Have you talked to Vanatta about this yet?”

“Not yet.”

His eyes narrowed. “You used to be the crusader on the white charger, Jeffries.”

“Ideals are excess baggage.”

He came around the desk and, in a silk-smooth voice, said, “What’s your price?”

“I’m getting paid by Vanatta.”

“Scum!” Grace Wilson spat. “Don’t listen to him, Charles. Play it your own way.”

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then at me. “Get out!”

“That’s your answer? Final answer?”

“Get out before I throw you out.”

He looked big enough to do it. I stood up slowly and walked to the door. I turned, started to tell him off, then thought better of it and continued on my way.

DOWN in a pay phone in the lobby I put in a long-distance call to Danabray, the seat of the state university, and was finally connected with Harry Larbell, who ran the Danabray *Declaration*, the town’s semi-weekly paper.

Harry hadn’t heard that I was off the *Star* so I told him nothing to make him think otherwise.

“All hell’s broke loose up here, Harry,” I said. “I’m trying to get some fresh background on Kell. Can you give me a hand?”

“Sure,” Harry said. “There may be something in it for us, too.”

“All right, Kell was in law school around ’Twenty-one and got himself in some kind of a scrape. Maybe he’s on record. How about checking the docket for me?”

“That’s easy. Shall I call you back at the *Star*?”

“Well, no, Harry. I’ll—I’ll probably be in and out. You know my home number. Call me there about six-thirty.”

“On the nose.”

I hung up and strolled through the lobby and out on the sidewalk, my mind on a million things. That was my mistake. My mind should have been on only *one* thing: self-preservation.

A car moved slowly along the curb. A black coupe, but I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t begin to think until I saw the glint of afternoon sunlight on the barrel of an automatic as it popped above the sill.

I threw myself headlong on the walk just as there came the faint, flat cough of a silenced gun. Glass in the door behind me exploded into a shower of a million sharp bits and the coupe sped away down the street.

There was an instant of terrified silence, and then a woman’s scream broke it. A hubbub of muttering, bewildered voices began all around me, and there was a confused scrape of feet as pedestrians scurried for cover, too late. Somewhere, a cop blew a whistle and I knew the police would be swarming all over me in a matter of minutes.

I got to my feet and wormed into the crowd which was beginning to form, and I let the crowd push around me, elbowing me toward the rear. And when there was

at last no one behind me, I turned and walked swiftly down the street. I made for Vanatta's office.

Lil Barnes was still reading the same magazine in the outer office when I got there.

"Is the boss in?" I said curtly.

"Yes," she said, And then she pouted. "Don't you even have a smile for a girl?"

"I don't have time."

"Well, I like that!" she cried indignantly. "You'd better have time for our date tonight. I had my hair done on my lunch hour."

I had completely forgotten the six o'clock date. "Listen, honey, we've got to make a change. I can't meet you at the Empire Room. I'm expecting an important phone call at my apartment. Let's get together there."

"That's a new approach."

"Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it." Her smile had a lot of stuff in it. I had seen a smile like it before.

I charged into Vanatta's office and found him paring his nails at his desk. "It's about time you showed up," he said gruffly.

"I've been busy dodging bullets." I told him what had happened.

"You're a fool," he said unsympathetically. "You asked to be shot at. A moron would have known better than to let the world know he could identify the—"

"Here's the laugh," I said, not laughing. "When the hoods knocked off Grane, I couldn't make their faces, couldn't have recognized them again in a million years. So they didn't have to shoot me. Their mistake was in thinking they had to—because now I *can* recognize the face behind the gun."

"Good Lord!" Vanatta gasped, chuckling. "Had you ever seen the triggerman before?"

"Never. I'll go along with Captain Stryker on that. I think both guys are

out-of-town gunsels doing a local job."

"What about Kell? Is he my boy yet or isn't he?"

"Not quite, but you'll have him gift-wrapped tonight. He got in a jam while he was in college and a friend of mine is checking it through."

Vanatta lighted a cigarette and stared at me through the smoke. "How far will you go, Jeffries?"

"I don't get you."

"Suppose we can link Kell with the killing, prove he hired the guns? Would you be willing to forget it and let me use the information as I want to?"

A murderer in the mayor's office. "I don't know, Vanatta. I—"

"You wouldn't lose by it," he said suavely. "Stick with me and you'll be able to go anywhere you want to go. Write your own ticket. But don't forget I'm the only one in town willing to hire you. No one else would take the chance. Break

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with me and you'll be right back where you were yesterday at this time. A drunk-en has-been. A poor risk."

"But—" I began to protest.

"You can make all the rest of them eat dirt, Jeffries. You owe that bunch at the *Star* something for what they did to you. This is your chance."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. I had worked my heart out for the *Star*, and then, for one mistake, had been paid off with the boom. Vanatta was right. I owed them something.

"All right, Vanatta," I said grimly, "you're the boss."

He opened his desk and brought out a bottle. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Death Wormed Over

GIL BARNES was prompt: She appeared at my apartment exactly at six and wandered through the hall to the living room with the rather shy manner of a sweet young thing who thinks it is very, very naughty to come to a bachelor's place—but would be disappointed if there were not still more naughtiness in prospect.

"I really shouldn't be here," she said, all the while posing in front of the window in a way which displayed her gorgeous figure to its best advantage. Her black cocktail dress, set off by a string of choker pearls, fit her like paper on a wall.

"Stand like that, honey," I said. "Don't move. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" It was no gag. She put me in mind of someone.

"Perhaps. I get around."

"I'll bet." I showed her to a seat, fumbled for cigarettes, lighting hers for her, then made a pitcher of three-to-one martinis. "Are you Vanatta's private property?" I asked, handing her a drink.

"We're friends." She patted the cushion.

I wasted no time sitting beside her. I mean, I wasted no time. In a matter of seconds, there was a soft, warm creature wriggling in my arms.

"Whew!" I gasped, and I eased her away from me. "This is much too quick. There's supposed to be a buildup. Anybody knows that. The male is required to chase a little and spin his line."

"Couldn't it wait until later?" the honey asked.

"It could," I said. It did.

The phone interrupted what might have been an alarming situation. I answered the jangling instrument and it was Harry.

"I've got it, sport," he said. "Ready?"

"Go ahead." I pulled a pencil and a pad toward me.

"He's in the black book, all right. On October 12, 1921, Kell and about a dozen others were tossed in the local jug for disturbing the peace. I don't know what inspired it—maybe a football victory—but the boys decided to stage a parade down the main street. The parade got out of hand and an auto got turned over along the way. The cops locked them up and let them cool off overnight."

"On a drunk charge?"

"My guess is they were all pretty tight, but the docket doesn't use the awful word. Only disorderly."

I wrote that much down, then asked, "How about the owner of the auto? Did he bring charges?"

"No. He was an undergraduate and took it as a big joke. That's the whole story."

"Thanks, Harry. You've been a big help."

"Any time."

We signed off and I returned to the living room, a big grin on my face. "That's that. Kell has a record, the old rascal." I sat down next to Lil and put my arm around her shoulders. "Now—what were we talking about?"

She gave me a sultry smile. "The eve-

ning is still an infant. Let's not end it too soon. Were you planning to buy a girl a dinner?"

"If necessary." I sighed. "Where would you like to go?"

"The steaks are good at the Garden Club."

"And so is the gambling," I said. "Let's go."

When we got down on the street, I looked cautiously in all directions but saw no sign of a black coupe. Feeling a bit more secure, I hailed a cab to take Lil and me to the Garden Club.

It was a long, rambling building on the outskirts of town, and it was patronized by a nice clientele. All the better people, the same ones who yelled about the corrupt administration, went there to try their luck in the games which were protected by that same administration.

The cab let us out at the curb and we walked down the winding garden path toward the front entrance, the black night as soft as a velvet glove around us. We came to a place where the path took a sharp jog to the right around a huge tree, when suddenly two new, man-sized shadows loomed up ahead of me.

One of them rammed a gun in my ribs. "All right, Jeffries," he muttered in a rough-edged voice.

The other gave Lil a shove toward the club. "Beat it, sister. We're going to have a little talk with your boy-friend."

"Stinkers!" she snapped.

The shadow slapped her face. "We know where we can find you if we want you. Don't make us have to come." He shoved her again.

She stumbled toward the club. The man with the gun in my ribs called after her, "And tell Vanatta that Kell can be rough."

"Kell's boys, eh?" I said softly.

"What do you think?"

The two men put me between them and hustled me back to the street where that

same black coupe was waiting. They shoved me inside and pushed me down on the floor, my face on the mat, but I had had a look at them as we crossed the sidewalk. The driver was tall and lean and his eyes were set close together. The other—the one who had slapped Lil—was short but very heavy in the shoulders and chest and he was almost bald. It was this second one who had shot at me and killed Grane.

As we sped down the street, I waited for the driver to make a turn. He didn't. I knew then that we were headed for the country and some lonely back road. This time they wouldn't miss me.

I was no hero but I didn't want to die without making some kind of a fight of it. I wondered what play I could make.

From my position on the floor, there was only one. I reached out cautiously and felt for the accelerator, knowing that if I touched the driver's foot first, I would be through immediately. Luck was with me. My fingers brushed the ribbed rubber. I jammed down hard with the heel of my hand and the car surged forward as if it had fired a rocket booster.

The driver kicked at me brutally and his toe exploded against my jaw, but I maintained contact with the accelerator. From then on, it was all my show. The driver was too busy sawing the car around the turns to kick me or even to think clearly; and the passenger couldn't club me because I was protected by the steering wheel above my head and shoulders.

"The ignition!" the passenger barked. "You stupid jerk! Turn it off!"

The driver, waking up at last, switched off the ignition and yanked the emergency brake. The coupe rocked and skidded to a dizzying stop, slamming driver and passenger forward against the dashboard.

I CAME up off the floor and piled over the short man's bald head. I went out the window and landed in a culvert on my

side. Rolling over and over, I made the underbrush at the side of the road, then, flat on my belly. I eased my gun from the holster and waited, eyes fixed on the car.

The tall one, the driver, was the first one out. He came around from his side of the car and fired one blind shot in my general direction. I held my fire. He crept closer, fired again and made a dive for the safety of the culvert.

He was like a sitting duck as he caught his breath in the ditch below me. I fired once, all that was necessary, and life bubbled from his mouth.

Now there was the other one. I fired a shot into the door on his side but it missed and he rolled out of the far side, scrambling under the car. I strained my eyes to catch a glimpse of him but he lay behind the rear right wheel and I knew he would wait there forever if he had to, his finger ready to squeeze a shot at me just as soon as I tried to creep out of the brush.

Far down the road there was a glow in the sky. A car was approaching, its headlights probing upward as it climbed a hill about a half-mile away. Now the car was over the hill, going at terrific speed, and the lights cut a blinding swathe down the road. It would be here in another twenty seconds.

The short man under the car knew it was now or never. He crawled out from under the car and fired upward at me, fired again. The headlights were now full upon him, pinpointing him for me.

I took deliberate aim and smiled as my shot boomed out. The short man's bald head turned tomato-red and he went down heavily in a sauce of blood.

The onrushing car jammed to a stop and two cops leaped out of it, guns drawn. Right behind them was Lieutenant Martin of Homicide.

I scrambled down the bank and leaped the culvert.

"I just shot a man," I said.

Martin scowled at the short man's body.

"Yeah."

"Two men," I said.

Martin looked at the other man at the bottom of the ditch. "Yeah." He turned to his two cops. "Clean it up. And you, Jeffries—back to town with me."

I nodded and got in the squad car. Martin at the wheel, we drove slowly toward town. The silence was memorable. Finally Martin said, "You've had a real big night, haven't you?"

"It's going to be bigger."

"Not for you, chum," he sneered. "Two things I don't like—cops who act like crooks and crooks who act like cops. You're one of these guys who see too many moving pictures."

"Like taking the law into my own hands?"

"Like that."

"What law?"

"There's that, too."

"I can wind this thing up," I said persuasively. "Quick."

He stopped the car at the side of the road and turned in his seat to stare at me. "You used to be an all-right guy, but you changed sides. I can't trust you."

I had made Vanatta a promise that I would keep Kell's name out of this, but there was no way to tell Martin the story without telling him everything. He listened patiently to me, his face grim.

"I notice you don't spare yourself," he said when I had finished. "If a punk calls himself a punk, the chances are that he isn't as big a one as he thinks he is."

"Thanks for that, at least. Well, how about it?"

He nodded his head and started the car. "I'm going to like this. Where will I find him?"

I gave him the address of the man who was behind it. It was a very impressive address in the shadows of the city hall: Vanatta's office.

There was a light burning behind the pane of frosted glass, and I could hear the

clink of glasses, the gentle murmur of pleased voices.

"He's entertaining," said Martin.

"Lovely," I said, and I kicked open the door. Vanatta and Lil were having a wonderful time with each other and a bottle of bourbon. "Surprise!"

They looked like people who had been caught with their hair in curlers but Vanatta made a quick recovery. "Pete!" he exclaimed. "Am I glad to see you!"

"I'll bet," I said bitterly. "What a chump you and your girl-friend almost made of me."

"I was worried sick when those men took you," she said. "I called the police, then came here to Lew."

"You called us, sister," Martin said. "You called us just in time to make sure we'd be about ten minutes too late." He took a pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket. "Come on, Vanatta."

"For what?"

"For engineering an assassination."

"YOU'RE nuts," Vanatta laughed harshly. "Ask Pete, here. He'll tell you it was against my interests for Grane to die. Kell's the boy who gained by it."

"It reads another way, too," I said. "A better way. Grane had been threatening for a long time to break away from you and blow the lid off vice in this town. He never quite had the guts to do it. When Kell began to attract a big following, you saw the handwriting on the wall. You knew he'd beat Grane at the polls—unless Grane put up a dramatic campaign and began to quote chapter and verse.

"You couldn't afford to let things go that far. Kell had to take over sooner. You hired a couple of guns to knock off Grane and—"

"That's crazy!" Vanatta roared. "You know I needed something on Kell before he could do me any good."

"That was a laugh," I said. "You hired me to dig up something, carefully suggest-

ing to me that Grane knew where the body was buried, thus giving Kell a good motive.

"You had it all figured out. So I checked until I learned what Grane knew about Kell."

"See!" cried Vanatta. "Kell had a record."

"He turned over an auto when he was in school. He and a gang of others. He spent a night in jail." I laughed in Vanatta's face. "No charges were ever brought.

"Not one mention of drunkenness ever appeared on Kell's record. You ask me to believe that a little fracas of almost twenty years ago would have been sufficient motive to kill a man."

I turned toward Lil Barnes. "There's a girl named Grace Wilson who works for Kell. What kith or kin is she to you? Cousin?"

"I never heard of her."

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"We can find out easily enough," Martin said.

Lil looked down at the floor. "She's my sister. I wanted to go on the stage so I changed my name." She was now sullenly defiant.

"I thought so," I said. "There's a strong resemblance." I turned back to Vanatta. "You knew Kell and Grace were in love. Maybe because you had Lil here to keep you posted. You had all you thought you needed to make him your man.

"All the rest was an act for my benefit. Even having your hoods act as if they were Kell's."

"This is the most ridiculous—" Vanatta began.

"Is it?" said Martin indifferently. "We've got one of your hired hoods. The other is dead." The man was a brilliant liar.

A change came swiftly to Vanatta's face. He stumbled to his feet and walked to the window to stare down at the dark square six floors below.

"Every man has his price," he said over his shoulder in a mumble. "What's yours, Martin?"

"Murder won't fix," Martin replied. He took a step toward Vanatta. "All I ask of life is a crack at you."

"Sorry," said Vanatta. He dove through the glass. His scream lasted as long as it takes a man to tumble six floors. An eternity for the man. A snap of the fingers for the rest of the world.

Martin shrugged his broad shoulders wearily.

"All right, sis," he said to Lil. "You'll have to do." He glanced at me. "Maybe you'd like to cuff her around a little first. You've got it coming to you."

She turned white.

"Let it go."

"If any woman put the finger on me, I'd—" He cracked his knuckles. "But I'm

no gentleman. The thing I can't figure out is why in tarnation Vanatta wanted to kill you."

"That's how I knew it was Vanatta and not Kell. Kell was smart. He told me he didn't believe I had seen the killers well enough to identify them, so he would have no reason to shut me up. But Vanatta was dumb. He believed that I really knew—"

"Yeah, I get it." He started toward the door, Lil Barnes in tow, then he stopped and looked back shrewdly. "This Kell ought to make a good mayor. He's honest. I'd hate to hear it said that he was no good because he had a mighty loyal girlfriend."

"He'd be a mighty poor man if he didn't have one," I said. "Especially a good woman who loves him and trusts him and will fight for him."

"Careful, son," Martin said, grinning. "You're talking like a man with some ideals."

He went out with Lil and left me alone in Vanatta's office.

A big moon was shining full upon the city hall across the square. The building looked clean and decent; it looked like a place where clean and decent people worked, elected to their high offices by other people who were also clean and decent.

Perhaps, I thought, city hall would soon be all of that. Perhaps, too, I had played some small part in bringing it about. Anyhow, I was still an idealistic reporter.

I had come full circle, or very nearly so. Maybe I didn't have a job but tomorrow was another day and I'd be pounding a typewriter in some noisy, wonderful city room by noon.

That was for sure.

A man with an *exclusive* holds the whole, wonderful world in the palm of his hand.

*The flatfoot figured
that homicidal Vera and her knight could be—*

CHECKMATED!

THE table where Delph Mayers had sat playing his last game of chess was covered with dust. There was a thin layer of dust on the ivory chessmen, and the stub of a cigarette in the ashtray was almost buried under a gray mound that looked curiously like a grave.

And Delph will soon be dust, thought Vera, and she covered her eyes with her hand. She could not go into the room where Delph had died, but from every corner where she stood in the adjoining living room she imagined she could see the chessmen standing guard.

Flynn, the detective from the local police station, had given her specific instructions about the room. "Don't go in there, Mrs. Mayers. Nothing must be touched. It's important to the inquest that everything remain as it is until

the final examination is all finished."

Inquest, examination, strange words. But they could only mean the police were not entirely satisfied about Delph's sudden death.

Vera had been sure the doctor's certificate of death made it clear Delph had died of a heart attack. Now all this silly talk of an inquest. It was absurd! Nothing would come of it. It was just routine!

Vera turned her back to the game room

**By
CORETTA
SLAVSKA**



Suddenly he fell to the
floor. . . .

where the chessmen stood. She was a tall, well-built woman in her early thirties. Her gray eyes which could look hard and cold when she was angry, usually appeared serene and soft. She had a slow, languid walk but now her steps quickened as she almost ran to a mirror.

With an effort, she looked at herself. No, she had not changed. She looked the same, a little pale perhaps, but not unduly nervous or frightened. She looked like a widow should look, weary and unhappy. After all, Delph had been buried only a few days ago.

Considering the circumstances, she and Karl had been bearing up very well. It was understandable that Karl had not returned since the day Delph died. After all, Karl had been playing chess with Delph. It would be natural if Karl looked nervous.

Vera hoped he would keep himself in check. Sometimes it seemed he needed only a slight shock to make him lose control. But nothing could go wrong now.

Soon their friends would come to visit. They would bring a cake, candy, perhaps some more flowers. They might play a game of cards. This was modern times. Distraction was good for a widow. It helped her to forget her sorrows.

Karl would come too. He had telephoned, saying he would be here tonight. Karl. Sleek-looking, gay, everything that Delph had never been! A good chess player too! Too good for Delph, who had been the acknowledged champ of Sparkhill until Karl moved to town.

Vera remembered the day she first met Karl. At the local gas station. Repairs were being made on her car.

Karl had smiled at her as he walked by, on his way to work. She smiled back, suddenly reckless.

"You live here?" he asked.

Vera nodded, almost afraid to speak. Something in his black eyes appraising her, warned her this would be no casual

friendship, but something more exciting.

"I suppose we'll meet at the usual town festivals," Karl said slowly.

"We don't go out often," Vera told him. "But my husband likes to play chess. Suddenly she knew Karl played too! It had been that way between them. She always knew a few moments before when he would telephone her. When he first brought her a box of candy, his hand seemed to burn on her arm as he touched it softly, and then went into the game-room to play chess with Delph.

He would come again tonight. For the first time, they would be together without Delph!

Vera's hands moved restlessly. She felt chilled suddenly, and ran back to the living room, hoping Karl would come soon so they could have a drink together.

The bell rang sharply. But it was not Karl. For the first time her instinct had failed her. Was it a sign, a warning that all was not going well!

Flynn, the detective stood at the door. Flynn had come once before when the undertaker had phoned the police station. It seemed when a man died so suddenly as Delph had, the police had to be called if a doctor was not immediately available.

Vera looked sharply at Flynn. She felt her smile freeze on her lips as she led him into the room. She could feel his eyes on her every movement.

"How are you feeling?" Flynn asked.

"Better! Much better. I try not to think about it, the suddenness of it. The confusion when I couldn't get the doctor at once, and the undertaker wouldn't touch the body until he called you! It's hard being here with that room staring at me, the dust getting thicker every minute! When can I have it cleaned out?"

"Easy does it," Flynn said quietly. "Have a cigarette."

Vera regained control. Her hand was steady as it held the cigarette, and she smiled into the detective's eyes.

"I'm not satisfied about your husband's death," Flynn said slowly. "I need your help. Tell me again what happened during the last chess game."

"Delph was playing chess with our friend, Karl Sommers."

FLYNN nodded. "Well, chess seems to me to be a quiet game. The players sit there calmly, hour after hour. Of course, I know nothing about it, but it seems a quiet hobby," Vera continued.

"Is it a quiet game?" Flynn asked softly. Then he added, "No, it isn't—not to the players of the game. Actually the players can become quite excited inwardly. When a player makes a move his heart beat quickens, his blood pressure rises!"

Vera looked at him intently.

"Yes, of course you are right! I guess that's what did happen, for the doctor who examined Delph did say it was heart failure. Delph's heart had never been strong."

Flynn nodded. "Yes, the death certificate said heart failure. Poor Delph! You said he made the last move and then fell back in his chair?"

Vera didn't like the way Flynn was looking at her.

"Yes, Delph made the last move. Why do you keep harping on that? You asked me that the night you came here. Don't you believe me?"

"Don't get excited," said Flynn. "You'll sign a statement to that effect, won't you?"

"Of course, and you can check with Karl Sommers! I think he's coming now."

It was Karl. He came in quickly, his movements light and cautious as a panther's step when he senses danger. His keen eyes focused on Vera.

Flynn watched him and turned away suddenly, quite sickened.

"Sit down, Mr. Sommers," he said to Karl. "Mrs. Mayers has told me again how her husband died. She said he had just finished a chess move, leaned back in his chair and slumped to the floor. You'll verify that, of course."

Karl nodded. "That's about it."

Flynn stood up. "Yes, I've heard about his reputation as a chess player. Would you mind coming into the game room with me?"

Karl nodded. Suddenly the door opened and there were people, two policemen, the local police sergeant. They were moving toward Karl.

Karl turned away, his eyes on the game room. His mouth twitched slightly. He moved automatically toward the room where Delph had died, and Flynn closed in after him.

Vera's hand moved toward her throat, her fingers dug into her cheek. Something was wrong. Was it something she had said? This was not going according to plan. But the doctor's certificate had said heart failure. It had all seemed so easy—there was nothing to worry about. She

(Please continue on page 129)

You crime-adventure fans thrill to the daring drama in DIME DETECTIVE . . .

And for similar suspenseful action, captured in flaming technicolor, you'll want to see Paramount's new motion picture—COPPER CANYON—with Ray Milland starring as the mysterious gunhawk, believed to be the fabulous Colonel Desmond of the Confederate Army. For a rip-roaring conflict of emotions and bullets, see Ray Milland playing a lone hand against a crooked sheriff's gun-crew . . . and intriguing Hedy Lamarr—in COPPER CANYON.

TUNE IN ON MURDER

By **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**



Dramatic Novelette of the Watchdog of the Airways

CHAPTER ONE

Kilocycle Clue

STUDIO X, in the famed Universal Broadcasting Company tower, was filled with hair-trigger tension. In less than two minutes, the air from coast to coast was due to be galvanized by the startling revelations of that flash-news reporter of broadcasting, Keyhole Kerry.

Announcer, technician, sound-effect man

and Kerry's secretary kept their anxious eyes on the entrance because, with fifty million people waiting to listen to his amazing gossip, the bad boy of the wavelengths had not yet appeared.

The willowy, champagne-haired young woman at the desk, whose cool and beautiful exterior concealed a case of tor-

As the sedan bounced down with its rear end flaming, the trunk burst open.

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tuous jitters, was Eve Vane. The radio newshawk had discovered her rare ability in the Garden of Eden Cabaret. But never, in all her career of appearing before enraptured audiences, had Eve Vane felt such freezing stage-fright as she experienced each time Keyhole Kerry was due to hit the mike.

As the studio door opened, her turquoise eyes lifted expectantly, then widened with alert concern. A young woman, obviously distressed, was resisting the sternly polite efforts of an immaculately uniformed usher to keep her out.

A handsome young man at her side was likewise protesting her purpose, vainly. White-faced, she hurried in. Immediately, the chubby announcer closed in upon her.

The girl pleaded hurriedly: "I must see Mr. Kerry before he goes on the air. I'm Hope Shepard—Mrs. Wallace's sister. This is—Philip Bryson, my fiancé. It's terribly important!"

The opening of the door behind Hope Shepard, at that moment, disclosed Guy Kerry himself. He was an electrically nervous young man with prematurely gray hair, possessed of an insensate hunger for news.

Kerry paused, slipping his copy from his inside pocket, glancing swiftly at the electric clock, then looking at Miss Shepard.

The girl rushed out: "I'm almost crazy with worry about my sister, Lucia—Mrs. Trent Wallace. I believe she was stunned in the crash. It may have robbed her of her memory. She may be hiding somewhere, too bewildered to know what to do—"

"The police," Kerry interrupted quickly, "have a different theory to account for the disappearance of Mrs. Trent Wallace."

The eyes of Eve Vane and the announcer lighted with surprise, for this was a development in the startling Wal-

lace case which the newspapers had not yet translated into banner headlines—a scoop typical of Keyhole Kerry.

It gave Miss Shepard pause, but only for an instant. She hurried on: "Almost every radio in the country will be tuned to your program, Mr. Kerry. The weather is warm, windows are open, Lucia may hear. Please let me send her a message. If she's lost her memory, it may come back when she hears my voice. Don't you realize—"

Kerry interrupted again. "Don't you know that the police dope has it your sister is being held captive by a maniac? I have the flash right here—the hottest stuff in my copy.

"What you say is directly contrary to it, just an unsupported theory. It's against the rules to broadcast an individual message, but I'll make a line out of what you believe—"

A tap on his shoulder turned Kerry from the anguished girl to the microphone on the desk. The clock had swung to the deadline second. While the introductory blurb concerning the virtues of his sponsor's cathartic lightened from coast to coast, Kerry's mind reviewed the details of the sensational Wallace case.

THE violent death of Trent Wallace, young millionaire yachtsman, at his estate, Land's End, was still spinning the metropolitan newspaper presses because it was news only three hours' old. Kerry, as usual, had been first on the air with the stop-program flash.

Facts were still sparse and baffling, though it was established that Wallace had died in an unaccountable plane crash and that his beautiful young wife, *née* Lucia Shepard, had vanished from the wreckage.

At twilight, Kerry had informed the world through the ether that Trent Wallace had prepared to take a short trip in his privately owned plane, alone. At the

last moment he had, for a still-unknown reason, induced his wife to accompany him.

Mrs. Wallace's brother, Gerard Shepard, well-known broker, had watched their ascent from the garden behind the big house. Suddenly, while the plane was still hovering low, a deafening explosion had shaken the sky. The craft had wrenched asunder in mid-air. Flaming wreckage had fallen to the field.

Gerard Shepard, running to the spot—Keyhole Kerry had divulged—had found Trent Wallace dead and Mrs. Wallace missing.

As the announcer completed his paean to his sponsor, Keyhole Kerry began his

Wallace. Trent Wallace caught Barrazo forcing his attentions on Mrs. Wallace and gave Barrazo an unmerciful beating.

"Barrazo then sent letters to Wallace, threatening vengeance. Later he was seen prowling around the estate at night. This evening a man believed to be Barrazo, actually planted a charge of dynamite in Wallace's plane."

Eve Vane gasped—a sound which Kerry hoped was being echoed in every home from the Atlantic to the Pacific. And Hope Shepard, though the announcer was keeping a wary eye on her, was shifting anxiously closer to Kerry, white fingers entwined.

"Wallace discovered the infernal ma-

*
*When a kill-maddened fugitive
sent Keyhole Kerry a threatening note,
the crime-reporter scooped the nation—
with a blow-by-blow broadcast . . . of his own murder!*

staccato delivery. "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. United States. This is Keyhole Kerry, once more beating the nation's headlines. Flash!"

The telephone bell kept up its muted accompaniment while Eve Vane listened, and Hope Shepard, in spite of her escort's gestured protest, drifted closer to the desk.

"Mrs. Trent Wallace, wife of the millionaire sportsman who met death in a mysterious airplane crash only a few hours ago, is the prisoner of a maniac. This is the theory of the metropolitan police, who have not yet divulged their information to the newspapers. At this moment they are searching for a former inmate of an insane asylum, one Rafaelo Barrazo.

"It is known," Kerry rushed on, "that Barrazo, a laborer, while building a rock-garden on the Wallace estate earlier this spring, sent endearing notes to Mrs.

chine," Kerry barked, "and immediately suspected Barrazo. He removed it at once, believing he had had a narrow escape. Yet, when the plane did ascend, a few minutes later, it was blown to bits. The police theory holds that Barrazo was watching and waiting for this to happen. According to their way of thinking, Barrazo rushed to the scene and carried Mrs. Wallace away—whether dead or alive, it is not known.

"The police have guarded this theory so closely that it is not known even to the immediate members of the family. Another theory is held by Miss Hope Shepard, sister of the missing woman, who is now here in the studio. She believes—"

Kerry had ceased reading from copy, was intent upon his impromptu account. He did not see Hope Shepard's quick move until after she had made it. Suddenly he was aware that the girl had the microphone in her hand, that Eve Vane

and the announcer were desperately trying to wrench it away.

Her gasping voice blanketed the country: "Lucia. Can you hear me, Lucia? It's Hope. Please try to remember everything—everything. Come back home, or telephone. Do you hear me. Lucia—"

Once Hope Shepard had the instrument, Kerry was delighted to let her keep it. This interruption was itself certain to arouse a tempest of excitement. Leaving to Milton Raney and Eve Vane the task of retrieving the mike, he glanced around to see the technician in the monitor room frantically gesturing that the program was off the air.

Raney retreated, clutching the microphone with the zeal of an outraged devout protecting a desecrated shrine. Kerry, eyes gleaming, stepped to the side of the agitated Hope Shepard.

"Now, there's hell to pay," he informed her exultantly. "But maybe we'll get an answer. Maybe you're right, and the cops are dead wrong. We might hear from her—who knows? If you promise to be a good girl from now on, you may stay here and see what happens."

MISS Shepard nodded her anxious hopefulness while her escort, Philip Bryson, stood mute with confusion. Swinging back to the mike, Kerry gestured Eve Vane to keep an eye on the two soundproof telephone booths in the room which were especially provided for the reception of white-hot beats.

The microphone having come back to life, Raney was uttering a dignified apology to the nation at large. Kerry perched tensely before his copy, and his rasp again drilled into the ears of the populace.

"This is your headline racer back again, Mr. and Mrs. United States. The newspapers haven't yet awakened to the fact that plenty money is mixed up in the Wallace case. A conservative estimate puts it at twelve million dollars.

Trent Wallace's only near relative is his wife, who may or may not be alive to inherit this huge fortune.

"If she is not, what becomes of it? I'll have that inside information for you soon. Keep your dial turned to the station to which you are now listening in order to be the first to hear the latest breaks in the Wallace case."

Kerry sped on, opening wide his dossier of gossip and revelations. He was startled, a moment later, to see Eve Vane vacate her chair with a dancer's graceful bound. A red light in the nearest telephone booth was blinking.

His clipped syllables never slowing, Kerry watched her listen, saw her luscious lips part in amazement, followed her quick move back to the desk, then stared at the scrawled slip she fluttered in front of him:

Woman claims she's Mrs. Wallace.

Kerry signaled Raney to take the mike, sprang up, strode toward the booth. Miss Hope Shepard had glimpsed the message over Eve Vane's shoulder. Her shapely, long legs beat Kerry's. Before he could stop her, she was inside the booth, snatching up the receiver, blurting over the wire: "Lucia. It's Hope, Lucia."

Kerry pried the receiver in time to catch the far-away, shaken, wailing tone that answered: "Hope, I heard you. I'm coming—I'm coming back now."

Kerry, his avidity for news far stronger than his gallantry, achieved complete possession of the instrument. With Hope Shepard pushed into the corner of the booth, he heard only one additional sound—the click of a severed connection. His staccato "hello's" brought no response.

Knowing that, if the call had come from a dial phone, the connection would be maintained as long as this end of the line remained open, he ducked out to grip Eve Vane's shapely shoulders.

"Use the other booth," he directed

breathlessly. "Try your best to trace that call."

Kerry dived back to the microphone. He cut short Raney's guileful praise of the sponsor's product with:

"Flash! Mrs. Kirby Wallace is not, as the police believe, being held prisoner by a maniac. Your radio oracle believes he was in communication with the missing woman not five seconds ago. Keep your dials tuned to this wave length for future developments to be brought to you as fast as they break. Keyhole Kerry the scoop specialist, going off the air. Mr. and Mrs. United States—until more piping-hot news brings him back!"

Kerry relinquished the mike at the last second of his allotted period. Raney resumed his blandishments concerning the sponsor's product. Kerry found Hope Shepard hurrying to the door, murmuring, "I knew—I knew!"

Her fiancé was hastening after her. Eve Vane emerged gracefully from the second telephone booth to fix Kerry with a beautiful, but censorious, turquoise gaze.

"Give it to me," he begged. "Where did the call come from? If it's good for another flash—"

His secretary chided: "Do you realize maybe that last flash of yours will do a neat job of cutting your throat, Mr. Conclusion Jumper? How do you know that call wasn't a fake, or just some crank or a practical joker? You've never pulled a boner yet, but just one good one will give every newspaper in the country the chance to scalp you. Do you realize—"

"The call—" Kerry was almost jumping up and down—"I know you've got it. Where—"

"From the Wallace estate," Eve Vane said coolly. "Land's End. Since you're so good at guessing, what's the answer to that one?"

Kerry grabbed her wrist, snatched at the doorknob, told her breathlessly: "For you and me both, ninety miles an hour."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder Promise

THE speedometer of Kerry's roadster flickered to the ninety-mile mark once it hit the river highway. . . . As he swung into the driveway of the Wallace estate, Eve Vane, at last able to let go of her hat, asked him:

"Just how did you get this dope about the maniac-captures-woman theory?"

Every city editor in the nation would have liked to know how Kerry came by his inside information. Actually, although his personal payroll did maintain a few spies at strategic points, most of Kerry's scoops dropped like manna from the skies.

He was constantly being buttonholed on the street, waylaid on his nocturnal rounds of the city's hot-spots, telephoned at all weird hours by persons eager to bestow upon him the priceless gift of exclusive inside stuff.

His secret he never divulged, and he conscientiously double-checked all items before putting them on the air. His creed was to get the news first, no matter how, but to get it right. He never betrayed his sources, though he had been placed under alarming official pressure at times, and he never knowingly spread any gossip that might disrupt a happy home.

"Where," Eve Vane persisted as Kerry scanned the lights playing across the Wallace grounds, "did you get that love-maniac dope?"

"From the police commissioner himself," Kerry answered with a grin, "though he doesn't know it. It will be a bad day for me when he realizes he can't keep from shouting at the wrong times. Smitty was shooting craps with Inspector Tarrant in the office next to the commissioner's when he bawled orders at his flock of gold-shield men."

Smitty was Kerry's leg-man, a lad of indeterminate age and nondescript ap-

pearance. "It's as simple as that. Of course, I sent Smitty there, hoping something would break. What's more, he took Tarrant for two bucks and a half."

Kerry looked worried as he left the car. "The lack of excitement about the place," he observed, "leads me to believe the missing Mrs. Wallace is still missing." With Eve Vane at his side, he approached the rear of the magnificent house.

"A beautiful spot for romance," he added, noting the reflection of the moon on the river, "except that there are too many bulls around." Patrolmen were posted plentifully about the estate.

They paused, arm in arm, watching a group of men emerge from the mansion. Some of them Kerry recognized as newspaper reporters. They forthwith directed scathing looks at him, which caused him to grin broadly in appreciation.

Commissioner Endicott, who was leading the way, paused to impale Kerry with a baneful glare. The commissioner declared loudly: "I heard your damned tattling, Kerry. When I find out where the leak came from, I'm going to break that man." Kerry's grin grew even broader. "How the devil can we crack a case with you broadcastin' a warning to the suspect? Damn it, we're in charge here. Clear out."

Kerry gazed at a distraught, middle-aged man at the commissioner's side. Having seen his photograph in the extra editions, Kerry readily recognized him as Gerard Shepard, brother-in-law of the millionaire who had dropped dead from the sky, and witness to the tragedy. Shepard was holding a strange object in his trembling hands.

It was three sticks of dynamite bundled together with wire, to one of which a few inches of fuse had been attached. To the end of the fuse fifteen or twenty kitchen matches were bound, heads clustered outward. In Kerry's eyes it appeared to be a devilishly simple infernal machine.

"Clear out," the commissioner gruffly reiterated. More quietly, he added: "Unless you choose to explain yourself, Kerry. We know that this stuff about your having heard from Mrs. Wallace is only a fluff.

"We know she's nowhere near here because we've searched for miles around. She couldn't have phoned you because she's the victim of a screwy kidnaper. That's the only answer. But why you broadcast that hooley is what I want to know!"

Kerry felt the sting of Eve Vane's caustic glance. He endeavored to evade the issue. "Mr. Shepard's sister, Hope, came to my studio tonight to ask my help. I complied so far as I was able. Mr. Shepard may feel that I'm better able to get at the bottom of this case than anyone else. In that case, he wouldn't want me to leave."

GERARD SHEPARD said hesitantly: "It's all right, Mr. Kerry—stay if you wish. But I must know the reason why you broadcast that Lucia is still alive. You said you heard—"

"A telephone call," Kerry answered. "Traced back to this estate. More I can't say."

Endicott looked startled. Reporters stared, began to race for the nearest wire. Shepard's further inquiry was drowned out by his booming orders to his men to search the house and grounds. Patrolmen and detectives began scurrying.

Endicott glowering at Kerry, asked: "It was Mrs. Wallace? You're sure that call was traced back here?"

"You heard my broadcast," Kerry answered noncommittally.

The commissioner grunted and trudged toward the broad, open lawn beyond. It was a green stretch flanking the river, the Wallace private landing-field. A small hangar sat at one corner of it. Police cars were stationed upon it, their headlamps shafting upon the pile of

wreckage that had been an airplane. Following behind Gerard Shepard, who still carried the bundled dynamite, Kerry felt a nudge from Eve Vane.

"Why did you tell 'em that?"

"You see, darling," Kerry answered blithely, "if I've come a cropper on that call, which I probably have—the police department and the Fourth Estate can now share it with me."

They paused short of the debris. Several headquarters sleuths were stationed near it, Kerry saw, to prevent the trampling of slight marks in the dust. Official photographers and moulage man, he knew, must already have done their utmost to preserve these almost intangible clues. On one side of the wreckage, were heavy footprints and a flattened area. On the other side, were the wavering impressions of a woman's shoes.

Kerry sharpened eyes and ears as Endicott, indicating the spot, directed Gerard Shepard: "Now, tell me again exactly what happened."

Shepard began: "I'm still so upset it seems like a dream. It was just getting dark when I walked out here with Trent. He didn't say where he was going to fly to—he often took random hops. He was just about to start when he saw this—this dynamite fastened to the engine, almost out of sight.

"He looked closely at it, and so did I. The matches were placed so that after the engine had been running a few minutes, the heat of combustion would ignite them and the dynamite would explode."

Kerry was itching to find the nearest telephone, but he waited.

"The first thing Trent said," Shepard continued unsteadily, "was, 'Barrazo'. He twisted the wires loose and took the dynamite off. Then we went together into the garage, where he kept a box of dynamite in a heavy oaken chest. He'd bought it for Barrazo to use while building the rock-garden.

"Trent had the only key, and the chest hadn't been touched since Barrazo was fired off the place. We found the chest broken open with a crowbar. These sticks had come from the box."

Something was beginning to work hurriedly in Kerry's mind.

Shepard went on uneasily: "Trent put this bundle of sticks in my hands and said, 'Take care of that—it's evidence. I'm going to notify the police.' Then he went into the house, and, in a few minutes came back. He was too upset to say much, but he inspected the plane, every square inch of it.

"He said something about having to stay away for a few days in connection with some investment, but he was damned if he was going to let Lucia stay here with a maniac like Barrazo prowling around the place and pulling off tricks like this."

"Then?" Endicott prompted.

"He told me to watch the plane," Shepard continued, "and again went into the house. In a moment he came out with Lucia. Lucia was carrying a small case, and had put on a flying-coat. I begged them not to use the plane, fearing that Barrazo might have done something else to it that Trent hadn't discovered.

"But he wouldn't listen. All the while, I had the dynamite—this very bundle—in my hands. Then they took off, and suddenly—" Shepard's eyes clamped shut.

"You saw the plane explode when it was still pretty close to the ground, and fall," Endicott supplied. "Wallace inspected it thoroughly before he went up, but regardless of that it blew up."

"Yes," Shepard nodded. "For a minute I was too stunned to know what to do. Then I began running toward the wreck. On the way, I heard someone laugh—a wild laugh. I couldn't tell where it was coming from. One of the wings was burning, and I could see that Trent had lived long enough after the crash to stag-

ger out of the pit and walk a few yards before he died. I called for Lucia, and suddenly something hit me."

Kerry cut in: "What was it, or who?"

SHEPARD answered, in spite of the commissioner's glower: "I couldn't see. It happened so suddenly. I was knocked down. For a few minutes, I must have been unconscious." Shepard tenderly rubbed a blackened laceration behind his right ear.

"When I was able to get up, I realized that the explosion was bringing other people from the house—Hope and Phil and the servants. I got to the wreck first, but Lucia wasn't in it, wasn't anywhere. We tried to find her, but—"

Shepard's gesture of bewilderment completed his story.

Kerry, pointing to the prints of a high-heeled shoe, preserved in the dust by a hardened spray fixative, observed eagerly:

"What do they mean, Commissioner? That she wasn't killed when the crate hit the ground? She was able to crawl out of it and wander away? Is it your idea that Barrazo grabbed her while she was too stunned to realize what had happened? With twelve million dollars involved, and—"

"Figure it out for yourself, Kerry," Commissioner Endicott snapped. "That ought to be easy for the prophet of the wave-lengths. You won't get any information from me."

"Where's Barrazo now?" he persisted. "Have you located him? If you haven't, what clues are you following? Come across, Commissioner. There's a whole country full of people waiting for that information, and I've promised to give it to 'em. Play ball with me, and, when you grab that maniac, I'll blow you up into the cleverest police official—"

"You'll grab all the credit for yourself, you mean," Endicott growled. "You want information, do you, Kerry? All

right, I'll give it to you. We don't know where Barrazo is. We've hunted to hell and back for him and haven't found a trace of him.

"I want him for murder and kidnaping, and maybe worse, and I'm going to nail him—but, when I do, you'll read about it in the newspapers. That's how I'm handling this case. Keyhole Kerry gets the news last."

Kerry swallowed hard. He merely nodded when Eve Vane said ruefully: "Smitty's inside dope has put you very definitely on the outside, Guy." He watched the commissioner trudge away with Gerard Shepard. Abruptly, his jaw clenched. With dogged purpose, and Eve Vane hurrying worriedly at his side, he strode to the house.

Entering quietly, he sensed that the huge dwelling was still undergoing a close search. He found the richly furnished library unoccupied. He took up the telephone, dialed a private number of the U. B. C., and obtained connection with one of two men who were constantly on duty, at the behest of his sponsor, to receive his calls at any hour of the day or night.

Kerry ordered crisply: "Put me on."

The special, high-priced arrangements provided for Kerry enabled him to break into any program at any time. Calling from any telephone, he could almost immediately hit the air. He waited a few anxious seconds while Eve Vane watched him, heard, "Take it away!" waited five seconds more, then began shooting out words.

"Attention, Mr. and Mrs. United States. Keyhole Kerry, the tattletale of the kilocycles, bringing you the latest flash in the Wallace murder case. For it is murder, ladies and gentlemen. Trent Wallace was killed by an infernal machine planted in his plane. Barrazo, the suspect, is still at large—but, as usual, Keyhole Kerry has the inside stuff.

"Later tonight I will reveal information as to the whereabouts of one identified with the name of Rafaelo Barrazo, which will enable the baffled police to make their first arrest. Listen for this sensational break. Keyhole Kerry, now going off the air and on the job."

He let go the instrument, took Eve's arm and sidled for the nearest door. His winey-haired secretary was gazing at him in apprehensive alarm.

"What did you mean by that?" she asked quickly. "You promised to tell the whole world where Barrazo is hiding, but you haven't the faintest idea where he is. How're you going to make good? Guy, you news-crazy fool, what're you going to do?"

"Where'm I going to get Barrazo?" he countered. "You're going to produce him for me, honey." Into Eve's wail of baffled despair, he inserted: "But we've got to get out of here before Endicott nails me, or Kerry will be pulled through a keyhole backwards!"

CHAPTER THREE

Preview of Death

KERRY, wto hours later, glanced cautiously up and down the shabby street before he entered the odorous lobby of the sooty Hotel Grande. Since his precipitous departure from the Wallace estate, he had busied himself by making undercover arrangements and keeping out of sight of the police. His purpose took him to the third floor of the hotel and inside a musty room.

There he found Eve Vane with a man. The man was one whom Kerry had never seen before. He had instructed his secretary to find, among her theatrical connections, a down-at-the heel actor of Latin descent, as profoundly unknown as possible, who needed money badly and who could even under crushing pressure

achieve the feat of keeping his mouth strictly shut.

This seedy, worn individual with faded eyes was the result. Kerry promptly but cautiously got to work.

"The name you wrote in the register is your real one?" he asked.

"John Dawson. Yes, sir."

Kerry promptly removed five-hundred dollars, in twenty-dollar bills, from his wallet and placed them in John Dawson's eager hand. "You'll get the other five hundred when it's all over," he said. "But remember one thing. If you crack, I'll renounce you. You can get away with it by saying as little as possible. Then, when you speak, tell the truth—except that you don't remember anything connected with me. Got that?"

"I've got it," Dawson nodded, pocketing the bills gratefully.

Kerry next produced several inscribed envelopes, a few pieces of cheap, tattered, scrawled scratch paper, a short length of dynamite fuse, and exchanged them for all the odds and ends Dawson could find on his person. Dawson behaved in a bewildered, uncertain manner as if already he were playing a part.

Kerry went on: "Understand clearly, you're doing nothing illegal. There's no law in the world to punish you for writing Barrazo's name on a few envelopes and slips of paper and carrying them with you. It's not unlawful to own a piece of dynamite fuse. You can't be held responsible for any conclusions the police may reach.

"On the other hand, you'll be in a perfect spot to sue the Commissioner for false arrest, if you choose to. If he tries to prove you're crazy, you'll be able to prove you're not. If necessary, I'll employ Doctor Carter Cole to give you a thorough-going psychological test, and that will settle that. But, above all, say nothing and forget all about me."

Dawson said: "Never heard of you."

Kerry protested: "That's going too far. Everybody's heard of me. But—all right."

With an exultant gleam in his eye, Kerry tugged the anxious Eve Vane from the room. When he closed the door, John Dawson was gratefully reaching for a pint bottle. Kerry promptly steered his secretary into the adjoining room, which he had instructed her to rent. Immediately, he went to the telephone.

He was connected with the U. B. C. offices, then his man. He directed: "Put me on." He heard in a minute: "It's all yours." At that moment, Kerry knew, dance music was fading from the ether. His driving voice supplanted it, striking far across the nation.

"Keyhole Kerry at your service, Mr. and Mrs. United States. Your rural correspondent is back with the inside information he promised you. In Room Three-thirty-two, of the Hotel Grande, in this city, the police will find one who maybe is Rafaelo Barrazo. I advise them to close in on him before he has an opportunity to escape.

"I am personally doubtful, ladies and gentlemen, that this is the suspect for whom Commissioner Endicott is searching, but I'm giving the tip for what it's worth. Keep your dial tuned to this station—next flash will come in a few minutes. Stand by for Keyhole Kerry, who brings you the news first!"

He disconnected, drew a deep breath, saw Eve Vane looking at him bleakly.

"You are crazy," she told him. "What if the cops beat the truth out of Dawson? You'll be hung higher than a kite. It will be the end of Keyhole Kerry. Why do you do insane things like this, and why do I help you?"

"Because, darling," Kerry answered grimly, "I refuse to let myself be scooped. Endicott forced me to this by warning me he'd give the dope about Barrazo's capture to the newspapers first. I'm beating him to the gun by manufacturing a

Barrazo, that's all. If the commissioner falls for it, that's his funeral, but I've played square with my listeners, haven't I?"

Eve Vane said: "I could choke you."
"Listen."

A SHRILL howl was penetrating from the street. The wavering wail brought a broad grin to Kerry's face. It told him that his flash had been caught at police headquarters, that an official alarm had at once been broadcast, that prowling cars were speeding to make the capture. Kerry bolted the door, while listening to hammering footfalls on the stairs and in the hall. They passed him, pounded into the next room.

A gruff voice growled: "Keep him covered. Search him." Then, after a moment of silence, "I'll be damned!" Finally, "The commissioner wants to see you!" Into the tension broke more footfalls and clamoring questions that meant a mob of newspaper reporters were swarming in to capitalize the break.

Kerry, glowing with elation, once more took up the telephone. His subdued instructions again connected him with his station and erased a program in favor of his imminent flash.

"Keyhole Kerry, telling you that the police are acting on my tip, ladies and gentlemen. They have just seized a suspect in the Hotel Grande. They have found envelopes and papers in this man's pockets, all bearing the name of Barrazo. This they believe to be evidence of mental derangement.

"They have also discovered a startling clue in the shape of a few inches of fuse such as used for igniting dynamite. A sensational move, Mr. and Mrs. America—but I still doubt that this prisoner is the man Commissioner Endicott wants. Wait for the next flash from your radio oracle, Keyhole Kerry."

Kerry had spoken softly, so that the

turmoil in the next room would conceal his presence, but he knew that his voice, booming out of countless loud-speakers, had already injected the flavor of a back issue into newspaper editions not yet printed.

Exultantly, he waited until the noises moved from the next room, down the hall, and away. He turned to find Eve Vane almost weeping.

"If you had to, you'd commit a murder yourself to make news," she blurted.

Kerry said: "Listen, darling. I'm in this case up to my neck. I'm looking for a break, a real break. Beating the papers to this false lead is only part of it. The real Barrazo is screwy, remember that. Being in the radio business, I know enough about nuts to be able to make a stab at figuring him out. He's glorying in this sensational publicity, count on that. It feeds his warped ego.

"But now he'll feel that he's being cheated by an imposter. It's a thousand to one he'll protest that he's the big shot the police are looking for. And who'll he give that dope to? Keyhole Kerry, of course. Come on, honey—we've got work to do."

Kerry slipped from the room with Eve Vane, unseen by the radio-division patrolmen remaining in that occupied by "Barrazo." He left the building unobtrusively by a side entrance, flagged a taxi. It zig-zagged him to the tall, white U. B. C. skyscraper, in which Kerry maintained his office. They entered to find the ubiquitous Smitty on the job.

If Smitty had any fuller name, no one had ever thought to inquire about. Some of Kerry's choicest flashes had come through the open-eared and wide-eyed Smitty.

Smitty declared admiringly, as Kerry trudged in: "Good work, chief!"

"If you mean his idea of how to commit suicide," Eve Vane retorted grievously, "it's unbeatable!"

Kerry gestured away the fateful implications. He directed his secretary: "You camp at that telephone. Cut everybody short unless it happens to be Barrazo, then make him hang on as long as possible until you trace the call. Smitty, stand by. If something else doesn't break pronto, we'll have to make it break."

"It will probably be your neck," Eve mourned.

A rap at the door turned Kerry. A pull on the knob disclosed a telegram messenger, bearing an envelope which had originated with the telegraph company. Smitty snatched it out of the boy's hands, placed it in Kerry's, signed the receipt. Kerry, thinking intently, ripped the envelope. Abruptly, as he glanced at the heavily typed lines, his mind swerved onto a new track. It read:

*FOR RELEASE AT EXACTLY TEN
P. M. TOMORROW:
EXACTLY ONE MINUTE AGO MISS
HOPE SHEPARD, SISTER OF THE
MISSING MRS. WALLACE, WAS
VIOLENTLY AND MYTERIOUSLY
MURDERED.*

That was all. Kerry stared at the message. Eve snatched it away and Smitty peered over her shoulder to read it. They looked dismayed. Eve exclaimed:

"Barrazo sent threatening notes to Wallace. This must have come from him. You've got to let the police in on this, Guy. You've got to do everything possible to stop it."

Kerry's head wagged. "What a marvelous flash!" he said. "What a swell, exclusive story—if I'm right there on the spot when she's murdered!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Millions at Stake

THE clock on the dash of Kerry's roadster registered nine forty-five next evening, when he swung expectantly into the driveway of the Wal-

lace estate. Stopping near the house, he saw that the wreckage had been removed from the field, that no cops were in evidence. Smitty slipped out of the car at his side.

Kerry directed him: "Stay here and keep your eyes peeled. If we aren't able to beat a murderer at his own game, then we've got to grab him."

Kerry felt let down because the expected telephone call from the real Barrazo had not materialized. The madman had resisted the bait. Possibly he was beyond the reach of newspapers and radio receivers.

On the other hand, the nation was reading billboard headlines concerning the arrest, at the Hotel Grande, of the man believed to be the murderous Barrazo. Kerry had noted with gratification that, while all policedom howled about John Dawson's head, the captive was managing to remain mute.

Kerry rapped the knocker of the Wallace mansion. A maid conducted him to Hope Shepard and Philip Bryson. Their drawn faces suggested to Kerry that they had been engaged in a trying discussion. He eyed them sharply. Then, without forewarning, he produced the threat of the girl's impending death. Her breath caught and her face went white.

"I don't blame you for being alarmed," Kerry said sympathetically, "because it's not long now until ten o'clock. Unless, of course, this warning is the work of a crank. Is it in any way similar to the death threats which Barrazo sent Trent Wallace?"

The girl choked out: "It is! It looks—it looks exactly the same!"

"And did Barrazo ever bother you, as he did your sister?" Kerry persisted shrewdly.

Again, with a halting effort: "Yes—he did! It was before Trent ordered him off the place. I hadn't said anything about it to anyone except Phil."

Philip Bryson was frowning at Kerry. "How long have you had this note?" he demanded. "Don't you realize we should do everything possible to protect Hope? It's a matter for the police, certainly. I'm going to phone the commissioner at once."

At that moment the telephone rang. Bryson, who had been reaching for it, lifted it. He listened nervously, said, "Right here," then proffered it to Kerry. "Please hurry," he urged. "Good Lord, it's not long now!" Kerry, one eye on the clock, heard Eve Vane's strained voice:

"Guy, you don't know what's happening!" she wailed. "This stunt—I mean Dawson—is succeeding altogether too well. Down at headquarters they don't believe he's Dawson. They think he's Barrazo. They've found out that Barrazo wasn't actually an inmate of an asylum, but was only examined once, so the records are no help to Dawson. He hasn't any family and only a few friends—the man can't prove his own identity. He's either going to have to tell the truth, which will wreck you, or he'll go to the chair."

"Don't forget, I can clear him."

The girl moaned: "At the cost of your scalp, maybe—but what makes you think they'll believe you? They've got a suspect and are going their utmost to nail it on him. I'll tell you how it's going to work out. Dawson's going to fry, and I'm going back to dancing in night clubs, and you'll be making little ones out of big ones, you fool!"

Kerry said soberly: "Maybe you're right."

"But that's not all." Now Eve's voice took on the crisp alertness of a news-huntress who had something. "I've just got a wire from our gabby friend, the Reverend Mr. Patterson, of Elkhorn, Maryland. Hope Shepard and Philip Bryson have secretly been man and wife for almost a week now. As things stand,

Bryson had married plenty of money, hasn't he?"

"What?" Kerry barked it, turning to glare at Bryson. He wanted confirmation, and wanted it rapidly, but an interruption kept it unspoken.

Into the hush of the library, a strangled cry broke. It came with chilling suddenness—the choking shout of a terrorized man. Its point of origin, Kerry sensed at once, was the garden at the rear of the mansion.

Following it came a startled yelp in the voice of Smitty: "Chief! Chief!"

The telephone clattered to the floor, as Kerry bounded to the French windows at the rear of the room. Thrusting out, he glimpsed the quick movements of a struggle. A hedge was swaying against two rocking, interlocked figures. Kerry sprinted.

He saw one of the men drop, glimpsed the other scurrying off into the darkness at a wild lope, then saw Smitty scrambling after him.

"Get him, Smitty!" Kerry shouted.

Gravel scattered from Kerry's sliding shoes as he grabbed at the man who had fallen against the hedge. He hoisted Gerard Shepard into the light radiating from the windows. Shepard's face was bruised, cut and bleeding. He had obviously absorbed the punishment of a furious attack.

He hung to Kerry and blurted: "It was Barrazo—Barrazo! Look out!"

HE POINTED frantically toward a heavy sedan sitting nearby in the driveway. Its motor was not running, its lights were off—it had evidently been standing there for sometime—but underneath it, at the rear, a sparkling stream of fire was playing across the ground.

It was as if a small hose was spraying out flame and thick, white smoke. It was a burning fuse. In the dim glare, Kerry saw only an appallingly short length of it remaining.

"He put it there!" Shepard screeched. "Get away!"

Shepard leaped into a crazy run. Kerry whirled, jumped, sprinted again. As he fled, he saw Hope Shepard and Philip Bryson emerging from the French windows. He howled a warning at them, caught their arms, twisted them back. Gerard Shepard sprang inside. Kerry shot one anxious glance in the direction of Smitty and saw that the boy had vanished in the darkness beyond.

Hell spreweed up through the crust of the earth.

The concussion tossed the sedan upward in a surf of fire and fumes. It twisted tortuously in mid-air while windows crashed from every frame in the rear of the house.

The French windows dropped tinkling fragments around the feet of Kerry, Bryson, Shepard and the girl. Stunned by the power of the concussion, Kerry saw the sedan bounce down with its rear end flaming and its trunk burst open.

The broken trunk revealed a sight which froze Kerry. A stiff, huddled figure had rolled from it. It was a grisly, ghastly thing—a woman's body torn by the force of the blast. It dropped into a pool of flaming gasoline that was streaming from the rent fuel tank.

The glare leaped high as Kerry trotted closer, staring aghast at a corpse clad in flying coat.

"It's Lucia!" The name came in a horrified cry from the waxen lips of Hope Shepard. "Lucia!"

One moment Kerry stood transfixed with shock. Then, through the snarling of the fire, he caught a shout carried on the night wind from out of the gloom which blanketed the grounds. It was Smitty's strained yell.

Kerry's whole being throbbed with patience to get to the telephone and whip this latest flash into the ether, but concern for Smitty drove him into a run.

"Smitty!"

The boy came scrambling out of the darkness, eyes rounded, breathless. He gestured to the big garage standing far back from the house and gulped: "In there—he went in there!"

Kerry trotted toward the dark structure, his hand sliding toward the automatic holstered to his left shoulder. He paused in the deeper darkness inside the garage with Smitty, who was breathing hard at his side, gesturing upward.

Kerry saw a hinged, rectangular section of the ceiling, counterbalanced by a weight and rope passing over a pulley. It was a flight of stairs, he knew, giving into a small space over head. Pointing his automatic at the widening opening, he lifted the weight. The panel creaked down, disclosing darkness above.

Kerry bluffed commandingly: "You're covered, Barrazo. Come on down."

A sound came out of the gloom in the space above the ceiling—quick, sobbing breathing. To Kerry it meant desperation or heart-rending surrender. He ventured up, step by step, trying to see something in the blackness.

Nothing was visible.

Smitty kept gamely at Kerry's heels. Kerry's head entered the hot, black void. He reached the top step. Suddenly unseen fury stormed upon him.

Kerry took a jolt in the chest, raised to tiptoes, whipped out a blow with his automatic, drove out a jab that met only empty air. He leaped, struck again, this time feeling his knuckles crack against a hard head.

He flung himself on the invisible man, with Smitty leaping into the battle beside him. Kerry's teeth clicked with the force of a blow that came from nowhere. Then, he grimly bridged himself over a struggling body and closed his fingers crushingly around a pulsing throat.

"Stop that! A light, Smitty!"

A white stream from Smitty's torch

struck upon a agonized face. Kerry looked into wild eyes, saw crazily working lips, and knew that this was Barrazo. He straightened, gathering a fistful of Barrazo's clothes, lifted Barrazo, plumped him into a broken-back chair.

His glance around showed him that this was a store-room. Dust-grime, all over Barrazo, hinted that he had been hiding here from the beginning. Kerry, grinning triumphantly, poked his automatic into Barrazo's hunger-deflated midriff.

"Come out with it. Go ahead—talk. I've got to have it fast—and exclusive!"

Blinking, Barrazo mouthed: "It is not me. I am not guilty. I put it there first, yes—the dynamite—but he took it off. I watched and I saw him take it off. No—I am not the one!"

"No?" Kerry grated. "If you're not behind all this bloody business, who is?"

Barrazo gestured bewilderment. "I put the dynamite there first, but he took it off. Tonight, I only try to get away. The man he see me. That's why we fight. The rest I don't know. Mercy of Heaven, I am not the man! I swear by everything I put the dynamite there, but he took it off. I am not guilty."

Kerry's grip tightened. "Listen here. If you're lying—"

BARRAZO moaned: "I do it. Tonight, the explosion was not me. I did not kill—and I did not take her away."

Kerry's zeal to hit the ether had heightened to an intolerable pitch. He backed away from Barrazo, took Smitty's hand, placed the automatic in it. "Keep that mugg covered, and, if he makes one funny move, wing him. Don't kill him—I've got a feeling he's telling the truth. But make him stay here until I come back." Then, his nerves afire, he bounded down the hinged flight.

He hoisted it, pulled the counterweight to close the trap. Hurrying toward the

house, he saw the wrecked sedan still flaming. The heat and fury of the blaze had kept Gerard Shepard at a distance. Kerry paused and heard him moan: "Lucia! Lucia!"

Hope Shepard and Philip Bryson were inside the house. Kerry entered the library to find the girl sobbing hysterically, Bryson trying to comfort her. Kerry hurried to the telephone.

His, "Hello!" was answered by Eve Vane's, "Guy! What is it?" She had retained the wire. Kerry barked her off, dialed U.B.C., snapped through his connections. His five seconds of wait, while the air was cleared for him, was an eternity.

Then his syllables machine-gunned the news about Mrs. Wallace's body. Then he went on:

"And there is one other bit of news, ladies and gentlemen, which the whole world does not know. Less than a week ago, Philip Bryson and Hope Shepard were secretly married in Elkhorn, Maryland. That may be part of the answer to the important question of who gets the twelve million dollars. Keep your radios going, ladies and gentlemen, and get the breaks as fast as they come—from Keyhole Kerry!"

Philip Bryson had snapped to his feet, was directing a ferocious scowl at Kerry. Hope Shepard was gazing, stricken. Into the tight hush, Kerry observed quietly: "Come to think of it, it's past ten o'clock now, and nobody's murdered your wife, Mr. Bryson."

Bryson clicked out: "Exactly what did you mean by that broadcast? Its tantamount to an accusation. If you dare insinuate again—"

"Do you consider it a suspicious circumstance? I merely said that you're in line to inherit some of Trent Wallace's fortune. That's a statement of fact. I wonder why nobody attempted to kill your wife at ten o'clock, as this note

threatened? Perhaps it's a fake—an effort to divert suspicion."

Philip Bryson started for Kerry with clenched fists. Hope Shepard—or Mrs. Bryson—gripped his arm to restrain him. At that moment Gerard Shepard appeared in the French windows, his face haggard, utterly shaken. He stared uncomprehendingly, as Kerry strode to confront Bryson squarely.

"If you don't like what I've already said, just listen to this. Murder has been committed. There are few suspects. One is Barrazo—the most likely, but perhaps he didn't actually perpetrate the deaths.

"Then who's left? Trent Wallace's heirs. Who are they? I don't pretend to know the terms of his will, but you're one of those heirs, Mr. Bryson, through marriage, and so is your wife, and so is Gerard Shepard.

"Look at Shepard. He's a broken man. One of the victims of this devilish job is his sister, Lucia. It's obvious that she meant a great deal to him. Can you believe he deliberately killed her for money? Can you think for a minute that your wife had any hand in it? Then, aside from any other heirs I don't know about at the moment, who's left? You."

Bryson's fists were clenched even harder, his face red with rage.

Kerry continued grimly, "There's more. Evidently Lucia Wallace was killed when the plane crashed. I've realized from the beginning that it's a highly important question—who died first, the man or the wife. If she did, the money goes to his side of the family. If he did, then the fortune falls to her side.

"It looks to me like Lucia Wallace was dead when she was found by the man who removed her body from the wreckage. He attempted to make it seem that she was still alive—because, Mr. Bryson, it would be worth millions to her blood relations and her in-laws! Now," Kerry wound up, "what have you to say?"

"Nothing!" Bryson ground out.

Cold alarm swept along Kerry's nerves, not due to Philip Bryson's challenge, but in response to a shrill sound sweeping upon the house from the highway. It revealed again that Kerry's broadcast had spurred the police into action.

His flash, concerning the discovery of Mrs. Wallace's body, was bringing a parade of prowling cars with sirens screaming. Kerry, his first thought directed at the captive in the attic of the garage, abandoned Philip Bryson and ran hastily to the garden.

He had time only to trot into the garage and call up: "Keep him there, Smitty—and remember, it's got to be exclusive!"

Smitty's muffled answer was: "I'll hold him till he dies of old age, chief—if you say so."

Car doors were slamming and uniformed men crowding toward the smoldering wreckage of the sedan. Kerry realized that a few more minutes would bring Commissioner Endicott, roaring. As unobtrusively as possible, Kerry slipped into his roadster and departed—having revealed nothing of the fact that the real Rafaello Barrazo was his prisoner.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer Broadcast

KEYHOLE KERRY felt a chill when he opened the door of his office to find a telegram messenger proffering him a white envelope. He gripped the boy's arm and pulled him inside before touching the message.

Opening it, with Eve Vane hurrying to his side, he gazed, alarmed, at terse, typewritten lines—

TWO RELEASES FOR USE ON YOUR PROGRAM TONIGHT: WHILE YOU ARE BROADCASTING, GERARD WILL MEET DEATH AT THE WALLACE ESTATE, LAND'S END.

TONIGHT WILL BE THE FINAL BROADCAST OF KEYNOTE KERRY, SINCE SOON AFTER YOU COMPLETE IT YOU WILL ALSO DIE.

Kerry took a deep breath. Demanding the source of the message from the boy, he learned only that the envelope had been handed across the office counter by a nondescript young man who, Kerry surmised, had been hired for the purpose.

Staring at the clock, which told him that his program must hit the air within an hour, he realized that attempting to trace the message would accomplish nothing. He let the messenger go, closed the door, paced back and forth across the office.

Eve Vane, striving to control herself, begged: "Say something. Say something before I go nuts."

Kerry answered: "Well, it's a flash—having to announce my own imminent demise. At least I've got it first—the newspapers won't know anything about it until afterward. I've a strange feeling, Eve, that whoever sent this message means it."

She blurted bitterly: "That makes me feel so much better. Guy, what're you going to do? Are you going to just wait to be killed?"

He fixed her with a surprised stare. "Good Lord, does it mean that much to you?" Then he said: "Certainly not. Get busy with that phone. Call Land's End and find out if it's any news to Gerard Shepard that he's going to get bumped off. I'm getting an idea. Damned if I'm going to put myself on the spot where a murderer's expecting me at a given time."

While Eve Vane busied herself with the telephone, Kerry ruefully read the banner headlines of the newspapers spread out on his desk.

They all announced that the police were building an air-tight case around Barrazo—the suspect, as only Kerry and Eve knew, being the actor who had no connec-

tion whatever with the crime. Dawson's exemplary silence, insisted upon by Kerry, had boomeranged. Mention of the electric chair in the accounts made Kerry's blood run cold.

Twenty hours had passed since Kerry had removed himself from the Wallace estate. Since then, he had not dared return because Land's End was overrun with headquarters men. Literally over their very heads, Smitty was, without a doubt, still holding the real Barrazo captive.

If the laborer was guilty, Kerry well knew that he would be obliged to suffer mercilessly the consequences of obstructing justice. Throughout the day, Kerry had been dodging from place to place, trying to avoid the police, trying to think out the Wallace case to a logical conclusion.

Eve Vane looked up from the telephone to say concernedly: "It's Hope Shepard—or Mrs. Bryson—on the phone. Her brother isn't there. He's on his way here right now. She says he got a warning by messenger promising him he'll die at Land's End tonight while you're broadcasting. Why he thinks coming to you will insure him a long and happy life is beyond me."

Kerry made no answer. He settled at his telephone, called U.B.C., talked long and ardently with a technician, using cryptic radio parlance. He spoke of his roadster, which was now parked in a lot near the building, a short-wave pick-up, a mobile broadcast, and insisted vehemently upon his plan.

When he disconnected, he gazed again at the unsigned warning of death, and observed: "He means it, all right, but I've a chance of fooling him."

Eve pleaded: "Don't talk in riddles. Not at a time like this. What're you doing?"

Kerry answered tautly: "Darling, you were right from the beginning. I've jock-

eyed myself into a suicidal spot. With a fake Barrazo getting the works in headquarters, thanks to me, and with the real Barrazo undercover, with the blame for it hovering over my gray head, and with the mugg who wrote this message believing I know too much to be allowed to live—"

He broke off, eyes flashing. "I feel like a man who is about to be shot out of a cannon, with the added irony that I'm going to pull the trigger myself. Here goes."

A GAIN he dialed U.B.C., got his watchdog on the wire, and asked for the air. It was given him in five seconds. While Eve Vane looked at him sorrowfully, as at a man doomed, he spoke in his crisp, swift, ringing fashion:

"Attention, Mr. and Mrs. United States. This is Keyhole Kerry, tipping you off that my next broadcast, which begins promptly on the hour, will be the most important I've ever made. I have inside stuff of the highest importance which I will give to you then. My life has been threatened. It may be my last program.

"But, while I'm on the air, I'm going to tell you my complete theory of the Wallace murders. More than that, I promise to name the man I believe to be the murderer. Hang on until I come back. It may be for my farewell appearance."

He hung up, stared at Eve. To her breathless, "Who's the man? What's his name? What're you talking about?" he answered despondently: "I don't know."

He was reaching for her hand when a sharp rap sounded on his door. Immediately it opened to disclose a wide-eyed Gerard Shepard.

Shepard came to Kerry with trembling hand fluttering a typed slip. Kerry read words to the effect that Gerard was doomed to suffer death at Land's End during the Keyhole News program. It

was, like the other warnings, unsigned, but it obviously came from the same lethal typewriter.

Kerry looked at the clock, saw that minutes were rapidly melting away, and was about to speak to Shepard when the door flashed open again—this time without the formality of a knock.

Commissioner Endicott charged at Kerry, spread his legs apart, glowered. "What the devil do you mean by that last flash?" he demanded. "Are you trying to make out that we're a bunch of dunderheads down at headquarters? We have our man, but you'll name the real murderer! You're a smart boy, aren't you, Kerry? Well, if you have a straight dope, I want it, right here and now."

"You won't get it, Commissioner," Kerry flatly answered. "Not any sooner than the rest of the population, which won't be long now. Look those over." He handed the two warnings to the commissioner and went on while Endicott blinked at them:

"Listen carefully. When I hit the air again, I'm going to do the greatest job of extemporaneous theorizing you ever heard in your life—but neither Gerard Shepard nor I are going to be where the murderer expects."

Eve Vane begged: "Please, Guy! Stop talking like a cross-word puzzle. What're you going to do?"

"This," Kerry answered. "The man who sent me that message expects me to keep the details under my hat until I put it on the air. He figures that neither the police nor I will have a chance to interfere, because the police won't know anything about it, and I'll be in my studio.

"More than that, he believes that once my program is over, I'll get to Land's End the fastest possible way. Maybe his plan is to be waiting for me to show up. Evidently, he intends to be there while I'm broadcasting, thinking Land's End is where Mr. Shepard will be. Well, we've

got him running because Shepard's here, and I'm going to arrive at Land's End while I'm broadcasting."

"Will you make sense?" Eve implored.

"But—" Shepard began to protest.

"That's it, and it's all settled," Kerry interposed. "We'd better be getting down there right now. On your way, gentlemen. Eve, you'd better not come. There's not enough room, and we can't tell what might happen. Please—"

"Being fool enough to be as crazy about you as I am, Guy Kerry," Eve said softly, "I want to be in on the obsequies."

Kerry had no answer for that. He slipped his arm through Eve's and left the office with her. While the commissioner and Shepard waited at the elevator, he hung back to say:

"I've got to make a stab at it, honey. Apparently the only way I can get Dawson out of a hellish mess is to confess the truth. That alone will sink me. Maybe I've got to tell the world where the real Barrazo is. The pleasant consequences of that will probably be prison. There's only one way out—for me to crack the case.

"I'll have to think in front of that mike as I've never thought before, because right now I have only a few vague notions, not yet pieced together. But—"

The elevator opened. The cab carried Kerry and the girl, with the scowling commissioner and the fidgeting Shepard, to the lobby level. They crossed to the big parking-space in which Kerry's roadster always sat.

Its top was folded down. In the rumble compartment a young man was cuddling a transmitter on his lap, pressing ear-phones to his head, looking up at a stretch of antenna on a wavering pole. From this mobile source Kerry had arranged, his flashes were to radiate across the continent.

He signaled Endicott into the rumble beside the technician. He slipped under the wheel, dropped a specially spidered

mike around his neck, adjusted it. Eve sidled in beside him, Shepard wedged in at her right.

Nerve tension made them silent while Kerry tested the transmission. He muttered into the mike until the technician signed an O. K. Then, eyes on his strap-watch, he waited.

"But—" Shepard's voice expressed a doubt—"wouldn't it be better if we all went to the regular studio and stayed there? Then—"

"That wouldn't put us in the neighborhood of a murderer," Kerry answered.

Silence again. The technician said at last: "Station announcement. Raney's announcing in the studio. Get set!" Then: "You're on, Kerry!"

KERRY launched out in a voice more sharply edged than ever, staring at nothing, thinking fast, preparing to turn the motor over and begin driving as soon as he was smoothly into his stride. He twanged:

"Attention, Mr. and Mrs. United States. This is Keyhole Kerry, bringing you the broadcast which may be his last. If, ladies and gentlemen, you should hear a sudden interruption of this program, it will probably be due to the fact that a murderer has made good his warning to kill me. But, in the meantime, I mean to keep my promise of a few minutes ago to give you the final inside stuff on the Wallace murder case."

While Eve Vane, the commissioner and Gerard Shepard watched, Kerry prepared to push the starter.

"Herewith, I present the proof of logic, ladies and gentlemen. It is not true that the murders were perpetrated by a vengeful maniac. It is a fact that Rafaelo Barrazo planted an infernal machine in Trent Wallace's plane, which he himself will admit. But there Barrazo's plan stopped, balked by Wallace's discovery of the dynamite wired to the motor."

The starter ground under Kerry's foot, and the motor caught, but these sounds did not reach the radio audience.

"First, Barrazo could not have hidden Mrs. Wallace's body in the trunk of her husband's sedan, for the simple reason that he was not in possession of a key. Second, not having hidden the body there, and therefore not knowing where it was, he could not have been the man who dynamited the sedan, which resulted in the discovery and the almost total destruction of the body.

"Third, Barrazo cannot be the man who tonight sent death threats to Gerard Shepard and myself, for the excellent reason that he is being held prisoner in the upstairs' section of the Wallace garage by my assistant, who captured him there only a short while ago."

"What—" Endicott gasped.

Kerry meshed the gears and sent the roadster crawling into the street as he rushed on: "This proves, regardless of how murderous Barrazo's intentions may have been, he actually is innocent.

"It also proves that, as I alone declared, the man now being held at police headquarters is not Barrazo. Moreover, it throws suspicion on other persons who have not yet been doubted by the police. As to who the guilty person may be, ladies and gentlemen, follow me through."

Kerry, steering the car more rapidly along the street, gave Eve Vane a glance that said he wished he knew where he was going to come out with this line of reasoning.

"Why, then, Mr. and Mrs. United States," he hurried on, "did the body of Lucia Wallace disappear from the wrecked plane? Why did it turn up again so mysteriously? Why was it deliberately destroyed? The answers to these questions are wrapped up in the other questions of what becomes of the Wallace fortune. These are the facts.

"Wallace had no near relatives other

than his wife. I learned through a confidential source this afternoon the gist of his will. Briefly, in the event of his prior death, he stipulated that his entire fortune should go to his wife. In the event of her prior death, and if there were no children, which there are not, small amounts are to go to his wife's relatives and the rest to various charities.

"So far as it is known, Mrs. Wallace herself drew up no will. Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, it became a matter of millions to someone to make it appear that the wife lived longer than the husband."

Kerry, maintaining the staccato speed of his discourse, was keeping the car rolling.

"If it could be made to appear that Mrs. Wallace lived longer than her husband after the crash, her relatives automatically come into the entire Wallace fortune. Mrs. Wallace's body was taken from the wreck for that reason—to make it appear that she had survived her husband. That is why the sedan in which her body was hidden was blown up—to make it impossible to determine exactly how long she had been dead.

"The person who committed these criminal acts knew that Wallace had lived longer than his wife because he found proof of it in the wreckage of the plane at a glance. He deliberately conspired to make the reverse seem true because it meant a difference of millions. Who, then, among Wallace's wife's heirs, was present at Land's End at the moment of the disaster? The answer is, Mr. and Mrs. United States, all of them."

Kerry's forehead was beaded. Driving automatically, he sped on. "Hope Shepard we can rule out immediately. Philip Bryson's marriage to her is considered to be a suspicious circumstance. He insists that they did not wish publicity, that they had kept the marriage secret at his wife's request. One fact, however, ladies and gentlemen, is absolutely conclusive so far

as Philip Bryson's guilt or innocence is concerned.

"At the moment when I received, in my broadcasting studio, a fake telephone call purporting to come from Mrs. Wallace, who even then was dead, Philip Bryson was present."

SUDDENLY Gerard Shepard choked out: "Stop the car! In heaven's name, stop—"

Kerry scarcely heard. He was unaware of Endicott's grim grab at Shepard. His line of reasoning had struck through fog straight to a bull's-eye and he was in a state of transcendent rapture. He clipped out:

"It leaves only one possible answer. One man not only maneuvered the disappearance of Mrs. Wallace's body but certainly planned her husband's death. Seizing the opportunity to fasten the guilt upon an unbalanced man who could not convincingly defend himself—"

Shepard screeched: "Stop the car!"

He tore away from Endicott's grasp. He thrust the door open, wrenched out while the roadster was still moving. The commissioner, with a bellow, dove at him. Kerry, staring exultantly, braked, thrust Eve Vane out, tackled Shepard.

With the microphone still around his neck, the cord whipping while the technician desperately played out slack, he fastened hands upon Shepard's shoulders, thrust his man against the roadster. A scream tore from Shepard's throat.

"Let me go! It'll explode! It'll explode!"

Shepard's shrilling fear drilled into Kerry's brain. His mind flashed to a picture of a plane flying to pieces in mid-air, to another of a sedan caught in a geyser of explosive power. Instantly, he dropped flat to the pavement. He peered under the car—and saw it.

Dangling from the chassis was a bundle of three sticks of dynamite. A fuse lead-

ing from it was spouting sparks—a fuse appallingly short. Another circle of wire meant that a bundle of matches, bound around the end of the fuse that was already consumed, had been tied against the exhaust-pipe.

He reached, grabbed the fuse. Fire burned into his palm as it tore it from the bundled dynamite. With the sticks swinging in their wire support, he scrambled out, gesturing to Endicott to look at it. Kerry's voice kept clipping:

"Attention! That momentary silence did not mean the end of Keyhole Kerry, ladies and gentlemen, although the police commissioner, Gerard Shepard, my secretary, a technician and I were within a hair of being blown to Kingdom Come by dynamite planted under my car—by Gerard Shepard. He's right here now, cornered."

He held on to Shepard and rasped: "You put Barrazo's dynamite back on Wallace's motor. You had a chance, while he was in the house, telephoning the police and urging his wife to fly with him, to improvise another infernal machine out of the dynamite left in the broken chest.

"No one knocked you down and carried Lucia Wallace's body away while you were unconscious—you did it yourself. You're the one who faked that telephone

call to me in a falsetto voice. You sent the warning notes to divert suspicion from yourself—but you meant the one you sent me."

Shepard wailed: "Don't—don't! I tried—I tried to keep Lucia from going with him. I pleaded with her, begged her, but they wouldn't listen. I had no intention of killing my own sister, but then it was too late. I hoped it wouldn't go off, but it did—it did!"

He realized then what he was saying, that Kerry's microphone was catching every word. "No—"

"No use!" Kerry shot at him.

Shepard moaned: "Trent was hopping off for Colorado to a mine. I had sold old stock in it—worthless. He suspected I'd tricked him and thousands of others. Then my income tax was being investigated, a demand for thousands more from the government. I didn't have the money. I was crazy. I guess—but I saw the chance!"

Kerry's face was flushed with a fever of triumph. "Mr. and Mrs. United States. You've just heard a murderer's confession. Commissioner of Police Endicott is taking charge of the prisoner. This is Keyhole Kerry, signing off—not his last broadcast after all, but beating the world by cracking the Wallace murder case."

THE END

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AND READ THE**

Complete Book-Length Novel

SLAY, MAESTRO, SLAY!

By Robert Turner



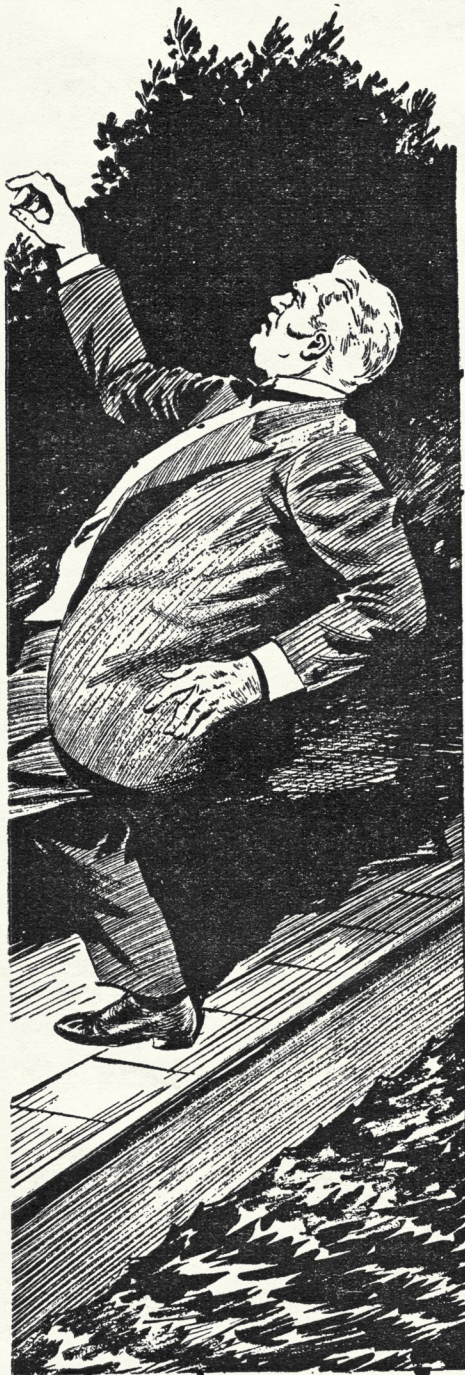
*Playing his bluest for the man-destroying siren
was trumpeter Hayes . . .*

*because when he stepped off that dais—
he was going to blow out her brains.*

Ernie Hayes caught
Warnickie neatly. . . .



SLAY, MAESTRO, SLAY!



Complete Book-Length Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Dirge for Theo

THIS is no way to write a story, they tell me. You should begin at the beginning. All that sort of thing. Otherwise it doesn't have form, they say. It doesn't come out all put together neat and trim, nice and pretty. Well, that's tough. There's nothing nice and pretty in this story. And whose story is it, anyhow?

So it ended at this little jump joint called The Blue Domino, on Highway 22, just outside of Steel City. Jump joint. That's polite terminology for a crummy little creephole where all the playful little steel mill boys go on Saturday nights when they want to break laws or maybe just a few heads. It was a fitting place for this to happen. It was made to order, made for murder.

Outside they had a flickering blue neon sign that said:

*THE BLUE DOMINO—WINE, DINE,
DANCE—FEATURING FAMOUS ERNIE
HAYES, HIS TRUMPET AND
HIS BAND!*

You get that? Ernie Hayes, a star, a drawing card, with his name in lights. The same name that had been in lights

By ROBERT TURNER

man-high on the marquees of the biggest stage show theatres on Broadway and the swank night spots of the nation, the plushy, velvet-rope places.

The kick was that the Domino was a little too late featuring this Ernie Hayes. About ten years too late. Not many people remembered him. But what the hell, said Tony Sarno, who owned The Blue Domino. Those who do will stop off and come in and spend money and pay for the sign.

Or maybe it was Ernie Hayes, himself, who put it that way, because he wanted his name out there. He wanted somebody to see it and remember it and come into the place. He wanted Theo Patrick to do that so that she could see what she'd done to him, so that he could kill her and she would know why he was killing her.

This Ernie Hayes was a bum now. I don't mean just a lush, though he was that, too. I mean he was way down deep in froggy bottom where the muck holds you like glue and its almost impossible to rise out of it.

Those who came in expecting to see the old Ernie Hayes went out of there a little sick and making *tch-tch* noises and saying how could that happen to a guy, it shows what liquor will do to you.

Well, this is how it could happen. And the liquor didn't do it. The liquor was an effect, not a cause.

The steel mill patrons of the Blue Domino hadn't known Ernie when he was Mr. Trumpet, a member of the royal family of hot horn players. To them he was a sodden buffoon who sometimes tried to get up out of a seat to take a solo out front but couldn't quite make it because his legs wouldn't hold him.

But he never let that stop him. Even when he was too swacked to stand, he'd give the patrons a foolish grin and go ahead and blat it out from a sitting position.

This night that the whole thing ended,

though, the night Theo Patrick was killed, the people in The Blue Domino got a break. They listened to the most sensational trumpet solo that had ever been played before or since.

For Theo Patrick, it was, but the customers didn't know that, of course. A dirge for Theo. And a swan song for Ernie Hayes.

The Blue Domino was a long, low-ceilinged room, with a hankie-sized dance floor in back near the band dais. There were booths all around the edge of the room. The lighting was as dim as you could make it and still have the waiters glide around without bumping into each other.

Smoke hung in the place like ground fog. There was always the comingled smells of cheap powder and perfume, stale beer and rotgut whiskey. Threaded through it was the pungent shoe-polish stench of marijuana. The Domino's food was revolting but nobody ever complained. People didn't go there to eat.

Ernie Hayes had been working here for nearly a year and a half. It was the end of the line for him in every way. The four other musicians who composed his band, were aged, broken-down, had never been more than third rate in their palmier days. But they managed to get by, making a lot of noise, keeping some semblance of time. That was all the customers of The Blue Domino expected in the way of music, anyhow.

It had been so long since Ernie Hayes had been paid, he'd forgotten what it was like. Not that Tony Sarno, the owner of the place, was a chiseler. It was just that he was a practical sort of guy. The first few weeks that Ernie Hayes worked there and had to go to Tony for an advance on his salary in the middle of the week, Tony gave it to him all right. But then he said:

"Look, maestro!" That was Sarno's brand of humor. "Let's make a little deal.

You've got a thirst, man. You've got a capacity. If I raise your salary, you'll still be back here next Wednesday looking for an advance. Why don't we do it this way? I don't give you any cash because you won't need any. You get all the liquor you want.

"You'll eat here and I'll fix up the storeroom behind the kitchen and you can sleep there. Every once in awhile when your clothes get too crummy, I'll stand you for a suit. Why don't we do it like that?"

Ernie Hayes didn't like it, but it finally didn't seem such a bad deal. He was a man of few needs by this time and Sarno was taking care of them all. What more did he want—until Theo Patrick came along?

But sometimes in the mornings while Ernie Hayes was working up strength to reach for the bottle that was always beside his cot in that back room, there would be a few moments of realization. Then, when he knew what he had become, it was like somebody sticking a knife into him, until he could get to that bottle. And then those moments were over and he drifted back into the anaesthetic of drunken fog through which he'd been existing the past few years. . . .

IT WAS after midnight the night that Theo Patrick finally came to the Blue Domino.

The first he knew was when Big Ambrose, the waiter, came up to the band dais between numbers. Big Ambrose's lobster-red scrambled features gathered themselves into a grin.

"Ernie," he said, "a lady—and I mean a lady, wit' plenty a class—said to give you this." He held a slip of paper scissored between his dirty, sausage-sized fingers.

The alcoholic fog around Ernie Hayes stirred like the first touch of breeze hitting the morning mists. He stood star-

ing stupidly down at the little slip of folded paper, just looking at it. "A lady?" he repeated, dully. "Where, Ambrose?"

The waiter jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Back there inna boot'. Right han' side, third from the back."

Ernie Hayes stared in that direction. He could see somebody sitting there but couldn't distinguish any details of her appearance. The lighting was too dim, the smoke too thick. Slowly he opened the slip of paper. On it, in fine, graceful feminine script was written three names:

*Gimpy Fowkes—
Walter Warnickie—
Piggy Malone.*

There was nothing else.

The letters blurred and twisted and began to dance before Ernie Hayes' bleared gaze. They seemed to form slowly into miniature figures of the three dead men who had owned those names. Ernie Hayes felt himself shake all over, violently, like a man going through shock.

Ernie let the slip of paper fall back from his numbed fingers. He looked back toward the booth again.

A cigarette lighter flared back there. A face bent over it, putting a cigarette to the flame. Great luminous dark eyes stared over the leaping flame toward Ernie.

Ernie heard himself saying, softly: "Theo! Theo!" The whole room turned upside down, twice, quickly.

Big Ambrose was holding hard to his arm, saying: "Hey, Ernie, what is it? You sick? You look like you're maybe gonna conk off or somethin'. You all right, Ernie?"

He looked at Big Ambrose and the waiter looked different. He looked around him and everybody, everything looked different. Before, everything had always seemed distorted, wavering, as though he was looking through flawed glass. Now, everything was crystal clear. The fog of

alcoholism no longer swirled around him. Ernie realized for the first time in years he was thoroughly sober. He felt weak and his head seemed to be floating loosely on his shoulders, the way you feel when you pass the crisis after a long illness. He managed a thin smile.

"I—I'm all right, now Ambrose," he said. "Just for a moment there I had a dizzy spell. That's all. I'm all right now."

Big Ambrose's small eyes peered at him anxiously. "You sure, Ernie? You still look kinda funny. What'll I tell the lady?"

"Tell her—I'll see her in a little while."

He turned to the other men in the band, said: "I'll be back in a minute. Bang out something without me until I get back."

He stepped down off the dais. He didn't look back toward the booth where Theo Patrick sat again. He turned toward the door that led through the kitchen and to his room. Just before he reached the door, somebody stepped out of some shadows in front of him, blocking his way. He looked up into the sleek and fleshily handsome face of Tony Sarno.

Tony was bigger than Ernie Hayes. Once he had fought in the light-heavy-weight division, but he had been too wary of getting his neat set of features messed up to be much good. Since then, the lean fighter's build had blubbered-up, moved Tony Sarno over into the heavyweight class. But he still looked good in a tux. He slowly, caressingly, polished the nails of his right hand on the satin lapel of the tux, smiled his toothsome, slightly patronizing smile.

"What's the matter, kid?" Sarno asked. His dark, deep-set eyes held Ernie's. "Where you going?"

"Nothing, Tony," Ernie said. "I just want to go back to my room and get something. I'll be right back. And listen, Tony. I'm going to play something you'll like tonight. I'm going to knock your

customers on their ears. You'll see. Your joint'll be the talk of the county after they hear this."

"Swell," Sarno said softly. He stepped aside and patted Ernie's stooped shoulders. "Fine, kid. You do that."

Ernie Hayes passed into the kitchen, holding his breath against the smell of garlic and stale cabbage and too much grease. He glanced at the scowling, unhappy face of Ching, the chef and went on into his own room.

Now he let his eyes move about the room, really seeing it for the first time. It was like a pig pen. He went over, opened the small window that had not been raised in months. Clean, spring night air poured in at him. He breathed deeply of it.

For the first time in a long while, he stepped over to the dresser, looked at himself in the fly-specked mirror. He saw an emaciated shell of a man, almost corpse-gaunt from living on alcohol. This creature was wearing what been a midnight-blue suit—before it had been slept in for weeks at a time. There was a black bow tie against a crumpled, soiled soft collar.

"Go out there and let Theo look," Ernie Hayes told the reflection.

"And then do what you've got to do."



He dragged his gaze away from the glass. He yanked open a dresser drawer, fumbled through a pile of dirty linen until he found an oiled paper packet. He unwrapped the oiled paper and removed a shiny, nickel-plated .38 revolver. He broke it open, saw that each chamber of the cylinder was loaded and then dropped the gun into the side pocket of his jacket. Then Ernie Hayes snapped off the light and left the room.

Still he didn't go back to Theo Patrick's

booth, nor look in that direction. He knew she would still be there. She hadn't come here only to leave without talking to him. He wasn't worried about her waiting. Theo was a patient woman, he knew. Patient as a sleek, sleepy-eyed cat at a mousehole.

CHAPTER TWO

One-Way Ride

BACK up on the band dais, Ernie Hayes picked up the battered second-hand trumpet he'd been using. He ran his long, sensitive fingers around the dull, scarred inside of the bell. He remembered the twenty-five-hundred dollar silver horn he'd once had and he wished he had it here right now again, just for this number.

The band finished up their jump number and Ernie Hayes turned to it. He said: "I want to do something a little special. *I Can't Get Started With You*. We've never done that, but you guys know it." They nodded, puzzled by the new firmness in his voice. He went on:

"I'm going to do this up front. Wicky, you introduce with the piano, slow and smoky but loud as you can bang it, then fade. The rest of the guys will come in and back me as I open up. And listen. I want it Dixieland, y'know? You won't be able to really do it but fake it your damndest. Really crawl under it. Do that for me, will you?"

He turned away from them. As Wicky slammed into his piano, Ernie Hayes walked to the front edge of the band dais and stood there, the soles of his scuffed shoes sticking out over the edge, balancing himself, teetering on his in-steps. He ran his tongue over his lips. He put the horn to his mouth and tongued the mouthpiece for a second and rippled his fingers over the valves, loosening them.

The rest of the outfit faded. It was time

for him to come in, to prove himself.

At first nobody was paying any attention, and the first few notes there was no reason for them to. It was just a horn blowing out some slow blues. But then the notes began to slide together and pick up power. At the same time, they got clear and sweet.

As the achinglly bittersweet notes poured out, the half-dozen couples on the dance floor moved over to cluster in front of the dais and stare up in awe at Ernie Hayes.

Even Ching, the chef, came out of the kitchen with a meat cleaver still in his hand. His scowl had lifted and his almond eyes took on a far-away look.

It was that kind of music that came up from the bottom of Ernie Hayes' feet and ran through the thin ruin of his body. There wasn't anybody in the place who wasn't touched by it. The sad, hurting sweetness of that melody fell over them all like a velvet mist.

Then it was over. Ernie Hayes took the mouthpiece from his lips. He sleeved the sheen of sweat from his face.

There was no applause. They kept standing there in front of the dais and there wasn't a sound in the place. That silence told Ernie Hayes what they thought about his performance, how badly they wanted another touch of the same.

He looked out at them all a little sadly, feeling a quick rush of affection for these people of The Blue Domino who had shared this experience with him.

"Sorry, folks," he said gently. "Not right now. Maybe later." But he knew there wouldn't be any more later. There wouldn't be any later.

As Ernie Hayes stepped down from the stand, the noises of The Blue Domino picked up again, but a little subdued. He moved through an aisle of tables back toward that booth where the cigarette lighter had flared.

He had his hand in his jacket pocket

and the butt of the .38 was cold and hard against his palm. The inside of his mouth began to shrivel and dry, and draw up so that his teeth got on edge.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for a long time. He was going to stand there and let Theo look at him, watching the effect it had on her. Then he was going to remind her why he was this way. He would take the .38 from his pocket and make sure that she saw it.

He would listen to her scream or maybe beg him not to do it or curse him—it didn't matter which. Any of it would be music to his ears. Then he would pull the trigger. He would keep pulling the trigger until it clicked on an empty chamber. The hell with what happened to him after that.

But Ernie Haynes had forgotten something. He'd forgotten what it did to him to look at Theo Patrick. Looking at Theo Patrick now, he felt the flesh along his spine begin to prickle.

Whoever coined the word stacked to describe a female figure was thinking of Theo. She wore a solid black gown of some kind, with a slashing V neckline. Her hair was black as artist's ink. Against the darkness of the booth all that blackness blended.

All Ernie Hayes could see was the pale white oval of her lovely face, the curving white roundness of her shoulders and upper arms. The dark pupils of her slightly slanting eyes stared up at him with an hypnotic, almost mystic intensity.

The things Ernie Hayes had planned to say suddenly jammed in his throat and ached there. He just stood there looking down at her. She was the one to break the silence, saying:

“HELLO, Ernie. I'm surprised at you. Take your hand out of that pocket. Take it away from that gun. You're not going to shoot me, Ernie. Why would you want to do that?”

He sucked in his breath. His hand pulled away from the gun and out of his pocket as though the nickel plate of the .38 had suddenly become cherry-red-hot. He didn't ask her how she knew about the gun, how she knew what he had on his mind. She would have only laughed at him and looked mysterious.

“You're wrong,” he said finally. “I am going to shoot you. And you know why. But you win for the moment. I'll wait a little while.”

“Sit down, Ernie and have a drink with me. You're upset. You're sick. I'd like to help you.”

He slid onto the booth bench opposite her, feeling ashamed of himself. He'd forgotten all about this. He'd forgotten what Theo could do to him. She flicked the lighter afire again, touched it to the tip of her cigarette. She didn't snap the flame right out but held it there by her face. Her enormous dark eyes, with each long, curled lash standing out separately around them, watched him with sleepy, half-bored interest.

“Do I look the same, Ernie?” she wanted to know. “Have I changed any?”

He figured it out rapidly in his mind. It was twenty years ago that he met Theo. She was about fifteen, then. That would make her thirty-five now. A year or two younger than himself. The difference was that she looked ten years younger than that—and he looked that much older.

She had kept all the good of youth, the bloom and the freshness, and added all the good of maturing years, the poise and sophistication. That was Theo Patrick. She somehow got only the good out of everything. Even the evil things like murder, Theo could twist around until *she* got something good out of them.

“No,” Ernie said finally, perversely, “you don't look the same. You *have* changed a lot.”

She cocked her head and pouted prettily.

"How, Ernie?"

"You weren't wearing any five-hundred-dollar black evening gown when I first saw you, Theo. You were wearing dirty dungarees and a plaid flannel shirt that had belonged to old man Snead. Your hair was matted and there were cockle burrs caught in it. Cinders were all stuck to the sweat on your face after riding a Missouri-Southern boxcar that hot summer day. You were only fifteen but you were already a tough road kid and you could swear like a switchman. You—"

She reached out and put the tip of her forefinger against his lips, gently silencing him. She must have touched the tips of her fingers with perfume because he could smell a tantalizing, delicate fragrance for that second.

"Hush, Ernie," she said. "That's your trouble. You're living in the past. You're always living in the past. I didn't mean changed since those days. I meant since the last time you saw me—that night in Baltimore, after the Preakness, at the Turf And Saddle Club. You were playing there, remember?"

"Yeah," he said. *Don't live in the past, she'd said. Forget about the past.* And then she stung him with another reminder.

"Yes," he said. "I remember. Baltimore. Piggy Malone. Your husband, Theo. Are you still Mrs. Malone, the poor, dear Widow Malone? You're still wearing black, Theo."

She smiled. The pale white face framed by the black flowing hair should have given that smile a Mona Lisa effect. But not with her eyes.

"Not for him, Ernie," she said dreamily. "I like black. It looks well on me, don't you think so?"

He thought so. He could hardly get his breath while looking at her. But something inside of him was yelling: *Why did I wait? I should have done it right away, without looking at her too long, without*

listening to her talk! Now maybe it's too late!

His voice was too deep and scratchy as he said: "What do you want, Theo? Why'd you come here? How did you ever find me in this out-of-the-way hell hole?" As if he hadn't been waiting for her to come here for a year and a half.

"One of Jan's friends was in Steel City on business. Some local people brought him out here," she said. "He happened to be a Dixieland jazz hound and he remembered you from years ago, Ernie. He was telling us what a sad thing that—"

"Jan?" he cut in on her. "Who's Jan?"

She laughed, a small melodious, polite sound from deep in her graceful white throat. "I forgot to tell you, Ernie. I married again after Piggy's—death. Jan's my husband. Jan Krantz. I—I've gotten to hate him. That's why I came here tonight. I need you. I want to tell you my troubles, Ernie." She looked away from him, let her dark, lazy eyes scan The Blue Domino. "Can we talk here?"

"No," he said harshly. His glance followed hers automatically. He saw Tony Sarno standing over near the door that led to the bar. He was leaning against the wall watching them. Then he turned and disappeared into the barroom.

"No," Ernie Hayes said. "We can't talk here nor anywhere. Not anywhere, you understand?" His voice was rising, beginning to break, to sound above the other noises of the Blue Domino.

But he didn't care. His heart was ramming at his ribs like a pile driver. He felt scared, trapped, here in this small booth with her.

She didn't flinch. She kept on smiling at him, said: "Don't make a scene, Ernie, please. Listen, I've got a car outside, a convertible, with the top down. The ride, the fresh air will do you good, Ernie. If you don't want to, we won't even talk. It will help me just to be alone with

you for a little while, and to think what might have been for both of us, Ernie."

He began to laugh, a soundless thing, with shoulders shaking idiotically. He cut the laugh off as suddenly as it had come on him. In his pocket, his fingers caressed the shiny .38. He thought:

Maybe in the car on a lonely road somewhere will be better. I could even run away afterward in the car. I might get by with it. With her gone, maybe I'll be all right again. Maybe I can start a new life.

"Sure," he said and eased out of the booth. "Let's take that ride, Theo."

CHAPTER THREE

Back-Seat Slayer

THEY weren't able to leave right away. Out at the bar, Tony Sarno was standing. The soft barroom lights made him look big and sleek and handsome. He said: "Taking time out for a little fresh air, maestro?"

"Yeah." Ernie Hayes plucked nervously at Theo's arm, kept on going. But Sarno's warm, silky voice was like a gentle hand on his shoulder, pulling him back as it said:

"First, let me buy a drink for you and the lady, maestro."

"No," Ernie told him. "Thanks, no. 'We—"

Theo broke in: "Don't be an ingrate, Ernie. You look like you *need* a drink. I know I do." She pulled away from him and moved toward Sarno.

Ernie Hayes watched her, the fluid, tigerish movement of her walk. She had ankles you could put your fingers around and the legs to go with them. Poems in motion, they were.

His mouth was suddenly on fire with thirst and she was right. He *did* need that drink. He walked over to the bar where Tony Sarno and Theo were stand-

ing, just in time to hear Sarno say: "—Don't be silly. It isn't often The Blue Domino gets customers like you, Mrs. Krantz. You've really dressed the place up tonight." Sarno's eyes were on Theo's while he talked. Then he turned and smiled at Ernie Hayes and excused himself and walked away.

The drink turned into three for Ernie as Theo sipped hers. They warmed him, and he felt more certain that he was going to go through with this thing, now. He was glad that he hadn't been a damned fool and done it right here at the roadhouse. Out in the car would be better.

It was a long, shiny, canary-colored thing, glittering faintly under the stars in the parking lot. Theo looked like she belonged in it—five thousand dollars worth of convertible with a million dollars worth of woman behind the wheel.

She tooled it effortlessly out onto the highway. She pushed a dash button and two cigarettes, lighted, ready to smoke, rolled out onto a little grooved tray. She took one and handed the other to Ernie Hayes. He pulled deeply on it, the Turkish tobacco sharp against his throat and thought how the only times he'd ever smoked was when he was with Theo.

"Tony Sarno called you by your married name," he said suddenly. "Do you know him?"

"No." She shrugged, her rounded white shoulders gleaming creamily in the moonlight. "He's probably seen my picture in the society pages. And Jan and I appeared in a full-page photo in one of the big picture magazines recently, in connection with an industrial story about his plant . . . His name is Sarno, that man?"

"Yes."

"He's quite handsome, isn't he?" She laughed. "In a brutish sort of way."

Ernie grunted. *There would be a combo*, he thought, *Theo and Tony Sarno*. He wondered how long Tony would last. He turned and looked at Theo. Wind

whipping over the top of the windshield was blowing her shoulder-length black hair out behind her. It had touched faint pink to her ivory cheeks. The glow from the dashlight gleamed on her nyloned legs. He gripped the cold butt of the .38 in his pocket until his fingers and the back of his hand ached.

Abruptly, he blurted, forcing himself to say it: "Jan Krantz, your husband, Theo—he's very rich?" It was a silly question, he knew the answer, but he had to start somewhere.

"Yes, darling." She didn't take her eyes from the headlight-penciled whiteness of Route 22, unreeling ahead of the car. "Filthy rich. You know I don't marry poor men. Of course, Ernie, maybe if you'd change your mind, finally, I might make an exception. You know that, don't you? Maybe, this time, afterward, you'll forget a lot of those silly notions of yours."

"Afterward?" A vein began to throb in his temple. "After what, Theo?"

She didn't answer. She eased up on the accelerator. "There ought to be a side road along here somewhere where we can park," she said.

They drove along in silence. Up ahead, the headlights picked out a turn-off into a dirt side road. As Theo braked and swung the car into it, Ernie Hayes said softly:

"When did you decide to kill him, Theo? When did you decide to get rid of this one?"

The convertible bumped along the road for a few hundred yards, stopped. Theo cut the headlamps and the ignition. The dash light stayed on. All around them was the thick silence of the country night, broken only by the chirping of crickets. Theo slid down, let her head rest back against the seat, looked up at the star-drenched sky.

Ernie Hayes got the full benefit of her profile. He watched a pulse beat calmly

in the soft curve of her throat. She whispered:

"As soon as I learned where you were, Ernie Hayes, that you were still alive."

"You made a mistake," he told her. "I'm not alive any more. Not really. I haven't been for a long time. You can see what I look like."

"That's nothing. I'll straighten you out. A Turkish bath, a couple of weeks of good wholesome food and no liquor. Lots of sleep and some new clothes. You'll be all right. You'll be my same wonderful, handsome Ernie once again."

He got a little light-headed. Her words came through a slight buzzing in his ear as though a whirring insect had lodged there. He watched her turn toward him. The roseate glow from the dash light made a lovely shadow picture of her face. But it did something to Theo's eyes, too. He saw now, that she *had* changed over the years.

Her eyes had changed. The way the dim light struck them now, they looked empty. It was like looking through pretty dark-brown bottle glass—but there was nothing behind those eyes. It told him that Theo Patrick had no conscience, no soul or whatever you want to call it that keeps people from being wholly, completely evil. She was flesh and blood and brain—but nothing else.

That was the answer to everything—why and how she could do all the things she had done. Why his love for her had been a hell and a torture. It was the answer, too, to why he was going to have to kill her, why he was going to be able to do that now.

HE SLID away from her on the red leather upholstery. He took the .38 from his pocket. Pointing it at her, he didn't say anything.

Theo looked at the revolver. There was a hint of amusement in her voice as she said: "Ernie, put that gun away. You're

not going to kill me. You know that."

"Look, Theo," Ernie Hayes said. The buzzing in his ears had grown louder. It was drowning out the sound of his own words so that he couldn't hear them; he could just feel the vibration of them. "You came to me tonight because you're going to kill your husband. You want me to help you. Like the other times.

"You're doing that because ever since the first time you murdered, when you were just a kid, when you killed Gimpy Fowkes, you've been superstitious about me. When I help you with your murders, nothing can go wrong, you think."

Her eyes slowly raised from the .38 in his fist to his face. Something she saw there sent dark shadows of fright suddenly flickering across her perfect features.

"Wait a minute, Ernie," she breathed. "Have you gone crazy? Put that gun away and let me explain, Ernie!"

"No," he said. "Each time before, I've let you talk me into it. I'll do that tonight, too, if I wait too long. That's why I have to kill you, Theo, to stop you from dragging me into your crime this time, too. How long did you think you could keep it up, Theo, marrying rich husbands and then killing them off so cleverly nobody even suspected murder? It had to end sometime. You must have known that. This is it. This is where it ends."

She edged as far back away from him on the seat as she could. The fear was naked on her face now, making an ugly mask of it. She talked fast and as she talked, she fumbled open her purse.

"No, no, Ernie," she said. "It's different, this time. You—you don't have to do anything. It's already done. I killed Jan tonight, before I came to you. This time I wasn't so clever, Ernie. I killed him in a fit of anger and it's impossible to cover it up. But they won't find him for another forty-eight hours. By that time we'll be in a little republic in South

America. I want you to go with me, though, Ernie. You're the only one I want. Look, Ernie!"

She pulled a fat roll of bills from the purse and unwrapped them. Her trembling fingers riffled through them. There were a lot of thousand-dollar bills, dozens of them, and there were hundreds, too, and some fifties and twenties.

"This—this was cash he had in a wall safe, Ernie. Nearly fifty thousand! Down there, with the high rate of exchange, it'll last us a long, long time. We'll live like royalty. You—you're still lucky for me, Ernie, darling," she said.

He stared down at the fat wad of bills. The things she'd said chased through his mind. They played there. The .38 began to droop in his fingers. But then the dying faces of Gimpy Fowkes and Walter Warnickie and Piggy Malone flashed before his eyes.

And he knew it was no good. Even if she didn't eventually do the same thing to him, it still wouldn't be any good. Because *his* eyes weren't empty. He had that inner something that Theo lacked and it would never give him peace.

"No, Theo," he said. He started to squeeze the trigger, his eyes on hers, her brown, shining, beautiful empty eyes.

The .38 didn't go off. Ernie Hayes' fingers never did finish squeezing that trigger. There was suddenly an explosion of pain at his temple. He half-turned toward the back of the seat. A man was standing up in the small space behind the front seat of the convertible.

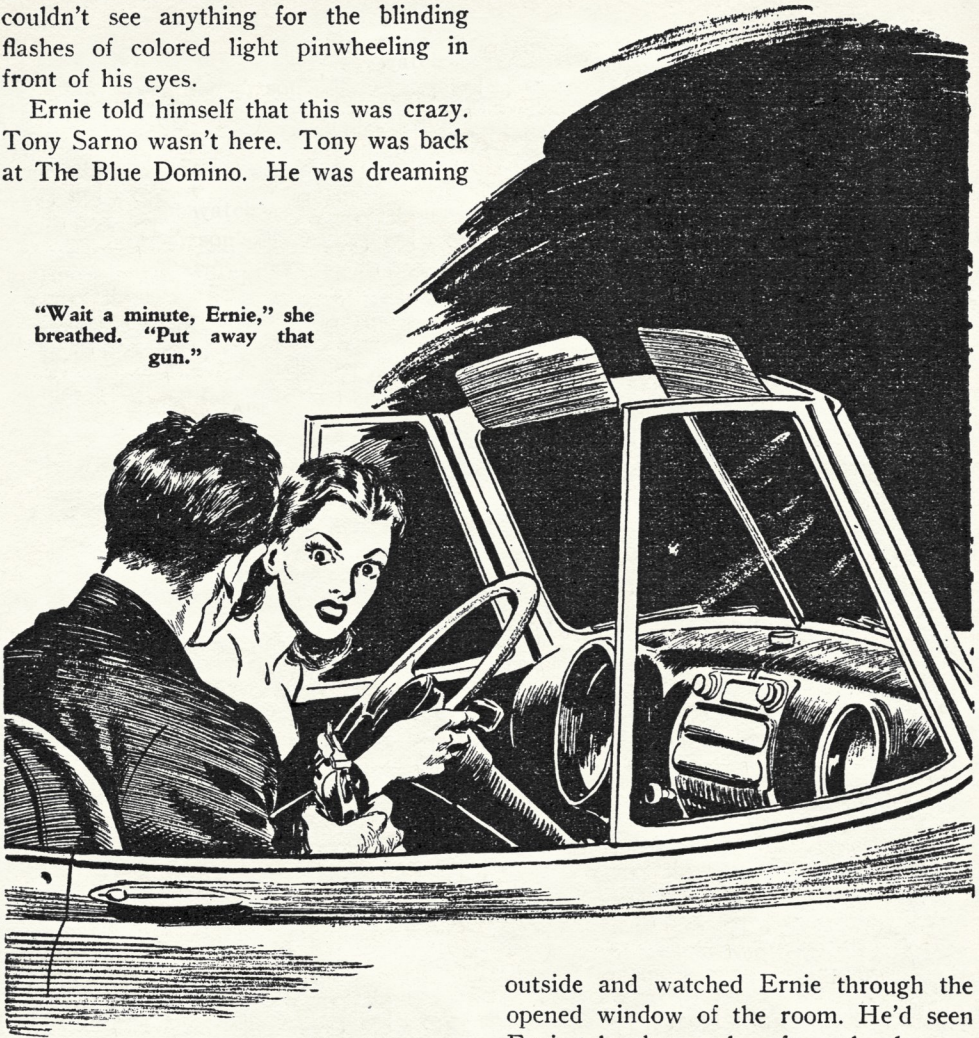
He was a big man in an impeccable tuxedo. Ernie saw Tony Sarno's big clenched fist driving at him again. He tried to duck but didn't quite make it. The fist glanced off the side of his cheekbone, and Fourth of July fireworks rocketed in front of Ernie's eyes.

He felt the .38 being yanked from his limp fingers. He tried to look back there where the punch had come from, but he

couldn't see anything for the blinding flashes of colored light pinwheeling in front of his eyes.

Ernie told himself that this was crazy. Tony Sarno wasn't here. Tony was back at The Blue Domino. He was dreaming

"Wait a minute, Ernie," she breathed. "Put away that gun."



this. He must be back in his room behind the kitchen at the Domino and Sarno was trying to awaken him. Sarno was slapping him with a wet towel.

This time the heavy steel of the butt of the .38 hit him—and Ernie Hayes knew that it wasn't any wet towel. He knew that he wasn't dreaming. The savage electrical jolts of pain that flashed from his head all through him, told him that.

And he realized what had happened. When Sarno had seen him go back to his room, he'd become curious. He'd run

outside and watched Ernie through the opened window of the room. He'd seen Ernie take the revolver from the drawer. He'd watched him talking with Theo and knew that something was cooking. Sarno had stalled them with a free drink while he'd gone out and secreted himself in the back of the car where he could eavesdrop.

It had been a smart play for Tony Sarno. Smart to the tune of fifty thousand dollars, and maybe with Theo thrown in for a bonus.

The rockets and flashing lights dimmed one by one. The pain struck at Ernie Hayes' head again but this time it was dulled. Then all the lights were out and there was no pain at all. Only thick,

smothering blackness, blacker than Theo's hair and the gowns she wore . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Jungle Jitters

IF THE newsreels can do it, so can I. Time marches backward. Way back. Twenty years. To when Ernie Hayes was not quite seventeen and he ran away from St. Stanislaus. That's an orphanage in the midwest and the state doesn't matter. What matters is that they taught Ernie Hayes to play a cornet there, and they let him blow it in the orphanage band, at assemblies and at football games. They never knew what Ernie was going to do with that horn once he'd mastered it. Sometimes, something in the staid school band pieces would hit him a certain way and he'd have to break away from the rest of the band and let that cornet take off on its own.

The first time this happened was during a summer band concert at St. Stanislaus. They were rendering a dull version of a spiritual. After the first few bars, Ernie Hayes stopped playing. He stopped looking at the music on the stand in front of him. He stopped listening to the music the others were playing.

He listened to the music that was building up inside of him. It was the same melody but treated differently. At the first opportunity, at the first break, he stood up and blew on the cheap cornet all this strange, jaunty but somehow still sad and haunting music inside of him.

At first the rest of the band and everybody else was too stunned to do anything about it. Then they didn't want to. All they wanted to do was to listen. None of them had ever heard anything like it before.

When he finished, the applause from the crowd of orphanage kids was thunderous. Brother Leo, who was in charge

of the band, held up a hand to silence the crowd, then stepped toward Ernie Hayes.

"What kind of music was that, Ernie?" he said, his mouth stern but his soft brown eyes sparkling. "What do you call it? Where did you learn it?"

Now that it was over, Ernie Hayes was a little scared. "I—I don't know," he blurted. "I didn't learn it anywhere. It just—well—I just sort of felt like I had to play like that and I did. I—I'm sorry." He wasn't though, really. Underneath the surface fright, he felt a strange exultation.

"Well, now," Brother Leo said. "Can you do it again? With some other song, perhaps?"

"Sure," Ernie said quickly. He didn't know why, but he was certain that he could. He could play that kind of music all day if they'd let him.

The bandmaster turned to the crowd and asked them if they'd like to hear Ernie Hayes play another cornet solo. They whooped their response and then let it fade out into expectant silence as they watched Ernie put the mouthpiece of his instrument against his lips.

He held them entranced for a half hour or more, running from one song into another, sometimes slow and sad things, sometimes fast and bouncy, but always with that strange surge and swing to the music, a certain throb, an extra value.

When Ernie Hayes finally stopped to rest, Brother Leo said: "Ummph! That—uh—that was fine, Ernest. Very entertaining, if a trifle exuberant. But for the rest of the concert, please stick to the sheet music in front of you."

After that, no concert at St. Stanislaus was complete without a solo session of Ernie Hayes' special music. Between concerts you could often hear the jouncy sound of that cornet floating over the grim brick buildings as he played for small groups of the boys.

Once, when he was playing like that, a handyman came over to him and listened and said: "Where you learn to play that stuff, boy?"

"Nowhere," he said, curious. "I—well—I just know it."

Then the handyman showed Ernie how he should hold certain notes a little longer and cut some off more sharply and blend others in together. And Ernie began to think about leaving St. Stanislaus. The music inside of him was growing too big for the fenced-in grounds of the orphanage. . . .

You say what's all this got to do with a story of crime and murder and let's get on to this Theo Patrick and what happened after that. Well, this was part of it. Ernie's way with a horn was what brought Theo and Ernie together in the first place.

His horn was part of what kept Ernie from being just another man to Theo, what took him all the way up to the top, the heights, so that she could tear him down.

HE'D been gone from St. Stanislaus a week when he met Theo. The little money he'd taken with him was gone by then. The few extra clothes he'd carried had been stolen.

In that week he'd become an experienced road kid. He'd been booted out of railroad yards. He'd been booked overnight for vagrancy. He'd fought with yards dicks and eaten mission handouts and skipped some meals. He was heading for New Orleans, and there was still a good five hundred miles to go.

The one thing Ernie Hayes held on to, though, was his cornet. He carried it wrapped in old newspaper and he told curious bo's that it was just an extra pair of shoes. He slept nights with his head pillowed on that hunk of brass. And he passed lonely hours in the boxcar playing it.

Late one afternoon, someone swung down over the open door of Ernie's boxcar, hung there by the hands and then swung inside. Because her thick black hair was pushed up under a dirty old cap, he didn't realize at first it was a girl. Then he looked more closely and the cap and the man's shirt and dungarees she wore didn't fool him anymore.

"Go on," she said. "Play some more. That's why I came down here, to listen to you play. I was walking the catwalk up there and I heard you. I wanted to see who was making that music, so I dropped down. What kind of a horn is that?"

He told her. He saw that she was a kid, too, only a little younger than he was. He played some more for her and she hunkered down beside him and stared at him while he played and listened.

Ernie looked at those burning, dark eyes of hers. In spite of the dirt and sweat and dust on her face, he began to think that she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen.

After awhile he became tired of playing and they just sat and talked. He told her who he was, where he'd come from and where he was going. For awhile she wouldn't talk about herself but finally she blurted it out.

"They called it a work farm for wayward girls," she said. "But it was a prison. They had high barbed wire fence all around the place. And some of the matrons carried guns. When you got out of line, when you beefed about the slop they fed you, they'd take a cat-o'-nine-tails to you. It was an awful place, Ernie."

He studied her curiously. Naturally, with the garb she was wearing, she looked tough. She talked rough and there was bitterness and hurt in her voice. But she didn't look bad; she didn't look like a kid who could commit a crime. He said: "Why'd they send you there, Theo?"

She made a snorting noise. "Because

I kept running away from home. Home," she said. "A shack on the edge of the garbage dumps. My old man would come home boiled every night and wreck all the junky furniture. I used to go to sleep every night listening my stepmother's screams. The next day, then, she'd take it out on me. So I'd keep running away and the cops would keep dragging me back. Finally they sent me to that farm."

"And you ran away from there, too?"

"Yeah. And nobody's dragging me back again . . . Play some more music, Ernie."

He played a melancholy blues number that one of the cops in the small-town clink had taught him. When he was almost through, Theo Patrick reached out and gently took the cornet away from his mouth. She took it from his hands, set it down on the floor of the box car. With her dark eyes stormy, she took his face between her hands.

Her lips were warm and firm against his. He sat there stiffly for a moment and just let her kiss him. Then it was as though somebody had poured liquid fire over him. He put his arms around her and pulled her close. Beneath them the wheels of the freight train *click-clacked* in monotonous rhythm. Up ahead the engine screamed shrilly for a crossing. They didn't hear any of that.

For a long time after their lips broke apart, they still sat there, clinging to each other. Finally, Theo whispered huskily: "I'm your girl now, ain't I?"

"Sure," he said, his heart pumping like crazy. "Sure," he said. "Come to New Orleans with me, Theo. I'll get a job there. I'll do all right. And listen. We'll get married. The hell with 'em if they say we're too young. We're not too young. We're both older than our years."

"Yes, Ernie," she whispered. "Oh, yes, yes!"

About fifty miles farther on, the freight came to a long upgrade, slowed and hauled itself laboriously up it. Now, Ernie and

Theo were standing in the opened doorway, watching the landscape flow by, letting the cool evening air wash over them. They passed a big clearing near the right-of-way where a campfire was burning and several men were clustered around it. As they passed, the pungent aroma of mulligan stew wafted to their nostrils.

Ernie made a sniffing noise, grinned at Theo. "Smell that? That made my stomach turn practically inside out. I haven't eaten since morning."

"Mmmm!" Theo said. "That's the first food I've even smelled since last night. I'm hungry, too, Ernie."

"Let's swing off this rattler before it reaches the top of the grade and hit back to that jungle and latch onto some of that grub. Come on." He moved over to her side of the doorway, took her arm.

She stared up at him. "I don't know, Ernie, I—I've been staying away from jungles. You know, all those men—I—"

"Skip it," Ernie told her. He wasn't particularly big but he was wiry and hard and he wasn't afraid of the devil himself. He felt as though he could lick the world for Theo. "I'll take care of you, honey. You don't have to worry. Let's go."

Holding tightly to each other's hands, they leaped from the slow-moving train. They hit the track-side cinders running, and got onto the dirt and scrub grass before they lost their balance and went down, rolling over and over but never releasing their grip on each other's hands. They got to their feet laughing, then turned back in the direction of the jungle campfire.

THERE were three men hunkered down around the fire. They all wore soiled odds and ends of clothing. Beard stubble was heavy on their dirty faces. They looked up out of coldly impassive, red-rimmed eyes as Ernie Hayes and

Theo strode into the clearing, came toward them.

This was in 1930 and the whole country was in a death struggle with a horrible depression. This was the year that a lot of one-time big money men were standing on street corners in the big cities selling apples. Others were moving from one city to another, looking for an opportunity to get started again. Many of them rode the rods.

Ernie Hayes had been hoping that this might be such a group. But he saw right away that they weren't.

These three were long-time vagrants. There was a difference and you got so that you could tell which was which right away. There was no question about this trio. They weren't once respectable men, victims of hard times, forced to travel and live any way that they could. They were out and out bums of the old school.

The short, squat one, stirring the big can of mulligan stewing over the fire, stared at them coldly. He was completely bald and there was a red, jagged, lightning-shaped scar across his forehead. He said: "Scram outa here. We just got enough for ourselves. We ain't runnin' no free feeding station for kids."

One of the other men told the tramp who had spoken: "Lay off 'em, Rocky. They look like nice kids. And one of 'em's a girl. Maybe we can figger some way for 'em to chow-up with us." He was looking at Theo Patrick when he spoke. He hadn't hardly glanced at Ernie Hayes.

He gestured around the camp fire to several loaves of bread, a can of coffee. "We've all contributed to this little feast, girlie. You do your share toward makin' this a pleasant repast for us all and we'll be glad to split some grub with you. Got any suggestions?"

He was a tall, stooped, gaunt-looking man with long arms and great hammy hands. His eyes, deep in their cavernous sockets, had a wild gleam to them.

"Nuts to that, Gimp!" the bum called Rocky whined. "Runaway kids like these are sure trouble. They probably got coppers out lookin' for 'em. Chase 'em out o' here, Gimpy."

Ernie Hayes didn't like the look on the face of the man called Gimpy. He took Theo's hand, started to back away from the fire. "Yeah," he said, tightly. "Maybe—maybe you're right. We—my sister and I—we wouldn't want to cause you 'bos no trouble."

Gimpy took a limping step toward them, held out one of his big hands. "Hold on," he said sharply. "I'm boss of this here jungle. I say you can stay and you stay. Isn't that right, Rocky? There won't be no trouble if we feed these kids. I say there won't be no trouble. What do *you* say now, Rocky?"

He hadn't even looked at the squat man. He hadn't taken his eyes away from Theo. Rocky spat into the fire, said sullenly: "Whatever you say, Gimpy. What the hell do I care?"

"You see." Gimpy smiled at them. Only it wasn't a smile. He just peeled his loose lips back from a row of big dirty-looking horse teeth. "You kids stay. What's a little stew between friends? And your sister's a good-lookin' kid, Sonny. She don't have to contribute nothin' else. Just being able to look at her while we're eatin' will be fine. Ain't that right, boys?"

The third man had a round, weather-beaten face, a constant twitch to one cheek and dull eyes. He made a crazy chuckling sound. "Yeah, man!" he said. "Been a long time since I et with a pretty gal. She sure's pretty, too, ain't she, Gimpy?"

"Yeah," the big man said.

Ernie Hayes started to edge away once more. "We're not really hungry," he said. "Maybe we better not stay. Like you said, cops are looking for us and—"

"We ain't afraid of cops," Gimpy stopped him. "Listen, I said you stay! You

want me and the boys to think you don't appreciate our hospitality, that we ain't good enough for you to eat with? The boys wouldn't like that. You'd better stay."

Ernie looked at the three hardbitten faces ringed around them now. He thought about wheeling Theo around and making a break out of here but he didn't think they'd make it.

Then Theo settled the matter. She smiled at Gimpy. "Don't be a moron. Of course we're staying. Ernie's just over-polite. I'm hungry."

GIMPY seemed appeased for the moment and introduced his comrades. The squat, bald man was Rocky Kosky, the round-faced man was called Dummo Farrel. "And I'm Gimpy Fowkes, king of this little jungle," he finished up.

The mulligan was thick and greasy but nourishing. None of them talked much as they ate. Ernie and Theo squatted with the others next to the fire and sipped the steaming stew from tin cans and soaked it up in hunks of bread. When the stew was finished, Rocky filled the big can with water from a nearby spring and they brewed strong black coffee.

"Where you kids headin'?" Gimpy asked Ernie after awhile.

Ernie told him New Orleans and saw that Gimpy kept eyeing the package of old newspapers in which his cornet was wrapped. Finally, the gaunt, lame man said: "What you got in that package?"

For a moment, Ernie didn't answer. But all through the meal he'd noticed that none of the three hobos could keep their eyes away from Theo. He knew that the brother-sister lie he'd told them wouldn't cut much ice with men of this type. They wouldn't care if Theo was his sister. He suddenly decided to try and keep them amused, to get their minds off of Theo.

"This?" Ernie said, unwrapping the

newspapers and pulling out the cornet. "This here is going to give us all a little after-dinner music." He rubbed the mouth-piece, trilled out a few warm-up notes and then knocked out a slow throbbing blues. The notes rang out true and clear in the still night air. Gimpy Fowkes and the others sat, watching and listening to him, spellbound.

When he'd finished, Gimpy told him: "That was fine, kid. Ain't nothin' like a little music to liven things up. A little music and some liquid refreshment. So happens I got a little of that, too, cached away in the woods. I'll go get it and we'll have a little party." He winked at Theo. "You like parties, beautiful?"

Ernie Hayes rubbed the brass bell of the cornet, fighting down the fear and anger beginning to roil within him. "We—we can't stick around much longer," he said. "We have to hike the tracks into the next town before it gets too late."

"What for? Next town's a burg called Stacey. They don't like 'bos. They'll vag you the minute you cross into the town limits. You stay here with us," Gimpy Fowkes said. "There's a through freight due about midnight. It'll be slowed down by that grade enough for us to board. We'll all hop it together. You go on and toot that horn, kid, while I get the refreshments."

He got up and headed out of the firelit clearing toward the dark border of woods and shrubbery before Ernie Hayes could answer. When Gimpy came back a few minutes later, he was carrying a small case. He set it down near the fire, started ripping open the carton. Dummo and Rocky stood close by, licking their lips.

Gimpy got a can free from the carton, reached for a can opener and got the lid off. "A little somethin' to warm the stomach," he said. "A little canned heat." He looked up at Theo. "It ain't champagne, honey. But a couple of sips of this after we squeeze the alky out through a

rag will put some stars in your eyes.”

Theo laughed stiffly but Ernie Hayes said: “My sister doesn’t drink, Gimp. Neither do I.”

“Well, now, that’s all right,” the lame man told him. “You and the gal can just be the featured entertainers. She can do a little dance or jig or something while you tootle on your golden horn. Me and Dummo and Rocky will sit back and sip our drinks like real gents. That way we’ll pass the time real fast until that midnight freight pulls through.”

Ernie and Theo watched the others empty cans of liquid heat into some old rags and squeeze the alcohol drippings out of them into a tin cup. In no time at all the cup was filled with the raw alcohol. Gimpy Fowkes took the first sip and choked and gagged and wiped tears from his eyes before passing the cup to Dummo.

“That’d curl the hair on the chest of a brass monkey,” he said. He turned to Ernie and with a commanding flourish of his arm, ordered: “Strike up the band, kid. Tell your sister to get her dancing feet on. Let’s get this party moving.”

Ernie and Theo looked at each other. Theo shrugged. She said: “I once knew a gypsy dance. Maybe I can still remember some of the steps. Go ahead and play, Ernie.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Fall Guy

THE next few hours seemed like some kind of a weird nightmare to Ernie Hayes. It didn’t take much of the alcohol from the canned heat to get the hobos drunk. The only one it didn’t seem to bother too much was Gimpy Fowkes. He got loud and noisy and his deeply sunken eyes shone with feverish brightness every time he looked at Theo, but he seemed to hold onto his senses.

While Theo danced, whirling and kicking around the glowing fire, Ernie Hayes played a few gypsy folk dance numbers he’d learned at the orphanage. Every moment, Ernie expected one of the drunken men to make a play for Theo. He knew it had to happen, that it was going to come and he dreaded it.

Gimpy was armed. Several times Ernie had glimpsed the butt of a pistol tucked inside Gimpy’s dirty shirt, under his rope belt. Ernie didn’t think he’d have much chance but maybe he could fight them off long enough for Theo to get away. But every long, dragging minute of that night he felt like a man sitting on a volcano, waiting for it to explode.

As the hours fled by, Dummo and Rocky got falling-down drunk and slowly lost their interest in Theo. At the same time, Gimpy Fowkes stopped drinking from the little tin cup. He watched his two cronies with a patient, cynical grin on his gaunt features.

Finally Rocky fell down and didn’t get up again. He began to snore. Dummo stood over him, swaying, rocking on his heels and tugging at his friend’s clothing, begging him to get up and join the party once more.

After a few minutes of this, the bald, fat tramp sank onto his knees. He put his head on Rocky’s shoulder. Shortly, he too, began to snore.

Gimpy Fowkes laughed. He got up and went over to the two men on the ground. “It took you long enough, you drunken louts!” he said. He bent and roughly yanked Dummo’s huddled figure away from the limp form of Rocky. He kicked the bald-headed man brutally in the ribs. Rocky just grunted and swore thickly but didn’t move or open his eyes.

Then Gimpy Fowkes squatted down and took off one of Rocky’s shoes. He pulled out a small wad of bills, neatly folded, opened them up and counted them. When he was finished, he looked around

at Ernie Hayes and Theo. He said then:

"Nine hundred. That's about right. You see, a few days ago, the three of us broke into a big chain food store. Rocky, here, knew how to blow a safe. We got about three grand and split it between us, but these slobs wouldn't know what to do with all that cash. There ain't no sense in my waitin' for somebody else to roll 'em."

He yent to work on Dummo's limply drunken form next and found another small packet of hundred-dollar bills. He tucked them, along with Rocky's share of the loot, into the small watch pocket of his trousers. He straightened up just as the whistle of a train screamed a few miles away. "Timed neat," he said. "That's our pullman coach comin'. Let's go. Let's hit for that grade. You kids stick with me and when we cross the state line over into Louisiana, the first big burg we hit, it'll be safe for me to break one of these C notes without attracting too much attention. I'll stake you both to a big night in the city."

Gimpy Fowkes was grinning at Theo and trying to look friendly when he said that. Gimpy turned away from them, then, and started toward the railroad right of way. They reached the steepest part of the grade and only had to wait a few minutes before the freight came straining and huffing past them.

"I'll board her first," Gimpy shouted to Ernie over the roar of the wheels. "Then between us, we can help Theo up into the car. Okay, kid? Let's go. There an open door of an empty comin' up."

The empty box car moved slowly past them and they all began to run alongside of it, Gimpy Fowkes limping but moving as fast as the others. He caught the side of the door and swung himself up. He reached down and grabbed hold of Theo's outstretched hand, hauled her up alongside of him.

As soon as she was inside the car,

Gimpy Fowkes caught her full across the face with a backhand blow that sent her sprawling into the darkness of the car behind him. Ernie Hayes yelled and grabbed at the side of the door and tried to pull himself up. He saw the whole thing now. He knew what Gimpy was up to.

Just in time he saw Gimpy Fowkes's heavy shoe slamming toward his face. He ducked, avoided catching the kick full in the mouth. Instead, it glanced off the side of his head. It stunned him and he felt his fingers slipping from the side of the car door.

He fought against the swirling of his senses. It didn't do any good. Consciousness faded for a moment and his fingers lost their grip. He felt the sharp bite of cinders grinding into his face. He heard the thundering of the freight train wheels racketing past his ears. He sobbed for breath and clawed his way to his feet.

The car Gimpy Fowkes and Theo were riding was long past, but in the moonlight he could still see it up ahead, a newly painted boxcar with the insignia of the Missouri-Western bright on its sides. He started once again to run alongside of the long freight, a stitch catching at his breath, like a knife through his lungs, but he kept going.

HE COUNTED the number of cars ahead to that newly painted one and then he reached out and grabbed hold of the rungs of a ladder. It almost wrenched his arms from their sockets, the way the freight was picking up speed now. But he held on. He climbed up onto the roof of the car, lay sprawled on the catwalk, getting his breath.

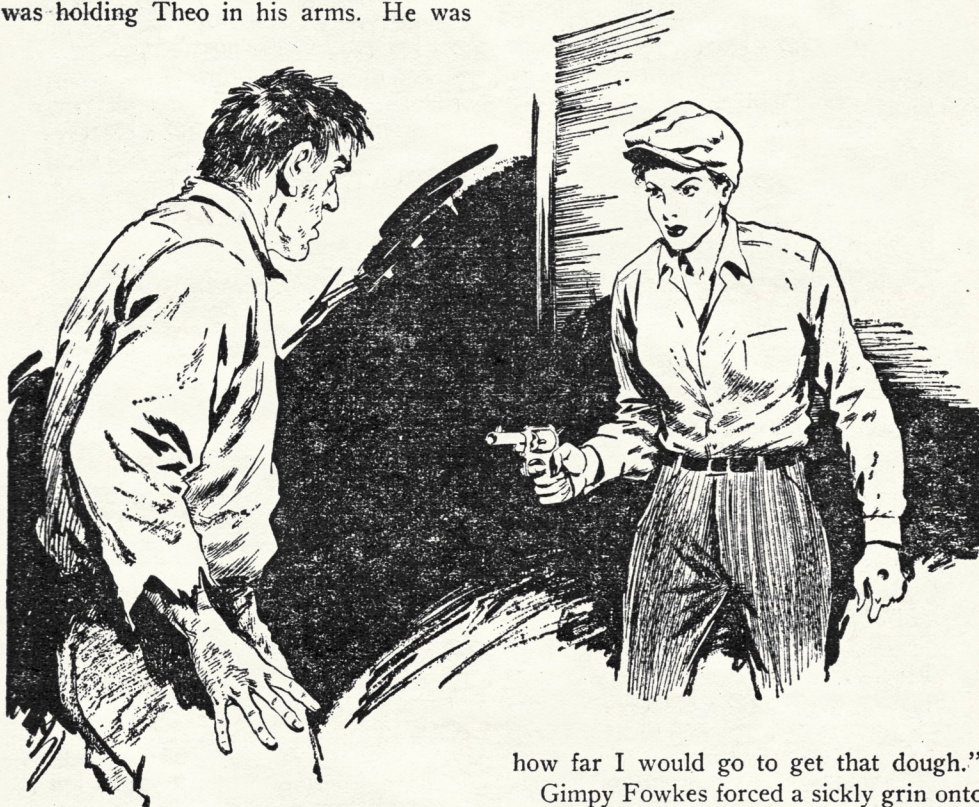
He ran along the catwalk, leaped between cars until he reached the one in which Gimpy and Theo were riding. He flopped over, eased toward the edge. Gripping the edge tight with his fingers, he let his legs slide over the side. He dropped down, hanging in the open door of the box

car, staring inside at Theo and Gimpy.

Moonglow, pouring over the tree tops, lighted the inside of the car. Ernie Hayes saw the scene like a spot-lighted stage act. And it was that unreal to him.

In the center of the car, Gimpy Fowkes was holding Theo in his arms. He was

from your pals and you boot my boyfriend off the train. You had it figured that I wasn't a sister of his, didn't you? You had it figured that money talked with me. But you didn't have it figured just



His lips twitched as he stared at the gun in Theo's hands.

kissing her and she wasn't resisting. But with one hand she was easing the gun from Gimpy's belt. The gaunt man didn't seem to notice—until suddenly Theo yanked the automatic free, wrenched out of his embrace.

She stepped back, in a half crouch, like a lithe jungle animal at bay. Gimpy blinked at her. He put out one of his huge hands. "Hey, wait a minute, kid!" he protested. "What's the idea?"

"You don't know, do you, you walkin' corpse?" Theo spat at him. "You steal

how far I would go to get that dough."

Gimpy Fowkes forced a sickly grin onto his sunken, frightened features. His flabby lips kept twitching as he stared at the gun held steadily in Theo's hand.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I know he wasn't any brother. Not the way you two looked at each other." He made a pitiful attempt to laugh. "Look, kiddo, let's have the heater back. You don't want to fool with that. You're liable to get hurt. Don't worry. You'll get your share of the dough and no strings attached. Come on, let's have that rosco."

"Thanks," she said. Looking at her standing there with the milky whiteness of moonglow falling over her, Ernie Hayes saw that there was nothing on her face to

indicate what she was going through. Her face was still calm and beautiful. Unbelieving, he heard her say, "I'm going to get hurt? Don't be silly, Gimp."

Then she shot him. She shot him in his good leg and it buckled under him, catching him by surprise. He sat down, gaping open-mouthed at her, clutching at his wounded leg.

"You're like all the rest of them," she said. "Like my old man and the cops that used to bring me back home and the head guard at the farm. You think you're a big shot. You kicked Ernie in the face. Well, Ernie was one of the few decent guys I ever met. You shouldn't have done that, Gimp."

She squeezed the trigger again, a deafening, thundering sound, reverberating in the close confines of the box car. She shot Gimpy Fowkes in the face, again and again. When the automatic clicked empty, Gimpy Fowkes pitched forward, his arms flung out in front of him like a man salaaming.

Ernie Hayes felt his fingers slipping. With a last, desperate effort, he swung his body forward so that it would land inside the box car. He landed on his feet near the edge of the door, tried to stagger back out through the door. But Theo saw him, reached out and grabbed his hand.

He heard the gun thump to the floor. The moonlight was gone now, obscured by the trees and it was inky black inside the box car. Theo flung herself into his arms, trembling. She buried her face against his shoulder, half-sobbed: "I'm glad you're here, Ernie. So glad you're here. I'd have been scared stiff to stay in here alone with that corpse. I—I killed him, Ernie. I shot him."

"I know, I know," he said. The sound of Gimpy's screams was still in his ears. He couldn't seem to think. He said: "I—I guess you had to do it, Theo. Don't let it prey on your mind. It was self-defense."

Her head moved away from his shoul-

der. He knew that she was looking up at him even though he couldn't see her face. "Prey on my mind?" she said. "Are you kidding, Ernie? For killing that beast?"

"Well, you had to do it," he told her. He said it argumentatively. He didn't know whom he was trying to convince, Theo or himself. He led her toward a corner of the car and they sat down, leaning against the walls. She clung to him but the trembling had stopped. After awhile, Theo pulled away from him, started to get up.

"Where are you going?" he asked her.

"He's got that money on him, Ernie," she whispered. "Almost three thousand dollars. That's a lot of money. Think what that money will do for us, Ernie. It's no good to him, now. He's dead."

"**N**O!" HE grabbed at her violently, pulled her back down. "You can't do that. You can't rob a corpse, Theo. We'd never get any good out of money like that. If—if we get caught with Gimpy's corpse in here, they're liable to think we killed him for the dough.

"It would go tough with us. If we leave the money there, when the cops find him they won't be able to think that. Then if we get caught, you can plead your self-defense and it'll stand up. I'm telling you this for your own sake, Theo. Leave that money alone."

She sat still. She didn't answer for awhile. Finally, she said: "Maybe you're right, Ernie." She didn't say anything else about it.

He sat there thinking, remembered the way Theo had looked at Gimpy Fowkes, the way she had smiled at him back there in the jungle camp, after he'd taken the money from Rocky and Dummo, the way her eyes had lighted up.

It came to him that maybe Theo had led Gimpy on, had planned all this in order to get his money. He remembered the way she had killed him. That wasn't just

self-defense, no matter how he worded it.

He felt a chill go over him. She hadn't seemed to feel sorry about what she had done. She had only been afraid of being alone with the corpse. He thought that maybe Theo Patrick was rotten inside. Like a shiny pretty apple that's worm-eaten inside.

Moonlight filtered into the car once again, fell softly on her face. She was sleeping, breathing easily. Her mouth was soft. Her lashes made long shadows against her cheeks. She was all that was sweet and feminine and beautiful, and he felt ashamed of himself for thinking the way he had.

He knew that he'd been crazy to think like that. The poor kid had led a tough life. Naturally she was a little hardened; nothing shocked her any more. Her emotions were numbed.

She stirred in her sleep and a small smile played around her soft, sleeping mouth. Her lips parted slightly and she whispered drowsily: "Ernie, honey! I love you, Ernie! Play me a song, Ernie!"

He couldn't do that. He had dropped the cornet when Gimpy Fowkes kicked him in the face. It was gone. So he did the next best thing. He put a kiss on those lips. It seemed to work just as well. . . .

Morning sunlight pouring through the opened door of the box car awakened him. He stretched stiffly, opened his eyes, squinting against the bright sunlight. He sat up. His eyes roamed all around the car. Theo wasn't there.

But Gimpy Fowkes was still there. Still huddled in the ridiculous position in which he'd died, surrounded by a dark brown stain almost dry, blotted up by the rough wood of the flooring.

Then Ernie's sleepy mind jolted fully awake. All of a sudden what it meant not to see Theo anywhere in the box car hit him.

It meant she was gone. Really gone. She'd jumped off the train. There wasn't

any other answer. There was no place in the empty box car where she could be hidden from view. You could swing down from the roof into the car but it would be humanly impossible to reverse that stunt. Theo was gone.

He felt something cold and hard touch the side of his hand. Ernie Hayes looked down. The automatic which had killed Gimpy was near his fingers. He got up quickly and walked over to Gimpy. He took a deep breath, forced himself to dig into Gimpy's watch pocket. It was empty. There was nothing in it. The money was gone. Theo Patrick had rifled the corpse's pocket.

Ernie ran to the door of the box car. He looked out dizzily at the countryside rolling by, saw that they were flying through the outskirts of a big city. The long freight was already beginning to slacken speed. In another half hour, they'd be rolling into a big freight yard. Railroad dicks would be going through the cars.

If he had been caught here, asleep, with the murder gun at his fingertips, with Gimpy's corpse. . . .

Ernie Hayes shuddered. Theo Patrick's voice, her kisses, came back to him. He remembered every single word she'd said to him. And he realized now that none of that had really meant anything to her.

For three thousand dollars, she had killed a man and left him to be the fall guy for the crime. Theo was a practical girl, he realized, a very practical girl. She hadn't let sentiment interfere with the sensible thing to do.

A few minutes later the freight reached a signal zone and slowed. Ernie Hayes leaped down from the box car, went rolling and tumbling down the right-of-way. He lay there, staring after the disappearing caboose of the freight that was carrying away Gimpy Fowkes' corpse . . . and a part of Ernie Hayes. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The Black Widow

IT WAS nearly five years before he saw Theo Patrick again. A lot happened in those years. Ernie Hayes got to New Orleans, got his job in a band, bought a trumpet. The things he did with that horn were an overnight sensation. His climb was rapid. He soon moved out of the St. Charles Street dives. He was soon playing in one of the big gambling clubs just outside the city limits. Then at a swank winter resort spot in Biloxie. After that someone with brains and a lot of money backed Ernie Hayes into forming his own band. In less than a year Ernie was booked solid in every major theatre and night spot in the country.

At the end of those five years, Ernie Hayes had matured a little. His lean, middle-sized frame had filled out some and he'd picked up some manners and poise. He bought a trumpet so bright and shiny it sent flashes of light across the dance floor like a baby spot.

But no woman seemed to hit Ernie Hayes just right. He kept telling himself that it had nothing to do with Theo Patrick, that he'd forgotten all about that murderous, cold-hearted beauty. But still he couldn't seem to get interested in any of the others. He couldn't figure it out.

Then one night between theatre engagements in Texas, Ernie Hayes and his band were hired for a private party at a fabulous figure. Ernie didn't think anything about it. The party was being given at a plushy country club just outside of Dallas, by a Mr. and Mrs. Walter Warnickie, celebrating their third wedding anniversary.

Ernie Hayes was at one of the three bars, when somebody touched his arm. A sultry voice said: "Mr. Hayes, I wonder if I could make a request."

"Certainly," he said, turning around.

"Play *I Can't Get Started With You*," she said. "That's my favorite song."

He looked at her and the drink fell from his fingers, the glass shattering on the bar.

It was a big jump from a freight car in Louisiana to this place. It was a big jump from a road kid with dirt smudges on her face to this regal-looking woman in a simple black, strapless evening gown, with her head held high and a pleasant, polite smile on her palely lovely face. But Theo Patrick had made that leap gracefully.

She said: "I'm Mrs. Warnickie, Mr. Hayes. This is my party. Mine and my husband's. Are you having a good time?"

Everything had changed about her on the surface. She was sleek and scrubbed and polished. But Ernie Hayes looked into her eyes and he knew that underneath all that surface sheen, nothing had changed.

"That three grand of Gimpy's went a long way, didn't it?" he said finally. "You really parlayed it. I hear that Walter Warnickie is worth several millions."

She laughed. "Not in cash or convertible securities, Ernie," she corrected. "Millionaires seldom are. But he's got a few pennies." A frown knit between her finely arched black brows. She looked unhappy. Her rounded white shoulders shrugged.

"What's money mean, Ernie?" she said. "I found the answer to that. It hadn't done anything for me. I—I hate it. And I hate the man who brought it to me."

Some other members of the party joined them. Ernie noticed that Theo introduced him as though he was somebody she'd just met. Walter Warnickie, her husband, joined the group after awhile.

He was a white-haired, portly man nearly twenty years older than Theo. A back-slapping, red-faced, big-mouthed man who hadn't let his sudden riches subdue his earthy oil-field talk, he was already drunk past the point of good taste.

Ernie Hayes knew that Theo had been telling the truth about hating her husband. But she'd been lying about hating his money.

Just before Ernie went back up onto the bandstand, Theo said: "Don't forget that request, Mr. Hayes."

The way he played *I Can't Get Started With You*, the song became associated with Ernie Hayes after that night. It was him. It was him and Theo Patrick Warnickie, although nobody ever knew about that. Because as he started to play it, he looked out over the dance floor at Theo. Their gazes held.

He went back five years to the time two kids sat in a lonely box car on a noisy freight and fell in love for the first time.

It was nearly an hour later that he found himself out in a dark arbor near the swimming pool with Theo. Theo's voice was like the night wind in his ear as she whispered: "That did it, Ernie! When I watched you up there, I knew. Something happened to us the first time we set eyes on each other, Ernie. Nothing will ever change it."

Then she moved into his arms. He gathered her up to him, and the years they'd been apart fell away. Theo was a married woman now. She had killed Gimpy Fowkes when it hadn't been necessary. She had robbed his corpse. She had left Ernie Hayes to take the blame. But none of this mattered in this moment in the arbor.

Before they went back inside and joined the party, Theo held Ernie's hands hard between her own, told him: "I've made up my mind. I—I'm going to divorce him, Ernie. I'm going to tell Walter tonight. Ernie, will you marry me then, if I do that? I've got to be your wife, darling. I'll never be happy until I am."

He couldn't answer her because he didn't know. He was so confused by her nearness and the miracle of finding and seeing her again, that he didn't know how

he *really* felt about her. But she seemed to accept his silence as acquiescence.

"Ernie," she said. "I want you to hear it. I want you to be sure that I'm on the level about this. You stay here in the arbor. The pool is only a few yards away. I'll bring Walter out there to the edge of the pool and talk the thing over with him.

"He'll rant and rave at first, but it won't mean anything. After he thinks it over, he'll be glad. He's tired of me, too, though he won't admit it. You stay here and listen, Ernie. I want you to see how brave and forthright I am."

She turned and ran out of the arbor. It seemed to Ernie that he ought to stop her. Why should she want him to witness this final break with her husband? He started to go after her, to return to the party. But then curiosity got the better of him. He stayed there.

ABOUT ten minutes later, he saw Theo and the tall, portly figure of Walter Warnickie walking along the path beside the edge of the swimming pool. Warnickie seemed a little unsteady on his feet and Theo was holding his arm. They reached a spot sheltered by the bulk of the arbor from view of the house.

Although they stood there talking, Ernie Hayes couldn't hear a word they were saying. It wasn't close enough for that and the night breeze was blowing the other way. But he kept watching them. It was obvious by Walter Warnickie's excited gestures that the conversation was making him angry.

Suddenly Ernie Hayes saw Warnickie grab hold of his wife's arms. Through the tangled branches and leaves of the arbor, it wasn't possible to distinguish much after that, except that the two of them were struggling beside the swimming pool.

Theo's voice came to him, rising. She called: "Ernie! Help me!"

He ran out of the arbor, and loped down the slight slope toward the edge of the pool

where Theo and Walter Warnickie were still struggling. He grabbed Warnickie by his beefy shoulder, whipped him around. The older man stared at him in bleary-eyed surprise. Rage had purpled his florid face. He said:

"Stay out of this, you horn-tooting young punk," and swung a clearly telegraphed punch up from the ground.

Ernie Hayes let the blow go over his shoulder. He jolted out a straight left of his own that caught Warnickie neatly on the chops. The big man staggered backward several paces and tumbled over into the pool. Ernie saw the water close over him.

Then Theo was in his arms, saying: "I had to call you, Ernie. I was so scared. He threatened to kill me, to throw me into the pool. He was like a wild man."

"I know," Ernie said. Over her shoulder he watched Warnickie's gray head break the surface of the water, saw him thrash wildly around. At the same time, Theo was tugging desperately at his arm. She was saying:

"Come on, Ernie." Her voice sounded tight and shrill. "We've got to get away from here before he climbs out. He'll be furious. He might try to kill both of us. After a while, though, he'll cool off. But we'd better stay out of his way until then."

He protested as she pulled him away from the pool toward the path that led back up to the house. "You sure he's all right, Theo? Can he swim?"

"Of course," she said impatiently. "That soaking will be good for him, sober him. Come on, Ernie!"

He followed her up the path. Just before they reached a side door that led into the house, Theo stopped, turned to him and took hold of his arms.

Her lovely face looked a little flushed. Her eyes were unusually bright. There was a pleased expression about her mouth as though a satisfied smile was being restrained there, like a child knowing she's

about to be praised for something but trying to be nonchalant.

"Ernie," she said softly. "I've got something to tell you. It's all over now. He's gone. Walter's gone and I'm free, Ernie."

He stared down at her, stupefied. He said those words over to himself several times, trying to make them mean something. The smile broke around her mouth and her teeth shone evenly and white and clean looking.

"What's the matter, Ernie, don't you understand? My, you *are* dense!" She laughed, a sound of excitement rather than amusement. "I lied, Ernie. Walter can't swim. He—he's dead by now. We're rid of him. I arranged the whole thing. You see how clever I am, Ernie, how much I love you, what I'm willing to do for you?"

The import of what she was saying rolled into his mind like a huge, roaring, smothering wave. "Good Lord!" he said. He said it several times. It was all he could think of to say.

"Shh! Talk quietly!" she commanded, her long, tapering fingers squeezing his arms. "Don't get excited, Ernie, and everything will be all right. They all knew how drunk Walter was. He just took a walk by the pool and staggered in. It was an accident, Ernie. You understand.

"But we've got to play it smart. I won't see you, talk to you anymore tonight, Ernie. You'll leave with the band and I won't get in touch with you for a long time. Then nobody can get suspicious. Then in about six months, we'll be able to get together. I'll be very rich, Ernie. We'll live a wonderful life together."

He didn't answer. He heard her say: "Good night, Ernie. Keep your mouth shut. And be patient, darling." He watched her walk away from him.

He stood there on the spot for quite awhile, fighting an impulse to run back to the pool and see for himself. He couldn't believe it. Theo couldn't do a thing like

that. He would go back to the pool and there would be no sign there of a corpse floating around because Theo was wrong, Walter Warnickie *could* swim and he had climbed back out of the pool.

Just then a scream sounded from the direction of the swimming pool. Some couple had strolled down that way. And Ernie Hayes knew what had made the girl scream. Theo hadn't been wrong.

He went inside, took his place on the band dais, blew his trumpet through the remaining numbers. But he was like a man walking through heavy fog, dazed and sick. If he told anybody the truth, he'd be involving himself. It would be the end of his career. He might even go to prison for his part in the murder.

It would sound silly to say that he had been tricked into knocking a man who couldn't swim into a pool to drown, to say that he hadn't *known* the man couldn't swim, that his wife had told him that he could. Who would believe him? . . .

Six months later, almost to the day, Theo Patrick called him at his hotel. The band was playing Philadelphia then. He heard her voice say: "Hello, Ernie, darling. When can I join you?"

He felt his heart begin to pound, dizzying him. He felt his mouth go dry. Every physical part of him screamed for him to tell her right away, to hurry, hurry. But he didn't do that. He'd thought it over too many times, too many sleepless nights.

"Never," he said. "Skip it, Theo. Forget about it. We're not for each other."

She gasped with surprise. She started to argue, to plead. He hung up on her. He didn't answer the phone when it rang again. A few days later when the desk announced that she was downstairs, he refused to see her. She didn't bother him again for nearly six years.

ERNIE HAYES reached his peak about this time and started on the down grade. After the death of Theo's

husband, he could never do anything but a standard, stilted job on *I Can't Get Started With You*. He now hated that song. He hated the people who requested it—and it showed on him. Once, when a juke box was playing one of his earlier recordings of the number, Ernie Hayes kicked in the glass of the juke box, wrecked the machine.

His trumpet began to slowly lose some of its magic. Ernie, himself, was beginning to drink heavily. It seemed to be the only way he could forget Theo Patrick and the men who had died at her hands—and the fact that some of their blood seemed also to be on his hands. The drinking didn't bother him much at first.

He didn't let it interfere with his work. And although the best touches had vanished from his music, he was still good enough and his name still big enough to keep him on the edge of the big time, right up until that night in Baltimore when he and Theo crossed paths once more.

Theo was married again by then. This time to an ex-beer baron of Prohibition days, a tough rum-runner gone legit and with a yen to forget his past and to cut a groove in society. He never quite made it. He moved in the moneyed crowd and he did all the things that wealthy men did, but he never quite was able to bite into the real upper crust.

He could never completely get rid of the smell of beer and dishonest money. Nor shake the nickname that he'd been stuck with since he'd been a fat kid swiping fruit from pushcarts in Hell's Kitchen. To the newspaper gossip columnists and others, he was still Piggy Malone.

Ernie Hayes met Piggy Malone and Theo the night of the Preakness. They were at a victory dance given by the man who owned the winner of that year's historic race. Piggy was a wild-mannered, amiable little man who always looked uncomfortable in dress clothes. He always looked surprised that he had won such a

beautiful wife. Like the man with the right ticket on a raffle.

Piggy Malone, it seemed, had a weakness for Dixieland and the kind of trumpet Ernie Hayes played. He insisted that Ernie join their party. That was the beginning of the end for Piggy Malone.

The Baltimore episode followed pretty closely the one in Texas. Only this time Theo forced Ernie to help her, threatening that if he didn't, she'd go screaming to the Texas police about his part in the death of her first husband. She said she'd be able to worm out of it, but it would be tough on him. He knew that she wasn't bluffing. He could look into those dark eyes of hers and tell that.

Piggy Malone was an ardent horseman. On a before-breakfast ride one morning, as he was accompanied by his wife, Theo and their guest, the famous band leader, Ernie Hayes, poor Piggy was thrown by a fractious horse. The animal then kicked him in the head, fatally.

Only, it hadn't happened quite that way. Theo had waited until they reached an isolated spot and then knocked her husband from his mount. While he was unconscious, she rolled him into the right position under the horse's hooves and then threw pepper in the poor beast's face.

Ernie Hayes sat his own mount nearby, watching this in unbelieving, crazy horror. When he tried to stop Theo, she struck him with her riding crop and drove him off. Later, to stay out of the mess himself, he was forced to testify that it was a sad, terrible accident and that it had happened just as Theo related.

That was the finish of Ernie Hayes. Drinking became his main occupation, his music secondary. He missed out on important playing dates, broke contracts. He faded fast. He went from one low dive to another over the years until he wound up at The Blue Domino, just outside of Steel City, on Route 22, where Theo crossed his path once again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Horn Man's Brass

AFTER Ernie Hayes was knocked out by Tony Sarno, he came flashing back to consciousness for a few moments. He could hear the roaring sound of a motor. Although his head felt as though it was held down by lead weights hanging from his eyeballs, he managed to raise it a little. He was still in the convertible, he saw.

Theo was still behind the wheel—slumped over it, with a deep gash on her forehead leaking blood. Then he realized that even though the car was moving, its motor racing, she was unconscious. Sarno had knocked her out, too.

He forced himself to look up through the windshield. The headlights were on, stabbing out into the blackness. Directly in front of them loomed a white wooden fence. A sign on it said:

DANGER—DEAD END!

Ernie Hayes tried to reach past Theo to the wheel, but his arms were too heavy.

There was a terrible splintering, tearing sound as the car roared crashing through the fence. There was suddenly no road in front of the headlights, only flat gray rock. Then there was nothing in front of them. Just the sound of the motor racing crazily as the wheels spun in empty air. The front of the car started to tip forward sickeningly.

Far ahead, in front of the headlights, from a great height, Ernie Hayes saw the cluster of lights that was Steel City. He saw the red hazy glow over the steel mills licked every few seconds by blue flame from the blast furnaces.

He knew now what that fence and sign meant. It was the end of the road that led out to Blind Man's Bluff. The bluff was six hundred feet high. The car was plunging into that deadly drop in space.

(Please continue on page 116)

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(Continued from page 114)

As it turned over slowly, Ernie Hayes saw the lights of the distant city revolve. Then he felt himself leaving the leather upholstery of the car. He glanced sideways and saw that Theo hadn't tumbled out with him. She was being held in by the steering wheel. He felt himself doing loop-the-loops and barrel-rolls through the velvety softness of space, the wind rushing past his ears. . . .

High up on the edge of the bluff a flashlight beam followed the descent of the car, losing it every few moments, then finding it again. When the car struck the boulders and brush at the bottom of the bluff, the flashlight suddenly became unnecessary.

There was a rending crash. The convertible's gas tank burst into flame. The fire roared and swelled and devoured the wreckage of the car. It threw a hellish red glow all up the face of the bluff and gave a sharp cast to the face of Tony Sarno standing up there on the edge, so that he looked like a husky Satan, before he turned away. . . .

Fire wardens had gathered together great piles of dead and dried-up brushwood for future burning. They'd spotted them around the rocky base of the cliff where they could burn safely when the time came. That was a fortunate thing for Ernie Hayes. He landed in one of them, the springy mass of branches and shrubbery breaking his fall.

He lay for nearly fifteen minutes buried in the center of that pile of brush, cut and bleeding and bruised, before he came out of it and painfully dragged himself free. He was dazed and sick from head injuries. Staggering away, he headed straight into thick woods, not knowing where he was going, not caring.

Once he looked back at the great fiery glow at the foot of the cliffs. Vaguely he realized that he was lucky to be alive, that if he'd stayed unconscious much longer

those flames might have been his funeral pyre.

He kept on stumbling and staggering forward until he fell on his face and couldn't get up again. He crawled a few yards, then curled up under a clump of shrubbery where he fell into a half sleep, half coma.

The sun awakened him. For a moment there was a blackout and Ernie Hayes couldn't remember anything. Then he tried to move, and pain shot all through him. At the same time, snatches of events of the night before flashed into his mind. He got to his feet, sore and aching in every muscle. His head throbbed but not much worse than with some of the hangovers he'd endured.

He knew that the land in this section wasn't too densely wooded. If he walked far enough in almost any direction, he would come out near some road. After about a mile, he came to a small stream. When he'd washed the crusted blood from his face and head, he felt better.

By noon, he finally emerged from the woods onto a dirt road. After a couple of miles, the dirt road intersected with Route 22. A farm truck picked him up and let him ride in the back. It was headed for Steel City and Ernie knew that it would pass by The Blue Domino.

It was now obvious to him what had happened the night before. Tony Sarno had taken Theo's fifty thousand dollars, set the steering wheel, stepped on the gas and sent them both over the cliff in the car.

Except for the freak luck of Ernie falling free from the car and into the pile of brush, it would have been a clean sweep for Sarno. He would have committed double murder and gotten away with it. He had still committed one. The big question in Ernie Hayes' mind now was whether to let him get away with that one.

It struck him then, like a knife slicing

(Please continue on page 118)



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Robert Turner

(Continued from page 116)
 down through his brain, that he, Ernie Hayes, had been seen with Theo in The Blue Domino.

Yet she would be found alone in the wreckage of the car. If there was suspicion that her death wasn't an accident—and the police were pretty clever at figuring things like that out—Ernie Hayes would be the man they'd look for.

Theo was dead, but the malady lingered on. She was probably laughing at him in hell right now because the curse she'd put upon him was living after her. She'd tangled him all up in the murders she'd committed—now she had him trapped in her own.

HE STOOD up in the back of the truck and let the cool wind, rushing across the top of the cab, blow in his face. It cleared his head a little. In the distance he could see the big neon sign of The Blue Domino. He knew that around this time of day Tony Sarno always came in to go over his books. He would most likely be there alone.

All at once it felt as though something like a big steel spring inside of Ernie Hayes came uncoiled. He was sick to death of himself and everything that had happened to him. Since he was a kid he'd been pushed around, made to do what other people wanted him to do. He'd been like a puppet on the end of a string manipulated by people like Theo and Tony.

That was going to end right now. And he was going to stop running from trouble, trying to escape. There was no escape—not even with liquor—he'd found that out. Now, for once, he was going to face something out.

He tapped on the rear window of the truck's cab as they passed The Blue Domino. "Let me out here."

The truck slowed, slid into the side of the road and Ernie Hayes jumped off. He

Slay, Maestro, Slay!

yelled his thanks, waved and started back toward The Blue Domino.

In the bright light of day, it was a dreary-looking building, with scabby, peeling paint. The front door was open.

Ernie walked in, past the hat check counter, past the bar. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror and saw that the ordeal he'd been through hadn't helped his appearance any. His clothes were soiled and torn. His hair was sticking up all over his head and he was a pasty gray color, his eyes burning luminously deep in their sockets.

Passing the door that led into the main room of The Blue Domino, Ernie saw Big Ambrose swabbing down the floor with a mop, between the stacked-up tables.

Tony Sarno was in his small office in back of the barroom. He looked up when Ernie walked in, his amber-colored eyes flickering with fear. Then his handsome, fleshy face, a yellowish color in the harsh light of day, set in hard lines. He said: "Hello, Ernie. You lead a charmed life."

"Yes," Ernie Hayes said. "Maybe like a cat, I've got nine lives. You want to try for the other eight now or later, Tony?"

Sarno's silky black brows raised in surprise. "That doesn't sound like you, Ernie. But you'd better not hang around here making jokes like a cheap M. C. The cops were here looking for you, and they'll be back. You'd better blow and don't try to make any trouble, maestro."

"No," Ernie Hayes said. His eyes were glittering bright and his mouth was thinned against his teeth. "That would be nice for you, wouldn't it? But I'm not going to do that. And stop calling me maestro, you cheap, murdering hoodlum."

Sarno's eyes veiled. A vein stood out in his high forehead, throbbled for a moment and then faded again. "Look, kid," he said. "I'll let that go by this once, because I think you're talking out of your head. I don't think you realize what

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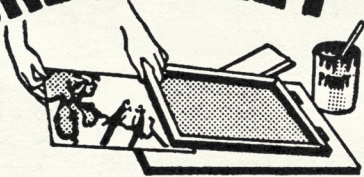
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you're up against. Here, did you see this?" He shoved a newspaper across the desk toward Ernie Hayes. It was that morning's edition of the Steel City *Advocate*. A banner headline proclaimed:

MILLIONAIRE MANUFACTURER SLAIN!

Beneath it a subhead said: *Jan Krantz murdered; wife dies same night in mysterious car-crash off cliff!* The story under the headlines went on to say that the police were looking for Ernie Hayes, orchestra leader at The Blue Domino, who had been seen to leave the place with Mrs. Krantz shortly after she had, according to obvious evidence, killed her husband in their home. But no sign of Ernie Hayes had been found in or near the charred wreckage. Police were seeking him for questioning.

When he finished reading, Ernie Hayes looked up. His eyes felt hot and blurry. Sarno's smugly smiling face shimmered in his gaze. He flung the newspaper back onto the desk.

"That's all right," he said. "The police won't have to look any farther. I'm going to them. I'm going to give myself up and answer their questions. Do you want to come with me, Tony—or shall I have them send for you? Because I'm going to tell them the whole thing."

Sarno leaned forward in his swivel chair. He laughed, but there was a faltering sound to it. "You *are* out of your mind, aren't you?" he said. "Do you think they'd believe you? I'll have witnesses that I never left the place last night. You won't stand a chance.

"The cops will nail you for one or both those killings—I promise you. You're made to order for them, especially when they learn you were once sweet on Theo. She was quite a gal, by the way."

Ernie Hayes didn't answer. He suddenly felt the terrible need for a drink. It

Slay. Maestro. Slay!

was so bad that he started to ask Sarno to give him one. But he finally fought the urge away. He knew that he had to start right now, fighting this liquor habit. It was going to be tough—but every time he fought it off, it would become that much easier.

“Yeah,” Sarno said. “It’s too bad she and I didn’t meet up a long time ago. That girl was clever. We could have gone far together. You should have heard the way she worked on me when she got an inkling of what I had in mind.” Sarno grinned.

“I pretended to go along with her just so I could see her whole bag of tricks. It was really too bad that I had to kill Theo, Ernie. She would have been so nice to come home to—for awhile, anyhow. You should have seen the look on her face when she found out that I was going to kill her anyway, that I’d—”

Sarno stopped as abruptly as though somebody had stuck a knife into his back. He was staring past Ernie Hayes toward the door. He snapped: “What are you doing here? I didn’t send for you. Get back to your work.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Swan Song

ERNIE wheeled around, saw Big Ambrose, the waiter, in the doorway. He had his shirt off and his powerful shoulders and his bulging biceps glistened with perspiration. His battered ex-fighter’s face held a peculiar expression of exaggerated innocence, like that of a child who is just busting with a big secret but is trying to hide it.

Big Ambrose sort of leered at Tony Sarno, said: “Okay, Mr. Sarno. I—I just wanted to make sure there wasn’t any trouble. I saw Ernie come in. But I’ll go now. I—I’ll talk to you later, Mr. Sarno. You know what I mean?”



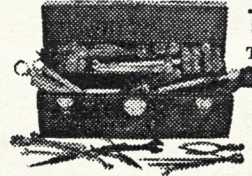
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The big man started to turn away from the doorway. Sarno said: "Wait a minute, Ambrose. Come back here."

Ernie Hayes saw a tight, frightened expression on Sarno's handsome face now. He saw little pinpoints of perspiration on the roadhouse owner's upper lip. Sarno said: "How long were you standing outside the door, there, Ambrose?"

Quickly, too quickly, his eyes not meeting Sarno's, he answered: "Oh, not long, Mr. Sarno. I—well, I just got there when you saw me. I—I didn't hear what you were talking about, I swear!"

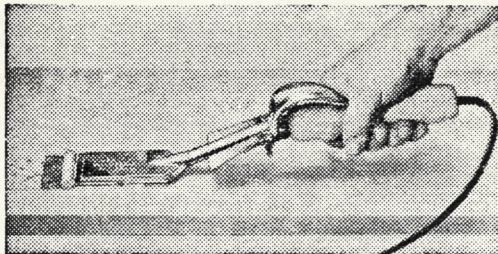
Big Ambrose *had* been standing outside, eavesdropping. The big man was punch-drunk, a little cloudy in his thinking, but not enough to miss out on the import of the things he had heard. He had heard his rich boss bragging to Ernie Hayes about killing a woman named Theo. Ambrose had read the papers that morning. Even his muddled mind would get the connection.

"You're lying!" Sarno said. His voice was strained, as though he was having difficulty controlling it. "Tell me, Ambrose. What did you hear?"

Big Ambrose's lumpy features twisted and worked and tried to look blandly innocent. They didn't make it. He said: "Honest, boss, nothing. I didn't hear nothing." He tried the injured innocence act. "What do you think I do, go 'round spyin' on people, Mr. Sarno?"

"Yes," Sarno said. "You want me to tell you what you overheard? You heard me say I killed a woman last night, the woman you read about in the paper, the one who went over in a car, the one they want to talk to Ernie about."

Big Ambrose had nothing to say to that. It bowled him over. He stood there with his big Neanderthal jaw dropping. Ernie Hayes saw now that Tony Sarno's eyes held an unnatural brightness. One corner of Sarno's mouth was pulled up. He



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Slay. Maestro, Slay!

opened a desk drawer and took out a gun. Ernie Hayes recognized it. It was his own .38, the one he'd been going to use on Theo the night before. He heard Tony Sarno saying softly:

"I think I could have worked something out with you, Ernie, and it wouldn't have been too bad. You weren't too much of a threat. After all, I had something on you, too. I overheard about the murders of Theo's husbands, in which you were involved, no matter how innocently. But having this big dumb ox know about Theo's death is just impossible.

"I could buy him off fairly cheap—but his knowing would always be a menace, a big dumb slob like him. He'd let something slip or he'd get drunk and shoot his mouth off. I can't have that."

He raised the .38 up slowly, casually, sighted along the gleaming nickel-plated barrel as calmly as a man trying out a pistol in a sporting goods store. Even when Ernie Hayes heard the sound of the shot, like a door slamming in the wind, he could hardly believe it. Even when he saw a look of ghastly surprise wash over Big Ambrose's face, saw him clasp both big, broken-knuckled hands to him.

Big Ambrose looked down at the blood oozing between his fingers and he didn't look up again. It was too much for him. He folded slowly, twisting lazily until he lay curled up on the floor.

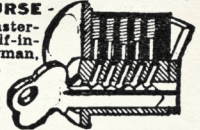
"Now you've really cooked your own goose," Ernie Hayes said. "You can't get away with a cold-blooded murder like that. You—"

"What murder?" Sarno interrupted. He looked down at the gun. "This is your gun, remember? Last night you killed your ex-sweetheart's current husband. You put her into her car and sent it crashing over the cliff. Today you came back here to settle some grudge against Big Ambrose, in the place where you both work.

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Robert Turner

"A drunken sot of a musician blows his wig, goes berserk. But after you shot Big Ambrose, he managed to get the gun away from you, to shoot you, too. Understand, maestro? Very simple. There are always ways and means for a guy who's smart."

Ernie Hayes saw Sarno's trigger finger start to whiten. He dropped to his hands and knees. He heard the slam of the .38 once again, and the wind from it riffled his hair as he dropped.

He pushed in under the desk behind which Sarno stood and came up with his back underneath it, pushing the desk over onto the other man. It took just about every ounce of his strength to make it.

Tony Sarno was caught by surprise. The desk slammed him back against the wall, partially pinned him there. Ernie Hayes straightened and went at him. He kicked the .38 from Sarno's hand just as he was about to let go with another shot. But Sarno scrounged out from behind the tilted-over desk before he could grab him. He swung at Ernie Hayes, but Ernie ducked and the blow just dusted off the side of his skull.

"You haven't got me by surprise the way you did last night," Ernie told him. He swung and felt the satisfying jolt all the way up his arm as his fist crashed against Sarno's meaty jaw. The punch staggered the big man, but his old ring training now stood him in good stead. He bore back in on Ernie, fell against him, tying him up in a professional clinch. Ernie fell back away from him.

Sarno came at him like a wounded bull. He got in close and he used every dirty ring trick that he'd ever learned. In a few moments he had Ernie Hayes a bloody battered wreck, just about able to stand on his feet. One final uppercut dropped Ernie.

Ernie tried to get up, but could get only his head off the floor. Through his blurred gaze, he saw Sarno go to pick the .38 up

Slay, Maestro, Slay!

off the floor where he'd dropped it, figuring to finish the job he'd started. But Sarno never did bend over to pick up the gun because it was no longer there.

Big Ambrose had it. The waiter was up on his elbows, just about able to hold his head up. He looked up at Tony Sarno from under lead-heavy lids. He was holding the .38 in both hands pointed at Tony Sarno. He said hoarsely:

"I—I never did like you, Boss. You shouldn't have shot me. You—you shouldn't have done that. We could have done business together on this."

The sound of that third shot seemed to take a long time to fade out. It seemed to go on and on, long after Tony Sarno had fallen. When it did finally cease, there was a clicking sound and Ernie Hayes saw why that shot had seemed so long. It was really three shots. Big Ambrose had kept on firing until the gun clicked empty.

It was a few minutes before Ernie Hayes was able to recover enough from the beating Tony Sarno had given him, to get up onto his hands and knees and crawl to the phone and call the police. He kept himself conscious until they got there. He heard Big Ambrose, still hanging onto a slender thread of life, tell the cops how he'd killed Tony Sarno and why.

Ernie was covered, and Sarno was stone cold dead. He couldn't make any trouble for Ernie about Theo's husband-murders. Everything had worked out all right, at last. Once again, Ernie Hayes let the soft darkness of unconsciousness slide over him. This time he welcomed it.

They kept Ernie in the hospital for two weeks but he didn't mind it too much. There was a little redheaded nurse in there who was a bug on Dixieland jazz. It seemed that she too had been an Ernie Hayes fan from way back. She had half-a-dozen albums of his early recordings.

She'd spend her off-hours in his room



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Robert Turner

with him, playing those records and listening to him talk about his music. She knew the whole Ernie Hayes story. Sometimes, when he'd get depressed and tell her that that was all over, that he was a has-been now, she'd laugh at him, tell him that he was being silly.

"This is just a beginning for you, Ernie," she would say. "The beginning of a new life. Why, you'll come out of this and be bigger and better than ever."

After awhile, he began to buy that. Once he got out of the hospital, Ernie Hayes never did go back to the big-time—but he made out all right playing with a small band and giving trumpet lessons on the side. It was like the nurse said, too—the beginning of a new life—for them both. She became Mrs. Ernie Hayes.

What's that? You want to know how I know all the intimate details of this story, where I come in on it? Now, that's a good question, brother, but I thought you'd probably guessed it by now. You see, I'm Ernie Hayes.

THE END

SNAPPY SHOTS

Noticing a man standing suspiciously close to a locked tavern door, Police Captain Emile Tovanie of Santa Rosa, Calif., investigated and found out that it was a departing patron whose thumb had been caught in the door.



A man stood in line for thirty minutes at the State Savings Bank in Addison, Mich. When his turn came at the teller's window, he held it up and escaped with three thousand dollars.



Indianapolis police expressed no surprise when Robert Mills reported a pair of binoculars had been stolen from his automobile. He had left the car parked in front of a burlesque theater.

By H. H.

Her Perfect Frame

(Continued from page 45)

a cigarette and pulled a slow draw. "This morning, when I woke up after the butting by Marcy, Johnny was standing over me. He got worried when he saw the shade and the bullet in the door. He got worried because he didn't figure anybody else but himself in on the deal. And he doesn't figure Blondie to shoot from any second-story window.

"By that time, he had already bumped Marcy off. He and his boys took it too lightly when they tripped up on following Marcy to the hotel. You don't take it so lightly when it's important enough to mean a hunk of Blondie's cash. So it meant they missed the tail but parked in Marcy's apartment and waited for her."

Rex said softly with just a touch of irony in it: "It figures on Johnny. But I would have given Blondie a divorce."

I caught a little wrong-way smoke and I coughed.

"And I think Johnny hired Marcy without knowing anything about us," Rex continued in a low, monotonous voice that was growing tired of conversation. "When I saw Marcy again, something clicked between us. I guess Blondie went into her act then and sold Johnny on the possibilities. I don't know what Blondie told you, Buster, but I know there's nothing like the wrath of a second wife losing out to the first one, believe me."

The sedan jerked to a stop. The sun was turning yellowish-red and was getting high with the shadows shrinking into small circles. Planes overhead were pushing their motors and the airport offices were in front of us. A porter opened the door.

I said: "So long, Rex."

He nodded and I left a sad, silent man in the back seat. It wasn't until I got into the plane that it suddenly occurred to me that maybe Blondie didn't shoot blanks at Marcy after all.

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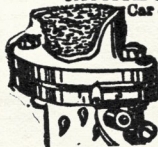
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The Grave Joker

(Continued from page 47)

"Lots of people play it," the voice was saying. "And it's a fascinating gamble." He held up a shiny revolver and picked a cartridge from the handful that lay on the table. "It's simple." He slipped the cartridge home and spun the cylinder. "One bullet. Six to one odds."

He put the muzzle to his temple. There was an empty click, and Mr. Dolan could hear the explosions of pent-up breath. Two or three others tried it. And that same empty click. Then the game paled and the crowd wandered off. Mr. Dolan closed his eyes.

Mrs. Dolan shook her husband. She snapped, "At least you can stay awake and pretend you're enjoying yourself." She saw him looking at the table on which the revolver lay. "What's that for?" she asked.

The man who had started the game came up. "You missed all the fun," he said. Mrs. Dolan listened and saw her husband shake his head.

She laughed. "That sounds like fun." Mr. Dolan touched her arm and she pulled away. She was always contrary.

"Look, everyone." She held the revolver and spun the cylinder. "Anyone want to lay odds?" Mrs. Dolan laughed and put the muzzle of the shiny gun in her mouth.

Then she pulled the trigger.

* * *

Later, the police were very severe. A lieutenant of detectives gave them a harsh lecture. But there wasn't much he could do.

And, besides, if anyone had seen Mr. Dolan take out five cartridges from the revolver before the police arrived, he never thought the fact important enough to volunteer the information.



Checkmated!

(Continued from page 65)

stood motionless in the middle of the room, the policemen watching her.

Then Karl came out of the gameroom, his face white.

"You touched those chessmen! You fool—you idiot! You've spoiled everything!"

"Stop it!" screamed Vera.

Flynn turned to Vera. "It's all over. Even Karl had to admit it couldn't have been Delph's last move! You see, we did an autopsy on your husband—there were traces of poison in his stomach. He probably died during the chess game, fell across the table. While Karl carried him into the living room, you fixed the chessmen to make it look as though he had just finished a move."

Vera looked puzzled. "But what does that prove? The doctor didn't say anything about that!"

Flynn grinned. "The good doctor doesn't play chess—but I do! When I saw the chessmen, I knew you had lied about it being Delph's last move. I ordered an autopsy on your husband. But we needed a confession from one of you. I figured if Karl saw the chessboard it would give him enough of a jolt to say something incriminating! Karl has already said enough to satisfy us. He, also, was quite stunned to see two black bishops on white squares!"



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