

25¢

DIME



APR.

# DETECTIVE

## MAGAZINE



**THE WILL TO DIE!**  
by THORNE LEE

**PLUS**

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL \$2.50 VALUE

**SLAY BELLES** by ROBERT TURNER

# Earn Big Money

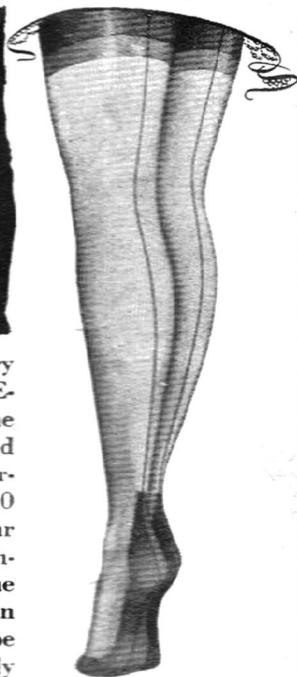
## WRITING ORDERS

## AMAZING NYLONS

*Guaranteed Against*

### RUNS AND SNAGS

*Regardless of Cause!*

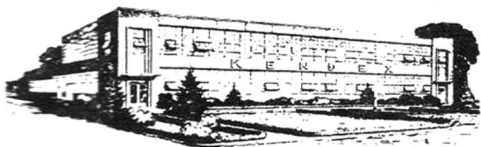


The world's ONLY complete, nationally advertised nylon hosiery line actually guaranteed against runs, snags or excessive wear, REGARDLESS OF CAUSE! It's amazing, but true! No matter what the cause—hard use or deliberate abuse—Kendex nylons are replaced FREE if they run, snag or become unfit for wear 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!



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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 huge cash bonus that increases your earnings up to 40%! Your name and address on postcard will bring you sample stocking; self-selling sales books with FULL COLOR illustrations; 32-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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# IT LOOKED LIKE AN EASY SHOT UNTIL...



WHAT THE...?  
HOLD IT! THAT DEER'S WEARING A COLLAR!

AFTER TWO DAYS' HUNTING IN THE NORTH WOODS, IT LOOKS LIKE STEVE AND BILL HAVE FOUND THEIR BUCK, BUT THEN...



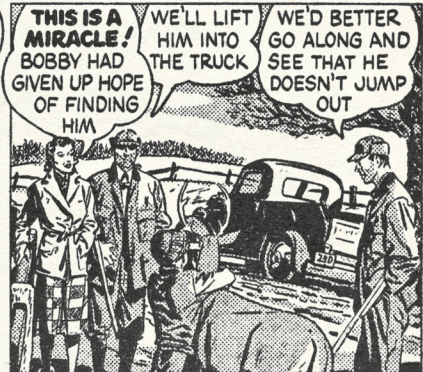
BY GOSH, HE'S TAME AS A DOG!

WONDER WHAT THAT TAG SAYS



IT SAYS: I'M BOBBY HOPKINS' PET DEER. PLEASE TAKE ME HOME

WONDER WHERE HE LIVES



THIS IS A MIRACLE! BOBBY HAD GIVEN UP HOPE OF FINDING HIM

WE'LL LIFT HIM INTO THE TRUCK

WE'D BETTER GO ALONG AND SEE THAT HE DOESN'T JUMP OUT



DEER WON'T BE MOVIN' MUCH TILL LATE AFTERNOON. WHY NOT KNOCK OFF AND HAVE A BITE WITH US?

I'M SOLD. SUPPOSE WE COULD CLEAN UP A BIT, TOO?



YOU'RE IN FOR A SLICK SHAVE, STEVE. THIS THIN GILLETTE SURE SKIMS 'EM OFF QUICK AND EASY!

I ALWAYS USE THEM. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



WE'VE ALL THE ROOM IN THE WORLD. WHY NOT FINISH YOUR WEEK OUT HERE?

IF YOU'RE SURE WE WON'T BE CROWDING YOU

TALL AND CERTAINLY HANDSOME!

MEN, TO ENJOY QUICKER, EASIER SHAVES AT A SAVING... TRY THIN GILLETTES! THESE ARE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. BUY THIN GILLETTES

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NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

# 25¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



**Vol. 65**

**CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1951**

**No. 3**

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*Her legacy was—*

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*Copyright 1943 by Popular Publications, Inc.*

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*The hand of death dealt out the—*

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**Complete Book-Length Novel—\$2.50 Value**

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**Next issue on sale April 4th**

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

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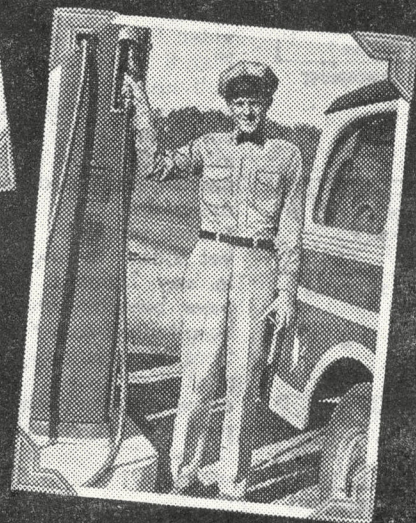
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say the Ervin Engelbachs of Pevely, Mo.



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Slim  
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# WILL YOU BE 1 OUT OF 9?

According to American Medical Association "Journal" one in every nine persons became a hospital patient last year.

## HOSPITALIZATION

### SICKNESS or ACCIDENT



HOSPITAL



ACCIDENT



SICKNESS



OPERATIONS

Every speeding ambulance calls attention to sudden accident or sickness. Can you listen to the screech of a siren with a satisfied feeling that you and your family have insurance to help pay Hospital and Surgical bills? If not, you should investigate our new Provider Hospital-Surgical Plan that is issued to both individuals and family groups at a very small cost that everyone can afford. We think it is the newest, most modern and up-to-date Hospital Protection plan on the market today. It covers you in any hospital. It also pays benefits when not hospitalized as a bed patient for emergency hospital treatments. At no extra cost the policy also pays for accidental loss of life and for loss of wages when in hospital for injury.

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*Mail Coupon Today*

## Ready for the Rackets

### A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

"There's one born every minute," was P. T. Barnum's popular remark about suckers. The words have been adopted as the swindlers' motto. It is up to all of us to beware of this scheming group by learning from the cruel experiences of others.

Hardest of the swindler's blows to avoid is his clever attack on your hobbies. The eagerness of stamp collectors, book lovers and photography hounds to improve their material sets them up as easy bait for the chiseler. There are known sources for you to check with before parting with hard-earned cash for the "only one of its kind" come-on.

It's no fun to be preached at but we would like to tell hobby enthusiasts that it might be wise to form a group with others who have similiar interests. Hobby clubs can help wipe the smirk from the swindler's lips.

With your aid, these pages will continue to try to unmask the swindler before his ruse plays havoc with your plans. Keep on sending us letters telling of your personal experiences with chiselers of all kinds.

If printed, your letters will not only enlighten your fellow-readers but will bring you \$5.00. Requests to have names withheld will be observed in all instances.

We're sorry but no letters can be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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

Now for our own "private eyes" on the lookout for rackets:

#### Swindle in Laugh Time

Dear Sir:

Upon answering a knock at my door one summer morning, I had a blue card handed to me. Glancing quickly over the printing I saw the words "deaf and dumb" and "only means

*(Please continue on page 8)*



... For the Well Trained Man in ...

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Address.....Apt.....

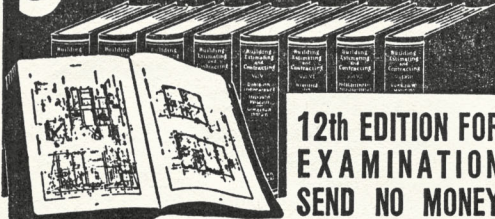
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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Please attach a letter stating your age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as a reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

# LEARN TO METALIZE!

and turn worthless objects into Gold and Silver Treasures  
**\$5.00 AN HOUR PROFIT**  
in New Home Business



Think of turning 56c worth of materials into a profit of \$5.00 and more for just a few minutes of easily learned handiwork. Sounds fantastic—yet, it's true—as you can quickly prove without risking any money. I have ready to mail to you a complete set of instructions—so easy to follow that even the inexperienced—old or young—men or women can learn the Art of Metalizing in few hours. Then use this magic to Restore Old Articles by replating in Bronze, Silver or Gold. Jump value of "dime store" articles 5 to 10 times. Turn leaves, shells, flowers, into Gold and Silver Costume Jewelry, Eternalize Baby Shoes and other keepsakes with layers of bronze.

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CITY \_\_\_\_\_ ZONE \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

## Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

of a living". The man had a pack of needles in the other hand. I gave him several coins and motioned for him to keep the needles, whereupon he broke into a broad grin and turned away, murmuring *thanks!* After feeling amazed, then stupid, I burst into laughter. It was a shameful swindle but I don't know when I've had a heartier laugh at my own expense.

Quincy L. Ingram  
Middletown, Ohio.

### Home-Work With a Loss

Dear Sir:

The ad said, "Earn up to \$100 a month in your spare time in your own home". I rushed my letter in to the address given. A week later I received all the glowing details plus a request for the small sum of two dollars for a Manual of Instructions and Placement Report. Nothing could have sounded more legitimate!

Now, I have answered a lot of ads of this type, but they always required large sums for materials or to show good faith. This outfit trusted me to send the two dollars so much that they included an assignment for me to do.

When the assignment was completed I was to mail it along with my statement for \$11.00 (good pay for a couple of hours work).

It sounded so good that my husband told me to go ahead and purchase a new typewriter, which would pay for itself in a short time with the work I was to do.

I completed a letter-perfect assignment and mailed it with my statement, only to receive a letter in return telling me there had been a mistake—would I please correct my statement to read \$7.00. This was still good pay, so I complied.

Another letter followed on the heels of this one asking that those who wished to compile mailing lists and those who wished to address envelopes to state their choice. But NO check for services rendered. I stated my choice and that hope-filled letter was returned to me stamped: OUT OF BUSINESS.

By this time I had received answers from companies listed in the Placement Report as possible sources of employment. All stated that they had never heard of the boss, nor did they hire help outside of their offices. I began to boil—it was the same old song with different words. I packed up all the letters and gave them to the Postal Inspector. Upon arrival, I found I was not the only who had been taken in.

I have had a letter from the Post Office officials stating that they were trying to determine the charge against the man. I only hope that some day there will be some way to put a stop to such practices, and I have come to the conclusion that the way to make money at home is to advertise your services and pick and chose among them. In this way it would be pretty hard to be swindled.

J. M. Moller,  
Sioux City, Iowa.

(Please continue on page 10)





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Telephony</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Radio Operating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Radio, General</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Radio Servicing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineering</li> </ul> | <p><b>Electrical Courses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electric Light and Power</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lighting Technician</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Practical Electrician</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Power House Electric</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ship Electrician</li> </ul> <p><b>Internal Combustion Engines Courses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Auto Technician</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Diesel-Electric</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Aviation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Gas Engines</li> </ul> <p><b>Mechanical Courses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Aircraft Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Forging</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Instrumentation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Metallurgy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Machine Shop</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Machine Shop Inspection</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineering</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mold-Loft Work</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaking—Wood, Metal</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sheet-Metal Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sheet-Metal Worker</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ship Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ship Fitting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tool Designing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Toolmaking</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Welding—Gas and Electric</li> </ul> <p><b>Railroad Courses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Air Brake</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Locomotive</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Engineer</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Fireman</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Machinist</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Railroad Section Foreman</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Steam and Diesel Loco. Eng.</li> </ul> <p><b>Stationary Engineering Courses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Boiler making</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Combust. Engrg.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Power Plant Engrg.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engineer</li> </ul> <p><b>Textile Courses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Loom Fixing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Rayon Weaving</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Textile Designing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacturing</li> </ul> |
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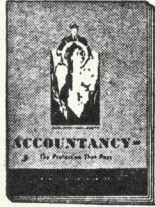
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DURACLEAN cleans by absorption! No scrubbing. No soaking or shrinkage. Fabrics dry in just a few hours. Dirt, grease and many unsightly spots vanish as if by magic . . . colors revive. Upholstery and floor covering last longer.

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Territories are limited! Write immediately for FREE Booklet and Easy Terms. No obligation.

DURACLEAN CO., 1-673 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

## Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

### Triple Rent

Dear Sir:

My father recently rented a small home and paid three months' rent in advance, securing a receipt for the money. We could occupy the house in fifteen days.

When the time came to move into the house, we discovered the hoax. Not only had the man rented the house to someone else prior to the time he rented to us; he had also listed it for sale with three separate real estate agencies, one of which had sold it and had a down payment!

My father considered himself lucky: he got an attachment against the down payment the real estate agency had, and we had our money back within a week. We are looking for a house.

R. M. J.,  
Grand Forks, N. D.

### Futile Trust

Dear Sir:

Not long ago, my aunt, who rents rooms in her home, was taken in for a little racket that was new, to say the least. Perhaps, others might have a similar experience and if so, this little warning might save them loss.

One morning, a fine looking young man, carrying an expensive suitcase, stopped at my aunt's home and asked to see a room. After my aunt showed him one, he told her it was just what he was looking for, and asked her what the rent would be for a week. When she told him the rate was \$5.00, he said that was all right, and that he would pay for a month in advance. When he took out his billfold to pay her, he apologized, saying that he was a little short of cash, and would she accept his personal check for \$25.00 - \$20.00 for the room, and the extra \$5.00 for a little extra cash for him until he moved in the next morning. Of course, my aunt told him that would be o.k. so he gave her his check on a local bank for \$25.00, and she gave him \$5.00 in change, and the young man left, taking his suitcase with him, saying he had some other things he wanted to put in it and bring with him the next morning.

Of course, when my aunt presented the check at her bank, which happened to be the one the young fellow had drawn the check on, he had no account there, and no one at the bank had ever heard tell of him. While my aunt was only out \$5.00, it taught her a lesson she is not likely to forget very soon.

Gene G. Grayson,  
Parkersburg, W. V.

### Convict Lure

Dear Sir:

Perhaps exposing this little racket will save some person with a loved one in the penn a nice sum of money and a tremendous strain of nervous anxiety.

(Please continue on page 12)

Let Me Set You Up For **BIG PROFITS** In '51!

**RUN THE BEST  
"SHOE STORE  
BUSINESS"  
IN YOUR TOWN!**



**Free!**  
**SELLING  
OUTFIT!**



DECLARATION OF A LEGION OF WOMEN  
Guaranteed by  
Good Housekeeping  
as an ADVERTISED PRODUCT

**GOOD  
HOUSEKEEPING  
SEAL OPENS DOORS**

Recognized by women all over the world as the symbol of quality merchandise, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on Velvet-eez shoes opens doors for you and clinches sales

**You Don't Invest a Cent!  
... Everything Furnished FREE!**

I'll put a profitable "shoe store business" right in your pocket! Make quick cash—earn liberal advance commissions from the first hour you work! You have none of the usual store expenses of rent, light, heat, etc.—no investment in costly stock. **WE FURNISH EVERYTHING YOU NEED—SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE BIG MONEY FROM THE VERY START!** Get into this business of never-ending demand, because **EVERYONE WEARS SHOES!** You'll get quick orders from comfort-hungry folks, and plenty of repeat business right along, following our **TESTED SELLING METHODS** proved by over 5,000 successful salesmen! Even starting in spare time, you should soon have a full-time, ever-growing, profitable lifetime business for yourself!

**OVER 160 FAST-SELLING  
STYLES FOR MEN & WOMEN**

Popular, air-cooled styles lead a wonderful line of foot-wear in the finest leathers, latest styles, and the **EXCLUSIVE** comfort-features that cannot be found in retail stores! You can satisfy the needs and taste of almost everyone in your territory—**SELL COMFORT, STYLE, QUALITY and CASH!** Sport, dress, work shoes for men and women—**EXTRA** profits with Leather Jackets, Raincoats, Wool Shirts, etc.!!

**EXTRA PROFITS  
SELLING CLOTHING**

In addition to the generous profit you make on every pair of shoes, you have an opportunity to **ADD TO YOUR INCOME** by selling top quality Leather Jackets, Wool Shirts, Raincoats for men and women.

**PUT A "SHOE STORE  
BUSINESS" RIGHT  
IN YOUR POCKET...  
YOU DON'T INVEST  
A CENT... MAKE  
BIGGER PROFITS...  
NO STORE OVERHEAD...  
EXCLUSIVE SALES  
FEATURES BUILD YOUR  
REPEAT BUSINESS!**

**A PENNY POSTCARD CAN  
PUT YOU IN BUSINESS!**

Sell them all! When you send your name and address on this coupon—even on a penny postcard—you are launching yourself in an entirely new world of profit! Sell them all! Complete line! 160 fine shoe styles of finest quality, plus other fast-selling numbers, all included in **FREE SELLING OUTFIT!** Rush that coupon today for your **BIG CHANCE** in '51!



**BILL EVANS, TELLS  
HOW HE HAS A  
PAY-DAY EVERYDAY!**

"I have been a salesman for thirty years, but I never thought selling could be so easy and pleasant. I HAVE A **PAYDAY EVERY DAY I WORK!** All I do is hand a new customer a sample and ask if he ever wore Velvet-eez Air Cushion shoes. I never failed to mention the way we give correct fit."  
W. M. Evans, Louisiana

**EXCLUSIVE FEATURES**



*Velvet-eez*

**AIR CUSHION CLINCHES SALES FOR YOU!**

When you sell this line, you sell **FEATURES**—features that no other shoe man can offer the folks in your territory—like this wonderful **EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez AIR CUSHION** that brings day-long comfort to men and women who are on their feet on hard floors and pavements from early morning to late night. The 5-second Velvet-eez Demonstrator you'll get free in your Sales Outfit, will clinch sales for you as it has for hundreds of other Consolidated Shoe Men all over the country!

**DON'T DELAY**

**RUSH THE COUPON NOW!**

Consolidated Shoe System  
Dept. S-116, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin  
Set me up for **BIG PROFITS!** Rush me **FREE** Selling Outfit featuring **AIR CUSHION** shoes, Jackets, Coats, Shirts, etc. Include amazing 5-second Velvet-eez Demonstrator, send it all **FREE** and **PREPAID**.

Name .....

Address .....

City & State .....

**Consolidated Shoe System**  
Dept. S-116 Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

**"I'M EARNING \$300 A MONTH!"**



... says Leonidas Burgoyne of Chicago, Illinois, "Expert individual instruction in the fully equipped shops of Greer Shop Training gave me the right start to get my good paying job."

**GREER SHOP TRAINING** . . . established 1902, is one of America's largest trade schools. Over 48,000 successful graduates. You learn by tearing down, repairing and rebuilding. Day and evening classes. Mail this coupon today!

**LEARN A TRADE NOW!**

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Gentlemen: Please send me information about trade I have checked below. (Specify if you are VET  or NON-VET .

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<input type="checkbox"/> AUTO MECHANICS	<input type="checkbox"/> BODY, FENDER REPAIR
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Above courses approved for Vets and Civilians.

**ALSO THE FOLLOWING HOME STUDY COURSES**

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**World's Lightest**

**SMALLER THAN A POSTAGE STAMP**

**\$1.00**  
Only 1.00  
6 for \$5.00

**World's Tiniest Lighter!**  
Only 3/8" Tall, 3/8" Wide, 3/8" Thick!  
PRECISION-MADE LIKE FINE WATCH!  
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You'll be thrilled . . . your friends will be amazed when you use the **WORLD'S SMALLEST LIGHTER!** Never before a lighter so small . . . yet so mechanically perfect. Gives a sure light every time you use it. Perfect for women because it has a built-in eyelet for use on charm bracelet or as a brooch. Wear it as a novel scatter pin. Men go for this tiny lighter because it takes a minimum of pocket room. Hides away in vest pocket. Creates a sensation wherever it's used. **NOT A TOY!** A sturdy, **PRECISION-BUILT LIGHTER** that will give years of service. Designed and built like a fine watch, handsomely plated in fine chrome. Uses regular fuel and flints.

**Unconditionally Guaranteed!**

SEND NO MONEY! Pay postman only \$1.00 each plus 35c postage on delivery. Or send cash with order and save 35c postage charges. Order 6 right now for only \$5.00 . . . a 20% savings for you! Use lighter 10 days. If not delighted, return for immediate refund.

**MODERN MERCHANDISE, Dept. 350**  
169 W. Madison Street, Chicago 2, Illinois

**Ready for the Rackets**

(Continued from page 10)

One day as I left my home I noticed I was being followed by a man and a woman in a car. They circled the block twice; and as I was walking, stopped and waited for me at the end of the second block. The woman got out of the car and approached me as the man drove off slowly.

"You're Doris Keats (fictitious name), aren't you?" the woman asked. When I confirmed the fact she continued:

"I have a message to you from your husband, Joe. He and my husband broke out of prison two days ago. He needs money, bad. Can't leave the room we smuggled him into after dark until he gets some clothes. He gave me his measurements for a suit. My Jack's afraid to be still a minute. We're in a hot car. Had the numbers changed. Joe said for you not to take any chances until the heat was off a little. Just send the money and he could manage the rest."

"But I haven't heard any report of an escape," I managed to say, trying to throw off the shock. "Couldn't I go to him. Is he O. K.?"

"Been too many breaks recently and they're trying to keep this one on the Q.T."

"But I don't have the money," I continued. "You've just got to scrape some up for him, all you can. We're too hot to pull a job; and that's the surest way to get picked up. We've got to have enough to clear a few states. I'll give you his address and you can catch a bus after dark and come to see him for a little while. He's just fifty miles from here."

"I do have a couple of small defense bonds in the bank," I added. "I could cash them and bring them tonight."

"Tonight's too late. He's got to have food and clothes today. Tell you what; we'll meet you at the corner of third and Grant in one hour, 2:35. That'll give you time to rake up all you can and I can still get clothes before the stores close. I'll take all the chances. The cops may be tailing you."

I did what any woman who loves a man would have done under the same circumstances. They were bound to have known my husband well, she told so much about him and what I was to do.

I handed over the money. Forty six dollars from my two small defense bonds which were not quite mature, and four out of my purse. They seemed disappointed; but I promised to bring more when I saw them at the address they had given me after dark.

There was no such address. Joe was still in the pen, I found out later; but someone who knew him had gotten out.

M. C.,  
Wichita Falls, Texas.

**Brother Love Backfires**

Dear Sir:  
My husband answered the telephone one evening and returned to the living room with an odd look on his face.

(Please continue on page 109)



**I Send You  
18 BIG  
KITS  
OF RADIO-  
TELEVISION  
EQUIPMENT**

**Train at Home  
in Spare Time for  
and**

# **RADIO TELEVISION**

**My Famous Training System Prepares You  
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Radio-Television is now America's greatest opportunity field! Trained men are needed to fill good jobs and handle profitable Radio-Television Service work. I have trained hundreds of men for success in Radio-Television—and I stand ready to Train you too, even if you have no previous experience. My training is 100% practical—designed to give you the knowledge and experience you need to make money in Radio-Television in the shortest possible time. I Train you with up-to-the-second revised lessons—PLUS many big kits of Radio-Television equipment. You actually do over 300 demonstrations, experiments and construction projects. In addition, you build a Powerful 6-tube-2-band radio, a multi-range test meter and a complete Television receiver! All equipment is **YOURS TO KEEP.**

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You do all your training with me AT HOME in spare hours. Keep right on with your present job and income while learning—and earn extra cash besides! The day you enroll I begin sending you plans and ideas for doing profitable spare time Radio-TV work. Many of my Sprayberry students pay for their entire training this way! You get priceless experience and many plans for making extra money. You build all your own Radio-TV Test Equipment from parts I send you—nothing else to buy. Just one more reason why I believe I offer the ambitious man the biggest value in top notch Radio-TV Training available anywhere in America today.

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Radio-Television is growing with amazing speed. More than 2000 Radio broadcasting stations PLUS an additional 102 Television stations are now on the air. Radio sets and TV receivers are being made and sold in record breaking numbers. If you enjoy working with your hands . . . if you like to do interesting and varied work . . . if you really want to make good money and work in an industry that has a future . . . **YOU BELONG IN RADIO-TELEVISION.** But you **MUST** have good Training to "cash in" . . . the kind of training that starts you out with basic fundamentals and carries you right through every circuit and problem of Radio-Television Servicing and Repair. In a word . . . that's Sprayberry Training . . . the course backed by more than 20 years of association with the Radio-Television industry!

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Radio, Dept. 53-U  
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**Mail  
Coupon  
Today!**

**SPRAYBERRY ACADEMY OF RADIO, Dept. 53-U  
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Please rush to me all information on your Radio-Television Training plan. I understand this does not obligate me and that no salesman will call upon me.

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

Address .....

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

Please Check Below About Your Experience  
 Are You Experienced?  No Experience



**VETERANS: My Radio  
Training is Approved  
for Veterans.**

**IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCED  
in Radio I'll qualify you for  
Television in 4 to 6 weeks.  
Rush coupon.**

**NO OBLIGATION  
No Salesman  
Will Call**

# THE WILL TO

## Baffling Mystery

### Novelette

#### CHAPTER ONE

##### The Long Ride

**T**HE eastbound train from Oakland to Chicago was winding through a series of little tunnels. Jane Beaumont could see, far ahead of her, the churning wheels of the twin engines bursting out of holes in the cliff before her own car plunged into them.

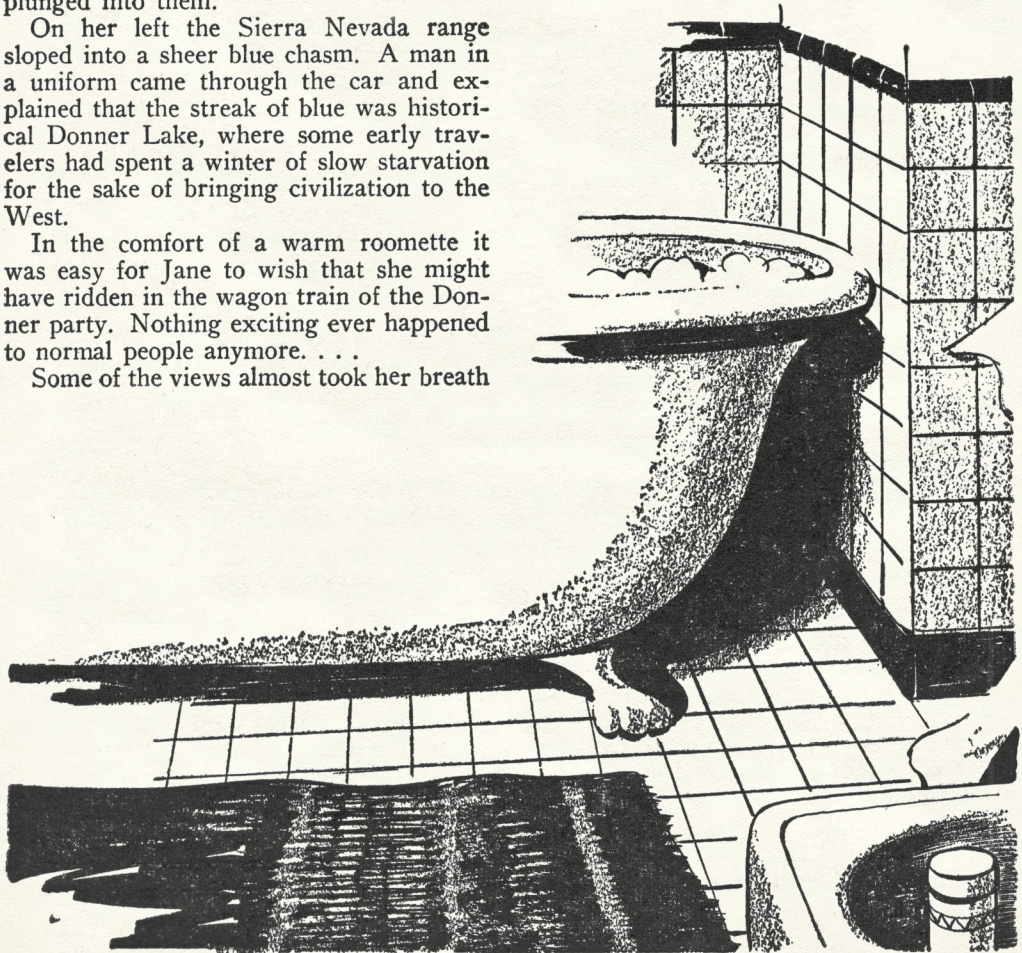
On her left the Sierra Nevada range sloped into a sheer blue chasm. A man in a uniform came through the car and explained that the streak of blue was historical Donner Lake, where some early travelers had spent a winter of slow starvation for the sake of bringing civilization to the West.

In the comfort of a warm roomette it was easy for Jane to wish that she might have ridden in the wagon train of the Donner party. Nothing exciting ever happened to normal people anymore. . . .

Some of the views almost took her breath

*Train tickets cover mileage not murder . . . but a pert and pretty coed found herself on a grim one-way passage to mayhem when her glamorous seat companion changed destination—in midpoint.*

**Jane threw her weight against the opening door.**



# DIE

By  
**THORNE**  
**LEE**



away. She was thankful that Kathie, the girl across the aisle, had offered to change seats with her while taking a nap. There was a lot more excitement on this side of the car, on the ragged edge of the universe—but it didn't last. The sun soon dipped behind giant peaks and darkness crept swiftly through the canyons.

To escape the last-minute scramble in the dining car, Jane answered the first call for dinner. A glance into her own roomette revealed Kathie tucked gracefully into the seat, fast asleep.

When Jane came back from dinner, she was startled to see the toe of a man's shoe protruding into the aisle where Kathie's foot should be. The man seemed to be sitting awkwardly on the edge of the seat. Kathie, completely hidden, was giggling at something he had said. Jane retreated discreetly to the seat across the aisle and sat looking out into a magnificent, spangled sweep of darkness.

Without deliberately listening, she could hear the man's deep, subdued voice: "Long ride. Too damn long. Carry m'own little monotony killer—Won't y'join me huh?"

Kathie must have accepted the drink, for her laughs grew louder, more brazen. Jane shrugged. It didn't matter. Kathie was just someone you meet on a train and never see again.

Personally, Jane felt lucky that this big lush had spotted another girl instead of herself. Perhaps men had an eye for their own kind. She wondered, uneasily, if that could possibly account for the lack of adventure in her own life.

Jane laughed at herself and immediately forgot all about Kathie and the man when she discovered her own reflection in the night-shaded window. She was also a blonde like Kathie, but not the fluffy, self-consciously cute type. Her own face was long and her hair fell smooth and straight to the shoulders, giving her a look of slenderness and height. Her eyes were a deep, shadowy blue.

She liked to think that most of her character was there in the eyes—confidence, enthusiasm, and dignity—and you could mask off the small red mouth and the soft blur of a chin and still know all about her.

Jane's reverie must have been a form of sleep, for she came suddenly awake when

that male voice spoke again in an audible whisper: "Conductor tol' me we stop a half-hour in Reno. I know a swell lil' bar just a block from the station. How about you and me. . ."

THE rest of his words faded away. Annoyed with Kathie, Jane leaped to her feet, pressed her small fists into the pockets of her blue jacket, and strolled toward the club car. On the way she caught a glimpse in her own roomette of a dark male profile and a froth of curly blonde hair. Jane felt like kicking both of them out, but she didn't. Instead she sat in the lounge and wrote a few postcards until the train steamed into Reno.

She might be able to mail her cards in the station, if that man was right about the half-hour stopover. Just to be sure, she consulted her time-table. To her surprise the schedule showed nothing but the usual brief passenger stop.

Oh gosh, she thought, I hope that drunk doesn't get Kathie off into some bar and make her miss her train!

Jane might have gotten off herself and tried to find them, but that would be like throwing good money after bad. If Kathie failed to get back, it was her own fault.

With her usual decisiveness, Jane shut the matter out of her mind. She sat in the lounge until the train was several minutes out of Reno. When she returned to her roomette, she found the curtain closed.

Brushing it angrily aside, she confronted not Kathie but a total stranger, a slim blonde woman, about her own height, who was struggling to remove a light blue flannel jacket.

"Hey!" the woman protested.

Jane backed hastily into the aisle, looking upward. It was her own number, eleven, over the door.

"I'm afraid there's some mistake," Jane said politely. "This happens to be my seat."

The woman's mouth hardened. Her eyes were as colorless as two clods. "You're wrong, girlie," she said. "Can't be yours. It's mine."

Jane was in no mood for argument. She sought out the conductor, a gaunt, friendly little man, and showed him her seat check. He came back with her and demanded a check from the other woman, who fumbled sourly in her purse and produced it.



The conductor shuffled through a sheaf of envelopes, opened one, and checked the woman's ticket. After some argument he convinced her that she was in the wrong seat. When he led her away, Jane shut the curtain and relaxed on her bed with a long, weary sigh. She wondered if Kathie had gotten back in time, but the problem did not really worry her. She was too tired to be afraid of anything. . . .

**A**WAKING at dawn to the lulling rhythm of the wheels, Jane discovered that the train had turned over in the night and they were riding along upside down with the sky where the ground should be.

Too sleepy to be alarmed, she identified the floating mass below her not as grey sky but a tremendous, tossing expanse of water. That brought her up with a jolt. The train was moving steadily along but it appeared to be riding the waves of some vast inland ocean.

She laughed suddenly, recalling that the railroad crossed the Great Salt Lake on its way to Ogden. It would be nice to get out and breathe some fresh air in the dry Utah dawn. Quickly, she dressed, patted, twisted, and combed herself into a reasonable facsimile of a lady.

The train was already slowing down and she hastened across the aisle to waken Kathie. Yanking open the curtain of number ten, she was astonished to see that the face which stirred dreamily on the pillow was not Kathie's at all. It was a twisted, hollowed, bitter sort of face which Jane finally recognized. This was the same woman who had tried to take her bed last night.

Confused, Jane let her eye rove quickly about the little cubicle. Spread over the foot of the bed were Kathie's love magazines. That bag on the rack was surely the exact duplicate of the little alligator bag Kathie had used.

Silently, Jane backed into the aisle without waking the woman. The simple explanation would be that Kathie's ticket had taken her only as far as Reno, but Jane knew better. Kathie was going to Chicago, like herself. She had said so.

The aisle was crowding now with a stream of eager passengers. Jane drifted along with them, found herself carried down the steps to the platform. The big,

airy yard was alive with panting trains. Breath came from her lips in a misty foam. She looked around for someone in authority but could see only a few porters.

Someone shouted, "Twenty minutes." Jane followed the crowd down a ramp and under the tracks to the big station. It took her several minutes to find the right door into the railway office. Pushing boldly inside, she saw a man who was nothing but a hooked nose, a green eyeshade, and a long, trembling ear cocked toward a telegraph key.

"Listen, please," Jane said, breathlessly, "there's something wrong on my train."

Invisible eyes studied her through the green shade. "Which train?"

"Eastbound, from Oakland."

"Yeah?"

"There was a girl named Kathie in the roomette across the aisle from me. Last night a man talked her into getting off with him at Reno. Now there's some other woman in her place."

"Maybe the man was her husband. Maybe they live in Reno."

"No, she had a ticket all the way to Chicago. Can't you check on that?"

"Yeah," he said, and pulled a pencil from a drawer. "You know the car and seat number?"

She gave him those.

"We'll check it. Now you better get back to your train. They don't wait for anybody, not even pretty girls."

Back in her own seat again, while the train pulled into Wyoming, Jane wondered if she might have been hasty. Sometimes mysterious things proved to have reasonable explanations.

The conductor, in her doorway, beckoned without speaking. She followed him back to the lounge car where he drew up two chairs to face a big, round-faced man in street clothes. The train was just leaving some busy railroad town in the heart of the prairie.

"Are you the girl who registered that complaint at Ogden?" the big man said gruffly.

"It wasn't a complaint, exactly—"

He grunted: "Your name?"

She gave him that and her address in Berkeley.

"Now tell us all about it, Miss Beaumont."

SHE RECITED the whole experience from her first meeting with Kathie just outside of Sacramento. At the end he asked her if she knew Kathie's last name.

Jane thoughtfully tapped a finger on her white teeth. "I think she mentioned it, but I can't—"

"Was it Saddler?"

Jane's eyes brightened. "Oh, yes! I—I think so. It was Saddler, or something very much like that!"

"Humph." The man scowled, but not at her. He was looking at his notes. "That's the name this other woman carries in her purse along with her seat check. Kathryn Saddler."

"She does? . . . Oh, don't you see what they've done? They've taken Kathie's purse away from her and put another woman in her place!"

"We'll see. You say this girl—this Kathie's bags are still on the train?"

"Yes."

The big man was out of his chair and striding up the aisle. The conductor thanked Jane and left her alone. Without appearing too eager, Jane got back to her own seat in time to hear part of the interrogation of the woman across the aisle. "Are those your bags?" the big man was asking.

"Of course!" was the harsh reply.

"Then you should be able to tell us what's in 'em, lady. This little one, for example—what's in here?"

There was an instant of hesitation. "Well, let me see, there's a brush and comb, face powder, perfume, a tooth brush—"

"What color?"

"Color?" The woman sounded rattled. She swore at him before adding, "Who the hell knows the color of their toothbrush?"

He chuckled. "In a family like mine, it's a good idea. Now, what else?"

She went on in a whine listing the items any woman would be likely to carry. Jane heard the snap of a bag being opened. There was a period of silence and then steps crossed the aisle. The big man was pushing a photograph in Jane's face. She saw a small blonde girl, her arm locked with a young man in army uniform.

"That's Kathie!" Jane whispered, excitedly.

"Good." The big man smiled.

He went away with the photograph and the questions abruptly stopped. When Jane looked out again, the detective and the conductor were gone. She felt a little uneasy being only a few feet away from that hard-faced woman whom she had betrayed to the law.

They stopped in another town and the woman herself rushed into the aisle, gliding toward the end of the car. Jane resisted an impulse to follow. She had already done her part as a civilian. Let the law take care of the rest.

The woman soon came back to her seat, muttering angrily. A short time later another man in street clothes appeared at Jane's door. He asked her to come to the lounge, where he took her whole statement on a typewriter and had her sign it. "This will save you being held over as a witness," he said.

Jane was glad of that. When the train reached Cheyenne that evening, two men with sheriff's badges came aboard. They arrested the strange woman and removed her from the train along with Kathie's belongings.

Poor Kathie! What could possibly have happened to her? Dreadful thoughts rode with Jane all that night across the dark plains of Nebraska. She would leap awake in a cold sweat and the pounding train wheels seemed to echo her terror.

Once her throat felt so dry and ragged, she was sure she must have screamed aloud in her sleep.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Country Cousin

A HAZY Iowa morning did not improve Jane's spirits. Her nerves were jumpy. She sat in the club car for a while just for the comfort of human companionship. When the train had crossed the Illinois line, she came back to her roomette and almost tripped over the legs of a man who was sprawled in her seat. She saw a young, grinning, not-too-hand-some face, and took a quick step backward. . . . It could be happening all over again, to herself. Another girl, another man—"This your seat?" the man asked. She swallowed. "Yes." He stood up. "Jane Beaumont?"

He was too close to her, his long body almost pressing against hers in that cramped space, cigarette smoke drifting from his lips directly into her face. She felt the sting of it in her eyes.

She edged into the aisle. "Yes, I'm Jane Beaumont."

He fumbled for his wallet and displayed a badge.

She sighed in relief. "Oh, you're another detective?"

He laughed pleasantly. "Well, there are arguments about that. I usually argue on my side. The name is Ross. Charley Ross."

His hair was sandy and his grin sent little wrinkling waves through his red, freckled cheeks. His ears were too large, seeming to lean forward at perpetual attention. His jaw came down to an acute V.

"Let's forget the detective part," he offered. "Let's say I'm a special greeter for the state of Illinois."

"You're not arresting me?" she gasped.

His eyes coolly surveyed her slender figure, pausing unduly long, she felt, at her ankles. He shook his head, crunched his cigarette in a tray, and guided her with a gentle pressure of his hand toward the rear of the train. "I was just thinking," he said, "that it's never the right kind of women who get into trouble. Take you, for instance—"

"Am I in trouble?"

"No, but you ought to be. Any time I get a chance to pull someone out of a hole, they usually deserve to be left in. For instance, this girl who got snatched. Why didn't it happen to somebody like you instead of her? I could really go to work on a deal like that—"

"Snatched?" Jane repeated. "Then I was right. Kathie was stolen bodily off the train!"

"I'd say the body went willingly," he replied, drily, "though there may have been some extra persuasion later on."

She shuddered. "In a dark and dangerous city."

He laughed his gentle laugh. "Reno is supposed to be dangerous only to the pocketbook, not the person. Let's sit here."

They were in the club car. There was a foursome of bridge at the far end. Otherwise, they were alone. Chicago was not far away and most of the passengers were in their seats, restless and expectant.

Jane sat facing Detective Ross, who locked his long red hands around a bony knee. "You gave the boys in Wyoming a good story, Miss Beaumont, but nothing about yourself."

"Do you think I have anything to hide, Mr. Ross?"

His eyes roved down again to her ankles and the thin, smiling lips seemed to consider some outrageous answer, then reject it. He spread his hands. "Where you from, Miss Beaumont, and where you going? Those are simple questions?"

JANE gave him simple answers. Doubling her fist and flipping up two fingers, she said, "One, I'm a graduate student at California. Two, I'm going to meet my grand uncle."

His long ears and sharp grey eyes seemed to seize on a single word. "To meet him, you say? Your uncle—er—grand uncle?"

"Yes. Ralph Beaumont, a retired manufacturer. He lives near Chicago. I hardly knew he existed until recently."

The sensitive ears gave a little jump. "Recently?"

"Yes. I received a letter and a ticket. Mister—ah—my uncle wrote that he's past eighty and he would like to meet all his relatives before he dies . . . even me."

Ross caught the afterthought, repeated it. "Even you? Are you a special case?"

"Well, sort of. My father was a black sheep. He was a nephew who was brought up by Ralph Beaumont, but he ran away with a girl that his uncle didn't like, so poor Dad was kicked right out of the family. He has never hear another word from the Beaumonts, any of them."

"Is your father living?"

"No. Nor my mother. I'm very much—" She hesitated "on my own, Mr. Ross."

"That could easily be remedied," Ross said in his breezy way, then leaned intently forward, his eyes scowling. "Do you know any of the relatives, the other Beaumonts?"

She shook her head. "Uncle Ralph mentioned two of my cousins—his grandsons—who live with him. Earl Hanlon and Luke Beaumont, I think their names are. Why do you ask me all this, Mr. Ross? Is it important?"

He shrugged. "You never know. You'd be surprised how many aimless questions I

can ask in a day. Let's go back to Reno and the snatching. I understand that you and the Saddler girl had switched seats at the time."

Jane nodded and explained the reason for that.

"You don't know whether the dark man might have known Kathie before?" he asked.

Jane speculated. "It sounded more like a pick-up to me. However," she added with a little, twisted smile, "I haven't had much experience."

Ross studied her, doubtfully. "No experience? At the University of California? How do college boys spend their time out there—playing football?"

"We were talking about Kathie Saddler," she reminded.

"Oh, yes. . . In your report you said that you first caught this other woman in your own compartment."

"My roommate," Jane corrected. "Yes, I did. I think she simply made a mistake in the numbers, because she *did* have Kathie's number on her check, not mine."

Ross stared past Jane at the fleeting landscape, whistling a popular tune. "You're quite sure this dark guy was interested in Kathie and not—"

"Interested is hardly the word," Jane said with a quick laugh.

Ross was suddenly on his feet.

"Aren't you going to ask me anything else?" Jane said, in surprise.

"All for now."

"For now?" She stood up. "You mean there'll be more later? Will they drag me into court if it's a serious crime?"

"Abduction is always a serious crime, Miss Beaumont. Just how much more there may be later and where you will be dragged, I'm not prepared to say." His mouth gave a little twist of humor to the words. "Where can I find you when you're in Chicago?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "Uncle Ralph's address was only a postal box. The boys are meeting me at the train."

"The boys?"

"My cousins."

"Oh. Well—" He shook her hand with a quick, warm pressure. As if by afterthought, he flipped a card out of his pocket. It gave his name, address, and phone number. "I'm available professionally, or

otherwise," he said with his sly grin, and before she could think of an answer he was gone.

THE train was rolling into the station, seeming to ride the rooftops, cutting rudely across a panorama of private lives, so closely that the dingy laundry strung from rear balconies across dreary back yards seemed almost within reach of her hand, plunging at last into the smudgy heart of the city, into man-made canyons which were steeper and more frightening than the rugged Sierras.

Jane let the rush of passengers leave the train ahead of her, while she calmly gave her face and hair some final touches in a hand mirror. The calmness was only on the exterior. A natural shyness urged her to turn and run the other way. What could she possibly have in common with relatives she had never known?

At least she would not let them treat her like a country cousin. Any bits of school-girl eagerness or wide-eyed excitement over this strange, big city might encourage them to be patronizing. This visit was their idea and not hers, so any enthusiasm must come from them.

Surprisingly, it did.

Trudging along the narrow platform between two steaming, sweating trains, Jane observed two young men going the alternate way, slowly sifting the crowd between them. They were both dark, good-looking men. One was tall and he moved lithely, like a hound. The other was shorter, stocky and curly-haired who bounced rather than walked, crouching expectantly with a quick, inviting grin for every girl he sighted.

They both saw Jane at the same instant, closed in on her.

"Jane?" said the curly-headed one.

"Beaumont?" added the other.

She nodded and they swung around, matching strides, gripping her elbows and lifting her so high on the toes that she felt as if she were a rag doll with stringy, dangling legs.

"Have a good trip?" the tall one asked, squeezing her arm.

"It was a little tiring."

"Yeah, it's a long ride from Frisco with too much scenery."

The other one slipped his arm around

her waist and hugged her. "That's for old time's sake, Janey," he said, "for all those old times that I didn't know you were alive!"

She hardly knew what to say. Her smile was hesitant. "Are you two my—ah—cousins?"

She hoped the emphasis on 'cousin' would restrain him a little but he kept his arm around her. "I'm sort of a cousin—Earl Hanlon," he said. "This guy here is Stuart Kennedy, a very good friend of the family."

Stuart, the tall one, pressed her arm again. She certainly could not complain about a lack of enthusiasm.

They followed the traffic, which was funneling through a row of doorways into the big, noisy station. Two men rose from a bench to greet them. One was very old, his feeble eyes deeply sunken in a face that was covered with brown blotches and outstanding veins. He caught Jane's hand, working it between dry fingers. This, she decided, must be her father's uncle, Ralph Beaumont.

The other cousin, Luther Beaumont, was

a lean blonde man, mildly handsome, with an unbending, refined manner. He shook her hand briefly and murmured. "Good to see you, Jane."

Earl Hanlon clapped him on the back. "Good?" he gloated. "That's an understatement, Luke! She's a lot more than you'd expect of a woman in this family. I think she's great!"

"Nice," the old man said, peering closely into her face. "She's going to be nice."

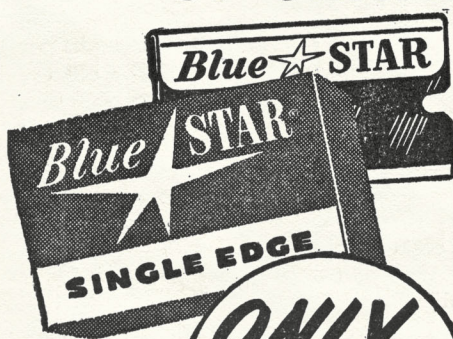
While Cousin Earl loaded her bags in a cab and Cousin Luke steered his grandfather into the front seat, Jane stood alone with the tall, dark-eyed man named Stuart Kennedy in a gloomy vault that smelled of exhaust fumes and echoed with a blare of horns. The very earth under her feet vibrated with the throbbing weight of the city.

Kennedy lit a cigarette. "Do you carry a lipstick?" he asked her curtly.

Jane was startled. "Why—ah—yes, of course."

"Well, use it!" he snapped. "You look like a fugitive from a finishing school!"

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## CHAPTER THREE

## In Need of a Playmate

JANE had no idea of the direction in which the taxi drove but it was a long way and at times they seemed to parallel the lake, turning at last into a wild, wooded sector which might be anywhere in the world except the heart of Chicago.

The Beaumont house was big and very old. Something about it reminded her of the gaunt, shrivelled features of Grandfather Beaumont himself.

The inside was gloomily lined with dark, panelled wood, and there was a tell-tale musty smell of airless corridors and aged furnishings.

"Someone should set fire to this place," Cousin Earl informed her privately, "and you're just the one who can do it, Janey."

It was a strange afternoon. Every time the old man tried to raise some question about her childhood Jane found someone pushing a drink into her hand. Her head was spinning from the first one. If she had accepted all of them, she would have soon fallen flat on her face.

Earl Hanlon could hardly restrain his exuberance over Jane's visit. Somehow he always managed to be sitting next to her. She was a little doubtful about his friendliness, though he was a type that some women might call cute, with his robust build and his crop of dark curls.

Stuart Kennedy was equally attentive. She found him an attractive man in spite of his strange remark at the station about her schoolgirl appearance. Of the three younger men, Cousin Luke Beaumont was the least likable. He was too stiff-kneed and stiff-tongued, but she thought he might be deep, very deep.

Before the conversation came to a dead standstill, old Ralph Beaumont, cackling over his wrinkled hands, had managed to find out that Jane remembered very little of her mother, who had died while she was quite young. This seemed to please the old man greatly.

At last Jane was allowed to go to her room and clean up for dinner. The guest room featured an ancient bed with successive mattresses ballooning under the silk coverlet. She thought of a tremendous loaf of white bread ready to burst its crust. It

was so high, she would have to jump to get in. All the other furniture was correspondingly antique.

A private door opened directly into a big bathroom and the bathtub, a king-size affair mounted on stumpy legs, brought a laugh to her lips.

At least they had hot water, and she quickly undressed, letting herself into the tub with a sigh of relief, a sense of escape from her stranger relatives. . . . She had scarcely sunk to her shoulders in a foam of suds when a sound brought her up with a jerk. Distinctly, she heard a door opening and a rapid movement in her own room.

She gasped. Sensing the direction of those thudding footsteps, she hastily gripped the edge of the tub and managed to throw on her robe. The bathroom doorknob was turning without the slightest hesitation. Jane threw her slippery, dripping body against the opening door just as a long arm twisted into her sight. Her weight crushed the dark wrist against the sill.

Someone swore at her very softly. "Listen!" a hoarse voice said— "You know what you're here for, so stop acting otherwise! What kind of a deal do you think this is?"

She could not control her throat to speak. She only produced a queer, choking noise.

The voice swore at her again, and concluded, scornfully: "I want you to get rid of that angelic smile and wear some clothes that will set the old boy back on his heels. If you don't, the two of us will toss you out of here . . . right on your head!"

The man's weight surged against the door and Jane fought it wildly, her feet slipping on the tile, but he was only trying to release his wrist. The door slammed shut and she heard a final muffled epithet before the footsteps went away, pausing briefly in the bedroom before the outer door opened and closed.

There was a bolt on the bathroom door and Jane slammed it into the socket like a pistol shot. She staggered back, found the tub with her hands, fighting a nausea that threatened to pitch her over the edge, unconscious, into the bath water. She slipped down to her knees on the mat, choking with anger and fear.

Somehow she managed to recover her senses, to get her trembling body dried and

put back her robe. Returning to the bedroom she bolted the outer door, then took a running leap and flung herself up on the big bed before the dizziness completely overwhelmed her. She lay there drifting in a black, impalpable cloud.

"You know what you're here for . . ." the man had said. She was not even sure which one of the three younger men it was, but he had come into her room without so much as a knock, without a trace of doubt. How had he expected her to receive him?

Bafflement slowly overtook the sensation of fear. Had some vicious reputation travelled ahead of her arrival? Had they gotten hold of something false and maligning which they intended to use against her?

Why?

She contrasted this rude invasion of her privacy with the way her Uncle Ralph had greeted her: "*Nice. She's going to be nice. . .*"

All she could get hold of was a deep impression of two teams of dangerous human wills fighting a battle over her in this strange house. One side expected her to act one way and one side demanded the exact opposite . . . but how could they have the slightest advance knowledge of what her character would be?

Another fragment of conversation came back to her, something her father had said to her years ago, explaining why he ran away from home: "*The old man called your mother a play girl! That was too much for me. . .*"

A play girl. . . . Was that it? Was she expected to appear in old Ralph's feeble vision as her mother had appeared to him years ago?

Jane sat up on the bed and her eyes immediately fell on her open purse. The contents had been rudely dumped on the marble dresser-top. One item, her lipstick, had been carefully set on end like a red-jacketed toy soldier.

Before descending to dinner, Jane made a difficult decision. She knew she had to survive one night in this house before she could possibly walk out. It might be easier if she did as she was told, but some stubborn sense of justice made her refuse. She went down the stairs that evening without a stroke of color on her face and wearing a very plain dress with a high collar, which exposed only the soft curve of her elbows.

Cousin Earl met her at the stairway, ushered her into dinner. As soon as she was seated facing old Ralph and Cousin Luke, an arm reached across her shoulder and a hand neatly planted something on the cloth beside her plate. She recognized that lean, dark hand. She had trapped it in the bathroom door.

"Mind if I borrow one of your smokes, Jane?" Stuart Kennedy asked, grinning down at her.

There on the tablecloth lay her red and gold lipstick cylinder and a pack of cigarettes which looked like the one she carried in her purse. Grandfather Beaumont leaned across the table, his eyelids fluttering weakly.

"What were you doing in my room, Mr. Kennedy?" Jane asked, frigidly.

He laughed and selected a cigarette. A lighter appeared in his palm and flame spurted away from the pressure of his thumb.

"I left my lighter in there the first time," he said. "When I came back to get it, you had already come down. I noticed you smoke my own brand, Jane, so I brought these down for reinforcements in case we have a late evening."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she protested. "When were you in my room the first time?"

He handed her the lighted cigarette and lit himself another. Nudging her playfully, he moved around to his chair at the end of the table. It struck her that his handsomeness had a very fine edge of cruelty. "You can't have forgotten about my visit already, Jane. You were telling me about your train trip. You know—Lake Tahoe, Reno, Salt Lake City, Cheyenne."

Jane sat up with a jolt. . . Reno— Of the four places he had named along her train route only two of them were accurate. She had not gone by Lake Tahoe, nor Salt Lake City. Why, if he were only guessing, did he happen to name Reno?

"You have a brilliant imagination, Mr. Kennedy," she said. "I have not seen you in my room at all this afternoon."

He let a fine lace of smoke escape his lips. "You, I'm afraid, have a very short memory."

Cousin Earl accepted one of the cigarettes. His grin was friendly. "Relax, Janey. Be yourself," he said. "Anything

you can do in California is being done here."

Jane stifled the fury which swept through her. She was at Kennedy's mercy until she could trap him in an obvious lie. First, she had to understand his intentions. This business of the lipstick, for instance, was pure nonsense!

Dinner proceeded with the aid of a glum-faced housekeeper. Jane noticed that her cousin Luke and his grandfather were observing her with great interest. Neither of them accepted any of the wine which Earl was freely pouring and again she had that peculiar feeling of a house divided into two extreme camps.

She decided boldness was the best strategy. "Uncle Ralph, you haven't told me why you sent for me."

The old man was holding a cracker over his soup bowl. "When you get to my advanced age, my dear, you may go very quickly, without warning—" He crushed his hands together and the cracker disintegrated, the tiny white fragments showering over his knuckles and wrists. "Like that!"

"You mean, you wanted to see me before—before you die?"

"You do understand, my dear." A smile broke across his thin, cracked lips. "We were a fine family in our time. I outlived all the others until only these boys, Luke and Earl, were left to me. Not a girl in the whole lot. What a shame, I thought! Girls can be very nice. Finally, someone—I forgot now who it was—reminded me of you. I sent for you, Jane, while there was time. Time to know if you were really . . . one of us. . . ."

The long speech seemed to exhaust the old man and he broke into a fit of violent coughing. The room grew hushed and expectant, as if waiting grimly upon his death.

Jane wanted to leap up and do something, but what could she do?

The old man recovered by himself, but his face was a dreadful greyish purple in color and his hands were drawn into shapeless knots at his throat. When the spasm passed, Cousin Luke whispered into his ear, helped him to his feet, and guided him shakily to a couch that was in the other room.

That seemed to be a signal for a general

relaxation of the tension which gripped the household. Stuart Kennedy sagged in his chair and lost all interest in Jane's appearance or the quality of her manners. He gulped his food in a completely abstracted way.

Cousin Earl poured himself a tremendous drink of wine. He held the glass before the light, studying the rich red color of it. "'Comes a pause in the day's occupation,'" he quoted, "'that is known as the children's hour.'"

"Longfellow?" Jane inquired, puzzled at the reference.

"No. Earl Hanlon. This damn house never wakes up until grandpappy goes to bed."

"Your grandfather hardly seems strong enough to hold a whip over you."

Earl grimaced. "The golden whip, my dear. The golden whip."

"Tell me more," Jane said. "You have been hearing all about me, but I hardly know anything about you boys. Chicago and Frisco are quite far apart."

Stuart Kennedy glanced at her with a sudden revival of interest.

"We're no bargains, either of us," Earl muttered. "Luke is a carbon-copy of his grandpappy, and I am, as you may notice, the opposite extreme. I must be the same sort of guy that your old man was, Janey. We really have a lot in common, you and I."

Earl's face was getting flushed. His smile was mellow and his eyes were like a friendly puppy's. He reached for Jane's wrist. Instinctively, she recoiled from his grip and the fork in her hand twisted up sharply.

"Your claws are showing, Janey." Earl grinned. "Sorry if I annoy you, but women fascinate me when I'm drunk. Also when I'm sober. You know, Janey, your old man was regarded as quite a lad in his day. Wish I had known him!"

He seemed to imply that she was not living up to her father's reputation. Jane tried to penetrate that sardonic, amused look of his. Was Earl in league with Stuart Kennedy to torment her until she left the house? They were the same pair who had greeted her at the train. Kennedy had warned her that "*the two of us will toss you out of here . . . right on your head!*"

The two of us. . . . Sitting between them,



Jane felt her throat tightening with fear and then Luther Beaumont appeared suddenly across the table, tall and pale and remote, and she felt she could breathe again.

"Grandfather will have to be excused," he informed them.

"I've been hearing all about you, Luke," Jane said. She offered him the best smile she could produce at the moment—hoping to establish at least one real friendship in this house.

Luther's answering smile was like a sudden spring thaw. Some of the icy stiffness went out of his face and it did wonders for him. He was very handsome, Jane decided when he smiled.

"If you heard about me from Earl," he said, "it could not have been complimentary. My cousin and I love each other like a pair of carving knives."

By way of illustration Luther sat down and sliced himself a strip of steak with a single sharp stroke of his silver knife. With his fork he tucked the meat neatly into one cheek. His eating was very polite, the jaw motion almost invisible.

Like a pair of carving knives. . . That was an odd comparison. It convinced Jane that she had been right about the opposing forces in the house. If she could manage to link herself with the right side, there would at least be a kind of balance—herself, the old man, and one cousin aligned against the other men.

For the rest of the evening Jane made sure that Luther did not get out of her sight, but Earl followed her so closely that she had no chance to speak to Luke alone. She finally used the excuse of a headache and ran swiftly up the stairs after a quick good night to the old man in the parlor. Alone in her room, behind a locked door, she felt safer.

While undressing, she noticed the contents of her purse which Kennedy had dumped out on the dresser. At the bottom of the pile protruded the corner of a white card. She snatched it up and smiled, reminiscantly, at the name printed on it—Charles F. Ross.

Ross, the detective, the red-headed man she had met on the train—she would give anything for some reassurance from a man like that, and there was his phone number at the bottom of the card. . . .

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## CHAPTER FOUR

## Hallway Horror

JANE was sitting huddled in bed, wrapped in her dressing gown, waiting for the house to grow quiet, when a sound disturbed her and she saw the doorknob slowly turn.

Thank goodness, she was prepared this time! She knew from experience how the men in this house behaved! They would have a hard time snapping that steel bolt. Shivering, she pulled the sheet up to her throat and sat quite still.

Failure of her door to open resulted in a quick rap. She waited for another rap, then another, before she crept to the door and pressed her lips to the crack. "What do you want?"

"Open up, baby," said that familiar hoarse voice.

"Go away," she said. "You must be crazy!"

Stuart Kennedy's outburst of profanity penetrated the door like a razor edge. It seemed to cut through her to the bone. "Listen, you double-crossing little—" She had heard the name before, but never spoken so viciously. "That kind of funny stuff will wind you up in the river. Open up now, damn it, or I'll come in the other way and—"

The other way! She looked around frantically for any other means of egress. The bathroom had only one door. Her room was one of twin dormers at the front of the house and she saw for the first time that her windows were the French style with flimsy glass panels.

She darted across the room to latch them tightly, noting that a narrow outer balcony ran out of sight toward the other dormer. He could come that way through the room next to hers.

For a moment Jane darted barefoot about the room, fluttering here and there in her white gown like a dove in a trap, then switched off the light, crept to the door, and pressed her ear against it. Somewhere down the hall she heard a door softly closing.

She had to get out of here and get down to the telephone in the parlor. Right now a red-headed detective by the name of Ross would be an island of sanity in a world gone mad.

If Stuart Kennedy was really coming by way of the balcony, he would have to leave the hallway unguarded—unless his accomplice was waiting out there now.

She decided to take the risk. Drawing back the bolt as quietly as possible, she gave the knob a slow twist. In a moment she was outside, closing the door behind her. She breathed openly again at sight of the free darkness of the hall, penetrated by a mere film of light from downstairs. If she was lucky, there might be a closet or something she could hide in until they were all in bed.

She ran forward, the silk gown whipping against her ankles. When the black gap of the stairway and its promise of safety were there, almost at her feet, a shadow leaped out at her from the nearest doorway. She gave a kind of whimper and an arm lashed around her waist, snatching her violently off her feet. A hand closed on her throat.

She could not scream. She was too far gone for that and his grip was too tight. Instead, she sank into a deep faint and the house and its terrors vanished totally from her mind. . . .

WHEN she drifted back to consciousness, the same crushing arm encircled her, supporting her weight, and the damp hand, instead of gripping her throat, was coolly stroking her forehead.

Fear was only a numb, remote sensation now. She understood the words whispered against her ear but she reacted listlessly. "It was our bad luck to get some two-timing woman with a face like an angel for this job, but if you're thinking of a little fancy blackmail, I'm afraid you have come to the wrong house. Now, wake up, damn it!"

The stroking hand drew away from her brow and slapped her smartly across the cheek. Jane sighed and another slap struck more savagely. Her brain was jarred and her eyelids burst apart.

"Please," she choked. "Let me go!"

Her weight was lowered until she could feel the floor with her feet, but the arm only loosened around her. It was not a full release. They stood together in absolute darkness.

"I haven't decided about you yet," Stuart Kennedy breathed, "but you won't

get away with anything more, beautiful—believe me!”

“Who are you?” she said. “What are you trying to do to me?”

“I’m a professional lawyer. The law is all right, but it moves too slowly for me. Right now I have been chosen as the fall guy. I’m the friend of the family who makes a big play for Cousin Jane.”

His arm tightened about her. “You’re a clever little beauty, aren’t you? I think I am beginning to see your angle now. You want a percentage instead of a flat fee. As soon as you saw the other cousin down at the railroad station, you made up your mind you could land him for yourself. That would boost you right up into the big money.”

Jane did not try to argue with him. Shocked and confused, she could think of nothing but escape from his crushing embrace, and then from this fantastic house and its private wars, escape from these unbelievable indignities.

She felt the loosening of his arm again and began to fight him, twisting, striking futilely at an invisible target.

“If you scream, I’ll smash you,” he said in a deadly monotone. “Just stand there and be good! From now on this thing is going our way, not yours.”

She stood shivering until he whispered, “All right. This is your big performance. You can go back to your room now.”

She could not understand what had changed him. She was aware, vaguely, that there was more light outside now, streaming under his door, and she could distinguish the tall, unreal outline of the man, towering over her.

He was opening the door. “Go on home,” he whispered, giving her a shove.

When she stumbled through the door, Kennedy’s voice rose perceptibly behind her, a kind of stage whisper that easily rounded the length of the hall: “Good night, baby!”

Jane was aware of a dazzling brightness about her. The meaning of the light came to her just as she reached her own door. Whirling about, she saw three men standing at the head of the stairway—Grandfather Beaumont supported on either side by Luke and Earl. She was trapped and she knew, instantly, that it had been planned this way.

“Oh!” With a single cry she turned and vanished into her own room.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### It Only Takes One

THE phone rang three times before it was answered, sleepily.

“Is that you, Charley? Jane asked.

“Yeah,” the voice grumbled.

She took a deep breath. Every word from now on had to be exactly right. If anyone had followed her downstairs, they must not understand the real significance of her phone call.

“Remember me, Charley?” she said. “We met on the train.”

The detective yawned, audibly. “What train? I practically live on trains.”

“Somewhere this side of Omaha.” She was trying to sound light-hearted, to quiet the leap of her pulse at every creak in the big, dark house. “You wanted me to call and tell you when I’d be free, Charley. You were going to show me the town.”

“The hell I was!”

Why did he have to be so stupid? “I think I’ll have time tomorrow.”

“Oh, great! I have nothing to do but show pretty girls around the town.” He hesitated. “I assume that you are a pretty girl? It might help if I knew your name.”

“I can’t tell you . . . right now.”

“Well, that’s great! You wake me up in the middle of the night to make a date for tomorrow and you don’t even have a name!”

“I thought you were smart,” she said, disheartenedly. “I guess I was mistaken.”

The insult had a certain arousing effect. “This side of Omaha, did you say?” The detective’s voice took on a note of alertness. “Are you that Beaumont girl, the one who got in the mix-up at Reno?”

“Yes.”

“Are you at the Beaumont house now?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“I can’t,” Jane replied simply.

“I don’t get this.” There was an instant of hesitation. “Do you mean that someone is listening and you can’t talk as you please?”

"Yes."

"Oh-ho! Are you in trouble?"

"Yes."

There was a low whistling sound. "Well, trouble is my business, Miss Beaumont. I'm glad you called. What kind of trouble?"

"I can't say."

"Oh, yeah—you're being overheard. Well, maybe I can dream up a little trouble and you can say yes when I'm right and no when I'm wrong. How's that?"

"That's . . . wonderful!" Jane said, eagerly.

"First—are you talking on the only phone connection in the house? If you aren't, someone may be listening to both sides of this conversation, and then you really will be in trouble!"

"I—I don't know," she admitted.

"Well, we'll have to take a chance on that. Now, Miss Beaumont, does your trouble have anything to do with that Reno business?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I think it does, and I'll tell you why. This afternoon I did some checking up on this Ralph Beaumont, your grand uncle or whatever he is, and the guy is worth something like three million bucks!"

Three million dollars! Jane felt her knees going limp. Her hand groped out, found a chair, and pulled it under her.

CHARLEY ROSS went on, crisply, "If someone wanted to stop a distant relative from getting a split of that three million, here's how they might try to do it. See how you like this plot, Miss Beaumont."

"I'm listening, Charley."

"Well, it seems a girl named Kathie was snatched off your train at Reno, but the fact is she was sitting in your seat at the time. It struck me that the guy who did the snatching may have gone by the seat number and not by the girl. He may have intended to get Jane Beaumont instead of Kathryn Saddler. Do you see that, Miss Beaumont?"

"Call me Jane. Yes, I see, Charley."

"One thing that confirmed my opinion, Jane, was the fact that the woman who took Kathie's place tried to get into your seat first and you had to call in the conductor to get her out. It looked like she

might also be going by some prearranged seat number.

"The thing that fooled all of us was the fact that she had Kathie's seat check in her purse, but that's easily explained. As soon as Kathie got off the train, her purse was stolen and handed over to the woman who was to take her place. Another thing—the way you described that woman, she came closer to resembling you than she did Kathie Saddler."

"Oh, yes," Jane agreed excitedly. "Now that you mention it—"

"All right, let's say they were crossed up because you and Kathie switched seats. Kathie was a blonde like you and the guy who played the drunk act may not have been briefed on the girl's appearance as accurately as the woman who had to take her place. Here's another question—do any of your traveling bags have your initials on them?"

"They all do."

"Well, the guy probably saw those initials on one of your bags while he was talking to Kathie, so he had all the identification he needed. If Kathie was whisked out of sight as soon as she got off the train, he may never have known about his mistake, because the woman accomplice was arrested right on the train without any chance of passing the word along. Chances are that she is still the only one who knows how their trick went wrong. Otherwise, they would already have gotten word back to the Beaumont house—"

"You mean . . ." Jane could not finish the sentence.

"Yes, I mean this train-lifting job may have been plotted by someone in the Beaumont family, someone who is due to inherit a sizable chunk of that three million dollars and doesn't want his grandfather to include another relative in the inheritance. They've tried to side-track the real Jane Beaumont at Reno and put another Jane in her place. I'm not sure that I can carry the plot any farther than that—"

"Oh, I can," Jane said, breathlessly. "I do see now, Charley, but I can't—explain."

"Okay. I understand. I'd better be hopping out there right now, Jane, if they've got you in a spot. I've checked the phone

directory and there are a terrific number of Beaumonts with the initial R. Where do your relatives live?"

She felt the faintness coming back. "Charley," she said feebly, "I don't know . . ."

"What?" he exploded. "You're a great help, Jane! What's the number on their telephone?"

She glanced down at the black stand, where the number should be. "There isn't any."

"That's great!" he groaned. "I don't know whether I can trace this call back or not. How in the devil am I supposed to come to the rescue—"

"I don't know." Her voice was trembling, almost out of control.

"Well, sit tight for the rest of the night," he urged, confidently. "I'll find you somehow."

"I suppose I could run," she said.

"Gosh, no. You're safer in the house, with the old man. Outdoors it's anybody's ball game."

"Oh, Charley!"

"Hang on, will you? I'll find you, Jane. I'm starting now. Good-by."

"Good-by. "

"Oh, one thing, Jane."

"Yes?"

"This is very serious business. They may not have kidnapped Kathie Saddler. They may have simply coaxed her off the train, but I'm afraid—if they were forced to get rough with her—that they're in pretty deep already. What I mean is—you're playing in rugged company, Jane, so take it easy."

"I'll try . . ."

AT THE foot of the stairs a man stepped suddenly out of the shadows to meet her. Jane felt that awful faintness again. She swayed on her feet and the man's arms came out to catch her. She was thankful for the strength of those arms. They kept her from a complete collapse.

"You're a busy girl, Janey," Earl Hanlon said. His eyes gleamed merrily. "I can hardly keep up with you."

"You were listening to my phone call," she accused, harshly.

"Why not, Janey? I like to chase girls around. Stu Kennedy started to follow you when you came downstairs, but I beat

him to it. You sure do keep the boys jumping, don't you, Janey?"

She took her cue from that. "Oh, Charley's just somebody I met on the train. He wants to show me the town."

"The Hanlon Good Will Tours are at your service."

"Let's talk about it tomorrow, Earl. I'm tired."

"It has been a big evening, hasn't it?" he said, drily.

She managed to twist away from him and speak a casual good night. She knew he was watching her up the stairs, probably laughing at the bare feet which showed below her trailing gown. She hugged the topcoat tightly around her body. She had not bothered to change into a dress. No doubt Stuart Kennedy would hear of it and render a few sly insinuations when they were all gathered at the breakfast table.

Back in her room again, Jane made a sudden decision. One look at the frail windows opening on the gallery convinced her she could not spend a whole night in this house. Not since Earl had heard her talking on the phone. He was no fool, that Earl. He would report to Kennedy and they would quickly agree that her outside link was dangerous. They may already have guessed that she was the real Jane Beaumont.

At least she now understood the crime in which she was the key figure. Old Ralph Beaumont had threatened to bring his grand niece back into the family and leave her a share of his fortune. That would split control of the three million dollar estate so that no one would have a clear-cut authority.

The only catch was that Jane must measure up to old Ralph's idea of a desirable character—so Earl Hanlon and Stuart Kennedy had tried to substitute a woman who would fail to meet Ralph's rigid requirements. That explained why Kennedy had treated her that way. Kennedy thought he had hired a stooge and was totally unprepared for the real Jane Beaumont.

It would not have been necessary for them to kidnap her at Reno, Jane decided. They merely had to trick her into missing the train. From then on she could not get in touch with Ralph Beaumont except by

mail, and Earl Hanlon could easily intercept any letters which came for his grandfather. If she tried to make trouble, Earl would find a way to steer her back to California and old Ralph would never know the difference.

Jane hastily slipped on her clothes. If she could only get to Uncle Ralph and explain—but that might be dangerous. By this time they would have the old man's room guarded. He had already seen enough to form a wrong opinion of his niece.

Luther! She could go to Luther with the whole story. Kennedy's words had convinced her that only one cousin was involved in this thing, and Earl was obviously the one. Luther Beaumont was a smug, self-righteous sort of person, but she had recognized something in his smile at the dinner table, a sign of what he might be when freed from his grandfather. If anybody could get her safely out of this house, Cousin Luke was the one . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

### Cousin by Choice

SHE HAD to guess which bedroom would be Luke's. She chose the door at the deepest end of the hall with the light shining under it. Her rap was the faintest possible sound.

The door opened quietly. It was Luke all right, in a heavy bathrobe, his throat rising long and thin from his open shirt collar. She pressed a finger to her lips. "Let me in," she said.

His grey eyes showed a trace of doubt.

"I'm harmless," she protested. "Please, let me come in!"

Luke shrugged and stepped aside. His clenched right fist came out of a pocket of his robe with a pipe still smoldering in the palm.

Jane wasted no time when the door was closed, telling him exactly how she had been tricked.

Luke thoughtfully tapped the pipe stem against his sharp white teeth. "Jane, it's fantastic! Earl, and Stu Kennedy! I thought Kennedy was a friend—"

"Oh, he is! Don't you see, Luke? He's doing his best to save the Beaumont fortune just for the two of you. Stuart will be paid with a share of Earl's money, I suppose."

"But—but why did he work with Earl alone? Why wasn't I in it, too?"

Jane gripped his arm and gave him a hard shake. "Because you're like your grandfather, Luke. You're a moral-minded man. You would not have done an unlawful thing like that."

Luke stroked a hand through his pale blonde hair, fascinated. "So you think . . . I'm like grandfather? I'm not sure that's a compliment, Jane."

"I don't mean you're narrow and shrivelled up inside, Luke. I just mean—well, there are some people who just naturally look right. You can tell them in a single glance."

Luke laughed hoarsely. "I didn't think you had glanced my way at all, Jane."

"Will you help me?"

"Of course. You can go any time you wish, Jane. I'll guarantee you that."

"Let's go now, then. Please."

"All right . . ."

It was simple enough to get out of the house with Luke's guidance. He offered to drive her to town in the family car. Riding through the deep, wooded Beaumont property, Jane had an unhappy thought.

"Luke, is it safe for you in the house now?"

"How do you mean?"

"You'll be alone with Earl and Kennedy. If they think you helped me, they might turn against you."

Luke laughed. "I can handle them."

"I don't think you realize their position, Luke. What they did to that girl on the train might be regarded as kidnapping. That's a serious crime. If they realize—"

"Don't worry!" he snapped. "I'll take care of myself!"

"Luke, don't take me all the way. You'd better go back before they have time to find I'm gone."

He considered. "Okay. I'll let you off at the main road. There's an elevated line a few blocks from here."

She nodded and the big car soon rolled up to the outer gate. Luke switched off the lights. They got out and Luke opened the big gate. She could see the dark avenue twisting through a grove of monstrous oak trees toward a distant street light.

"I really should drive you to the el station," he said.

"I'll walk. It's not the dark I'm afraid of, Luke. It's the people in it." She took a deep breath. "I've never felt so free or so safe in my life. You ought to get back though—quickly."

He was standing quite close to her. "It's too bad about you, Jane. I was just getting to know you."

"Oh, I'll be back. We won't let them get away with a thing like that, will me, Luke?"

"No . . . I suppose not."

"Good-by for now."

"Good-by."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cool side of his cheek. Turning, she took a step toward the dark road. Nothing by night or day had ever looked quite as welcome to her as that lonely strip of road. She was free. The fear was all behind her. She had gotten away. It was all over.

She took another step, but the fear came quickly, miraculously out of the darkness and caught her by the wrist . . .

"Wait!" said a voice that sounded like a drowning man's.

Jane could hardly force her feet to turn. A thought was spinning crazily through her mind. Luke, Luke—of course it must be Luke—the one who behaved exactly like his grandfather, who lived in a prison of perfect behavior to satisfy that grim, pious old man. Earl Hanlon was the cousin who acted in his own light-hearted way, who was not afraid to be himself.

"Jane—why did you have to say that?" the voice asked.

"Say what, Luke?" She tried to free her wrist without revealing her panic, but it was useless. His long, bony fingers gripped like iron.

"About kidnapping and all that, Jane. It wasn't meant to be that. Why couldn't you just run away home, Jane, and leave it alone?"

"I will, Luke." Her voice was as steady as she could make it. "I certainly don't care about your grandfather's money. There's nothing I could prove, actually—"

"Why did you force me to this, Jane?"

She could just distinguish the lines of his face in the darkness—rigid, unmerciful lines—the outline of a frozen soul. She had to know his mind. She couldn't just let it happen, without argument, with-

out protest. "Force you to what, Luke?"

He seemed not to hear. His tone was an inward thing, spoken to himself. "There might be another way for you—and for me. Just the two of us, Jane. We could forget Earl. If he knew how grandfather despises him, he would not count on much of a share. It could be you and I, Jane—together!"

His free arm was coming around her, tightly. It seemed she had done nothing since her arrival but fight against somebody's arms, but she was afraid to fight these, afraid that whatever delicate mechanism controlled them would—snap.

"Something happened to me tonight," Luke whispered. "When the three of us saw you come out of Kennedy's room. Jane, I got all twisted up inside. I went back to my room and I was shaking. I wanted to smash something. I wanted to smash Kennedy. I wanted to smash Earl."

"Luke, please."

"I knew how Kennedy had arranged it, Jane, but—seeing you like that—it shook me."

She was going to faint again, and she could not allow that. She sank limply away from him. There was nothing holding her and she was falling. In her mind she was tumbling into a void, but the void had a bottom and she struck, stunningly, with the full weight of her body.

She lay for a moment, helplessly, crouching away from the shadow that seemed to sway over her. The shadow breathed like an exhausted runner and then moved apart from her, struggling furiously.

Horrified, she thought she was witnessing the unbelievable spectacle of a man fighting himself, torn convulsively by some inner confusion. Then it seemed to be two men, parting, weaving a shadowy pattern about each other, then colliding violently, tumbling on the ground, rolling in the dry leaves.

Jane scrambled to her feet. There was some kind of silent, furious combat off there among the trees. She ran to the car, leaned in, and fumbled at the switchboard until the lights came on. \*

Hugging her arms against her body, Jane approached the two struggling forms in the road. The violence seemed to lessen, to concentrate itself in the heavier, thicker shadow which straddled the long, thin one

with the pale hair. A fist rose and fell like a hammer and that was all.

"Earl!"

The upper man rose, shakily, and faced her, his dark, curly hair streaking damply over one eye, his mouth bruised and twisted. "Found a card in your room, Jane—that detective's card," Earl Hanlon panted. His hand reached for her shoulder. Leaning against her, choking for breath, he limped toward the car. "Phoned your friend, Ross, an' he told me—the whole deal. Then I heard Luke's car going, Luke giving you a ride—ran for my life, ran for your life, Janey!"

Earl sat wearily on the running board of the car. "That detective, your friend . . . will bring the police, Janey."

She sat beside him and his head fell, listlessly, against her shoulder. "Poor Luke," he moaned—"lived in a strait-jacket. Grandpa Beaumont's intellectual straitjacket. When Luke finally broke loose, he didn't know the true limits of human behavior . . ."

They were still sitting there, watching Luke Beaumont recover consciousness, when Detective Ross arrived in a shriek-

ing patrol car. Two policemen were with him. One of them took the dazed and broken Luke in hand and another drove up to arrest Stuart Kennedy, who was back in the house.

At dawn Jane walked back to the big house with Charley Ross on one arm and Earl Hanlon on the other. "I'm sorry about the way I suspected you, Earl," she said. "You were such a contrast to your grandfather, so much like Stuart Kennedy, and so—well—affectionate! I thought you were the bad cousin."

Earl laughed. "Forgive me, Janey. I like pretty girls! You were quite a happy surprise to me, the best thing that ever happened in our family."

Detective Ross squeezed her hand. "If that kind of affection is the trait of a criminal, Jane, I'm afraid I should be on the other side of the law!"

The three of them walked awkwardly, locked together, weaving unevenly in the road. Jane was glad that one of these men was her cousin. A very distant one, to be sure, but she was glad. That might help her, if this little tug-of-war ever came to a decision.

THE END

## PROOF POSITIVE

It takes a heap o' diggin' to make a tunnel, some eager beavers found. For days they tunneled their way into the vault of a Hamilton, Wash. state bank—only to discover that four years previously it had closed down, lock, stock and cash.

\* \* \*

Ingenuity led to injury for the second-story man who tried climbing through the transom of a Los Angeles doctor's office. The unhappy thief fell, bruised himself and had to phone the doctor to mend his cuts, if not his pride. The doctor hurried over—and so did the police.

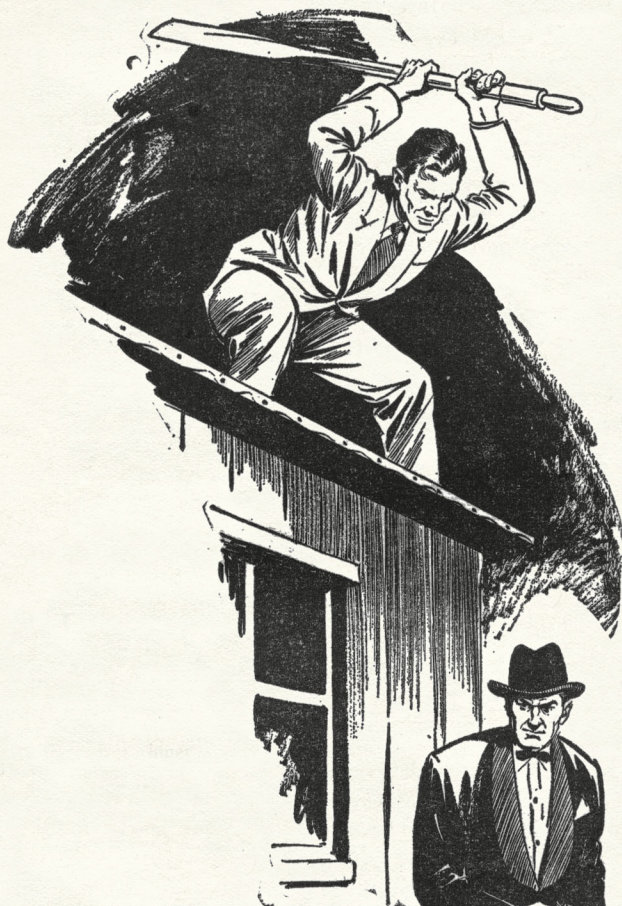
\* \* \*

A Provincetown, Mass., policeman who had been watching his calories noticed another over-weight gent. He searched this suspicious character—and lightened his load of the two suits of clothing he was wearing, the pockets piled with stolen vitamin pills, stage money, sun glasses, scissors, surgical throat lights and 212 other odds and ends.

—L. M.



# FORGER'S FATE



By  
**LARRY  
HOLDEN**

*Talk is cheap . . . so how could super-salesman Wesley know that he had sold himself as a fall guy—and talked himself into an armful of trouble . . . called Peggy.*

*(Verbatim statement of Wesley Smith; taken by stenographer in the office of the District Attorney, Saturday, June 16)*

**M**Y NAME is Wesley Smith. I am twenty-seven years of age, six feet in height, weigh one hundred and seventy-five pounds, and was educated in the public schools of lower Jersey City, augmented by night courses in the YMCA. I now live in Nokomis, Florida, which is on Dona Bay and not on the banks of Gitchee-goomee, as Sergeant O'Shea has inferred.

Until this morning I was a salesman in the employ of the Bankers Friend Automatic Check Writer Corporation. Circumstances, which I shall explain, have altered this association. I swear that the

● ●  
Mr. Ganey had but to glance up—and my career would end.



facts contained herein are the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

On the afternoon of Thursday, June 14, at approximately 6:00 P.M., I entered the premises of the Gulfshore Club for the sole purpose of selling the management a check writing machine. The Gulfshore Club is the lone structure, excepting a boathouse, on Bonito Key, which can be reached only by the causeway.

As I entered the Tap Room, I saw several persons imbibing, and at the far end of the bar, a dark heavy-set man was talking in angry undertones with a very pretty girl, who was drinking milk.

"What'll it be, Reverend," the bartender greeted me, possibly because of the conservative cut of my clothes.

"I am not a Reverend," I assured him. "I represent the Bankers Friend Automatic Check Writer Corporation. Is the manager in?"

He said, "Let us pray," and walked up the bar to the dark heavy-set man. He was brusquely dismissed and returned.

"Mr. Ganey's busy, Reverend," he asserted. "But he says to give me the pitch. I'm his assistant."

I have always found it good policy to impress a subordinate, so I looked him straight in the eye and said significantly, "Do you realize that within one week with less than fifteen minutes practice per day, the average man can learn to forge your name to a check so perfectly that your own bank would cash it without hesitation?"

I have found that this declaration usually arouses interest.

"Think of that," said the bartender, astounded.

"A sobering thought," I said, placing a pad and pencil on the bar before him. "Just write your name and I'll prove how easily it can be duplicated by the simple exercise of muscle forgery."

He put his tongue into his cheek and quickly wrote, "Poor Lew, the barkeep," on the pad. His handwriting was florid.

I turned the pad so that the words were upside down as I faced them, and immediately beneath them and also upside down, I rapidly made a perfect replica. The reason for doing it thusly, I must explain, is that the principle of muscle forgery, aside from the fact that the action is solely from the forearm muscle, lies in its total disas-

sociation from personal foibles in the formation of the letters of the alphabet.

Yes, Sergeant O'Shea, I am speaking English! I have taken courses in Business English and spend thirty minutes a day at Vocabularly Building. I shall enunciate more clearly if you wish.

To continue, I tore the sheet of paper in half, shuffled the pieces and, smiling, defied the bartender to tell them apart.

He could not and said suspiciously, "You do this for a living?"

I laughed heartily and assured him that I used muscle forgery only as a sales argument. "However," I said gravely, "forgery is exactly what our machine will protect you against."

"Sure, sure. But where're you staying, Reverend?"

"At the De Soto Hotel in Sarasota," I gave him one of my cards, which he put in his pocket. "Mr. Ganey can reach me. . ."

"He'll reach you all right if you pass around any samples of his signature. Have one on the house before you go, Reverend?"

Again protesting that I was not a Reverend, I selected a dry aperatif sherry, then continued to my hotel in Sarasota.

**A**FTER dinner, I consulted my appointment book for Friday, and found that I had fifteen call-backs to make. I desperately needed ten orders. The Company was conducting a competition for the post of district sales manager for the south Florida area, and Mr. Zimmer, a go-getter himself, had hinted that no one but a go-getter would be considered. Ten orders would, as they say, put me over the top.

I had not abandoned hope of selling the Gulfshore Club, but I did not expect Mr. Ganey to send for me at 3:00 A.M. A heavy knock on my door was followed by the voice of Lew, the bartender.

"The boss wants to see one of them gadgets you're peddling, Rev."

"At this advanced hour?" I said suspiciously. Why can't I contact him in the morning?"

"Because he'll be in bed. You gotta get Ganey when he's hot; Reverend. That's the gin mill business for you."

Had I not needed every order I could muster at this critical moment, I would have demurred. As it was, I went.

We drove in his car, and when we arrived, the building was entirely dark. I had found his manner increasingly nervous and furtive, and I admit to a certain uneasiness as I followed him through the hushed and gloomy Tap Room.

He opened a door at the rear of the Club, and the sudden brilliance of light dazzled me.

Mr. Ganey's voice roared, Get him out of here, dammit!" and this was followed immediately by a feminine scream.

Lew muttered, "Hold it, Rev," and attempted to close the door in my face.

I thrust him aside and strode into the room, and as I did so, a girl hurtled toward me, crying, "Get me out of here. He killed Whitney!"

It was the girl who had been drinking at the bar. Distorted by fear though her face was, she was still lovely.

Mr. Ganey took a long step and slapped her sharply across the cheek, his own face congested with rage. I have never been able to stand by and permit a woman to be maltreated, and I started toward Mr. Ganey with the intention of giving him some of his own medicine. My arms were grasped from behind and Lew whispered:

"Relax, Reverend. She's a little hysterical."

I felt that this explanation was inadequate, for at this moment I caught sight of an overturned game table at the far end of the room and among the scattered cards and chips I saw a pair of legs lying in such a way that their owner could only be recumbent on his face.

"Is that," I asked, "Mr. Whitney?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Mr. Ganey said, "That's right, Reverend. He had a heart attack."

"Don't believe him," the girl cried, again appealing to me. "They were playing poker. Whitney caught him stacking the deck, and Ganey hit him."

I heard Lew draw in his breath, but Mr. Ganey, though his eyes were furious, was smiling.

"That little tap I gave him wouldn't kill anybody," he said. "He was a heart case. He even carried nitro pills with him. Everybody can tell you that. That little tap didn't mean a thing."

"The police," I said coldly, "may differ."

Wrenching myself free of Lew's grasp,

I sprang for the door. Something struck me violently from behind, and I fell unconscious.

Sergeant O'Shea, I resent your remark! That was the first and only time I was unconscious. All right, Mr. District Attorney, I'll continue, but this guy's . . . Sergeant O'Shea is trying my temper.

HOW long I was unconscious, I do not know, but when I opened my eyes, I was lying on the chartreuse leather sofa at the window, and Lew, the young lady and Mr. Whitney were no longer in the room.

Mr. Ganey sat facing me in a chair, idly holding a gun by the trigger guard. My senses were confused, and a little incoherently I stammered, "Where—where's Mr. Whitney?"

"In the refrigerator," answered Mr. Ganey coolly. "I want him to keep for awhile."

This callous statement sent a shiver through me.

"And now, Reverend," Mr. Ganey continued, "you and me, we're going to make a deal. You know what an IOU is?"

I faltered that I did.

"Good. Whitney left me with a mittful of them when he kicked off. He had a million and I thought he was good, but now it looks like I'm stuck for something like twenty grand. I don't like it. That's too much sugar to be stuck for. So I'm cutting you in, Reverend."

Startled, I cried, "I?"

"Yeah, you. Lew tells me you're quite a genius with the pen. Muscle forgery, you call it? It must be quite a knack."

Aghast at what he was suggesting, I could only stare.

"I got Whitney's signature all over the place," Mr. Ganey said. "All you gotta do is put it on a check, and we're set."

I sat up. "No!" I said indignantly.

"Did I mention," Mr. Ganey murmured, "that we're making this check out for twenty-five grand? That extra five is your cut. Look, Reverend, if I keep Whitney in the deep freeze until say Tuesday or Wednesday, there isn't a doc in the world who'd be able to say he was dead before the check was made out.

"On Tuesday or Wednesday I'll drop Whitney on the beach somewhere, but in

the meantime we'll cash the check and everything'll be copacetic."

It was an ingenious scheme, and had I assented, the bank would have undoubtedly cashed such a check without question, for I am exceptionally proficient in the science of muscle forgery. I had no intention, however, of lending myself to his plot.

On the other hand, I faced the prospect of being held prisoner, which meant that I would miss my last selling day before the close of the contest, lose those vital orders, and with them every chance of being named district sales manager for the south Florida area.

Had not the flutter of the drapes that masked the window to my right caught my eye, my dilemma would have been insoluble. I would not forge that check, and Mr. Ganey would not release me until I did. I turned and dived for the division between the drapes, hoping that the window behind them was open widely.

Fortunately, it was. I scrambled to my feet in the soft sand and ran precipitately through the palm trees and shrubbery toward the causeway.

I confess that my sensation at the sound of the first shot was that of profound shock. I could not believe that Mr. Ganey was actually shooting at me, but when his second bullet struck the tree immediately beside me, I realized with horror that he would actually kill me if he could.

In fact, I realized that he would have to kill me, anyway. He could not permit me to go to the police with the facts about the death of Mr. Whitney, and there was only one way that he could be certain that I would not.

This realization gave rise to another, equally as dismaying. I was not the only one who had to be silenced. There was the young lady who had appealed to me for assistance.

All right, Sergeant O'Shea, perhaps she did not know to whom she was appealing, and look, I'm getting tired of the way . . . I'm sorry, Mr. District Attorney. I did not realize I was shouting. I'll go on as soon as you tell Sergeant O'Shea to keep his big mouth . . . Thank you.

As I was saying, I could not run away knowing that I was leaving another in danger. I stopped and turned back toward the Club. As I did, the car roared by and

thundered over the causeway, and I glimpsed Mr. Ganey's dark face bent grimly over the wheel.

Seeking me.

I MADE my way cautiously toward the building, taking advantage of all possible cover. Unfortunately, I was not wary enough, and in the darkness, I collided with the burly figure of Lew. In a trice, we were locked in a furious struggle. I struck him several times before he closed with me, swearing. I hooked my heel behind his and when we fell to the ground, I was astride him. It was not until then that I realized he was making pacific gestures.

"Hold it, Reverend," he pleaded. "For the love of Mike, hold it. I'm with you. If I wanted to, I could of plugged you a dozen times."

To my consternation, I saw that he was grasping a gun in his right hand. I rose stiffly. He did likewise, brushing the sand from him and grumbling:

"Why don't you listen to a guy before you try to tear his head off?"

"I thought you were swearing," I stammered.

"I was. You pack a stiff right, Rev. But listen. I don't want any part of this. I'm levelling with you. I didn't know Ganey had knocked Whitney off, and that's the honest truth, Reverend."

"What do you propose to do?" I asked, not entirely convinced.

"We gotta get the car away from Ganey. He took the keys away from me. He don't trust nobody. Peggy twisted her ankle when he smacked her down, so we need the car to get out of here. I got her stashed in the boathouse for the time being."

He pointed and I could see the small, flat-roofed building at the edge of the Bay about a hundred yards distant.

The sky was becoming lighter in the east. Lew's face was clearly visible to me. It was haggard and there was fear in it. He clutched my arm and cocked his head at a listening angle. The car was slowly returning over the causeway. We exchanged an apprehensive glance.

"You stay here, Rev," Lew whispered. "I'll go to meet him. He don't know I've dealt myself out. He won't have an eye out for trouble if I go alone."

I wanted to protest, but his logic was unassailable. Cautioning me to silence, he stood and walked boldly through the trees toward the Club. I was wretched because I wanted to help, yet I knew that any overt act on my part would endanger his life. I lay concealed behind the hibiscus bush, my heart pumping violently.

I heard him hail the car and there was a grinding slide as Mr. Ganey applied the brakes. I could not distinguish their words, but I could hear that they were talking together. The car door slammed and their footsteps crunched in the shell driveway. Suddenly there was a cry, a scuffle and then the abrupt sound of a shot. The world seemed to stand still in the thick silence that followed.

Then Lew came walking slowly through the gray light, and I surged to my feet in a wave of relief. He raised his arm—but a moment later I saw that it was not in greeting, for he bent slowly forward, toppled to the ground and lay motionless. Before I could stir, Mr. Ganey burst through the bushes and, making an ugly sound in his throat, stood over Lew and fired two more shots into his defenseless body.

He had not seen me, and I dropped hastily behind the hibiscus bush again, sick with the impotent rage that rose within me at the sight of that savage act. It was only by clenching my teeth that I restrained myself from rushing out and attacking Mr. Ganey with my bare hands. Trembling, I circled away. When I thought I was clear, I sprinted for the boathouse.

Mr. Ganey opened fire almost immediately, and the bullets were spurting sand at my feet when I flung myself at the door of the boathouse and tumbled inside. I slammed the door and bolted it.

Turning, I saw Peggy crouched against the wall, her face pale behind an upraised oar. In the meager light that filtered through the only window, I saw another oar at my feet. Giving her a pallid smile of reassurance, I picked up the second oar and broke off the blade, leaving me a sizeable and dangerous club.

I SCARCELY dared breathe as Mr. Ganey's running footsteps approached the boathouse. The doorknob turned and the dry wood creaked a little as he leaned

against it. Then I heard him creep along the wall, and I went toward the window. The moment his head showed through the glass, I swung at it with my club. In my haste and over-anxiety, I misjudged my swing and achieved nothing but a broken window.

He swore savagely and disappeared from sight. I heard him walk around the boathouse, and he returned within a few minutes apparently satisfied that we had no way of escape except the small door and the window. The huge double doors, that opened to admit the passage of a boat to the Bay, had a metal grill that extended down into the water, effectively blocking it as a means of egress. There was no boat.

"Come on, Reverend," called Mr. Ganey, "use your head. This isn't doing either of us any good. What's so tough about signing that check? There isn't a chance you'd get caught. Be smart."

"I am smart," I said. "Smart enough not to sign any name to a check but my own."

"There's five grand in it for you, Reverend."

"No."

"Ten grand."

"No!"

"Okay. Think it over. I got all the time in the world."

He did not have, I felt, all the time in the world. Sooner or later, someone would come looking for Mr. Whitney. All we had to do was wait.

"What are you feeling so good about, Reverend?" asked Peggy, giving me a curious glance.

"I am not a Reverend," I protested, for, somehow, I did not want her to call me that. "My name is Wesley Smith."

"Right, Wes. But what's the secret?"

I told her my thought about Mr. Whitney. She slowly shook her head. Dejectedly, she told me that there was little chance of anyone coming to look for Mr. Whitney.

Though he was wealthy and had all a man could wish, at periodic intervals he disappeared for as long as a week at a time to drink and gamble, despite his heart condition, and even Mrs. Whitney had long since resigned herself to her husband's profligacy.

"Ganey wanted me to keep Whitney

interested while he trimmed him," she said, "but I didn't want any part of that."

"Naturally not!" I said.

She gave me an odd glance, then unexpectedly she said, "You're sweet."

I did not understand that at all.

There was no sound from outside, and apparently Mr. Ganey was content just to wait. Very well. We could wait, too.

But as the sun climbed higher and higher, the flat-roofed, uninsulated boathouse became hotter and hotter, and I would have given much for a plain glass of cold water. I glanced sidelong at Peggy and saw her run her tongue over her dry lips. She, too, was feeling the first pangs of thirst. It was obvious that this discomfort would increase, so I looked about for a means of escape.

**T**HE large double doors opened to the Bay, so I knew there had to be a channel. If I could open those doors just wide enough to permit the passage of my body, I knew that I could swim underwater for a considerable distance, having won several prizes at the YMCA for my aquatic ability.

There was a bar across the doors. It could easily be reached from a boat, but standing at the edge of the enclosed dock I could just barely touch it with my splintered oar. Peggy watched me.

"And what's that going to get you?" she asked despondently.

I told her my plan of swimming underwater, and added, "But even if I am apprehended, I hope to draw off Mr. Ganey sufficiently to permit your escape. You could telephone from the Club and summon assistance."

"If he catches you in the water, Wes, he'll shoot you like a fish in a barrel!"

"I don't think so," I said with an assurance I was far from feeling. "He needs me to forge that check."

"And he'd cut you down," she retored emphatically, "before he'd let you get away."

I shook my head stubbornly. It was, I felt, a necessary risk.

I gave the bar a preliminary prod. It was firmly wedged, but by squatting and prodding beneath it, I could feel it give just a little. Before very long, my muscles were aching from holding the heavy, bro-

ken oar at arm's length. I could work no more than ten minutes at a stretch, and each time I thrust, I lifted the bar no more than a fraction of an inch. The perspiration was pouring from me, and the intervals between thrusts grew longer. What made it more difficult was that I could not make a sound to arouse Mr. Ganey's suspicion.

It took fully two and a half hours of the most arduous labor to raise that bar the necessary four inches. Breathing heavily, I stripped off my shoes, socks, trousers, jacket and shirt. It was no time for false modesty. I let myself down into the water. It was about five feet deep. I waded silently to the door and inched it open.

I swear that the small squeak it made would not have aroused a bird, but almost instantly Mr. Ganey's feet thudded outside and a bullet through the door sent splinters flying into my face. I hastily splashed away from it as he laughed.

"Try again, pal," he called. "I was getting bored out here."

Discouraged, I climbed out of the water. His vigilance, it seemed, was greater than my ingenuity. Peggy patted my cheek.

"Don't take it so hard," she said with forced cheeriness. "At least you've had a refreshing dip."

I smiled weakly and started to dress again. As I picked up my wristwatch, I saw the time and uttered a small cry of consternation. It was 1:30 P.M.

"What's the matter?" Peggy asked anxiously.

"The time," I said dully. "I had to get ten orders today."

I told her about the contest and the post of district sales manager that I had hoped to win. "If I can get out of here," I said, "there's still a chance!"

She gave me another odd look, then said, "You're all business, aren't you?"

"The chance of becoming district sales manager does not occur every day."

"Yeah, and the chance of getting your head blown off doesn't occur every day, either."

She limped away from me and sat down on the floor with her back against the wall. I wanted to tell her that I was far from being "all business", but at that moment, Mr. Ganey called out again.

"I'm pushing a check under the door,

pal. Take a look at it. Think it over. All you have to do is sign it. How else can you get five grand?"

**I** SAW the yellow oblong of paper slide under the door, and I snatched it up. I tore it angrily into several pieces and flung them through the open window. He gave a cry of rage as he saw them flutter to the ground.

Okay, pal," he said harshly, "I'm giving you till three o'clock and that's all. Three o'clock."

Peggy sat up tensely. "He's thought of something!" she said. "He's figured a way to get in."

I picked up the splintered oar. It seemed pitifully inadequate against a gun. However, there was nothing else.

"I don't see how he could get in," I tried to sound confident.

"You don't know Ganey. He's shrewder and tougher than anyone you've ever met before. Say . . . how did you manage to get away from that guy in the first place, Wes?"

"I—I jumped out the window."

"Just like that?"

"I ran and he shot at me."

She looked at me as if there was something about me that was beyond understanding. "You got away from him," she said slowly, "and . . . you came back. Why?"

I said hurriedly, "We've got to keep our eyes open now. We cannot afford to permit Mr. Ganey to surprise us."

I shouldered my club and began a slow patrol of the walls, listening for any untoward activity outside.

All right Sergeant O'Shea, so I didn't actually shoulder the club! What difference does it make, anyway? Now listen,

I've taken just about as much from you as I . . . All right, Mr. District Attorney, I'll sit down, and I'll finish my statement, but under protest, understand? Under protest!

The walls of the boathouse were very flimsy, nothing more than boards nailed to uprights, and in some cases the cracks between were more than an inch wide in width.

I felt increasingly apprehensive. If Mr. Ganey could manage to insert his gun between the boards of the wall, shooting us would be merely a matter of pulling the trigger. I posted myself in a corner and tried to watch all the walls at once. I couldn't think of any other way.

It was Peggy who first heard him. "Wes," she beckoned urgently. "He's up to something at the door."

I listened. Something scratched against the wood. There was a brief silence, and something scratched down the door again. I looked at Peggy, and she shook her head. I couldn't understand it, either.

Mr. Ganey called heavily, "Last chance, pal. What's the word?"

I licked my lips. "No," I managed to sputter out.

This time he did not answer. I watched tensely. Nothing happened—then suddenly there was a crackling and a roar and a puff of smoke came under the door. He had piled dry palm fronds against the door and set fire to them. All he had to do was sit outside and shoot us as we ran out, through the water door or the window. Or—

My eyes lighted. He would be exceptionally vigilant, I know, and we could use that as a weapon against him. I rapidly outlined a plan to Peggy, anxious, I admit, for her approval. To my astonishment,

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she stood on tiptoe, kissed me and whispered, "That's for luck, Wes."

Taking the second oar, she limped to the wall opposite the window and inserted the blade between the boards. She did it with caution, but nevertheless, the pried nails screeched, as I knew they would. I heard Mr. Ganey move rapidly outside as he went to investigate. I knew that I would have to act quickly.

Grasping my club, I scrambled through the window, grasped the edge of the flat roof and, panting, swung myself up. I tiptoed across. I peered over the opposite edge. There at the corner, a gloating smile on his lips, Mr. Ganey was watching, his gun ready in his hand to shoot us down as we came through the aperture Peggy was ostensibly making in the wall.

I was, at this point, actually hanging over the edge of the roof. Mr. Ganey had but to glance up and my career would have ended then and there. My heart hammering wildly. I raised my club and brought it down squarely on top of his head. . . .

**I'M AFRAID** Peggy exaggerated my part in the incident when she gave her version at Police Headquarters, for I admit now that no one could have been as badly frightened as I. I slipped out of Headquarters in the confusion. It was 5:30. I went through the motions of calling on two prospects, two I had considered sure sales, but somehow, my heart was not in it, and I sold neither of them.

I felt very badly at having deserted Peggy at Headquarters. She alone would know why. "All business," she would say. I wanted desperately for her to know that I wasn't "all business," but now it seemed that there was no longer anything I could do about it.

The next morning I slunk into the sales meeting, glancing glumly at the chart on the wall that showed the progress of each salesman. I was third on the list, though only four sales behind the leader. I sat down in the back row of chairs as Mr. Zimmer mounted the platform and rapped for order with a rolled up newspaper firmly held in his hand.

"Well, fellas," he said in that inspirational voice of his, "today, as you know, is the big day. Yessir. Today one of you goes up another rung on the ladder of suc-

cess, proving what I've always said— It's backbone, not wishbone, that gets the soup-bone!"

Kelly, the high ranking salesman, was already being congratulated by his neighbors.

"But first," said Mr. Zimmer, unrolling the newspaper, "I want to read you a little something . . ."

I felt myself blushing as he read the news account of my belated capture of Mr. Ganey. Mr. Zimmer slapped the newspaper down against the table when he finished, and I jumped because it sounded uncomfortably like a pistol shot. He raised himself on tiptoe as he always does when he is putting across a message. It was his method of calling for attention.

"Wesley Smith," he said in a voice that grew in volume as he continued, "was offered a bitter choice—his life in exchange for his integrity—yet he steadfastly refused to forge that check. And what did he prove? I'll tell you what he proved. He proved that the integrity of a company can be as great and no greater than the integrity of the men who represent it to the public.

"I want each and every one of you to go out and buy this newspaper. I want you to read the story of Wesley Smith on the front page. There's a message in it for each and every one of you. Two columns long, and the name of the Bankers Friend Automatic Check Writer Corporation mentioned four times, telling the world that there must be something *great* about a Company for which a man will risk his life to safeguard its name.

"Stand up, Wesley. Get up on your hind legs and give the boys a good look at the new district sales manager of the Bankers Friend Automatic Check Writer Corporation."

Well, that's all, Mr. District Attorney. I just wanted you to know why I left Police Headquarters instead of staying to make my statement at that time. If you're finished with me, I'd like to go, because Peggy's waiting for me outsi—

That's the end! That's the last wise-crack I'm taking from you! Come on, O'Shea, put up your hands. You've been dishing it out, now let's see if you can take it. . . .





Complications set in for Claims Investigator Lane when a jewel snatch involved a bevy of beauties who had plenty of everything—including murder in their hearts.



Even so, Lane didn't mind doing his snooping in his boss's mansion until he found a Chinese chest in his room . . . which doubled for a casket.



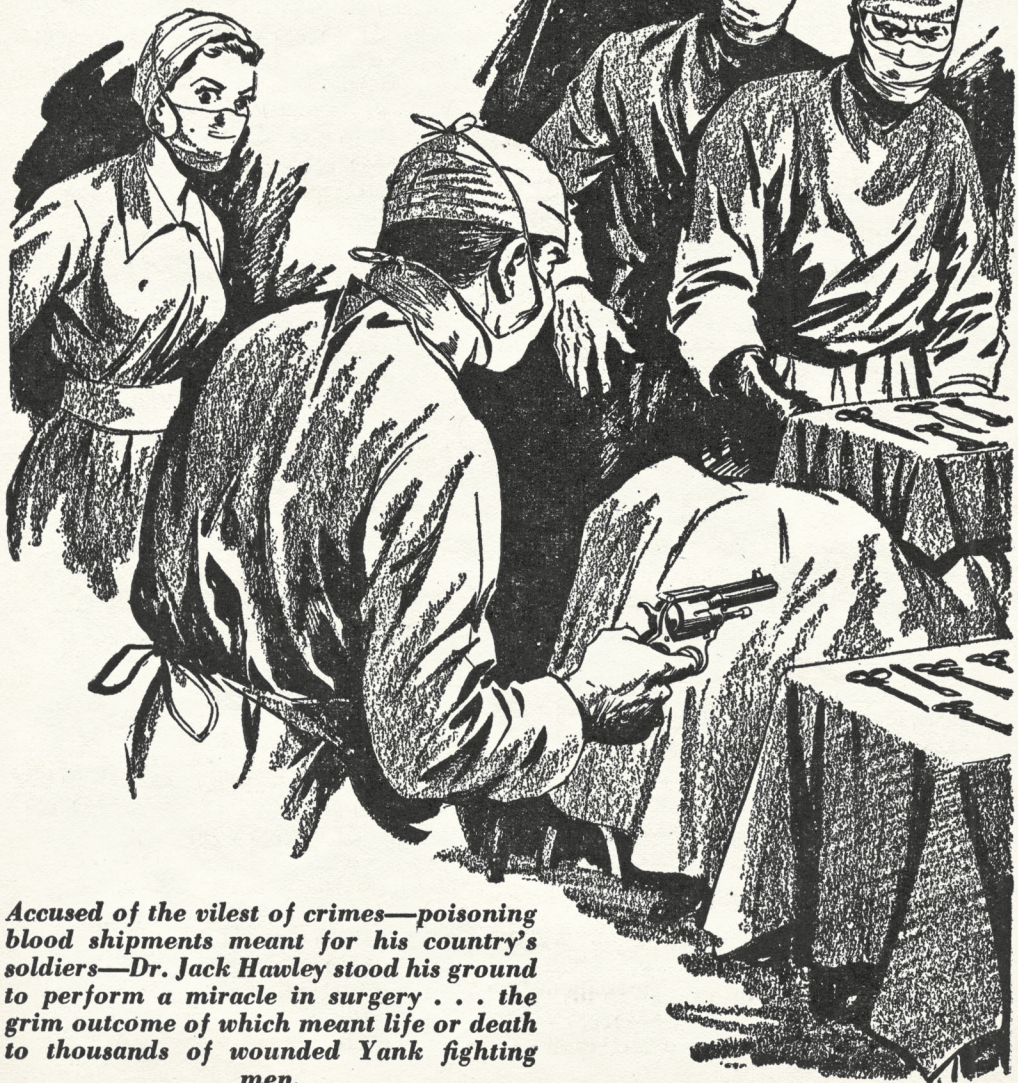
Lane spent many a weary hour in the line of duty. He should have slept soundly but it seemed that one of his boss's guests had a different idea in mind.



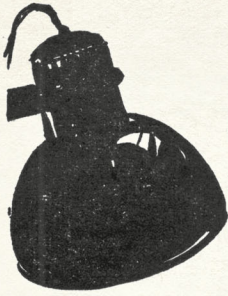
Then Lane placed the blame on his host and found himself facing . . . "Guns Across the Table," in Frederick C. Davis' novel in the June issue, published on April 4th.

# THE BLOODBANK KILLINGS

"Everybody stand pat."



*Accused of the vilest of crimes—poisoning blood shipments meant for his country's soldiers—Dr. Jack Hawley stood his ground to perform a miracle in surgery . . . the grim outcome of which meant life or death to thousands of wounded Yank fighting men.*



By  
**HANK  
NAPHEYS**

CHAPTER ONE

When Satan Bleeds

**T**HE girl receptionist at the hospital desk watched young Doctor Hawley come down the long marble corridor. She smiled to herself in anticipation of *personally* speaking to the tall, coldly efficient surgeon.

"Oh, Doctor Hawley," she said in her huskiest voice. She watched him swing in



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her direction and felt the shock of his cool and utterly impersonal blue eyes.

"Yes," he asked, his level voice neither brusque nor polite.

"There is a Major Kirk in the private reception room," she said, flashing a smile that would have had the internes doing handsprings.

Jack Hawley inclined his head slightly. "Thank you." He turned a broad, well-tailored back on her and walked off.

She muttered, "Well, the damned icicle!" And as she later told the nurses in the locker room: "He looked right at me. What did he see? The smile that gave him the green light? No indeed. He saw the muscles that made the smile. He saw the shape of my skull, the depth of my hollow eye sockets. . . ."

Hawley turned off the corridor and walked to the reception room. There he found the hawk-faced major sitting in a straight chair and smoking a cigarette in short, jerky drags.

"Hello, Major Kirk," said Hawley.

The Medical Corps officer shook hands. Then, glancing about the reception room, he asked, "Is it safe to speak here?"

Hawley gestured toward a huge settee in the far corner. They both crossed to it and sat down. The major said:

"I am just checking on that blood shipment, Doctor. Are you positive nothing will hinder its leaving at eight in the morning? We are scheduling a fast bomber to leave ahead of the ammunition cargo plane. It is vitally important that your shipment be on that bomber."

"It'll be ready, Major." Jack Hawley stuffed and lighted a pipe, clamped the stem firmly in strong white teeth.

"And, of course, it's most confidential," stressed the major. "Our boys have suffered heavy casualties on that front, and we can't let the enemy know how serious they are. If an enemy agent knew where that blood bank was being shipped—"

Jack Hawley leaned forward. "Only our superintendent, Doctor Whittaker, and myself know of its destination."

The major rose, offered his hand. "I'm depending on you, Doctor—and so are hundreds of wounded American soldiers." He gripped Hawley's hand tightly, smiled a weary, tired smile and turned to leave.

Hawley, slowly puffing his pipe, walked

beside the major, saying, "We're completing the bank on some rare groups. Tonight we'll crate it for shipping."

They reached the front door. Hawley stepped out into the air with the major and filled his lungs with the crisp, sunny afternoon. The major waved and walked off. Hawley stood there, smoking and watching the golden-red autumn leaves chase themselves across the well-kept terrace.

His keen eyes picked out the major's erect figure as it neared the corner. The major's head was bowed in thought, as he stepped off the curb into the street.

Hawley saw the car whisking along at a fast clip. An involuntary yell of warning started from his throat and was drowned in the shrill squeal of locked tires on asphalt. He saw the middle-aged army officer lifted from the street and thrown against a store front. The crash of shattering glass added to the din.

Jack Hawley swiftly re-entered the hospital and snapped up the phone on the girl's reception desk.

"Emergency . . . This is Doctor Hawley. Dispatch ambulance to northeast corner of building. Man hit by car and hurled through plate-glass window of stationery store. My case." He broke the connection, then:

"Office—this is Doctor Hawley. Accident case coming in. Major Kirk, Medical Corps. Send for his son at the Gage Rope and Wire Company." Again he broke the connection.

"A-Five desk—Nurse Ware, please . . . This is Doctor Hawley, Ware. Accident case coming in. Meet me on the platform."

He put the phone on its stand on the girl's desk. Then he put his pipe back between his teeth, felt through his pockets for a match.

The desk girl quickly struck a match. "Here's one, Doctor Hawley." When he took the burning match from her fingers and relighted his pipe, she thought, *Well, it's nice to have someone around who never loses his head.*

Hawley nodded his thanks, turned and walked along the high-ceilinged, marble corridor.

**S**URGERY was a white room of quiet efficiency. Doctor Hawley watched the preparation through the glass window of

the ante-room as he dried his hands under the wind dryer. Out in surgery they were wheeling in Major Kirk. A new nurse, Grace Latham, was walking backwards, guiding the rubber-tired table. Nurse Eileen Ware was behind the table pushing. Both nurses wore masks. Another nurse was tinkering with the anesthesia tanks. Still another was setting up the transfusion apparatus.

Hawley glanced at the other man in the ante-room. "Are the operation papers in order, Doctor Belden?"

Doctor Belden was a medium-sized, tan-haired man. He pressed the foot lever on another dryer and talked above the wind-whine, "All in order, sir. The patient's son signed. That plate-glass window did a nasty job on Kirk. Right arm is hanging on shreds."

A nurse stepped over and put a white cap over Jack Hawley's dark hair and held the operating gown for him.

Belden jerked his head at the nurse to put on his cap. Then he spoke to Hawley, "I understand, Doctor Hawley, that you saw the accident and took personal charge of the patient."

Jack Hawley nodded as he thrust his hands into the rubber gloves held by the nurse. Then he stooped for the nurse to adjust his mask and to wrap a towel around his gloved hands which he folded in front of him.

A glance at Belden and he led the way into surgery, looking for all the world like a high priest going to a sacrificial altar. In surgery he paused a moment in front of the X-ray of Major Kirk's arm. Then, with one searching glance at his assistants, he stepped up to the operating table and into the cold brilliance of the overhead light.

Nurse Ware brought the instruments in a steaming hot towel and laid them out. Nurse Latham whipped the other towel from Hawley's gloved hands. The sheet was drawn back from the patient's mangled arm. Hawley didn't have to tell Nurse Ware what instruments to hand him. He just signaled and the gleaming tools of medical science flashed in the bright light. Hawley's movements were swift, sure, deliberate. He cut, snipped, slashed, sewed with the cold assurance that it was impossible for him to make a mistake.

A sharp word from the nurse at the tanks flicked Hawley's eye to the rubber "heart." It was fluttering spasmodically. Then suddenly it deflated.

Ware swiftly injected adrenalin.

The rubber "heart" quivered, then was flat again.

Hawley stared at it.

A gasp of amazement rose from the others.

Hawley quickly felt the pulse of Major Kirk's right wrist. But there was no pulse. Hawley then announced in a flat voice:

"Major Kirk is dead."

"Major—" Belden gulped, stared at the still form.

Eileen Ware's violet eyes on Hawley were incredulous, amazed. She stood there, her slender figure rigid, almost disbelieving what he had said.

Doctor Belden stepped closer to the operating table. He husked, "But—it can't be!"

Hawley pulled off his mask and smelled the major's lips, looked into the mouth, raised the eyelids, examined the point of transfusion. Then he looked at Belden, saying:

"Cyanide."

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Belden whipped off his mask. "You—you mean to say—"

Doctor Hawley nodded. "Major Kirk—was murdered."

"Murder!" the word chorused from all their lips.

**HAWLEY** looked from one to the other. "There is nothing to be gained in needlessly alarming yourselves. Maybe one of us here in this room murdered Major Kirk—and maybe not. Keep your heads when questioned by the police. Tell the truth—absolutely the truth, no matter what they ask." He turned to Nurse Eileen Ware. "Ware, take a smear of those instruments, and the blood and the saliva. Run them up to the lab and test them yourself."

Doctor Belden cut in with, "Pardon me, but do you think it wise—in this instance—to move anything from this room?"

Hawley's cool, blue eyes went to Belden. "If you feel it necessary to tell the police of this, you are perfectly at liberty to do so. And you had better call them now." He turned and left the surgery.

Eileen Ware removed her mask, got the smears and started off.

"I hope you realize what you're doing," warned Belden.

"Precisely," said Eileen Ware. "I am carrying out Doctor Hawley's orders. He's my boss."

Belden smiled tightly. "In more ways than one, I imagine."

Eileen stepped closer to him. "I dare you to say that to Doctor Hawley's face." Her violet eyes flashed contemptuously. Then she swished out of the surgery, carrying her smears.

Belden shrugged. "Guess that hit kind of close to home."

The others paid no attention to him. They were looking at the sheet-shrouded body of Major Kirk. . . .

Jack Hawley closed the door of his office and sank wearily into his chair. He rested his elbows on the desk and put his forehead between his palms. Words came from his taut lips, words that would have caused a sensation if they reached the ears of the nurses in the locker room. He seemed barely aware of uttering them.

"Such a nice guy—the major. Worried about the wounded boys at the front. He

was with them, suffering with them—when he stepped in front of that automobile. . . ."

Then Jack Hawley lifted his head, took the phone and called the Medical Corps office. "Colonel Rutland, please. . . Colonel, this is Doctor Hawley. When Major Kirk left here he was hit by an automobile. I brought him in here, found that an amputation of the right arm was necessary. During the operation Major Kirk died of cyanide poisoning. I don't know what to make of it, Colonel. Those are the facts and you are the first to know them. The police are on the way now. . . Right."

Hawley listened for several moments; then, "Yes, I assured Major Kirk that the shipment would be ready. All right, I'll be expecting you, Colonel." He hung up.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Doctor Death

**DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT CRITTEN** studied his neatly polished black shoes while Doctor Hawley told him step by step what had happened from the accident to the discovery of the cyanide. They were in surgery. When Hawley finished, the detective-lieutenant glanced at the assistant medical examiner who was busy at the operating table.

"What do you say, Tomlin?"

"Everything seems to check," said the thin, gaunt medical examiner. "I want to test these instruments and the—"

Hawley put in, "I am having smears tested now. Nurse Ware should be along soon with the results."

Lieutenant Critten straightened. "Why was anything moved from this room? Who is responsible for that?"

"I am," said Hawley. "I ordered the tests to be made."

Critten's jawline tightened. "Don't you know anything about police rules bearing on homicide?"

"Not a thing, Lieutenant," said Hawley levelly. "This is the first murder I've witnessed."

At that moment Eileen Ware came in, went over to Hawley. "The blood is polluted, Doctor Hawley."

"Where is it?" demanded Critten.

Hawley indicated the transfusion apparatus. "What we used is there. Only a smear was taken."

The print man carefully dusted the container. A plainclothesman wrote out a tag to attach to it.

Tomlin, the assistant medical examiner, took the lieutenant to one side and whispered, "I don't know if this will be of any use to you, Lieutenant, but Hawley has the reputation of being a brilliant surgeon. Too brilliant, some say."

Critten looked sharply at Tomlin. "What do you mean by that?"

"That some of his techniques are new to the medical profession. I'm not saying that they are frowned upon but sometimes he treads on very thin ground."

Critten was very thoughtful when he moved back to Hawley's side. He studied the young surgeon a moment before saying, "Major Kirk was with you just before the accident. What did he see you about?"

"The Army Medical Corps will possibly give you that information. I am not at liberty to divulge it."

The detective thrust out his jaw. "You're a pretty cool customer, Doc. And let me tell you that you'll save yourself a lot of grief by cooperating with me. Now look—here's the setup as I see it: You talked with the major; he was run down by a car; you had him brought in here; you operated—and he died of cyanide poisoning. Damn it all, Doc, I wouldn't say that it looked too good for you!"

Eileen Ware had been standing there in her crisp, white uniform taking in every word. And when the detective finished, she spoke up quickly. "Doctor Hawley never touched that blood. When the patient was being prepared for surgery, Doctor Belden phoned in the order for it. Nurse Latham went up to the blood bank, signed for it and brought it down here. Latham and I set it up. Then Doctor Hawley entered surgery and immediately started to operate."

Jack Hawley's eyes never once left Eileen's face, watching her changing expressions as the words came tumbling out to his defense. And Hawley's eyes were puzzled. He hadn't thought the efficient Ware capable of so impassioned an outburst.

Lieutenant Critten spoke in a dry voice. "Thank you, nurse. That's the first constructive cooperation I've gotten since I came in here." He turned to the print

man. "Take everybody's fingerprints and compare them with the ones on the bottle." He rubbed his hands briskly as if matters were progressing. "And you all can help yourselves by telling me everything you think is of the minutest importance."

DOCTOR BELDEN wiped his inky fingers on the oiled rag the police gave him and spoke in a deliberate voice. "I'm saying this for the protection of my friends and helpers. And they will bear me out when I say that I warned Doctor Hawley against removing anything from this room before the police examiners arrived."

Eileen Ware sucked in a gasp. "Why you—"

The lieutenant stabbed a forefinger at Hawley, "What do you say to that?"

"Nothing," replied Hawley quietly. "It is true. I wanted my own laboratory tests in preference to taking someone's else word for it."

Tomlin, the assistant medical examiner, looked up from packing his kit. "Lieutenant," he said caustically, "the learned doctor simply means that a Hawley test is much more satisfactory to him than an official police test."

Jack Hawley made no comment, just glanced at his watch and frowned.

The print man beckoned to Lieutenant Critten. They went into a huddle. Then Critten announced, "Doctor Hawley's prints are not on the bottle." Then to Belden, "Yours are on here, Doc. How come?"

"I must have adjusted the setup, Lieutenant. It's my duty to see that every detail is in readiness for the operation."

Lieutenant Critten contemplated his polished shoes. Walking to the door, he addressed everyone, "No one is to leave the hospital without my permission." He then beckoned to one of the plainclothesmen. "Okay, we'll talk with the major's son now." They left the surgery.

For long minutes Hawley watched the door through which the lieutenant had passed. Suddenly, without a word to anyone, he left the room. His footsteps echoed hollowly in the long marble corridor. He took an elevator to the top floor, passed the main entrance to the laboratory and opened a private door into the blood bank.

There were rows of huge refrigerators

lining the wall. Hawley went to one separated from the others—the one holding the blood shipment for the Army.

He nodded to the middle-aged attendant nurse, then unlocked this special refrigerator with a key from his pocket. The big box held shelf upon shelf of plasma, carefully sealed and labeled.

He asked the nurse, "Have you noticed anyone showing undue curiosity about this locked refrigerator?"

"No, Doctor. No one at all."

Then Hawley took a little memorandum book from his pocket and painstakingly checked every bottle in every row. When he finished he gave a vast sigh of relief. All the bottles designated for the Army were accounted for.

He told the nurse, "This lot will be crated tonight. Let me know when the last bottles are sealed." Then he walked over to the nurse's desk and looked at the ledger-like blood register. He saw that Doctor Belden phoned for the plasma at three-fifteen p.m., and that it had been picked up and initialed by Grace Latham.

The nurse pointed toward the Belden notation in the register. "I took that plasma from the regular hospital blood bank and put it on this desk. And I attached the order to it with an elastic. When Latham called for it, she signed the order and register and took the bottle off the desk herself."

Jack Hawley rubbed one balled fist into his palm and thoughtfully stared at the floor. Looking up, he asked the nurse, "Were you here every minute from the time you took the bottle out till Latham picked it up?"

"Yes, I was. And—" She hesitated, frowned; looked strangely at him for a moment. "No, I was out for several minutes. I'd almost forgotten it. . . . It was when you sent for me, Doctor."

"I sent for you?" said Hawley. "Not me. There's a mistake somewhere. . . . Well, what happened?"

"When I got downstairs to your office, you weren't there. So I came back here again."

"It wasn't my call," Hawley said. "Did the voice sound like mine? Did it say it was me?"

"No, Doctor, it was a woman's voice. She said that she was calling for Doctor

Hawley and to come right to his office."

"What time was that?"

The nurse thought a moment. "Somewhere around three-thirty."

He picked up the phone, saying to the operator: "This is Doctor Hawley. Do you remember a call coming up here about three-thirty—perhaps from my office?"

The operator's voice was harassed, edgy, "I'm sorry, Doctor Hawley, but I can't keep track of all the calls. This board is ringing every minute without a stop. And three calls are coming in now. I'm sorry I can't help you, Doctor." She clicked off.

Hawley put the phone down. "She doesn't remember the call, nurse. Can you tell me what the woman sounded like?"

"Her voice was deep—and now that I think of it, it sounded as if the person had a cold. . . . But you say you didn't call for me. It certainly sounds suspicious all right."

Jack Hawley was thinking that Detective Lieutenant Critten would feel the same way about it.

HAWLEY'S eye caught his number flashing on the Doctors' Call System on the wall. The little purple light was blinking furiously behind the No. 6. He took up the phone.

"Hawley speaking."

The operator answered, "Superintendent Whittaker is in your office now, Doctor Hawley, and he says it is urgent that you see him immediately."

Hawley hung up and went downstairs to his office. He opened the door and saw the plump, bald-headed Whittaker pacing up and down the office. Sitting on the edge of Hawley's desk was Detective Lieutenant Critten. And seated in the leather guest's chair was a slim, light-haired man with watery blue eyes and steel-rimmed glasses. The light-haired man was a smaller, younger and a somewhat weak imitation of the dead Major Kirk. The younger Kirk held his hat in his lap and was running his finger around the welt on the edge of the brim.

Doctor Whittaker stopped his pacing, cocked his bald head at Hawley. "What is there to do, Doctor Hawley—*what* is there to do? I confess I am at wit's end. This frightful—this—er—"

"Murder," supplied the lieutenant.

"Murder," Whittaker gingerly used the



word. "This murder is a disastrous thing for the hospital. How—how could so monstrous a deed happen?"

Hawley glanced at young Kirk, who was still running his finger around the welt on his hatbrim, then spoke to Doctor Whittaker. "A poisoned bottle of plasma was substituted for a bottle from our bank. The attendant nurse up in the laboratory set out the pure blood, then left the room for several minutes on a call and got back when Nurse Latham arrived to sign for the blood. In the time she was out, the blood must have been changed. The labels are easy to duplicate, so the difference would never be noticed."

Lieutenant Critten asked, "Why did the nurse upstairs leave the room?"

Jack Hawley was anxious to avoid answering that question. He looked levelly at the detective. "The point that the blood was changed will be proved when you discover whether or not the attendant nurse's fingerprints are on the bottle which was used in surgery."

That sent Critten reaching for the telephone. He barked orders into it, then turned to Doctor Whittaker, asking:

"Tell me, Doctor, would you say that Doctor Hawley was a brilliant surgeon?"

Hawley's eyes flickered. He tried to puzzle out what the detective was leading to. One thing was certain; Critten was not given to flattery.

Doctor Whittaker nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes—I would indeed say so."

Critten studied his neatly polished shoes a moment before going on, "Is that because he tries out new techniques and things?"

"Things?" Whittaker cocked his head.

Critten spread his hands. "You know what I mean, Doctor. This medical racket is Greek to me. What I'm trying to get across is—does Doctor Hawley try out all sorts of new combinations. You know, new ideas that have never been tried before."

Young Kirk's finger was sliding faster and faster around his hatbrim.

Doctor Whittaker hesitated, "Well—I don't exactly know how to answer—"

"He means," put in Jack Hawley, "was I practicing a new technique on Major Kirk."

Whittaker straightened stiffly. "Of course not! Certainly not!"

C RITTEN put his hands before him, palms out. "Now don't bite me, Doctor. I was just seeking information." But the detective's eyes had narrowed. He touched young Kirk on the shoulder. The young man's rotating finger suddenly stopped as he looked up at the detective.

"Mr. Kirk, have you ever seen Doctor Hawley before?"

Kirk's watery eyes drifted over Hawley, then back to the detective. "No, I have never seen Doctor Hawley before."

"Did you ever hear your father speak of him?"

"Yes, often. Dad has said many times that Doctor Hawley would go very far in medicine, if he were allowed a free hand with his revolutionary ideas."

The detective clucked his tongue. "Very, very interesting, Mr. Kirk." He leaned against the wall and slowly dug a cigarette out of a crumpled pack.

There was an awkward silence.

Doctor Whittaker quickly stepped into the breach. "Mr. Kirk, we certainly are indeed sorry about this frightful—"

Kirk raised his watery eyes, and his finger went back to rounding the hatbrim. "It is frightful, Doctor. So unnecessary to take the life of a man serving his country in time of danger. And as much as I sincerely regret having to think of such a thing right now—I'm afraid that it falls under the heading of—malpractice."

Jack Hawley was not looking at Kirk—but at Detective Lieutenant Critten. He said to the detective, "Nice maneuvering, Lieutenant. You are determined to find a murderer—even if you have to manufacture one yourself."

Doctor Whittaker entirely missed what had passed between Hawley and the detective. The elderly doctor was staring openmouthed at young Kirk. "You mean—you mean that you—"

Young Kirk went on, "It is really ghastly to even mention it now, Doctor—so, out of respect to poor Dad, I'll wait until after the burial before consulting my attorney." He rose to his feet. "I'll just walk around a bit. The shock has been so great I don't trust myself out in the street right now." He went quietly out of the office.

There was a dead silence after he had left.

Hawley was the first to speak. He slow-

ly wagged his head. "How do you like that for a cold-blooded beast? His father's body is still warm—and that fellow is figuring how much he can collect on a law-suit."

The lieutenant put in, "If I'm not mistaken, he will collect—plenty."

"And," said Hawley, pointing his thumb toward himself, "you will have a first-class suspect."

The lieutenant shook his head grimly. "No, Doctor—I will have a first class murderer."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Under the Knife . . .

A STRANGLING sound came from Doctor Whittaker as he mopped his bald head with a handkerchief. "B-but the b-board of d-directors—" He collapsed in a chair and stared awesomely at the picture he had conjured up in his mind.

Detective Lieutenant Critten moved toward the door. It opened before he could touch the knob. A tall, stiff-backed man stood there in the uniform of a colonel of the U. S. Army Medical Corps. The newcomer stepped in and nodded to Hawley.

"That was grave news, Doctor Hawley."

"Yes," said Hawley. "Come in, Colonel. This is Detective Lieutenant Critten of Homicide, Colonel Rutland."

The men nodded somberly. Then the colonel raised his swagger stick in comradely salute to Doctor Whittaker.

Critten squarely faced the medical officer. "Doctor Hawley here refused to tell me what business he had with Major Kirk. And I believe it might aid in fastening guilt on the murderer."

Colonel Rutland's fingers beat a contemplative tattoo on his swagger stick. The tattoo abruptly ceased as he said, "The information you seek, Lieutenant, will have to come from General Frankson himself. It is not within my province to reveal it."

Critten blew out a gusty breath of impatience. "Maybe I'll have to go to the President before I crack this case. But I'll do it. All right, so it's General Frankson." He went over to the door again, turning to Hawley. "It wouldn't be wise, Doctor, to attempt to leave the building." He went out.

The colonel took the seat Hawley offered. "Does he insinuate, Doctor Hawley, that you are involved in Major Kirk's death?"

"He does," said Jack Hawley. "I'm a medical fiend who practices vile concoctions on patients."

"What utter rot!" snorted the colonel. "I hope the fool's blundering hasn't interfered with that shipment—"

Hawley shook his head. "It will be ready at the appointed hour, Colonel. I readily understand the great urgency of its being on time."

The colonel leaned forward to include the wilted Whittaker. "The urgency is of a still more vital nature, gentlemen. There has been another engagement. More casualties. This shipment of blood *must* go out tomorrow morning." The colonel rose. "Now, I'd like to see—Kirk."

Doctor Whittaker pulled himself to his feet. "I'll escort you, Colonel. Perhaps we old medical men can put our heads together and figure out this case." They left the office.

There was a knock on the door. Hawley called, "Come in."

EILEEN WARE entered. A little, starched nurse's cap replaced the cover-all that she had worn in surgery. Her corn-silk hair curled softly around the edges of the cap.

"Hello, Ware," said Jack Hawley. "You certainly made it plain to the lieutenant that I was nowhere near the transfusion setup. Thanks." He indicated the chair beside his desk, and immediately wondered why he had done it. Never before had he asked a nurse to sit down in his office.

Eileen's violet eyes were slightly puzzled as she slipped into the chair. Then she said quietly, "I spoke the truth."

Hawley opened a package of cigarettes. "I don't know whether or not you smoke, Ware. . . ."

"I could use one, Doctor Hawley."

He held the light, then fired his own.

Eileen Ware crossed her legs which were attractive even in the white cotton stockings and flat-heeled shoes. "I just had to muzzle that young Kirk. He was roaming the corridor, talking malpractice to anyone who would listen to him."

Jack Hawley got to his feet quickly. "I'll

quiet him down." He moved toward the door, stopped.

Detective Lieutenant Critten was standing in the doorway and Hawley didn't know how long he had been there. Critten said, "Take it easy, Doc . . . And you, too, miss, sit down." Then, to both of them, "I want some answers—the right answers." The detective made a motion as if to push Doctor Hawley toward the chair but changed his mind when he saw the young doctor regarding him coolly, almost indifferently.

Instead, Critten leveled a finger at Hawley. "You were right about the switch in plasma bottles. And you were right about the attendant nurse's fingerprints not being on the bottle which was used in the operation." Then Critten's voice sharpened. "But why didn't you tell me about your phoning the nurse to come down to your office—and get her away from the blood bank so the switch could be made?"

"Very simply explained," said Doctor Hawley matter-of-factly. "I didn't make the call and know nothing about it."

Lieutenant Critten gave a short bark of a laugh. "Just like that, eh? But it's not settled as easily as that—"

"Then," put in Hawley, "we'll have to continue in surgery. Ware and I are scheduled for an appendectomy. You can come along and watch, if you care to, Lieutenant."

"I'll see you afterward," said Critten quickly. "But let me tell you one thing straight, Doc. When I find the motive for this murder—and if it fits you—you can forget all your fancy words. You're going to get slapped into the jug so fast your head will swim."

"Until then—" said Jack Hawley, not feeling half so flippant as his words sounded—"I'll have to stand seeing you around."

"You bet you will!" growled Critten.

**JACK HAWLEY** was briskly washing-up after the successful appendectomy when Doctor Belden almost ran into the ante-room. He saw Hawley there and quickly closed and locked the door.

Hawley glanced up. "What's the matter with you, Belden?"

"The police are looking for you, Doctor Hawley!" husked Belden. "Young Kirk

was found in bad shape. Serious gunshot wound, bullet lodged near the heart—"

A fist banged on the door of the room. "Open up! It's the Law!"

Belden whispered hoarsely: "You can beat it through surgery to the rear door . . . I'll hold them here!"

Hawley shook his head. "Open the door." He finished washing his hands and was shaking water from them when Detective Lieutenant Critten plunged into the room.

Critten looked from Belden to Hawley. "He told you?" Critten asked Hawley. When Hawley nodded, the detective said flatly, "Then you know that I want you for attempted murder!"

The room filled with doctors, nurses and internes and more police.

Jack Hawley strode up to the detective. "What the hell is the matter with you, Critten? Am I going to be suspected of every murder and attempted murder in the state? Only a damned fool would try to put this latest crime on me. I've been with witnesses every second since I left you. . . .

"Now, let's get down to some common sense. I'm a doctor—and if any doctor in the country can save young Kirk's life . . . I can! The heart is my specialty. So, if you want Kirk to regain consciousness and tell us who tried to kill him—let's go!"

Lieutenant Critten had backed several paces before Hawley. The detective's face was a dull red. But he was a good lieutenant and a square cop. He clamped his jaws together, forced words out:

"If the superintendent of this hospital okays the operation, you can do it. And then we'll see what young Kirk has to say." He took a deep breath, then said calmly, "And you realize what a spot you are putting yourself in—if anything goes wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong," replied Hawley. He turned to Eileen Ware. "You, Ware, supervise the testing of the patient's blood. . . . You, Belden, prepare the surgery—"

Critten cut in, "And there'll be medical examiner's men watching both of them."

"Where's young Kirk?" asked Hawley.

"I'll take you," Critten said, clearing a way through the throng of doctors and nurses. . . .

Young Kirk was being carefully lifted

to a carrier table with Doctor Whittaker supervising. Hawley saw this as he entered the laundry-chute room on the second floor.

Colonel Rutland of the Medical Corps was grimly silent as a detective was explaining that young Kirk must have been forced into this chute room and then shot. Powder burns on some soiled linen showed that it had been used as a muffler.

Minutes later in Doctor Hawley's office, Lieutenant Critten was questioning Doctor Belden, finishing with, "Well, Nurse Latham gives you a clean bill."

The phone buzzed.

Hawley lifted the instrument, heard Eileen Ware's report on the blood. Hawley frowned, then said: "It would probably take hours to get it . . . Wait a moment, Ware."

He turned to Colonel Rutland, beckoned him to the corner of the office and whispered, "We have no blood compatible to Kirk's and it might take hours to get the right donor. Now here's a suggestion: We have that compatible blood in your Army shipment. What do you say, Colonel? It's in your hands."

Colonel Rutland fingered his swagger stick. "It would be used in a good cause." He looked straight into Hawley's eyes. "You aren't a murderer, doctor."

"You're right, Colonel," said Hawley. "The Army blood will be used to help solve the murder of an American major. Young Kirk heard something, or stumbled onto something—and was shot so he wouldn't reveal it. If the police hadn't found him, he would have been dead by now. Colonel, young Kirk must be saved. He has something of vital importance to tell us. . . . Shall we use Army plasma?"

"Yes," said the colonel decisively.

Hawley quickly crossed to the phone. "Ware, stay right where you are. Colonel Rutland will be up." He disconnected, then looked at the colonel. "We might get more cooperation and be able to work faster if we told the lieutenant where the blood was coming from."

Colonel Rutland nodded gravely. "I was thinking along those lines. You are right. And I'll take complete responsibility."

Jack Hawley handed the colonel the key to the Army blood bank. "Might be still better if you and the lieutenant went up for

it, selected it yourselves and brought it down, never once letting it leave your hands. Here's the key. You know the location as well as I do."

"Good," said the colonel. "I'll explain to him on the way up. We'll have to take the risk of telling him—but I don't believe our confidence will be misplaced in a police lieutenant."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Blonde's Blackout

YOUNG KIRK lay under the brilliant light on the operating table. Jack Hawley stood by the sliding board with its glittering array of surgical instruments on a steaming towel. At his side was Lieutenant Critten in white gown and mask, his hawkish eyes not once leaving the blood bottle. Eileen Ware and Nurse Latham were there. Colonel Rutland, Doctor Belden and the assistant medical examiner were on the other side of the operating table.

Jack Hawley, rubber-gloved hands still wrapped in a towel, watched Nurse Latham for the signal that the anesthesia had settled in. Then Latham raised the mask.

The towel removed from his hands, Hawley flexed his fingers once, then held his open hand for the scalpel. The gleaming knife turned red—and Hawley moved with a sure, swift hand. To the others, Hawley seemed the coolest, most detached person in surgery.

But Hawley was operating by instinct, habit, the skillfully trained reflexes of the rigorous self-discipline he had imposed upon himself for years. He had a sound knowledge of the human body, could almost have operated blindfolded.

And it was well that that instinct was at Hawley's command. For into even his Spartan-trained mind came visions of wounded and dying American soldiers on a distant, foreign battlefield. And visions of the plasma that would leave in the morning by fast plane to save their lives. The blood that was now flowing into young Kirk's body.

Colonel Rutland's jaw seemed a granite slab beneath his white mask. His thoughts, too, must have been along similar lines, for his eyes were riveted on the rubber "heart."

And that heart suddenly deflated as if someone had pricked it with a pin.

No one cried out—yet everyone was simultaneously conscious of what had happened.

Hawley's gloved hand clawed, then opened in a numbed paralysis. The shiny retractors dropped from his hand, clattered to the stone floor, bounced several feet away. The jarring sound seemed to press a button that released a bedlam of gasps, cries and exclamations.

Loudest of all was the ringing voice of Detective Lieutenant Critten. He talked along the gleaming gun barrel in his hand. "Everybody stand pat! Tomlin, take a look at Kirk. Nobody better bat an eye!"

The medical examiner's assistant moved closer to the still figure on the operating table. Moments later he looked up at Critten.

"Dead, Lieutenant. . . . Cyanide."

Jack Hawley looked numbly at Colonel Rutland.

The colonel's mouth started to form words several times before sound came out, "That means, Hawley—that means that all of the Army blood is poisoned!"

Lieutenant Critten broke in, "Only an enemy agent would poison blood meant to save the lives of wounded American soldiers! Don't move an eyelash, Hawley! I'll plug you sure as hell!"

Colonel Rutland stared at Hawley in dumbfounded amazement. "It seems incredible," he whispered hoarsely. "Yet the blood was in your care, Hawley, under your lock and key. I—I can't believe it."

Jack Hawley spoke steadily. "I was in charge of the blood bank—but I didn't poison it." He turned slightly toward Critten. "And will you tell me *why* the hell you accuse me of going around killing people—before witnesses?"

**T**HE lieutenant nodded grimly. "I'll tell you, sure I will. I have all the answers *now!* You poisoned the blood which you knew was going to American soldiers tomorrow morning. But before it went you had to practice on somebody to see if you had made it deadly enough. Then you tried it openly on Major Kirk, knowing there was no motive to connect you with the crime."

Hawley said, "You're not using good

sense, Lieutenant. Why would I pick on the major when we have cages full of rabbits, monkeys and guinea pigs?"

"Because it's exactly what an enemy rat would do," Critten gestured to the body of young Kirk on the operating table. "I heard with my own ears your threat to shut him up. He was going to bring suit for malpractice. You didn't want public attention drawn to yourself. It would finish you in the medical game. So you shut him up—or tried to. Then—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Jack Hawley. "Before you have me strapped in the electric chair, tell me how I could have shot young Kirk. I was with witnesses—"

"Witnesses—hell! You have someone working right with you here in the hospital. We'll go into this witness business later."

Doctor Whittaker stepped forward. "If I may intrude here, Lieutenant Critten. I have been following your logic—and it sounds damning enough. But why would Doctor Hawley, if he is as craven as you paint him, try to kill Kirk before all of us—when the young fellow was practically dying from the gunshot wound?"

"There's one damn' good reason for that, Doc," replied Critten. "Hawley had to make sure that Kirk died—because if Kirk talked he could identify Hawley as the man who shot him. And Hawley used the poisoned blood to make sure that Kirk did die. He used the poisoned blood that he was going to send to American soldiers!"

Jack Hawley stood there, feeling the weight of the theory piling up against him, smothering him. His eyes traveled over the faces of those in the surgery. There were mixed emotions in their expressions. There was only one smile for him in the whole room full of people. All that smile was on the face of Eileen Ware.

The blonde nurse then quickly frowned at Hawley and dropped her violet eyes toward her left shoe.

His eyes followed hers. He saw something like a hairpin wedged into the side of her shoe. The prongs of the hairpin were sticking out. And she was edging her foot toward an open floor-board electric socket.

Lieutenant Critten's voice broke in on Hawley's wildly churning thoughts:

"And he had the brass to pull this off here because he probably has some get-away planned—"

There was a flash—and the lights went out!

Jack Hawley was moving with the flash. His mind retained everybody's position in that split-second before darkness blanketed the surgery.

Then Doctor Belden's voice ripped through the darkness as he lunged straight for where Hawley had been, "Get the lousy foreign agent. He's here! Right over—"

Hawley then did what he subconsciously had wanted to do for a long time. He drew back his fist and sent it crashing into Belden's face. The blow drove Belden backward, sent him stumbling into other figures. One of those other figures immediately cried out:

"I got him! Here he is, Lieutenant!"

Feet rushed in that direction.

Jack Hawley rapidly skirted the operating table, darted around the tanks and reached out. His fingers found a crisp uniform with a girl's softly firm body in it. Hawley had to chance risking detection, for Eileen Ware had risked so much for him. He put his face close to her head, whispered:

"It's—Hawley. . . ."

"Jack," the word was muffled by a mask, but it was Eileen Ware's voice. And it was the first time she had called him by his first name.

A loud scuffling came from the other side of the surgery—grunts, thuds and yells for light.

Hawley swept Eileen up into his arms and swiftly made for the little door leading to the emergency receiving platform. He got her out of the room while it was still dark. There was a dim bulb at the far end of the corridor and he had to chance that it would not be noticed in the surgery. He fairly ran down the corridor. Eileen was quiet, clinging snugly to him.

No ambulance was at the platform, so he stepped off and went across the shadowy grounds in the gathering dusk of the late fall night. . . .

**JACK HAWLEY** slid Eileen into his coupe, climbed behind the wheel and whipped the car out of the parking lot. He swiftly twisted up and down streets, the

dim-out working more in his favor than against him. When he had left the hospital district far behind him he pulled up on a side street off a busy shopping neighborhood.

Eileen had taken off her nurse's cap and mask. Her violet eyes were large and luminous in the soft glow of the dashlight. She asked, "Why did you risk taking me out? You might have been caught in the time you spent getting me. What help can I be?"

Hawley pulled a dark raincoat from the shelf over the seat and slipped into it, covering his hospital whites. "It was you who risked so much for me," he said. "The flash that was made when you shorted the fuse could easily have been traced to you." He gestured toward the floorboards. "Look at your shoe."

She lifted her foot higher into the glow of the dash and saw the twisted, burned part of a hairpin and the scorched surface of her white shoe. "I see," she said quietly, marveling that he had thought of that while a room full of armed men were seeking to capture him, perhaps kill him.

Hawley went around to the back compartment of the coupe, lifted the lid and took out the overalls he used for car repairs and a pair of sneakers. In the dimly lighted street he made short work of pulling the overalls over his white trousers and of changing shoes. When he came back to her, there was no trace of the surgeon about him.

He put a blanket over her shoulders, saying, "Keep low in the seat. I'll be right back. Oh, by the way, what size coat, shoes and stockings do you wear?"

She told him and he disappeared around the corner in the direction of the shopping district.

Some twenty minutes later he returned with a dark, conservative coat, stockings and dark shoes.

"Slip into these," he said. "And bring your white stuff along. No one at the hospital actually saw you leave with me, so we won't help them any with clues. We're going to leave the car here—which they probably have a radio call out for now—and then we'll take the subway. We'll be safer in the crowds."

He closed the car door and stood nearby smoking a cigarette and making plans. He

had lived at the hospital for years. It was the only home he had known since joining the staff. In his mind he was carefully checking off the people he could go to in an emergency like this.

There weren't many left after his first mental elimination. And on his second checking of the list, only one remained. Jack Hawley hadn't made many friends in his hard struggle to forge ahead in the medical profession. There had never seemed to be much time for anything but medicine.

He smiled slightly when he thought of the one remaining prospect. This prospect, who loomed so importantly now, came to the hospital three months ago for an appendectomy.

An old sea captain, he was. A grizzled salt who had always been fond of saying that when he sailed the seas the ships were made of wood and the men of iron. The captain lived uptown on East 55th Street. Hawley had visited him there several times and remembered the house and neighborhood.

Eileen stepped out of the car and came toward him. She said, "Not a bad fit at all, Doctor—"

"Now, now," broke in Hawley, "that wasn't what you called me when we were in surgery."

"All right. Not a bad fit at all, Jack."

"Fine. And now will you please tell me your first name?"

"Eileen."

"Well, Eileen, we'll have to do something about all that nice yellow hair of yours. You'll be spotted blocks away." He then reached into his overalls pocket and brought out a large, fresh, blue-checked handkerchief. "I was planning to use this when I did repairs on the road." He gave it to her. "Think you can do something with it?"

Eileen opened it out. "It's nice and big." She deftly folded it and tied it under her chin, leaving practically no hair showing.

"We look like a couple of munition workers coming home from the shop. There's no worthier disguise we could have chosen." He took her tightly wrapped hospital outfit, then offered his arm. Together they walked two blocks and down into the subway to be utterly lost among New York's millions.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Surgeon Strategist

OLD CAPTAIN HARDWICK opened the door of his apartment and stared closely at his two visitors. His gray eyes, sharp under their heavy fringe of iron-gray eyebrows, never so much as flicked as he recognized Jack Hawley. He bowed, opening his door wider.

"It's good to see you again, Doc." He bowed lower to Eileen. "And my favorite nurse. Welcome."

"I'm glad to see you, Captain Hardwick," said Eileen. She stepped into the cozy apartment and a feeling of friendly warmth flowed over her, seeped into her very being.

Her feet sank into soft rugs. Deep, comfortable chairs were covered with shawls from foreign lands. A log fire crackled merrily in a smoke-blackened fireplace. Carved wooden ships of all periods rode in a majestic armada across the mantelpiece. Good, richly colored seascapes decorated the walls. Eileen said enthusiastically:

"Why, it's more wonderful than Jack told me."

Jack Hawley smiled at the old captain. "Guess I didn't do your quarters justice when I told Eileen about them."

A slow grin creased the captain's weather-beaten face. "So now it's Eileen and Jack. I always did wonder how you two could be so stern and cold to each other. 'Ware, do this.' 'Yes, Doctor Hawley.'" He chuckled, wagged his bushy head of iron-gray hair. Then he glanced at Hawley. "What do you say, Doc—to a batch of torpedoes? I've been saving that black rum."

Jack Hawley cleared his throat. "Nothing could be better, Captain—but there's something I must tell you first. I'm taking enough advantage of your hospitality as it—"

The old captain drew himself up. "Were you by any chance referring to certain police calls I picked up on that contraption of the devil?" He jabbed a contemptuous finger at the radio, glared at Hawley.

"You've heard?" asked Hawley.

"Sure I've heard, Doc. And your coming here makes me feel mighty good. If

you don't remember it, Doc—you pulled me right up out of the grave not three months ago. . . . Now, how about the torpedoes?"

"Fine," said Jack Hawley.

"And the lady?" asked Hardwick.

Eileen nodded. "I could use a torpedo right now."

The captain disappeared into the kitchen and rattled bottles and glasses.

Eileen looked up at Hawley and saw that his brows were knitted in deep thought. She kept looking at him, seeing again the cold, austere young surgeon.

His eyes flicked to her face and he spoke slowly. "I've been thinking about Belden and his righteousness in keeping to the letter of the Law. He was so righteous one minute—and the next he was telling me to run out the back door, that he'd hold off the police."

"When was this?" asked Eileen quickly.

"Just after the appendectomy, when young Kirk was found shot. Belden ran into the surgery anteroom and played the big brother."

Eileen's violet eyes narrowed. "If you'll pardon my saying so—Belden is a plain louse." She hesitated a moment, glanced toward the kitchen, then lowered her voice. "It may help to tell you this, Jack—otherwise I wouldn't bother you with it. He offered to get me an apartment at the Marlow-Cuttingham."

Hawley blurted, "How the hell could he do that on sixty dollars a week?"

"I've been thinking about that, too, Jack. He seems to have plenty of spending money. And this week Nurse Latham was flashing a diamond wristwatch and looking wise about it."

"Go on," said Hawley. "Things are beginning to take a definite shape. Anything else?"

Eileen worried her lower lip a moment. "Oh, yes. One night I came upon Belden and Latham on the rear stairway—the one that nurses sneak up on when they are out late. Well, they were in a—well, I guess it might be called—a heavy clinch."

**A**T THAT moment Captain Hardwick came into the room, carrying a tray of three tall, iced glasses. "The torpedoes," he announced.

They each took one. The captain raised

his to Hawley and Eileen. "To what you both want most."

They sipped the tall ones. Eileen and the captain sat down. Hawley stood with his back to the burning logs and his glass held against his chest.

"Captain," he asked, "just what did the police radio call have to say?"

The old captain set down his glass and commenced to stuff tobacco into a big-bowled pipe. "They said that you were wanted and to shoot on sight."

"The fools!" said Eileen vehemently.

"Aye to that," agreed Captain Hardwick.

Hawley swiftly and concisely told the sea captain of the events leading up to his flight from the hospital, ending with:

"And I have no qualms in telling a retired American sea captain that that poisoned blood was to be shipped in the morning to our wounded soldiers on a foreign battlefield."

The captain's teeth clamped on his pipe, almost biting the tough stem in two. "The bilge-blooded devils, to do a thing like that! In all the years I've sailed I've never heard of such black doings." He puffed silently for several moments. "And that Belden seems to have a hand in the filth. Think back, Doc—did your Colonel Rutland tell the police detectives where that blood was going?"

"No, he didn't," said Hawley quickly. "I could swear to that." Then a bright gleam flashed into his eyes as he followed the sea captain's line of thought. "No, the lieutenant didn't know—and he accused me of being a saboteur. . . . But Belden, assuming he is an enemy agent, must have gotten hold of the information somehow—for he accused me."

An expression of indescribable contempt came to Eileen's face. "Then Belden is working for those treacherous dogs!"

"There's no proof—yet," said Jack Hawley. "We're just thinking these things. And meanwhile that blood shipment is going to be delayed. We don't know how much of it has been poisoned. Belden must have had a key made—and poisoned the Army blood whenever he could get to it unobserved."

Captain Hardwick had surrounded his head in a dense cloud of tobacco smoke. His voice came out of that cloud. "As I



see your problem Doc—there are two steps. One: to satisfy yourself that Belden is the agent. Two: to make him tell how much of the blood has been poisoned.” The captain got to his feet. “I can handle the first step. You will have to figure out the second.”

Then Hardwick walked to a wardrobe closet and took out his coat and hat and walked to the door. “You two make yourselves at home. I’m going around the corner—can’t risk having the call traced to my phone.” He opened the door. “There are more torpedoes in the ice-chest. Help yourselves.” Then he was gone.

Eileen’s corn-silk hair rippled in the fire-light as she looked up at Hawley. “What in the world is he going to do?”

Hawley shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. But I’m going to get busy figuring my part.” He paced the room in long strides, his feet sinking silently into the deep-napped rugs. Minutes marched by.

The doorbell sounded. Then, moments later, Captain Hardwick walked into the apartment. He closed the door and greeted them in a strange, sing-song language.

“What is that?” asked Hawley.

The sea captain’s smile was hard and taut. “Just a little foreign lingo I picked up in my travels, Doc. It means: ‘You have failed. Explain, please.’ I got Belden on the phone and rattled that off to him. Before he could get a grip on himself he answered, ‘No. No.’ Then he pretended he didn’t understand me, hung up quickly.” Hardwick threw off his coat. “But that’s not court evidence, Doc.”

“Thank you, captain,” said Hawley quietly. “I don’t need court evidence. That’s good enough for me.” He slipped into his raincoat, buttoned it high around his neck. “By the way, captain, have you a spare gun around—one that can’t be traced back to you?”

“Aye to that, Doc. I once picked up one with the registration burned off with acid. I’ll fetch it.”

Eileen sprang up, went close to Hawley. She put her hand on his arm. “I know you’re doing it for those wounded soldiers, Jack—but please be careful—”

Jack Hawley put his hand over hers and his fingers were cool and steady. “I’ll be careful. And you stay here with the captain. I’ll phone you.”

The captain came in with the gun, handed it to Hawley. And Hawley took it, held it firmly, competently. And to Eileen it seemed a glittering surgical instrument in the hands of a superbly skillful surgeon who invented new techniques.

CHAPTER SIX

Bloody Test

JACK HAWLEY quickly mounted the “sneak” stairs which Eileen had told him were used by nurses coming in from late dates. He paused at the corridor door to the floor his office was on and waited till two nurses wheeled a stretcher table down the far end. Then he hunched his head into his upturned collar and swiftly made his way along the corridor to his office. He opened the door, ducked in.

And found Detective-Lieutenant Critten sitting at his desk.

Hawley pulled the gun out of his pocket. But he saw that Critten was leaning back in the chair taking a snooze for himself. Intermittent snores came from the lieutenant’s open mouth. Hawley quietly locked



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the door, slipped into the chair beside the desk, and keeping the gun pointed at the detective, lifted the telephone. Holding it close to his mouth, he said:

"Send Doctor Belden to Lieutenant Critten in Hawley's office." He replaced the instrument.

Quiet as it was, the sound of his voice awakened Lieutenant Critten. The detective's eyes opened, blinked rapidly, then almost popped from their sockets. "*You—*"

"Take it easy," warned Hawley softly. "The lives of many wounded American soldiers are at stake. If you force me to—I'll shoot you."

Critten's mouth tightened into grim lines. "You'll never get out of here alive, Hawley. Take my word for that!"

"I have no intention of leaving," replied Hawley. "Doctor Belden is on his way up here. He is the murderer you want. And I'm going to prove it to you." The gun in Hawley's hand was rock-steady. "While we're waiting for Belden you can think about the risk I took in coming back here. If I was the murderer I'd still be running. Think about that, Lieutenant."

Critten wagged his head from side to side. "If you think I'm going to sit here and watch you kill Belden, you're crazy. You'll never get away with it."

"Killing Belden is not my object, Lieutenant. I want Belden to talk. His corpse would be of no use to me." Then Hawley said earnestly, "Give me a fighting chance, Lieutenant—a halfway break. That's all I ask."

A knock sounded on the door.

Hawley whispered, "Don't try to warn him off, Critten. I'll be thinking of those wounded soldiers—when I shoot you." He got up, unlocked the door, stood behind it and opened the panel.

Doctor Belden stepped in, moved toward Critten at the desk.

It was then that Hawley said, "Raise your hands, Belden," and locked the door.

Belden husked, "Hawley!"

"Sit down in that chair, Belden," ordered Hawley. He moved across the room where he could keep them both under the threat of the gun. Then he said to Belden, "There's not time to go over the whole case to show where you made your mistakes. I'm convinced in my own mind that you are the traitor."

**B**EFORE Belden could answer, Hawley said to the detective, "You had the right motives when you accused me of being a murdering foreign agent—but you accused the wrong man."

Lieutenant Critten stared steadily at Hawley. "It's going to take some lot of proving. And when you've finished, I'm going to remember, too, that you pulled a gun on me."

"And here's something else to remember, Lieutenant," replied Hawley. "You said that the murderer probably had a nurse help him change the bottle of blood when the major was poisoned. You were right. And when you get to work on that angle you can check where Nurse Latham got her diamond wrist-watch, and where Belden gets the money he is spending around town."

Belden put in, "I can see the fine hand of that blonde friend of yours."

Hawley's icy blue eyes didn't change expression. "Shooting you is going to be a very pleasant chore, Belden."

"Nobody's going to shoot nobody!" blasted Lieutenant Critten. "I'm counting ten, Hawley. If you haven't put that gun down I'm going to take it away from you. . . . *One!*"

"Another thing you can check, Lieutenant," said Hawley coolly, "is the probability of young Kirk pussy-footing around the hospital and coming upon Belden and Latham and hearing something—and getting killed for hearing it."

"*Two!*"

Belden was smiling as he heard Critten's second count.

But Hawley seemed to ignore it. "Listen, Belden, you can tell us how much of the plasma you poisoned. Is it worth your life to keep that from us?"

"*Three!*"

Hawley's voice rapped on, "Your first mistake was in using the poisoned blood on Major Kirk. You didn't know he was a major. Remember how surprised you were in surgery when I first referred to Kirk as a major?"

"*Four!*"

"You must have known it was going to end like this, Belden," said Hawley. "You sold out your countrymen for some money to splash around on the girls."

"*Five!*"

Hawley leaned tensely forward. "By the way, Belden, Military Intelligence has the hospital phones tapped—"

Belden cursed shrilly. He made a sudden lunge against Critten, knocking the detective off balance. Belden's hand flicked under Critten's coat and came out with the detective's police positive. Then Belden leaped away from Critten, swinging the gun toward Hawley.

And, strangely, there was a smile of satisfaction on Hawley's face. Carefully, unhurriedly, he lined his own gun on a certain spot on Belden's chest. And as Belden's hastily flung lead ripped past his shoulder, his finger squeezed the trigger.

His bullet slapped Belden back against the wall. The police positive dropped from his fingers. Then Belden slid to the floor.

Lieutenant Critten, spellbound by the dazzling speed of what had happened, at last found his voice. "Well, I'll be damned!"

**H**AWLEY handed his smoking gun to Critten. And without waiting to see what Critten would do, leaned over Belden, opened his clothing and examined the wound.

Then Hawley pushed Critten a little away from the desk, lifted the phone and asked to speak to Doctor Whittaker.

Hawley spoke briefly to Doctor Whittaker and hung up. Then he bent over Belden again, speaking to Critten, "He'll be coming around most any minute. I've stopped the blood so he won't be too weak to talk." He leaned over Belden. "Belden. . . ." The man's eyelids fluttered; his eyes finally focused. Hawley said, "You know what I can do on an operating table—and you know I can save your life. You know that, don't you, Belden?"

"Yes," whispered Belden.

"But I have to have your help, Belden," went on Hawley. "I have to know what blood to use for the transfusion. Only you can tell me which is poisoned. . . ."

Belden's eyes closed—then very slowly opened. He seemed to have made a decision there in the darkness of his closed eyes. "First row bottom shelf—is poisoned. . . . Others are all right. . . . Don't let me die—please."

Hawley looked at Lieutenant Critten.

The detective muttered: "That's that.

He's a lousy renegade. It's a shame we can't let him die."

There was a banging on the door and Doctor Whittaker's voice demanding admittance.

Jack Hawley went to the door, saying over his shoulder, "It is a shame—but I've got to test the blood on him. Hope he's telling the truth, as I'm picking a bottle of compatible plasma at random in the section he said is safe."

"It's safe," whispered Belden. "Don't let me die. I swear I've told the truth."

Lieutenant Critten went over to the door with Hawley, said low-voiced, "Patch him up so I can have the pleasure of seeing the louse burn in the chair."

Two hours later, Lieutenant Critten shook hands with Hawley, "Thanks, Doctor Hawley, now I'll have that pleasure." He looked admiringly at the surgeon. "I don't know if you're a better doctor than a detective, or a better detective than a doctor. Anyway, you sure get results!"

Jack Hawley went to his office, lifted the phone and called his old sea captain friend's number. When he heard Hardwick's voice, he said:

"All is well, captain."

"And a happy man that makes me, Doc. . . . Just a moment."

There was a brief silence, then Eileen spoke. "Are you all right, dear?"

Jack Hawley sat up and grinned at the telephone. "Yes, Belden told me what blood was not polluted. I made a test—on Belden—and he was telling the truth. The shipment is on its way to the Army. . . . And, honey, I'm coming right up—"

"Just a moment, dear," said Eileen. She came back after a long silence and she was laughing. Captain Hardwick says all this 'dear' business is too much for an old man. He's going over to his club."

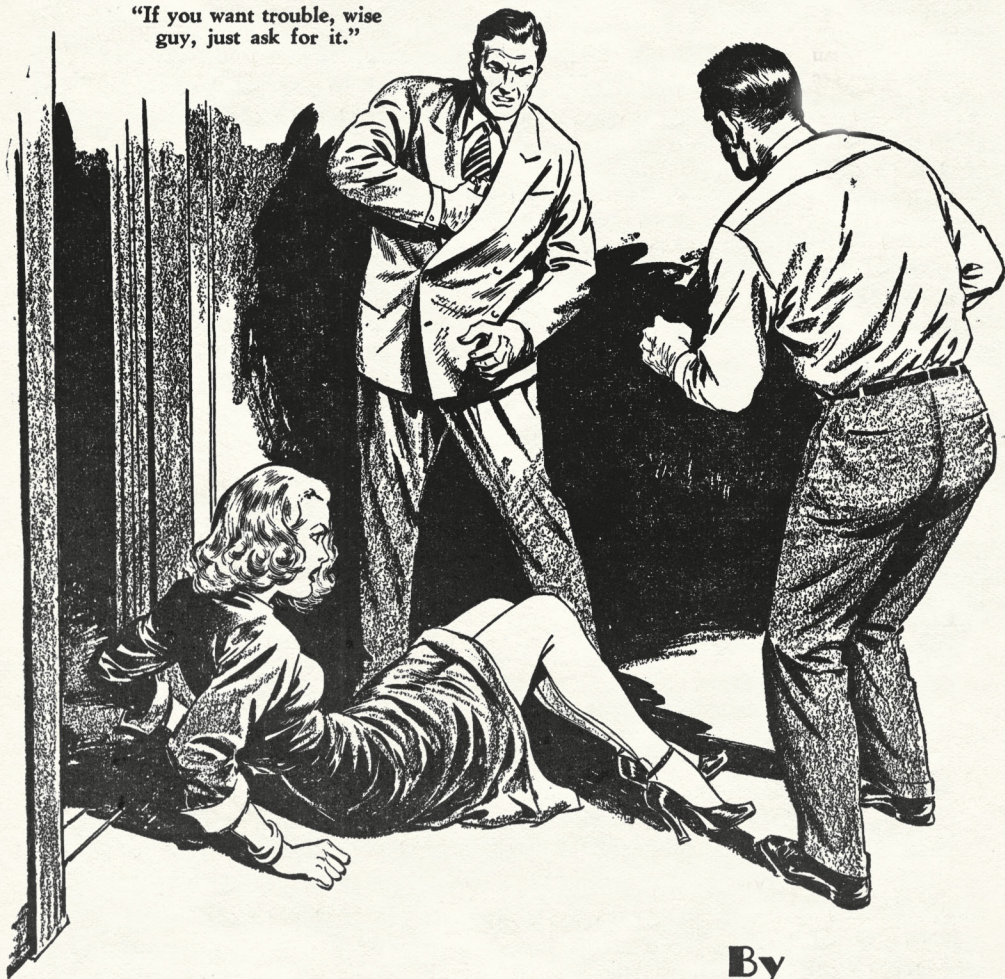
Jack Hawley's smile reached even into those cool eyes of his. "I'm practically there, honey." He moved swiftly to the door and strode down the corridor, hands in trouser pockets and whistling.

The girl receptionist at the desk looked up in amazement. And as she later told the nurses in the locker room: "He looked right at me and didn't see me. But I know that look he had on his face. He was looking at a green light—somebody gave him."

*Three's a crowd—thought the taut-nerved man called Smith till he met the green-eyed blonde who made . . .*

# ROOM FOR MURDER

"If you want trouble, wise guy, just ask for it."



By

**JOHN BENDER**

**H**E WALKED from the station to the hotel, which was, he remembered, less than five blocks away, and the night air felt good and clean upon his face. The train ride had not been very long, but it was another form of confinement which he had resented. As he moved through the darkened streets, some of the stiffness went from his long legs.

He carried a small, cheap suitcase in his right hand. The clothes which they had

given him were serviceable, if not natty, and he had been honestly surprised at how well they fitted.

He was a tall man, and heavy, running to muscle rather than to fat. His hair, cut shorter than he liked, was black; his eyes were dark and lusterless; his face firmly jawed, but pleasant. He looked like the

kind of man you'd like to have on your side in a fight.

The lights of the hotel broke out sharply in the night when he turned a corner and came into a wider square. The sign was the one that he remembered—*Hotel La Salle*—sputtering in blue neon letters. It was not the best hotel in this up-state city. The railroad tracks cut in sharply on the edge of town here and ran the length of the hotel, separated only by a ten-foot alley. When the flyers raced through, your bed would shake.

Inside, a sleepy-eyed desk clerk was doodling over a crossword puzzle, killing time. He came alert when he heard the footsteps and the suitcase being put down on the bare wooden floor.

"Yes?" he said. "Do something for you?"

"You have a reservation for John Smith. I phoned about it this morning." There was just the slightest pause. "Room 402?"

The clerk grinned, "That's a tough name to remember," saw no humor in the tall man's face, and began flipping through the box of room cards in front of him. "Oh, yes, here we are. Mr. John Smith, New York City. I'll have the boy show you up."

He rang the desk bell and they waited. Behind and to the left of the desk an open doorway led into a dimly-lighted lounge bar. A juke box began to play, loud and scratchy, making the people inside the bar raise their voices to be heard.

The bell boy came out of the lounge, picked up the key and the suitcase and led the way wordlessly to the ancient elevator. He was forty years away from being a boy. They went down the fourth floor corridor to a room at the extreme end, and the man who called himself Smith said,

"You got the wrong room, Pop. This isn't 402."

The bell boy looked up at him, held out the key. "403, it says on da tag. Dis is 403, ain't it?"

Mr. John Smith took the key. "Wait here, pop." He went downstairs and dropped the room key on the clerk's crossword puzzle. "402, remember."

"Huh—oh, yeah." He checked the cards some more. "I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, but 402 is occupied. Someone checked in this afternoon and wanted the room, so the day clerk must have—"

"Why didn't you tell me that before? I don't like people who try to sucker me."

"But, really—"

"How soon'll it be open?"

"I don't—"

"How soon. Tomorrow? The day after tomorrow?"

The clerk began to pale. His tongue popped out, licking his lips nervously. "I think the lady will be leaving in the morning."

"Good. As soon as she's out of it, I go in." He smiled. "Don't forget."

"Oh, no, sir. Of course not." The clerk felt better now. He even tried to smile. "Why all the fuss? The room you've got is the better one. Really. How come it got to be 402?"

The man who called himself Smith thinned his lips. "I'm sentimental," he said.

**S**ITUATED directly across the narrow corridor from 402, this room was really not very bad at all. A large double bed, two dressers, a night table and several chairs made up the furnishings. The single, over-size window opened out on the fire escape which ran the width of the building, past the hall window, down as far as the window of 402. A small bathroom, opening off one corner, contained a shower stall that looked new, but the other fixtures, he noted with satisfaction, had served for years.

Smiling, the tall man unpacked. There was a radio switch panel and speaker set high in the wall, near the doorway; an off-on switch and six push buttons. He was experimenting with the buttons when he heard the commotion outside.

It was just a rumble of voices at first—a woman's voice pitched high, without the words coming distinctly, then the deeper tones of the masculine reply. He could hear the anger in both voices. The door across the way slammed shut, cutting off the sounds almost completely; they seemed louder when the door opened again.

"I'm telling you to stop it!" The woman was speaking loudly but not shouting, urgency putting a feathery-breathed edge on her words.

"Shut up, ya hear me," the man's voice said. "C'mon, get back inside!"

There were brief sounds of activity.

"Get out of here!" From the woman. Then the sharp noise of a hand slap, a

thump, shaking the floor and then silence.

The tall man snapped off the radio and stepped out into the hall. He had removed his suit coat; he stood in shirtsleeves, his long arms hanging loosely, readily at his sides.

A good-looking, blonde girl sat on the floor of the hall. She was tall and pleasantly made, slender but not thin. She wore a dark green dress, high-heeled shoes and sheer nylons.

When she had fallen her skirt had ridden up, showing shapely knees. Although she was not crying her face was white with emotion, except for the mark on her cheek—a dull, glowing red—where the man's hand had struck her.

The door of 402 was wide open. She had come out of there, obviously. A thick-set man of middle height stood in the open doorway, breathing hard, his gray eyes bright and angry. He used some time to button the double-breasted gray suit and to smooth his dark, straight hair. After a moment he reached down and took her arm.

"C'mon, honey—"

"Keep away from me!" The blonde shrugged free, but did not rise.

The tall man who called himself Smith moved closer to them.

"Why don't you let her make up her own mind?"

The thick-set man growled, "Keep ya nose clean, ya hear me. I wantcha for anything, I'll send ya a telegram." He drew himself up fully, his florid face setting into harder lines of annoyance. "Get back inside, nosey."

The suit he wore fitted him tightly, like gray cloth wrapped around a barrel. Beneath the left shoulder was the tell-tale bulge which the tall man did not miss.

From the floor the girl said, "Leave me alone."

"You heard her," the tall man said.

The other came around the seated girl, closer to the tall man. "Ya heard *me*," he said. "Now, ya gonna keep your nose clean, or do I push it all over ya face? What d'ya want here? Trouble? I got it if you want it, wiseguy. Just ask for it, go ahead, just ask."

**T**HE tall man didn't say a word. He threw the right hand hard, a digging six-inch blow that exploded just where the

other's coat lapels came together over the solar plexus. The shorter man sagged with the blow.

The second blow was with the open left hand, a slice upward, stiff fingers knifing into the hard cartilage between the nostrils; then the right hand, open, chopping like the blade of a cleaver against the side of the throat, where the ear joined the column of the neck.

It was over in a second. The thick-set man hit the floor and bounced on his face. He tried to move, groaned, and collapsed, his arms and legs quivering, outstretched. The tall man reached down and took the gun away from him.

"You better get inside before he comes out of it," he told the girl. She led him into 402 without a word.

He had worked up some breath but the excitement within him was part of the room, not the recent exertion, not the girl. It had been almost a year, and he was well aware of this now, since he had come in closer contact with a woman's scent and heard the rustle of her clothes. However, he knew that his quickened pulse was because of the room itself.

He looked around, seeing it as the reverse, in placement, of the one he occupied across the hall. He recognized an unrepaired crack in the ceiling plaster, a green leather chair.

"Thank you very much," she said. "Mr.—"

"Smith," he supplied. He had a momentary impulse to tell her that his name was Larry Rand, but at the last moment he chose to continue the minor deception. Something in her face, in the dark green eyes, communicated a warning that he could not avoid.

"My name is Jane Arnold," she said quickly. "I'm sorry you had to get into trouble."

"Who is he?"

She moistened her full red lips. "I—I don't know. He came in here and started—er—getting fresh. When I told him to leave—" She shrugged—"I managed to get outside . . . and then you heard us." One hand fluttered to her mouth. She did only a fair job of suppressing a simulated yawn. "Thank you again, Mr. Smith. Now, if you don't mind . . . I'd like to get some sleep."

"You might call the desk," he suggested. "I'm sure they like to keep tabs on all the mashers in the place."

"Oh, no!" Was she as nervous as she seemed? "Really, I don't want any trouble."

"Looks like you've already had it—"

"No, honestly, I'll be all right." She tried a smile, but the lovely face looked more haunted than relieved. "I'll snap the latch. There won't be any trouble."

She held the door for him, managing somehow not to face him as he went by. She's afraid, Rand thought, and she doesn't want me hanging around. It was, in many ways, quite a shame.

He said goodnight and headed back to his own room.

The corridor was empty.

**I**N HIS own room, Rand broke the gun and dumped the bullets in some twists of paper and flushed them down the toilet. He put the gun—a Smith and Wesson, .38—in a towel and tucked it into the bottom drawer of a dresser, making a note to get rid of it permanently in the morning. He was familiar with guns, but they had no place in his life now.

He was paid up with the law, and he meant to keep it that way. A bad break at this stage could complicate things more than he wanted, and if there should be any legal kickback for putting the arm on the guy who'd been bothering the girl across the way, Rand did not want to be found with a loaded gun on him.

He lay on the bed, sucking on his cigarette. The night had proved that his impulses were still too quick and violent to be wholly trusted. He might have avoided trouble just now if he'd kept talking—but he did not dwell on the subject. He decided the blonde girl was damned attractive, and more than a bit peculiar. Any other woman would have been more gracious.

Yet his full interest was not in her. The impulse that had taken him into her room had been long burning in him, a year old almost, and he was annoyed and impatient now, lying on the bed, thinking that he had come so close without a score. For a year he had been patient, even unconcerned. Now he found himself tense and growing more fidgety by the moment, unable to wait for the morning.

It was not just the money. It was the room itself. A year ago, a career—such as it was—had ended there for him.

In the year in prison he had thought a lot about himself and the life he'd led—the

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impermanence, the dodging, the trouble flushing dead beats or borrowing around to pay off a big hit against him. He'd run a book for one of the larger syndicates and promoted floating card games; and after five years at it he had exactly two thousand dollars he could call his own.

Common sense—pride, even—told him there were truck drivers who could match it. So he hadn't hollered to the syndicate; he'd taken the year and figured what the hell, it would clear him with the law and he could start again, with a clean tab. Something clean and simple . . . a salesman, maybe . . .

When the cops had raided him in 402, he'd had his own two thousand in his pocket. A trip to the bathroom, before being taken downtown, had given him a chance to stash the dough—because Larry Rand had never trusted policemen all the way and that two grand could have disappeared very easily.

On a long chance, he'd put the money in an oil-skin tobacco pouch, lifted the heavy porcelain lid of the toilet's water bowl and tucked the pouch in there, holding it above the water line by jamming the lid down on the pouch flap.

Come morning, he would know if the gamble had paid off—or if some plumber were luckier than himself. At any rate, in the morning, Larry Rand could start his new life, from Room 402, where he had ended the old one.

Outside, a train rumbled past and the mirror rattled above the dresser. A car motor raced in the parking lot behind the hotel; a door opened somewhere along the hall, slammed shut, vibrating the walls.

He smoked another cigarette, then got up, put on his clothes and went downstairs to the cocktail lounge.

It was almost eleven. There weren't many people in the bar. A half-dozen youngsters—high school kids tying the tail on the night with cokes that might or might not have been spiked. At the age of thirty-four, Rand was too far away from his own school days to recognize unfortified high spirits at a glance. Some couples were keeping secrets at other tables, and paid no attention to him.

He took a booth in the far corner and ordered scotch mist. The liquor was raw and pleasant on his tongue. With the sec-

ond drink he was relaxed, beginning to feel familiar with the world. He decided it was a tempo, really, that he had to find again before he would feel comfortable among free people.

**P**ERHAPS it was because he was not thinking of the blonde girl and Room 402 that it shocked him so to see her then. She came across his line of vision only for an instant as she stepped around a table to get into a booth nearer the door than his own. She was facing him, but could not see him—as he could not see her now—because of the intervening booths.

Rand sucked his drink, wondering if this was the kind of luck that he would have crowded in the past. He could join her, he was sure, and might even make 402 tonight. Or he might get past her unnoticed and take a crack at the cheesebox lock on her door upstairs.

Then he chuckled to himself. "You're going straight, son, all the way."

A moment later, he was glad he hadn't moved from his booth.

As it was, he expected there was embarrassment enough when the thick-set individual he had fought upstairs crowded into the booth with the blonde girl.

Rand waited for the fireworks. He saw the waiter go to the booth, accept an order and return with two highballs from the bar. The hum of conversation about the place remained the same; there were no sudden outbursts of anger or surprise from the girl's booth.

Rand frowned, disbelieving. Unless Jane Arnold were the greatest actress in the world, the scene upstairs in the hall had been the McCoy. He was sure it had been on the level. Now, she was sudden pals with the character who had tried to get overly chummy before.

Rand swore.

He had another drink, paid the waiter, and left an extra dollar on the small tray.

"I can't see very well without my glasses," he improvised. "I thought that was Miss Arnold who came in just then. Who's that with her?"

The waiter picked up the tray, his face impassive. He looked to the other booth, then back at Rand. "You want another drink, buddy, before the bar closes?" He didn't have to draw Rand a picture to show



he wasn't interested in talking to any guy.

"All I want is a name."

The man smiled crookedly, showing bad teeth. "You got one, ain't you, pally?"

"Bring the drink," Rand said. "Out of the buck."

The waiter scowled. Rand wondered at the clam-up about the thick-set man. The waiter delivered the drink and didn't lose much time about going over to the girl's booth, where he bent to take another order or whisper something. . . .

Rand waited, feeling the trickle of perspiration break along his upper lip. He sipped his drink slowly. Five minutes, ten minutes passed. The high school kids paid up and left; the bar lights dimmed to the point of impossibility. Rand might have been on another planet for all the attention anyone paid him.

Finally, the blonde girl and the thick-set man got up and went out without a glance in his direction.

**H**E WAS taking off his coat, liking the night less and less when he heard the soft rapping at his door. The knuckles held off, then tapped again. Hesitatingly, he thought.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Smith?" The voice was low, feminine, barely penetrating the door panel. "I've got to see you. Please!"

He crossed the room and turned back the bolt, opened up, and got just the briefest glimpse of Jane Arnold standing there, the dim light making a soft halo of her blonde hair, her green eyes growing wider. Then, abruptly, he saw nothing but the explosions of pain, like wavering red blossoms before his eyes, and he was going down, down, down into the cheap carpet of the corridor. . . .

His elbows supported him only momentarily before his face ground into the floor. A shuddering impact took him in his side, and another; he had this much clutch on consciousness to realize that he was being kicked, being driven by foot back into his room. He heard nothing but the labored grunt that preceded the noise that was his own body being kicked again, and, finally, the slamming of the door.

He had no idea how long it took for the room to stop swinging in eccentric circles. The darkness at the edges of the circles

were his eyelids, fighting to close and free him from the pain. But he did not go all the way out, and eventually he was able to draw his breath without shuddering.

A train roared by outside. Its rumble swelled into the room, grew quickly large, then faded, to be replaced by an almost similar, fainter rumble. He separated the sound as laughter, coarse, soft.

"Ya wakin' up, wiseguy? That's fine!"

As he struggled to sit a hand smashed across his mouth, stinging, driving away the last mists that clouded his vision.

"How ya like it, smart boy?"

The thick-set man grinned down at him. "So ya wanta find out who I am? Well, I'll tell ya. I'm Harry. So what'ya know now? Does that do ya any good?"

So the waiter had been a friend of this man's—and the blonde girl, too. Else why would she have suckered him just now as she did.

Rand rubbed the back of his skull, where it felt as if the thick-set man had rabbit-punched him. The sharp pains in his body subsided into burning aches; he felt his stomach drawing in upon itself as if he were going to be sick.

"Nobody beats up Harry," the other man said. "Ya heard me, wiseguy. Nobody gets tough wth Harry."

It was as if they were discussing someone not in the room. Rand shivered at the man's intensity. The bright gray eyes in the impassive, slightly slack-jawed face were like bits of ice. Fear was there with him, then, a strange, chilling breeze that tingled along his neck and arms.

It angered him that he could not command himself to action. He did not doubt his own strength or ability against this man, but the beating had made traitors of his mind and body; he did not dare trust his responses now.

"Ya play rough with me, ya get hurt," Harry said. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?" Rand's mouth felt like a flannel sock.

Harry kicked him in the chest. "The gun, wiseguy. The gun."

Rand winced. "Go to hell."

Against his better judgment he tried swinging his body away from the oncoming foot. He was slow, desperately slow, sitting cramped that way on the floor, but he avoided the full force of the kick. Some-

how he managed to catch the ankle; his hands clamped and twisted, spilling the thick-set man into the footboard of the bed. The momentary surprise gave him hope.

Throwing himself forward, Rand sought to tangle bodies, to let his superior weight work for him. For a moment he thought he'd make it as his hands drove for Harry's throat. But he found only the shirt, ripping loose the collar.

"You dog!" Harry was more astonished than subdued. "Ya wanna play rough!"

A bomb went off in Rand's head. He had time to realize that Harry had used a blackjack . . . then there was nothing. . . .

**T**HE darkness rolled like waves breaking on a beach, drowning everything then receding, leaving grayness in its wake. Finally he could see, not well, but enough to hold the room in his vision: The dark waves ended completely, the grayness became the light of the room.

He was lying where the blackjack had dropped him, just below the footboard of the bed, and his head was a roaring fire on his shoulders. He thought of throwing himself into the soothing sanctuary of the mattress, but he had the feeling that he would suffocate if he did so. He needed air, vast quantities of it, to relieve the clutching grasp that tortured his chest.

Rand managed to reach his feet. Amazingly, they supported him, but he had to sit for a moment on the bed before they could carry him across the room. He threw up the bottom half of the window, gulped air, then ran the bathroom shower and stuck his head under the cold, needle flow.

It helped. More than he thought possible, it helped. Where he had been only a quivering mass of pain, he became gradually a bone-aching human being. When the water began to sting his neck, Rand groaned erect, found a towel and rubbed his neck and head as vigorously as the misery within himself would permit. His face, in the mirror, looked like something that should have been on a butcher's block.

Around the room he saw the evidence of Harry's search—the overturned, pawed through suitcase, the dresser drawers flung open. The drawers were enough to tell him that the thick-set man had found the gun.

Off in the distance the lonely whistle of

a train wavered in the cool night. Rand sat on the window sill, breathing deeply, looking down through the metal slats of the outside fire-escape to the gleaming railroad tracks down below.

Abruptly, he stiffened.

He heard the scuffling noise on the fire-escape and leaned his head slightly out the window so that he could see along the length of the metal platform. In the dim light, the bulk which was pressed against the wall—down where the fire-escape fronted Jane Arnold's window—turned fully in his direction.

The thick-set man stood on the fire-escape, the gun in his hand. He peered momentarily into the girl's room, held the gun to the window and pumped the trigger.

Rand's cry was wrung involuntarily, and it was the loudest noise. The gun didn't fire; it clicked . . . again, and again. Then Harry roared in rage as he pumped the rest of the empty cylinders through the firing chamber. He was working his arm so hard that the gun crashed the glass in a noisy shower.

The girl's voice climbed Rand's nerve ends in an ear-piercing scream, then Harry was looking wildly about, startled and enraged, his face quivering. A man's voice joined the rumble of confused shouting as Harry broke away from the window.

He came at Rand, flinging the gun before him like a baseball. "Ya emptied it! Ya emptied it!" Curses followed the swift flight of the weapon as Harry lumbered forward.

Rand, who had ducked to let the gun slam into the window frame, attempted to scramble back inside. He didn't make it. Harry's arm caught him by the throat, dragged him outside. Harry tried to slam his head down against the metal. Rand squirmed to free himself, got his hands up and locked about Harry's body and managed to pull himself erect.

"I'll kill ya—dirty, rotten punk. . ."

Harry's words were lost in the grunted exertions, muffled with anger and distress. Digging his fingers around Harry's shoulders, Rand pulled himself fully upward as hard and as fast as he could, using his head like a battering ram.

It caught the shorter man fully in the face, breaking his hold, driving him away. They both stumbled on the uncertain foot-

ing of the metal-stripped fire-escape, Harry seeking to brace himself against any rush.

Rand broke his charge in time, remembering not to grapple but to swing, to use his length of arm to advantage. The right hand, thrown with strength he did not think he had, caught the thicker man's face, staggering him, and Rand closed with his knee high, aiming for the groin.

Harry screamed. He was buckling, turning in pain when Rand's second, hard-thrown right took him behind the ear, driving him against the thin, thigh-high railing. He toppled forward, then curled further over the edge, and his feet scraped only once before losing all contact. He went out into space as if he had leaped. His body struck a lower level platform and bounced free to the railroad tracks.

Rand watched, breathing hard through his nose and mouth. He began to tremble, not of himself, but with the growing motion of the metal, of the building itself. Below, the tracks began to gleam brighter, the dark blob of the body took on definition, light and shadow, as the headlamp of the oncoming train approached.

The screech of metal upon metal as the brakes were slammed on, the frantic, warning whistle that could do no good . . . the noises built into a climax of destructive sound that no scream could penetrate.

And the thick-set man could never hear. . . .

**MURDER,**" said the man in the girl's room. "They planned to kill me all the time!"

He was a small man, middle aged, slightly bald. In his dark suit, he looked more like Wall Street than upstate New York. His face was ashen, his lips trembled and he rubbed his fat little hand against them, as if he were trying to dry his lips of a distasteful drink.

Rand said, looking at the girl, "Soon as they figure where that body on the tracks fell from, cops are going to be running all over the joint."

"Not me," she said, to the small man not to him. "Honest, you've got to believe me. I wasn't in on it with Harry! I couldn't do a thing like that, Mr. Troy!"

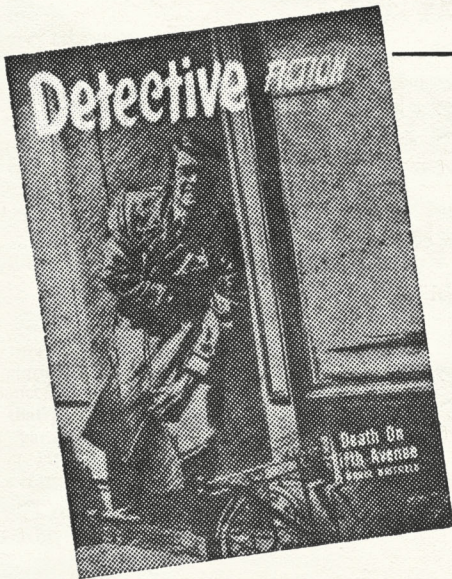
"Kill me," the small man said. He looked at Rand out of vacant eyes. "It would have been murder." He sat down. "The divorce wasn't enough. It had to be murder." He began to sob.

The blonde girl clutched Rand's arm. "Listen to him—I've got to make him tell you. He's Frank Troy—my boss. I work for him—I'm his secretary. He said I'd be doing him a favor."

Rand frowned. His head was beginning to lose some of the fiery pain, now. He looked over at the bathroom door. It would take only a few seconds—

"Tell him!" Jane Arnold fairly shrieked

*(Please continue on page 108)*



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# STAND-IN FOR DEATH

In his hand was a  
shiny black gun.

By ALVIN  
YUDKOFF



*The Dream Street queen didn't want much . . .  
just that Quent rescue her leading man—  
from the crime-czar's cement tub.*

**E**VEN in the wavery light of the Manhattan dawn, the low-slung convertible gleamed brightly as it skidded to a stop in front of a dingy brownstone. The driver, a tired-looking man in a rumpled blue suit, did not cut the motor. He didn't have time anyway, because the girl next to him flung herself into his arms.

"Quent," she sobbed, holding tight to him as her mink stole slipped off her

shoulders down onto the seat. "Quent, darling."

"Easy, honey," the man said. "Time to say bye-bye."

"I can't bear the thought of leaving you, Quent."

"Try hard, honey," he said. With almost a weary look on his face, he leaned back, unclasped her hands and placed them carefully on the wheel. Then he stepped out of the car flipping the door

shut behind him. "So long kid," he said.

"Darling," she said earnestly, her wet-stained face staring across at him. "You will call me?"

"Uh huh." He walked to the sidewalk.

"Today?"

He paused on the steps of the brownstone as he groped inside his pocket for a key. "Yeah."

Down the block, a milkman's truck pulled to the curb. The girl blew a kiss to Quent, then slowly pulled the car away from the sidewalk. As the powerful motor throbbed into high, Quent suddenly snapped his fingers. He wheeled around and jumped down to the curb.

"Honey!" he yelled. "What the devil's your name?"

But the car had picked up speed now and Quent's shout was lost in the surge of the motor. He shrugged and came up the steps of the stoop again. It was then he heard a throaty, harsh laugh and he saw the tall man in the shadows of the doorway.

"Still the same old Quent Murray," he heard the man say.

"Who the hell—" said Quent angrily, stepping forward. Then, as he drew close, he stopped. "Max," he said. "Max Wynkoop."

"Who else would be waiting for you at six-thirty in the morning?" Max said genially, shaking Quent's hand. "I've been trying to reach you all night."

"What's up, Max?" Quent asked. "You didn't roost on this stoop just to check up whether I'm still a hit with the women." Quent was very tired, his mouth felt dry and sour. He had drunk a lot, too much, on his gay tour of Fifty Second Street joints with Miss Somebody.

"Max Wynkoop, Esquire," he said irritably. "You're a big-shot now, Max, a big-shot Broadway producer. What brings you over to the slums of Hell's Kitchen?"

The smile died on Wynkoop's thin face. "I'm in trouble, Quent."

"So what?"

"That's just what I figured to hear from Quent Murray," said Max. "I know you never give a damn for anybody, anything. But somebody special is involved here." He paused before he said: "Elaine Rodgers."

"Oh?" All at once Quent felt his chest press in on him. *And only at the mention of her name too*, he thought; *I still can't get away from her*. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know if you've been reading the papers lately," Max said, "but you must know I've a show opening tonight. *Step A Little Closer*, a musical comedy. Elaine and Johnny Barr are co-starred."

"I do recall reading something about Elaine," Quent said as calmly as he could. He lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag. *Something about Elaine*. He smiled to himself. Why, he knew *all* about Elaine.

**H**ADN'T he discovered her, a hat-check girl at a Hennepin Avenue dive in Minneapolis, when he had toured through there with the Madcaps.

He had wangled her a job with his troupe. He had cajoled one of the best voice coaches in New York to work on her. He had taught her his dance routines. He had begged all the producers he knew to give her one break—a showcase spot.

Finally, one producer had—Max Wynkoop—and Elaine Rodgers had come on fast to become the musical comedy queen of Broadway.

Strangely enough, he, Quent Murray, had been happy to accept second billing—until the day of that Christmas matinée two years before. Just before the performance, he had told Elaine to be ready for a very small-sized Christmas package from him, straight from the most expensive jeweler on 5th Avenue.

She had paled. Then, in a spurt of embarrassed words, she'd explained—she had fallen in love with Johnny Barr, at that time just a good-looking kid in the dancing chorus of *Wyoming*. The news had hit him hard; he had walked into a bar and never made the matinée.

Private detectives hired by Wynkoop finally traced him to a seedy Trenton hotel room five days later. That had been over two years ago. Since then, he had gone down, down, down. . . . He broke off the unpleasant thoughts.

"Why do you tell me about the show, Max?" he said. "The box-office so bad you have to sell me some tickets?"

"Listen," Max said, wetting his line-thin lips. "Johnny Barr has disappeared."

"Huh?" Quent looked hard at Max.

"Yeah. He skipped off yesterday afternoon. Just like that, *Pfft!* And with the show opening tonight."

"So?"

The words came with the impact of pistol shots. "I want you to take his place."

"What about Barr's understudy?"

Max shook his head. "He can't handle it. There are two songs and one dance number with Elaine that only you can do in Barr's place, Quent. Sure you'll have to work like hell today but you can do it!" He smacked his hands together. "This show will be a hit, I know it and you'll be on top of show business again!"

"What does Elaine say about this?"

"She doesn't even know I'm here. Look, Quent, Johnny Barr's disappearance has sunk her pretty low. She doesn't want to go on with the show. She's just closed herself up in her apartment. I've pleaded with her, but she won't listen to me. If you go up to her apartment, Quent, alone, and tell her you've come back to take Johnny's place . . . why, it'll be like the old days."

"Anybody know why Barr took a powder?" Quent asked.

"No," Max said. He leaned forward anxiously. "Quent, you and I know that show business is a dirty racket—it's every man for himself. I don't ask you to do this for me, it's for Elaine—"

"What do I owe her?" Quent broke in angrily.

"Nothing," Max said evenly. "But you love her."

There was a long pause as the men stared at each other. "Yeah," Quent finally said. He tossed his cigarette into the alley. "Yeah, I do. I'm with you, Max."

The two men turned and walked down the steps together. . . .

As Elaine opened her apartment door, it seemed to him that the two years had made her look even more lovely. She was, he decided in that instant when both were fumbling to say something, one of those rare willowy blondes who can somehow look exciting yet decent at the same time.

For a moment, for just one moment, Quent thought if he could take her by the shoulders and pull her to him, every

thing would be all right again. But the moment passed and he just stood there. Perhaps it was because her eyes were red; she had been crying.

Finally he asked, "May I come in?"

She started to speak, hesitated, then pulled the door back, and he walked into her apartment. She followed him in slowly.

"I heard about Johnny Barr's disappearance," he said.

Her face went paler. "Who told you?"

"Max." He paused. "I've come back, Elaine. I'd like to substitute for him tonight. I know how much his leaving has put you and Max in a hole . . . just like my skipping off a couple of years ago."

He tried to smile.

"You think Johnny ran off just as you did?"

"I don't think anything," he said. "I'd just like to help."

He was surprised to see her eyes narrow angrily. "I see," she said. "No sooner is Johnny down than the Broadway ghouls step all over him."

"Take it easy."

"Johnny Barr didn't run away, Quent."

"Did he fly then?"

"Ha ha," she said wryly. "No, Quent, he was kidnapped by a couple of thugs, a couple of Sailor Tew's boys."

"Sailor!" Quent sucked in his breath. Sailor Tew. One of the leading numbers racketeers in the East, a thug who had a bad reputation for violence. A reputation the police couldn't make stick with any convictions. Quent had known him on and off for years. "How do you know Sailor nabbed him?"

"Sailor is—" she stammered— "very fond of me. He found out that Johnny and I— that we—"

His voice came in flat. "Love's the word, Elaine."

She went on: "You know Sailor's temper. He was jealous of Johnny, threatened him several times. Now, with the show opening tonight, Johnny's big chance, he had his musclemen go to work. But I don't dare tell the police or Max or anybody because Sailor might harm Johnny!"

Elaine shook her head bitterly. "You used to be a great favorite of Sailor's. And now you appear to take Johnny's place. It sounds fishy."

She was barely holding back the tears

now, he could see that. "I'm trying to say, Quent, that you've always been a selfish man, doing things only for yourself, never giving a darn for anybody else—even those you say you care for. But this is really low, even for Quent Murray! Working with Sailor Tew to get Johnny out of the way so you can be a star again. . . ." Looking at him, her voice trailed off breathlessly. Her face was flushed and angry.

"Listen Elaine," he said harshly. "I came up here to do a good turn. Like you said, I don't do one very often." He pounded his fist into his other palm. "And what do I get for it? A nice sweet kick in the teeth!" He picked up his coat and walked to the door.

"Well, you can worry about Johnny boy on your own now, honey. For all I care, he can end up in the Hudson with a couple of slugs in him!" He slammed the door behind him and the hallway echoed with the sound.

Downstairs in the lobby, Max Wynkoop jumped up from the couch when Quent came out of the elevator. "What's the story?" he asked.

All at once, Quent felt the anger surge up within himself. "Wynkoop," he said, "I ought to belt you one."

He pushed the producer aside roughly and strode out of the lobby.

**I**T WAS mid-morning and the bar was depressingly empty. Quent hardly noticed as he sat in the booth, anger stabbing at him.

At noon he had something to eat, then picked up on his drinking again. His temper fired at Johnny Barr, at Max, at Elaine. He had made a complete sucker of himself and he only had Quent Murray to blame for it.

A newsboy came through the bar with the early afternoon papers. Quent bought a tabloid. Almost before he realized it, he found the theatre section. A large quarter-page ad flashed before his eyes and the printed details jumped out at him:

*Opening Tonight . . . Max Wynkoop Presents a Gay New Musical Comedy . . . Starring Elaine Rodgers . . . With Johnny Barr.*

On the next page he found a publicity release on Johnny Barr. Something about

Barr's activities during the war when he had been in the Signal Corps—but Quent couldn't read the article through. He started to turn the page and then he saw the picture of Elaine, a full close-up of her staring out at the reader.

Quent glared at the picture. He tried to read hardness into those eyes but he couldn't, he tried to see some sort of a selfish smirk on her lips but that was impossible. Crumpling up the paper, he threw it angrily against the wall of the booth. The bartender looked over at him warily. Quent called for another drink.

There was no question about it; he still loved her. Yes, despite the humiliation of the morning, despite the way she felt about Johnny Barr, he still loved her.

Johnny Barr, now there's a laugh, he thought. The fool kid—doesn't know when Sailor Tew likes a doll everybody else stays clear. Right at this moment, just a few hours before Barr was to go on stage, Sailor Tew was probably giving Barr's pretty-boy face the once-over. Or maybe worse, much worse.

Quent emptied his glass in one fast swig. Well, tough luck for the kid but there was nothing he, Quent, could do about it.

Or was there? After all, he knew a lot of Sailor's henchmen. If Sailor Tew was holding Johnny as a prisoner, he might possibly trace the whereabouts of the hiding place. Maybe he could even get Johnny back in time to make the performance.

The bartender took his glass away and he decided not to have any more. He stood up wearily. He still wasn't sure why, but in the suddenness of a glance at Elaine's picture, he had decided to find Johnny Barr. . . .

In and around the vast city of New York, over ten million people live their anonymous lifetimes. To trace down one who is hidden away is an incredibly difficult undertaking—and no one knew that better than Quent Murray.

All that day Quent made the rounds of the midtown area looking for any numbers runners he knew, who might lead him on to Sailor Tew. He inquired everywhere—pool halls, bookie layouts, barber shops, candy stores . . . but by late in the afternoon he had made no progress at all.

Walking in the chill spring air, he realized he was hungry and stopped in at a small diner for some chili. He hadn't taken two spoonfuls when he saw Fatso Dee.

Fatso was a short, rotund man in a wildly checked sport jacket. He had been in and out of prison for the last twenty years as a small-time confidence man. Quent had heard he was tied up in the policy numbers racket now. Quent moved over next to Fatso.

Fatso munched on a hamburger, alternating with deep gulps of root beer. He took five or six quick bites before, his mouth full, he finally looked up. When he saw Quent, his heavy-lidded eyes seemed to grow smaller in their wariness.

"Hello, Fatso," said Quent.

Quent turned back to his plate and stuffed the rest of the hamburger into his mouth. "Couple of hot dogs," he told the counterman.

"Where can I find Sailor Tew?" Quent said. The counterman slid forward a plate with two frankfurters buried in sauerkraut. Fatso ordered some more root beer, then ladled on a heavy coating of mustard. He opened his large mouth and thrust almost half of one frankfurter inside, using his left hand to push in stray bits of sauerkraut which threatened to fall away.

Fatso took a heavy draught of root beer, then went to work on the other frankfurter. He ordered a side order of French fries. The potatoes came and Fatso lathered them in catsup.

Quent said: "Fatso, I have to find Sailor Tew. I'll pay you for your trouble."

"YOUR dough won't buy nothing for me in the cemetery," Fatso said. "That's where I'll wind up if I play around with Sailor." He caught the attention of the counterman and clinked his glass against the empty bottle. The counterman brought another root beer.

"He'll never know you told me. How about it?" Quent prodded him. But Fatso was now gulping down the second frankfurter, the juice of the meat working out of the sides of his mouth. Every few seconds he managed to part his lips and pop one of the red-soaked French fries

inside, but he didn't offer any answer.

"Fatso," murmured Quent, "there's a lot I know about you—and what you do in order to pay for your boyish appetite. It's the kind of story the Parole Board likes to hear."

"Stop bluffing me, Quent," said Fatso. Then, to the counterman: "Couple o' burgers, uh?"

"No bluff. One tip from me, and the Parole Board cracks down."

"Aw shuddup, willya Quent," Fatso said, wiping the grease from his mouth with a paper napkin. "I don't know where Sailor is, no kidding."

"But you work for his numbers racket?" Quent bluffed.

"Look, if you're *in* the racket, you work for Sailor. That's the way things are in this town. I just collect a route for him, that's all. And I don't turn the dough over to him, I hand it over to one of his guys."

"Which one?"

"I don't know—"

Quent broke in angrily, "What kind of a story is that?"

The hamburgers arrived. Fatso gave them both the catsup treatment, then bit into one heartily. "It's true," he sputtered through a mouthful of bread and meat. "I turn the dough over to Sailor's guy every night at seven in the same place. But it's a dark place, so I don't see who it is."

He washed the hamburger down with some root beer. "That way I've got nothing on Sailor's man. Pretty smart of him, uh?"

He reached for the second hamburger—and then he saw it wasn't in front of him any more. Quent had pulled it away.

"Stop gorging yourself and take me to him," Quent said.

"I tell you, I—"

"Parole Board," Quent said simply.

"Hell," Fatso said as he maneuvered himself off the stool, popping the last of the fries into his mouth. "C'mon. You ruin my appetite, anyway. . . ."

The afternoon light had faded into the dark gray of dusk, then the blue-black of night. Quent buttoned up his topcoat against the chill evening breeze as he and Fatso walked south on Eighth Avenue to the subway station.



Inside the subway station, with the rush hour over, the downtown platform was almost empty. Fatso walked to the rear of the platform. Fatso stepped to the edge of the concrete and peered squintingly into the murky tunnel. Quent was careful to keep Fatso between himself and the tracks.

They both heard a noise from down the tracks, a roar that grew louder and louder. Then the train plunged around the approach curve and slowed down as it came noisily into the station. Quent relaxed as the first car passed them. The train stopped and the doors jerked open. Fatso started forward and Quent followed.

Suddenly Fatso whirled around. Quent saw a fist loom up in his face and he felt a tingling thud of pain over his mouth. He tripped and fell to the concrete floor. Fatso turned back and jumped for the open subway car. Quent scrambled to his feet and dove for Fatso as the doors closed.

His fingers gripped the end of Fatso's sport jacket. Fatso tried to wrench free as now the heavy rubber-rimmed doors ground against his squat body. Fatso kicked out at Quent, but Quent managed to hang on. Suddenly, Fatso twisted about and pulled back his arms.

All at once, the sport jacket came away from his body. Quent spun backwards into a trash can, which turned over with a booming crash. He got to his feet, but the train doors were shut and he could see Fatso thumbing his nose at him. The train moved away from the platform.

**S**TANDING on the vacant platform with the train receding into the darkness of the tunnel, Quent gripped the empty jacket fiercely. Cursing himself, he walked back to a bench and sat down. Now, along with the disappointment, fatigue rose up within him and he felt exhausted.

Idly he went through the pockets of Fatso's jacket. There was nothing in any way unusual; some toothpicks, a dandruff-gray comb, matches, a tipster's mimeographed suggestion for the week at Belmont, a half-eaten bar of candy, a bag of cashew nuts and several theatre ticket stubs.

Carefully Quent examined the stubs. There were four of them, all from the Tuxedo Theatre, an all-night grind house on the East side. He could tell by the

serial numbers that the tickets weren't bought all at once. There was about the same interval between all the numbers, indicating that Fatso probably had gone to the Tuxedo at the same time each day.

Quent stood up now and ran for the station exit. Outside the subway station, he hailed a cab. Fatso had said he passed on the numbers collection to one of Sailor's men in a dark place at 7 p.m.

"The Tuxedo Theatre," Quent said to the cabbie. "And hurry!"

It was almost 6:45 when he arrived and took up a position in back of the theatre, flush against the wall where he could see everybody who entered the brightly lit lobby. The minutes dragged by slowly. With each passing second, his confidence sagged more and more.

But at two minutes to seven he saw Fatso coming through the lobby. He was wearing another sport jacket, as gaudy as the one Quent had ripped off him. Fatso stopped at the popcorn machine, bought a large-sized bag. Quent faded back against the wall as Fatso passed him, heading down the right-side aisle, finally taking a seat just off the aisle.

Quent seated himself a few rows behind Fatso. Ignoring the racket on the screen, he watched Fatso Dee's bulky shoulders.

A husky man in an overcoat sidestepped across the right side of the theatre along Fatso's row. He sat down next to Fatso. Thirty seconds later, he stood up, cut across to the right again and started out. Quent gave him a little lead, then followed. Keeping about ten yards behind as the man crossed the lobby, Quent could see that he was a young fellow with bright red hair.

The man walked across the street and entered his car, a gray coupe. A taxicab was just discharging a passenger at the entrance to the theatre. Jumping into it, Quent instructed the driver to follow the coupe. The cabbie gave him a wondering look, but smoothly shifted into first and trailed the coupe, which was heading east toward the river.

At First Avenue, the coupe turned right and sped at a fast clip past the United Nation's building, across Forty Second Street, slowed to a stop in front of a dark apartment house in the Thirty's.

Quent's cab driver waited for the red-headed man to leave his car and enter the

apartment house, before he pulled up at the corner. Quent pushed a bill at the driver and sprinted for the entrance of the house.

It was a four-story remodelled tenement walk-up. The vestibule smelled as if it had not been washed for days. Although red-head had disappeared, Quent could hear the clump of his shoes against the stairs. Then a door slammed and there was silence.

There were sixteen apartments in the building. How could he guess which one was Sailor Tew's? He looked at the name tags under the mail slots; there were no familiar names.

Walking up to the top floor, Quent put his ear against the door of the apartment nearest the stairs. He heard nothing and moved on. In the fourth apartment the quiet was broken by a baby crying. Scowling, Quent walked down to the third floor.

Again he started his rounds. Inside the first apartment, a man and a woman were arguing—something about an overdrawn check account. He could hear the swift beat of a rumba pound through the adjoining apartment. Straining to catch any voices above the music, he pressed his ear close against the crack of the door.

It opened suddenly and he nearly fell forward.

A WOMAN was standing in the doorway now, a sultry brunette in a sweater and skirt. She seemed surprised, rather than frightened, at Quent's sudden appearance—as if no man alive could frighten her. A slight smile played across her heavily made-up lips.

"What'cha doing there, mister?" she said. Her voice was low pitched with just a trace of hoarseness.

"Sorry, honey," Quent said, smiling. "I was just passing by and heard that delicious rumba music."

"Yeah?"

Quent nodded and grinned down at her. "Yeah."

"You a rumba fan?" the woman asked.

"Sure. I go dancing all the time. Crazy about it."

The girl bobbed her long brown hair in agreement. "Me too. Fact is, I was just going downstairs to the apartment below this one. Couple of guys live there and I

feel like dancing." As she talked, she swayed slightly to the beat of the music. The rumba ended and Quent heard the click of the automatic record player. Another South American tune started.

"A mambo!" the woman said. "Do you mambo?"

"Better than any of the jokers downstairs," Quent said. He put his arm around her and led her back into the apartment, a sparsely furnished place with a scuffed, rugless floor.

The music was loud in Quent's ear as they started to dance. She was a good dancer, as all girls who like dancing are, and they worked together smoothly. He led her through some intricate breaks which she followed easily. Gradually she snuggled closer.

"Whew," he finally said, looking at his watch. It was 7:30. "You wear me out, honey."

"Vi," she said. "The name is Vi." She walked away slowly, turned the record player off and went on into the kitchen. "Rye and soda all right?" she asked.

"Anything's okay." He stepped quickly to the window. Right outside there was a fire escape. He pulled the window wide open. "It's warm in here," he said.

He could hear the tinkle of glasses from the kitchen. He leaned out of the window and peered downward. The lights were on in the apartment below.

"You're not leaving me, are you?" he heard the woman's voice behind him.

He turned around quickly. She was at the door of the apartment. "You crazy, honey?" he said.

She smiled at that. "I need some ice cubes," she said. "Make yourself comfortable while I check with the people next door." She left the door ajar and stepped out.

*It's a break,* Quent thought, *my first decent break in a long day.* He slipped out of the window onto the fire escape, climbed down the ladder quickly, careful not to make noise. He stopped at the fire escape below and, very cautiously, peered inside.

The first person he saw was Johnny Barr.

Johnny was seated on a wooden chair in the diagonal corner of the room, his head slumped down wearily on his chest. Be-

tween him and Quent sat an unshaven tough. Quent recognized him as a former prohibition era strong-arm named Cottrell. The radio was on—a quiz show.

Quent inched up the window. The noise of the sliding was covered by the bursts of heavy laughter and applause from the radio. As far as Quent could make out, there was nobody else in the apartment.

From upstairs he heard the apartment door slam. "Hey," he heard Vi call loudly. "Say, where the devil—" and he could hear her walking through the apartment. Quent debated quickly whether to rush Cottrell or go up to quiet the girl. "Where are you?" her voice sounded very loud now, and he was afraid Cottrell would hear. Cursing low, he ran up the fire escape steps again. He made it just as she appeared at the window.

"Oh," she said, looking very relieved. "I was wondering where you'd gone."

"Just sitting out here getting the air," he said.

"Don't you want that drink?"

"You bet." He put his foot over the window ledge. "I have to leave right away though. I'm late for an appoint—"

But he didn't finish the sentence. For as soon as he stepped into the room, he saw the girl wasn't alone. A man in a turtleneck sweater was standing behind Vi now. Quent knew who he was: Sailor Tew. Next to him was a redheaded muscleman.

But at the moment Sailor was the important one—because in his large right hand was folded a shiny black gun.

"EVENING, gentlemen," Quent turned to Vi. "More visitors, honey."

She started to answer, but Sailor waved at her. "Shut up, Vi," he said; adding, "Here, Red, take this cannon." Then, to Quent:

"What are you doing here, Quent?"

"Teaching Vi the mambo."

"All right, all right," Sailor said slowly. "Fatso Dee told Red you wanted me. What for?"

"You know what for. The kid downstairs."

"What about him?"

"Let him go. He's got a Broadway opening tonight."

Sailor threw back his head and laughed. "Listen to this guy, willya, Red?" he said

good-naturedly. "He wants me to—" he bent over in sputtering laughter.

"What's the percentage, Sailor?" asked Quent. "If you were holding him for some king-sized dough, it might make sense."

"I'll explain it to you, chum," said Sailor. "Pretty Boy downstairs is supposed to be in a show tonight. With a girl I'm nuts about. He's in the way—see!" Sailor took a deep breath. "Well, Quent, Pretty Boy won't play his show tonight—"

"That's right," Quent broke in. "Toss the kid's body into the river because she's got him on her mind."

"Maybe," Sailor said grimly. "Or maybe I'll dump a pail of acid on that pretty-boy face. I'll show her that when Sailor nods at a baby— She comes running. I could have any doll on Broadway," he gritted out, "and she's not going to play hard-to-get."

"Don't kid yourself," Quent said. "You'll never get close enough to polish her shoes."

Sailor stepped forward and hooked his fist into Quent's belt. Quent doubled up under the pain and Sailor chopped at his face. He slumped to the floor.

"So you're playing hero, huh?" he heard Sailor say from above. "You used to be a smart egg, Quent, but you're going bats. I'll teach you how to behave!" His shoe lashed out and struck Quent above the eye. "Get up."

"Not here, Sailor," the other man pleaded.

"Stay out of this, Red!" Sailor shouted. "Get up, Quent." His shoe dug into Quent's back. Quent managed to get to his feet.

"Now dance, you," yelled Sailor. "Dance!"

"What?" said Quent dully, trying to clear his head of the pain.

"You heard me."

"You heard Sailor," Red said, grinning now.

Quent broke into a slow tap routine.

"Faster," ordered Sailor. Then he grinned wildly. "You don't have to worry about the people downstairs."

"That's right," said Quent slowly. "I don't." He rapped out a salvo of quick steps, then broke into a standard time step. The clicks sounded loud and clear on the hardwood floor. He worked in a lot of

tricky stuff, then led into an intricate shuffle pattern across the room and back.

"That's it!" Sailor shouted. "And keep it up!"

The sweat gleamed on Quent's brow. He switched into a wing step, then a double wing which carried him over near the window. The two drinks Vi had prepared were on the end table near the ledge. Quent broke into an ancient soft-shoe routine.

When he came around in a graceful turn, his hand snatched up one of the glasses. With the same motion, he flung it toward Red, then turned and jumped out onto the fire escape.

As he scrambled down the steps, he saw that Johnny Barr had made it to his fire escape. But Cottrell was holding on to him, clubbing him over the head with a gun butt. Quent dove at Cottrell, wrapped his arm around his neck in a half-nelson, hard. With a gasp of pain, Cottrell released Barr.

"Beat it, kid," Quent said. As he closed with Cottrell, he saw Barr vault over the side of the fire escape on to the ladder. But he couldn't watch Barr any more—Cottrell was trying to force the gun around toward him.

Quent grabbed Cottrell's wrist and the two men struggled in the half-light which spilled out from the apartment. There was hardly enough room to move. Quent knew Sailor and Red were waiting on the stairs above, waiting for a chance to move in and help Cottrell.

Cottrell rammed Quent against the rail. Quent bent backwards and pounded home a low right. There was a grunt of agony from Cottrell and he backed up. Quent rammed his left fist into the thug's face. Cottrell fell back against the window, his head piercing a pane of glass. He tried to wriggle out, then Quent heard a horrible scream. A thin sliver of glass was sticking into Cottrell's neck. Cottrell dropped his gun. Quent bent for it.

And at that moment, from above, he heard the shots in quick succession and felt a poker-hot pain in his shoulder. As he brought the gun up, he could hear the *caching caching* of the bullets ricocheting off the fire escape framework.

Quent was barely conscious of the pulsing gun in his hand, but the blasts echoed through his arms, through his chest, through his senses. . . .

He saw Sailor stiffen, a few steps above him, then topple across the ladder railing. There was a sudden breeze as his body hurtled past. Then silence. Red's body lay on the fire escape above.

Quent stepped forward and carefully extricated Cottrell's head from the shattered window pane.

The siren sounded then. Quent looked down at the street, saw a police car racing up to the house. Two blocks further north he could still make out Johnny Barr running toward Forty Second Street.

"Good luck tonight, kid!" he shouted. Then he turned back to help Cottrell.

"**H**OW is it?" the police detective asked, pointing with his pipe to Quent's heavily bandaged shoulder.

"The slug's out," Quent said. It was almost three hours later. Sailor was dead, Red was dying, Cottrell would live—in a prison infirmary.

"I'd better drive you home," Detective Cotler said.

"Thanks," said Quent. "I've seen enough of headquarters for tonight." He got into the detective's car. The clock on the dashboard read eleven o'clock.

"What I still don't understand," Cotler said, starting uptown, "is how you arranged for Johnny Barr to make his break simultaneously with your own."

"Well," Quent explained, "I remembered Barr was in the Signal Corps during the war. I was a radioman in the Navy myself. So when Sailor forced me to dance, I tapped out a message in Morse Code telling Johnny when to dive for the window. I figured I could get down in time to help him—and I was right. Lucky!"

Suddenly Quent said: "Mind cutting across Forty Fifth Street?"

Detective Cotler turned west on Forty Fifth, drove crosstown slowly. Near Broadway a crowd had gathered in front of a theatre. Half-a-dozen policemen were trying to keep the spectators under control. Limousines were lined up along the curb.

"An opening night," said the detective. "And the show's nearly over."

"Yeah." Quent hesitated. "Could you let me off here?" he said.

"Whatever you say," the detective said, pulling the car to the curb.

The whole side of the theatre marqu e

was taken up with an enormous sign: *Starring Elaine Rodgers*. Quent paused before a huge poster in one of the display cases. It was a blow-up of Elaine and Johnny Barr doing an Apache dance. Even from the frozen positions of a photograph, it was easy to see they made a good team.

"Hey, you!" He heard the brash voice of a policeman call to him. "Better get out of the way! The show's breakin' any minute and we gotta keep the lobby area clear."

"Okay, sorry," Quent mumbled. He headed westward along the street. He found it difficult to walk fast, he seemed to be stumbling along. When he had walked about a quarter-block, he heard quick steps behind him. It was Max Wynkoop.

"Quent," he said. "The doorman told me he spotted you." He took Quent by the arm. "Why didn't you come in?"

"Johnny okay?" he managed to get out.

"Yes, he made it in time . . . and the show's going to be a terrific hit!" Max exulted. "I don't know how I can repay you, Quent. Elaine too. Look," the producer went on. "I'm giving an after-theatre party tonight and I'd like you—"

"No, thanks, Max," he said. "The party's in honor of the stars — Elaine and Johnny. I'm through trying to horn in on those kids." Suddenly, from the theatre, he heard a tremendous surge of applause. "The show's over, Max. Good luck with the critics." He turned abruptly away.

Quent hadn't gone a half-dozen steps when he saw the sleek convertible parked in front of a bar, the girl in it, her head bent over as she lit a cigarette. He walked up to the car. "Hello, again, honey.

The girl's head came up. She seemed to take a long time before she said: "Hello yourself."

Quent walked around the front of the car. "What wonderful luck! Just running into you like this, I mean. When you drove away this morning, I thought it was good-bye forever."

She sat quietly, eying him; then she returned his smile with her own.

"How'd you manage to last the day out without me, honey?" Quent asked jokingly.

She took a deep drag on her cigarette. "I managed."

He opened the car door. "Move over, I'll drive," he said. She slid over and he got behind the wheel.

It was then it happened; as the car moved forward he sensed the different feel of it. And her perfume smelled different too, sultrier, muskier. He turned and stared carefully at her—now there was no question about it.

All at once, as the car raced down the street, Quent started to laugh. *Can you beat that*, he thought, *it's not the same babe!* And he laughed harder—because he didn't give a damn, and neither did this honey.



## Death Is My Comrade

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*Sound and fury signifying nothing—thought New York shamus Vic Coyne when he first heard Smithfield's three luscious damsels humming their theme song . . . "there'll be a hot crime in the old town tonight."*

# SLAY BELLES

By **ROBERT TURNER**

• • •  
"A nice shot, Mr. Coyne. I think I got it all in."



## COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Nooses Wild

**T**HE corpse was not a pretty thing. You work a man over with a pair of brass knuckles before you hang him and it does not help his appearance. This one had been a neat person—neat but gaudy. His faun colored slacks were sharply creased and the Hollywood style sport shirt, with palm trees, with tropical sunsets, with round-hipped Hula girls, was

hardly ruffled. Somehow, no blood had gotten onto it. The note pinned onto the shirt was printed with lipstick on brown wrapping paper.

His face was not so neat. It was a crimson mask, blackened and swollen from strangulation. You couldn't tell anything much about it. His hair was whitish blond, short-cropped like a college boy's. He twirled and swung lethargically from the end of his rope in the dawn breeze, unaware of the stew and the stir he was going to start in the town of Southfield, this day,



when he was found hanging in the center of the town square.

It wasn't really a square. It was only the junction of two broad thoroughfares, Main Street and Willmette Avenue, distinguished only by the fact that in the center of the junction stood the big bronze statue of a Confederate hero, General Caspar K. Willmette, brandishing his cavalry sword as he sat proudly erect on a massive bronze horse. Still, it was the geographical center of the town. You couldn't find a more conspicuous place to hang a man. Nor a better make-shift gallows. The general had killed his share of Yankees at Boggs' Run, where Lee, himself, had cited him for gallantry in action. He would probably have thought it only fitting and proper that the murderers had used the outthrust arm of his statue to string up another invader from the North. He probably wouldn't have even called it murder. It was that, nonetheless.

Old Wilmer Coots, the town drunk, discovered the corpse that morning. The night before, Wilmer had passed-out in the vestibule of the Southfield Trust building. The first thing to strike his gaze when he knuckled open bleared eyes was the man who had been hung. At first Wilmer figured it was just a spell of "seein' things" again. Some mornings he was so afflicted. But after a few moments when the dangling body didn't turn into something more picturesque, such as a giant cotton-moth with six heads, he knew that wasn't so.

He stood there, a small, broken old man in stiff-dirty overalls and nothing else, shivering, scratching at a chronic case of hives with both hands and broodingly regarded this bizarre spectacle. "It ain't real, of course," he told himself. He forced a reassuring chuckle. "It's a dummy, one of these here effigees or whatever. Dam' kids playin' a prank on the town."

He shuffled out into the street for a close-up. He looked at the head, tilted grotesquely on its broken neck. He goggled at the hideous dead face, bloody and battered beyond recognition. He gagged. His stomach contracted into a tight knot and he would have been sick if it were possible for him to be so. But last night's alcohol was already absorbed by Wilmer's thirsty system. He hadn't eaten for three days. All he got was a bellyache which gave up in disgust after a few futile spasms.

Recovering from the shock of finding that the corpse was real, Wilmer tried to figure out who it was. "Looks vaguely familiar," he mused. "Seems like I ought to know this critter. Look at them shoes!" They were open-work summer sport sandals. "Dam' furriner if ever I see one. Nobody in Southfield would be found dead in silly, fancy-dan shoes like them." Wilmer looked surprised and pleased with himself. He chuckled. "Hey! Found dead in 'em! That's a good one, ain't it? Just what he was, found dead in 'em."

Wilmer walked slowly around the big statue, studying the gently swinging corpse from all angles. He kept trying to figure out who the corpse was. With this the opening day of the tobacco market in Southfield, Wilmer knew there were a heap of furriners in town but why this one should somehow be familiar to him, he couldn't quite grasp.

"Brain's a mite addled this mornin'," he told himself. "Must've taken a drap too much last night. Better watch that. A man could get to be a, now, what do they call 'em—a alkyholic—if he wasn't careful of the stuff." But he had to laugh at that. Not Wilmer Coots. He was a man could handle his Corn. Leastways, most of the time.

The pleasant thought struck Wilmer that his being the first to discover the dead man swinging in the morning breeze had its valuable points. Folks would want to know just every detail about how it looked, how he happened to discover the thing. This would be an event in Southfield and they would want to hear it over and over. Would take some telling, too, especially with the proper embellishments to give the folks a real thrill. A man could get parched in the throat from talking so much. Common courtesy would call for someone to buy drinks for Wilmer to wet his whistle. He had an idea a good full day's free drinking might well come of this.

IT WAS difficult for Wilmer Coots to convince Deputy Sheriff Pollard that Wilmer had actually seen what he had seen. Pollard came sleepily to the door, listened with half closed eyes and slammed the door in Wilmer's face. "Go home and sleep it off, Wilm," he ordered. "You've got the whim-whams again."



But after three or four attacks on the doorbell and Wilmer swearing he hoped nobody'd ever buy him another drink if he was lying, Pollard was convinced. For Wilmer, that was like swearing on three stacks of Bibles. Pollard decided he'd better investigate.

By the time they got back to the square, several farmers in town early for the market opening, had parked their pickup trucks and were standing around the statue, gaping in awe at its grisly ornament. When they saw Pollard, they started yawping at him to cut the thing down before the women and children began arriving in town. Pollard, fat and jeweled and red-faced, was a man who knew his law. He said:

"Can't touch the thing until the sher'ff and cor'ner git here. 'Spect that thing'll have to swing a spell. Sher'ff and Cor'ner on a fishin' trip together. Take several hours to get 'em back here."

So the statue was roped off. The women and young'ns started arriving in Southfield and somehow they didn't seem to find the corpse doing its dead man's rigadon from the arm of the big statue such a thing of horror. In fact they got highly indignant when Pollard, and Clemshaw, the town cop, tried to shoo them away. So for three hours the opening sales in the big warehouses were of secondary interest. People would run over to them for a few moments to see how the prices were going and then hustle back to the Square to stand around gawking at the hanging man, conjecturing in hushed tones as to who could have perpetrated this delicious outrage on the town of Southfield.

The corpse had already been identified, with Wilmer Coots cussing and snorting because he'd been so all-fired snuffle-headed as not to be able to figure it out. He was—or had been—Ed Charnow, a private detective, representing the Coyne Agency in New York City. He had been hired by the town of Southfield for the first two weeks of the tobacco market to spot outside hustlers and hoodlums and sharpers drawn by the big money flowing so freely at this time of year. That wasn't unusual. Every year the town hired a Coyne man for that purpose. Competition is keen between tobacco market towns.

Southfield had found that it encouraged farmers to bring their tobacco to local

warehouses for auctioning when they knew that a special effort was being made to protect them and the year's income they'd get for their crops. The Coyne men had always done a good job of that. But this year, someone had done a good job on the Coyne man. It had not been anybody from the outside, either. The note made that clear.

Pollard had climbed a ladder and read the note, without disturbing the corpse. He read it aloud and its contents caused a satisfactory stir. The lipstick-scrawled words said:

*He stuck his snoopy nose into private lives and look what happened. If any more outside busy-bodies try it, they'll get the same treatment. It's dangerous to stir up old troubles. Let sleeping dogs lie!*

That tagged it for most of the people in the crowd. Those last two sentences were familiar words. For a long time there was silence. Then somebody put all their thoughts into voice. "It's them crazy Willmettes!" he said. "They're at it again. One of them did this. The town won't have any peace until every last one of 'em is either dead or in the booby hatch!"

"Now, now, quit that kind of talk!" Pollard warned. "We don't want no accusations until we get some facts."

But it didn't do much good. The people there in the town square remembered the last instance of public violence in Southfield. That was when old Jabez Willmette had horsewhipped a reporter from a fact detective magazine, clean out of town. The reporter had come to Southfield to do a story on the old Bleeks Creek murder, in which the whole Willmette family had been involved. As he set upon the reporter with the whip, old Jabez had used the same words: "Learn to let sleeping dogs lie, you Yankee scoundrel!"

So, today, when Pollard read the note pinned onto the hanging corpse, the whole thing was settled then and there in the minds of the gaping crowd. This was some more work of the Mad Willmettes.

As though to verify that fact, an hour after the statue had been roped off, an old fashioned fringe-topped surrey, pulled by a team of raven-black horses, hammered and swerved through the opening-day-of-market traffic on Main Street, which fortunately was still not too congested, and

shuddered to a stop against the ropes. The crowd which had been scattered in panic by its approach, now closed in about the surrey and looked up in awed anticipation at the woman driving it. She was something to see.

The only thing about Naomi Willmette that gave away the fact that she was in her early thirties, was a certain maturity of expression about the mouth and eyes, the air of rakish confidence with which she held her proud, lovely head. Except for that she could have been eighteen. Her hair was Spanish black, the real black, not just dark brown. She wore it parted in the middle over her high forehead and drawn back tightly into pigtailed that bounced about her shoulders every time she moved her head. Her elliptical eyes were like shiny wet, ripe black olives. Her nose was high-bridged and finely cut. The fluid line of her mouth was the color of red berries.

She was wearing what the Southfield Fashion Shoppe, in its ads, described as a playsuit. The way it looked on Naomi Willmette, she wouldn't have trouble finding playmates, either. It had been designed, originally, for coltish, not fully developed teen-agers. The halter was cut to exaggerate and flatter the figure, the lines of the brief shorts to round-out too youthful looking hips. But Naomi's figure needed no flattering; her hips were already lyre-like, so that the effect of this costume on her was devastating. And she knew it.

She stood in the front of the surrey, one hand still holding the reins of the team, the other brandishing a hatchet, its new, razor-edged blade glittering in the morning sunlight. Her flashing, black-eyed gaze swung around the crowd, giving a shock-like tingle to everyone it touched.

"You ought to be ashamed, all of you!" she told them. "Standing around gaping at this—this desecration of the statue of the greatest hero the South ever knew. What's the matter with you? Isn't there any one in this mob with an ounce of gumption? If nothing else, you shouldn't want the town ruined as a tobacco market. Are farmers going to bring their crops to the Southfield warehouses next year after seeing a shocking spectacle like this?"

A bold voice in the crowd cried: "Mr. Pollard said to leave it be until the sher'ff and the—"

"Pollard!" Naomi cut him off. "Dam' the sheriff!"

She bent, reached down and sliced the hatchet through the rope strung around the statue. She clucked gently to the team, urged them into the section close to the statue, that had been roped off and with another deft blow, hacked through the hemp that held the corpse. It hit the pavement with a dull thud. The sharply in-drawn breaths of the crowd were audible.

"Tell Pollard to cart that thing to the funeral home where it belongs," Naomi Willmette ordered. Then while the mob fell back out of the way, stared in shocked awe, she swung the team around, galloped them back up Main Street as fast as they had come.

A sharp-faced woman in the crowd gasped: "The nerve! The unholy nerve of that Willmette woman! No wonder that family has the curse of Satan on them! Did you see the way she was dressed?"

Her husband chuckled, rolled his eyes. "Yes'm," he said. "I surely did—if you'd call it dressed. But that Naomi surely is a sight to make a man feel young again, if that's what you mean. She—"

The wife's sharp elbow in his ribs cut off his ecstatic comments. Someone sent for Pollard and old man Clemshaw and now that there was nothing else to do, the cadaver of Ed Charnow was removed to Finney's Funeral Home, which served, when necessary, as the town morgue. The crowd in the Square dispersed and went back to the warehouse to watch the tobacco sales.

AT nine o'clock that morning, Vic Coyne, head of the Coyne Detective Agency in New York City, got the message from Southfield that Ed Charnow had been murdered. At mid-afternoon, after flying to the state capitol, Coyne got off the tiny belt-line railroad that ran through Southfield. The sun was blistering and his midnight blue linen suit hadn't traveled well.

Vic Coyne was a man whose clothes never looked as though they fitted him, anyhow. The best tailors in New York screamed when they saw him coming. He was one of those long, loose-jointed, gangling type of men. Now, after the hour run in the bake-oven confines of the belt line railroad car, he looked as though

somebody had run him through a mangle—and felt like it.

Vic Coyne resented having to come down here to what he considered the bowels of the earth in August. Everything had just reached the point where it was nice and quiet in New York. He'd begun to think maybe he'd be able to take a few days off and make use of the cabana at Atlantic Beach which he'd rashly rented, even take in some of the summer stock shows in the Metropolitan area.

And then this dolt, Charnow, had to go and get himself murdered. Vic Coyne couldn't afford to let people get away with bumping one of his agency men. It hurt the agency's reputation. His only consolation was that maybe it would only take him a few days to nail the man who had done it. He had an idea what had happened. Ed Charnow had an inclination to be rough at times. He must have used too much muscle in easing some outside fast-buck boy out of Southfield. The guy had resented it. Or perhaps a number of them had gotten together, organized and decided to use Charnow as an example to discourage outside interference with their soft touch.

There was nobody else on the tiny depot platform as the train stopped long enough for him to alight. He watched the three car train chug away toward the coast, banged his overnight bag against the side of his leg and swung around the depot waiting room. He almost bumped into the long, orange colored convertible parked there. It had an excess of chrome and leopard skin seat covers—the kind of little runabout you could pick up anywhere for four or five thousand dollars. The girl sitting at the wheel was the type you probably couldn't pick up anywhere for any amount of money.

"Hi!" she said. The southern accent was spread just thin enough to be tasty. "You just *think* it's hotter down here than in N'York because it's a few hundred miles farther south. It really isn't."

"I see," he said. He wished that most of her wasn't seated in the car so that he could be disillusioned fast and get it over with. With a face like hers it had to be that she was at least knock-kneed or pigeon-toed or both, with thick ankles thrown in for a bargain. They hadn't made

the legs that could match the face of this girl.

She was blonde, the kind that men prefer, gentle or otherwise. Not just light hair. But like honey pouring in tissue-thin skeins from a wide-mouthed pitcher, with the sun shining through it. That color. It was cut short in one of the cute new-old coiffures and a good thing, too. Shoulder length hair like that would have been too much for a mere man to bear to look at.

The eyes were unbelievably wide-set. They were the incredible blue that technicolor sometimes gives to the sky. She wore some kind of frothy pink summer-dress, off-the-shoulder—way off. The shoulders were tanned the shade of coffee-light and they had dimples. Vic Coyne permitted his astonished gaze to go below that only briefly. He didn't like to be caught with his jaw hanging at half mast and his eyes rolling down his cheeks.

"I see," he said again. "So it's not the climate but the psychology of the thing."

"What difference does it make? I just didn't want you making some corny remark about the heat of the South. Or should I have said Coyney? I'm Hildie Wilmette, your one-woman reception committee."

"I see," he said again. "Before you think that's all I can say, you asked for this: Does your being here make me a hail-fellow-Willmette?"

She laughed as she reached out and swung the far door of the convertible open. "You win," she said. "Get in. You don't have any place to stay, do you?"

He swung loose-jointedly around the car, aware that she followed his movements in the rear view mirror. He eased into the seat beside her. "No," he said. "I figured on the local hotel. You've got a better idea?"

"You'd be turned away. Matter of fact you'd be turned away everywhere. There just isn't any place to sleep in Southfield this week. Opening of the tobacco market. Auctioneers, warehousemen and buyers have every place taken up. You're lucky I met you."

His eyes were resting under the steering wheel. He had been wrong. A pair of legs had been created to match the rest of Hildie Wilmette. They were stockingless and as sleek and tanned as her shoulders. They were perfect right to the tiny pair of feet

encased in summer clogs. She was perfect.

"I certainly am," he agreed. "If you could call anybody who had to come to Southfield at this time of year lucky."

The convertible was moving wormingly through traffic on Main Street, heavy out of all proportion to the size of the town. There were knee-high curbstones on both sides of the street, hangovers from horse-and-buggy days. Most of the buildings were one story and some of them had false fronts. It was the first time Vic Coyne had seen a Southern tobacco market town, yet it looked vaguely familiar. It struck him then that it slightly resembled a set from a Hollywood horse opera. He half expected the automobiles to dematerialize and to see a Sunset Boulevard cowboy come galloping along on his trick horse. But they didn't.

As they drew closer to the middle of the town, the traffic thickened and the sidewalks became jammed as Times Square on New Year's Eve. At frequent intervals mobs of farmers and their wives and children, looking uncomfortable in their Sunday-go-to-meetin' finery stood around barbecue stands with signs over them proclaiming them sponsored by different church groups. He remembered now, hearing that opening day in a tobacco town was the biggest holiday of the year. It was like Christmas, Fourth Of July and carnival-time all rolled into one.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hot House

**H**ILDIE WILMETTE'S voice struck through Coyne's thoughts. She was saying:—"the statue. That's where it happened." She was gesturing straight ahead to where a huge mouldy looking metal monstrosity reared itself in the center of an intersection.

"Oh, yes," Coyne said. "The statue. And who would that be—Beauregarde P. Yewall, suh—of Lee's ninety fifth 'orse marines, that is?"

She laughed. It was a pretty thing, warm and mellow sounding from deep in her throat. Dimples peeked in and out of her cheeks. The flash of small, even, bone-white teeth against all that tan was dazzling. But it occurred to Coyne that this girl was

laughing at everything he said. He knew he was not that funny. He was instantly suspicious, on his guard.

"How can you be so gay," she said, "about such a grisly, exhibitionistic crime?"

"Huh?" Coyne said. "Wait a minute. Let's serve that up again. What crime?"

She turned on him in surprise, shifted her gaze back to the street in front of her just in time to swerve around a shuffle-footed old man precariously balancing a fruit jar of corn liquor in each hand.

"The murder, of course," she said. "Isn't that what you're down here for? Charnow was one of your men, wasn't he?"

"Yes. But—Maybe you'd better give me the lurid details of the thing. The wire I got from this bird, Pollard, just said Ed Charnow had been murdered. It didn't say how or where—or why. Maybe if you know any of those items, you'd run over them for me . . . By the way, I half expected that if anyone met me at the depot, it would be Pollard or some member of the local law brigade. Where do you come in? You don't look like a cop or a deputy sheriff."

"Gee, thanks!" she told him. "That question, I'll answer first. I was in the telegraph office when your wire giving the approximate time of your arrival came in. I decided that it would be best if I grabbed you before Pollard or his boss, Sheriff Buxton."

"Why? What's Ed Charnow's murder to you?"

"That, we'll discuss later. First, let me tell you what I know about the thing."

She told him, then, about the corpse being found hung from the arm of the statue and about her sister, Naomi, cutting it down. While she was talking, Vic Coyne began to remember some of the things his agents who'd been assigned down here in past years, had told him about the town and its crazy first family, the Willmettes. At the time, he hadn't paid much attention. He'd figured most of it to be only local gossip. Now he began to wonder.

He remembered that there were three sisters, all unbelievably beautiful and after seeing Hildie, he believed that. There was also a brother, if he remembered rightly, and the old man. They were all town characters. Their ancestors had been the town's founding fathers and at one time

they'd owned most of it, been extremely wealthy. Right now, they were supposed to be poor as church mice but by some mysterious method maintained a high standard of living and dwelt in secluded grandeur in the old family mansion, out at the edge of town.

When Hildie finished an account of Charnow's murder, Coyne said: "Why would your sister, Naomi, do a thing like that? If nothing else, I'd think she was liable to arrest for interfering with evidence at the scene of a crime."

Hildie snorted. "They wouldn't arrest Naomi—or any of us—for any such minor infraction. You see, there's a legend in Southfield that whenever any misfortune strikes the Willmettes, trouble hits the town, itself. It's happened several times. Frankly, I think it's sheer coincidence but the towns folk believe in it. You'd be surprised what we Willmettes get away with in Southfield. Just about anything short of murder."

The convertible had long ago turned out of Main Street onto an old tar road that had once been a main highway. Several miles from the residential district of Southfield, it swerved into a driveway lined with weeping willow trees. Halfway into the estate, Hildie swung the car in under one of the huge, billowing trees, which formed a shady, natural bower all around them. She cut off the motor.

"Before we get to the house and some of the others get hold of you, I'd better set you straight on a few things," she said. "So you won't draw any wrong conclusions. In town you'll hear a lot of talk about the Mad Willmettes but we're not really crazy, any of us. Eccentric, perhaps—wild, highly strung, over emotional. That's bound to happen after several generations of second and third cousin marriages."

"Just a minute," Coyne cut in. "I appreciate your confidences but why bother? I figured that as a member of one of the leading families in town and because of the crowded condition of Southfield at this season, you were merely showing me some of that old fashioned southern hospitality. If it will save embarrassment, I don't even have to meet your family. I don't expect I'll be in Southfield long, anyhow. Most of the time I'll be in town, consulting with the local police and working on this thing."

She half swung around on the seat, toward him. The blue eyes were shimmering with tears. The slightly underthrust full lower lip began to quiver. Her voice was small and tremulous. "Vic," she said. "That's just it. I—Vic—I'm scared. I thought I could handle this, that I could make you do what I want, the way I can with most men. Now I know I was wrong. You're too tough. You're like steel, Vic Coyne. I'll never get anywhere with you."

How she managed it, how she did it, he never knew. She half twisted, half slid, but without any visible effort, and she was over on his side of the wide seat of the convertible. She had her head resting against his chest and there wasn't much he could do but put his arms around her. She was very warm and soft and clinging against him. The clean, sweet scent of her honey-blond hair got into his nostrils.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

She didn't tell him. She turned her face toward him. Vic Coyne suddenly realized that he'd been working too hard. It had been a long time since he'd taken time out for something like this. And he knew what was expected of him. If he didn't kiss this Hildie Willmette after receiving a red-lipped personal invitation, she'd think he was a fool. He'd be a fool. He felt that he'd better uphold the reputation of the North. So he kissed her.

**I**T WAS like the time he'd taken his first drink of raw whiskey, back in the days when he was a kid, during prohibition, and you could have capped the stuff, set a fuse to it and blown open the side of a mountain with a half pint. It was like the time on his Grandfather's farm when he got too close to the back end of a horse and got kicked. It was like a small hydrogen bomb dropping right through the top of his head and going off there. And the whole thing seemed to go on and on and he didn't care; it was all right with him.

A sound like a pistol shot, so close it was right in his ears, put an end to it. Coyne and Hildie Willmette broke apart like a couple of kids in the balcony when the theatre lights go on. Coyne saw what had made the sound. It hadn't been a gun.

While he and Hildie had been briefly soaring out of this world, an old fashioned surrey had driven up alongside of the con-

vertible. Naomi Willmette was still wearing the abbreviated playsuit. Coyne took one look at her, decided that beautiful women ran in the Wilmette family the way pug noses and big ears ran in others.

She held the long bull whip that she'd snapped over their heads, poised in her right hand. "You ought to be ashamed, Hildie," she said. "Courtin' like that with a perfect stranger. I ought've cut off your ear with this whip. What will Saint think? Honestly, Hildie, I don't know how you stay engaged to him."

Hildie Wilmette laughed. She reached up and tousled Vic Coyne's shaggy hair. "We weren't courtin' and he's not perfect by a long shot and he's no stranger. Vic and I've known each other for at least a half hour. I just wanted to see if these Yankees had any different technique. I'm sure Saint understands. He doesn't look as though it bothered him very much."

A man was sitting on the seat of the surrey next to Naomi Willmette. He wore a pastel blue T-shirt which nicely displayed carefully developed shoulders, chest and biceps. He had the face to go with the Greek god physique. Long, narrow, coldly amused eyes, decorated with fine black brows and lashes. His nose looked as though somebody had deliberately and expertly broken it just to relieve the monotony of his otherwise perfectly pretty boy features. It accentuated, rather than detracted from, his good looks. A mustache like a black crayon streak called attention to a mouth short and blunt and somehow, in spite of its smiling twist, cruel looking. He was regarding Hildie and Vic Coyne as though they were children at play and he was mildly amused by their childish antics.

"Vic," Hildie Willmette said, remembering her manners, "This is Naomi, my sweet oldest sister. She is the flower of the southland as you can plainly see. Everybody tells her she'd look much better driving around in that vintage surrey if she wore a hoop skirt and buttons and bows. But Naomi feels *that* would make her seem eccentric . . . The ugly beast with the bored demeanor, sitting next to her, is my fiance, Vernon St. Marks. If we don't call him Saint, he pouts: He thinks that's cute. And don't let him fool you. He's inwardly seething. If he had a glove, he'd slap your face with it and challenge you to fight it out at twenty

paces with a brace of barbells . . . Naomi—Saint—this is Vic Coyne, of Coyne investigations, down to investigate the death of one of his employees."

She made a horrible leer, pointed her fore-fingers, cocking her thumbs like gun hammers. "You know—a private eye. *Drop the gun, Jack!*"

Vic Coyne was having a rough time keeping up with this. He'd always thought they built high walls around people like these and locked the gates. He wondered if insulin shock treatments would help.

Naomi Willmette leaned down toward him from the surrey. Her black eyes were blazing wild. Her lips peeled back across her teeth and she snarled at him like a peevish child:

"You're wasting your time. You'll never find out who killed him. That Charnow was snooping into people's private business and he only got what was coming to him. You understand? You should have seen him, hanging there. You should have seen his face, all battered and bloody and—"

She broke off, sucking in a ragged breath. The pupils of her eyes were oddly pinpointed. The anger suddenly fled from her face, leaving it vacant of expression for a flashing instant. Then amusement showed in its place. She made a small chuckling sound. "I should have left him there. I shouldn't have cut him down. He—he looked so funny, dangling there like a puppet. So ridiculous. He—"

"Naomi, stop it!" Hildie Willmette cut her off.

The dark girl didn't seem to hear. She began to laugh, a silly, giggling, school-girlish sound. Hildie said: "Naomi, if you don't stop it, this second, go back to the house, I'll take away your little silver box!"

Naomi's laughter snapped. Fear crossed her exotically beautiful face. She said, quickly: "No, Hildie! I—I'll do as you say."

She reined hard on the horses, clucked to them and wheeled the surrey around in a dangerously short turn, then cracked the whip over the heads of the team, sent them thundering back up the driveway toward the huge house, distantly visible. Just before the vehicle rounded a turn, out of sight, Vernon St. Marks turned and grinned at them, waved nonchalantly.

Hildie sighed. "Don't mind my sister,"

she said. "She's a bit impetuous. Let's get on up to the house." She keyed the ignition, pressed the starter button and the convertible hummed politely into life again.

Coyne reached out and put a big hand on her wrist. "Look," he said. "Do me a favor. I wouldn't want to put you people out. Suppose you just wheel this kiddie car around and take me back into town. I'll find *some* place to sleep. If the rest of your family feels the same way your sister does about private investigators, they're not going to take too well to your bringing me in as a guest."

She flicked his hand away. "Don't be childish," she told him. "Nobody's going to bother you. You came down here to help catch the one who killed your man, Charnow, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, if you stay with us, you'll probably find him a lot quicker than you will by ramming around town and playing games with our local law. I might as well come right out and tell you, now. One of *us* killed him. You'd have soon figured that out, anyhow. You're a clever man, Vic. I knew that the instant I saw you. You won't waste time bumbling around like the Hook county sheriff and his men. Whoever killed Charnow didn't reckon on a set of brains like yours being brought in on the crime, I'm sure. If it had been left solely up to the local lawmen, the whole business might have died out, blown away, become just another unsolved murder, like the Bleek's Creek affair."

THE base of Vic Coyne's spine felt as though something with furry wet feet was crawling along it. Here, this woman was calmly, quietly telling him that not only did she believe that one of her own family was a murderer but that by staying with them as their guest, he, Coyne, might more quickly put the finger on the guilty one. He didn't get it. He thought he had seen and heard everything. But the cold-bloodedness of this beat him.

"The *what* affair?" he managed, weakly.

"The other murder, when my uncle, Carl Willmette, was drowned under, shall we say, rather mysterious circumstances. This Bleek's Creek runs through our property. It was obvious to almost every one that someone in our family murdered Uncle

Carl. But there was insufficient evidence for the police to pin it on any one of us. This one is different, though. I'm afraid, with you working on it, Vic. I was going to tell you before—I was going to try to bribe you not to work too hard on this case. I was going to offer you five thousand dollars just to take it easy while you're down here, just to make a token showing of running down Charnow's killer. But soon after I met you, I knew it wouldn't do any good. I knew you couldn't be bought."

"That's right," he admitted. "Not that I hate money. Nor do I have a lot of phoney ideas about honor and all that. It just wouldn't be practical. An unsolved murder of one of my own agents would cost me more than that in fees. People would be a little leary of an agency that couldn't solve the murder of one of its own operatives."

They drove up under the *porte cochere* of a huge mansion. It was scabby from lack of paint and parts of the woodwork were rotting off but in all there was still an air of grandiose elegance about it. It was like a once wealthy old aristocrat whose clothes have gotten a little seedy. Stopping the car, Hildie Willmette turned toward Coyne again.

"I still have an offer to make," she said. "Maybe this one you'll be able to accept. Let's say you do crack down on the murderer and it does turn out to be one of us Willmettes—you will still get the five thousand dollars if you'll do us all a big favor. Instead of going to the police first with any conclusive evidence, come to me. I'll see to it that the guilty one writes a full confession and then does the honorable thing."

Coyne put his index finger to his temple. He said: "You mean *bang-bang*?"

She nodded. Coyne grimaced. "That sounds well. I can see the point, I suppose. It'll save your family the disgrace of having one of them stand trial, being convicted and executed and all that. But what's to stop this guilty party from taking it on the run once the finger is on him—or her?"

"I give you my word that won't happen," Hildie said. "Before you laugh that off, inquire around Southfield and you'll find that the word of a Willmette really means something. It has never been broken."

For a moment, Vic Coyne didn't answer. He looked at Hildie and she seemed very solemn and anxious. The moods of flippancy and pathos that she'd tried on him before were gone. He liked her this way best of all. There was something appealing about her almost strained intensity.

"Let me think it over," he said. "We'll see. That's all I can tell you right now."

He opened the door of the car, stepped out. Hildie led him up the creaking old steps and through the front door into a vast entrance hallway that was like something out of "*Gone With The Wind*". He was a little surprised not to see a gray haired old man in knee-breeches come doddering toward them.

The place had the musty, empty smell of a deserted house. There was no sound nor sign of anybody living there. The heavy silence seemed to fold around them, until Hildie shattered it. She spoke in a normal voice but it sounded for an instant as though she was shouting:

"Set your bag down. Before I take you to your room, you might as well meet the rest of the tribe." She moved down the hall, stopped before a set of closed sliding doors and spread them open.

Coyne followed her into a library, walled with dusty, ponderous looking old books. There was a massive rolltop desk in one corner, several club chairs with their old leather upholstery breaking open, spilling out the mohair stuffing. In the center of the room, two men sat hunched over a chest table. A liquor decanter and two glasses occupied a smaller table next to them. Neither of the men looked up from the game until Hildie and Coyne stopped beside them.

The younger of the two men was in his middle thirties. He had a massive, dome-like forehead, with visible blue veins straining out at the temples. Rimless glasses perched precariously on the bridge of a thin, blade-like nose. Behind triple-strength lenses, his dark eyes looked like peeled Malagar grapes. He had high cheekbones and the lower part of his face was drawn and sunken so that when he grinned up at Coyne and Hildie, his big, dingy, crooked teeth bared, Coyne got the impression that he was looking at the preserved skull of a man long dead. He was big in a slope-shouldered, ape-like way under a yellow

silk sport shirt. His hands, protruding from the long sleeves, were enormous, the joints swollen and the thick fingers crooked from arthritis.

"This is my brother, Wynne," Hildie said. "Ignore anything he says. He's anti-social. He doesn't like people."

Wynne Willmette turned his glance toward Vic Coyne. He let his magnified gaze move from Coyne's feet to his head in lazy, insolent inspection. In a voice that sounded more like Harvard than Dixie, he said: "This is people? It looks more like an ignorant New York gumshoe who doesn't know enough to stay in his own bailiwick, to me."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Grave Danger

VIC COYNE felt his scalp tighten and the first faint stirrings of anger nipped him but he forced them away. He ducked his head in stiff acknowledgment of the introduction and said nothing. He turned toward the man sitting across from Wynne.

He could have been any age from fifty to seventy. His thinned white hair was worn long and waved silkily back from his forehead. He was handsome in the way of a faded, sickly matinee idol of yesteryear. His thin face held the tight, controlled look of an alcoholic who was very drunk and trying hard not to show it. Only the foginess of his gaze and an almost imperceptible weaving on his chair gave him away. He formed a cynical but somehow charming smile.

"Happy to know you, Coyne. Just relax and enjoy yourself down here. Don't work too hard and you won't find the climate too warm for you." The voice was soft, well-mannered, but Coyne thought he could detect a veiled note of threat. Apparently all the Willmettes knew who he was and why he had come to Southfield.

"I don't think my job will be too hard," he said. "You're Hildie's father?"

"Yes," Hildie said. "That's old Jabez and don't let his charm and manners fool you. He can be an unholy devil when his temper's up."

"The last Yankee snoop that came prying into our family affairs, Father horse-



whipped the length of Main Street," Wynne said. "Perhaps you'd better not unpack, Coyne."

"You think the murder of Charnow is an affair of your family, then?" Coyne said, sharply.

"You must or you wouldn't be here," Wynne answered.

"Your sister invited me, practically insisted that I come."

Wynne sneered. "Dear Hildie always has had an affinity for slimy, crawling things. When she was a child, she used to bring home pet snakes. She had a tame rat, too."

"Perhaps she thought they'd be company for you," Coyne told him, anger now a hot flush around his ears.

Wynne Willmette came up out of his chair with fluid grace for a man so large. Seated in a chair, his size had been deceptive. He had a short torso but his legs were abnormally long. He towered a foot over Vic Coyne.

He led with a college boxing team left that glanced from Coyne's cheekbone as he swiveled his head. The right came behind it, nicely timed, except for the fact that Coyne came in under it. Coyne sunk his left fist into the big man's midriff, doubling him slightly, bringing his thin jaw down within range. Then Coyne blasted him with a right hook. It wasn't pretty to watch but it did damage. Wynne Willmette's glasses bounced from his nose to the rug. He walked backward on his heels until he bumped into the wall. Then he slid gently down it to a sitting position. He patted his jaw like a man seeing if he needed a shave.

Old Jabez Willmette was chuckling softly. He clapped his hands, a polite patty-cake of sound. "Bravo, Coyne!" he said. "I've always suspected that Wynne had a glass jaw if anyone could get to it. I—"

A scream cut off the rest of his words. It came from somewhere up over their heads. It rose and fell in thin, ear-piercing, wavering spasms. When it cut off as abruptly as it had started, Hildie Willmette reached out and clutched Vic Coyne's arm. She half pulled him toward the door. "Come with me!" she pleaded.

She ran, leading him up a broad, carpeted circular staircase, two steps at a time. In the second floor hallway, Vernon St. Marks and Naomi Willmette were strug-

gling. One of Naomi's pigtails had come undone. Her black hair was fanned out over one shoulder. There was a raw red scratch mark across St. Mark's cheek. He was twisting Naomi's wrist just as Coyne and Hildie arrived on the scene and an ugly, needle-bladed stiletto clattered from her hand to the floor. St. Marks flung her away from him, bent and scooped up the stiletto.

Naomi stumbled against the wall. She stood there, looking from one to the other of the group, her head lowered, her eyes glittering wildly at them from under their thick black lashes. Her beautiful face was sullenly distorted. Her breathing was coming in harsh gasps. Her hands were smoothing up and down the sides of her long, graceful legs, the fingers splayed.

"Naomi," Hildie demanded. "What in the name of sin is going on here?"

"It—it's she—Sissie!" Naomi blurted. "She started it, dam' her. I caught her—caught her slinkin' around in my room. She was stealin' my little silver fox. She's got it now." Naomi started to whine. "Make her give it back, Hildie. Make Sissie give me back my medicinal cigarettes. I need them. My head'll get all stuffed up and hurting again and I won't be able to stand it. They're the only things that help me when my head gets like that."

Vic Coyne turned his glance toward the third girl standing in the hall, keeping Vernon St. Marks' muscular figure carefully between herself and Naomi. She was holding a small hammered silver cigarette box in both hands. Coyne was struck instantly by the genealogically freakish variance of types in this family.

The third sister was redhaired. She was younger than the others; she couldn't have been any more than twenty. She was shorter and slimmer than either Hildie or Naomi but she was equally as beautiful, though not in quite so blatant a manner. And she had made every effort to subdue that beauty, to hide it with a getup that would have looked ridiculous on anyone else. On Sissie Willmette, though, it made you only conscious of her own private brand of loveliness.

She wore her rust-red hair drawn back severely from her forehead, unwaved and wound in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She wore sequin-studded, horn-

rimmed harlequin glasses, enormous on her small-featured face.

Sissie had the legitimate redhead's alabaster white skin but the dead whiteness of her face was broken by the bud-like fullness of her mouth, formed exquisitely with orange lipstick. There was a scattering of russet freckles across her retrousse nose. A green blouse was fastened high at the neck by a small black bow, under a simple yellow linen suit, the plain lines of which subtly hinted at the perfection of her tiny figure. The whole attempt of Sissie Willmette to look prim merely accentuated her completely feminine appeal.

"Medicinal cigarettes!" she repeated mockingly. "Sure, I rooted them out. Ever since I came home I've thought I detected the stench of marijuana somewhere up here on the second floor." She wheeled toward Hildie. "You gave them to her, didn't you? What's the matter with you, Hildie? Isn't she crazy enough? One day, she'll get really looped on these things and go out and kill somebody." She shot a quick glance at Vic Coyne.

**H**ILDIE kept her voice level and quiet with great effort. "Give back her cigarettes, Sissie," she said. "They're not—not what you think at all. They're what Naomi says—medicinal cigarettes for the easing of catarrh, nasal congestion. Sissie's troubled with that."

Without turning her head toward him, holding her gaze firmly on her sister's, she said: "Vic, ignore Sissie. She's been away to college up North and it's overdeveloped her imagination. She goes in for amateur theatrics, too. She dramatizes everything."

"Dramatize, hell!" Sissie said. "I've smoked the dam' things myself. I'd know that stink anywhere. And I doubt you're kidding Mr. Coyne, either. One look at Naomi and he can tell she's hopped up with something half the time."

Naomi said: "I don't care what you say about me, Sissie! You think you're so smart! At least I'm not always trying to steal Hildie's boyfriend like you are. And you always pretending to act so sweet and innocent, dressing so demure and old-fashioned, when you're nothing but a little—"

"Shut up, Naomi!" Sissie slashed out the words.

"I won't!" Naomi countered. "And if

you don't give me back my—my cigarettes, I'll tell a lot of other things. You know I can, too! You know I can tell lots of things about this family. You think I'm afraid to, but someday—"

"Take your lousy weeds!" Sissie flung the silver cigarette box toward the dark girl.

Naomi caught it in both hands, hugged it to her bare midriff and spun away from the group like a halfback clutching the ball on a reverse spinner play. She hurried down the hall, disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

Sissie glared at Hildie. "I'm sick of this crazy family. The Mad Willmettes is right! I've got a gutful. I'm leaving this week-end before one of you goes berserk and murders the rest of us while we're sleeping in our beds." She tilted up her chin and turned to the door behind her, opened it.

Just before she stepped inside, she said: "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Coyne. Enjoy your stay. You can see what a chummy little household it is." The slam of the door punctuated her words.

"I—I'm sorry, Vic," Hildie said. "We—I guess we're all just terribly upset over this new murder in the town."

Coyne looked toward Vernon St. Marks, who was dabbing the scratch on his cheek with a pastel blue handkerchief that matched his T-shirt. He studied the pale smears of blood on the cloth with great interest, then glanced up at Coyne. He said, flashing white teeth in contrast to his dark mustache:

"Sissie seemed quite taken with you, Coyne, old man. You should be flattered. She never addresses anyone as Mister." He carefully maneuvered the smile, without disturbing any of its brilliance, around toward Hildie. "Maybe we've got a budding romance on our hands, darling. I'd like that. I'm tired of being the lone wolf around here. Romancing one of the Wilmette girls becomes a little trying."

"What you mean is that misery loves company, isn't that it, Saint, my sweet?" Hildie said. Then, impatiently: "For goodness sake, stop flashing all that beautiful china you keep in your mouth. Some day that asinine smile will freeze on your pretty face and then what will you do? . . . Come on, Vic, I'll show you to your room. . . ."

St. Marks' finger curled  
around the trigger.



Saint, go on downstairs and console Wynne and help Father get drunker. Vic, here, knocked Wynne low with a fetching right hook after Wynne took a swing at him from pure meanness."

"Really?" St. Marks said. "Something I've always wanted to try myself. Surly beggar, my prospective brother-in-law."

The room assigned to Vic Coyne was slightly smaller than a hotel lobby. It was high-ceilinged and papered with a faded design of stupid-faced cupids shooting arrows at each other. The massive, four-poster bed and the chintz-covered chairs, the highboy and the heavy-legged table were all over a half century old.

A door through one wall, Coyne was gratified to see, led into a fairly modern private bathroom in a space that had once been an oversized closet. He stripped, opened his bag to get out razor and tooth brush and went in to shower off some of his travel grime.

While needle-points of hot water stung him and at the same time soothed nerves somewhat frazzled by his hectic introductions to the Willmette family, Vic Coyne tried to sort out the things he had heard and seen and learned, in an orderly fashion. To catalogue them for bearing on the death of Ed Charnow.

He was annoyed to find that what he had supposed would be a fairly simple murder by some one or group of outside hoodlums working the town, was really a fantastic crime, involving, possibly, a whole family of weirdly neurotic people.

He cursed Charnow for blundering into something that had nothing to do with the job he was being paid to do down here. The contents of the note pinned onto Charnow's corpse, as Hildie had told it to him, made fairly certain that was what had happened. The fact that it had been written with lipstick indicated that one of the Willmette girls was guilty. That automatically elimi-

nated old Jabez, Wayne and Vernon St. Marks. Except that it could have been done purposely to throw off any investigation.

There were so many screwy and obscure angles to the thing that the more Coyne thought about it, the less progress he made, the more muddled it got. He finally pushed the whole thing from his mind until he could fit some missing pieces into the picture after he went into town, talked with the police and other people and got some more information.

**W**HEN Vic Coyne came out of the bathroom, he saw Vernon St. Mark's broad, muscular back. St. Marks was standing next to the bed, apparently peering down into Coyne's opened suitcase.

"When you find what you're looking for, yell huckle-buckle beanstalk and you'll win the big red and yellow yoyo, old boy!" Coyne said.

St. Marks turned around and he was holding a snub-nosed .38 in his fist, pointed flush at Coyne's stomach. St. Mark's hand was very steady and his finger was curled around the trigger. He wasn't smiling this time and that fact exposed for the instant his whole act of being a fatuous hanky-panky young man with a pretty face and a fancy set of muscles that he wouldn't know how to use.

Something about the set of St. Mark's mouth in this moment, the slight narrowing of his gray eyes, the complete lack of any emotion showing on his handsome features, told Vic Coyne that here was a boy who could be really difficult to handle if things got grim.

"I don't mind you fondling my gun," Coyne said. "But would you mind turning it the other way? A man doesn't like to get shot without his clothes on. It's not quite decent."

"Oh!" Vernon St. Marks slipped his smile back on like a mask. He lowered the revolver. "I—I'm sorry. I'm fascinated by guns of any kind. Used to be pretty handy with the things. On the pistol team at school, that sort of thing. Didn't realize I was pointing it at you. Damned rude."

He whipped out his blue handkerchief, then, carefully wiped off the .38 and making sure that he didn't touch it again with his fingers, tossed it back on top of the clothing in Coyne's bag.

Coyne watched this, said: "Cautious guy, aren't you?"

St. Marks spread his finely manicured hands, palms up. "Why not? The way things are going in this house, someone could get shot with any weapon that's lying around loose. I wouldn't want my prints on it . . . I just dropped in to see if you needed anything I had to offer, a razor, perhaps or some new blades."

"Thanks, no," Coyne said. "Only that isn't what you really came in for, is it? Let's talk about the Willmettes and this murder business. Let's get it off your mind."

"I like people who are direct." St. Marks laughed easily and raised his fine dark brows. "All right, Coyne. As one outsider to another, I thought I ought to tip you off to a few items. In the first place, all the Willmettes know that one of them killed this Charnow chap. This morning, after Naomi got back from town and reported about the corpse being hung from their grandfather's statue in the town square, they all held a—shall we say—war pow-pow? Naturally, none of them would admit that he—or she—was the culprit.

But they all agreed that the Bleek's Creek murder hadn't brought too much pressure because it was purely a family affair. They decided that this time they wouldn't be so lucky. The victim was an outsider. There would be a lot of pressure put onto local law forces to solve the crime. And they were pretty certain that someone from New York would be sent down to investigate. Hildie was elected to grab whoever that was, before our police got him and to proposition him, to bribe him into lousing up the investigation. If that failed, into tipping them off to which was the guilty party."

"I know. She told me that part of it," Coyne said.

"They all solemnly agreed that if conclusive evidence was brought in, that the guilty one would write a confession and blow his—or her—brains out."

"Why?" Coyne demanded. "I don't get that. It seems to me to be carrying this family honor business to an extreme."

St. Marks smiled. "There are good reasons. In the first place, if that wasn't done, the family would be obliged to spend big money defending the one accused. They

are no longer well heeled. At the same time, a long-drawn-out trial and investigation would probably dig up family skeletons that would better remain buried. It might, perhaps, even reopen the old Bleek's Creek case and nail some other member of the family for that. There are other minor reasons that we won't go into."

Those arguments made sense and Coyne nodded. "This is all very flattering to me. They must feel pretty certain that I'll dig up the killer."

"They know you'll at least be in on it when it happens."

"I see." Coyne yanked a pair of checkered shorts, a pair of rumpled slacks and a sport shirt from his bag, slipped into them. "So far, you've told me little that I didn't already know, Saint. What other—uh—items do you have?"

St. Marks was watching himself in the dresser mirror. He tilted his handsome head, twisted it a degree, trying out the three-quarters view of his profile.

"Yes," he said. "This man of yours, Charnow, was up here yesterday and had a long talk with old Jabez and that gorilla-looking son of his, Wynne. I also heard talk that the Willmettes knew that Charnow had been going through local newspaper files, checking up on the old Bleek's Creek murder. Apparently his interest in that cost him his life."

Vic Coyne didn't answer. While St. Marks had been talking, he'd suddenly thought of something. He stepped over to his suitcase again, picked up the .38. He sniffed at the barrel, jacked open the chamber and saw that one shell had been fired.

He turned very slowly toward Vernon St. Marks, his jaw clamping so tight it made all of his teeth ache. He couldn't even get it apart to talk. Through his teeth, he said: "I guess I'm a little slow for this part of the country. I guess we city boys just don't clack our brains hard or fast enough. While I was enjoying a noisy shower, somebody slipped in here, borrowed my thirty-eight and used it. Since you were the one I saw putting it back, very meticulously wiping off your prints, I'd say you might know something about it, Saint. Where will I find the missing slug from this thing? In whose dead body?"

St. Marks' smile stretched tight at the corners. In another moment it looked as

though it would rip his ruddy cheeks open. His eyes grew muddy looking. "Really, old man, I wouldn't know what you're talking about." He started backing, carefully, like a man easing along toward the edge of a springboard to do a back-flip, toward the door. "I'm afraid I'll have to leave you now. Perhaps we'll talk about this thing again, later, when you feel a bit more rational. Shall we?"

Vic Coyne started after him. "Come back here, body-beautiful!" He raised the gun toward St. Marks. "Or maybe you'd like to see if I'm handy enough with this flit gun to have made your old school pistol team. You—"

Something jarred the rest of the words out of Vic Coyne's mouth. He stared at Vernon St. Marks incredulously. The other man seemed to be doing cartwheels and taking the whole room around with him. Coyne felt the .38 loosen from his fingers and fall. It had suddenly gotten very heavy.

Someone was playing a set of chimes right in his ears. The sound swelled until it filled his whole head. St. Marks and the room seemed to spin faster and faster. Abruptly they stopped and what looked like a huge black plastic bubble seemed to come floating down and settle around Coyne and blotted out everything. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Picture Frame

HE WAS reaching out through the darkness and his fingers finally found the inside of the big black plastic bubble. He clutched at it and it pulled away stickily in his hands. He kept clawing at it but it didn't seem to do any good. Then the bubble burst and he was back in his room in the Willmette mansion. For some reason he was lying on his face. He looked down at the flowers-in-a-basket design on the threadbare rug and slowly memory of his scene with Vernon St. Marks returned to him.

He got up onto his hands and knees. He discovered that he still held the .38 clutched in his right hand. Holding onto it, he crawled toward a chair, pulled himself to his feet. He saw Wynne Willmette, then, sprawled across the big four-poster bed on

his back, as though he had fallen that way.

Young Willmette's glasses were missing and without their magnifying lenses, his eyes looked small and deeply sunken. They stared up at a crack in the ceiling plaster. His small, indrawn jaw hung open and Coyne could see the whole mouthful of Willmette's rotting, crooked teeth. Pale and waxy-shiny now, the dead man's huge, dome-like forehead held a small hole dead center of it. The hole was clogged with half coagulated blood. A trickle of it made a thin, twisting line toward his temple.

Coyne looked down at the .38 in his hand and then at the dead man and he felt his stomach turn. He found himself listening to the vast silence of the house. He had the sudden sensation that he was here all alone in the mansion with the dead man, that everybody else had fled, leaving him here. He could hear the drumming of his own heart.

Then there was another sound, from behind him. It was a soft, rippling giggle. He wheeled around and saw Naomi Willmette coming toward him from the opened door of the room.

She walked with slow, measured stride, like a bathing beauty parading before contest judges. She wasn't looking at him. She was staring toward the corpse of Wynne Willmette, on the bed. She stopped in front of it. Her darkly beautiful face was set in an beatific smile. She kept giggling softly. She said in a tone of mild amusement:

"You killed Wynne, didn't you? I heard that you fought, that you knocked him down. I knew there would be more trouble between you. Wynne couldn't take humiliation. He came after you again, didn't he? And so you had to kill him."

Coyne thought: *Oh, sister, sister, you're all really working together on this thing, aren't you? You're all really giving me the business, aren't you?*

Then she turned toward him and he saw that was not so. This girl wasn't in on the frame that had been so carefully set up against him. She couldn't be. Not in her condition. He'd seen people charged on marijuana before and he recognized that Naomi had a giant-sized lungful. The guileless expression on her face made it obvious that she really believed what she had said.

"Don't worry," she said. "I—I won't

tell on you, Mr. Coyne. You see, I'm glad Wynne's dead. Glad. I—I hated him, Mr. Coyne. He's always been cruel to me; always driven me crazy with teasing. And he's bad. Wynne brought a lot of trouble to our family. You see, he's the one killed Uncle Carl and threw him into Bleek's Creek. I know that. I saw it happen. But I couldn't ever tell because then they'd take all our money away from us and we wouldn't be rich anymore. And the rest of them told me they'd say I was lying, making it all up. They'd have me sent away to a—you know—a place for people not quite right. They'd have done it, too. So I was always afraid of anybody finding out because they'd maybe think I'd told about it. But it doesn't matter now, does it? Because now Wynne's dead."

She came close to Vic Coyne and put both hands flat against his chest. She worked them up to his shoulders. Her head was thrown back and from under her long, shadowy lashes, her dilating, unblinking eyes stared up at him. She whispered:

"I'm not angry at you any more. I don't hate you anymore, Mr. Coyne—Vic—because now you can't do anything about Wynne drowning Uncle Carl in Bleek's Creek. Nobody can. Wynne's dead, too, now. You know, Vic, I watched you kissing Hildie, yesterday. I liked the way you kissed her, Vic. Kiss me like that. Nobody ever tries to kiss me, except Saint and that's nothing. He goes after all of us, even Sissie. I don't think he's really in love with Hildie at all. Do you? How could he be? Kiss me, Vic, please!"

Her hands were around his neck, now, clasped there. She was squirm-close to him. He looked down into the hypnotic depths of her half-closed black eyes and dizziness swept over him. He felt the pulses in his wrists surge like little wild horses. Then from the corner of his eye, over Naomi's shoulder, he saw someone standing in the doorway to the room. A photo flash bulb exploded with a white hot flare of light. Vic Coyne swung Naomi away from him, wheeled toward the doorway.

SISSIE WILLMETTE stood there, unscrewing the spent bulb from the camera's reflector. From behind the Harlequin glasses, her green eyes held his gaze

levelly. She said: "A nice shot. Mr. Coyne. I think I got it all in—you and my sister in each other's arms, you with a revolver in your hand—and my dear, wild tempered brother sprawled dead on the bed. It tells a neat little story. This sort of puts you on our side, doesn't it, Mr. Coyne?"

He raised the .38 toward her. "It might, if you ever got that film developed. Bring that camera to me, right now. You forget I still have the gun."

"No!" She smiled, patiently, like a teacher with a pupil not quite bright. "We didn't forget. Go ahead and squeeze the trigger. You'll hear it click on an empty chamber. While you were unconscious, Mr. Coyne, we held your hand over the trigger and emptied the gun into the wall." Coyne turned toward five deep pits in the wall paper with bits of plaster chipped around them. "That served two purposes. It fixed your hand so that it won't pass a parafin test and it rendered the weapon harmless at a time like this. You understand, Mr. Coyne?"

"You keep saying 'we'. You and who else?"

"Saint and I."

"Mmm-hmmm. Then, it was you who was hiding here in the room while I was talking to him?"

She carefully tucked a stray wisp of rusty red hair back into place. She shook her head. "No. It was Naomi. Saint heard the bang when she shot Wynne in his room. He came out into the hall just in time to see her sneaking back in here to return your gun. He followed her in but before he could get a chance to talk to her, you started to come out of the bathroom. He told her to hide and she did that.

"Then when she saw you put the gun on Saint, realized that you might force him to tell the truth, she came out of her hiding place, crept up behind you and banged you over the head with a paper weight from the desk. Saint let her do it because it gave him a chance to get out from under that gun. Then he came to me and told me what had happened. We decided that since Wynne was dead, we might as well turn it to our advantage and frame you for it."

The cool calmness of her voice during this recital, as though she was, perhaps, telling him about a tennis match or some-

thing, stunned Vic Coyne. Finally, he managed: "Where is Saint, now?"

"About a hundred yards or so behind the barn, at our family burial grounds. Saint is back there, digging a final resting place for Wynne. You see, it's going to work like this: Nobody will miss Wynne. He was practically a recluse here. He never went into town. He had no friends. Nobody ever came to see him. So all you have to do, Mr. Coyne, is keep quiet about his being dead and we'll do that, too. Then you will go to Sheriff Buxton and Deputy Pollard, in Southfield, and tell them that you've been out here and talked to all of us.

"We're a screwy bunch but you've definitely decided that none of us had anything to do with Charnow's murder, that it was just made to look that way. You'll tell them you think the killer is some town hoodlum who had a grudge against Charnow. You'll be surprised how willing they'll be to go along with you, Mr. Coyne. They'll soon find a scapegoat to pin the murder on."

Coyne started edging a fraction of an inch at a time toward her. "And if I don't do that, you'll frame me for killing Wynne, with the picture you've got in that camera? Is that it?"

"Plus the fact that Wynne was killed with your gun."

"Suppose I call your bluff, let you go right ahead and do that? Then I'll tell the true story of what happened."

She laughed, a warm, throaty sound. "Do you think anybody will believe you, believe the true story?"

He thought about that. All the events since he'd arrived in Southfield a few hours earlier kaleidoscoped through his brain in a crazy-quilt pattern. He sighed. "No, I don't suppose they would." He was several inches closer to the girl in the doorway now. She hadn't seemed to notice. Coyne knew that he had to get that camera, destroy the film, if he was to have even half a chance of getting out of this mess. To distract Sissie's attention for a moment, he turned to Naomi, who had been standing by, listening, switching her now vacant gaze back and forth between him and Sissie. He said:

"Naomi, did you kill Wynne, your brother?"

She jumped as though somebody had stuck a pin in her. Her pigtails, like twined black silk, were hanging forward over the front of her shoulders. She was twisting and toying with the end of one of them with both her long, nervous hands. She giggled. "Of course, not, Silly. You did. I told you that before. Don't listen to Sissie. She blames everything on me. She even thinks I killed Charnow. But I didn't, of course. I didn't kill either of them."

Sissie Willmette said: "Naomi has blank spots when she's been smoking her—her medicinal cigarettes—especially about her fits of violence. She has them often but she never remembers. Like the time she got angry at a window that was stuck and punched her fist through it and cut a main artery and almost bled to death before we got to her. She didn't remember a thing about that, either, did you, Naomi?"

Fingering her wrist, looking down at the long white scar across it, Naomi shook her head and pouted her swollen-looking lips. "No," she said, sullenly. "But I'd remember if I'd killed somebody. I—I know I would."

"You see, Mr. Coyne?" Sissie smiled, triumphantly. "Naomi swears she didn't kill Wynne and we'll back her up. She says *you* did it. So do the rest of us and the film in this camera will back that up. Are you ready to pack and go down to talk with Buxton and Pollard, Mr. Coyne?"

He was several feet closer to her, now. Coyne had an idea that with one headlong leap he might reach her before she could get away. The tendons of his legs tautened. Then Sissie Willmette laughed. As he started toward her, she whisked away from the door. She said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Coyne, but you can't have the camera."

HE plunged through the doorway after her, stumbling, off balance. By the time he straightened out in the hall, Sissie disappeared into another room. The door slammed behind her. The lock clicked. In a fury of frustration, Vic Coyne stood before the door, studying it. It had been made in the days when good lumber wasn't at a premium. It was solid oak and several inches thick. He had an idea all he might get out of trying to break it down, was a lame shoulder.

Finally, he said: "All right. You win. I'm leaving. I'm going into town to talk to the local law."

Through the door, Sissie Willmette told him: "I knew you'd be sensible, Mr. Coyne. It's too bad everything had to happen this way. I'd have liked to get to know you better. Your work must be simply fascinating. You must get to meet such interesting people." Her laughter was muffled but still audible.

With great effort, Vic Coyne restrained himself from trying to smash his fist through the door and into that pertly pretty little laughing face. He finally spun away from the door, went on downstairs.

He saw Hildie coming out of the library, half carrying, half dragging the limp form of her father, Jabez Willmette. The old man's silky gray hair was no longer brushed back neatly from his forehead. It strung down over one side of his face. His dissipatedly handsome features had lost their control, had come apart. As is so often the case with alcoholics, once he'd passed a certain point in his drinking bout, the end came fast. His features were slack, his complexion blotchy. His eyes looked like the little plus signs cartoonists use to indicate unconsciousness in a character. He was really blotto.

Hildie tried to form a worldly smile of understanding but it didn't quite come off. The hurt and disgust showed through. She succeeded merely in looking like a child who has caught a grownup doing something that it shouldn't. She said: "I—I'm afraid I need help, Vic. I'd like to get him into bed before he falls on his face. I'm afraid father never learned when to stop."

He stepped toward her and just as he reached them, old Jabez rallied some semblance of sobriety. His eyelids forced themselves open heavily. He made a serio-comic attempt at dignity. He leaned back against the wall, disdainfully pushed away Hildie's supporting arm. He mumbled: "Mperftly all right. Jus' had one t'many, tha's all."

"Come on, Father," Hildie said patiently. "We know you're a rugged old guy with the bottle but let's go to beddie while you can still make it under your own power. You want to do that, don't you? You wouldn't want your po' li'l daughter to have to tuck you in—a powerful big drink-



in' man like you, father? Now would you?"

She wasn't ragging him, Vic Coyne saw. She was being as tender and persuasive as he'd ever seen anybody with a disgusting drunk. In that moment, no matter what had happened with this murder business, no matter how much she might be involved, his estimate of Hildie Willmette jumped up one hundred percent. But the old man was recalcitrant. He again pushed away her offer of support. "Tell you I'm all righ'. Le's go back in libr'r and have nigh' cap."

Coyne decided it was time to step in. "There isn't any more, old timer," he said. "You drank it all up. Just enough for an eye opener in the morning. You wouldn't want to be without that, would you? Let's skip it and get to bed, now."

Jabez Willmette put a pale, shaking hand to his brow, flipped back the long loose silky strands of gray to some semblance of order. His bleared eyes stared belligerently at Coyne from under their weighted lids.

"Who're you, sir?" he demanded. "What're you doin' my house?" He made an exaggerated expression of remembrance. "You—you're that detective fellow from N'york. I 'member distinctly now. How—how you like this family of mine, sir? Hope you have t'put 'em all in jail. Put 'em 'way for long, long time, yes, sir. Not a dam' one of 'em any good."

A tear slipped from the old man's eye, trembled on his waxen, wasted cheek. "I made a miserable job of bringin' 'em up." He suddenly saw Hildie standing next to him. He brushed away the tear, smiled wanly at her. "All excep' good ol' Hildie. She's on'y decent one in family, sir. That Naomi, takin' narcotics; Sissie with her Northe'n education but nasty and rotten as they come. Wynne, he's no good, eith—" He broke off, straightened up a bit more.

"Say, where's ol' Wynne? Got to talk to him." He managed to look secretive. "Very important. Got t'talk to Wynne about somethin', Hildie. Where's he? We—Wynne and I—we goin' to fix that handsome lout you're engaged to, Hildie. We finally got the goods on that boy and his charm'n fancy manners. Get Wynne for me, Hildie. We'll confront that St. Marks scoundrel righ' this minute." He balled his thin old fist, made a half hearted effort to bristle with righteous indignation.

"Of course, Father," Hildie said, smiling indulgently. "Later, after you've had a little nap. Wynne isn't around right now, anyhow. I don't know where he is." She started to put her arm around old Jabez. She made faces at Vic Coyne, silently urging him to do the same, to help her.

"Wait a minute, Hildie," Coyne said. "Maybe what your father has to say about Vernon St. Marks can't wait. Maybe that's the key to this whole crazy puzzle. I'll tell you why—because your brother, Wynne, is lying upstairs in my room dead, right now. Someone murdered him. Sissie claims Naomi did it but maybe if Wynne had something wrong on St. Marks, the way your father says—maybe he killed Wynne, to shut him up."

Hildie stared at him dumbfounded, her face stupid with shock at the news of her brother's death. Finally, she said: "You say Sissie claims Naomi killed Wynne."

Some of the bewilderment vanished from her face and anger flushed her high cheekbones. "That damned smartie-pants Sissie! She hates Naomi's guts. She'd put every crime in the world on her, if she could. She's 'been trying to tell us that Naomi killed your agent, Charnow, too. Sissie hates Naomi because she's so beautiful. If Sissie says Naomi murdered our brother, Wynne, you can be damned sure she's the one person who *didn't!*"

"Look!" Coyne said, urgently. "We've got to get your father sobered up, hear his story about St. Marks. We—we've got to work fast, Hildie. Help me get him sober."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Grave Danger

THE old man's legs were starting to give on him again. He floundered against the wall, made weak, drunken gestures, his head drooping. He hadn't seemed to have heard anything that either Vic Coyne or Hildie had said. He murmured: "Go fin' Wynne for me. Wynne'n' I goin' to fix that scoun'rel, St. Marks. Will—will somebo'd please find m'son, Wynne. I—"

Hildie and Vic Coyne grabbed him under the shoulders, dragged him, fighting feebly, down the hallway toward a huge cav-

ern of a kitchen at the back of the house. "You brew some coffee, black and thick and scalding hot," Coyne ordered. "I'll give him the ice cube treatment."

By the time Coyne had emptied a tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator, the old man had slumped down, passed out cold in a kitchen chair. Coyne frantically rubbed ice cubes along the nape of Jabez Willmette's neck, soaked a dish towel in ice water and patted and slapped his face with the icy cloth. By the time Hildie had the black coffee ready, old Jabez was beginning to flicker open his eyes, mumble oaths and to try and surge weakly up out of the chair every once in awhile.

While Vic Coyne held the old man's head, Hildie forced the steaming thick black coffee down his throat. In about ten minutes Jabez Willmette was able to sit up straight in the chair and talk haltingly and with some semblance of coherency.

Slowly, patiently, Hildie put across the fact to him that Wynne had been murdered, that it was important that he tell them what he and Wynne knew about Vernon St. Marks. He eyed them bleakly while they talked, his thin, once-handsome old face working. Finally he nodded in understanding and blurted out his story.

Yesterday, Ed Charnow, the Coyne agency man, came to Jabez and Wynne Willmette, told them that in Southfield he'd seen a man on the street that he recognized as Verne Markheim, with whom he'd once worked in the oilfields of the southwest. He'd made inquiries and found out that this Markheim was using the name Vernon St. Marks, that he was living with the Willmettes, was, in fact engaged to one of the Willmette girls.

At the same time, Charnow remembered that there had been another man working in their field by the name of Carl Willmette, an older man. Both Markheim and Willmette had left the oil fields hurriedly one day and never showed up again. With them went a seventy-five-thousand-dollar payroll. Carl Willmette had been the company paymaster and Markheim, his assistant.

After recognizing Markheim, Ed Charnow remembered hearing about the famous Bleek's Creek murder in Southfield. At the time he'd only thought it a coincidence that the name of the murdered man was

the same as the paymaster who'd skipped with the payroll from the oil fields that day many years ago. But spotting Markheim made him realize that it was not. Markheim being in Southfield, the town where Carl Willmette had come, made him certain of that.

To make doubly sure, he'd looked up all the old newspaper accounts of the Bleek's Creek affair. He'd found an item that told how Carl Willmette, when he'd run away from Southfield a number of years ago, had gone to the oil fields of the southwest.

It was fairly simple, then, for Charnow to figure what had happened. Carl Willmette had double-crossed Markheim, run out on him with the loot. When Markheim finally succeeded in hunting down his double-dealing old crony in crime, landed in Southfield, he found that he was too late, that Carl had been murdered.

"Charnow had it all figured rightly," old Jabez Willmette concluded. "My brother, Carl, when he came here, still had most of the seventy five thousand dollars with him. We—we found it in a briefcase in his room after—after he was killed. That's the money we've been living on ever since. It's just about gone, now, though."

All the time that Jabez Willmette had been talking, the facts of his affairs were working into place in Vic Coyne's mind. That the old man's story was patently true, he was certain. Ed Charnow's employment record showed that he'd worked in the oil fields as a special payroll guard before joining the Coyne agency.

Coyne looked at old Jabez hunched dejectedly in his chair, exhausted after his long story, humiliated about the family secrets he'd been forced to expose. Hildie was too stunned by the whole story about her fiance, to do anything but gape in bewilderment for the moment. Coyne reached out and took her arm, shook her.

"Snap out of it," he ordered. "We've got to do something fast before this whole thing cracks wide open around us. Before Markheim—or St. Marks, as he calls himself—finds out that we know about him. The way I see it, is this: He must have spotted Charnow leaving here yesterday, or maybe saw him in town. Anyhow, he had to kill Charnow. Markheim is still a fugitive on that oil field payroll theft. Charnow was the only one in town who knew

about that, could make trouble for him. There was nothing for him to do but get rid of Charnow. To throw any possible suspicion off of himself, he hung Charnow's corpse from your grandfather's statue in the town square, stuck that note written in lipstick on it.

"This afternoon, after he'd learned about my fight with Wynne, St. Marks must have ragged Wynne about me slugging him. Wynne got sore and blurted out that he knew who St. Marks really was. That was like Wynne signing his own death sentence. Saint had to kill him, too, then. Somehow he conned Sissie into thinking

**H**ILDIE put her hand over her eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. The tension and excitement of all that had happened was beginning to get her, Coyne saw. Before she could give in and let herself go to pieces, he said:

"Go up and straighten out Sissie on the whole setup, Hildie. Get that camera from her and destroy the film in it. I'll go out and put the arm on our friend, Saint. Then we'll all go into Southfield and straighten this thing out with the sheriff."

Coyne eased the .38 out of his belt where he had tucked it when he went after Sissie,



"Drop that shovel, Saint."

that Naomi had done it, got her to snap that picture of me, framing me for the crime, under the pretense that it would force me to help you Willmettes out of your jam. Really, of course, he was covering for himself. In other words, the Willmette family has been getting itself into a big stew over two crimes none of you committed."

upstairs. "This thing is no good to me. St. Marks emptied it and I didn't bring any extra cartridges with me. Do you have a gun of any kind I can use?"

Hildie got up and went out into a little storeroom off the kitchen. She came back with a .22 target rifle. Coyne took it, grinning ruefully. "This is a little light for hunting game like St. Marks."

He left the house by the rear kitchen door, found a path that wound around the big barn in the back yard, twisted through a thick grove of trees and down into an acre-size hollow a few hundred yards behind the barn. Here a rickety looking iron fence enclosed a small graveyard, overgrown with weeds. A cluster of old and neglected headstones perked up crookedly like jagged teeth.

Evening mists had already begun to wisp into the hollow. In the dull reddish glow from the fading sun, the whole scene, with St. Marks, stripped to the waist, his powerfully muscled torso gleaming with sweat, feverishly spading dirt out of the shallow grave he was digging, looked unreal.

Vic Coyne stopped a few feet away from St. Marks, leveled the small rifle at him. He said: "Drop the shovel, Saint. Turn around slowly. Put those newly calloused hands of yours up to the back of your neck. Try any kind of a wise play and you'll have the pleasure of trying that new grave on for size. I'll drop you right where you stand."

Vernon St. Marks straightened slowly, swung around. With his forearm, he smeared dirt and sweat from his face. He forgot about his charming smile for the moment. His handsome face looked puzzled and tired and very worried.

"What happened?" he said. "What went wrong, Coyne? Something fouled-up or you wouldn't be bucking that frame Sissie and I planted on you for killing that fool Wynne."

"I'm glad you've decided to drop the act, Markheim," Coyne said. "I like you better, playing it straight, talking and acting like an oil field hunky instead of a teacup-tilting swisho. It's much more in character. Although you *were* good at the other. I'll give you that. I've got an idea that it was when Sissie Willmette found out about Markheim-the-tuffy, that she got interested, wasn't it? She wouldn't go for the St. Marks type. How long have you and Sissie been playing footsie without Hildie knowing about it?"

Markheim sighed. "I never cared anything about Hildie in the first place. She was beautiful enough. But she doesn't have much color."

"You mean she lacks that little touch of

larceny that you like in a woman." Coyne corrected. "But Sissie has it."

"Call it what you want." Markheim shrugged. "I met Hildie first. She was bored and not much interested in any of the Southfield romeos. I figured she'd give me a chance to get on the inside with the Willmettes, find out how much was left of old Carl's seventy five grand and how to get hold of it. I soon found out there wasn't enough left to bother with. Then I met Sissie."

"She showed me a stand of timber—several hundred acres—in a back corner of the estate, one day. After old Carl Willmette skipped' out on me, I worked in a lumber camp for awhile. I saw right away that this timber stand was worth a fortune. It was all full-grown cypress. It figured to about a hundred thousand dollars worth. The Willmettes knew it was worth something but had no idea of the full value. Up until now, before Carl's stolen money ran out, the family didn't need cash and the old man refused to sell that stand of cypress. Well, after that, Sissie saw through the act I was putting on. We decided to team up, under cover, with me still pretending to be Hilde's boyfriend so that nobody would suspect Sissie and I. Finally—"

Markheim broke off. Resignedly, he said: "What the hell's the use of me going through the whole lousy story twice? Let's get into Southfield and you can hear the rest when I spill it to the sheriff."

Climbing up out of the shallow grave, Markheim seemed to lose his balance. He teetered on the edge for a moment, his arms flailing, waving the spade, held in one hand, in a circle. Before Vic Coyne realized what was happening, Markheim let the spade fly. It struck the .22 rifle, knocked it to one side. Then Markheim came at him, swinging. The first punch caught Vic Coyne a glancing blow across the cheek, spun him off balance. When he recovered, Markheim was coming at him again. Only this time, he was fitting a pair of brass knuckles over his right fist.

Coyne ducked under the first round-house swing of that brass-knuckled fist. He knew that a weapon like that put all the odds in Markheim's favor in a stand-up slugfest. He bore in close, rammed his head into Markheim's belly. It didn't do

much damage against Markheim's muscle-layered abdomen. It was like ramming his skull against a brick wall. His arms closed around the other man and he bore him backward to the ground, swarmed on top of him.

That was a mistake. He'd forgotten that a man who'd worked in oil fields and lumber camps would be a past master at the art of knock-down-drag-out. A streak of pain like a lightning flash flamed all through Coyne as Markheim kned him. All strength flowed out of him. He felt Markheim easily roll him away.

**D**ESPERATELY fighting against the sickness and pain flooding him, Vic Coyne managed to scabble to his feet, to avoid getting stomped and kicked. He saw Markheim coming at him, tried to throw a punch but there was no strength in it. His timing was way off. He buried his face behind his arms and waited, half-conscious, for the killing rain of blows that were going to come. But there was only one. A clean, solid punch that caught him just above the temple. He felt himself hit the ground on his side. He rolled over, tried to get up but couldn't make it. He lay there, the small tree-enclosed graveyard spinning around him.

As though from a great distance, he heard a woman's voice saying: "Oh, Saint, why did you finish him off so quickly? Why didn't you work him over more, the way you did Charnow? You're an artist with those knucks, Saint. You know I love to watch you work with them. Get him on his feet! Give it to him some more, Saint!"

The world stopped swimming and Coyne's vision cleared some. He saw a pair of slenderly curved legs. His eyes raised and he saw Sissie Willmette standing there. She'd removed the harlequin glasses. She'd loosened her hair from the tight bun at the back of her neck and now it flowed about her shoulders, glinting dully in the late sun, like burnished copper. She'd changed the shape of her mouth with deft strokes of lipstick. Now it was full and deep, like a wound in the whiteness of her face. Her green eyes, without the glasses covering them, distorting them, were filled with a fierce, wildly shining light. They seemed to have been pulled up at the outer

corners like a cat's eyes. She stood there, no longer a subduedly pretty girl hiding behind a camouflage of primness, but a wantonly beautiful woman who would stop at nothing to get what she wanted.

She was no longer wearing the simple linen suit. She wore white, tautly fitted sharkskin slacks. A thin cotton sweater accentuated the fullness of her figure.

"What's the matter with you, Saint?" she said. "Are you getting soft? You're not finished with him, are you?"

"I don't want to mark him up too badly," Markheim said. "For Pete's sake now that this business is almost over with, stop calling me Saint. What happened up at the house? Where are the others? Do they know as much as this monkey?" He kicked Coyne in the ribs.

"I came downstairs," she said. "I overheard them talking. When Coyne left I went to work on the others. Everything's taken care of, at the house, Baby. You don't have to worry about them. Naomi's locked in her room, having a private tea-party all by her lonesome, getting charged-up as hell with her precious weed. I forced Hildie and the old man into a closet, locked them in. All you've got to do now, is drag this private snoop up to the house and then we can set the place in flames. It will all be over then, Honey. We'll tell Pollard and Buxton that Naomi finally ran amok. That she had you and I locked in like the others but that we managed to break out. It will be a sad and terrible thing, Baby—Naomi locking herself in and dying with the rest of them. I'll be the last of the Willmettes, with only poor, poor Markheim to console me. And all that money we'll get from selling the timber. Won't that be terrible, Honey?"

Her laughter, quiet, controlled, as though she was mildly amused at the prospect of some schoolgirl prank in the offing, raised the back hairs on Vic Coyne's neck. He saw the way it was going to be, now, with Naomi being the fall-girl for everything that had happened. He felt some of his strength coming back. The sickening realization that these two planned to burn him to death with the others, jarred him into desperate action.

By suddenly rolling over onto his back, Coyne was able to reach out and grab one of Markheim's ankles. He wrenched it

out from under the other man and Markheim fell. There was a sickening thud as his head banged against one of the tombstones. Coyne looked down and saw that Markheim was out cold.

Coyne thought about the rifle that had been knocked out of his hand, earlier, a fraction of a second too late. Sissie Willmette was already scooping it up from the ground.

There was only one thing to do. If he could put enough distance between himself and that rifle, Coyne knew that its light calibre might not kill him instantly. Before Sissie could train it on him, he wheeled and took off in a crouching, weaving run toward the far side of the little cemetery.

He heard the first two flat cracks of rifle fire. One slug whistled harmlessly over his head. The second struck a headstone, ricocheted off with a whining scream. He reached the fence around the family burying grounds, vaulted over it. That was when the third shot got him. It felt like a hot needle lancing into his shoulder blade.

He felt pain for what seemed seconds before he heard the sound of the shot. He half-fell on the other side of the fence but managed to keep running, staggering. Spells of blackness alternated between blinding flashes of many-colored lights exploding in front of his eyes. He kept running, blundering through thick shrubbery, bumping into trees and caroming off of them again. It seemed that he ran on and on for hours before he finally fell in complete exhaustion for the last time and couldn't get up again. There was a huge felled log nearby, half covered by a tangle of briars. He managed to claw his way in and sprawl in the shadowed shelter of the log before he passed out. . . .

## CHAPTER SIX

### Hot House

**W**HEN Vic Coyne came too, the back of his sport shirt was stiff and stuck to his back with dried blood. His side felt partially paralyzed. Here, deep in the cluster of trees and shrubbery, it was already dark. He rolled out into the clear, stumbled to his feet and was sick to his stomach. It left him weak but clearer-headed. His nostrils dilated at the strong

smell of smoke, pouring thick and black through the tops of the trees. He pushed on through the woods, came out onto the path between the graveyard and the barn. From there he could see great sheets of flame and oily clouds of black smoke rolling from the Willmette mansion. He ran toward it.

Off toward Southfield, Coyne heard the wail of a fire siren but there was yet nobody from town on the scene. The grounds around the already half-flaming house were empty. He figured that Sissie and Markheim were probably still down scouring the small patch of woods for him. He ran around to the windward side of the house. The fire had not yet reached the lower floor on this side. He picked up a rock, smashed a window and started to climb inside.

Sharply, through the roar and crackle of flames devouring the house, Coyne heard the spat of a rifle shot. He turned and saw Sissie Willmette, her face contorted with rage, coming across the yard toward him, the .22 raised, ready for another shot. She'd apparently reckoned that he might return to the house, had been waiting for him while Markheim searched the woods. Coyne rolled in through the broken window, fell inside the house.

He stood up and through the thick smoke already filling the room, saw that he was in the library. He ran toward the door, got it open and looked back to see Sissie Willmette, her mouth wide and screaming at him, crawling through the window with the rifle.

The stairs and part of the hallway outside the library were a mass of roaring flame. Coughing and choking against the thick pall of smoke, Vic Coyne staggered down the hall toward the kitchen. Just before he entered it, he heard a thin, piercing shriek.

He turned around and saw Sissie Willmette fling the rifle from her, madly try to scramble out of the way as the huge circular staircase caved in, fell toward her. It came down around her in a great hissing blaze and shower of sparks and the sound of her screaming cut off. Where she had stood there was now nothing but the great angry orange and red flaming wreckage of the staircase.

Coyne slammed on into the kitchen. He flung open several closet doors before he

## Slay Belles

found one that was locked. He grabbed a heavy table and using it as a battering ram, broke down the door. The fire was curling in from the hallway into the kitchen a few moments later as Coyne dragged out Hildie Willmette, her eyes shining in wild fright from the smoke-blackened mask of her face.

"Your father?" Coyne yelled above the roar of the fire. "Is he still in that pantry? If you can get out a window by yourself, I'll go after him."

She grabbed at his hand, shook her soot-smudged blonde head. "No," she sobbed. "The smoke got him, Vic. He died several minutes before you broke in. Let's get out of here."

Holding onto each other, they stumbled through the smoke-clouded kitchen toward a window. Coyne pushed Hildie out and then flung himself after her. Exhausted, still coughing and choking, they were unable to regain their feet, had to roll across the grass away from the burning house. They lay, huddled together in the darkness, beneath a clump of shrubbery.

The whine of the fire siren sounded close at hand now. In a few moments, Coyne heard the angry *swish* of hose-water playing on the flaming house. He helped Hildie to her feet and holding onto each other's arms, they circled around to the front where a small fire engine and about a dozen cars from town were parked.

Volunteer firemen were futilely spouting a weak stream of water from two hoses onto the fire but they might just as well have been squirting a water pistol at it. The big mansion was going fast, the top two stories already nothing but charred framework, the flames bellying out the downstairs windows in giant, fiery mushrooms.

Coyne and Hildie Willmette found Deputy Pollard and shriveled little old Clemshaw, the town cop, standing with a group of other men near one of the cars, watching the fire. They goggled unbelievably at Coyne and Hildie as though they were looking at ghosts.

"Gosh 'a' mercy!" Pollard cried. "I didn't think anybody'd get out of that hell-fire alive! Did any of the others make it with you?"

Coyne helped Hildie down onto the running board of a car, turned to Pollard. "No," he said. "The only other survivor



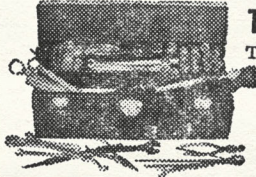
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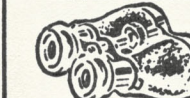
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## Robert Turner

is the man you know as Vernon St. Marks. He wasn't in the fire at all. You'll probably be seeing him any minute."

Quickly, then, Vic Coyne told his story. He took a few liberties with the truth, though. He didn't say anything about Sissie Willmette being in on this thing with Markheim. He didn't see where it would help things any for Hildie—or anyone—to have the Willmette name blackened any more. He figured that he and Hildie could stand together and deny the facts if Markheim insisted on drawing Sissie into it.

When he was finished, Coyne said: "Now, if you'll excuse us, Sheriff, Miss Willmette and I'd better get to a doctor—if we can borrow a car. And look, if you want to save yourself a lot of trouble, break this Markheim guy in a hurry when he starts screaming his innocence, I think I can show you how."

Coyne had noticed a little old man, wearing nothing but a pair of dirty old overalls, standing at the edge of the crowd that had come out from town. The old codger was watching the fire, sipping contentedly at a half full fruit jar of corn liquor. Coyne jerked his thumb toward him. "If I'm not mistaken, isn't that old Wilmer Coots, the guy who first discovered Charnow's corpse swinging from the statue this morning?"

Pollard nodded, looked puzzled. "What's he got to do with it?"

"The way I heard it," Coyne said, grinning, "He could have been passed-out in that bank building entrance way at the same time Markheim was stringing Charnow's corpse up from the statue. Suppose you tell Markheim that Wilmer saw him doing that, had been keeping quiet, figuring maybe to blackmail Markheim with his knowledge later. But seeing the fire here, he got scared and blurted out his story to you. That ought to get a confession out of Markheim, fast."

**P**OLLARD fingered his triple chins, spat a stream of tobacco juice. "Might work at that," he said, nodding sagely. "I think maybe you've got an idea there, son."

Several minutes later, Vic Coyne helped Hildie Willmette into one of the cars and was just about to climb in himself when he saw Markheim, still naked to the waist, stride up to Pollard and the others. He



## Slay Belles

heard Markheim ask if anybody had escaped from the fire.

In the glow from the burning house, Markheim's face was lit up. Coyne saw Markheim's jaw drop as Pollard answered his question. His handsome head swiveled around, desperately. Then Markheim stared at Pollard while the sheriff accused him of murdering Charnow, Wynne Willmette—and of burning the others alive.

"That's ridiculous!" Markheim spluttered. "If you try to arrest me on such a flim-flam story cooked up by that rotter, Coyne, I'll sue you and the town to the hilt for false arrest."

Then Deputy Pollard fed him the story about Wilmer Coots. Markheim wheeled toward the drunken little old man. Coots, having heard his name mentioned, grinned, swayed back and forth on his bare feet. He raised the fruit jar in salute.

Markheim seemed to accept this sign as Wilmer's acknowledgement of the story. His handsome features worked wildly in the flickering flamelight. He smashed a backhand blow against Pollard's face, knocking the fat man back out of the way. He sprinted between the row of cars down the driveway.

Vic Coyne took a deep breath, rubbed his knuckles against the sides of his half burned slacks and stepped out into the other man's path. Markheim was running too fast to stop. He put up his hands, palms outward, in a futile gesture of defense, when he recognized Coyne. His good looking features seemed to fall apart.

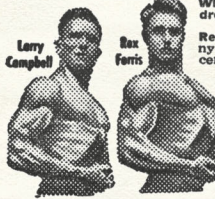
"No, no, Coyne!" he screamed.

Vic Coyne's fist, brought up from so low that the back of his hand dusted the ground, crashed through Markheim's flutter-handed defense. The running man's momentum and the power of that looping punch made the blow murderous. It snapped back Markheim's head and Coyne could feel the shuddering impact in his shoulder.

Markheim's feet came off the ground. He staggered against one of the cars and Coyne stepped in and hit him once more before he fell, this time smashing his fist full into the center of Markheim's face. The sound of grinding gristle told Coyne that this time, Markheim's broken nose would not help out his looks.

Weak from the wound in the back of his

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shoulder, now that this thing was pretty much over, reaction set in for Vic Coyne. He just about made it to the car where Hildie Willmette was sitting.

On the ride into Southfield, he sprawled across the back seat of the car with his head in Hildie's lap. Her fingers were soft and cool across his temples as she told him about Naomi and why she kept her sister supplied with marijuana.

Hildie verified the previous statement of Markheim, that Naomi had seen her brother, Wynne, kill her uncle Carl and throw him into Bleek's creek in a fit of maniacal temper. Naomi had gone all to pieces after that. She had always been highly strung and over-emotional. That just about finished her. Especially when the rest of the family frightened and threatened her into keeping quiet about what she had seen.

Hildie explained that when she found out that Naomi had been smoking the weed, anyhow, and that it did seem to give her relief from excruciating headache attacks, she hadn't seen any harm in keeping her sister supplied. At the same time it gave her a means of keeping Naomi in check whenever she got into one of her wild spells.

"I just didn't want you to think I was no good at all, Vic," she said. "I thought I'd better explain. I—I guess it's probably just as well that it all ended this way. I'm afraid that none of us Willmettes were worth much to the world. We're a wild and tainted bunch. It's probably just as well that—they're all dead now. All except me. I—I almost wish that I—that I—" She broke off, choking up.

He let her cry. He figured she had that much coming to her after all she'd been through. He had an idea, too, that it would turn out that she had inherited what good there was in the Willmette family and none of the evil taint. He hoped so. With that shot wound in his shoulder, he wouldn't be able to leave Southfield for awhile. He had it figured that a girl like Hildie could aid a convalescence.

In a few moments Hildie stopped sobbing but she didn't raise her head up from next to his. She kept it there, her cheek velvety soft against his. That was all right with Vic Coyne. His only regret was that it was such a short ride back to Southfield.

**THE END**

# OFF BEAT

By  
**HAROLD HELFER**

In Ohio, a theater proprietor is now subject to a fine if he allows a person to wear a hat that will obstruct another patron's view.

\* \* \*

A Los Angeles woman had her husband arrested on a charge of assault with a deadly weapon—a prayer book.

\* \* \*

A detective in Pittsburgh had to admit that he might deserve the usually hated epithet of "gumshoe." Finding moving about on his rounds quite uncomfortable, he took off the offending shoe and found inside a huge wad of bubblegum, apparently stored away by an offspring.

\* \* \*

A Fort Wayne, Ind., police prowler received this radio message: "Car 42, Car 42. Investigate man walking down street with sack over his head. That is all."

\* \* \*

Two Baltimore thieves discovered that it doesn't pay to steal cars. They collided at a downtown intersection. Each jumped out of his stolen auto and hot-footed it away.

\* \* \*

Crime has reached a new high at a Mississippi town. At least as far as the sheriff is concerned. A thief broke into his home and stole \$300 from his trousers, while he slept nearby.

\* \* \*

A baseball writer covering a last-place ball club was on his way to the field in his auto when a cop stopped him for speeding and commenced ticketing him. "What was your hurry," growled the officer. "I cover the Bees and I'm late," replied the violator. "Brother, if you've covered the Bees all season, you've suffered enough," said the cop and tore up the ticket.

\* \* \*

Somewhere there's a thief with a lot of time on his hands. An electric clock was stolen from a 20-foot signboard in Philadelphia.

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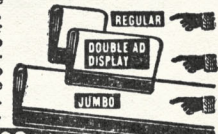
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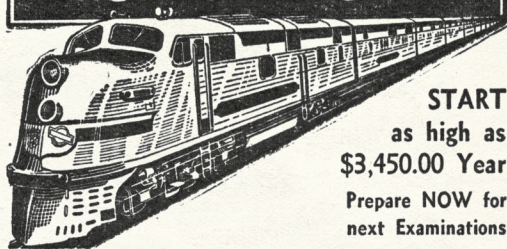
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## John Bender

(Continued from page 67)

at the small man. "I was just supposed to help with the divorce."

Troy sobbed. "She wanted to kill me." "His wife," the girl cried. "Mrs. Troy. It was all her idea. Mrs. Troy asked me to help them arrange their divorce—be the unnamed correspondent. They didn't want to bring in any outsider they couldn't really trust, afterward. They got Tucker," she explained. "He was a private detective, the man... who fell in front of that train."

She took a deep breath, fighting to remain calm, to explain it all completely to Rand, who stood watching her. "Harry Tucker was supposed to find Mr. Troy and me in this room... in... in what they call a compromising situation. His testimony would clinch the divorce."

"She wanted my money," Troy said.

Rand nodded. "Your wife didn't just want alimony."

"I was to get five hundred dollars," Jane Arnold told him. "I didn't know what Harry was really planning."

"A corpse in your room." Rand shook his head. "You would have looked guilty as hell, all right—if he'd let you live to talk about anything."

"He was crazy. A beast. I should have guessed how he was. When he came into my room earlier tonight." The blonde girl blushed. "But I had to go on working with him, to help the Troys. Then when we were down in the bar and the waiter told him you were asking questions, he told me he had to get you out of the way or we'd have trouble with the divorce—"

"That's when you got me to open the door."

Her eyes dropped. "I'm sorry..."

He really thought she was.

"That's all of it," she said simply. "You'll tell them how it was."

"Tell who?"

"The other policemen. You are a cop, aren't you?"

Rand looked at her, then went into the bathroom. When he came out, he was carrying a dripping oilskin pouch in his hand, and grinning despite the pain in his face.

"I'm a lucky plumber," he told her.

She couldn't understand, of course, and he found himself looking forward to explaining to her, later, after the police.

## Ready For The Rackets

(Continued from page 12)

"Who was it?" I said, puzzled at his expression.

"A man named Mac something who is in trouble. He saw my name in the phone book and called me because he said he knew a Scotchman would help another Scotchman if he knew he were in trouble."

"What!" I said. "How are you going to help him?"

"He has lost his money and wants to borrow enough to call his brother in Detroit. I told him to come out."

Thirty minutes later the man arrived. It seemed he had just arrived in America and was trying to locate his brother. He had come to Chicago thinking he was there, and then heard he was in Detroit. He left with enough money to call Detroit. Later the phone rang again. He had spent his money for the call, but the brother was not there. Next day he came to the house and we invited him to dinner. He ate with us and borrowed more money for a telegram. He was surely having a tough time.

We heard no more from the Scotchman after the free meal, but I picked up a paper a few days later telling of a crook who had been caught for a new racket. He called people in the phone book with a Scotch name and asked for help because he had just arrived from Scotland, etc. The racket had really paid off, because everyone fell for it, even my very own husband.

E. M. McPherson,  
Albuquerque, N. M.

### Holes in the Covers

Dear Sir:

At a country auction one day two men, driving an out of state car and trailer, offered 24'x48' tarpaulins to the highest bidder. One was unrolled to show the prospective buyers that they were good as new. They sold for \$10.00 each.

When they had sold fifteen they asked the sale clerk if they might have their money then because they had to make another sale that same day in another town. They left hurriedly.

That night fifteen angry people discovered they had been tricked. Upon unrolling the tarpaulins they found them to be full of holes, tears and rotted places.

Of course, the one they used for demonstrating hadn't been sold. It was saved to use in the next town.

Don Garrison,  
Bloomington, Ind.

### A Crook's Corpse

Dear Sir:

The phone rang in a small apartment on East 50th. "Hello! Miss Davis? You don't know me, but my name is George Scott. Do you know when Rev. White will be back?"

"No, I don't. Mr. White is attending a convention and is not expected back for several days."

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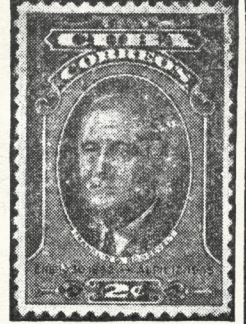
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## Ready For The Rackets

"My mother, who is quite elderly, passed away and I was trying to get someone to have her funeral. May I come down to the church and talk with you? I would like to find out about arrangements."

An appointment was made, but Mr. Scott did not show up. Early the next morning the phone rang again. It was Mr. Scott calling to apologize, saying he had been called to work unexpectedly. "May I see you later in the morning at the church? Say around 9:00 o'clock?" A second appointment was arranged.

In the course of the conversation, it came out that poor Mr. Scott had been robbed two days earlier and was in need of a small sum of money for a day or two. In the meantime, would Miss Davis make arrangements for a minister, a soloist, pallbearers, etc?

While Miss Davis was conversing, one of the church trustees called. She told him about Mr. Scott's plight. The trustee readily gave his permission to take \$10.00 out of petty cash, which he would replace. Mr. Scott was grateful for the \$10.00, but this would not quite take care of his immediate needs until he could go through necessary legal procedure to get money from other assets, but if he had another \$15.00, that would do the trick. He wanted everything to be perfect for his mother.

Miss Davis thought a minute, then opened her purse and withdrew a crisp ten and five dollar bills to make the needed amount. He was the sort of person you want to help.

The funeral? Oh, that! NO CORPSE.

Paul V. Waddell,  
Seattle, Wash.

## Round-Trip Check

Dear Sir:

Several years ago I owned and operated a Beauty Shop in Spokane, Washington and during the Holiday Season, I was the victim of a clever passer of bad checks. Of course, he was eventually discovered and arrested, but at the time I was out \$12 and as I was just getting started, it was a trifle hard to take. We had featured as a Christmas Special on Permanent Waves, an ad, saying in effect, "Get a Gift Card and enclose it in your wife's (or daughter's or sweetheart's, etc.) gift package, and so on and so on. Now early one morning during the usual Holiday rush, this tall, well-dressed man came hesitantly into the shop, seeming a little uncomfortable, embarrassed, and shy. Of course, we were eager and willing to be of assistance. He wanted to buy one of our gift certificates to enclose in a box of hosiery, he explained, and would his wife be able to call and make her own appointment. We assured him that that was the general idea. He asked in detail about our permanents. Finally he decided to give her a Cold Wave certificate. At that time, this type of Permanent was just coming into its present day popularity, so we hipped and hoorayed to ourselves and gladly cashed his check for him—giving him change to the tune of \$12. Weren't we gullible? We didn't even ask for identi-

## Ready For The Rackets

fication, but I have no doubt that he could have furnished that also, as he pulled the same stunt in exactly eight other shops belonging to friends of mine, who were all just as obliging as I tried to be.

Although, as I said, he was later arrested and sentenced for Petty Larceny, I never recovered the \$12, but you can bet that was the last unknown check I ever cashed.

Helen E. Higginbotham,  
Walnut, Kansas.

## Unbeatable Horses

Dear Sir:

Finding myself marked for special attention pleased me. In my mail box one morning was a letter from a man possessing "inside information" on horse races. Inclosed was the name of a horse that was "out to win" that next afternoon.

My new friend suggested I play all I could lay my hands on. The idea was pretty simple. If the horse won, my benefactor asked 10% of my winnings. And if he didn't win, I owed nothing at all. That was certainly fair enough. And if he won, and the letter said he certainly should, my friend would send the name of another horse just waiting to tear up the track the next time out of the stall. I looked forward to a profitable season.

I bet \$10 on the horse to win. He ran second. Well, he came pretty close, I thought to myself. Maybe this fellow knows what he's talking about. Then another letter came. It contained the name of another horse. I decided to give my friend another try. The horse ran fifth.

No more letters came for me. More than a year later, I found out I had been on a "sucker list." A professional racetrack tout who bought the list that I was on sent me the name of the two horses. After writing me, he continued down the list, sending the name of each horse in the race to a different person. No matter which horse won, he collected his 10%.

If ever I find any inside information in my mail, from someone on the "inside," I won't feel quite so flattered.

William E. Sheehy,  
Boston, Mass.

## Shorthand Stand

Sir:

First of all, let me admit that I am a sucker. Almost any poor boy minus an arm or leg can give me a sad story and I'm a goner. Even though I have stacks of magazines, more than I'll ever read, I usually end up with a new subscription, if the salesman is able to arouse my sympathy.

The time I was swindled out of ten dollars was different though. The benevolent-looking old man reminded me of a favorite uncle of mine; so he had won the first round before either of us knew it. He was selling a new kind of short-hand lessons (of all the things I didn't need, that topped the list). He lied so convincingly

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**Ready For The Rackets**

ly, however, that he made me believe I could learn his method in no time at all, and never revert to long-hand. Here was the catch. Each lesson was in a sealed envelope except the first one. It was as easy as ABC and he swore that all the others were just as simple. He said I owed it to my children to buy the lessons, that even a fourth grade child could pick it up easily. The price of the course was twenty dollars. I paid him ten dollars down, and was to pay the balance in a month. After I studied the first three lessons, it dawned on me that I had been swindled. Each lesson was more tedious than the one before. Time and again I discovered that his statements had been utterly false. Needless to say, I never sent the other ten dollars, and he never sent me a bill.

Mrs. John Mueller  
Austin, Texas

**Hail and Farewell**

Dear Sir:

We thought we had the world by the tail when we saw our many acres of waving ripe wheat. The fall before, we had all but mortgaged away our whole future to get backing for seeds and other expenses in order to get that crop planted.

A few weeks before we had added the last straw to the heavily loaded camel and insured the wheat against hail, wind and rain. This added expense left us flat, but we felt it was worth it when we heard every one who saw it exclaim over that good wheat and then hope that it would not be hurt by hail. This community had a bad hail record. There had never seemed anything to do about it before this.

That insurance agent assured us we had nothing to lose. He walked over our fields and, as an experienced wheat man, assured us without doubt we had a bumper crop. It was there, nothing could prevent our having it except hail, wind or rain, as it was already too late for rust or other blight to do much damage.

The day we went into the field with the combine we felt more confident than ever. The wheat really poured into the hopper.

But that very night came a light rain, some hail and wind. The insurance adjusters tests consisted of counting the wheat stalks knocked down in so many feet. As a result, they decided we had no claim—not enough stalks were down. But the wheat was not in those stalks even though they stood up. The combine ran over that field and got very few bushels.

Still, that insurance company refused to pay us a dime. We had no money to sue. I call that a swindle.

Zola Wilson  
Litchfield, Nebr.

That's the line-up on rackets for this month, detective fans. Keep writing us about your own experiences, so we can all be prepared.

The Editor



# CURE-ALL

By  
**SKIPPY ADELMAN**

**M**ARIE DEFENBACH was beautiful, dumb and avaricious—a combination certain to get a girl into trouble. Marie was an artist's model, which was considered a fairly disreputable profession in the Chicago of the turn of the century, where she practiced it. Marie soon learned that art would never get her what she wanted—a lot of money. She therefore listened attentively when Dr. August Unger, a friend-of-a-friend of Marie's, proposed a highly profitable and illegal transaction.

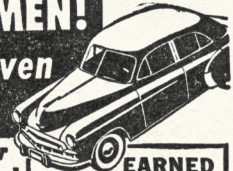
The doctor's idea, as proposed to Marie, was a switch on the old insurance swindle. Marie was to move to another part of town and change her name. She was to take an insurance policy under her new identity, listing Dr. Unger as beneficiary. Then she would feign illness for awhile, capping that performance by taking a drug which would cause her to fall into a deep sleep, outwardly identical to death. Marie would be taken to a certain undertaking parlor, where she would be revived and an unclaimed corpse would be cremated in her place.

It was a good plan and it might have worked—but Dr. Unger knew of no such drug as he described to Marie. The supposedly harmless potion, which Marie willingly swallowed with a smile, was a deadly poison. She died almost instantly. Her body was cremated and Dr. Unger received his blood-money.

Marie's disappearance finally caused her uncle to begin an investigation. He traced her to her new identity and learned of the insurance policy which had so suddenly benefited the doctor. The police were called in. They found it impossible to prove murder, since Marie's body had been destroyed by fire. But the state did prove that the money from the insurance company had been obtained by fraud, and Unger was given five years in the state penitentiary.



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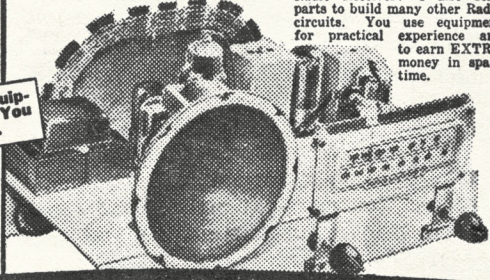


As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

## 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 many other Radio circuits. You use equipment for practical experience and to earn EXTRA money in spare time.

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J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute

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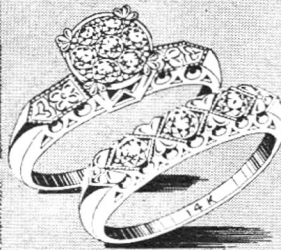
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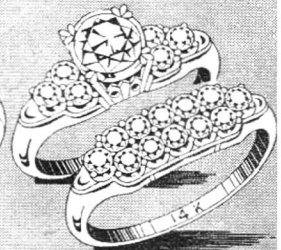
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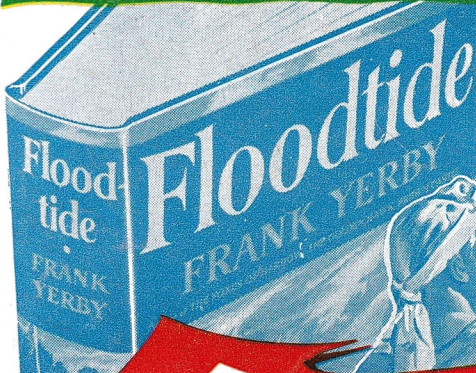
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