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DIME



JUNE

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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by **ALBERT
SIMMONS**

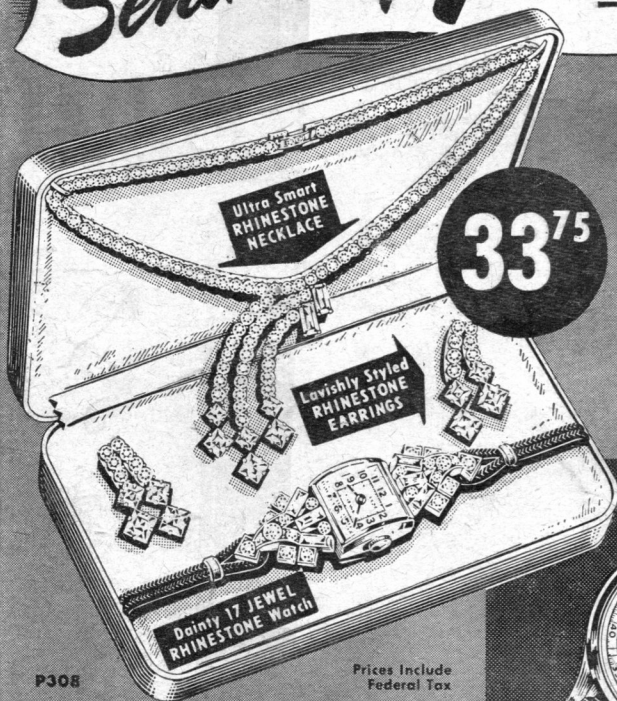


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P308

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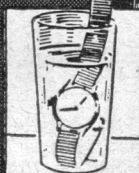
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YES, AND IF YOU WILL BRING IT TO ME AT ONCE, THERE IS A LIBERAL REWARD!

BILL BAKER, YOUNG LAWYER, FOUND A BRIEF CASE COMING HOME ON THE MIDNIGHT COMMUTING TRAIN AND NOW IT LOOKS LIKE HE HAS LOCATED THE OWNER...



SO...YOU HAVE EXAMINED THE CONTENTS, EH?

THAT'S HOW I FOUND YOUR PHONE NUMBER.

COME WITH ME, PLEASE



HURRY UP! THERE'S NO TIME TO LOSE!

DON'T WORRY. HE'LL BE A LONG TIME GETTING OUT OF THIS!



WHEW! DID YOU GET THEM?

WE SURE DID... PAPERS AND ALL!

YOU'LL SEE YOUR "FRIENDS" DOWN AT THE BUREAU

AND THEN THE FEDERAL AGENTS ARRIVED...



I'LL BE READY FOR BAKER IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!

THAT'S THE CHIEF. HOW DO YOU FEEL?

TIRE AND DIRTY. ANY CHANCE OF FRESHENING UP HERE?



HERE, A CLEAN SHAVE WILL HELP

THANKS



I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN! THAT WAS THE SLICKEST, MOST REFRESHING SHAVE I'VE EVER HAD!

THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING



SO WHEN I SAW "URANIUM" AND "SECRET" ON THE PAPERS, I CALLED YOUR OFFICE FIRST

... AND NETTED US TWO DANGEROUS SPIES

HE HAS LOOKS, COURAGE AND INTELLIGENCE. WE NEED MEN LIKE HIM

ENJOY FAST, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING... USE THIN GILLETTES. FAR KEENER AND LONGER LASTING THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES, THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND ELIMINATE THE RISK OF SCRAPES AND NICKS. BUY THIN GILLETTES IN THE NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT



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25c DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



Vol. 65

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Complete Book-Length Novel—\$2.50 Value

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Next issue on sale June 1st

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

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READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

As fast as people wise up to the current slick schemes for doing them out of their savings and grocery money, new ones are thought up. The on-his-toes operator keeps up with fads and war news and the latest in political maneuvering, so he can move in and collect before his victim has a chance to reason out the pros and cons—and by cons we mean the confidence angle.

In the meantime, we'll keep you posted on the newest plots, as they are brought to our attention by our readers. This is your column. If you've been the victim of some vicious racket, send us a letter describing how it was worked, and, if we can use it, we'll pay you \$5.00. If you want, we'll withhold your name from print, but no letters can be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. All rackets letters should be addressed to The Racket Editor, c/o DIME DETECTIVE, 205 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, N.Y.

Hacking Good Crime

Dear Sir:

I would like you to publish this letter to inform your taxi-driver readers, of which I am one, of a new racket to beware of. This is generally pulled between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., when local neighborhood stores are closed. The swindlers are usually a couple.

This man and woman get into your cab someplace in midtown and give you an address uptown, in a residential neighborhood. They usually have the fare run about a dollar and a few cents.

The woman always gets out first and walks into the building and the man fumbles in his pockets and then says, "I'm sorry but all I have is a twenty-dollar bill." He gets out, looks around and says, "Gee, all the stores are closed. Do you want to come in with me?"

If the driver does, he winds up getting held up. If he says he'll wait, like I did, the couple go out the back way of the building, and the driver waits an hour, then pulls away, stuck for the fare. This has happened quite a few times lately to a lot of my friends.

What makes it look good at first is the fact that the fare always tells the driver to take a dollar tip for himself, knowing that ninety-nine out of a hundred drivers, at that hour, will always say, "I'm sorry, but I can't change a bill so large." I hope this will do some good.

D. Davidson
Bronx 59, N. Y.

A Change in Change

Dear Sir:

I am the assistant manager of a large downtown drug store, and a few days ago I had the opportunity of seeing a new twist on the "wrong change" game.

Two young lads came into the store and stood beside the cigar counter, discussing a pending date in rather loud tones. A few minutes later, a girl of fifteen came in and bought a package of gum, tendering a five-dollar bill and receiving her change.

As soon as she left, one of the boys bought a pack of cigarettes and paid for it with a one-dollar bill. When he got his change, the youth complained that he had given a five. He was so insistent that the clerk became suspicious and called the manager.

In the meantime, the other lad turned to his companion and said, "Wait, Paul, didn't you write the girl's phone number on that five-dollar bill?" and quoted the number. By this time, the clerk was counting her cash and the boys were becoming fairly indignant. While the argument was still in progress—I had phoned the police—the detective arrived and began to quiz the boys. Needless to say, they confessed. The two boys received a two-month jail term apiece, while the girl is soon to appear in juvenile court.

A. O.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada

Liquor Is Quicker

Dear Sir:

I would like to tell about a trick that was played on me. I have a luncheonette on upper Broadway in New York City. One day a heavy-set man, wearing one of those cotton jackets that liquor dealers wear, came in for a sandwich. He paid for it on his way out and spoke pleasantly to me. I saw him on subsequent occasions during the week.

On one of his mid-day visits, he told me he worked in the liquor store up the block. He was very pleasant, and I was cordial toward him. At the beginning of the second week, he stopped in again and asked me if I cared for wines? I told him that I did, and he went on to say that he had some imported and domestic wines that he could let me have at a terrific discount.

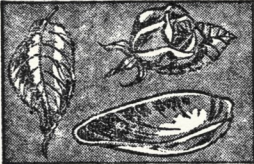
As the price was low, I jumped at it and gave him partial payment. He went off, saying that he would deliver the cases that afternoon. I never saw him again, and when I went into the liquor store to find him, they had never heard of such an individual. I had been taken, but good!

Joseph Newberger
Bronx, Y. Y.

(Please continue on page 8)

Now! YOU CAN MAKE MONEY... TURNING WORTHLESS OBJECTS INTO GOLDEN TREASURES— ... BY METALIZING!

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE HUNDREDS OF ARTICLES THAT CAN BE RESTORED BY REPLATING—INCREASED IN VALUE—OR “ETERNALIZED” AS KEEPSAKES WITH A COATING OF EVERLASTING BRONZE, STERLING SILVER, OR 14 KARAT GOLD.



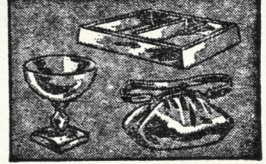
Costume Jewelry from flowers, insects, shells, and leaves.



Ash trays, paper weights, from leaves, fruit, vegetables.



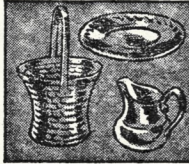
Metalize busts, figure, from plaster cast or wood carvings.



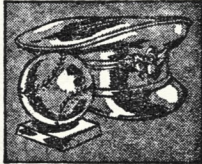
Metal plate object of glass, cloth, leather, plastic or rubber.



Eternalize Baby Shoes, Toys, and other sentimental mementoes.



Metalize baskets, plates, ceramics and other non-metallic objects.



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YES—ANY MAN OR WOMAN CAN DO WORK LIKE THIS IN ONE CORNER OF THE KITCHEN OR IN ANY SPARE ROOM!

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HOW to do the work—how to get customers—how to set up the simple equipment—how and where to buy the materials—what to charge—how to start in spare time—how to expand into a full time business whenever you wish. Shows you in pictures and words how to put a coating of pure metal on such things as flowers, leaves, insects, shells, wood carvings, plaster castings, busts, statuettes, religious figures, buttons, baskets, feathers, base balls, golf balls, mementoes of all kinds, such as, baby shoes, party and wedding favors and decorations. Operating a home metalizing business is one of the greatest insurance policies a man could ask for his future. Read about it without risking a penny.

OWN YOUR OWN HOME-OPERATED BUSINESS

Think of turning 56 cents worth of materials into a profit of \$5.00 and over for just a few minutes of easily learned handwork. Sounds fantastic! . . . Yet it is absolutely true . . . **AS YOU CAN QUICKLY PROVE TO YOURSELF.**

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Just at a time when hundreds of men and women would like to make an extra \$35.00 to \$50.00 a week in spare time home work, the old—established—and highly profitable Metalizing Business has been turned into a home-work money-maker. Where in the past a few big companies have been making fortunes, now hundreds of smaller home operators can become independent. I have ready to send you a complete set of simple instructions by which anyone—regardless of age or education—can learn the fascinating art of metalizing.

By this process you can replate worn objects in silver, copper, or real gold—you can change silver to gold by overplating—you can even deposit a heavy coating of solid metal on non-metallic objects such as baby shoes, golf balls, toys and other precious keepsakes—or you can take inexpensive articles and make them worth 10 to 20 times their cost by jewel plating with precious metals.

ALL THIS INFORMATION IS FREE

The information is free. A stamp brings you the details of the exact plan by which hundreds are NOW MAKING EXTRA MONEY EVERY WEEK. Study it over. Analyze the possibilities. Then if you don't think it's made to order for you—your only loss is your 3c stamp. You can read every fact, every secret, every step of the instructions—all at my risk.

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complete facts about this permanent lifetime business that has now opened its door to home operation. Scores of men and women have already started . . . Plenty of opportunity for hundreds more. **BUT DON'T PUT IT OFF.** Send your name and address **TODAY . . .** It may open new horizons in your life.

R. E. Brandell, Warner Electric Co., 1512 Jarvis, Dpt. 1055, Chicago 26, Ill.

R. E. Brandell, Warner Electric Co.
1512 Jarvis, Dept. 1055, Chicago 26, Ill.

Rush complete facts showing how the old and profitable Metalizing Business has now been converted into a homework money-maker for full or spare time. No charge or obligation for the information you send.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

(Continued from page 6)
Uniformly Bad

Dear Sir:

A few years ago, when I was working in a beauty shop, a woman came in with a catalog of different styles of uniforms. They were of a very lovely material, of which she had samples to show us.

Of course, we were very much enthused over them, so we decided to order some. She took our measurements for sizes and then asked for a deposit of five dollars from each of us.

We paid her, and she took our names and the name of the beauty shop. Then she gave us a receipt. Later, we noticed that there was no address on it.

Well, that was the last we saw of our money and the uniforms we were supposed to get. Never again will I be talked into paying money down on anything until I receive the goods.

Crystal Cramer
Grand Rapids, Mich.

The Eyes Have It

Dear Sir:

My father's eyes were giving him a great deal of trouble. One day, a solicitous stranger came in with an eye-testing apparatus.

With his suave manner, he convinced my father that he had a skim over his eyes and that he could remove it very easily by using an eye solution, a guaranteed harmless one. My father was easily persuaded.

The man used the solution, waited a few minutes, then showed my father two thin skins that looked like thin, white rubber. My parents, old and easily deceived, were overjoyed. They paid the one-hundred dollar fee with a check my husband had given my father.

The check was cashed, the stranger vanished, and, too late, my father knew he had been swindled.

Mrs. A. W. Jerwigan
Van Alstyne, Tex.

Kids' Stuff

Dear Sir:

Not only grown-ups try to film-flam the public. You now must beware the juvenile. I was coming home from work one day, when a little boy, no more than eleven years old, came up to me carrying a stack of copies of a very popular magazine.

He asked me please to buy one. As I buy this magazine every month anyway, I thought I would give him the sale. I noticed the top one was the latest edition, so I paid him. He gave me my magazine, and, when I had handed him the money, he ran like the dickens. I stood, wondering why he ran.

When I had walked a few blocks, still wondering, I looked at the magazine he had given me. He had taken it, I remember, from the bottom of his pile. It was the same magazine, all right, only three years late. All the copies, except for the top one apparently, were old ones.

Mrs. M. Kahlefeut
Neptune, N. J.

Postage Due

Dear Sir:

Stamp-collecting is my hobby. A few weeks ago I purchased a packet of mixed stamps for a dollar. The number of stamps in a packet is determined by weight. The envelope in which the stamps came had a big, cellophane window. Through the window you could see a few good stamps. Some of the stamps were still on their original paper.

Later, when I opened the packet, I found nothing but plain, everyday three-cent stamps on heavy cardboard and one or two different ones here and there. Besides this, there were big chunks of plain cardboard used to make it heavy.

There wasn't much I could do but warn our readers against such a swindle.

Steve Myers
Lowell, Mich.

Turn on a Dime

Dear Sir:

I am a registered druggist and consider myself to be pretty shrewd, but I was really taken for a sucker some time ago.

A well-dressed man came into the store where I was working and asked for the manager. I told him that the manager wasn't in. He then explained to me that he was an operator of a lot of juke boxes and that the manager had taken some of his change for bills. He handed me a roll of dimes, and I unwrapped and counted them. He laughed and said, "What's the matter? Don't you trust me?"

I felt a little sheepish about it, so when he offered me five more rolls of dimes, I gave him three ten-dollar bills for the six rolls. He thanked me and said they had almost worn his pocket out.

After he had left, I found myself in possession of one roll of dimes, value: five dollars, and five dime rolls containing a piece of lead pipe the same size and weight as the dimes, value: zero.

I found out that he had pulled the same deal in ten other stores in our city within two hours.

So far as I know, he is still selling lead pipes at \$5.00 apiece. At any rate, he wasn't caught in our town. He may be in yours now.

R. E. Weisenbarger
Orlando, Fla.

Book Crook

Dear Sir:

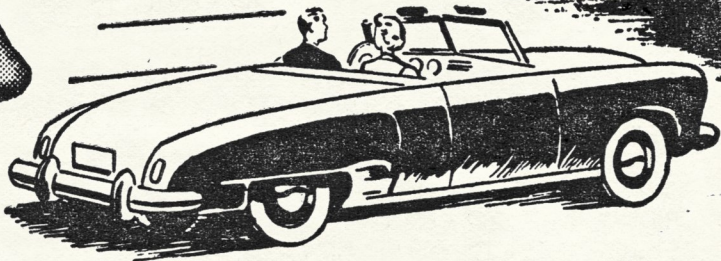
I sent a publisher in Iowa cash for a book offered for five days' free inspection. I received the book, which was anything but satisfactory, on June 8th and sent it back by return mail the following day.

Then I received a letter from the publisher dated June 12th, saying that the book was mailed to me June 5th, and therefore the five-day period had long ago expired. The Post Office is investigating, but apparently the publisher is getting by with his racket, as he is still advertising.

W. L. McAboy
Columbia City, Ore.

(Please continue on page 10)

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STREET..... APT.....

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(Continued from page 8)

Quick Service

Dear Sir:

A clean-cut, alert young man, carrying a small sample case, came into our office shortly before noon, soliciting orders for carbon paper, typewriter ribbons, second sheets, etc. He named one of our large stationery and office supply houses and said he had been with them since leaving the service but was now trying it on his own.

As his prices were much below what we had been paying for similar quality, we bought a few items. He went down to his car, so he said, and brought the order back promptly to our office.

He then remarked he also serviced office machines and asked if he might check our typewriter. He said a good deal of dust had gotten into it, and that it should be thoroughly cleaned and adjusted.

I carefully placed his business card under the glass top on my desk for reference. He assured us he would be calling regularly and asked that we phone for anything we might need in the meantime.

In our office everyone except the bookkeeper goes to lunch promptly at noon. He remains to attend to such calls as may come in until we return.

Scarcely an hour later when we were at lunch and only the bookkeeper remained, the bright sales chap came back. Greeting the bookkeeper by name, he stated that I had stopped him downstairs and told him to come up and get our machine for a thorough going-over and cleaning.

He said he would immediately send up a loan machine for us to use while he had ours. Knowing the man had been in but a short while before, the bookkeeper let him have our almost new typewriter—worth better than one hundred bucks in any man's money!

When the stenographer returned and found her typewriter gone, inquiry quickly brought out the fact that I had not seen nor spoken to the so-called salesman since his visit before noon.

An attempt to call the telephone shown on his card brought the operator onto the line with the information that there was never any such listing.

A hurried trip to the address given proved it, too, to be bogus. The police informed us we were the sixth firm that had lost expensive office machines to this fellow within two days. No clue has ever been found to any of them, or to the man himself.

Our bookkeeper felt responsible and wanted to make good the loss, but we would not let him do so. We just nicknamed him "Typewriter" until we figured he had been raw-hided enough. He humbly admits that Barnum could have been right!

S. C. Humes
P. O. Box 1548
Memphis 1, Tenn.

Itching Fists

Dear Sir,

A friend and myself had journeyed to Seattle a couple of years ago. We had been looking for work and upon arrival in the city found ourselves not so much in the chips. A job would have to be found.

We were passing a few hours of the first day along the waterfront, with our suitcases, watching the ships and hoping of being able to work our passage to Alaska—when a man approached. He was wearing a tan hat, leather boots, breeches, and a suede jacket—typical out-of-doors dress.

He asked us how long we had been in Seattle. Learning this, he slowly maneuvered the talk around to Alaska. He wondered how we would like working there. We were both on the affirmative.

He then introduced himself as "Mr. Sanders." Said he was down hiring help for a mining company in Alaska. He went into a song on living conditions up there and such. The wages weren't too high, but the living quarters were fair and the food was plentiful and wholesome. He said the \$1.50 per day for board would be taken from our pay. The company furnished travel, but we had to sign on for one year. Were we interested?

We most certainly were.

He went on to explain that he would take us up to see "Mr. Benson" in the company's Seattle office.

We accompanied him to a phone booth, where he talked loud enough for us to hear although we didn't know he kept his finger on the hook. From the sound of things, we were in, all set for the job.

We went to a large office building that afternoon and on the way in we met "Benson" coming out. We stopped. Handshakes went around. He was off on some important business and "Sanders" was to bring us, along with our luggage in the morning. We'd sign on then. The boat sailed at noon.

"Sanders" then took us to a hotel. He had rented the room earlier, and it didn't occur to us who had the key because we were so elated over our good fortune.

When we awoke in the morning things appeared in a different light. Our suits, overcoats, a cigarette lighter, a wrist watch and about a dollar in change were gone. Luckily our billfolds had been put in our pillow cases. We still had a few dollars, but not enough to stay in Seattle long.

We never did see Sanders or Benson again. The only consolation we have is that maybe we'll meet the characters some day—that would be just wonderful.

M. C.
Chelan, Wash.

Well, that's the roster for this month, detective fans, but we'll be back again next issue with some more dope on how not to get swindled.



Borrow Money By Mail!

and repay in convenient monthly installments

Our Guarantee
If for any reason you return the money within 10 days after the loan is made there will be no charge or cost to you.



PAY DOCTOR BILLS

THOUSANDS OF MEN AND WOMEN LIKE YOU USE OUR CONFIDENTIAL BY MAIL LOAN SERVICE

So much easier than calling on friends and relatives . . . so much more business-like . . . to borrow the money you need from fifty-year old State Finance Company that meets the need for ready cash for thousands of folks all over America! Yes—no matter where you live, you can borrow any amount from \$50.00 to \$300.00 entirely by mail in complete privacy, without anyone to sign or endorse the loan for you. Your friends, neighbors, family, or even your employer will not know you are applying for a loan. If you need money fast, rush the coupon below for FREE LOAN INFORMATION.



PAY OLD DEBTS

GET \$50⁰⁰ to \$300⁰⁰ Quick-Easy-Private

You Can Borrow From
STATE FINANCE COMPANY
Regardless of State Where You Live

Monthly payments are made to fit your budget best. You can start paying six weeks after the loan is made, and repay in convenient monthly payments out of your future earnings. The cost of the loan is regulated by the laws of the State of Iowa. For example, if the loan is repaid ahead of time, you pay only for the time you use the money . . . not one day longer! One out of three applicants get cash on their signature only. Furniture and auto loans are also made. No matter in which state you live, you can borrow from State Finance Company in complete confidence.



PAY INSURANCE

If you are over 25 years of age and steadily employed, simply mail the coupon below for your Loan Application, sent to you in a plain envelope. There is no obligation, and you'll get fast action. You can get the money you need to help pay bills, to buy furniture, to repair your home or car, to pay doctor or hospital bills, to pay for a vacation, a trip, or for schooling, or for any other purpose. This money is here, waiting for you, so rush this coupon today!

Mail Coupon for FREE Loan Application!!

CONFIDENTIAL

Complete privacy is assured. No one knows you are applying for a loan. All details are handled in the privacy of your own home, and entirely by mail. **ONLY YOU AND WE KNOW ABOUT IT!**

Old Reliable Company—MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF SERVICE!

STATE FINANCE COMPANY was organized in 1897. During the past 54 years, we have helped over 1,000,000 men and women in all walks of life. Confidential loans are made all over America, in all 48 states. We are licensed by the Banking Department of the State of Iowa to do business under the Small Loan Law. You'll enjoy borrowing this free, confidential, convenient way from this old, responsible company in whom you can place the greatest confidence.



STATE FINANCE COMPANY
Dept. U-71, 210 State Finance Bldg., Des Moines 8, Iowa



PAY for HOME REPAIRS

You'll agree with thousands of others that this is a wonderfully easy way to solve your money problem. No matter who you are or where you live—if you're over 25 years old and steadily employed—mail this coupon now. Loans are made to men and women in all walks of life and in all kinds of jobs—to factory and office workers, teachers, civil service employees, railroad men, and hundreds of others. Get the money you need and get it now. Rush the coupon.

MAIL COUPON Today!

STATE FINANCE COMPANY, Dept. U-71
510 State Finance Bldg., Des Moines 8, Iowa
In plain envelope, send me FREE "Borrow-by-Mail" details.

Name..... Age.....
Address..... Occupation.....
City..... State.....

TRAITORS TO THEMSELVES

*Here, from the annals of deceit,
are the master masqueraders.*

A couple of years ago inhabitants of West Haven, Connecticut, were amazed to learn that an old man known as the Hermit of Stevens Heights was really a woman. The Hermit lived alone in a shack, picking up food wherever he could and collecting paper bags. A neighbor found Old Man Holt, as he was known, on the verge of death from starvation.

Rushed to hospital, Old Man Holt was admitted. An orderly transferred Holt to the female side of the hospital. Old Man Holt then said that he was Teresa Hetzeneter, age eighty-three, who, entering these states forty years earlier, had donned male attire and had never been challenged.

Everyone knew Ted O'Connor, an old fellow who minded perambulators outside the Rotherhithe public laundry in London while mothers went in to do the weekly wash. They thought a lot of Ted, such a nice old fellow he was, so kind to the nippers. Ted slipped one day on a piece of soap dropped by a careless laundress, and the ambulance took him to St Olave's hospital. Ted turned out to be Mary Ellen O'Connor.

In September of 1932 there died at Grenoble, France, in the shadows of the Alps, George Howells, age seventy-three, believed to be an Englishman.

When Howells first appeared in the city, it was as a handsome young man not more than twenty. He had a game leg which made it easy for him to escape examinations when, later in life, the question of military service arose. He held a job as English agent of a big glove-making concern, and, though he came in close contact daily with numbers of people, not a soul had any idea he was other than he appeared.

Death disclosed that Howells might possibly be a Mary Morgan, whom the French police tried to trace when she vanished just about the time when Howells came to

Grenoble. A shattered romance was supposed to be back of the girl's disappearance, and her case was classified as one of suicide—body not found.

Then there is the case of Sir Victor Barker. Captain Barker's valet was positive that his employer was a man. Why, the Captain had a D.S.O. He was also a prominent member of the National section of the Fascisti movement and at the head of his men laid a wreath on the Cenotaph in Whitehall.

As President of the Mons Club, he presided at dinners of the veterans who had been in the famous retreat, and those hard-boiled soldiers never for a moment suspected a woman in their midst. The captain—or, as he later promoted himself, colonel—knew all the little happenings of the affair—names, dates, places. He could tell a good smoking-room story and take his brandy and soda and his cigar. He played a male part in a musical show.

Carelessness accounted for his discovery. He failed to attend bankruptcy proceedings after failure as a restaurant proprietor, and an order was issued for his arrest. The officer found Captain Barker as reception clerk of the Regent's Palace Hotel, immaculate in smart black coat and vest with striped trousers, and took him to Brixton Prison. It was only when the captain was about to be put through the usual formalities of examination that he acknowledged his real identity.

At the same time another case came to light, though in a lower sphere of life, in the Midlands of England. A working man, who did heavy physical labor—road-mending, coal-heaving and the like—was admitted to Evesham Hospital as William Holtom. Hospital authorities were astonished to discover the entries were wrong. The patient was in reality Sarah Holtom who for twenty years had worn trousers.

(Please continue on page 14)

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By ROBERT W. SNEDDON

IF IT SLIPS... IF IT CHAFES... IF IT GRIPES... THEN

THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS!



Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry, and fear—if we provide you with the support you want and need? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers have entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . . have worn our Appliance without the slightest inconvenience. Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair*. The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Wonderful Protection

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It is GUARANTEED to bring you heavenly comfort and security,—or it costs you NOTHING. The Air-Cushion works in its own unique way, softly, silently helping Nature support the weakened muscles. Learn what this marvelous invention may mean to you—send coupon quick!



C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT on TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete Brooks is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

FREE! Latest Rupture Book Explains All!

SENT YOU IN PLAIN ENVELOPE JUST CLIP and SEND COUPON ➔

Brooks Appliance Co., 199 State St., Marshall, Mich.

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 52,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Never Loses a Day's Work in Shipyard

"A few weeks ago I received the Appliance you made for me. I put it on the afternoon I received it and wouldn't do without it now. My fellow workers notice how much better I can do my work and get around over these ships—and believe me, the work in a Navy shipyard is anything but easy. You have been a life saver to me. I never lose a day's work now. One of my buddies was ruptured on the job about two months ago. After seeing my Appliance he wants me to order him one." J. A. Comer, 1506 Green Ave., Orange, Texas.

Perfect Satisfaction in Every Way

"I am happy to report that the Appliance that I received from you more than a year ago has given perfect satisfaction in every way.
"In fact, I am not sure I will ever need another one, but I am asking you to send me the best grade as marked on the order blank, then if I should ever need it I would have it. I think I would want to use it when I go for long walks or work at heavy work of any kind, just for protection."—H. M. Herron, Mouthcard, Ky.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.
199 State St., Marshall, Mich.

Without obligation, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.

Name

Street

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

State whether for Man Woman or Child

(Continued from page 12)

In Mainz, Germany, Josef Einemanns worked with the French army of occupation in charge of a military car park. Then he got various positions of trust, finally as night watchman of a factory.

He had the misfortune to hurt his hand and claimed compensation from the state. In going through the records, a discrepancy came to light. An investigation was made. The jovial beer-drinking, smoking Josef was revealed as Maria, who had run away, years back, from her husband, taking his identification card and using it.

Anzac Andy, one of the most notorious con-men operating on the pockets of tourists in Europe, including Americans, is not, as was long assumed, James Andrew Joy, of Sydney, Australia, but his wife. When her husband came to Europe with the Australians in war time, she came with him. He died in Gallipoli but, nothing daunted, the widow assumed his name, adapted herself to his papers of identity and embarked on a profitable career of crime.

This masquerader became engaged to at least forty-three women of various ages and social levels encountered in her travels, giving them the go-by when she secured what valuables and property they had. Three times she went through a marriage ceremony. Matters in these cases were so arranged that the bride had her jewelry and securities in a handbag ready for the honeymoon. Andy merely retired from sight with the handbag.

As impudent an adventurer as ever trod in shoe leather, this lady, in the guise of Colonel Joy, showed up in Constantinople with a good story. She had been sent by the Australian government to purchase a cemetery in the city where the Anzac dead might rest after transference from where they lay.

The Turks received this envoy favorably, but made no offer to donate the cemetery. Colonel Joy then gave out that the government had failed to remit the necessary funds and that they must borrow in order to secure the desired site. A fabulous financier was beguiled into advancing five-thousand pounds to the persuasive Colonel Joy who at once folded up his tents and, like the Arabs, silently stole away. At last word Scotland Yard was looking for the Colonel lady.

In Algeria in 1932, during the salvage operations in connection with the wreck of a train which was conveying a regiment of the Foreign Legion, it was discovered that one of the dead soldiers was a girl. She was entered on the roll as Sydney Hardy, British or American birth, enlisted two years earlier, and had seen active service. As far as could be learned her true identity had never been discovered.

How had she passed medical examination at time of recruiting? The supposition was that an actual Sydney Hardy had passed examination and then passed on the duly attested papers to the girl, the only female, it is said, to have served with the Legion.

An equally amazing story is that of the woman who gave up all for her beloved Apache. In 1893, during a knife fight, Gaston Foy, Parisian gangster, killed a man. He escaped the guillotine but was sent to Devil's Island for life. His sweetheart, Jeanne Lebuc, pled to be allowed to accompany him. Her plea was refused.

She took to wearing male dress and, while thus attired, stabbed the man who had been principal witness at Gaston Foy's trial. She was tried and, as a man, condemned also to the penal settlement.

She reached Saint Laurent and there she met Gaston Foy. Employed as laborers with a degree of liberty, the couple were able to meet from time to time. Some years later, Gaston was killed by a snake bite. Jeanne might have returned to France, but she preferred to be near Gaston's grave. And it was not till she, too, died in the summer of last year that the true identity of this modern Manon Lescaut was revealed.

In the fall of last year a good-looking boy wandered into a police station in Portland, Oregon, and asked how he could be helped to get women's clothes and a job.

"He" explained he was a girl, nineteen years old, and told a convincing story that all her life her parents had made her wear masculine dress and pass as a boy, in order that they might obtain a legacy which fell due to her on her twenty-first birthday. The matron provided an outfit, since the runaway refused to go back to her parents.

Bucharest, Roumania, for a time harbored on its outskirts a dashing adventurer

(Please continue on page 113)

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS

STAPHYLOCOCCUS
ALBUS

WITH WARD'S FORMULA

MOROCOCCUS

PITYROSPORUM
OVALE

MICROBACILLUS

NOTHING, Absolutely nothing
known to Science can do more to

SAVE YOUR HAIR

Beware of your itchy scalp, hair loss, dandruff, head scales, unpleasant head odors! Nature may be warning you of approaching baldness. Heed Nature's warning! Treat your scalp to scientifically prepared Ward's Formula.

Millions of trouble-breeding bacteria, living on your sick scalp (see above) are killed on contact. Ward's Formula kills not one, but *all four* types of these destructive scalp germs now recognized by many medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness. Kill these germs—don't risk letting them kill your hair growth.

ENJOY THESE 5 BENEFITS IMMEDIATELY

1. Kills these 4 types of germs that retard normal hair growth—on contact
2. Removes ugly infectious dandruff—fast
3. Brings hair-nourishing blood to scalp—quickly
4. Stops annoying scalp itch and burn—instantly
5. Starts wonderful self-massaging action—within 3 seconds

Once you're bald, that's *it*, friends! There's nothing you can do. Your hair is gone forever. So are your chances of getting it back. But Ward's Formula, used as directed, keeps your sick scalp free of itchy dandruff, seborrhea, and stops the hair loss they cause. Almost at once your hair looks thicker, more attractive and alive.

We don't ask you to believe us. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have *proved* what we say. Read their grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's *better* than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at our risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy *all* the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but **DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK**. You be the judge! © Ward Laboratories Inc., 1430 Broadway, New York 18, N.Y.

TO SAVE YOUR HAIR ACT NOW

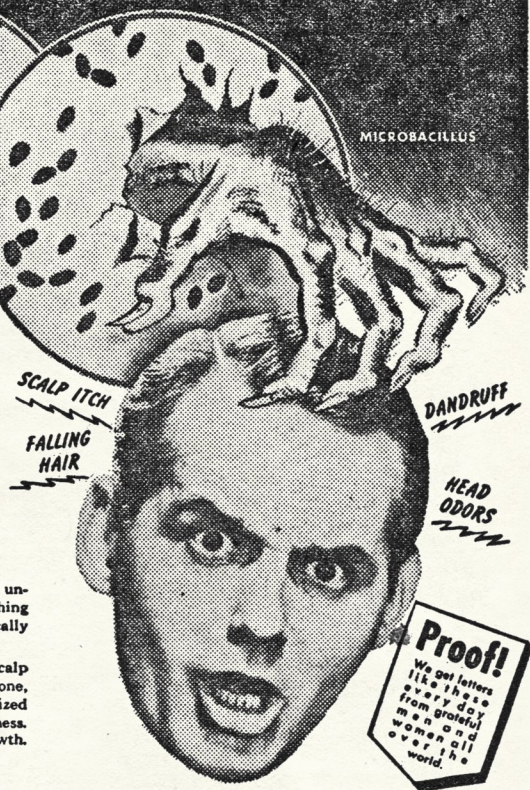
Send coupon today for 10-day offer. Send No Money

I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.

E. K., Cleveland, Ohio
Out of all the Hair Experts I went to, I've gotten the most help from one bottle of Ward's Formula.
C. La M., Philadelphia, Pa.

After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.

R. W. C., Cicero, Ill.
I am tickled to death with the results. In just two weeks' time—no dandruff! W. T. W., Portola, Cal.
I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio



Guarantee

This written guarantee entitles you not only to return of price paid for Ward's Formula, but **Double Your Money Back** unless you actually SEE, FEEL and ENJOY all benefits herein claimed in only ten days. The test is at our risk. All you do is return unused portion or the empty bottle unless completely satisfied.

Ward Laboratories Inc.

ACT TODAY or YOU MAY BE TOO LATE!

Ward Laboratories Inc.,
1430 Broadway, Dept. 10-R, New York 18, N.Y.

Rush Ward's Formula to me at once. I will pay postman two dollars plus postage. I must be completely satisfied within 10 days, or you **GUARANTEE** refund of **DOUBLE MY MONEY BACK** upon return of bottle and unused portion.

Name
Address
City Zone State
 Check here if you enclose \$2.00 with order, and we will pay postage. Some refund offer holds, of course. *APO, FPO, Canada & Foreign add 50c; no C.O.D.s.*

DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

CHAPTER ONE

For the Love of a Mike

I'M SURE she must have said, "Good evening, Mr. Arnold," when she came through the door of my office, only I didn't hear her—I was listening with my eyes. If you'd been there to take a good squint at Dotty Whitfield, you would readily have seen why. This was the kind of gal you want to whistle at as she goes by—only every other guy has the same idea, so that it usually winds up sounding some-

By **ALBERT
SIMMONS**



"Don't!" she was screaming.
"Don't, Bud, for heaven's sake!"

thing like a large canary choral group.

I lifted my five-foot-ten out of the swivel chair and I said, "Sit down, huh." I pointed a finger at the chair next to my desk and I watched her slide into it as if she belonged in it. Then I sank back and squatted, my eager eyes picking up where they'd left off.

This one was built with just the right

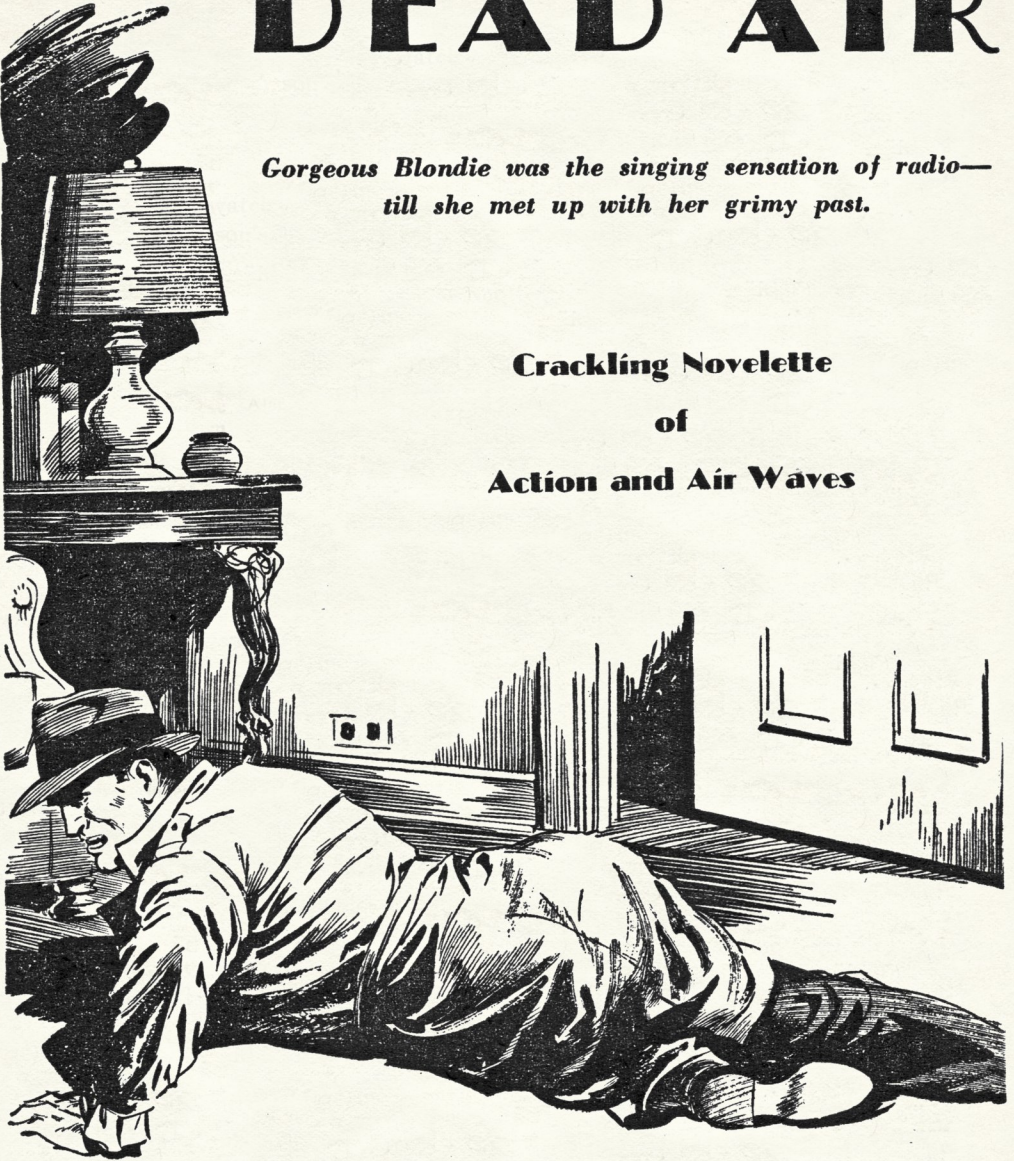
amount of curves—and curves I am used to. Believe me, a guy in the agency business handling radio actresses and gal singers is as used to figures as a Certified Public Accountant with twenty years book experience.

Reluctantly I shifted my attention to her face and let it stay there because it intrigued me. Don't laugh, it did! She had

DEAD AIR

*Gorgeous Blondie was the singing sensation of radio—
till she met up with her grimy past.*

**Crackling Novelette
of
Action and Air Waves**



the freshly scrubbed look of a three-year-old kid coming out of a warm bath. Her face was clean, sweet and had on it a minimum of the glop that usually made 'em all look alike.

"Don't tell me you want to be a singer, too?" I squawked, and I couldn't help sounding a little disgusted because she didn't look the type.

"Yes, Mr. Arnold," she bubbled quietly, "and I can sing, I really can."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, "you can sing. You can all sing." I ignored the surprised look she tossed me. "Why the hell is it every dame thinks she can sing?"

She shrugged and then I noticed the low, vibrant tone of her voice. "I can only answer for myself, Mr. Arnold," she said

softly, "I can sing!" She was a determined one.

I smiled inside. She sounded good—real good. The right quality was there all right, but hell, I needed another gal singer like I needed another head. It was tough enough to represent Blondie Parks without getting involved with another one.

I leaned back and sighed. Blondie Parks, ah—there was a gal, and she could sing, too. But Blondie was a babe who acted like she always had something on her mind, only she kept it strictly to herself. Maybe that was what made her so jittery and tough to handle. I'd decided only a week before that she was afraid of something—or someone. But whenever I'd ask she'd give a damned good imitation of a cherry-stone clam and I learned from nothing.

She was always watching over her shoulder as if she expected someone and I got the idea that if she ever saw him there was going to be trouble—double trouble. Even after I'd taken Blondie off that crummy cruise ship between New Orleans and South America and booked her over at Amalgamated Broadcasting Company she kept watching—she was always watching!

Of course, the booking part of it hadn't been too tough. Like I say, she really could sing. But like I didn't say, I knew Les Lord over at the network—and I also knew his taste in women, if you follow me. Well, he took to Blondie like a fat trout takes to a green fly. That's right, within two weeks after I took her off the cruise ship she went on a national hook-up and I went on twenty-five cent cigars.

I got up and limped around the desk until I stood next to the good-looking kid who wanted to be a singer, too. A sharp, stabbing pain shot through my leg. It was going to rain. Whenever it was going to rain, I felt that in my leg and I remembered—remembered a place called Okinawa and what a fifty-calibre can do to the bones of your leg.

"Go home, baby," I told her. "Forget about singing. It's a tough racket, baby, it's—well, it's—you're not the type."

She shifted uneasily in her chair. "What type does it take, Mr. Arnold?" Her red lips looked petulant but her chin stubborn.

I put my hand on her shoulder. Through the thin material of her green dress that well-shaped shoulder felt smooth. "Be-

lieve me, it's a tough racket," I said again and, as I got a good look at her eyes, I grunted, "Besides, I got me a gal singer."

She laughed quietly and stood up. That moved her lips closer than it was wise for me to let them get. "One 'gal' singer isn't enough," she murmured, "maybe you need insurance, Mr. Arnold."

"Insurance!" I gawked at her. This was something new.

Her smile must have meant something, only for the life of me I didn't know what. "New York is a dangerous place, Mr. Arnold," she went on. "Perhaps your girl singer may get sick or—or—she might even get—killed!"

MY-HAND leaped off her shoulder, almost of its own accord, and I stared. The small office was still ringing with the harsh sound of the word she had used so casually. It bounced itself crazily against the freshly painted walls like a soft rubber ball, and I strained my ears to hear it again. Perhaps I'd been mistaken, perhaps—but the word was gone, lost in the smothering cloak of silence that ensued.

"Do you know, Mr. Arnold," she was saying then in a very calm tone of voice, "New York has a higher rate of traffic accidents than any other—"

"Oh," I said dumbly, "Oh!" But that wasn't what I felt like saying. She hadn't meant anything at all, she was just talking and I relaxed, relaxed completely. "Go home, honey," I croaked, "will you, huh?"

"Will you audition me, Mr. Arnold?" she persisted. "Please?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll listen to you, baby. But not now, huh, not now."

I wrote her name on a pad together with her hotel and rushed her out of the office. After she was gone, I limped back to the swivel chair and let it swing slowly around while I gently massaged the splintered bone in my right leg.

The phone startled me when it went off and I made a mental note to have the telephone company come in and put a soft pedal on the bell. I reached over and hefted the thing off its hook. It was Les Lord over at Amalgamated.

"Where the hell is Blondie, Bud?" his whining voice squeaked.

"Don't you know?" I said into the mouthpiece.

"Look, Bud, you're her agent. Why the hell can't you get her to rehearsal on time?" He listened to my grunt and went on, "I got a sixteen-piece orchestra sitting around here waiting for her. That costs dough, Bud, you know it costs dough. What I want to know is, where the hell is she?"

His oily, whining voice rubbed me the wrong way. It always rubbed me the wrong way. But he produced several of the top-flight programs on the network, so I just let it rub. What the hell, it didn't hurt.

"Look, boy," I rasped back, "you two did the town together last night, huh. So what do you want from me? Maybe she's still sleeping."

He coughed like he had a sudden bone in his throat and his voice got to quivering like a plate of slippery jelly. "She doesn't answer her phone, Bud. I've tried all morning, and I just thought that maybe if you went over there, you might be able to get her to come right to the studio. For me, huh, Bud?"

I hung up and laughed. I laughed because the minute I'd spotted Blondie on that cruise ship I'd had Les in mind. When she had first come out in that revealing white spotlight singing "When You Kiss A Stranger," her soft, lithe body undulating with easy grace in the seductive rhythm of the torch ballad, I had Les in mind. Thinking about it now, I felt good all over. This must be the way a general feels when a planned campaign works out as scheduled.

I was still laughing to myself when I got into a taxi and headed for Blondie's apartment. With Les snug and warm in the hollow of Blondie's white, little hand, I had me an insurance policy in the gal that was worth plenty of dough. Like I said, she could really sing, and with Les and Amalgamated behind her, this was just the beginning.

I paid off the cab and went upstairs. I heard the buzzer sound loudly inside before I realized that the door wasn't closed completely. She must have gone down for the mail and forgotten to close the door. I went inside, calling her name. There was no answer, and it wasn't until I pushed open the bedroom door and looked inside that I saw why!

Blondie was sprawled across the bed, her stiff fingers still clutching the white sheets. Her long, slender legs showed white and

smooth and still beneath the lacy pattern of a peach-colored nightgown. But it wasn't her legs I was staring at, it was the horrible expression on her face and he jagged, blue-black little hole in the middle of her forehead!

I don't know why I thought of Les Lord at that moment, but I did—Les and the sixteen musicians waiting for her in Studio A. They could wait now, they could wait forever. Blondie would never go on the air again—she was dead. Blondie was very dead.

THEY took me down to Police Headquarters because I'd called them, because I'd told them I'd discovered Blondie's body, and because if I'd had any damned sense, I'd have walked away from her dead body and made like the three little monkeys. But honest guys don't play ball that way and me, I'm honest—an honest fool—so I called the cops.

From the way they questioned me—"they" being plain-clothesman Sergeant Murphy and Detective Captain Johnny Palargo of Homicide—you might almost get the idea that they wanted to pin Blondie's murder on me, on anyone, as long as they pinned it. That's the way it looked to me when I was down there.

After two hours, Captain Palargo finally called it quits and thundered, "Okay, Arnold, you can go now." And his thick, bushy eyebrows dipping low over searching eyes were mute evidence of the suspicion he viewed me with. "Don't leave town, though, Arnold," he added pointedly, and he jabbed the air with a thick, spatulate finger. "We may need you!"

You know something? He didn't need me half as much as I needed a drink, and two quick bourbons did me a lot of good. Later that evening I talked to Les, and although he did a quick turnabout on his attitude towards me now that I didn't have Blondie any more, at least I learned that Captain Palargo had given him the double-O, too, and that made me feel a whole lot better.

I sat in my office until air time, then I went over to the broadcast. Maybe I went because I was curious to see how Les would replace Blondie. Maybe I went because I just wanted to see all that was left of my gravy-train, my place in the sun.

With Blondie dead, it was back to the small time for me, booking acrobats on the 'carny' circuit and two-bit singers on the cruise ships, and I knew it!

Which gave me an idea. I picked up the phone and called Dotty Whitfield. In show biz you never can tell about things like that. Maybe luscious Dotty was the answer to my problem—if she could sing! She wasn't in, so I left word at her hotel and went on over to Amalgamated's Radio Theatre No. 3 at Broadway and 53rd Street.

When the show went on the air, the announcer made a pretty little speech about the loss they'd sustained in Blondie's sudden demise. Then an entire thirty-minute program was cleverly made up of songs that the girl singer supposedly had liked. All of them sung by a serious-faced male quartet.

Sitting there at the rear of the theatre, I had to admit that Les was playing it smart. He was holding on to his audience. I got a quick peek at him sitting behind the glass-enclosed control booth, and I couldn't help wondering how a fat slob like that could be the white-haired boy at the network. But he was. Les had all the best shows.

When it was over, I waited outside on the sidewalk until they started emptying out and Les finally appeared. His sickly grin was reminiscent of a thin grass-stain on a white sheet. His puffy fingers agitated the air in front of him very slowly, as though he was too tired to expend that much energy. "Hi, Bud. Like the show?"

It was an automatic question that solicited no response. But I answered him. What I wanted to say was that I'd felt like somebody had stuck a finger down my throat, only small-time agents don't say things like that to the Les Lords of radio—and I was a small-time agent, without Blondie.

Know what I said? "Great show, Les, great show!"

Thus I became a full-fledged member of the great class of people known in radio circles as "baby kissers." I couldn't help it; it goes like that sometimes. But that didn't prevent me from feeling nausea like a heavy weight on my chest. I guess I wasn't nauseous enough.

"Tough break, Bud," he was saying like

he didn't mean it. "Maybe you have another gal who—"

"No!" said a woman's voice from behind me, "no more. Do you hear me, no more!"

Les Lord's wife Sara might have been beautiful at one time, but soft living had put unsightly bulges where they didn't belong and where they belonged there was nothing.

"So, what do you want me to do?" he snapped in an irritated voice. "Give up radio?" He answered his own question as if he dared her to contradict him, "You should live so! I've got shows to do and I won't let you or—"

"No more women, Les," she said quietly, but there was ground glass in her words. "I won't stand for any more of your women. Do you hear me? This one is the last one, the last one—"

"Oh, shut up, Sara," the producer said and he looked like a man who was tired of hearing the same record over and over again. Then, turning his back, he walked away from his wife, leaving her standing on the sidewalk like a lone manikin in an undressed shop window. She stood there for a second, her green eyes flashing signs that were as unmistakable as the red signals at a railway crossing.

I was half a block away before I could wipe off the sick expression I knew was around my lips, and I noticed that I had company.

"Hi," Dotty Whitfield said. She pursed her red lips prettily. "I knew I'd find you here."

"Yeah?"

She smiled, and that was the first thing all evening that I enjoyed. "Now you want to hear me sing, I betcha."

I took her just above the elbow. "I'll be damned if you're not like all the rest. A little vulture. You didn't lose much time, did you?"

I didn't notice that her arm was soft and round until she pulled it away from me and said, "I don't like that, Mr. Arnold. It doesn't sound right."

"Okay, baby, I apologize. So you're an opportunist." I reached out and took her arm again. This time she didn't pull away. "Can you really sing?"

"I told you earlier, Mr. Arnold, I can sing."

"Okay, baby," I told her, "what are we waiting for? A singer's what I need most right now. Come on, let's go to my place."

DID you ever see a gal equipped with hydraulic brakes? This was one. She stopped so suddenly that I was two paces ahead of her before I realized I was alone. She was standing there with an indignant expression on her face, her lips compressed into a tight line. Somehow she looked years younger than her twenty.

"Look, Mr. Arnold," she said stiffly, "I'm not a child but that doesn't mean—"

"Whoa, baby, hold everything!" I cut in quickly. "This is the way it is with me—" I reached out and tapped my forefinger on her white, slender throat. "Tonsils is what I'm interested in, baby, tonsils! Get it?" She started to smile sheepishly and I kept talking. "You say you can sing, baby. Okay, so prove it. That's all. Understand?"

She understood because she slipped her hand in the crook of my elbow and started walking again. Just before we got to my

place I suggested we stop off at the Blue Heron for a quickie. We stopped off. And that's where I saw the guy with the sallow complexion and hollow eyes.

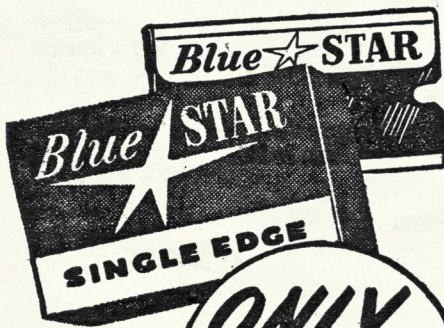
He was leaning against the bar drinking out of a tall glass, his deep-set eyes watching me. He seemed more interested in me than in his drink. That, I didn't mind. It was because he seemed more interested in me than in lovely Dotty next to me that my own interest was aroused. That was really doing it in reverse English.

"That man seems to know you," she said and she nudged me with her elbow. "He's been staring ever since we—"

"Yeah, I know," I said and changed the subject.

While Dotty told me all about herself I studied the man at the bar. I studied him carefully because from somewhere I knew that guy and it bothered me, just like the narrow slits of his eyes bothered me. He was tall and gaunt—about thirty, I judged. His sunken eyes were too small and his parrot nose too large. He wore his thin, black hair greased back over a bulging forehead. But it wasn't until he paid for his

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drink and went through the door that led to the street that I placed him—I should have known!

He had the stiff, straddling stance of a man of the sea and that prodded my memory—that and the rolling gait of his big body as he disappeared from view. He was the purser aboard the crummy cruise ship where I'd found poor Blondie! I was half inclined to chase after him because he'd been looking at me with more than just faint recognition, but, when lovely Dotty put her hand on my arm and smiled, I promptly forgot all about him. I shouldn't have!

I tilted the glass to my lips and then got up. "Okay, baby, let's go." I was suddenly anxious to find out if she really could sing and she seemed just as anxious to show me.

When we got to my apartment, I went right to the record player, took a straight instrumental recording out of the rack and held it out for her to see. "Know this one, baby?" It was Blondie's favorite, and I couldn't help wondering.

She read from the label out loud, "When You Kiss A Stranger." Yes, I know it."

"Then here goes, honey, you're on."

She slipped out of her coat and stood next to the player, waiting. There was none of the usual fluffing of fingers through hair and the smoothing of dress over hips. She just stood there waiting, and she was smiling.

I turned the volume down low and adjusted the tone arm, then I went over and sat down on the studio couch. As the soft music of many muted strings wafted across the room, she started to sing, softly she started to sing as if she enjoyed it—and I listened.

*Will your heart be lost when you kiss a stranger?
Is there danger? Ask the gypsy to say.*

I sat up straight and watched her. The back of my neck felt like it was sweating, only I knew that it wasn't.

*When your path is crossed by a handsome stranger,
Will he kiss and go, or love and stay?*

She was standing perfectly still, there were no gestures, none of the studied move-

ments of her body to help sell the song. There was only the sweet, unaffected beauty of her lovely face and the pure deep-throated throbbing of her rich contralto voice.

*Never count the cost, never fear the danger
When a stranger says I love you one day.*

She was sensational. She made Blondie sound cheap, coarse. I tingled all over, and if the kid did that to me—yipes! What would she do to Broadway! I couldn't wait for her to finish. I rushed over and, grabbing her around the waist, hugged her to me like she was worth a million dollars. You know something, with her voice and my know-how, she was! I had me a gold mine and I knew it.

I bent down and kissed her, kissed her the way you'd pucker up to a brand-new thousand-dollar bill. That's all there was to it, except that I couldn't help noticing the firmness of her body, the cool softness of her red lips. I dropped my hands quickly and stepped back.

"You weren't kidding, baby," I said a little hoarsely. "You sure can sing!"

She clapped her hands together like a little girl. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I'm so happy, Mr. Arnold, so terribly happy."

"Everybody calls me Bud, Dotty."

"Will you manage me, Bud? Will you?"

I don't know why the hell the sound of my own name should have made me feel the way I did, but I caught myself wishing she'd say it again. Instead the doorbell went *brrr!* I got up to answer it and Dotty went over and started looking at the record rack.

It was the guy from the Blue Heron—the one with the sallow complexion and furtive eyes.

"Yeah?" I mouthed.

"Hi!" was what he said. "Remember me?" His voice had the hollow sound of water dripping into a rain barrel, and it was every bit as monotonous. He started to walk in like I'd invited him, which I hadn't.

I blocked him off by standing in front of the partly open door. "What do you want, Purser?"

He laughed and looked impudently over my shoulder. "So you know me?" He nodded. "That's a good beginning, mister. Now how about being real nice and asking me in." He laughed again, only his eyes

didn't. "My little friend won't like it if you don't."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I snapped. "What little friend?"

"This one," he grunted. "See!"

His "little friend" turned out to be a 38-calibre with a blue-black barrel and an ugly, round muzzle. Only it wasn't "little"—not to me it wasn't—not the way he held it cradled in the palm of his right hand, the business end of it pointing straight at me as if it had a date with my midriff!

CHAPTER TWO

Agent For Death

QUIETLY, I limped back into the room, and he came in as though he had known all the time that he would. He closed the door with his left hand and nodded at Dotty. "Get rid of her." Then he changed his mind and told her to stay. She saw the gun in his hand and sat down suddenly. She looked limp and scared.

Don't think he got any fight from my corner either. When he waved the gun at me, I obliged by parking in the nearest chair. "What's it all about?" I yelped and I pointed at the gun. "Are you kidding?"

He ignored my questions and asked one of his own. "The papers say that you found Blondie's body, right, huh?"

For just a second I forgot that he was the one with the gun. "Look, Mac," I said, "you're not the D.A. So how come you ask questions? Why in the—"

He cut my words off short and at the same time reminded me who was the boss by walking over and slapping me across the jaw with the hard muzzle of the gun. Through the fog of noise that engulfed me I heard Dotty gasp hoarsely and the Purser say:

"Just to make sure you know who's top dog, huh?" I didn't answer but just sat there until the buzzing in my ears stopped. Then he nodded at the red spot along my jaw and he hefted the gun in his palm. "You *did* find Blondie's body, huh, feller? Huh?"

"Yes," I said meekly. "It's no secret, I found her—why?"

He grinned. "Never mind the questions, feller. What else did you find?"

I stared at him, my fingers tenderly feeling the soreness of my face where he'd hit me. My jaw bone hurt like hell and there was blood in my mouth. I got up and limped into the bathroom with him watching me all the time. Those sunken eyes of his were on my back but I took my time washing out my mouth. When I was finished, I went inside and sat down again in the chair.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mac," I said slowly. "What's it all about?"

He raised the gun again menacingly and Dotty cried out like she was the one who was going to get hurt. Maybe that's what made him change his mind because instead of belaboring me with it he just stood there with the weapon in his hand, his face muscles working like he was chewing a huge wad of gum. His eyes seemed to be getting even smaller as he stared at me.

He didn't seem to notice Dotty crouching like a frightened little bird in my big, yellow chair, but he sure noticed me. "I ain't going to ask you again, feller," he rasped. "I want that package she gave you and I want it now, savvy?"

He didn't have to get so het up about a lousy little package. What the hell, I'd have given it to him. Blondie had given it to me to keep for her but if it was meant for him, he was welcome to it. Only he didn't give me a chance. He cursed at me and lashed out like he had a bull whip in his hand.

The gun caught me across the face for the second time, and it hurt just as much as the first. I half rose from the chair trying to avoid being hit. At that it was only a glancing blow, but the next one wasn't, and I went over backwards, taking the chair with me. I could feel the warm blood running out of my mouth and I heard the girl's muffled sobbing but I could also hear the purser's gruff voice screaming at me for the package . . . that's what he wanted, that damned package! What the hell was in it, radium?

When Blondie had given it to me and asked me to keep it for her, I took it—it didn't mean a thing to me. But now—now I knew that it was apt to mean plenty to me—say, perhaps my life!

I rolled over and tried to get up. I could see his gaunt face, his sunken eyes and snarling lips. He was still screaming at

me when I felt his heavy shoe thud into my ribs. I tried to roll away from him but he followed my painful movements with his hard brogan. I clenched my teeth and took it, trying all the time to get to my feet, but when he viciously switched his attack to my bad leg, I cried out. That was something else again.

It was a bad mistake to show pain, because he stood over me hammering at the leg, while sharp, hot knives stabbed into me. He stood there then, deliberately, cruelly aiming his foot at my leg. Again—again—I felt nausea creeping over me in slow waves and I sobbed with the excruciating agony that coursed up and down my aching limb. A man can stand just so much pain and then he—

Desperately I reached out as his foot thundered at me again. This time I was lucky! I caught it in my hand and I twisted—twisted hard with all my waning strength. He lost his balance, as I held on and kept twisting, and he went down heavily on his back. As the gun went sliding across the floor I scrambled blindly after it like a dog looking for a place to be sick. By the time he got to a half-crouch, I had the weapon in my hand.

I could have shot him—I wanted to, I really did. My finger tightened and I could see his white face. I could also hear my old Army instructor saying once again, *Squeeze the trigger, soldier. Squeeze it. Gently, gently—*

SOMETHING touched my shoulder. It was Dotty's hand. I looked up, her lips were moving and I tried to hear her. What was she saying?

"Don't! Bud, for heaven's sake, don't!"

I was sitting on the floor cross-legged, the purser's 38-calibre gun in my hand, the muzzle pointing right at him. My finger was on the trigger—a minute more and I—

Then the pressure was gone and I heard her very clearly. "Don't, Bud, don't!"

"Get out!" I said haltingly to the purser. "Get out, now!"

He turned and I heard the door close loudly behind him. The gun was getting very heavy then—too heavy to hold. I let it slip out of my hand and I forgot about the purser. I forgot about Blondie's oblong package—I forgot about everything except that terrible pain in my right leg.

Then the sick, numbing paralysis reached out and took my entire body in its soft, enveloping embrace, and I sank down into the deep pit of black, black unconsciousness.

Dotty's face was the first thing I saw when I came to. She was sitting next to me, her cool hand on my forehead. It must have been the wet towel she was dabbing at my brow that opened my eyes, but it was the smile on her face that opened my lips.

"Some hero, huh?" I said sheepishly.

She glanced down pointedly at my right leg and didn't answer, but her expressive eyes did, and somehow I didn't feel so foolish any more.

"I tried to move you," she said, "but I couldn't." It was almost an apology.

I reached out and touched her cheek with my hand, then slowly I got to my feet and hobbled painfully to the medicine chest in the bathroom. I took a pain-killing pill and by the time I'd washed my face and combed my hair I was feeling okay again. I don't know what I'd do without those little red pills.

Dotty had been sitting quietly watching me; now she said, "How about me making some coffee, Bud? Can use?"

"Unuh, honey," I cracked, "ain't strong enough. I'm going to have some bourbon. How about you?"

She grinned and nodded in agreement. I wondered when she would ask about what had happened. Anybody else would have been gone by the time I came to, but I still wondered when she would ask.

I poured two stiff ones and after a big slug had trickled down my throat, I leaned back in the chair and relaxed. "You know something, baby," I said quietly, "you're a doll, a real doll." Then I changed the subject. "Now, let's see," I mused. "What are we going to do about you?"

Dotty looked surprised. She put her glass down on the low table in front of the couch and it made a loud clinking noise. "What about that man?" she queried. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

"You haven't up till now, baby," I said grimly. "But even if you did, what about him?" All I knew was that he was the purser of the S.S. *Exeter* and that he obviously wanted something the dead singer had given me to keep. Obviously he wanted it pretty bad.

Dotty shrugged. There was a faint line

of annoyance tracing its thin way around the soft curve of her mouth, but she made it disappear by smiling. "All right then, Bud," she said almost gaily, "what were you going to say about me?"

"Huh?" I muttered dumbly. I hardly heard her because it had just occurred to me that maybe the purser was the reason for poor Blondie's jitters all these weeks. Was he the guy she had feared? Was he the one who—

"You're not listening, Bud," Dotty was saying petulantly. I stared at her soft, red lips. "What were you going to say about me, Bud?"

I finished my drink and got up. "Come on, baby, let's go over and have a talk with Les Lord."

"Les Lord!" she exclaimed. "The radio producer?"

"Yeah," I said, "the radio producer. Why?"

"Do you think I'm that good?" she asked. "Really?"

I laughed. "Listen, honey, you sing, I'll manage. Okay?"

"But it's so late, Bud," she protested. "Maybe tomorrow morning—"

"Tomorrow morning is always too late in this business, baby. Les may want to sign somebody else up tomorrow morning." I reached down and took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Tonight," I said stubbornly. "Now. You go on back to your hotel and get spruced up, then meet me at Les' place." I wrote the address down on one of my cards and handed it to her.

She was looking at herself in the mirror then. "All I need is a little touch of make-up, Bud."

"Unuh, baby, that's not what I mean." I watched her eyes widen. "Do you have a low-necked gown?"

"Yes."

"Okay then, Dotty," I told her. "Put it on."

"But I don't understand—"

"You will, honey, when you meet Les." I saw the expression on her face change and I said, "And let it plunge, baby, like it was going down for the last time—get it?"

"Oh," she said and, turning, swiftly walked from the room. It seemed terribly empty when she closed the door.

FOR a good five minutes after she had gone, I waited, and then I left my apartment and went back to my small office on West 45th Street. I went over and started pulling the file cabinet apart. That's where I'd put Blondie's package and it was still there in the rear of the steel drawer. It was the size of a ten-pound box of chocolates and I soon found out that it was a hell of a lot sweeter.

I took it over and put it on the desk, trying to remember all the time why Blondie had asked me to keep it for her, but I couldn't. I ripped the brown paper off and opened up the box; then I stared—stared like a guy seeing the wonders of the Grand Canyon for the first time. The cardboard box was packed solid with tight bundles of twenty-dollar bills—thousands of dollars worth and all in twentys.

I picked up one thick bundle and thumbed through it like they were twenty-dollar bills, if you follow me. They were crisp, fresh, crinkly—and phony! Don't ask me how I knew, I just knew that I was looking at a box full of queer money.

I riffled the bundle in my hand. So that was why Blondie had been so anxious to get away from the cruise trade. She must have been bringing in the stuff and working with the purser. Sallow-puss was obviously part of the set-up and what I had on the desk in front of me was why he'd wanted it so badly. No wonder poor Blondie was such a frightened gal.

Looking at all that sugar on top of the desk I knew that it was about time I called the cops. I put down my handful of dough and picked up the telephone—then put it right back down again, only quicker. The door to my office had opened silently so that I only heard it click when the purser closed it.

He stood there with his back flush against the panel of glass, his beady eyes lost in the depths of their sockets but still sharp enough to cut me to pieces. The gun was as big as the one he had before—and why not? It was an identical twin to the 38-calibre he'd left back on the floor of my apartment.

"Hi!" he said out of the side of his mouth, only it didn't sound pleasant. I just sat there looking at him. It was his move and we both knew it. He walked forward with that rolling gait peculiar to

sailors. "Put the lid on, feller," he grated, "and rap it up again like you found it, huh?"

I covered the stuff up and rolled it in the brown paper carefully, like it was real money. He came closer and reaching down picked it up. Then, tucking it under his arm, he walked towards the door and at the same time motioned me to follow him by flicking his gun at me. I went through the door and saw him close it behind him.

His hand was in his pocket then, but I knew the gun was still in his palm so I kept walking straight ahead. Just before we turned the corridor that led to the flight of stairs downwards to the street, I glanced back past him to where I could read my name on the frosted pane of glass: *BUD ARNOLD, AGENT*. I just couldn't suppress the thought that maybe it was the last time I would see my name on any door.

As we hit the sidewalk, a small, flashy convertible pulled up from in front of the building, its twin beams switching from park to city. The purser reached over and opened the car door.

"Get in, feller," he said and helped me along by planting a hand firmly in the small of my back and shoving. After I was in, he climbed in next to me. "Okay, Pete," he said. "Let's get going."

We drove away with me sitting stiffly between them like a houn' dog on the point. The purser didn't speak but the little guy at the wheel stared at me with eyes that bulged like convex glass. He had a thin, ferret face and a voice that squeaked. "Who's he?" And I noticed that his chin pointed.

"You mean who *was* he?" corrected the purser grimly.

"Oh," said the little guy and he grinned as his right foot pressed a little harder on the accelerator pedal. Then he looked past me at the box under the purser's arm. "Operation successful, huh, pal?"

"Yeah."

"But the patient died, huh?" He laughed, and the laugh was an irritating high-pitched sound that got on my nerves more than the meaning his words conveyed.

Now that I'd seen what was in that box, I was a poor risk—a damned poor risk and even I knew it. Sitting there, tightly jammed between the two of them with a 38-

calibre pointing at me through the purser's pocket, I started getting ideas. All of them smelled—smelled of death, my death. It wasn't until we started rolling across George Washington Bridge and it started to rain that I got my first good idea and the opportunity I needed, both at the same time.

AS THE guy at the wheel reached over and pressed the button that started the folded canvas top on its automatic sweep over our heads, the purser reached back and upwards to speed its descent. I guess he didn't like getting wet. At just that moment I threw myself against his body, my hand pushing down hard on the door handle. He grunted out loud as I banged into him and that was when the door flung open and I dived for the roadway.

He was much too busy trying to hang inside the car and keep a firm hold on the box of phony twenty-dollar bills to prevent me from clearing the moving car. I went out head first, sliding on the wet pavement as I landed. I heard the tires screaming as the brakes were applied, and then I was scraping my chest on yards of wet roadway as I felt myself skimming across the slippery asphalt. If it hadn't been raining, the oily pavement wouldn't have been like grease and I—I stopped thinking about it when I hit the steel side of the bridge.

I crawled wearily to my feet and tried to forget the terrible knifing pain in my right leg. About fifty yards away I could see the red tail-lights of the purser's car stopped by the side of the bridge. I could hear running footsteps—but in the dark and the driving rain, I couldn't see them. They were coming towards me and getting closer.

I limped about ten yards before I quit cold. I knew that with my leg I could never make it back to the New York side. I found the Y girder on the side of the bridge where I knew there was a steel support beam and I pulled myself up and over the railing and went down under the roadway. I hung there by my hands until I felt my feet touch a steel support; then I let go and slid down about two feet until I was astride a beam and wedged in with my back resting against the upper part of the Y support.

As I crouched there in the dismal black-

ness of a rain-drenched night, I could hear them running along the bridge, looking for me. Above me was the roadway and violent death—I looked down about two-hundred and fifty feet, straight down—below me was the river and violent death!

The rain was a muffled, monotonous splattering on the black asphalt over my head. I hung there and didn't move. Several cars went by but my ears were attuned only to the voices I could hear calling excitedly to each other above me. I hung there and didn't move and after a while they were gone and there was only the sound of rain and the agonized throbbing of my own heart. But still I clung there waiting—waiting—

Far below me I could see the red and green firefly lights as the barges moved slowly under the bridge. If I could have penetrated the night and the rain, they would have looked like so many black beetles crawling along the choppy surface of the Hudson River, but all I saw was the lights, the tiny almost imperceptible movements of the lights. I shivered and hugged the wet steel beam to me like it was my lover.

The purser and his driver had been gone about thirty minutes. I was sure they had gone but still I clung there. I had to be more than certain, I just had to be. I was soaking wet and cold, but I'd been soaking wet and cold before. The ache in my leg was a thing alive, incredibly alive—a sharp burning knife, a many-sided knife that sent fingers of pain exploring far up my throbbing limb. Soon I was afraid I couldn't take it—if it lasted much longer, I couldn't.

I clung there and I was sick. After a while I wasn't cold any more. I felt the long, warm arms of sleep reaching out for me and I almost surrendered. They were soft and smooth, like a woman's arms, and I nodded. My head drooped, my eyeballs were heavy, my grip was loose—

It must have been a trailer truck or a bus going by that joggled my senses. Anyway, I came fully awake and my loosening fingers once again made tight contact with the steel beam. I looked down and shuddered—another few seconds—

I reached out and found the footing I needed to boost me to the top. By the time I'd pulled myself over the railing and stood alone on the glistening black asphalt

surface of the bridge, I felt so good that I damned near forgot the pain in my leg.

The rain was slowly slackening and there was even some slight promise of stars in the blackness above, which was gradually opening its skylight to the cloud-hidden moon. I found a taxi on the New York side of the bridge and got in wearily like a wet and bedraggled dog.

The driver looked at me with a certain degree of caution. Maybe I didn't have the fare. "Sick or drunk?" he challenged gruffly, and I noticed that he didn't pull down the meter flag.

I jerked my wallet out and handed him a five-dollar bill. "Just tired, Mac," I answered. "Okay?"

Maybe it was because my voice was liquor-free or maybe it was because of the five note I'd given him. Anyway, he reached out a hairy paw and flipped down the flag. "Where to, bud?" he asked eagerly.

As the motor started to purr and he pulled slowly away from the stand at the curb, I leaned back against the comfortable leather cushions of Angie Valange's yellow taxi and said just two things:

"Police Headquarters on Center Street" and "Wake me up when we get there."

You know something? I don't remember a thing from then on until a big hand was shaking me by the shoulder and I heard Angie's strident voice saying, "Okay, bud, we're here. Come on, bud, wake up. We're here."

CHAPTER THREE

Same Crime, Same Station

I GOT out of the cab and stood on the sidewalk, stretching. It had stopped raining and the promise of stars had been fulfilled. They glittered in the dark sky like so many pure, blue-white diamonds in a jeweler's black-velvet case. I walked away from Angie and started up the long flight of stairs that led to Police Headquarters.

"Hey, fellow," came Angie's voice from behind me, "your change, how about your change?"

I kept right on going. "Keep it, Angie," I called back over my shoulder, "the sleep was worth it."

He was still there when I made the last

step and walked inside the big revolving door. I grinned to myself. Well, the sleep *was* worth it, and that's no kidding—or maybe it was because I was just glad to be around.

Captain Palargo listened to my story while his boy took notes in the corner. The detective didn't interrupt me once while I was talking; he just sat there with a face like a hunk of Vermont granite, listening to my monologue. When I'd finished, he picked up a mechanical pencil and started tapping it on the hard surface of his desk and soon came the questions, loads of them and with machine-gun rapidity.

I described the car, the purser and his driver, Pete, how Blondie had looked when she'd given me the box with the money in it, and answered dozens of other relative queries. Suddenly, the detective stopped asking questions and told his assistant to contact the Treasury Department.

"Get their district office here in the city," he instructed. "Tell them to send a man over pronto." He looked at me again, then picked up his pencil and started tapping all over again. "Could be this is hot, huh?" he mused softly to himself.

"*Could* be!" I echoed, but with more surprise than he evinced. "You kidding?"

"Look, Arnold," the captain rasped, "yours is an awful pretty story, awful pretty. How do we know it's as you tell it—how do we know that—"

I boiled over like a cracked three-minute egg. "You're right, Captain, you don't know about it—and what's more, I'll be damned if I'm not thinking you don't know period!"

I got up to go and he said quietly, "Anything else you want to say?"

"Yes," I yelled. "Can I go now or are you going to hold me?"

Captain Palargo laughed. "Go ahead, Arnold, I'm not holding you—yet!" He finished off pointedly, "We know where to find you if we want you."

I turned away from the slouching figure behind the beaten-up desk. He was grinning at me so I went back and faced him. "I don't get it," I sung out slowly, "I bring you in a perfect explanation for the gal's murder and you just sit there, grinning at me, looking for ways to involve me—I don't get it!"

He stopped smiling then, and there was

something else on his face that I couldn't figure; but whatever it was, it wasn't pleasant to look at. "Everything in time, Arnold," he said, "and everything in its proper place. For instance," he droned, "if there is such a thing as a box of counterfeit money—and if there is such a person as the purser of the *S. S. Exeter* as you describe, then according to your own story—" he paused dramatically with the shiny, silver pencil poised high in the air, "—the purser didn't murder the blonde singer!"

"What!"

"No," he went on, and he looked right at me as if he was trying to make something sink in, "—the killer was someone else!"

When I went out of there, I hated his guts, but I knew just the same that the guy was right and I wondered why I hadn't seen it. At the same time, I could now see why Captain Palargo looked upon me and my story of the phony money with a certain degree of suspicion.

If the purser wanted the box of phony dough so badly, why would he kill Blondie before she'd given it to him, and how come he hadn't ripped her apartment apart looking for it? Which promptly set me thinking the other way. Could also be he had known she'd given the box to me, so he killed her to protect himself and then came looking for me and the money.

I stopped suddenly on the top step of Police Headquarters. It was like being on the short end of a stout rope. I damned near snapped my own head off. Why hadn't Captain Palargo seen that side of it? Why was the detective so insistent that Blondie had been killed by someone other than the purser of the *Exeter*. Why?

"HEY, mister, hey!" I looked down the flight of stairs. It was Angie Valange, the cab driver. He was standing there with his cab door open and his hand raised, one finger sticking straight out in the universal gesture of the cruising hackman.

I went down the rest of the long flight of concrete stairs and said, "Why did you wait?"

He grinned at me like a guy who'd just gotten a big tip. "I figured you'd be coming out soon, so I waited. Want a cab?"

"Yeah," I said and gave him Les' address. "Take me to 932 Sutton Place," and I climbed in and sat back stiffly against the leather seat.

It was almost midnight by the time Angie made Sutton Place, and even before we got there I doubted that Dotty was still waiting for me in the lobby the way I'd told her to do. I asked Angie to wait and I went inside. She was still there, looking as lovely as a bachelor's dream. But from the way she was tapping her little number 4-B at a furious pace, I knew she was, too—furious, that is.

I limped slowly towards her and the angry sound her shoe made. When she saw me she stood up, hot words of protest on her lovely lips.

"I was in an accident," I said simply and I saw all the anger drain from her face. Suddenly she was all soft femininity—but more than that. I saw frightened concern, and all of it was for me.

"Are you all right, Bud? Are you?" She reached out for me, "Are you sure?"

I looked at her two hands trembling on my arms, her red lips so close to me and her lovely unspoiled eyes. What was going on inside me shouldn't happen to a dog, only it did to me and it was quite a battle for a while. Her hand slid down my arm until it found a nest in my palm. I took my fingers from hers and encircled her waist.

"Come on, honey," I said softly, "let's you and me go see Les together." And as we walked into the elevator I didn't tell her that I'd changed my plans about her. Yeah, I'd make her a singing star all right, but not the way I'd planned, definitely not the way I'd planned it!

Les opened the door, and, when he saw me, he growled, "Say, this is a fine time of the night to—" And then he spotted Dotty. "Say!" said his fat lips again, and I saw his eyes fasten upon her hungrily. It reminded me of the time in India when I'd seen a cobra about to strike a small, unprotected white rabbit.

I felt uncomfortable and I noticed Dotty move her shoulders as if she was cold. I saw her small hand come up slowly and fidget at the bodice of her dress. "This is Dotty Whitfield," I said quickly. "She's your new singer, Les."

"Hello, sweetie," he whispered, and without his even hearing her sing I knew

he had approved. It was just the way I'd figured it. He was that kind—and so was I, up till then. He reached down and took her by the hand.

"Come on in, sweetie," he crooned softly, "got to hear you sing. This I got to do for ol' Buddy boy, right, Bud?" I nodded but I noticed that his eyes didn't let go. Even when he led her to the piano, they didn't let go.

I followed behind Dotty, and, when Les went into the drawing-room and sat down at the piano, I winked at her and squeezed her fingers reassuringly.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

"'When You Kiss A Stranger,'" I told him. I made it sound offhand, unstudied, and I saw his startled eyes. "Same song as Blondie, boy," I rapped out, "only better—do you mind?"

"Better?" He looked a little nervous. "Did you say *better* than Blondie?" He was shaking his head from side to side. "Couldn't be better, Bud, couldn't be."

"Wait," I sang out. "You'll see, boy, you'll see." And I said it again. "Better than Blondie, yes sir," and I nodded happily like I had me a sure thing in the fifth at Belmont.

Dotty leaned against the piano as the radio producer started to play. He stopped almost as soon as he'd started, and we all turned around and looked across the room to where the voice was coming from.

"No, Les, no," she was saying. "I won't stand for it. I won't!"

It was his wife. Her loose figure was draped in a blue robe and her white face in a black mantle of hate and despair. Les didn't speak, nobody spoke, it was very quiet.

"Mrs. Lord," I said, but she didn't seem to hear me. She was standing there, looking at Dotty as if she was seeing her own lost youth and it hurt—you could see that it hurt.

The radio producer brushed her off impatiently, the way you would a fly. "Please, Sara—this is business. Do you mind?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried out, "I mind, I mind!" And she threw herself at him, her hands holding on to him, her shaking lips trying to caress him, desperately trying to caress him. "Don't do this to me, Les, don't—don't—"

I wanted to tell her that it *was* business,

nothing else but business, strictly business. But I knew that it was too late, she wouldn't believe me. She'd never believe me or anybody. I watched Les standing there stiffly while she slid slowly down his body until she was a moaning, sobbing blob of humanity on the floor at his feet. It was a sickening sight, and he should have felt humiliated and even disgusted. But as he looked down at her, his face was contorted with such cold, callous contempt that I was glad that her eyes were busy with hot tears and she couldn't see. Dotty took my hand and pulled me away and I was glad to go. This was something I couldn't take.

Les stopped us at the door. "Look, Bud, if she's as good as you say, I'll sign her. Tonight—now, okay?"

Dotty was walking away, but I stood there at the door. This was business. I slapped my palm with my right fist. "You've got yourself a deal, boy," I said. I glanced at his wife behind him and said, "We'll be at my place in, say, uh—"

"One o'clock," he finished, "see you at one!"

JUST before he closed the door, I could see Sara Lord still lying on the floor. Her eyes were open now, they were looking right at me, and I wished they weren't. Then the door closed and I could see nothing. I turned slowly and moved down the hall. I caught up with Dotty and she waited. I put my arm around her waist as we walked away.

Angie, the cab driver, was standing outside the entrance to the apartment house as we came out. He had company—a patrol car and one of Captain Palargo's men. The detective must have followed me.

"The Cap'n says for you to come down to Headquarters, mister. They've got a line on this here purser guy."

I shrugged and turned to Angie. "Do me something, Angie, huh?"

He cocked his head to one side. "You in trouble, mister?"

"No," I grinned at him, and, taking Dotty's arm, I pushed her inside the taxi. "Here, baby," I said and gave her the key to my apartment. "Go there and wait until I get back. I'll be there before Les Lord arrives for the closing, okay?"

She looked worried but she smiled be-

cause I did. "If you say so, Bud, but that Les, I don't think I—"

"That's right, honey," I interrupted, "I'll think, you sing, okay?" She smiled again and I turned to Angie. "Go up to my place with her, Angie, huh, and stay there with her until I get back." I handed him a twenty-dollar bill, a good one. "You must have a kid her age, huh?"

He held up two fingers of his right hand, "And both girls, mister." He climbed behind the wheel of his hack and, leaning out, said, "Don't worry, feller, she'll be all right."

The patrol car was only half way down to Headquarters when their two-way radio exploded like a riot call—it pretty near was! I listened while the voice came through the speaker giving instructions. At the first words, they spun the car around for the West Side.

From what I could hear, I knew that the police had located the purser aboard a small private boat tied up alongside the river on the New York side. A couple of Treasury men had tried to walk in and take him into custody for questioning. There was a gun battle, and from the sound of the police call there must have been more than just the purser and Pete his driver involved. It sounded like quite a production.

By the time the young cop driving the patrol car headed on to Pier 50, it was all over. The place was swarming with uniformed police and plainclothes men. The entire area was ablaze with lights, as dozens of searchlights that had been rigged up around the pier turned the pitch darkness of the waterfront into the bright light of noon.

As I clambered out of the car with the detective, I could see that it had been a good night for fishing. Under my feet were empty shells and the acrid smell of cordite still hung heavy in the air all around me. Police were milling around, and I could see some of the men they'd captured being shoved into cars and rushed away, sirens screaming wide open.

But there were a few who weren't going anywhere, never would. I saw their dark, crumpled shapes as mere blobs against the brightly lighted wooden flooring of the pier—they weren't moving.

Captain Palargo came over then and spoke to me in an impatient tone as if he

had been waiting a long time. "Come over here, Arnold. Take a look, huh?" I went over with him to where one of those still figures was sprawled on the ground. The captain pointed, "Who's that?"

I looked. It was the purser. He was still and quiet—and very dead! "Yeah," I mumbled, "that's him, that's the purser."

The captain of detectives walked away, and I went with him. "The Feds made quite a haul on that boat," and he pointed to the cabin cruiser tied alongside the pier. "Yeah, quite a haul—but the boys in S.A. ought to do even better," he murmured, as if he was talking strictly for his own benefit.

"I'm glad it's over," I said.

"Yeah," he agreed, "that part of it."

"Huh?"

He turned and looked at me the way he'd done once before up in his office. His keen eyes were ablaze, piercing. "You'll probably get a reward out of this, Arnold," he growled, "if you can use it."

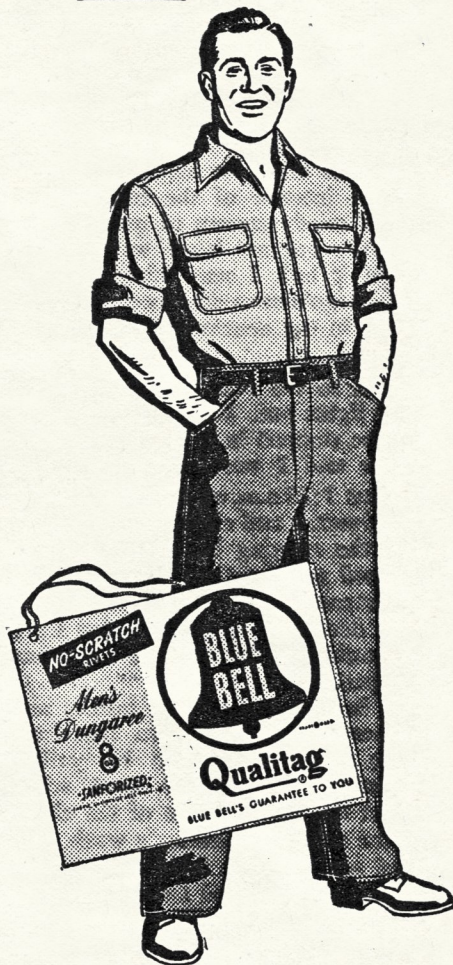
If I could use it! Was he kidding? I started to answer, but instead I glanced at him quickly. It was then that I knew that it *wasn't* over, that it hadn't been the purser who had murdered the blonde singer. It *was* someone else.

He must have read my mind, because he said almost cheerfully, "The way I figure it, Arnold, it boils down to two people." I didn't like the way he was eyeing me and I liked even less his conclusion, which he didn't hesitate to voice forthwith. "You know something, Arnold?" he drawled, as he laid a heavy hand on my arm, "you're still my favorite!"

WHAT I did then was as foolhardy as it was dangerous. I planted my right palm in his broad, thick features and pushed. There was a surprised look on his face as he went over backwards. Then I looked around quickly. Everybody was too busy to notice, so I promptly made them notice by yelling loudly for help, calling out that the captain had fallen into the river.

There was a sudden rush for the edge of the pier, and soon I found myself on the outer fringe of a cordon of excited cops, trying to rescue the captain of detectives from the briny deep. They paid no attention to me at all.

How to buy better work clothes



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I walked slowly away until I was lost in the darkness beyond the semi-circle of white searchlights. I had to hurry now, only I couldn't. My leg was a dragging anchor. I did the best I could, and luckily a lone taxi came cruising by.

I stopped him, got in and gave him my address. "Make it quick, huh, Mac. I've got to get a story out."

He yapped all the way to my place about my being a newspaper reporter, and, believe me, in his thirst for bloody adventure he filled the interior of the cab and my ears with a steady stream of questions. I answered him but my heart wasn't in it. How could it be? I was thinking about Captain Palargo's second suspect and Dotty up there in my apartment.

I could see Angie's taxi then. It was parked next to the rear exit, and it was empty, the lights out. I threw a bill at the driver, as he stopped in front of my apartment house and I ran for the entrance.

It was just 1:20 a.m. as I got in the self-operating elevator and closed the door. As I pressed the starting button, the generator hummed an impatient tune which it probably learned from me. From the first to the fifth floor took an eternity, but I got there. I could see the door to my place partially open.

I could hear a voice from inside, and I went over and pushed open the door. Dotty was crouching in that big yellow chair of mine. Her fingers were stiffly clutching at the leather arms of the chair, her face the color of Monday's wash.

Les had said he'd be there at 1 a.m.—he was there, all right, and I was just twenty minutes late. My willing little hack driver, Angie, had kept his word—he was still there, too, and from the expression on his olive-skinned face, he wished he wasn't. They weren't speaking though, none of them were speaking. The three of them just sat there silently, listening, watching, seeming not to hear and not to see. And I knew why!

The voice I'd heard from the elevator went on talking in a low, lifeless monotone. "You won't do it," it was saying. "Never again will you do it, do you hear me? Do you hear me?" The pitch of the voice was raised by hysteria until it ended on a loud raucous scream. "Do you hear me?"

Les, Amalgamated's ace radio producer, nodded like a man in a dream, an inescapable dream. "Y—yes, Sara, yes, I hear you."

She was standing near the entrance to the foyer, a wicked-looking automatic in her hand. If she moved about three inches to her left, she couldn't fail to see me—she mustn't, not yet!

"You won't stop, Les," she went on, "I know that now. There will always be others, always—"

"No," he croaked hoarsely, wringing his hands in anguish. "You don't know what you're saying, Sara! You don't know what you're doing—"

"Yes, yes, I do. I can't kill them all. I can't, not all of them." She turned away from Dotty, the muzzle of her gun swinging in a wide arc until it pointed right at her husband's middle. "No, Les, I'm tired of them—so—"

Les Lord got to his feet slowly, his jaw flopping open, his filmy eyes bulging like buttered popcorn. "Don't, Sara, don't!" he screamed. "Sara—"

"Look at me, Les, look at me." Now her voice was cold—deadly.

And that's when I stepped behind her silently and slugged her—slugged her hard, with all my strength. She pitched forward on her face like a wet sack of flour and the gun dropped from her nerveless fingers. I don't know which hit the floor first, but it didn't make much difference any more, because Dotty had flown across the room, and I only knew that her arms were around me, her soft body clinging close to mine, her eager, red lips searching—searching—I knew then that I had more than just a gal singer on my hands and I was glad!

* * *

I suppose you ought to know that you can now hear Dotty on her own weekly show over the full network of the Consolidated Broadcasting System—also in case you want to hear her on records, she's made a stack of them—also she's just signed with Apex Pictures to do a couple of movies a year—also, if you ever get out to Hollywood, look us up, huh? It's Mr. and Mrs. Bud Arnold, address—Beverly Hills. Okay?

*Five-thousand pennies was the alimony
Pete was bringing his greedy ex-wife—
until he found that she'd already been paid in . . .*

PENNIES FROM HELL

By
**RAYMOND
DRENNEN**

Hilda had no heart—
yet a knife found it.



“YES, HILDA!” Pete Godfrey pushed the receiver up to his ear with his shoulder and scowled. “I appreciate your gesture, but you can skip the presents.” He waved the copy boy on with his free hand and glared down at his desk. Then his face colored as he listened, and he exploded. “What the hell will I do with a potted geranium?”

Mich Evans sang out from across the office, “Hey, Pete. Make a date for me.”

Jeanie Hale got up and came over to lean against Pete’s desk, tapping her heel significantly.

“Well if it’s not a present, what is it?”

Pete growled. Then he exploded again. “Memento, hell! I’ve got a memento. It says **DIVORCED. D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D.** Got it? You get your fifty bucks every week, don’t you?” He listened a minute and

grinned sadistically. “Yes, you’ll get it, Hilda,” he said sweetly.

Then he banged the receiver down and the desk rocked. Mich Evans let out a long, low whistle. “Alimony trouble, Pete?” he heckled. “Why don’t you pay the poor gal?”

Joe Quirt snorted, “Why don’t you knock her off, Pete? It’d be cheaper.”

“And that, my friend, is an idea,” Pete murmured deliciously. He pulled a sack out of his desk drawer and slammed on his hat.

Jeanie Hale acted bored. “Pennies again?”

“Pennies,” Pete smiled nicely. “Always pennies. It takes her two days to count ‘em and cash ‘em in.”

Pete spread his feet apart and glared at the office collectively.

"Any more help from anyone?" he demanded.

"You could join the Marines," Joe Quirt muttered.

"And leave a dish like that!" Mich Evans asked incredulously.

Pete stomped toward the door.

"She was only a farmer's daughter," someone called, "But Whooooee!"

Every Friday, Pete muttered. *Every damn Friday!* He pushed open the door of the tavern, went in and plopped the sack on the bar.

"Get that thing outa here," the bartender said.

"A glass of bourbon, Max, and lace it with arsenic," Pete said moodily. He had to do something. It was bad enough shelling out half his income every week, but the heckling had to stop. At first it hadn't been so bad, but at first there hadn't been Jeanie. She wouldn't stand for it much longer.

"I won't mind supporting you, Pete," she'd said nobly, "but I won't have that woman haunting our domestic castle." She'd put it to him bluntly, if a bit caustically, "Get rid of her, and you can have me."

Hilda had an expensive little apartment in Sutton Place. A bit gaudy, perhaps, but she was the kind of woman who could get away with it. She knew what her assets were, including her ex-husband. She fondly hoped, as she told him, to rook him for a good big sum one of these days. Her eyes, he'd informed her, were green from the reflection of money.

It was later than usual when Pete entered the apartment building and took the automatic elevator up to Hilda's apartment, sack in hand. He had dallied at Max's until after seven and his spirits had improved somewhat.

This shelling out had been a Friday night ritual, but it was wearing thin now. Her capacity for throwing a tantrum seemed boundless. Her eyes would flash fire and she would quiver. When she seized the sack and threw it at him, scattering five-thousand pennies all over the apartment, he would leave feeling somewhat better about the heckling he'd taken during the week. The pennies had been a fanciful gimmick to make her beg for mercy and lay off. But it hadn't worked. This was the

last time, he'd finally decided in Max's.

The door was ajar, and, when she didn't answer immediately, he walked in. A strange force gripped him and held him motionless, sending shivers along his spine. The only light in the apartment came from the moon slanting pale rays through the corner window.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he knew there was something wrong—terribly wrong. There was a chair overturned. He could make that out near the window. The carpet was up—not a roll, just a shapeless heap in the middle of the floor. But more than that, there was a smell of horror in the air, a pungent odor that seeped subtly into his nostrils and made his skin crawl.

He had a sudden, overpowering urge to turn and run out of the apartment. Disaster, some unknown presence seemed to be lurking. He forced himself to walk to the table and switch on the lamp, then he stood stiffly surveying the wreckage. The room was a shambles, with drawers pulled out and overturned and chair bottoms slashed. The malicious vandalism had touched everything.

A fierce prescience drew him through the living room to the bedroom. He found her there, lying on the bare bed-springs, her hands and feet bound and her mouth closed with adhesive tape.

The acrid, pungent odor was stronger here, and he could see the cigarette ashes on her bare flesh around the blisters. He gazed at her for a moment, stunned with disbelief, then closed his eyes tight, grimly thankful for the knife wound in her heart that had brought relief from her torment.

HE WALKED stiffly back into the living room, his mind blocked with horror, as in some ominous nightmare. He put his hand on the phone and dialed.

The silence around him was oppressive and malignant. As much as he'd hated her, he couldn't wish her to be murdered so brutally.

"Police headquarters," the receiver said.

As much as he'd hated her—

Why don't you knock her off, Pete! Joe Quirt had said.

Pete heard his own voice coming sepulchraly back, telling her in words that could hold a thousand meanings for the

half dozen people who'd heard them, *Yes, you'll get it, Hilda—*

"Police Headquarters!" the voice repeated gruffly.

There'd been more words in the tavern with Max. Other things, for weeks, that could be misinterpreted. Pete had made no secret of his intense hatred for Hilda. She'd heckled him and tormented him and driven him into debt.

Could you put a little arsenic in a bottle of scotch, he'd asked Max. *I want to send a birthday present to my ex-wife.* He was blowing off steam then, but the police might not think so when Max told them about it.

His palm was moist as he let the receiver slip out of his hand onto the telephone base. His eyes stared fixedly as thoughts lashed through his brain. He wanted her murderer caught and punished, but no one knew who the murderer was. Pete was a first suspect for the police, and, if it was a crime of pure sadism and passion, they might not look any further. Who had a better motive for that kind of murder than he?

Suppose he left quietly and attempted to establish an alibi of some sort? Then the police would spend their energies looking for the real murderer.

He took his handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped the telephone. He'd touched the light when he'd turned it on and the door knob when he'd come in. Nothing else.

He moved quickly, his breath coming fast. He let himself out and started for the stairway, when he remembered. He'd come up in the elevator and had touched the door and pressed the buttons. He veered toward it now, stepped in, carefully wiping the handle, and pushed the number-two button. He wiped the buttons, got off at the second floor and walked down.

In front, he glanced quickly along the sidewalk in both directions. It was dark, and there were a number of people on the street, but no one close to him. He had his hand on his hat brim, pulling it down over his face, trying to shield it but not appear furtive if anyone was watching him.

The man across the street seemed to have an unusual interest in him, and Pete felt a moment of panic as he walked swiftly toward the corner, toward the subway a block further. He wanted to run, to look

back and see if the man was following him, but he didn't dare.

As he walked, he had the apprehensive conviction that he'd overlooked something. Mentally he went over every move he'd made. He'd gone into the bedroom, but the door had been open and he hadn't touched it. He hadn't touched her. He'd just looked, then he'd gone back to the telephone. Still, he had the feeling there was something important he'd missed.

At the corner, he looked back as he turned. The man had crossed the street to his side and was coming after him swiftly, half running. He was a tall man, well dressed in a dark suit and heavy set, but that was all Pete could see in his quick glance.

He turned the corner and there was a cab waiting, its engine running for warmth. Pete prayed gratefully and jumped in.

"Columbus Circle and hurry!" he barked.

The driver glared at him coldly. "Yes, sir!" he growled.

The cab moved away from the curb, and Pete collapsed on the seat, his lungs sucking in a deep breath of air. His chest ached as if it had been crushed in an encircling vice.

Maybe the man wasn't following him after all, he thought. Just his nerves. He was imagining everything. It couldn't be a detective. The police didn't know about the murder yet. And there was certainly no reason why the murderer should follow him.

Pete felt a little foolish and angry. He looked back through the window of the cab, to reassure himself. But it wasn't his nerves. The man was there, standing on the curb under the light, trying to get another cab.

At Columbus Circle, Pete got out, handing the driver a bill without looking at him, and walked away quickly. Then he began to think.

The driver would remember him, running out, nervous, in a hurry to get away to Columbus Circle. No specific address. When he saw the murder in the paper, he would tell the police. Identification would be a cinch, because Pete was the Number-One Boy.

He walked up Broadway and went into a drug store for a cup of coffee. He couldn't

be sure the man was following him, but why in the name of everything holy hadn't Pete gone up to him and found out. Yeah, he thought sourly, and get his head blown off if it was the murderer. So what! The man wouldn't have gunned him if Pete was hanging on to him. There were other people around. Well—anyway—a block away.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Sure, he had a good motive for murdering Hilda, but he'd been panicked into running. You can't live with a woman, even Hilda—particularly Hilda—for a year without dropping a bearing. The sudden shock had demoralized him, and, as he thought about it, he realized his every action was making him more suspect than ever.

Suppose they did find something to prove he'd been in the apartment, and the driver identified him. He couldn't hope to explain his actions—or how the very thought of Hilda could panic the strongest of men. An innocent man didn't run away.

GETTING a grip on himself, Pete went to a telephone booth and dialed police headquarters again. It had been done now, and he couldn't undo it. He'd have to simmer in his own devil's stew. But he could lay the ground work to prove good faith. Well, it might help. He asked for the Homicide Bureau.

"There's been a murder at the Sgrave Apartments in Sutton Place," he said. He pitched his voice low and mumbled his words. "Mrs. Hilda Godfrey."

"Who is this?" the police voice demanded quietly.

"I heard the noise," Pete explained, "and don't want to get drawn into it."

He hung up and found he was shivering. "Dammit," he muttered. "She can't even get herself killed without fouling me up."

He went out on Broadway, hailed a taxi and rode to his own apartment. The clerk at the desk said, "Some guy's been calling you."

Pete stiffened.

"He wouldn't leave any message." Pete started for the elevator, and the desk clerk called, "Mr. Godfrey, there's a plant here for you: A nice pretty geranium."

Pete slid the elevator door open.

"Don't you want it, Mr. Godfrey?" the

clerk asked, leaning over the marble desk-top. "What'll I do with it?"

"Put it on the table for breakfast," Pete suggested irritably. When he got to his room, the phone was ringing. It was Jeanie.

Her voice was low-pitched and worried. "Pete, where have you been since you left the office?"

"Where are you?" Pete countered.

"I'm home," she said. "A man's been trying to get in touch with you. He called a couple times on the phone, and then he came over. I told him I didn't know where you were, but he didn't believe me. He was—" she hesitated, "—well, nasty about it. I told him to go fly a kite."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, he was very mysterious about it. A character out of a spy thriller."

"What did he look like?"

"I didn't see his face very well. I didn't take the chain off the door, and he kept his hat pulled down, cloak and daggerish. He was a thin man in a gray suit."

"Two of them," Pete muttered. "I'll be over as soon as I can get there, Jeanie. Keep the chain on the door."

"Pete, he's parked outside in his car. I can see him from my window." He heard her breathe deeply. Her voice was huskier than usual. She was frightened. "Listen, boy friend. What's happening?"

"Hilda's been murdered," he said bluntly. "I went over to pay—"

Pete caught his breath. *The pennies!* The creeping conviction that he'd overlooked something. He'd dropped the sack on the floor by the lamp table when he'd turned the light on.

"Oh, lordy," he groaned. "The cops are there now."

"Cops!" Jeanie wailed. "Pete! You didn't—murder Hildee!"

"Don't be asinine," he barked. "But they might think I did."

"Me too," she echoed. Then she said suddenly, "Pete! There's someone at the door. Hang on a minute."

"Don't, Jeanie!" he yelled. "It might be the murderer!"

The dull sound of the phone striking wood came over the wire as she laid it down. She hadn't heard him. A thin film of perspiration covered his face. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and put it in his mouth, his ear straining at the receiver.

A muted thud came over the wire, followed by the sound of muffled, indistinct voices.

"Jeanie! Jeanie!" he shouted. "Get on the phone!"

The voices had stopped. There was no sound at all from the other end. Blood rushed in his temples and he held his breath in frustrated anger. Then he heard a gentle click, and the line went dead.

His finger did a war dance on the telephone lever. The clerk answered finally. "Yes, Mr. Godfrey?"

"Get that number back quick," he belated. "Jeanie Hale. You know it."

He heard the clerk dial the number at the switchboard. He heard it ring in Jeanie's apartment. Once—twice—sweat was pouring down his face. The ringing stopped abruptly, and the desk clerk cut in pleasantly, "Mr. Godfrey, there's a call for you on the other wire. Just a moment."

"Don't!" Pete cried savagely. He ground his teeth in helpless rage. Then he heard the voice, smooth and insinuating, and a red flag ran up in his mind.

"Godfrey?" the voice asked.

"Who is it?" Pete demanded cautiously.

"Now take it easy, Godfrey," the man said softly. "You shouldn't have run away from me."

It was the man who'd followed him. The murderer—

"What do you want?" Pete asked hoarsely.

"You know what we want, Godfrey."

The silky purr in his voice was more menacing than a guttural threat. "We persuaded Hilda to tell us what she did with it, so we know you have it."

"Have what?" Pete demanded.

The man laughed shortly. "Don't be stupid, Godfrey." The clear contempt in his silky voice was maddening, perhaps intentional to goad Pete. "We've got the girl and she's still alive and pretty. But she won't be long, if you act stupid. Remember what happened to Hilda?"

Pete's face was red with impotent rage. "What do you want me to do?" he asked bitterly. Hilda had apparently told them she'd given something to Pete, and there was no way he could convince them she hadn't. He shuddered, thinking of the way Hilda had looked—and now Jeanie. Perhaps if he played along, stalled —

"Put it in your right hand coat pocket," the man snapped. His voice was crisp now. "Walk up the east side of Broadway to Columbus Circle. Go on into the park, walk past the zoo, and keep walking. Keep walking, chump. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," Pete muttered.

"Some place along the route, a man will come up beside you and ask for it. You give it to him and keep walking." The man made a nasty sound. "God help the girl if anyone's with you or tailing you. If there's a slip-up or if you bring in the police, you can keep the necklace, because the girl will be dead."

"Okay," Pete snarled. At least he knew what they were after. A necklace of some kind. Hilda had told them she'd given it to Pete, then they'd killed her. He could never convince them she hadn't. Not egocentric, miser-souled Hilda! It wasn't in her to give anything to anyone, not even to save her own alabaster neck.

"Start now, Godfrey," the man said, and hung up.

PETE dropped the receiver, his mind racing like a decontrolled merry-go-round. There had to be something he could do. He couldn't bring the police in, even if he wanted to. He was their prize suspect. They'd take him down to headquarters for grilling, and by the time he could convince them of the truth—if he could convince them—it would be too late for Jeanie's neck, too.

The police! he thought suddenly. They were probably on their way to get him now. He clapped his hat on his head and started for the door, but the sharp, insistent ring of the phone halted him.

He went back to it, undecided whether to answer, then scooped it up. It *might* be Jeanie. He still believed in miracles, though at the present he could do with a small manifestation.

"Yeah?"

"Shall I ring Miss Hale now?" the desk clerk asked cheerfully.

Ring Miss Hale—? In a split second it came to him. Just the small edge of a miracle, but maybe he could blow it up to a full-sized one. He'd been ringing Jeanie when the heavy-set man's call came in. That meant the man hadn't used the phone in Jeanie's apartment. He had probably called

from the cigar store across from Pete's apartment, and was now watching the front entrance for Pete to come out. That meant the thin man in the gray suit was alone with Jeanie. If Pete hurried, he might be able to save Jeanie before the heavy-set man got suspicious.

"Let it go," he cried, slamming the receiver down and running for the door. He took the stairs four at a time, went out through the bar entrance on the side street and caught a cab. Jeanie's place was only four blocks away, the second-floor-rear apartment of an old brownstone.

He couldn't hope to crash the front door, but with a little luck, he might make the fire escape through the bedroom window. In the alley he could see light in Jeanie's living room, but the bedroom was dark. He jumped against the brick and caught the rung of the drop ladder. The rusty squeak sounded in the dark alley like a tired ban-shee.

He listened a minute, expecting to see head, shoulders and a cannon pop out of the window over his head. Nothing happened and he started up the ladder. He'd never tried this route into Jeanie's life before, but he knew there was no screen on the window. He knew the lock was broken, too, because he'd tried to fix it himself. He was now fervently thankful for his ignominious failure.

He pressed his fingers under the edge of the window frame and lifted, then eased his long legs over the sill. There wasn't enough light coming down the short hallway from the living room for him to see very well, and he stood inside the window for a moment, trying to recall the position of furniture. The radio was playing in the living room, and he knew grimly that the faint aroma he was sniffing wasn't from Jeanie's cigar.

Creeping stealthily down the hall, he heard a chair scrape suddenly in the living room, and he froze against the wall. A man's gruff voice rumbled, "Where do you keep your liquor, beautiful?"

There was a pause, followed by a nasty laugh. "Ha, you just don't feel like answering, do you, beautiful?"

Pete was next to the kitchen door opening off the hall, and he melted into the darkness. He could hear the man walking around the living room, pacing nervous-

ly. But there was no sound from Jeanie. Then the footsteps came closer, entered the mouth of the hallway.

"Maybe there's a snort in the kitchen, beautiful," he grunted. "You'll never miss it."

In the darkness, Pete's fingers closed around the neck of a milk bottle on the sink. If you've hurt her, brother—he promised direfully.

The dark figure of the man appeared suddenly in the doorway, and Pete swung the bottle. He felt it splinter against the man's forehead and warm liquid spray out over him. He felt it in his face and on his hands as the man slid to the floor.

Pete lunged desperately for the light switch on the wall, then stood for a moment, gazing down a little bewildered at the prostrate figure of the thin man in the gray suit. Maybe the man was dead. He was certainly unconscious and likely to stay that way.

Pete leaped over his body and ran toward the living room as the telephone started to ring. As he burst in, he halted suddenly. Then he took his first breath of air since starting up the fire escape and grinned.

Jeanie was sitting in a hard-backed chair, her hands tied behind her and her legs taped to the chairlegs.

"Well, do something, Robin Hood," she urged sarcastically. "You look silly standing there dripping warm milk all over my carpet."

Pete looked at the uncertain gleam in her eye and decided to come to an understanding with her about their immediate and long-range relationship while he still had the advantage. The phone was ringing insistently, and he picked it up.

"Yeah—?" he grunted.

"This you, Sam? Godfrey hasn't showed yet." The voice wasn't silky or purring now. It carried an undercurrent of alarm and desperation. In a sudden inspiration, Pete grinned a little crookedly and turned his mouth away from the receiver, speaking so the man on the other end could only hear him muffled.

"Okay, okay Sam. Take it easy with that rod," he pleaded. "Okay I'll tell him. Just don't hurt the girl."

Pete put his mouth back against the receiver. "This is Godfrey. Sam says to tell

you I'm here and come on over. But, listen, he promised to let us go." Pete listened a minute. "Yeah, I gave it to Sam," he said, grinning.

A MOMENT later, Pete put the receiver down, took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. Jeanie's eyes, he reflected somberly, were lovely when she was angry.

"Peter Hornfield Godfrey," she snarled, "get me out of this—this—"

He walked over to her slowly, tilted her chin up and kissed her on the mouth.

"Oh, Pete," she sighed. "I've been so afraid. After they got the Nestor necklace, they were going to use me to decoy you out to a lonely place on Long Island and kill us both. What have you done with the necklace, Pete?"

Pete groaned. "I don't have it, and I never heard of it before. What is the Nestor necklace?"

"But you *must* have it," Jeanie insisted. "Hilda told them she'd sent it to you."

Pete stood up, folded his hands and gazed at her patiently. "Will you please tell me," he said in a rising voice, "what the hell is the Nestor necklace?"

Jeanie's eyes widened. "Lower your voice, Peter," she said primly. "It's a \$40,000 string of baubles stolen from Madame Nestor at her home in Great Neck this afternoon. Two men and a woman pulled the job, the police think, according to the radio. Madame Nestor became a corpse during the episode."

Pete whistled softly. "And Hilda couldn't resist trying a double-cross," he murmured.

"I can understand your avarice, what with your earlier environment," Jeanie purred, "but you ought to know you can't get away with it. What have you done

with the necklace?" She added pointedly, "And untie me this minute!"

Pete walked to the sofa and laid down. "My pet," he said patiently, "you don't know Hilda. She wouldn't send it to me. She just told them that so they would knock me off, when I couldn't deliver it to them, and at the same time throw them off her track. Only her scheme backfired."

"Oh!" Jeanie cried. "How you story! Why would she want you knocked off? Her alimony stops."

"For \$10,000 worth of insurance," Pete said wearily. "We took out a joint policy, payable to the other in case of death." His short laugh sounded like the wail of an imprisoned ghost. "She told me she'd collect on it or die in the attempt. Wheeewwww," he added, "I thought she was kidding."

"Peter," Jeanie said sternly. "That's eyewash. I heard you talking to Hilda on the phone this afternoon. She sent you a potted geranium. The necklace obviously is hidden in the roots, in case you haven't found it." She sniffed. "Which I find hard to believe. Your mind is ordinarily sharp."

Pete sat up on the sofa, looked at Jeanie for a long minute, and laughed. "A potted geranium, my sweet, is usually a potted geranium," he murmured patiently. "But in this case, it was nothing more than a herring train for our two boys to sniff at. You don't know Hilda!"

A faint footpad sounded in the hall, and Pete jumped off the sofa, his eyes darting around. "Oh, lordy," he groaned. He spied a bronze bust on the bookcase and dived for it, just as the door burst open.

It was a big man, gun in hand, with six squads of artillery crowding behind him.

(Please continue on page 110)

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A HITCH IN CRIME



"I'll fix up the time bomb," he said.

By
RUFUS BAKALOR

ALICIA strolled down the dark street as if she were out for nothing more than a breath of fresh air. Suddenly, a convertible glided alongside her, its left door swung open, and Alicia darted into the car in one smooth, practiced movement.

She lit a cigarette and took a series of quick, nervous puffs at it. "Today was the

pay-off. Bar none, he's the stupidest man that was ever created."

"Who? Irwin?" asked her companion. "What'd he do now?"

"He let some door-to-door salesman talk him into buying a vacuum cleaner on the installment plan. With all the attachments, one-hundred-and-nine dollars."

"Does *that* prove he's stupid?"

*Irwin was the champion bungler—
he even managed to retain his title
at the funeral his wife had planned for him.*

"It helps. We haven't got a carpet in the house—only linoleum."

Tom Macaulay laughed for a while in fits and starts. At last, he said, "Any trouble about getting out tonight?"

"The dumb cluck thinks I went to a linen shower at Ruthie's house. She'll cover me."

"Ruthie doesn't know about us, does she?"

"She knows there's *someone*, but I've never told her that you're the lucky man." Tom was silent and Alicia changed the subject. "I can see him now," she said angrily, "sitting at home in his smelly socks, playing solitaire and listening to the ball game. Ugh!"

"Hey, don't take it out on me. Why'd you marry him for in the first place?"

"After twelve years of married life, there's damn few wives that can answer *that* question. Anyway, it's a miserable life—except when I'm with you." She slid closer to him and put her head on his shoulder. "There's one thing that's for sure: he'd never give me a divorce, not Irwin."

"He's on your mind quite a bit, isn't he, Alicia?"

"If only he'd disappear or something," she mused. "There's people—nice people—reported missing every day, but not Irwin. Why doesn't he blow up sometime? You've both told me that there's a lot of explosives in the storeroom where he works. Well, what's holding back the explosion?"

"Don't bank on anything like that happening. They take too many precautions."

"Well, I can dream, can't I?" She looked up at Tom. He was biting at a corner of his lower lip. "A penny for your thoughts."

"Maybe they're worth more than a penny." He paused. "I was thinking: Irwin's got some life insurance, hasn't he?"

"Sure. Like he always says, he's worth more dead than alive. Fifteen-thousand-dollars worth."

"Double indemnity for an accident makes it thirty-thousand. Then you sue our company and get—say thirty-thousand more. Could you bear to part with Irwin for sixty-thousand dollars? How's that sound?"

"Like music to my ears," said Alicia with a wriggle. "You're 'way ahead of me. What's it all about?"

"It just occurred to me, like a flash," said Tom. "This storeroom Irwin works in at the research lab, its got ether, butane, gasoline, and alcohol stored in it. Ordinarily there's not much chance of an explosion because they've got too many safety checks."

"*But*, if there was an explosion to start it all off, it would be a dandy. And, if Irwin ever came down, it would be in very teeny, weeny pieces. Still interested?"

"Go on," said Alicia.

"This explosion to start things popping would be pretty easy to make—just a simple little time bomb. All you'd need is an innertube filled with gasoline, some matches, dry cells, and an alarm clock. Strong enough, though, to do the trick, even if it didn't touch the other stuff off."

Alicia narrowed her eyes. "It would be murder, wouldn't it?"

"Depends on your viewpoint. Want to forget about it?"

"What are the chances of getting caught?"

"None. Play it smart, and there's no risk at all."

"And what about afterwards? What about you and me?"

"You'll be a widow then, Alicia, and free. We'll take that sixty-grand, blow this town for good and get married."

Alicia sat quietly for a long time. Then she said brightly, "What the hell, it's worth a try. Anything's better than this life I'm leading."

"Good girl! I'll fix up the time bomb, set for about ten-thirty in the morning, when Irwin's sure to be in the storeroom alone. He always is, at about that time, making up his requisitions. We'll wrap it all up in a parcel, addressed and ready for shipment. You give it to him when he goes to work in the morning, to mail after work. His bus only gets to the plant at a quarter-to-eight, so he'd have to keep it with him all day."

"If there's going to be a clock in it, the ticking might make him suspicious. So I'll say that it is a clock—a big clock, that I'm sending to his Aunt Louise in Madison. It could even have her address on the package. I'll say that it's one she asked me to pick up for her."

"Brilliant. Brilliant. How can we miss, two brilliant people like us?"

"When shall we do it, Tom?"

"The sooner, the better, so we won't get cold feet. There's only one thing, though. Since I work at the same place as Irwin, maybe it'd be best if it would happen on a day when I wasn't there. Just a little added protection. I'm due to drive to our Dubuque plant Thursday. How about then?"

"Thursday's the day. Shake on it?"

"Kiss on it," said Tom, drawing her to him. "I'll fix the bomb up Wednesday night, any time after ten-thirty, and give it to you."

"Poor Irwin," said Alicia wistfully. "He doesn't know what's coming to him."

"Oh, don't worry about Irwin. He'll get a big bang out of it."

THURSDAY morning, as Irwin rose sleepily from the breakfast table, Alicia said casually, "Oh, by the way, lover-boy, do me a favor, will you? Mail this parcel for me after work."

"Huh?" said Irwin, studying the address label. "Aunt Louise in Madison. What you sending her?"

"A clock. One of those mantelpiece models. She's always wanted one like it and I picked this one up yesterday at the second-hand shop. Got it for practically nothing."

"Let's have a look at it," said Irwin, fumbling at the wrapping.

"No, Irwin. No!" said Alicia, pulling it away from him. "The man packed it all specially, so it wouldn't get damaged in shipment, and we'd never get it packed like that again. Besides, Irwin, there isn't time. Look, your bus is due in five minutes?"

"Bus? Oh, yes, the bus. O.K."

"Insure the parcel, Irwin, and have them mark it *'FRAGILE'*, and be sure to keep it with you in the storeroom. Don't let it out of your sight. I'd never find another one like it for your Aunt Louise in a thousand years."

Irwin stood with his lunch box in one hand and the parcel under his other arm. Alicia put his hat on his head.

"Promise me, Irwin, that you won't open it. Promise me!"

"I promise," said Irwin, and he was off to the bus stop, humming "Oh, Promise Me."

When Irwin was out of sight, two-and-

a-half hours of maddening waiting started for Alicia. She tried to do the breakfast dishes, but couldn't.

She kept glancing jerkily at the kitchen clock, and seeing the clock in the time-bomb parcel running contemporaneously with it. At the rate the minute hand crept around, ten-thirty seemed ages away.

And what if the fool should open the parcel? That would be just like him. She wouldn't put it past him. What then? But she kept assuring herself that he wouldn't open the parcel, that she'd insisted strongly enough that he wasn't to open it.

Something would go wrong. She was sure it would. And if it did, everything would point to her. Oh, sure, Tom Macaulay was in the clear. He'd seen to that. By ten-thirty, he'd be driving along the highway, on his way to Dubuque. No connection with the explosion, the stinker. Little Alicia'd be left holding the bag.

Ah, but nothing could go wrong. How could it? Irwin was too stupid. It was a cinch. He only did what other people told him to do. No mind of his own.

They'd probably call her from the mill right after it happens. Hysterical, that's what she'd be—hysterical, all broken up. If she didn't go crazy first.

It was the worst, and the longest, two-and-a-half hours Alicia had ever suffered. At nine-thirty, she had been convinced that the kitchen clock had come to a dead stop. She called Western Union and found that it hadn't.

Ten o'clock, half-an-hour to go, and her mind buzzed with fluttering pros, cons, suspicions, doubts, fears, reassurances, and—finally—regrets.

At ten-past-ten, her mind suddenly took a different track: Irwin had a lot of faults, but so did she. As the time for his undoing came precariously close, she felt very tenderly disposed toward him.

Maybe his eyebrows didn't meet, like Tom Macaulay's did, and maybe he didn't have nearly as good a job at the company as Tom had, or a convertible. But he was good and simple and steady. Irwin would never think of murder.

She decided that she couldn't go through with it, and stumbled to the telephone. The dial seemed out of focus, but she managed to get the mill's number.

(Please continue on page 111)



Private-peep Merrit drove cross-country to answer an SOS from his ex-gal friend and found himself in small-town Paynesburg—and a hot case of attempted murder.

He was met by a trio of beauties who hated each other, a dying old man and a sleepy lug with plenty of muscle and strange ideas of hospitality.



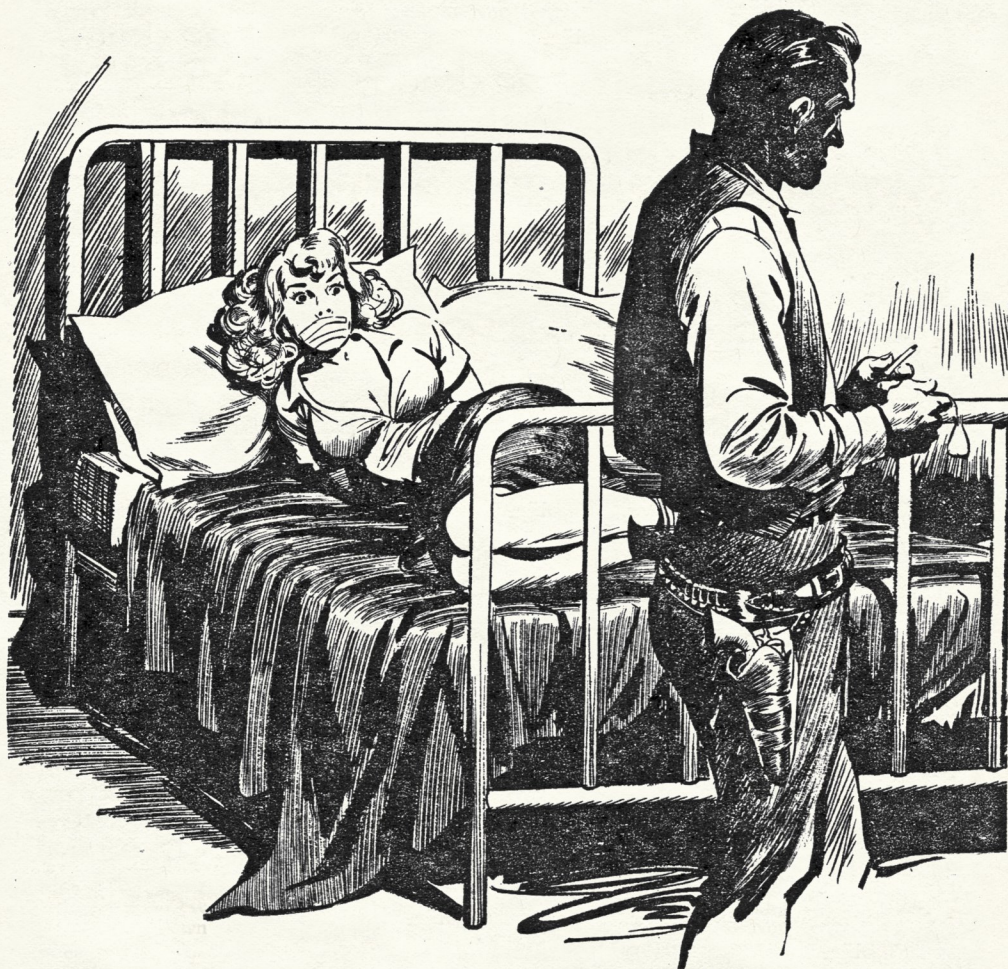
Merrit hadn't been around long before he discovered that small towns can offer haven to homicides, too, and that his mission was no secret—even from his ex's husband.

It all came to a suicidal simmer when Merrit learned that . . . "Death Runs In The Family," in John D. MacDonald's new novel, in the next issue, out June 1st.

*On the speeding cattle train
a poker hand was turning into a Cain-branded feud—
and the cows were not the only creatures
rushing to meet their doom.*

Thrill-Loaded Detective Novelette

By DAY KEENE



**HE WHO
DIES LAST,**

CHAPTER ONE

Death, Dealing

OUTSIDE the caboose the night was a scene from a picture postal card. A silver moon glistened on fallow fields, fence-deep in snow. There were tall trees bowing in the wind and the jangling of bells and flashing of lights at crossings



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A voice came from behind Joel. "Okay, drop it, chump!"

DIES HARDEST

passed. Dark farmhouses nestled in sleep, indifferent to the flying red-ball out of Cheyenne, as it sped east on the last lap of its long haul to Chicago.

Here in the crummy—where murder was in the making—there was no sound but the plaintive bawling of doomed cattle that was whipped back by the wind, the rhythmic click of the rail joints and the slap of greasy cards on the table.

Morton, the cattle-train conductor, had tried to break it up in vain. Now he stood watching the players who had been frozen out.

Joel Dawson, his new white Stetson pushed back on his forehead and his eyes bright with excitement, counted the pile of bills and silver in front of him. It was almost unbelievable, but true. He had five-thousand, eight-hundred and fifty dollars.

"It's bad luck to count your money, Joel," Tex grinned across the card table.

White teeth flashed in Joel's youthful, bronzed face. "I'll chance it." He sat swaying with the motion of the train, listening to the click of the rail joints. His hat, his boots, his suit were new. Tomorrow he would be twenty-one—a man. He fingered the bills again. It was the first time that he had ever had the handling of more than fifty dollars in his life, a top-hand's wages. It was also the first time that he had ever been east of Omaha. If this was life, he liked it.

Blackie Dawson, his older^{er} brother, cut the cards and laid the deck in front of Joel. Despite the four years difference in their ages, the brothers might have been twins, except for a certain grim self-assurance in the older brother's face. Blackie had a right to be self-assured. He had taken over a run-down spread when their father had died five years before and built it up into the Crazy K.

"Your deal, Joel," Blackie said quietly.

There were ten Crazy K riders in the car but only the three were still playing. The game had been going on for days, abandoned for brief moments only when infrequent stops were made to prod the weary cattle to their feet.

It had begun as a dime ante, two-bit limit, three raises around the table pastime. That had been the other side of Omaha. There was no limit now. If you had the

cards, you bet them. Ted and Joel were out of their class but playing on velvet. Blackie Dawson could afford no-limit games. Beef cull or prime, yearling or grass-cows, heifers, cutters, feeders, anything with four hoofs that could moo or bawl was at a premium. This one cattle shipment would net him one-hundred-thousand dollars.

Joel glanced at his brother as he dealt. He had never hated anyone so much. Blackie had worked him like a dog and kept him, on hand's rations. He had laughed at the younger man when Joel had suggested that one-half of the ranch should be his. He had drilled him long and late in his own code of life:

Play by the rules. Keep your ears open and your mouth shut. Never take a penny that you haven't earned. Hold your liquor like a man or leave it alone. Never start a fight and never run from one that someone else has started. Never over-bet your hand or make a promise you can't keep. Never count your calves before they're dropped.

The latest cause of friction had been Sally. Joel had worshipped the girl and brought her wild flowers. The more practical Blackie had bought her a diamond the size of a pigeon egg and married her. She was waiting for him now at the Chalmer's House in Chicago while her husband rode a stinking cattle train like any of his hands.

A card fell on the table face up, a tray of clubs, and Tex demanded that it be burned. "Come on. Keep your mind on your business, Joel," he said curtly. "This isn't a kid's game. We aren't playing penny ante."

YOUNG Joel's face flushed but he accepted the rebuke in silence. Tex Martin was the only other hand still playing. A lean, taciturn little man, he had arrived at the Crazy K three months before the Eldridge kidnapping case, by which all of Laramie County now dated events, and in a year had earned a foreman's job. He also could play poker. He had as much cash in front of him as Joel and all of it was velvet.

The red-ball whistled for a crossing, then began to slacken speed as the men

picked up their hands. A brakie stormed through the crummy door and stood brushing the snow from his shoulders.

"Better make this the last hand, fellows," he advised. "We're pulling into the yards."

Tex Martin studied his hand. "That's fine with me."

"And me," Joel nodded. He felt suddenly very tired.

"Sure." Blackie Dawson's chuckle was good-natured. "Why shouldn't you tin-horns be willing to quit. You're into me for over ten-thousand dollars."

Joel half rose in his chair to face his brother. The butt of a pearl-handled .45 showed plainly in his shoulder holster. "You can have your satisfaction in any caper you name," he suggested hopefully.

The air in the crummy grew electric. Blackie Dawson rose to face his younger brother.

Both men were six-feet tall. Both bet-tered two-hundred pounds.

"Okay," Blackie said quietly. "I choose heifer dust at thirty yards."

The crummy rocked with laughter. Tex rapped sharply on the table. "Come on. Quit horsing, fellows. Let's play cyards."

"Later," Joel said quietly to his brother.

"Forget it, kid," Blackie grinned. He sat down and picked up his cards. "I open for a hundred dollars."

Tex kicked it up five hundred.

Still smarting from being laughed at, Joel raised him a thousand dollars. "That's fifteen-hundred dollars to you, Mr. Dawson."

The lookers-on grew silent. This wasn't poker. This was blood.

Blackie Dawson studied his cards. "Let's

put it up a thousand more," he said.

Both Tex and Joel met the raise. The skin on the youth's cheek bones had grown taut. He had let his anger get the better of his judgment. He was twenty-six hundred dollars in the pot before the draw—on nothing but a four flush in clubs. He kept his emotion from his voice as he picked up the deck. "Cyards—?"

His brother tossed a king of hearts face up on the table. "One to me and I'm breaking up my openers."

"I'll play these," Tex said.

"And on to the dealer." Joel tried hard not to grin as he looked at the card. His luck was holding. It was the ten of clubs.

Blackie checked to the pat hand and Tex bet a thousand dollars.

"And up a thousand more." Joel grinned. He figured that Tex and Blackie were bluffing and hoped to freeze them out.

But Blackie wasn't bluffing. "And two thousand more," he said quietly.

The watchers gasped. Cold sweat beaded the youngster's forehead. He had broken the cardinal rule that Blackie had pounded into him for years. Never over-bet your hand. If Tex raised now instead of calling he was automatically out of the pot. He had only two hundred dollars left. He couldn't meet another raise.

Tex kicked it five hundred dollars.

Blackie deliberately counted the money stacked in front of Tex. Then he raised him a hundred dollars more than Tex could cover.

His face grown ashen now beneath its bronze, Tex pushed his pile into the center of the table. "I call and play a hundred dollars light."

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The rancher shook his head. "Not in this game you won't. You know the rules. Put up or shut up. You either meet all raises with cash—or you lose all interest in the pot."

THE watchers stopped breathing. There was better than fifteen-thousand dollars on the table. Tex Martin wet his lips. He seemed to be coming to some decision.

"No," he said finally. "That pot is mine." He fumbled inside his flannel shirt and drew out a limp one-hundred-dollar bill. "You're called, Dawson. Beat a king high full!"

"I can." The ranch owner grinned. "I got two pairs of deuces!"

He laid down the four little ones. The watchers began to breathe again. An excited chatter filled the crummy.

Joel got up from the table in disgust. "If you fell in a vat of cattle dip, you'd still smell like a polecat."

His brother let the insult pass.

Tex Martin's face was still ashen. "You're going to have to let me draw some wages, Blackie," he said meekly. He reached for the limp one-hundred-dollar bill. "Say about—"

The rancher slapped his hand away. "I'll do the saying." He counted out ten twenties and pushed them toward the rider. "There's a bonus on this shipment, Tex." He pushed the limp hundred and five twenties toward his brother. "And there's the same for you, Joel." He tucked the balance of the money into a bulging wallet and got up from the table. "The rest of you boys can draw up to three months wages after we get the cattle unloaded."

Joel stuffed the money in his pocket and stopped his brother as he turned to go. "Aren't you forgetting that other little game?"

More in sorrow than in anger, the older man took off his coat. Joel rushed him and connected with a wild haymaker that sent Blackie crashing back into the stove.

The conductor raised a coupling pin, then seemed to reconsider. This had been brooding for a long time. As long as they fought with their fists instead of guns it might be well to let the brothers have it out.

It ended quickly in Blackie's favor. Taking two blows to land one, he crowded

his brother to the wall. Then Blackie hammered him methodically and without malice, a man intent upon a duty, until the younger man dropped unconscious to the floor.

By now the train had stopped.

"Okay," the rancher snapped at the gaping riders. "Drag out of here."

Tex Martin was the last to leave. "That hundred I bet you, Blackie. I was kinda trying to save it. And I wonder if—"

"Get out!" the rancher roared.

Alone with his brother and the conductor, Blackie moistened the youth's lips with whiskey. His voice was strangely gentle. "Come on. Snap out of it, Joel. You're a swell kid and I like you. It's just that you don't understand. I—" A man of action and not words he was unable to express his feeling. "Come on. Snap out of it," he repeated gruffly.

The last was all Joel heard. He got shakily to his feet, lifted a hat from the floor and tugged it on his head.

"Someday," he said in farewell from the doorway, "I'm going to kill you, Blackie."

The door slammed hard behind him.

Joel had taken his brother's hat instead of his own new Stetson. Dawson recovered the new one from the floor. He turned, smiling, to the conductor. "He's only a kid—hot tempered. He didn't mean that."

"The hell he didn't," the conductor told him sagely.

CHAPTER TWO

Mistake Made

JOEL seemed to be riding a red, morroco-leather saddle, stuffed with inner springs. At the far end of a long bar, a girl in a spotlight was moaning that her man had gone away. Another girl in a bare-backed, strapless evening gown sat beside him. As far as he could see, they were the only customers in the bar.

"Feeling better, honey?" she inquired as he sat up.

The youth pulled himself straight with an effort. "How did I get here?" he demanded.

A fat barman laughed so hard that his jelly-like belly bobbed. "Under your own power, son. You yipped that you'd just

turned twenty-one and this was your night to howl." He consulted a tab on the back-bar. "You've done pretty well so far."

Joel held his aching head. He hadn't the least recollection of the last few hours. Blackie's face stared at him disapprovingly through his alcoholic fog. *Hold your liquor like a man or leave it alone. If you must raise hell, stay sober when you paint a town. It's a lot more fun that way.*

"Where am I?" he demanded of the girl.

She was pretty in a cheap and tawdry way. "You're in Goldie's on South State Street," she told him.

The name was familiar. Joel had often heard it around the watch-fires on the range. The night spot catered to the catlemen.

"And it's five o'clock in the morning," the girl continued. She took a lipstick from her bag and applied it earnestly.

Joel asked the barman for his tab. It came to forty-nine dollars and fifty cents. "For what?" the young cattleman demanded.

The fat barman spread both plump palms on the bar. "Well, you bought twice for the house, sonny," he said glibly. "But if you want to be a piker—"

Joel knew that he was being clipped, but there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't prove otherwise. He laid three of the twenties that Blackie had given him on the bar. Then he ordered an old-fashioned to sooth his screaming nerves. "Give the girl the change," he told the barman.

"You darling!" The hostess on the stool beside him kissed him swiftly.

"Good night," he said shortly.

She flipped a farewell and swung away. Joel sat nursing his drink glumly and wondering what to do. He wasn't going back to the ranch. That much he knew. His days of slaving for Blackie, doing the work of three hands for one hand's begrudged pay, were over. To hell with the Crazy K.

The entertainer had stopped singing. The piano player had shifted from his bench over to the bar. He and Joel had the long bar to themselves. The hostesses had gathered, to a chattering group, in one of the back booths against the wall.

"Must be about time for the morning war news," the barman yawned as he fid-

dled with the dials of a small radio on the back-bar. "Tough guys them Heinies, eh?"

"But not as tough as our boys," Joel insisted. He knew now what he was going to do. He was going to find a recruiting office and wait until it opened. Blackie couldn't beg him off the draft board here, claiming he was needed to raise beef.

He sat smiling at the thought, half-listening to the voice of the announcer until he shifted to the local news.

". . . and now for local news. Of tragic interest is the death of Joel Dawson, a young cattleman of Broken Bow, Wyoming, who arrived at the Chicago Stockyards last night with a shipment of cattle badly needed on our far-spread battlefronts.

"At first thought an accident when his trampled and mutilated body was found in a still-loaded cattle car, Lieutenant McNeary of Homicide has now definitely established the fact that the young cattleman was shot twice through the head before being thrown into the car for the frightened cattle to mutilate almost beyond identification.

"Wanted by the police for questioning is Blackie Dawson, an elder brother of the murdered youth with whom he is known to have quarreled bitterly over the outcome of a high-stake poker game. Witnesses state. . ."

Joe slid off the bar stool and stared at his reflection in the glass. "I'm dead," he told the barman. "That fellow just said over the radio that I'm dead.

"Yeah. Sure. You're dead, son," the barman humored him. He pointed to the handle of the youth's .45 showing in his gaping coat front. "But if you're walking out of here you'd better tuck that cannon back into your armpit. What say? Have one on the house before you go?"

"No," Joel said. "No, thank you."

He strode out of the night-spot on limber legs. The morning was clear and crisp. The cold wind off the lake bit into his still slightly fuddled senses and cleared them.

Someone was dead out at the Yard. Tex or Pinky or Lobo. The police thought it was him. Because he and Blackie had quarreled in the crummy the police had blamed it on Blackie. Joel had to warn him right away. They had to go out to the Yards together and identify the body.

"The Chalmer House," he told the driver of a waiting cab.

SALLY'S face was white and tear-stained. Her long black hair, done up in braids, hung over the shoulders of her nightdress. She looked like a little girl.

"You're drunk," she told Joel. "Get out of my room. Blackie would kill you if he found you here."

"I'm looking for Blackie," Joel said. "I—"

"Have run out of money, I suppose," his brother's wife interrupted.

Joel fought to keep his temper. He wished that Sally wouldn't always needle him every time that they met. "No," he insisted. "I—" He shifted from one leg to the other and wavered slightly.

"Why you can't even stand straight," the girl said scornfully. "And Blackie is a fool. You're a weakling like your father was. Once it's in your hands, you'll go through your half of the ranch in no time."

"My half of the ranch," Joel said quietly.

Sally's voice was skeptical. "You didn't know that Blackie was turning over half of the Crazy K to you today? You didn't know that half of the money for the shipment that just came in was to be your birthday present? That wasn't what you were celebrating?"

Joel tried to answer her, and couldn't. A lot of things had been suddenly made clear. Blackie didn't hate him. He felt toward him as a brother should. All the hell he had put him through had been a training course in manhood. Blackie had wanted to be certain that his younger brother was a man. That was why he had worked him like a slave, made him walk a chalk-line. Blackie liked him. He was giving him half of the ranch.

"Wasn't it?" the girl insisted.

"No," Joel told her quietly. "This is the first time that I've heard about it. You see, I haven't seen Blackie since our train pulled in. But I just heard over the radio that there has been a—an accident out at the Yards. One of the boys has been killed. The police think that it's me."

She knew how much they looked alike. Without warning, Sally fainted in his arms. Joel picked up his brother's wife and carried her to a chair.

"That's fine," a suave voice said behind

him in the doorway that he just had quitted. "Put your wife down, Blackie, and turf around with your hands in the air. The name is McNeary—Lieutenant McNeary of Homicide."

Joel sat Sally down in the chair and turned around. A well-dressed, gray-haired man, flanked by two burly bruisers whose faces spelled plainclothes men, had walked into the room and closed the door.

"And don't try for that heater you're carrying, Blackie," one of the detectives warned him curtly. "You're in Chicago now—not in Wyoming. Be smart!"

Joel took his hand away from his gun. "You're making a mistake. I'm not Blackie—I'm Joel Dawson."

Gorky, the larger of the two plainclothes men hooted. "Why kind of stupes do you think we are, cowboy? Get wise. We've found your brother's body. Joe Dawson's dead."

McNeary picked up the Stetson and glanced at the initialed sweat-band. "Since when," he demanded, "does Joel begin with B?"

Sudden fear, not for himself, drove an icy knife through the youth's heart. "How—how did you identify that—that man out at the Yards?" he asked in taut voice.

Gorky grinned. "By his new white Stetson. That's where you slipped up, Blackie, if you didn't want your brother to be identified. A half a dozen boys from the Crazy K identified the hat as one that Joel bought in Omaha." The detective took two quick steps forward and slipped the youth's gun from its holster.

McNeary took it from him and examined it with interest. "This what you shot him with, Blackie?"

"I'm not Blackie," Joel protested. "I left my hat in the crummy and took Blackie's by mistake. I was so mad I couldn't see. We—" he hesitated.

"Sure. We know," McNeary said crisply. "You and your brother beat each other's ears in. You'd just euchred him out of a fifteen-thousand-dollar poker pot—and Joel swore he was going to kill you. But you jumped the gun and killed him first. Is that the story, Blackie?"

Sally came out of her faint and began to sob. "He's dead. I know he is. That's why he didn't come to me last night. He's dead, Joel. Blackie's dead."

McNeary said: "What the hell—?"

Joel tried to twist free from Gorky to console Sally. The detective slapped him across the lips. Joel hit him so hard that the big man spun across the room to crumple unconscious on the bed. The other plainclothes man started for Joel.

"Hold it, Ed," McNeary stopped him.

Joel knelt by the sobbing girl's chair. "Please, Sally," he tried to soothe her. "These men are detectives and they want to help you. Tell them who you are."

"I'm Mrs. Dawson. Mrs. Blackie Dawson," she said choking on a sob.

"And who am I?"

"You're Joel, Blackie's brother."

Gorky had gotten up from the bed and had started at Joel in a bull-like rush. He stopped halfway across the floor as if suddenly walking on eggs.

"All right. So you're Joel," McNeary said sourly. "When did you last see your brother?"

"When I slammed out of the crummy—I think," the young cattleman told him frankly. "You see, I was drunk last night."

McNeary straightened stiffly. "Sometimes," he said quietly, "I wish I had stuck to driving a truck. Suppose you tell me this, son. If there has been a mistake in the identification of the deceased, who—" He changed his mind about what he had been about to say. "Suppose," he said instead, "we all go out to the Yards. I just learned the name of the hotel where Mrs. Dawson was staying or we'd have been here two hours ago."

"He isn't dead. He can't be. It can't be Blackie," Sally sobbed.

But she was wrong. It was.

IT WAS a dirty gray morning. The tech squad and the pic men had finished with the corpse and had piled the mangled thing that once had been a man into a stretcher. Joel made the identification. He hadn't allowed his brother's wife to see Blackie. He knew that Blackie wouldn't want her to. He would want Sally to remember him as he had been.

Here in the crummy nothing had changed. Except for McNeary and his squad, the faces were the same—with one face missing. The greasy cards still lay scattered on the table. The brisk morning wind still whipped the bawl of doomed cattle to the ears of the men in the caboose. The breathing of the men was as hoarse and strained as it had been the night before.

"Yeah. That's right," the sleepy-eyed cattle-train conductor told McNeary. "The kid picked up the wrong hat when he stormed out after threatening to kill his brother. 'He's just a hot-headed kid,' says Dawson to me. 'He doesn't mean it.'" The trainman looked sourly at Joel. "And I says to Dawson. The hell he don't." And it looks like I was right."

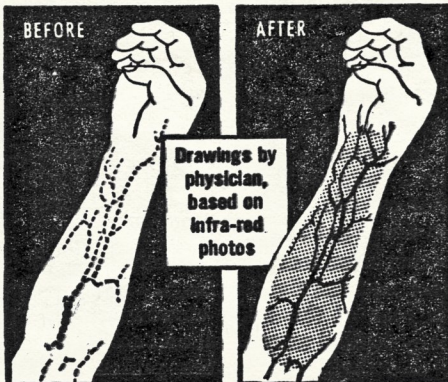
"Aw," Tex Martin scoffed, "Joel never killed Blackie."

The other Crazy K riders nodded their agreement.

McNeary lighted a cigarette. "How about it, Joel? Can you prove where you went after you left here last night?"

"No," Joel admitted, "I can't. I don't know where all I went or what I did. But I came to in a joint named Goldie's at five o'clock this morning."

Gorky said grimly, "I'll bet you tell that to all the detectives. Come on. Come clean, cowboy. Admit that you killed him."



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"Lay off, Tom," McNearly ordered. He leveled a finger at Tex Martin. "You were the third player in the game?"

The rider gulped. "Yes, sir. I'm right smart fond of cyards."

"You lost how much?"

The rider considered. "Well, I started with a hundred and twenty dollars and run it up to near six-thousand before that last hand bust me. But Blackie gave me a two-hundred-dollar bonus on this train of cattle. So, though I lost the six thousand, I really came out eighty to the good."

"And where was Blackie Dawson and what was he doing when you last saw him?"

Tex considered. "Blackie was standing near one of the pens giving the yard-master hell because we couldn't unload last night. Another big shipment had just come in and all the corrals were filled."

The trainman corroborated the statement. After raising hell in general because of the mix-up, Blackie had said that he was going down to the Loop to see his wife but would be back at five in the morning. He had started across the yards. No one had seen him from that time until his mangled body had been found almost a full hour later by two of the Crazy K riders who had noticed a carload of cattle milling. No one had heard the shots.

McNearly changed his tactics. "You're in love with your brother's wife, aren't you, Joel?"

"That's none of your business," the youth told the detective, white-faced.

"But murder is," the homicide man said curtly. "You sure that you didn't kill your brother, son?"

"I am," Joel gulped. "Sure, I was drunk last night. But I wasn't drunk enough to kill my brother and not remember a thing about it. Why don't you look for some of your Chicago gunmen that we're always reading about back home? Blackie had over fifteen thousand dollars on him last time I saw him."

Lieutenant McNearly shook his head. "That doesn't pass the rationing board. Whoever killed Blackie Dawson wasn't after money."

A grim silence filled the car. It was Tex who broke it finally. "How—how do you know that, mister?"

McNearly produced Blackie Dawson's

well-filled wallet. "Because one of the tech boys found this on the floor of the cattle car while I was on my way down to the hotel to see Mrs. Dawson." He turned back to Joel. "Why not tell us the truth now, son? This looks bad for you, damn bad."

CHAPTER THREE

Killers' Sign

DAY had finally passed and night had come again. Buffeted, jostled by the crowd that thronged the Loop, Joel strode down State Street with long strides to pause on the corner of Randolph. A million lights winked at him from the marquees of the big theatres. He had never seen so many people at one time. This was the night of which he had dreamed for years. Now it didn't mean a thing.

"Where," he asked the traffic officer on the corner, "would I find a restaurant by the name of Sam's Steak House, mister?" Sally had agreed to meet him there.

"Straight ahead in the middle of the next block," the policeman told him. He looked at the youth's puffed and battered face beneath the soiled white Stetson. "What's the matter, cowboy? Been in a fight?"

"One-sided," Joel agreed. He tapped the other man's star. "Four of your plain-clothes marshals have been building up their muscle on me since seven o'clock this morning."

He strode off, leaving the traffic man gaping. The youth wasn't even bitter. It had been a mere statement of fact. A man had his job to do. Blackie had pounded that into Joel with his fists a hundred times. And it was Lieutenant McNearly's job to find—by any means that he could—the man who had killed Blackie.

The youth swept off his white Stetson as he stepped out of the cold into the steamy fragrance of Sam's Steak House. "There's a lady waiting for me," he told the waiter-captain. "A Mrs. Dawson. She said that she'd get a table."

The other man looked his disapproval of Joel's face and led the way back to a table near the rear of the long, narrow restaurant. Sally looked very small and somehow fragile. Her eyes, too, were puffed and

swollen from the tears that she had shed.

"They hurt you, Joel," she said softly. She touched his purpling cheeks with her fingertips.

"It was their job," he said and then added, "but they were fair. Lieutenant McNeary checked all the places near the Yards where I might have been and found out that I'd been in most of them. When he found that I'd been whooping it up in a place called Mack's at the time the police doctor said that Blackie had been killed, he let me go."

He ordered a double porter-house.

"What," Sally asked a bit uncertainly after the waiter had gone, "are we going to do now, Joel?"

"I'm staying in Chicago," Joel told her grimly, "until they get whoever killed Blackie. Then I'm going back to the Crazy K and run the ranch the way I know that Blackie would want it run. I—" He stopped in the middle of his sentence, turned his head.

The heavy snout of a revolver was pressed into his spine. A tall, well-dressed, hard-faced man, breathing heavily as though he had been running, stood at his side, smiling down at him. A second man beamed at Sally as though they were old friends. The gun was hidden by a newspaper.

"You walk fast, Dawson," the tall man said, still smiling. "We tried to stop you before you left the Bureau but we couldn't catch you. Up on your feet now, son. McNeary wants to talk to you again."

Joel had never seen either man before. He half rose to his feet, then sat back in his chair, his palms spread on the table.

The man with the hidden gun in his back was lying. He wasn't a detective. A detective wouldn't hide his gun.

"We won't keep him so long this time, Mrs. Dawson." The second man smiled at Sally. "You go right on with your dinner. The chances are that he'll be back before you're finished."

The hidden gun dug deeper into Joel's spine. "Come on, Dawson," the tall man smiled. "Time's wasting."

WORRIED now, Joel got slowly to his feet. He was unarmed. McNeary had impounded his gun—said that a man was not allowed to carry one in Chicago. But

both of these men seemed to have guns.

"You wait right here, Sally," he told his brother's widow. "I'll be right back as soon as I—" He reached for his white Stetson on a wall hook, dropped it on the floor and stooped to pick it up.

His hand closed on a service table leg instead. He straightened, whirling the table above his head straight into the smiling face of the man who held the hidden gun. The gun clattered to the floor. The man crashed back into a table at which four women were sitting. It upset with a crash of chinaware and a tinkling of silver.

The four women screamed. The rest became confusion. Men jumped up from their tables and someone shouted for the police. Joel waited for a bullet that didn't come. The second man had scooped his companion's revolver from the floor, and the two of them fled in the confusion.

Red-faced with anger, the waiter-captain pushed through the milling diners and tried to restore order. "What happened here?" he demanded of Joel.

"A man threw down on me with a gun," Joel told him truthfully, "so I picked up that little table there and slugged him."

The waiter-captain looked skeptical. "You saw this gun?" he asked Sally.

The girl was staring at Joel, puzzled. "No," she admitted truthfully, "I didn't. But two men did come to our table. They said that they were policemen and—"

The waiter-captain was no longer listening to her. He was staring at the wreckage on the floor. "I wish that you cowhands would stay out of this place," he told Joel. "Every time one of you comes in here there's a brawl. Who's going to pay for this damage?"

The youth's face flooded crimson. He wasn't used to being stared at. "I will." He fumbled his billfold from his pocket. He had had a good time, so they told him, the night before. He had still had two hundred dollars when the poker game broke up. Blackie had given him another two hundred. Now all that he had left was the limp one-hundred-dollar bill. He gave it to the waiter-captain. "Here. Take it out of this."

The man clutched it greedily and went away pouring smiles on the troubled diners as he passed. "Everything's all right now," he assured them. "You know how these

Westerners are. It was only a slight misunderstanding between friends."

A porter appeared to clean up the wreckage. Two waiters hastily set up another table for the four women. Joel picked up his hat from the floor and replaced it on the hook before sitting back down at his table. "You didn't believe me," he said quietly to Sally, "but both of those men did have guns."

His brother's widow seemed to be trying to come to some decision. "If they were policemen, Joel," she said finally, "why didn't you go with them?"

"But they weren't policemen," he said patiently. "If they were, they would have arrested me—instead of running out after I smacked that tall lad with the table."

Sally's reasoning was feminine. "But why," she persisted, "would anyone not a policeman want you to come with them? You don't know a soul in town. You've never been here before." Her tone was slightly nettled. "It doesn't make sense, Joel."

"No," he admitted, "it doesn't." He hesitated and added, "But neither did it make sense when you up and married Blackie—when you were in love with me."

He hadn't meant to say that. Sally got up from the table. Joel tried to stop her. "Sally—"

She swept past him and out of the restaurant. The waiter brought their food. Joel sat picking at it. His appetite was gone. Whatever he said, whatever he did, was wrong.

HE WISHED that Blackie was there to advise him, but Blackie was dead. And whether Sally believed it or not, two unknown Chicago gunmen had tried to take him for a ride for some equally unknown reason.

He waited five minutes, hoping Sally would come back, then asked the waiter for his check.

"The captain is preparing it," the man assured him.

Joel waited another five minutes then strode up to the desk. The waiter-captain was very flustered now and seemed to be sweating over a column of figures.

"Don't bother to tally the brands on the chinaware," Joel said. "Just tell me if the hundred covers the damage and my check."

"Yeah. Sure it does, Bud." The other man eyed him furtively and began to perspire more profusely. "But if you'll wait just a few minutes more now until I add this up I think that you'll have some change coming to you."

"Keep it," Joel said quietly.

"But, mister," the other man tried to restrain him. "I—"

Joel brushed away the waiter-captain's clutching hands and strode out into the cold. He stood for a moment glowering at the lights and the passing crowd. The two men who had thrown down on him in the restaurant were nowhere in sight. He had half expected that they would be waiting for him. Baffled, worried, weary with pain and fatigue and grief, he closed his eyes briefly against the cold that made them smart.

That was why he did not see the man at first. A gray-faced, ragged little man, with the button-bright eyes of an addict, passed Joel once—then returned to ask him for a match. Engrossed in his thoughts, the young cattleman fumbled in his pockets—and caught the glint of steel. Joel swiftly seized the hop-head by the wrist as the knife swept down to bury itself in his chest.

There was a sharp snap of breaking bone. Steel tinkled on the walk—the little man screamed in pain, then darted furtively through the gathering crowd, holding one arm in the other.

Joel picked up the knife from the walk. It was thin-bladed and razor-sharp. He had never seen the man before. He knew of no reason why the other man should want to kill him.

"I'm over my head," he thought. "I'd best go back to that Central Bureau and talk to Lieutenant McNeary."

He slipped the knife into his belt and strode through the gaping crowd. He was a quarter of a block away when he heard the first shout.

"There he is. That's him. That big man in the white sombrero!"

A car motor roared briefly. A big black sedan braked abruptly beside him and five grim-faced men swarmed out. All of them were armed with sub-machine guns.

"Hold it, you," one of them ordered. "We've been looking for you for a long time. Come on. Get into the car."

Joel stared from one face to another. All

were cold, unsmiling. These men were deadly serious. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"As if you didn't know," coldly scoffed the man who had first spoken. He frisked the cattleman deftly and seemed surprised to find the knife.

Two of the grim-faced men seized Joel, pushed him into the back seat of the car.

"You sure we got the right guy this time?" one of the men demanded as the car roared from the curb.

"Positive," someone said.

You're sure we've got the right guy this time? The words pounded through Joel's mind. They didn't make sense but he knew now why Blackie had been murdered. His brother's death had been a mistake. They looked enough alike to have passed for each other in the dimly lighted Yards. And Blackie had been wearing his white Stetson.

What he had done, or why he had to die, Joel didn't know. But whoever had killed Blackie had thought that they were killing him. Now they were correcting their mistake.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Last Roundup

LIGHTS blazed in every window of the large house. As nearly as Joel could tell, it was on a street called Sheridan Road somewhere on the north side of Chicago. Two or three times he had glimpsed the shores of the ice-fringed lake through the windows of the speeding car. Once he had seen a street sign. None of the men had spoken since the car had left the Loop.

Now one of them ordered curtly, "All right. Get out."

Joel tensed his muscles to fight, hesitated, puzzled, as he got out of the car. This seemed a very public spot in which to kill a man. The driveway was bathed in light. Traffic flowed past in an endless stream only fifty feet away. A gray-haired man who looked vaguely familiar stood waiting in an open doorway of the house.

His captors pushed Joel towards the door.

"Thank the Lord, you've got him at last," the gray-haired man said fervently.

"I'll tell the master that you are here."

He left them waiting in a large and expensively furnished entrance hall. Joel tried to remember where he had seen the gray-haired man before and couldn't.

"Look, fellows." He turned to the man nearest to him. "Who are you? What's this all about? You're making a mistake. I—"

The man spoke in a coldly furious voice. "I'd like to put a slug right in between your eyes just like you did to little Bobby."

Joel was puzzled. "Little Bobby?"

The gray-haired man returned. "The master is waiting," he said simply. He led the way down the hall and threw open the doors of a lavishly furnished library.

The four walls were lined with books. A log fire burned in a great stone fireplace. In front of a massive desk, a tired-eyed man with iron-gray hair stood waiting with his arm around the shoulders of a grief-faded, younger woman who was weeping.

Joel recognized the famous financier who had turned the old Hawkins ranch into a show place and bred blooded cattle for a hobby. "Mr. Eldridge!" he gasped.

It was small wonder that the gray-haired man's face had seemed familiar—he was the Eldridge butler. The Eldridge ranch adjoined the Crazy K, and, as one of the posse who had searched tirelessly for the missing boy, Joel had seen the entire family perhaps a dozen times. When they found the six-year-old boy, he had been dead—shot between the eyes.

"You aren't gunmen—you're G-men," Joel told his captors.

Eldridge spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. "Why did you kill my son? I met every term of your ransom note. I left the two-hundred thousand dollars where you told me to. I didn't call the F.B.I. until we found Bobby—" his voice broke slightly "—dead."

"How could you? How could you?" Mrs. Eldridge sobbed.

I'm mad, Joel thought. *This isn't happening to me. They think that I killed their boy. They think that I'm the man who kidnaped Bobby Eldridge.*

"How did you get him?" Eldridge asked one of the agents.

"We always get them—in time," the F. B.I. man said quietly. "It was simply a case of waiting for the ransom bills to come

in." He added grimly, "Dawson held out longer than most. But he passed the first bill tonight in a Loop restaurant called Sam's Steak House. The cashier had the list of numbers that we had given her and called us."

Joel had it now, the whole fantastic picture. The G-men had not dropped the case. They had merely allowed it to sleep, hoping to lull the guilty party into a false sense of security. His own dark eyes blazed fiercely. The motive back of Blackie's death, the attempts on his own life were as clear now as a 'sign' on the prairie to a Blackfoot. He could backtrail the whole thing to three months before the Eldridge boy had been kidnaped from his father's ranch.

The Federal agent continued. "At the time, we never even suspected young Dawson, but we should have. He was a younger brother, a malcontent. Last night, according to the blotter down at the Detective Bureau, he killed his older brother and—"

"*That's a lie!*" Heedless of the hands that clutched at him, Joel took a half-dozen quick steps forward until he stood in front of Mrs. Eldridge. "I didn't kidnap and I didn't kill your boy. But I think I know who did. It was the same man who killed my brother, who—"

Layton, the gray-haired butler, stepped forward, unable any longer to control himself. "You beast. You filthy beast! Don't lie to Mrs. Eldridge!" He flung himself upon Joel and forced the youth off-balance, to the floor. There, under the cover of his flailing fists, he whispered tersely in Joel's ear, "One more crack out of you and Sally Dawson goes into the lake with her feet in a tub of concrete. We picked her up as she left Sam's Steak House.

Two of the Federal agents pulled Layton off Joel. "I know how you feel," one of them sympathized, "but let's save this for the chair."

The young cattleman got to his feet. His face was no longer bronzed. It was a sickly lemon.

"You were saying—?" the multi-millionaire suggested quietly.

Joel shook his head. "Nothing." There was nothing that he could say. The man who had killed the Eldridge boy and murdered Blackie had Sally. And Layton, the trusted Eldridge butler, was a member of

the kidnap gang. He added rather vaguely, "But I—I would like to see a lawyer."

The Federal men laughed curtly. One of them said, "You don't want a lawyer. You want a magician."

The leader nodded at the door. "Okay, take him out in the hall. I just wanted Mr. and Mrs. Eldridge to know that we'd finally broken the case. You wait here with me, Tom. We'll be with the rest of you in a minute."

Three of the agents herded Joel back to the hall. "What happens now?" he asked.

One of them said coldly, "We want the names of the lads who were in this with you—and we want the rest of the kidnap money."

Joel's eyes flicked to the door. It was only a few feet away. It was now or never. "I've some of the money in my belt," he said.

"Yeah?" The agent was interested. He pulled Joel's shirt from his trousers and felt for a money belt, momentarily off guard. It was a very bad mistake.

Joel, hands moving with the speed of a striking snake, yanked the G-man's gun from his shoulder holster with one hand, spun him around and clamped his left arm under his throat commando fashion.

"I don't want to kill him—I don't want to kill you," Joel told the other agents as he backed to the door, the struggling body of the Federal man forming a shield. "But I didn't kidnap and I didn't kill the Eldridge boy."

The agents stood hard-eyed, undecided, their sub-machine guns half raised in their hands. Joel fumbled the door open with his gun hand. Then, the agent he had held was stumbling down the hall from the force of the cattleman's push and his fellows were firing over his head at the slammed door.

By the time they fought it open, Joel was a hundred feet away, running in an eccentric zigzag. Lead slapped at the walk beside him, screamed off the walls of buildings. One slug knocked him off his feet. He got up grimly and ran on.

Joel no longer cared about himself, but he wouldn't fail Blackie. The man who had killed him—had Sally.

AS HE turned into the dark street, the smell of the slaughter yards was strong on the cold night air. The dingy

hotel sign creaked unmusically in the wind. In back of the drawn blinds of the bar-room on the first floor, some cowhand with more ambition than talent was picking out "Deep In The Heart of Texas" on an out-of-key piano.

Joel climbed the long wooden stairs slowly. "Is Tex Martin in?" he asked the old man at the desk.

The clerk glowered at him over his bifocals. "How the hell should I know?"

Joel spun the dog-eared register to him. Tex was signed into room 307. "Who are these fellows in rooms 305 and 309?" he demanded.

The old man snorted. "You're looking at the register. I don't know who they are. But they aren't cowhands, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean," Joel said.

The clerk resumed his reading. Joel climbed the third-floor stairs. Patronized chiefly by cowhands who had come in with cattle shipments, the halls and the rooms of the hotel were bedlam. He could hear a dice game going on in one room. A woman's drunken laughter floated out the open transom of another. The man in the next room was snoring, undisturbed. The police seldom bothered the hotel except in a case of homicide. The boys were noisy but not bad. They had worked hard for their spree. In a day or two their money would be gone and they would be filtering west again in the crummies and day coaches to their cow-punching jobs.

Joel rapped sharply on the door of 307 with the barrel of the gun that he had taken from the Federal agent.

Tex Martin opened the door, his lean face thoughtful. He made no attempt at pretence. "So you figured it out," he said.

Joel shook his head. "It was figured out for me."

Martin opened the door wider. "Come in."

Joel walked into the room and closed the door behind him. Sally lay on the bed, bound and gagged.

"She kinda stumped me," Tex Martin admitted. "I didn't quite know what to do about Sally but I figured her for an ace card. I knew you wouldn't want nothing to happen to her."

Joel walked over to the bed.

"Okay. Drop it, chump, or you get it

right through the spine. And this time I'm not fooling." The tall dark man who had tried to order him out of Sam's Steak House stood in the door connecting with room 305. He drew back the hammer of a long-barreled .38 with his thumb.

Joel dropped the gun he had taken from the Federal agent and sat down on the bed beside Sally. "They haven't hurt you?"

She shook her head. Joel reached for the tape on her lips, and a second voice from the doorway connecting room 309 stopped him.

"Don't bother to rip the tape off, sucker, because I'll drill you if you do. The boys are used to hearing some drunken waddie blaze away into the ceiling but they don't like to hear dames scream."

Joel looked at the unsmiling man who had accompanied the tall dark man in the restaurant. "Now if we only had the lad who tried to knife me and that lousy Eldridge butler, we'd all be here."

Tex rolled a brown-paper cigarette and licked the ungummed edge reflectively. "I sure hated to see you come in that doorway, kid," he said. "I didn't cotton much

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to Blackie, but I did like you all right."

"Well enough to try and kill me," Joel said hotly.

The lean little rider shrugged. "That was business. I had to get that hundred-dollar bill back someway."

Joel asked, "How did they hook you into this, Tex?"

The tall dark man laughed. "That's a hot one. How did we hook him in? Hell. Tex was the guy who planned it."

"**B**ILLY MACK and Tony Vedo," Tex introduced the two men to Joel. "We'd done time together in the Texas pen. That's where we met."

"And the Layton butler?"

"We needed an inside man," the lean little rider explained. "We were afraid that the bills might be marked. They weren't, but the G-men had the numbers. That's why we laid low for a year before we tried to pass them."

"We still will," Tony Vedo boasted. "The cops are going to find you, buddy, with a .38 slug in your head. You felt so bad, see, on account of having killed your brother and being caught up with on the Eldridge case. Meanwhile we're shipping the dough to an agent down in Rio. He's making a little and giving us good Brazilian milreis in exchange."

"You won't get away with this, Tex," Joel warned.

The rider grinned. "Quit kidding. So far—we're doing swell. But if you don't think that it broke my heart to toss that wallet of Blackie's with fifteen grand in it back into that heifer dust, you're crazy. But I had to do it, see? That pinned it onto you and put you in the jug where you couldn't spend that hundred until I figured out how to get at you."

Joel stared at Sally's white face and frightened eyes. Then he asked the men, "Which one of you knocked off Bobby Eldridge?"

Billy Mack chuckled. "Believe it or not, it was that stuffed-shirt butler. The kid pulls the blindfold off and sees him."

The heat and fatigue and strain of the long search for the missing boy came back and swept over Joel like a wave. Tex had ridden right beside him. And all the time he had the ransom money and had known that the boy was dead.

Joel got stiffly to his feet. "I'm going to kill you, Tex," he warned.

The rider hooted. "Not in this world, pal." He lifted Sally from the bed and wrapped her in a blanket. "We're taking Joel and Sally for a little ride. See if the hall's clear, Tony."

The hall door opened seemingly of its own accord before Vedo reached it. "I can answer that," Lieutenant McNearly said, "it isn't. You see, when Joel bust loose from the Feds he saw me. And there has been an official police stenographer taking down your confessions."

"Nix." Gorky warned Billy Mack. "Gives a slug if you reach for that .38." He stepped into the room and disarmed Mack and Vedo.

"I'll get Tex's gun," Joel said.

He pulled a murderous .38 from the little rider's shoulder holster and stuck it in his own belt. McNearly ripped the tape from Sally's mouth as gently as that operation can be performed.

"You can thank your husband's brother for this, sister," he said quietly. "He's got both the goods and the guts. We had him wrong. We had him pegged as a young smart-aleck."

"So did I," Sally said very quietly. "That's why I married his brother when I was really in love with him."

Joel didn't even turn his head. "Take her out of the room," he said. "I'll bring Tex Martin."

Gorky muscled Mack and Vedo from the room. McNearly followed with Sally.

"All right Tex. Let's go," Joel said.

The lean little rider, no longer smiling, stood with his legs apart, flat-footed, his arms held slightly away from his body. "The hell I will," he said coldly. "Give my regards to Blackie!"

His right hand flashed beneath his coat to reappear with a gun—the twin of the one that Joel had taken. The two guns roared as one. Tex Martin slouched forward, clutching his stomach in agony.

"Make it my regards," Joel said. "And tell Blackie I said—thanks for everything." He turned from the dying rider, his eyes misted with emotion, and handed his gun to McNearly. "I overlooked his second gun," he lied.

"So I see," McNearly said.



"Okay, Rocky," said Coll, "now start digging. It's a good spot for a quick grave."

By **DON JAMES**

HE WAS a small boy with red hair, freckles, and tattered clothing. His name was Mike Connors, and he had simply climbed into Rocky's car where it was parked at the curb near the Fairview bank.

Rocky Taylor tried to prevent it. He said, "Scram! Beat it. Get gone."

The boy grinned and said, "My name's

BABE AND THE HOODS

*Tough-guy Rocky could deal with the cops
and his partners-in-crime—
but now he had to face up to a six-year-old boy.*

Mike Connors and I'm six years old. My daddy was in the war. He got kilt an' my mommy works in the Pastime Tavern. Her name's Mable."

"Look, kid—on your way. I'm busy."
"I'll wait with you."

"Wait for what?" Rocky said nervously. He looked down the street. Spike and Coll weren't in sight. The plan was for them to wander leisurely down the street, go into the bank, make a fast take and out to the street where Rocky would have the car running.

"Just wait," said Mike. He settled back in the seat beside Rocky. "You got any gum for me?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

"Skip it." Rocky reached across for the door the redhead had closed. "Get going. Get lost."

"Nope."

"Look, kid. You gotta leave! See?"

"Were you a soldier, too?"

"Yes. And that ain't got nothin' to do with it. You got to beat it outta here."

Spike and Coll had rounded a corner and were approaching. The sun was in their eyes and they probably couldn't see the kid in the car. Rocky tried to shake his head at them, but they carefully avoided looking at him.

A few early morning shoppers were on the street. A mailman sorted mail at a corner. A jewelry store owner swept his sidewalk. Perhaps a half-dozen persons were in the bank.

Rocky reached for the small boy, but the kid scrambled into the back seat and crouched on the floor.

"I'm a robber an' you're a cop an' you can't catch me!" the kid yelled.

Frantically Rocky looked toward Spike and Coll, but they were gone. They were in the bank and it was only a matter of moments.

Automatically, Rocky started the engine. He turned and reached for Mike Connors, but the kid squirmed away from him.

"Can't catch me! Can't catch me!"

"You little—"

A shot sounded and someone yelled. Rocky looked up and Spike and Coll were racing toward him. Spike had the shopping bag and it looked full. Coll had a gun in his hand. He stopped and shot

toward the bank. A window shattered.

The mailman stared at them and the jeweler darted back into his shop. Across the street, a woman screamed and then collapsed in a faint.

Rocky slipped the car in gear and kept his foot on the clutch. He gunned the engine for a fast start.

The fleeing men piled into the car. The sedan shot away from the curb.

Rocky heard a sharp oath behind him and knew that they had discovered Mike Connors.

Rocky swung the car around a corner, hit across town, swung back to a side street and then headed for the maze of country roads they'd carefully chosen for the getaway.

Coll Zenich spoke angrily in his ear. Rocky stepped on the gas as they hit the blacktop of the getaway road. The speedometer climbed to 80.

"What?" he snapped back at Coll.

"What's this kid doing here?" Coll demanded.

Rocky slammed on brakes for a turn, went into it, tromped the gas pedal for the snap-out. "He just got in."

"You damned fool!"

"Shut up!"

From his riding position on the floor Mike Connors piped, "Reckless drivin'! Reckless drivin'!"

Rocky clamped his teeth and concentrated on the task of getting to the abandoned farm where they planned to hide out.

It had been dark for an hour and the three men sat in the farmhouse with windows covered by old sacks. They were in the kitchen and they had a fire going in a battered stove. Three candles gave meagre light. Sitting on the floor near the stove was Mike Connors.

Mike no longer smiled cheerfully, nor wanted to play cops and robbers. Tears had streaked down his dirty cheeks and he gazed at Rocky solemnly.

"I'm hungry," he said. "An' I want my Mommy."

"Shut up!" Coll snapped. He was a scrawny little man with black hair that was thin on top. His face was angular and lean. He was wanted in many states.

Across a scarred kitchen table, big and hulking Spike Haney scowled.

"What's with the kid?" he demanded. "What's with him?"

Coll said, "Get rid of him."

Rocky got up and stretched. He was solidly built with wide shoulders, a blunt face, and eyes that sometimes were a friendly blue and sometimes a cold green.

"Lay off the punk," he said. "He ain't to blame. I don't know what we're gonna do with him, but lay off him."

"You're takin' on a lot of weight," Coll said coldly.

"Maybe. You got a reason I shouldn't?"

"Only that we got the cops lookin' for us. We got no time to fool with a kid."

"The kid doesn't get hurt," Rocky said.

"Nuts." Spike's voice was harsh. "We get rid of him like Coll says. We got thirty grand in that haul. We ain't packin' the kid around to tip-off the getaway."

"Yeah? And how you gonna get rid of him?"

"How do you think? What ways are there? What ways you get rid of a cat you don't want around?"

"No dice," Rocky said. He went to the kid and lifted him from the floor. Mike leaned his head on Rocky's shoulder and slipped a grimy hand around the man's neck.

"Please, Mr. Rocky, can I go home?"

"We'll see, kid. We got to figure things out."

"An' can I please have something to eat?"

"Sure."

Rocky went to a box of groceries they had lugged in from the car. He ignored the stares of his two companions as he selected a can of condensed milk and a loaf of bread. He put the kid down and opened the can with a knife. He poured the contents into a paper cup taken from a small package in the box.

"Here, kid. Maybe you won't like it, but it's the best I got for you. A kid needs milk. You can have bread, too."

"Thanks, Mr. Rocky."

THE youngster drank the milk in quick, breathless swallows. He attacked the slice of bread that Rocky handed him. Rocky watched with a look of satisfaction in his eyes. When the boy was finished Rocky picked him up again and faced the two men.

"The kid's gotta go home," he announced.

"The kid goes nowhere," Coll said stubbornly.

For a long moment the two men stared at one another. Mike rested his head on Rocky's shoulder again and stared at Coll.

"You're bad," he said.

"What d'ya say, Spike?" Coll asked.

"He goes."

Coll looked back at Rocky. "That's it, Rocky. That's the way it is. I'll do the job."

He started toward them with a hand outstretched for the kid.

"Get back, Coll," Rocky said.

"I'm running this," Coll said softly. "Remember?"

Rocky shook his head. "Not this time, Coll."

"Give me the brat."

He took a step nearer and suddenly the boy sensed the danger and began to weep. Gently, Rocky put him down, and when he straightened he had a gun in his hand.

"What now, Coll?" he asked.

Coll stopped and his eyes narrowed. "Put the gun down."

Rocky shook his head. "This is the split-up. Count out my ten-grand. I'll take the kid and my dough and scam."

"Like hell! You'll have every cop in the country on your tail. That kid's a give-away."

"Count the money, Coll." Rocky glanced suddenly at Spike, and the gun in his hand jerked with a quick shot. Spike pulled his hand away from a shoulder holster as plaster from the wall near his head trickled to the floor.

"Take it easy, Rocky!" he yelled.

"Count the money, Coll."

After a brief silence Coll said, "Okay. Have it your way. Sometime there'll be another payoff. You got the gun in your hand, but you won't always have it there."

"I'll take my chances."

Mike Connors stubbornly clung to one of his trouser legs, and he dropped his free hand to the boy's head.

Coll emptied the shopping bag on the table, counted the money and put a third of it in a pile on the end of the table.

"Okay?" he asked shortly.

"Okay. Now step back and let me pick it up. The car's mine. I'm taking it."

There were two cars in the dilapidated barn. One was the sedan Rocky had driven. The other was a brown, mud-covered coupe.

"That's Coll's buggy," he said to Mike. "Maybe I should take the distributor. Sort of ground 'em."

Mike clung to his hand without comment.

"But what's that buy me?" Rocky said. "Them guys got a right to a break."

He lifted the boy into the sedan, got in, backed the car out, and circled toward the country feeder road that ran by the farm.

"Are we going home, Mister Rocky?"

"Yeah. I got to figure this out, but you're goin' home."

Mike pulled his legs up on the seat and curled into a small ball. When Rocky glanced at the youngster again, Mike was asleep.

He turned on the radio he'd installed and played with the short-wave band until he picked up a police call. It was routine and didn't concern him. He settled back and kept the speed down. Undoubtedly there were road blocks. He'd have to be careful.

Another message came through to all cars. It was in code. Rocky swore softly and glanced at his wrist watch. It was almost nine. There should be a newscast.

He dialed on the standard band and found one. The news about the bank stick-up was brief and rapid. Road blocks had been set up. It was thought the car with the bandits was headed west. No one had been hurt in the hold-up and Rocky pursed his lips when there was no mention of the boy.

He said his mother works in a tavern, he thought. Maybe she doesn't keep good track of him. Maybe she doesn't know he's gone. And I guess no one saw the kid get in the car.

He breathed a little easier. At least he didn't have that to worry him!

ROCKY took a back road into Fairview and parked on a deserted residential street. Gently, he awakened the boy.

"Mike, Mike—were do you live. What house?"

The boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. He yawned and looked around. "Are we home, Mr. Rocky?"

"We're in town, Mike. You gotta show me where you live."

"I live at 927 South Eighth," Mike recited. "In a brown house."

Rocky found the house. It was small, shabby and dark.

"I guess your Mommy isn't home," Rocky said.

"She goes to work at the tavern at night," Mike said. He rubbed his eyes again. "You come in with me, Mr. Rocky."

"You mean she leaves you alone nights?"

"Mommy doesn't want to leave me alone. She says someday she won't have to work in the tavern an' she'll be with me every night."

"You're awful small to be left alone."

"That's why Mommy cries. Mommy says there aren't any other jobs, and she cries because she has to work in the tavern and leave me alone."

"You want me to go in with you, huh?"

"Please, Mr Rocky. You don't have to stay. Just come in with me, and then you can go."

"Sure."

Rocky opened the door for the boy and got out after him. He was acutely conscious of the bulk of money stowed in his pockets and wondered if he should hide it in the car. He decided against it. Ten-grand was a nice pile of dough. He'd like to keep it on him.

He followed the boy to the house, and Mike opened the front door. In the darkness, the blur of Mike's hand reached for a light switch by the door. The switch clicked, and the room sprang into being.

Rocky blinked and stared at the woman sitting by a window. She was small and pretty, and her eyes were red as if she had been weeping. For a second she stared at the two and then in a flurry of movement she was on her feet and had the boy in her arms.

"Mike! Mike! They came for me at the tavern. They said someone thought you were in the car with those men. I've been sitting here in the dark—" Her sobs were frightening the boy, and he began to cry.

Uncomfortably, Rocky watched them.

"Look—it's okay," he said finally. "Everything's okay."

The woman looked up from her kneeling position by the boy.

"You didn't hurt him," she said. "You didn't—you brought him back. Are you—?" A quick fear suddenly widened her eyes. "You're—!"

"Listen, lady, you got nothing to worry you now. You got him home." Rocky moved toward the door.

"Mr. Rocky has lots of money," Mike announced. He had stopped crying and was gazing at the man with solemn, admiring eyes.

The woman slowly stood. "You are!" she whispered.

Somehow the fright made her even prettier, Rocky thought. She wasn't very old, either. Maybe twenty-five. Somehow she didn't look as if she worked in a tavern. She didn't have the look of most B-girls Rocky had known.

"Forget it," Rocky said. "Just forget it. You got the kid back, and he ain't hurt."

"Mr. Coll wanted to hurt me," Mike said. "He didn't like me, Mommy." The woman held him close to her thigh.

Rocky backed toward the door. "Okay, lady," he said. "Everything's okay with the kid now. Skip the whole thing, huh?"

"They're looking for you."

Rocky stopped and his eyes held hers. "You're not going to tell them I was here," he said flatly.

She shook her head. "You brought Mike home. I guess—I guess that's all I could ask for."

"Sure."

"I won't tell."

"Then I'll be shovin' off."

He reached behind him for the door and opened it. Coll Zenich and Spike Haney pushed him back into the room and closed the door behind them. Spike had a gun in his hand.

"We followed you," Coll said simply. "We couldn't let you get away with it."

"The kid knows too much," Spike said. "You know too much. Now the dame knows too much."

Rocky stood between them and the woman and boy. Behind him, Mike stifled a sob.

"Don't try anything," Rocky said quietly. "This town's loaded with cops."

"Yeah. Nothing rough here, Rocky."

Coll looked at the woman and boy. "We're not leaving you around, Rocky. There are a few guys who know about the three of us. We leave no tip-offs."

"You don't have to worry about me. The kid and the dame will keep shut."

"Nuts to that."

"What's the pitch, then?"

"You're going for a ride. The three of you."

Rocky tightened and leaned forward on the balls of his feet. "You can't make it stick."

"We think we can. Come on outside. In your car."

The woman spoke. "Please—we'll never say a word. Mike and I—"

"Shut up."

Mike was crying again.

"Outside," Coll said again. "Quick!"

Spike carefully edged to one side and the gun was very steady.

Slowly the three moved out before the two men and walked toward the sedan. Behind them the light went off, and the door clicked shut. No one was in the street. It was very quiet.

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COLL drove. Spike sat beside him, facing back to watch the three in the back seat. The woman sat behind Coll and Rocky sat at the other end of the seat. The boy was between them.

They were out of town about five minutes on a dirt road that gradually was becoming worse.

Coll stopped, and Mike began to cry again. Coll reached across the back of his seat and slapped the boy across the face.

Mable Connors stifled a scream, and her hands slashed at the man's face in tigerish anger. He jerked back, and his hand flashed again. The woman's head jerked with the blow, and she fell back into the seat.

Rocky started forward, and the cold muzzle of Spike's gun jabbed into his throat. He sat back slowly.

"Out of the car," Coll ordered.

Then they were walking across a rough field toward a cluster of trees and heavy underbrush. The boy fell, and Rocky picked him up, feeling the small arm around his neck again and the wetness of the boy's cheek against his own.

They were in a grove of trees, and Coll was packing the shovel they'd carried in the back of Rocky's car.

"This is okay," Coll said. "Now, Rocky, you can dig. The dirt's soft. It's a good spot for quick graves and an easy cover-up."

Slowly Rocky gave the boy to the woman. For a moment he was motionless as he stared at Coll. The dark little man handed him the shovel.

Rocky felt the smooth handle in his hands. He felt the weight of the metal, the balance of the shovel. He thought of the sharp metal blade.

"I'll give you the dough," he said futilely. It was a grasp for time.

"Make me laugh again, Rocky. We're not worrying about the dough. You got it on you. We'll take care of it."

Rocky glanced to his left. Spike was watching closely with the gun ready. The woman and boy stood back.

"Okay," Rocky said. "Where shall I dig?"

Coll pointed at Rocky's feet.

"There's stone here," Rocky said. "I'm standing on one."

Instinctively, the two men glanced at his feet. Rocky swung the shovel in a short, hard arc. He felt the solid impact as it hit Spike Haney.

Haney screamed and went down. Rocky swung again, at Coll Zenich, aiming for the arm that reached for a gun. The shovel knocked the man back. Rocky struck again. Then there was no reason to swing the shovel.

Rocky turned to the woman and boy.

"Cover his eyes!" he said angrily. "You want him to remember this? You want him to have bad dreams?"

Like a person in a nightmare, she held her hand over the boy's eyes, pulling him to her. Her face was white in the darkness.

Rocky inspected the two men. They were dead. He had known that. He took out a handkerchief and carefully wiped the length of the shovel handle for prints. Then he bent over the men again and slipped currency from their pockets. They'd carried the money as he had.

When he straightened, the woman had walked toward the car with the boy. They waited for him. He unbuttoned his shirt and crammed the money through the opening.

When he caught up with the woman and boy, they were faced away from him.

"Let's get out of here," he said quietly.

Back in town, he parked behind the coupe the men had parked a half block from her house.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked. Mike still slept, but she had put him on the back seat.

"I've got all the dough," Rocky said.

"I know. But what are you going to do?"

"Scram out of here. You're all right now, and the kid is."

"You'll always be running."

"Yeah. But it had to come out this way sometime."

"You mean there isn't anything else to run from? Just this time?"

"It's the first. I knew 'em. Coll ran a legitimate business once. I worked for him. They offered me a part of this. I figured I might as well. Tired workin' for peanuts."

"And this is better?"

"Sure. Why not? Nothin' to tie me down. I got no ties."

"I'd like to have him remember—" She hesitated and looked away.

"Remember what"

"He never saw his father. He doesn't have a man to remember like he should. I mean like he thinks you are. And the way I guess you are."

"Leave me out of it. What about you? Workin' in a tavern? Leavin' the kid alone?"

Suddenly, she was weeping, her face buried in her hands.

Rocky frowned. "Cut it out. I don't like dames who cry. Anyhow, I didn't mean it that way. I guess you got no other out. I guess you got to keep the two of you goin' and a job's a job."

She didn't answer, and he slowed and parked. He reached into a pocket and brought out a small pile of bills.

"You want this dough?"

She pulled away from him and her eyes were wide when she took her hands from her face.

"It's dirty money! I couldn't!"

"Yeah. I see what you mean."

"It's dirty money to you, too, Rocky."

He stared at her, and behind them Mike moaned softly in his sleep and turned over. Rocky glanced back at him.

He started the car and slowly circled the block, his eyes narrowed in thought. Abruptly, he stopped at a mail box and got out. He was busy at the box for several moments. When he returned to the car, he was grinning.

The woman didn't return his grin. She stared at him solemnly, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Thank you, Rocky," she whispered.

"Yeah. It's for the kid. I don't get all this, but I guess you mean something."

"I do."

He looked at her when he was in the car again. She was small and young, and she was taking a beating from life.

"Your name is Mabel," he said.

"Yes."

"I got to shove on. I couldn't take a chance stayin'."

"No more things like the bank, though?"

"I can always wheel a truck."

She smiled then. "You'll write? Just one letter—a card?"

"Sure."

He drove again and turned into the street to her house. He parked and took Mike out of the back seat. The three went toward the house. At the door they stopped, and Rocky gently put the boy in the woman's arms. He looked up at the address over the door.

"I got to remember that address," he said. "I'll write."

Abruptly she leaned toward him, the boy between them, and somehow Rocky's arms were about both of them, and the woman's lips were cool and soft beneath his.

They stepped apart. Rocky smiled. "I guess I didn't expect that," he said. "I mean—well—"

"Good night, Rocky."

"Maybe if I found a better job for you somewhere—?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's getting away from here. The first step is the hardest."

"I'm no good. It can't be anything else. But don't worry about Mike. He can remember me like you want. I guess I wasn't cut out for the other, anyhow."

"I know you weren't."

He heard the finality in her voice. A strange faith he'd never heard from anyone else.

"Listen, Mabel—this is no good. You can't do it this way, either. You got to tell the cops what happened."

"But you—"

"I was in the heist. I still got that. And those two guys out there in the woods."

"But you saved our lives, Rocky."

"I got you into it. Look—I'm leavin'. You go down an' tell 'em. I'll take my chances. Promise?"

Tears were in her eyes. "I promise, Rocky. After you leave. But if I can tell them right, they'll understand. They'll know you don't owe them anything."

"They won't understand—but you'll try," he smiled.

He turned and went to the car. He had four directions to chose from. Road blocks were ahead of him. He didn't know what else was waiting for him out there in the dark.

But she'll try! he thought.

It was a good feeling to have someone pitching for you! Rocky smiled and stepped on the gas.

*Patrolman Kelly's only chance for life
was a D.P. immigrant—
who could not read an SOS.*



A chill voice cracked out sharply from somewhere behind: "Okay, copper! Freeze!"

By **DUANE
YARNELL**

DEATH ON THE MENU

A SHUDDER shook young Mike Kelly's six-foot frame as he lifted the receiver on the corner call box. It was a mean night, and he turned his face away from the chill sting of the rain. He wore a rubber parka, but water had already soaked his uniform from the knees down, and, as he lifted the receiver, he could feel his toes squishing inside his heavy shoes. "Police station—McManus speaking—" "Kelly reporting. Badge 8189." "How's the weather down there, Kelly?" "It shouldn't happen to a duck." Mike

squinted down the long street, flanked on either side by tall, dark warehouses. Five blocks below, near the bay, fog was billowing around the yellow lights that outlined the wharf. "If the wind dies," Mike said, "the town'll be covered by fog in an hour." "Well, don't get lost in it," McManus chuckled.

Mike made a wry face. McManus could be happy on a night like this, sitting in a warm room, a steaming thermos of coffee at his elbow. He could make cracks and think them funny.

Mike was on the verge of hanging up, but a single thought kept driving through his mind. "Fat Slocum's mob hasn't pulled a safe-cracking job in three months—and they like to work on foggy nights. If the Chief's smart, he'll put a stakeout on every outlying bank in the district," he sincerely admonished.

"I'd think you'd want to forget Fat Slocum. You had your chance to play detective once and you muffed it."

Mike Kelly's young face flamed, and a spasmodic shudder made muscles leap along the bony outline of his jaw. Angrily, he slammed the receiver. He'd probably get a hundred demerits for that, but in his present mood, he did not greatly care.

Mike turned into the wind, realized that it was dying, as it usually did along toward midnight. Far down the street, fog edged in off the bay like rolling clouds of smoke.

Mike scowled as he thought of Fat Slocum. Six months ago, after having served a long apprenticeship on beats such as this one, Mike had been given a temporary appointment as a detective.

"Your first assignment," the Chief had told him, "is Fat Slocum's mob. Get me a lead—any kind of lead—and the minute you get it, report to me."

Mike was young for a detective, only 24, and in the background there was a girl, Ellen Davis, so much in love with him that it hurt. On the strength of his promotion, Mike had married this girl of his choice. They'd moved into a neat little ranch house, painted in soft pastels and plastered with a long term mortgage.

A few nights later, on a night such as this one, Mike had been prowling the bay district, looking for Fat Slocum whom he'd heard had holed up there. He found Fat Slocum eating his way through a dozen bluepoints on the half shell—sitting near the front window of a restaurant, of all places—and he'd slipped inside to await developments.

Mike waited three long hours before the king of the safecrackers made his move. Then Fat got up and went into the men's room. Five minutes later, Mike followed. But the room was empty, except for the cloud of fog that had moved in through the open window on the alley.

So Mike had reported to the Chief, only to learn that while he had been playing cat

and mouse with Fat Slocum—and, incidentally, providing Fat with a perfect alibi—the mob had calmly rifled a bank across the street to the tune of \$70,000. Fat Slocum, using the old decoy gag, had played Mike Kelly for a sucker. And Mike, who had made a solo play instead of contacting the Chief, had found himself pounding a beat again.

Now, as Mike continued to slosh down the dark street, he wondered how much longer he could take it. Sure, he'd pulled a boner. And maybe he didn't much blame the Chief for making an example of him. Still, it was a hell of a come-down, pulling the eight-to-four shift while a lovely young bride waited at home in a nice little house, even though the house was far from paid for.

Mike crossed a narrow intersection, came to a huge, imposing building of polished marble—the Warehouse Exchange Bank. Mike tested the massive doors, found them locked. He tried to peer through the plate-glass windows, but they were too high off the street. It was a hell of a way to build a bank, he decided bitterly. For all he knew, Fat Slocum's mob could be working inside now, for who, watching from the street, could tell?

Suddenly, Mike heard tires singing on the wet street behind him. He leaped for a doorway, pressed his back against the shadows, wondering why he'd become so unnerved. Then he understood. The car was moving slowly and without lights.

Mike's vision was 20/20 and when the car drew abreast, he strained to catch a glimpse of those inside. But the chill rain and fog had clouded the car's windows with moisture. Still, it seemed that two men were inside, and under the illumination of the dash one seemed to be much heavier than the other, and the head, above the rounded outline, had the chinless contour of a grapefruit. The impression was fleeting, but, after the car disappeared in the fog, it was still with Mike, still gnawing at his mind.

IT WAS three blocks back to the call box, but only half a block around the corner to the restaurant of Jimmy the Greek who made a slim living by keeping open around the clock for the convenience of those dock hands who worked the night shift on the

wharf two blocks below. He took Jimmy's.

When Mike entered the restaurant, he shook the mist from his heavy brows, then glanced at the vacant counter. Jimmy was polishing glasses, a short, graying little man with harshly etched features and dark, friendly eyes.

"Ah—my good frien' Mike. You can drink a cup of coffee while you give my brother, Georgie, another lesson, no?"

"Yeah, Jimmy," Mike said. "But first, your phone—"

He went to the wall phone, dropped a coin, then dialed the Chief's home number. A moment later, he heard the Chief's sleepy salutation.

"This is Patrolman Kelly, sir. I think Fat Slocum's on the prowl tonight. A minute ago, I spotted a car that—"

"Did you get the license number?" the Chief asked excitedly.

Mike said, "No—I was more interested in who was inside. By the time I thought of the license, it was too foggy to see."

"If it's *that* foggy down there," the Chief exploded, "how the hell did you recognize Fat Slocum?"

"I'm not saying it *was* Fat Slocum," Mike said doggedly. "I just think it *might* have been. With this foggy night, and—"

"Is that all the information you've got, Kelly?"

"That's all," Mike admitted lamely.

"You don't make sense," the Chief thundered. "The one time you knew you were on Fat's tail, you refused to call me. Now, in a fog so thick you couldn't recognize your grandmother, you get me out of bed in the middle of the night because you saw some one who weighed over two-hundred. Get back on your beat, Kelly! And don't call me again until you know you've got something!"

Mike was flushing when he hung up. He hesitated, then dropped still another nickel, dialed his home. Seconds later, he heard Ellen's voice.

"Mike, darling—is that you?"

He felt warm again. "You ought to be asleep, baby."

"I'd rather wait up. If you're with Jimmy and Georgie, don't let them feed you anything. I'll have ham and eggs waiting."

"You're too good for a flatfoot," he said tenderly.

"You won't be a flatfoot much longer."

As he hung up, he wondered what he'd ever done to deserve such faith. But with Ellen it would always be that way, even though, as a cop, he continued on the downgrade. Even though the finance company on some not too distant day might separate them from their furniture.

"Mike—it's good to see you, my frien'—"

A man had come out of the kitchen, a thin, frail man with a gaunt face in which only the darkly shining eyes seemed to be alive.

"Georgie," Mike said. "How's the pearl-diving?"

Georgie Moulous wiped weatherbeaten hands on the white apron he was wearing and his eyes twinkled. "Someday," he laughed, "I fool you, Mike. Someday I really find a pearl when I drain the dishwasher, no?"

Looking at Georgie, it was hard to guess that he'd spent four hard years of his life in a slave-labor camp. Georgie Moulous had come into this country as a D. P., with Jimmy the Greek, his brother, guaranteeing him a job, if only as a dishwasher.

"You teach me some more, no?" Georgie asked.

Mike knew he should be outside. But he hated to say it, hated to see the look go out of Georgie's eyes. Georgie was anxious to become a citizen and while he could speak the language well, he could neither read nor write it.

Down at the station, they kidded Mike Kelly for the way he wasted his time in the restaurant of Jimmy the Greek, and some of the kidding was a trifle too harsh to be well meant. It was as if they blamed him for goldbricking on his job. Now, Mike sighed.

"Give me a pencil and paper, Georgie." When Georgie handed him a cheap tablet, Mike printed words onto the page. He wrote:

I W-A-N-T T-O B-E A G-O-O-D
C-I-T-I-Z-E-N

Georgie twisted up his face. "I—want—to—be—a—good—citizen," he read in a voice that was painfully labored. Then he looked up, caught Mike's expression, and a triumphant grin broke over his face. "I am learning, no?"

Mike nodded. "Now we try some new

words. Here—" Mike printed more words, made Georgie spell them out, pronounce them. And when he left the restaurant, ten minutes later, he felt an inner glow of pride.

BUT the gloom outside quickly dispelled that glow, and once again Mike Kelly was just another harness bull with a job to do. But he kept thinking about the way they'd been laughing at him down at the station. They accused him of spending too much time talking to the people on his beat—people like Jimmy the Greek and Georgie Moulous. They said he was too easy-going, that he'd never make a good cop until he learned to pay more attention to business.

Still, Mike wasn't convinced. If you walked a beat, you built up friendships with the people you met, no matter how much extra time you spent. You could never tell when a friendship might pay off. With a man like Georgie, of course, a tired, bent little man who wanted nothing more than to become a citizen, you could expect little in return. Georgie Moulous, a dishwasher, a pearl-diver whose hands smelled constantly of soap. What could a man like Georgie do for a cop? Nothing. Not a thing . . .

The fog was heavier, now, and it was impossible to see even the hazy glow around the next street lamp ahead. It was getting colder, and Mike was glad he'd wasted ten minutes of his time. Now he could walk faster; he'd have to if he was to make his call in time.

The luminous hands of his watch showed straight up twelve as he lifted the receiver on the call box. Mike made a brief report, then started down the street again, thankful that his tour of duty was half done.

He walked three blocks, ten minutes by his slow-moving watch. His ears picked up a sound, the gently purring sound of a car motor. Mike froze in his tracks, reached for his gun as he turned around. The car—the same one he'd spotted earlier—was easing into the curb a few feet beyond him. But before Mike could bring his gun through the flap in his parka, a chill voice cracked out sharply from somewhere behind:

"Okay, copper! Freeze!"

He stood there, hands half-raised. Three men boiled from the car, but Mike Kelly had eyes for only one of them—a fat little man, grinning now, pushing steadily closer

—Fat Slocum, king of the safe-crackers.

"We were set for you, copper," Fat Slocum chuckled. "You're right on schedule." Fat turned to the other two men, then nodded toward the bank. "Eddie's got the alarm disconnected. With luck, you can finish in less than two hours—"

"And if we get caught," one of them snarled, "you'll be where they can't touch you!"

"Shut up," Fat Slocum warned. Then he added to the man behind Mike, "Get his gun, Pete." A hand snaked through the flap of Mike's parka and his hip felt lighter with the gun missing. "Now," Fat said, "get going!"

Mike felt the pressure of the gun against his spine. He knew how to handle a man who stood that close, but even if he could get possession of the gun, there'd still be Fat Slocum to consider. So when the gunman, Pete, prodded him forward, he did not resist.

They walked down the fog-filled street, turned a corner. Half a block away, Mike could see the faint blue glow that was the neon on the restaurant of Jimmy the Greek.

"This is it, copper. Turn left. Up the stairs."

A flashlight beam illuminated a set of narrow stairs. Mike climbed them, came to a door that was partially open. He stepped inside, still fearing to make a move with two men back of him. The door slammed and a light switched on. It was a large loft, a warehouse filled with packing boxes. Mike stiffened at the sight of the man lying face up in a far corner.

The man's eyes were open and sightless. Blood had already coagulated around the bullet hole in his temple. Now Mike understood why Fat Slocum had come into this place as if he owned it—the uniformed watchman had already been murdered.

"Sit down on that packing box," Pete ordered.

Mike sat down. When he looked back, he saw Fat and the gunman grinning at him, a full ten feet away. Pete sprawled on a wooden box, placed his gun carefully beside him. Pete was a thin man with a sallow complexion and a nose that looked as if it had been used for a door stop. His lashless eyes were cold, the pupils pin-pointed. Mike knew the man was all hopped up.

"Cozy, huh?" Pete said.

Mike didn't answer. He knew why he'd been brought here. With Fat Slocum watching him, he wouldn't be able to spread the alarm, nor, for that matter, would Fat be caught if the safe-cracking mob was discovered. It was neat, clean—and with the watchman already dead, Mike sensed that he himself would not live to tell it.

MIKE tried not to think of Ellen, but it was no good. He could see her now, a book in her lap, pale-gold hair cascading around a face so lovely that his throat ached at the thought of it—Ellen his wife, waiting expectantly for him to come home.

"Don't get ideas," Fat Slocum said abruptly. "We know your schedule. When the time comes for you to call the station, we'll see that you make the call."

Mike groaned inwardly. He carefully measured the distance that separated them, but Pete, interpreting the glance, grinned slyly as he let his fingers creep toward the gun.

"I wouldn't try it, copper. I really wouldn't—"

Mike sat there staring at them. The seconds ticked away, became minutes. At last, Fat Slocum arose. "Time to report," he said. "Get going, copper."

They marched back to the call box. Mike prayed for someone to pass—a prowler, a bum, a dock worker, anyone. But the street was silent and deserted, hidden under a swirling fog.

The color drained from Mike's face as he lifted the receiver. He made a quick report, a gun pressing against his back. Then he heard shuffling footsteps, and for an instant his heart filled with hope. But it was only Eddie.

"We busted a drill, Fat. We had to start over."

"How much longer?" Fat Slocum asked edgily.

"About an hour. A little more, a little less—"

"Okay," Fat muttered. "But step on it—"

"Better take it easy with the copper," Eddie warned. "He may have to make another call—"

Mike Kelly realized that his life had been spared, if only for an hour. But after that, what? A bullet in the back—and Ellen, he thought painfully, wearing widow's black.

They took him back to the loft again, but, as he started up the steps, as he caught the glow of the neon sign, he had a wild desire to make a break for it, to try to reach the restaurant of Jimmy the Greek.

But he knew such a gesture would be futile. He had no gun and they'd cut him down before he took a dozen steps. Yet even if he should make it, what good would it do? And why should he inflict himself and his immediate danger upon two defenseless men, one who wanted only to become a citizen of this country?

But he hesitated as a thought struck him. Then he stopped dead still, his temples pounding savagely. Back of him, he heard Fat Slocum's angry snarl.

"I'm hungry," Mike said abruptly.

"Now ain't *that* a bird!" Pete muttered.

Mike turned around, half expecting a clout over the skull. He glanced at the corpulent Slocum, knowing full well how the extra weight had gotten there. "A steak would taste good on a cold night like this—a steak with french fries and hot sauce."

Fat Slocum's mouth trembled in anticipation. But he said, "You won't need it where you're goin'. And I can wait."

"There's a joint half a block down the street," Mike persisted. "They'll let you carry food out—"

Fat Slocum said slowly, "How about you, Pete? We got more time to kill then we figured—"

"I could eat," Pete admitted.

"I'll get it," Fat decided. "Take him upstairs, Pete."

Mike said, "I'll settle for a bowl of soup. The kind with barley in it—"

"I should carry hot soup on a night like this."

"Hell, I know what I'm in for. But even in Sing Sing a guy gets to choose his last meal—"

"We'll see," Fat said tolerantly.

But fifteen minutes later, when Fat Slocum waddled upstairs, he was carrying an aluminum tray that contained two steaks and the soup that Mike had ordered.

"The condemned man's last meal," Fat said, handing Mike the bowl of soup. "And three to one you can't eat it."

Mike Kelly lifted the bowl, drank the hot liquid through clenched teeth, keeping the chunky parts for last. Then, as the mobsters began to eat their steaks, Mike

put his bowl down and with his spoon began to toy with that part of his soup that was left. He picked out the barley, bite at a time.

"I'd have won my bet," Fat Slocum taunted.

"It's not as good as I expected," Mike admitted.

He kept picking at the rest of his soup. Then, with a sigh, he crumpled the paper napkin and tossed it into the bowl.

"You want this bowl?" Mike asked.

"Why should I give a damn?" Fat demanded.

"I figured you'd want to return it."

Fat considered a moment, then his eyes filled with a dawning light. "Quit usin' reverse psychology on me, copper."

"I don't follow you," Mike said.

"You want me to leave the stuff here. Then, tomorrow, when the cops find it, they'll ask the Greek if it's his. And he'll remember the description of the guy who took the dishes out."

Mike shrugged. "Anyway, I tried—"

"But it didn't work," Fat Slocum said. "So I take the stuff back, just like I promised I would. That way, there's nothing to tie me with the bodies on the floor."

THE little vein at the base of Mike's throat began to throb. He glanced at his watch again. Twenty minutes more. Twenty minutes before he'd have to put in another call—unless the bank job was finished sooner. Twenty minutes to live. Unless—

Five minutes later, Fat was back, a toothpick sticking from his thick lips, contentment in his pale eyes. Fat sat down beside Pete, grinned at Mike across the room.

"It was a good steak, copper."

But Mike wasn't listening. Ears straining, he thought he picked up a sound. Somewhere, a board creaked. Was it on the stairway? Or was it only the wind? Then, abruptly, he heard it again. He glanced toward the door, saw the knob move. It took but an instant to comprehend. He leaned forward, began to scream a warning.

"Jimmy—Georgie—stay out of here!"

But it was too late. The door burst open. Jimmy the Greek, flanked by his brother Georgie, came crashing inside. Jimmy carried a blackjack, while Georgie was brand-

ishing a meat cleaver almost half as long as his arm.

Pete's surprise was genuine, Fat Slocum's likewise. Fat leaped up just as Pete reached for his gun. At that instant, Mike Kelly dived. The five of them converged together in a tangle of flying arms and legs.

Pete's gun came up, but Mike slapped the arm aside and the bullet plowed harmlessly into the floor at the same instant that Georgie smashed the flat side of his cleaver against the top of Pete's skull. Mike whirled around, but Fat Slocum was already down, while over him stood Jimmy the Greek, fondly kissing his blackjack.

"The Marines, they have landed, no!" Jimmy laughed.

"You fools!" Mike said in a choked voice. "You crazy, chance-taking fools. I warned you to get the cops—"

"A man," explained Jimmy the Greek, "cannot hope to live forever. It it not so, Georgie?"

Georgie Moulous grinned. "It is so, my brother—"

"Guard these bums," Mike said. "I've got to make a call—"

He grabbed his gun, then raced down the steps and made it to the call box in only a little over a minute. He whispered his excited message, then sat on the curb to wait.

A few moments later, a prowler car, moving without siren or light, pulled up to the curb beside him. Two men leaped out, both carrying tommy guns.

They moved toward the bank, took their positions in the shadows. When the getaway car appeared, Mike stuck his gun through the open window, told the driver to keep quiet. Then the bank door swung open and four men stepped out, carrying sacks of currency and safe-cracking tools.

"Okay, boys. The party's over—"

Mike blew his patrolman's whistle. Sirens began to moan and within minutes the street outside the bank was swarming with cops.

Mike told them where they'd find Fat Slocum and Pete, his gunman. Then, feeling suddenly carefree, Mike added, "I've had enough for one night. If anyone wants anything, they'll find me at the restaurant of Jimmy the Greek."

And it was there, almost an hour later, that the Chief found him. Mike was sitting at the counter, two beers beneath his belt

(Please continue on page 112)

GUNS ACROSS THE TABLE

*Insurance-dick Lane was in for a red-hot time—
when his jewel hunt began to involve a bevy of gorgeous babes . . .
one of them very, very cold.*

PLUS

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL



CHAPTER ONE

Pardon My Blood

SOMETHING was hiding under that dinner napkin of finest damask. A gun. An automatic was staring straight across the table at me from under a little crumpled heap of linen as white and chaste as a shroud.

By **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**



An automatic was staring straight across the table at me.

Just a glimmer of its dark and deadly snout was visible. I watched it and thought that this was indeed a lush and wacky way to die. It was hardly the place for it, here at this festive table in the thick of a very elegant, really ultra-swank party. Happy people all round. A small orchestra bouncing out a gay tune in harmony with the tinkling of tall scotches.

On the dance floor, charming couples cheek to cheek in the gloaming, or wriggling off a samba. Waiters hustling trays loaded with grilled squab and broiled lobster. Laughter bubbling under paper lanterns swinging prettily in the evening breeze. The loveliest girl in the world, Ilene Brooke by name, seated at my elbow all unaware that in another half minute or so she would find her escort a suddenly dead bucko.

Ilene might find that same gun turned on her next. Once I'd tumbled lifeless off my chair it could also bang out Ilene's own swift death. For the same reason. Because we'd grown a little too snooty for a killer's liking.

The wackiest angle of all this was the fact that although I knew the gun was there, ready to give me the business, I couldn't make out whose hand was gripping it. Maybe I shouldn't have taken that last Moscow Mule so fast. The hand was there, all right, tight on the automatic under the napkin—but whose finger was about to squeeze the trigger?

Three persons were sitting opposite me at the table, and one more was standing behind them. One of those four wanted me dead—wanted it desperately enough to put the blast on me right here in the middle of a glittery social affair. But which?

"We were discussing homicide," I said, playing for time. "Three murders, to be specific. Not just one, not even two, but three. All of them the work of the same bloody hand. Am I boring you—or shall I go on and mention the killer's name?"

They didn't speak. They just went on looking at me, all of them, all four people and the gun, too. Still I couldn't tell which one of the four was about to shut me up for good.

Taking them from right to left—

The man seated on my right-most, at a slight diagonal, was my boss, Leon Harlington, president and chairman of the board of the Preferential Liabilities Assur-

ance Co., Ltd. He had assigned me, as a staff investigator, to this dizzy fandango of a case. "Shake it down, Lane, no matter whom it may hurt."

But now that I was about to spring the answer, he didn't seem to want to hear it. Somehow I'd found out the wrong things. Harlington now considered me a shark-hearted double-crosser at best, and that shiny round face of his was puffy with anger.

His hot eyes were threatening me. *That's all, Lane. Sign off now, or I'll chop you up into goulash.* He could do it, too, with the greatest of ease.

He had curled one arm, his right one, around the waist of his lovely wife Lida, who was sitting close at his side, and the hand gripping the gun under the napkin could be his.

Lida Harlington was directly opposite me—which ordinarily would have been a very choice location. Lida was a songstress whose voice unfortunately happened to be the least beautiful part of her, but that was a detail easily overlooked.

Otherwise she had more than everything—genuine red hair, really flame-red, deep green eyes that smoldered easily, a figure that could be conservatively appraised at three or four million bucks, a husband with a city apartment, this country estate, boats, cars, a private plane, dozens of other guys mooning in her wake wherever she went. Lida had plenty of everything, all right—including maybe murder in her heart.

She sat there with three champagne glasses in front of her, all of them emptied within the past several minutes, gazing across at me with hatred flickering like heat lightning in those lovely green eyes. Both her hands were out of sight. Both of them might be under the table or one of them might be under that napkin with a slender scarlet-nailed finger slowly teasing the trigger.

On Lida's right, also close, sat that temperamental producer of musical extravaganzas, Victor Cornish. Cornish was a born bully who had made an art of kicking people around when they least could take it. He had a cultivated attitude of arrogance and hardly ever missed a chance to exercise it.

He loathed his fellow-men in general with a fine-honed loathing, and me he de-

tested in particular. Maybe it was because I thought his constant posing was funny, and showed it. Whatever his reasons were, that steely glitter in his eyes said he might be well pleased to see me fall over on my face, dead. He was left-handed, I recalled, so it could easily be his fist under the napkin—his poet's hand sensitively aiming a slug of doom at me.

As for the fourth person across the table, I wasn't sure. He or she was behind Lida, bending as if to whisper in her ear. The lanterns swung and flickered and a shadow hovered above Lida's lovely red head, obscuring that fourth person.

It might be a man in a dinner coat, or a woman wearing black with her hair slicked down. So far I hadn't dared lift my eyes for a better look. But the hand under the napkin at the table's edge could belong to Number Four too—a hand pushing closer now, pushing slightly closer to make surer of a bulls-eye hit.

I was unarmed—except for a double scotch and certain well-loaded information.

Don't just sit there, Lane, like a damned duck, I warned myself. *Start talking fast. Get it said—get it out before the bullet comes.*

"Speaking of murder," I resumed aloud—

IT HAD started only a few deadly days ago in the Claims Investigation Section of the offices of the Preferential Liabilities Assurance Co., Ltd, on lower Broadway, Manhattan.

I must have been a little late getting back from lunch. Ilene Brooke's frown was a little more darkly disapproving than usual as she approached my desk. The way Ilene could look so luscious and act so poisonous, both at the same time, was something I was given to brooding about. I had just now come in from a place where I had been sitting alone and brooding about it to the extent of four beers. This could have been the reason I was maybe a little late.

"Wickley Lane, wherever on earth have you been?" Ilene asked, sounding stern.

As head secretary of Claims Investigation, comprising twelve insurance detectives, plus assistants, plus stenographers and file clerks, Ilene Brooke was charged with the task of checking on our comings, our goings and our sobriety, if any. Since

the retirement of our previous chief two months ago, in fact—a spot not yet filled—Ilene had been practically running the investigation section.

"I was out hunting stolen diamonds, sugar-pie." Since this was exactly what I was hired to do, it seemed a very reasonable answer. "However," I felt obliged to add, "I didn't root up any."

"Mr. Harlington's waiting in his office," Ilene told me, unsmiling. "He asked to see you more than an hour ago. Think up a good excuse and get in there fast." She turned away but paused. "Not that it makes the slightest difference to me, Mr. Lane—you can go right on your dissolute way indefinitely for all I care—but if you have any breath-sweeteners in your desk you'd better swallow a boxful on the way."

"That's unjust," I said. "I'm a very moderate drinker, really. I only drink one drink at a time."

Ilene's lovely dark eyes began to glitter. She looked so aloof and so embraceable—tall, willowy, tidy. She was a girl whose shoes always shone, whose nylon seams were always ruler-straight. Hair blacker than black, eyes even deeper. Somehow Ilene gave me the impression of wanting something, of wanting it very deeply, and I'd never been able to figure out what it might be—except, certainly, it wasn't me. Her lovely eyes were gazing upon me with all the warm softness with which she might gaze upon a case of cholera.

"You get the wrong impression of me simply because my disposition resembles a whiskey-sour," I said. "The first taste may make you shudder, but after that I get much easier to take."

She just frowned at me.

"I was a happy man once, but I turned acid recently because a lovely girl named Ilene Brooke fails strangely to appreciate my sterling qualities and true affectionate nature. I don't know why. Nothing ever goes right for me."

"Things will go wronger for you fast if you don't hustle," she warned me. "Mr. Harlington, remember? Right now."

I wended my way toward Mr. Harlington's office, running a gauntlet of his private staff. As I passed them, a sub-secretary, a secretary and a super-secretary each said ominously, "Go right in, Mr. Lane."

I went right in and Mr. Harlington him-

self greeted me by asking in slightly scathing tones, "I hope I haven't torn you away from something really important?"

"I was working on the Gibson case, sir."

He looked skeptical, as if suspecting it might be more accurate for me to say a case of Gibson's. "Got to the bottom of it yet?" he asked, sounding a shade sarcastic.

"No, sir," I said, "but in a case like that I rarely give up until it's really polished off."

"Ha," said Mr. Leon Harlington, grimly.

He was a big man with a round face like a wax apple and nobody to kid around with, at least not during business hours on a bad day. Preferential Liabilities was a sizable organization and Leon Harlington was its biggest wheel. He was way up there in the chips and socially he bled blue. He was well aware of his formidable position and hardly ever hesitated to throw his considerable weight around.

He was worried, all right, and, as Ilene had said, he evidently wanted to get something important done urgently. He was trying hard to maintain his usual urbane manner but his jitters showed through as he flipped rapidly through sheaves of papers on his desk.

"Yes, yes, here's the report, Gibson case. Also the reports on the Anderson case, the Clairborne case and the Hotel Riviera case. All assigned to you, Lane. No results in any of them. No results at all except expense accounts. Not one stolen jewel recovered."

"Gem thieves are getting smarter every day, sir."

He looked up sharply. "But not detectives?"

"I don't deserve all the blame," I said. "Those cases were stone cold when they were shifted to me, after other operatives had had a crack at them and failed. Every one of them was fairly hopeless to begin with. Put any other man you may choose on them and ten to one they still won't close."

L EON HARLINGTON was unimpressed. He shoved those reports aside and took up others. "Any failure to recover stolen property insured by us is, as you should know, Lane, costly to this company." Costly to Harlington personally

also, since he owned a big chunk of it. "We can't afford to let thieves be smarter than we are. This job calls for tireless, top-flight brainwork. It calls for diligent application. That is, Lane, diligent application to the task at hand, not to taprooms, blondes and night clubs."

I sat up. "Just a minute, Mr. Harlington. That estimation of me is a little exaggerated. I do take a drink now and then. I like to squire pretty girls around. Once in a while I might grab one of 'em and break into a creaky rhumba at a chop suey joint. That's practically as wild as I ever get."

Mr. Harlington smiled thinly.

"It should be obvious that I'm not living a profligate night life," I insisted, feeling the temperature rising under my collar. "How could I—on the money I'm making?"

His smile fading, Harlington significantly flicked his finger across those other reports. Ah. So. He'd been having me tailed. Another P.L.A. man had been spying on me under orders and reporting my private activities to the top brass.

Burning a little more warmly at that, I asked, "May I see those reports of Steese's, sir?"

The president of the company looked at me hard. "What makes you assume it was Steese who wrote them?"

"He's been cultivating me these past several weeks—tagging me around with all the subtlety of a bass drummer in a fireman's parade."

Sid Steese, another operative in Claims Investigation, undoubtedly stood higher in Mr. Harlington's esteem than I did. He'd worked at it. He was a favor-courier, a rodent-faced guy who had been born with a stiletto in his little fist. I could be fairly sure, even without having read them, that Steese's confidential reports on my extra-curricular interests were highly colored.

With Harlington, however, they seemed to carry weight. He eyed me with an unchanging, ominous expression. *The next sound you hear, Lane, I told myself, will be the sickening thud of the axe falling.* After a moment of poker-faced scrutiny, Harlington said, "Most certainly you may not read them," and put the reports aside.

I watched him press a well-kept finger on one of a bank of pearl push-buttons. His

summons produced the pleasantest result I could have hoped for—Ilene. She gave me a serves-you-right frown and stood there expectantly, waiting for the big boss to say, "Make out a voucher for Lane's severance pay, Miss Brooke."

But he didn't say that. He got out of his chair and paced all around his mahogany desk for a minute without saying anything at all. Several times he stopped, as if about to speak, but wagged his head and went on pacing. He seemed deeply disturbed by something that was almost too painful to talk about.

Ilene looked prettily puzzled. We waited until finally Harlington squared his shoulders and said, "Lane, I ought to fire you. But I'm going to give you one more chance."

I was still smouldering and this didn't help to cool me off. "Look here, Mr. Harlington. I don't get all this. My assignments lately have all been dogs. Results, a bad record I don't deserve. Also, somewhat, I've been picking up a reputation as a natural-born heel, a girl-snatching rounder, and a bar-buzzing bum, which I also don't deserve. Somebody's going around and blackening my good name."

Eying me skeptically, Harlington asked, "Who's doing it, Lane, and why?"

"I don't know who or why, but I'm damned well going to find out."

"That's what a detective's for, to find out things," Harlington remarked wryly. "I wish you luck."

My protest had had no favorable effect on Ilene. Her lovely face showed no sympathy for me.

"Meanwhile," Harlington continued, "I've decided on a special assignment for you, Lane. It has certain important angles that make it seem particularly well adapted to you."

That was better. Ilene was about to hear a good word about me, for a change. "In what way, sir?" I asked hopefully.

"It's especially well adapted to you in the respect that you don't look like a detective, and you don't act like one, and you certainly haven't exactly functioned as one lately, either."

THAT was another one below the belt. I absorbed it and managed, this time, not to put up an argument that would get

me nowhere in a great, big rush anyway.

"It's the most important robbery case we've faced in ten years," Harlington went on. "It's top secret. The papers haven't heard about it so far and I hope to hell they never will. Above all, we've got to keep it hushed up." He added, "It's a theft of jewels worth a little more than three-hundred thousand, insured with us for their full value."

A loss of three-hundred grand was worth a second thought, all right, but it wouldn't bankrupt the company. Our rates are computed to take care of such contingencies. Still, it would certainly be better business to recover the thefted jewels and thereby avoid shelling out that mintful of dough.

Harlington handed me a typed list. "The loot," he explained, sounding brittle. Glancing down the list, I saw such items as a diamond pendant, twenty carats, one platinum necklace set with ninety baguettes, emerald earrings, eight carats each, ruby brooch, thirty-five carats, and matching clips, oriental pear necklace with sapphire clasp. Detailed descriptions followed. Any one of these little items would have been a very respectable haul in itself. Taken together, the swag was slightly historical.

"I merely wish to get those trinkets back, Lane," Harlington said grimly. "All of them. In a hurry. That's all I wish, Lane. Except that, also, it must be done absolutely without a leak, without publicity."

That was the oddest angle—some unusual necessity for keeping the whole deal under wraps. A burglary of that size really ought to rate a mention in the news columns. You might even expect to see it in big, black headlines. But this time, no.

"Wasn't it reported to the police, sir?"

"It was not."

"Who lost these jewels?"

Mr. Harlington's face lost a little color. He ignored that second question and went on answering the first.

"I felt my own operatives could handle it. I gave Steese the assignment at once, while it was red hot. I hoped for quick results, particularly because I strongly suspect it was not a professional job. However, it does involve unusual circumstances, certain factors very difficult to handle. In short, the situation urgently calls for something more than routine handling."

I asked it again, "Who lost those jewels, sir?"

"Don't interrupt me, Lane. I have every confidence in Steese, understand. He'll go right on pressing the case. Unfortunately, however, he's handicapped because apparently the thief knows who he is. The theft occurred in the thick of a group of people who work together every day. Crook's in a position to watch Steese's moves, in other words, and be forewarned."

Surprised, I asked, "Yet you're keeping him on the job?"

Harlington nodded. "Would do no good to jerk him off and substitute another man. Crook would soon spot the new one in the same way. Smarter to play dumb and let Steese stay on the job as a decoy while we pull in a sneak play from the rear."

Even considering the big money involved, Leon Harlington was taking a remarkably keen interest in this case.

"Have it all planned out. Our real investigation must center inside that group. Work from the inside out. Detectives must not be known as such, but as something else having no apparent interest in or connection with the case. That way we'll stand a far better chance of finding which one of those charming people actually stole that jewelry."

I tried again. "Wouldn't it help a little if I knew who it was stolen from?"

Ignoring me grimly, Harlington turned to Ilene. "You sing, Miss Brooke?"

Caught by surprise, she stammered, "Why—why, yes."

"Dance? Don't mean one-step, rumba, nothing like that. Tap, ballet, stage dancing?"

"I—I've taken a few lessons, Mr. Harlington."

"I'm told you're damn good," Harlington said. "Really professional. That's what you really want, isn't it—stage career? Don't hesitate to admit it. Beautiful, talented girl like you shouldn't be wasting her time sheep-herding my collection of dubious gumshoes. Wish you luck, Miss Brooke. This may give you the start you've been hoping for."

Confused, Ilene said, "Thank you, Mr. Harlington—but frankly, I don't get it."

"You've heard of the Summit Musical Circus?"

"Oh, yes!"

It took me a little longer to remember about the Summit Musical Circus. It was one of the many so-called musical circuses which had begun blooming in rural Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Florida and elsewhere since the success of the first one at Lambertville, New Jersey, summer before last. The idea was to present favorite musical comedy hits—*Show Boat*, *Student Prince*, *Good News* and so on—on a circular stage under a real circus tent. Novel, pleasantly informal, inexpensive entertainment.

"The Summit Musical Circus is located in a corner of my country place," Harlington explained. "In fact, I'm its biggest backer. My wife is its featured singing star. The principal members of the cast and the staff are my house guests. This is the group of people I spoke about."

He turned to me, his face set. "Now, Lane, to answer the question you've asked me three times—Those jewels were stolen from the lovely woman known professionally as Lida Cordray."

For half a moment the name didn't click. "Lida Cordray Harlington," he explained.

Then I stared at him.

"My wife, of course," he added quietly.

CHAPTER TWO

Here Comes the Corpse

LEON HARLINGTON glowered as if daring me to so much as smile. Fortunately I managed to stay deadpan. As a piece of news it was both cock-eyed and staggering, not to mention ironical—the head man of a big insurance company finding his own wife robbed of a peck of jewels heavily insured by his own firm! It was, to say the least, embarrassing.

It was very easy now to understand why Leon Harlington had gone to lengths to avoid publicity, why he was so shaken, why he was desperately anxious to get his wife's ice back as soon as humanly possible.

It was as absurd as police headquarters getting its safe cracked or a chief of detectives losing his shield to a picketpocket or the firehouse burning down. Once the news of his mortifying predicament leaked out, Harlington would become the helpless laughing stock of his social and profes-

sional circles and life for him would no longer be worth living.

But it had its serious side also. This fine mess would invite suspicious smirks. It would breed whispered innuendos reflecting darkly on the integrity of the company and it might undermine our clients' faith in our management. The inevitable result: collapse. Small wonder Harlington was feeling a little jittery.

"That peculiar look on your face, Lane," he observed quietly, "tells me you appreciate the importance and the delicacy of the matter."

Peering into the box, I stood frozen motionless.



"Yes, sir."

"Well, Lane, it has become your responsibility to get me out of it."

He didn't actually add "or else." He didn't need to. It was perfectly clear that I would come out of this either loaded with Mrs. Harlington's baubles or dead.

After swallowing twice, I said, "Yes, sir," again, sounding far more enthusiastic than I felt.

Ilene, following Harlington's cryptic mention of the music circus, had almost forgotten to breathe. Now he turned back to her and said, "You're to help with this as-

signment, Miss Brooke. That is, you and Lane will work on it together. I have already arranged for you to become a member of the cast at Summit, as an understudy."

"Mr. Harlington!" Ilene squealed. "Why, that's wonderful of you! You mean I'll actually have a chance to get out there on a stage—"

"You will," Harlington broke in, "meanwhile, of course, working under cover at your principal job of getting my wife's jewels back."

I asked, "And how am I to insinuate myself into this group, Mr. Harlington? I don't look as fetching as Ilene does in a

ballet skirt and my high C is simply *blah!*"

"I imagine not. Your part will be a very easy one for you, Lane. You'll be a lazy, irresponsible, none too bright man-about-town type of character. As your excuse for being present, you'll be known as Ilene's brand-new husband."

Ilene blanched. "As my wha-at?"

"That's the very essence of my plan," Harlington said, beaming at us both. "If I do say so myself, I think it's devilishly clever. You'll disarm that crook completely—you'll fool him six ways from breakfast simply by appearing to be on your honeymoon."

"For heaven's sake!" Ilene blurted. "No! It's utterly impossible."

"Nonsense," Harlington said shortly. "Lane is hardly Montgomery Clift, but on the other hand he's not too repugnant. You'll have to watch him like a hawk, but then—"

"That's just it," Ilene said quickly. "I'm engaged—and Wickley Lane is the kind of man who doesn't respect a girl's engagement."

Ilene engaged? This was bad news which I hadn't heard before. It jarred me, but it really didn't make too much difference. Because Ilene's crack about me was entirely correct—in *her* case, anyway. Given half a chance, I'd get her unengaged in a hurry.

"Come now," Harlington chided her. "You must know well enough by now how to handle yourself in the clinches. You must have had plenty of practise at it. As for your fiancé, don't tell him a word about it. On my part, I'm going to tell absolutely no one else who you really are or what you're really working at—not even my wife."

"But if—if Roland ever heard of this," Ilene stammered, "he'd *never* believe it was really—well, platonic. My fiancé, I mean. There'd always be an ugly suspicion lurking in the back of his mind. It would poison our marriage. No, Mr. Harlington. It's too big a risk. At least with an unethical character like Wickley Lane it is."

"But, Ilene, darling, think of your future, your career," I said sourly. "You want to see your name up in lights some day, don't you? Then you must be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices. You must grasp this, your chance of a lifetime."

"Yours, too, you hope, and that's just what I'm afraid of." Ilene said. She was actually trembling. "No. Really. It's out. I wouldn't *dream*—"

AND so it was that twenty-four hours thereafter Ilene Brooke and I were ushered into what was presumably the bridal suite of Léon Harlington's sumptuous country home.

A monkey-jacketed manservant bowed us in. A flunky followed, lugging our luggage. They smiled coyly and immediately withdrew, thereby leaving my "bride" and I alone together for the very first time in our lives.

A real bride and groom, of course, would have immediately hurled themselves into a this-is-it clinch. We stared at each other in silence, like wrestlers each waiting for the other to flex a muscle. As for what might come of all this, it didn't look too promising, either professionally or amorously. I could hope, of course, but not for much.

In coming here Ilene had not abandoned her principles. Far from it. In fact, those lofty principles of hers seemed even stronger than before. Mr. Harlington and I had finally persuaded her to come by appealing to her ambition—and she had a lot of it to appeal to.

Finally, but still guardedly, she had agreed to go ahead with it, out of loyalty to dear old P.L.A., provided that Mr. and Mrs. Harlington promised to stay within earshot, prepared at all hours to help her slap me silly at the first offside play. So here we were together, in our blossom-bedecked blue room, my un-kissed bride and I.

Ilene stood there, all slicked up for this moment of moments, looking especially luscious, with an icy frown aimed squarely at me. I had never seen her looking more attractive, in fact, or more forbidding.

"Wickley, let me remind you that this is strictly business," she said. "*Strictly* business. If you so much as try to lay a finger on me, I'll scream."

"That will cause considerable chuckling on the part of the other guests," I said. "I better ask our host to transfer us to a sound-proofed room."

"You wouldn't dare." Ilene bristled. "You'll keep your mind strictly on your

host's business and those jewels, or else."

"Or else on you?"

"No!"

"I'm really not in a business mood this evening."

"Wickley Lane!"

"Well, I'll try," I said, "but not too hard."

"I warn you." Ilene clenched her fists. "I warn you—"

"All right, all right, relax," I said. "You over-estimate me, sugar. I'm really a rather slow drooler. Subtle too. Really smooth. I wouldn't think of making a pass at you within the first thirty seconds."

Ilene pinched her lovely lips together, plainly suspecting that this was not entirely true, while I gazed all around this room which was supposed to be our nuptial chamber.

It was obviously one of the choicest in the joint. Dreamy was the word for it. The windows could be snugly shuttered, and, when open, they offered views of beautiful droopy willows in a velvet lawn spreading into verdant hills—and not a person in sight.

The thick, woolly rug was the kind you'd love to wade through barefoot. No royal couch could have been more luxurious than the big double bed appeared to be. At the first opportunity, I suspected, Ilene would sprinkle it with itch powder.

As special guests of Leon Harlington, we could command his servants. Anything at all we might wish, just call for it. Scotch and ice at any hour. Anything. Perfect. Who could wish for anything more?

I could.

I could wish that my luscious roommate would stop trying to prove that she was not amorously inclined. I already believed it.

"Keep reminding yourself" Irene said loftily, "that *I am engaged* and deeply in love with my fiance."

It was a tough thing to remember, Ilene being as toothsome as she was, but she proceeded to demonstrate that also. She opened her traveling case and removed a framed photograph. She placed it on her vanity, gave me a chilly, keep-your-distance glance, then gazed at it starry-eyed. It was inscribed, *To Ilene with love forever—Roland*.

It soured me a little more. Roland was

really handsome. Whoever the guy was, I couldn't compete with him in looks and he had five or six years on me besides. The fact that he had connected with Ilene ahead of me was just one more item in a long list of bad breaks that proved me to be one of the unluckiest guys alive.

"For Pete's sake, get that pretty boy out of sight," I said. "What'll the servants think when they come in here and find my tender young bride swooning some other guy's picture?"

Ilene sniffed, placed the picture up front on her vanity where she could look at it at every opportunity, then flicked me with a frown that warned me not to touch it.

While Ilene applied lipstick to her luscious mouth, I tried to take my mind off her by getting down to cases. Any investigator's first move should be to check the room, so I circled it, first looking into the adjoining bath and the closets. A pair of french doors opened onto an ornate balcony whereon sat tables and lounging chairs. The balcony ran completely across the front of the house and at intervals along it were other french doors.

From somewhere below came the sounds of splashing in the pool, the clatter of ice in tall glasses and the lighthearted laughter of the Harlingtons' other guests.

"Don't trust anybody," Mr. Harlington had cautioned me. "The stakes are too big. Remember, don't trust anybody—not even me."

He had smiled grimly when saying it. To both the big boss and me this was a crucially important assignment, so I went on snooping carefully all around the room. I even craned into flower vases and behind hanging pictures, mindful that wire recorders are pretty common these days and there might be a microphone planted somewhere in here.

That's what prompted me to look inside the chest.

Bent over, peering into the big, ornate box, I stood frozen motionless.

It was a large chest of heavy black wood, inlaid with gold leaf and carved with Chinese symbols. It was as large as a casket. In a sense it *was* a casket—because inside it lay a girl, dead.

The girl was one I'd never seen before, dead or alive. A brunette, small, the cute type, dressed in a wisp of a swimsuit.

She appeared to have taken a beating, but if so she had died fast, before the bruises could form.

She lay like a child asleep on stored blankets. Twice she had been stabbed, both times low near the heart. The wounds were hardly more than small red spots. The weapon—I guessed an ice pick. It had disappeared with the killer, unless it had fallen under her body.

Bent there, stiffened, I looked carefully around at Ilene. She was still seated at the vanity before Roland's picture, still prettying herself—and had noticed nothing.

I reached into the chest carefully and placed my hand gently on the girl's corpse. Thereby I handed myself a second shock. This murder had happened only minutes ago. Her body was still warm as life.

CHAPTER THREE

Sweetly She Sleeps

QUIETLY I lowered the lid of the chest, walked slowly to the opposite side of the room and sat down. I tried to think. All I could think at first was that nobody but a genius like me could get himself fouled up like this so fast without even trying.

Here I was in paradise as the unmarried husband of the most attractive and most untouchable chick I'd ever met, but that wasn't bad enough. I had now found myself lovelessly honeymooning with not just one lovely girl, but two. The second one—lying in the chest, dead, here in my platonic bridal chamber—had come along just for the ride. A ride in a hearse, that was—to the morgue.

My "bride" didn't even know she was intruding. Nobody knew she was there except the killer and me.

Looking up, I found on Ilene's lovely face an expression I had never seen before. Seeming sad yet happy, too, she appeared to have floated off in a dream, all dew-eyed. A fine time for it, I reflected, with a corpse lying just across the room—but she was actually gazing at me in a softly sentimental mood, just as a genuine bride might do. It startled me. I couldn't believe it.

Just then a sharp knock sounded on the door. Ilene snapped back to herself and

frost settled grimly over her face again.

Crossing to the door to answer the knock, I thought fast about the unknown dead girl. One thing was certain—the moment the cops took over, Ilene and I would be licked. Our chances of carrying on our little matrimonial deception in the face of a homicide investigation would be nil. Inevitably it would bring down upon us the one disaster Harlington wanted so desperately to avoid—a big noise in the newspapers.

Publicity, besides, would not benefit Ilene's reputation, and just incidentally it would cause the sudden professional demise of a minor character named Wickley Lane.

Discretion demanded that the contents of that chest must remain temporarily undisturbed and unreported. Until I found a better chance to decide what to do about the dead girl, she'd have to stick around.

Reaching for the door-knob, I realized one other important possibility. The killer may have dumped his victim inside the chest because he was pressed for time and wasn't aware that a pair of "newlyweds" were about to move into this room. Very possibly he meant to hustle back, first chance he found, and shift her over to a better hiding place.

If so, I could wait in ambush with a good chance of nailing him red-handed. Then, if he had any connection with the big gem theft, his capture might wind up my assignment fast and shower me with glory.

The opened door revealed our caller to be a spare, poetic-faced young man wearing plaid shorts. That's all he was wearing—no shirt, no shoes, just those walking shorts expensively tailored of some of the noisiest tartan ever to blow out of Scotland.

He ducked as he came in to avoid bumping his tousled black head—he was that tall. Handsome too—even handsomer than Roland Whozis over there in Ilene's picture frame. Offensively handsome, in fact, offensive in manner also. Ignoring me, he moved up on Ilene with a sort of rolling, slumped-shouldered insolence.

"I'm Victor Cornish," he announced.

So okay, he was Victor Cornish. I didn't start purring over the news. I'd never heard of the guy before. If Ilene knew who he was, she kept a grip on herself and man-

aged to refrain from dropping a curtsy.

Annoyed by our lack of jubilation, Cornish explained, "Director of this rat-race called the Summit Musical Circus. You're not Ilene Lansing, I hope."

"Well, I'm really very sorry," Ilene Brooke answered, chin lifted, "but I *am* Ilene Lansing." She added with an effort, "This is my h-husband, Wickley Lansing."

Harlington had insisted we use this phony name. Maybe there was a legal reason for it. Anyway, it was part of this "devilishly clever" plan of his.

VICTOR CORNISH awarded me a casual glance. No handshake, no howdy-do, just a disinterested swipe of his dark eyes. I didn't rate even his disfavor. That was for Ilene.

"Mr. Leon Harlington tells me—" a hint of scorn showed in the way he pronounced the name of the man whose financial support had made the musical circus possible, "—Mr. Leon Harlington tells me you're my new understudy. I wasn't aware I needed one. I felt Jody Dodd was quite competent enough. I *still* prefer Jody. You're too skinny."

Skinny to him, willowy to me. The guy was a little hard to please. What he seemed to want more than a new understudy was a mouthful of knuckles. It was at that point that Victor Cornish began hating me right back. That was the first time I laughed at him.

He glared at me murderously, then turned back to Ilene to ask, with a lordly bite in his words, "And just what experience have you had?"

Looking as cool as a princess and six inches taller than normal, Ilene answered, "I have had the experience of being hired by the backer of this show, Mr. Leon Harlington."

Good girl. She wasn't afraid to stand up to this insufferably supercilious director. He couldn't top her answer, either, except with a mean twist of his selfish mouth that seemed to say he'd soon fix *her* wagon.

Altogether this peculiar honeymoon of mine was getting sweeter by the minute. At just this juncture, to add to the piquancy of it, quarrelsome voices, one male and one female, became audible through the french doors and footsteps came rapidly

along the balcony just outside our window.

I turned a quick, half-guilty glance across the room at the chest. As long as it continued to serve as a coffin for the unknown dead girl, this wasn't the best place for a

A throaty voice said, "Ah, there you are, my pet."



meeting of the clan. I could see already, though, "honeymoon" or not, that I was going to have a nerve-racking time keeping people out of here. Particularly right

now, because the couple entering from the balcony was our host and hostess.

"Ah, Ilene, my dear!" Leon Harlington greeted us. "Delighted to see you, Wick, old man!" Just as if I wasn't really a low-ranking hired hand on probation. At the same time Lida Cordray Harlington embraced Ilene like a long-lost pal, in the way women do, while graciously burbling profuse welcomes.

"I'm so *angry* with Leon for not telling me sooner that you were coming, darling! Leon, she's *lovely*. Such *fresh* loveliness Vic! She'll do *wonderfully*. Ilene darling, I'm so *happy* you're with us, and Leon must tell me all about *how* he discovered you."

Harlington squeezed in a suggestion that we all go right down to join his other guests for cocktails on the terrace beside the pool. Nobody vetoed it. Accordingly, we trooped out into the hall and I closed the door firmly behind me, glad to leave the dead girl in decent privacy.

Be patient, baby, I begged her silently, *until I get back*.

A throaty voice said, "Ah, *there* you are, my pet."

A *highly blonde* blonde was just exiting from the bedroom next mine. Her swim suit was satin, seal-sleek—but there was less of it than a seal normally wears. A hip-length cape hung from her shoulders. She was slightly plumpish but on her I wouldn't have had it otherwise. When my eyes finally worked their way up to her face, I found vivid coloring, the eyes of a hard-minded, experienced woman who was nobody's fool, and a tart, insinuating smile. Just *what* it insinuated was something to speculate about.

It was Vic Cornish she had addressed as "my pet," and now she came to him with an easy, stately walk. "You're such a comfort, darling—I always know just where to find you. With the loveliest women in the place." She curled an arm through Cornish's in a way that clearly warned Ilene, the newcomer, *This guy is mine and if you don't keep your hands off him you'll get your swan-like throat cut*.

There followed another round of introductions. This super-blonde was Mimi Kimball, dance director of the music circus. The endearments which she and Lida showed on each other showed they were rivals

to the teeth and detested each other with all their feline hearts.

Mimi went on with us, arm still linked through Cornish's, her beautiful stems in their cool rangy walk making me almost forget I was supposed to be a married man. Harlington annoyingly distracted my attention by tugging at my sleeve as we went down the broad staircase.

"Watch your chance to slip away," he muttered in my ear. "Talk to Steese. Waiting for you at Lion's Head bar, Newtowne. Get information there. Stay sober. See me later."

"Okay to all of it," I muttered back.

A worried young man was climbing the stairs toward us. He had a phony wave in his hair, his shirt collar open halfway down to his belt buckle and a handful of iced scotch. He was theatrical-looking in a dark, Latin way.

"Ha, Carlo," Harlington greeted him paternally. "Carlo Lionni, meet the Lansings, Ilene and Wickley. Just married, you know." For our benefit he added, "Very promising tenor, Carlo, very promising indeed except that he worries too much."

After politely wishing us a long and blissful married life, Lionni said in his soft Latin voice, "I'm worried, yes, about Jody. Have you seen her? I can't find her anywhere."

"She's *somewhere*, of course, darling," Lida said lightly. "When you find her, bring her down to meet these *delightful* Lansings."

Lionni murmured that he would do so and as he went on anxiously climbing the stairway a dizzy hunch hit me. Maybe I could tell him where to find the missing Jody. Just step into the room of those delightful Lansings, draw a deep breath and lift the lid of the chest—

In the process of passing through enormous, richly appointed rooms to the garden-bordered terrace beside the pool, we met six or eight more people. All of them were associated with the Summit Musical Circus—all were good-looking, expensively dressed, or just as expensively undressed, easily genial and glowing with dry martinis.

While I went through the motions of the introductions as charmingly as hell, the back of my mind was wrestling with a ticklish question: should I tell my host and boss that I was hiding a dead teen-ager

in my haven of newly-married bliss?

With the help of a well-laced gin-and-tonic I decided no. Keeping him in the dark would keep it simpler. Besides, Harlington had warned, *Don't trust anybody, not even me.* Maybe he hadn't meant that literally, but it was smart tactics anyhow. No, I wouldn't tell him. I'd let it stay a secret, just between the killer and me.

Watch your chance and slip away. Slipping away from a place like this was by no means easy. Not for me. Not with the pool such a scene of beauty—sparkling blue water, gleaming tiles, not to mention the musical circus's dancing girls.

WHEN I finally did slip away, reluctantly, it was not yet in the direction of a stinker named Steese. He could wait. Just now I had a date—a date with the lovely and pitifully young corpse upstairs.

I went around the house and in by a side door, unseen. The hallways were quiet. I eased back into my room, paused for half a moment, then went over to the chest and gently raised the lid.

She was still there, just as I had left her—eighteen or nineteen, child-like in her long, long sleep. She'd lived too little and had died too fast, and as I looked down at her the shameful waste of her life began to get me sore.

An odd tilt of her hips puzzled me. I reached in again—her skin was cooler now—and rolled her aside a little. Something was wedged under her, between the small of her back and her bed of folded blankets. A handbag.

I tugged it loose, opened it and fished up, first, a billfold. Inside this, nine dollars in folding money and her operator's license. Her name was Jody Dodd, all right. Her address was one I recognized as that of a low-rate rooming house for aspiring stage stars in mid-Manhattan. Nothing else unusual in the purse, just lipstick, bobby pins, matches, cigs. All commonplace. Yet there was something odd about this.

This handbag was an expensive job—hand-tooled leather, soft as a baby's cheek, ornamented in gold. A lowly little understudy couldn't afford it. A gift from a boyfriend, maybe? Perhaps Carlo Lionni. Also commonplace, that angle. Yet it was odd that Jody Dood should have come here to this unoccupied room to die, wearing only

a wisp of a swimsuit and carrying her dress-up, Park Avenue bag.

I dumped all its contents on the rug, reached in and found nothing more. Still, that bag wasn't empty. It was too heavy. The construction of its bottom, like that of a platform shoe, was suspicious. I fished into it again, felt around until I found a little leather tab to pull, pulled it—and out came a false bottom.

Next cotton came out. Packing. After that, a diamond necklace. Next, two rings and a bracelet. That was all. It added up to five figures' worth of baubles, and undoubtedly they belonged to Lida Cordray Harlington, but they were only a small part of the total loot.

I didn't take time then to wonder where the rest of it was. Actually I was jittery about finding this much of it. These trinkets had some to light entirely too soon. It wasn't natural, not for me. Moreover, although I'd never once glimpsed her alive, I couldn't believe that a sweet-looking child like Jody Dodd had been any part of a gem thief.

If this ice were found with her, though, she'd be branded by it. I didn't know why I felt so solicitous over this dead babe, but somehow I didn't want that to happen to her. Also, this bag with the jewels concealed in it might very well come in handy as an ace in the hole.

Whatever my real reason was, I stuffed the gems and the cotton back in place, fitted in the false bottom, then, after a good look around, decided that the safest place for it was somewhere outside this room.

I tucked it inside my coat, sucking in my stomach to make room for it behind my belt, and reached for the door-knob.

At that precise moment the door opened. The young man who stopped short on the sill to stare at me was Carlo Lionni. He looked feverish, half from scotch, half from anxiety.

"Beg your pardon," he said jerkily. "Didn't realize this was your room. I—I'm still looking. Can't imagine what became of her."

"What was the name of the girl you want to find?" I said. "Ruby? Pearl? Opal? Jewel?"

It was a shot in the dark and not too smart—it came too close to tipping my hand. The effect of it, however, was slightly

startling. Carlo Lionni's dimpled chin dropped into the hollow of a gasp and his cheeks turned as white as cold cream. A stunned moment passed before he could even recoil. Then he jerked back, snapped the door shut and I could hear him fading fearfully fast down the hall.

There, to judge from all the signs, went a scared and guilty guy.

JODY DODD'S trick bag containing the trinkets was now locked in the trunk of my six-year-old car. Squeezing past the new busses parked along Harlington's driveway and quietly heading out, I glanced up at the windows of my room. *Watch her for me, Roland.*

If anyone had missed me so far it must be Carlo Lionni, pleasantly. This badly bothered tenor was loaded with guilty knowledge, I felt sure, and possibly he might be my best break in years—except that I didn't dare let myself believe it. Somebody else might walk into a case as ticklish as this one and spot the crook on a hunch within practically the first forty minutes, but not Wickley Lane.

I turned out the stone-pillared gate of the Harlington estate, toward Newtowne, and passed the Summit Musical Circus. The tent, much smaller than the usual "big top" was painted in rainbow colors and bright banners flew from the poles. Acres of grassy parking space surrounded it—deserted now except for a few cars belonging to the men who were raking the oyster-shell walks and stocking the refreshment wagons for the evening's performance.

I rolled toward Newtowne under a sky that had begun to take on a surly look, as if it might work itself up into a storm. Newtowne was a picture-postcard village strung haphazardly along the Delaware—an art colony and a favorite summer lazing spot for New Yorkers inclined toward the bohemian.

The Lion's Head bar was the drinking department of a pre-Revolutionary tavern. It was full of city slickers in casual clothes making loud talk. Among them, down at the low end of the brass rail, was a weasel-faced character named Sid Steese.

I gave no sign of recognition and Steese stayed where he was, munching on free pretzels, while I finished a leisurely coke. It was coke, not beer, for Steese's

special benefit. I strayed out and stood on the porch watching ill-natured clouds rolling past the thickening forest of television antennas until Steese also emerged.

He walked across the street in his loose-jointed way and slouched himself into his parked car. After a minute I strolled over and folded into the seat beside him.

All this cagey maneuvering was done under Harlington's instructions. I was to avoid any open communication with this guy.

"Congrats on those reports you wrote about me for Harlington, pal," I said. "Never suspected you had such a fine talent for fiction."

Steese eyed me narrowly while chewing on a toothpick. "There's no need to gild *your* lily, brother," he answered in nasty tones. "You're lurid enough just as you come—as those reports show."

"I admit I can't say the same for you, Sid. You don't carouse around nights. Instead, you lie awake scheming how to make yourself the new chief of Claims Investigation. That's the dearest desire of that eager little heart of yours—if it is a heart."

Steese shrugged, still eyeing me. "What's more, I think I'll get there."

"Anyhow you can let up now. I'm already scratched out of the running. What your reports really show is how underhanded you can get, you rat."

"My reports on you to Harlington are strictly the straight goods." Steese was getting sore too. "Check for yourself. And don't call me a rat again."

"As straight as you can make 'em, you mean, which is as straight as a roller coaster. If it isn't your expert hand that's tickling my back with a dagger, whose is it?"

"Maybe your own," Steese snapped. "Lay off it now, Lane, or I'll slug you."

I had a sneaky feeling that maybe we were being listened in on. A glance around, though, didn't show anyone lurking about.

"Why am I talking to you anyway?" I said. "Something about some stolen jewelry? Wasn't it that?"

"Worry must have curdled Harlington's mind," Steese said, deep in his throat. "First he expects me to crack the case overnight, then he turns you loose in my hair. You've found the stuff already, of course?"

"Part of it."

Steese looked at me hard, sensing that I

actually wasn't kidding. "Which part?"

In saying that, I hadn't been too bright. It gave Steese a better reason for twisting the blade a little deeper between my shoulder-blades. Covering up, I kept on my best poker-face and said, "Harlington sent me here for a briefing. •Let's have it."

STEESE nibbled on his toothpick, cold eyes warning me to watch my footwork. He didn't intend to be beat out on this one—least of all by a disreputable character like me.

"Those three-hundred grand worth of sparklers ought to have been safely away inside a vault," I said. "Most of 'em, anyway. How come they were all out in circulation at once?"

"Mrs. Harlington wore them as part of her costume in last week's play. No publicity about it, you understand. The boss insisted on keeping it quiet. Said it would be tempting fate to use it as a promotion angle—not to mention every gem thief east of the Mississippi. So only a comparatively few members of the company knew that the jewelry festooned on Mrs. Harlington was the real thing."

"Where was it lifted?" I already knew the answers to these questions, having heard them from the big wheel himself. This was to check on Steese. "From her dressing room?"

He shook his head. "This stick-up was a real stage production. Pulled off right inside Harlington's own home, on the biggest social night of the week. See, after the final performance of each play the whole cast stays in costume for a party at Harlington's home. Weekly event, very ultra. The show last week was full of swashbuckling sword-play, knight-errands stuff, so it was easy for the crook to slip right in wearing a flowing cape of scarlet velvet and a black velvet mask."

Check.

"Mrs. Harlington was in the television room, watching something on the screen, with two or three friends not connected with the music circus. The semi-darkness in there made it even an easier setup for the crook. All through the stick-up Mrs. H. and the others laughed like it was a practical joke, just somebody having fun. But when the guy scrambled out with a hatful of her sparklers, just like Robin Hood, she

began to give with the yelps for help."

"Where was Harlington himself at the time?"

Steeze gave me a shrewd look. "Somewhere around."

"Who else saw the crook?"

"Practically the whole crowd. He strolled off with the loot, bowing and smiling as he went, and everybody bowed and smiled back."

Smart. If nailed during his get-away he could have laughed it off. Just a slightly swacked friend enjoying his little joke.

"Anything helpful about his description?" I was thinking of Victor Cornish for some reason. "Unusually tall, anything like that?"

"Average build. Nothing distinctive. As for the costume, it was a spare snatched from the wardrobe tent. Any average guy could have worn it. Even a dame."

Judy Dodd? I still didn't want to believe it of her.

"Who in that bunch needed money badly?"

"All of them."

Including Leon Harlington himself, maybe? When a rich guy gets a little poorer it hurts him worse than it hurts a poor guy who's used to it.

"Any other possible reason behind the theft?"

Steeze's smile turned nasty again. "Everybody in the company who has talent resents Lida Cordray Harlington because she hasn't."

"I get it. Lida Cordray is famous because her husband hires a top-flight publicity man for her. She's the show's lead, because her husband bought it for her. In filling that spot week after week, she's crowding out others who deserve it through merit. So she's secretly hated. Is that the way it adds up, Steese?"

Steeze's smile stayed nasty and sly. "I happen to be working for the lady's husband. Perhaps you'd like to tell him how much she's resented. You might also like to add that Harlington himself is roundly despised, in spite of all the fawning he gets, because of the way he throws his weight around in order to pamper his Lida."

Again I remembered Victor Cornish, this time wondering if his thinly veiled contempt for Harlington was the general attitude.

"You mean the robbery may have been an act of retribution for real or fancied wrongs? All right, which members of the company have the Harlingtons wronged the wrongest?"

Steese eyed me. "You on a vacation, Lane?"

In other words, get busy digging on my own. I didn't blame him, but I couldn't trust him to be the soul of cooperation either. "After almost a week of working on the case, Steese, you must know more than that."

"I haven't yet found any part of the swag," Steese said in ominously quiet tones. "If I should happen to come across any of it, I'll let you know."

Characteristically, he would give me the least help possible. He meant to break this case ahead of me because it would move him up to the chief's vacant desk. In the last extreme, when I started going down for the third time, then I might count on a little assistance from him—for example, his foot on my head.

I ducked out of the car and said, "I'm under instructions to keep checking with you, so I'll phone when the coast is clear." Foolishly I added, "Harlington won't like hearing you're maybe holding out on me and him both."

"Complain about it," Steese advised me with a sting in his voice. "Complain to Claims Investigation's new chief."

His sly mind was sneaking around behind my back, all right, with his little stiletto nicely whetted up and ready. I remembered coldly a thought that had been haunting me from the start—that I would come out of this case either loaded with loot or dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

I Ain't Got No Body

WHEN I wound my way quietly back up the long driveway of Harlington's estate, it was so late—or rather so early in the morning—that not even the mice were astir.

Under the cloud-heavy sky the pool lay black and choppy. Parked near the garage with the headlamps switched off, I mulled over certain information I'd picked up. The first dark suspicions that a double-cross

might be operating had begun to itch in my mind while I hung around the music circus during the evening performance.

Afterward, in Newtowne, I had buzzed from bar to bar buying drinks for the lower members of the show's staff—the musicians, electricians and stage-hands. These hard-working guys went practically unnoticed around the place while seeing and hearing everything, which made them the best source of news available.

There was a nagging rumor going about that Harlington, for all his lush front, was floundering in rough financial waters. The music circus, far from breaking even, was going deeper in the red every week. Lida, with Vic Cornish's encouragement, insisted on, and got, productions that were far too lavish and expensive.

The extravagant series of parties being staged here, also for the purpose of spotlighting Lida, were stacking up unpaid bills. Seen from this angle, the jewel robbery looked really fruity—it opened up wide the suspicion that Harlington might be defrauding his own company.

If so, he didn't really want those gems back. Then, in turn, I was being played for a sucker in some "devilishly clever" way of Harlington's.

I eased out of the car and walked quietly through the dew-wet grass toward the mansion while the gusty wind rattled the trees all around. The whole big house was silent in sleep. I climbed the broad, dimly lighted stairs and turned the knob of the door behind which, I presumed, I would find my lovely and lonely bride. I presumed wrong.

A light shining in across the balcony, from the parking space, showed me that the big, downy bed hadn't been touched. I couldn't even find Ilene sleeping on the floor. She wasn't anywhere.

There wasn't anybody here in this grimly cock-eyed bridal chamber but me, Roland Whozis in the silver frame, and—

I lifted the lid of the Chinese chest, reached in and immediately drew back. Jody Dodd was still in there in her makeshift, secret coffin, not minding it at all, but cold now, deadly cold.

I was getting squeamish about the young lady. A little too much of her could turn into a nightmare, which meant that I would have to come up with some glittering results in this case very fast.

I stood still listening to slow footfalls out there on the balcony. They were a man's steps and he was either barefoot or wearing soft slippers. After a moment I saw him, a shadow against the far light, coming from my left, the direction of the guests' rooms. He went on quietly toward the master's suite on my right, then paused.

He bent over a chair and murmured, "Darling—"

There in the chair was a woman curled up in a fleecy white blanket. She was, I judged, about to be kissed by the man who had just joined her. Instead, he stiffened and straightened, muttering something that sounded like, "Beg your pardon!" He turned back, moving rapidly, and passed out of my sight.

A second later came a thumping sound and a growl of blasphemy. When I stepped soundlessly out on the balcony he was gone—into one of the guests' bedrooms.

The woman cuddling herself there in the reclining chair was Ilene.

Her hair was twice as black as the night against the white pillow. I envied the wind toying with those ebony-dark tendrils. She looked so warmly enfolded there, so softly embraceable. Also, she looked unnaturally tense. She was only pretending to be asleep.

I thought, *She heard me come into the room. She knew I was watching there when this guy showed up. She might have whispered to him, "Cheese it, the husband!" and that could be why he faded so fast.*

"A good, good morning, Mrs. Lansing," I said sourly. "I'm afraid you've disillusioned me just a little, my darling. We've been married so short a time and already you're meeting guys on balconies on the sly. Who was this one, sweetest?"

ILENE sat up with her eyes narrowed at me. She didn't answer. I shrugged and sat wearily on the edge of the long chair. She drew away more tightly. One of her hands, holding the blanket around her, was bunched up into an odd-shaped fist.

"Let me guess who it was, then," I went on, feeling gone behind the belt buckle. "Maybe it was the top boy himself. You're Harlington's right-hand girl in Claims Investigation, so why not in other departments too?"

Her face in the glow was so lovely. Luscious lips thinned hatefully, beautiful chin

puckering with an impulse to sock me, eyes sparkling with enmity—really lovely.

"Sorry if I'm misjudging you, precious," I said. "I may be turning a little cynical. So far I haven't found one character in this classy setup of more than doubtful decency. You see, I would like to go on thinking well of you, Ilene—if only for Roland's sake."

Eyes narrowed to a brighter glitter, she asked quietly, "Jealous?"

"Naturally. Other guys make time with you—but not your own dear, phony husband."

"Stop it, Wick. I don't know who the man was who just called me darling or why he did. He certainly hadn't arranged a meeting with me here."

"Besides," I pointed out, "you *are* engaged to Roland, and a girl's engagement must be respected."

For a second she wavered on the point of smacking me. That one peculiar fist of hers, already so tight, grew even harder.

"I'm sorry, Ilene." Acting like a heel was no way to warm her up. "I'm jumpy, full of a funny, doomed feeling, like a guy strolling out to sea on a plank. This situation we're in is so plush and chi-chi on the surface, but inside it's ugly and raw."

Ilene seemed to shudder in the folds of her blanket. "I feel it too—selfish schemes at work, greed, and no mercy in it."

I nodded, still wondering against my will whether she was in a better position to know than I was.

"Better start checking leads, Ilene—tomorrow. For example, Jody Dodd."

"I already have. Everybody's really anxious about Jody. She missed the evening show—does a veil dance in it and the number had to be cut. That's not like her at all, they say—she's such a conscientious, sweet kid. She's carrying a torch for Carlo Lionni, I learned—and she's still unaccounted for."

Not by me, she wasn't. "Torch for Lionni? You mean he doesn't care too much about her? When he was prowling around hunting for her, he seemed half sick with worry."

"I have it on the authority of the very best gossips in the cast," Ilene insisted, "that Jody's mad about Carlo but definitely it's not vice versa. It's Lida he goes for."

"Ah? Listen, Ilene, I've picked up a few

tidbits of news about our Lida. First of all, she easily takes honors as the most hated member of the cast. Those other guys and gals have real talent and work themselves dizzy trying for a break. But it's Lida, with nothing but gorgeous looks to recommend her, who gets star billing simply because her husband buys it for her, like another mink coat."

"I know," Ilene said quietly. "She's much too much of a prima donna, too. Some fine day she'll get her beautiful eyes scratched out, or worse. Most probably by Mimi."

"Another thing, Lida's best talent seems to be a certain sort which her husband doesn't appear to know about and wouldn't exploit if he did. I mean she has, from all I hear, a really fine talent for two-timing him."

"You couldn't expect her to lavish all her charm on just one man, could you?"

I eyed Ilene, speculating on possible hidden meanings in this remark, then went on explaining about Lida. She was evidently very clever about it—guarded the secret of her extra-curricular amour with the slick cleverness of a worldly woman having a great deal at stake.

She deluded her husband with a profuse show of affection in public and left even her closest friends guessing as to who the man of her dreams really was. Their suspicions hadn't lighted for sure on any of the swarm of adoring males who trailed her around.

"Have *you* any idea who the guy is, Ilene? Ilene, weren't you listening?"

NO, SHE wasn't listening. There was a far-away look in her eyes. "I've been out here for hours, hoping as hard as I can, too excited to sleep a wink. Because Vic Cornish said that if Jody stays missing, I'll have to learn her dance and sub for her at tomorrow night's show."

Here it was already, the little girl's big chance—slightly ghoulish perhaps, but just like a backstage musical in technicolor. She was really starry-eyed about it.

"Better get an early start, then, baby," I said with a grimness she couldn't quite appreciate. "You need some sleep, so hop right into that lovely bed."

Ilene snuggled deeper in the chair. "I love it right here."

I reached for her wrist.

"Don't you touch me!"

That little fist of hers moved threateningly. I caught that wrist anyway, pulled her hand into the open and forced her to turn it over. I stared at the thing she was clenching.

An ice pick.

Instantly my thoughts jerked over to the girl lying secretly dead in the chest only a few yards from this spot. Those red spots left on her skin by the weapon of murder driving into her heart—my first glance had suggested an ice pick. And here gripped in Ilene's hand—

"Where'd you get that?" I asked it sharply.

Chin lifted, she answered defiantly. "From the terrace bar. Because I thought I might need it."

I stared at her appalled. In precisely that same way a killer might have surreptitiously lifted an ice pick from the terrace bar just before meeting Jody Dodd up here in our room. It may have been—probably *had* been—sneaked back afterward. The thing in Ilene's hand now could be the very same one the murderer had used on Jody.

"Give it to me, Ilene!"

"No, I won't give it to you," she said coldly, "but I'll trade it for a loaded gun."

"Hell," I muttered. "Don't you think, dearest, that if you tried very hard you might learn some day to trust me as far as you could throw a man-hole cover?"

I stalked off without waiting for an answer, leaving the weapon—very possibly a genuine weapon of murder, at that—in Ilene's fist. This really topped off my day. Griped to the core, I dropped myself prostrate on that cloud-soft bed and sprawled out luxuriously into all four of its corners, fully dressed and blanketed with a heavy layer of disgust.

I slept. . . .

After all those hours I'd labored in all those bars in the line of duty I should have slept as soundly as little Jody over there in the Chinese chest. Instead, I floated restlessly around and around on a slow black whirlpool of numbness. Perhaps hopefulness was keeping me fractionally awake—a sort of dreamy super-expectancy.

Ah? . . .

Yes? . . .

My pulse quickened. The pre-dawn dark-

ness was so thick I could see nothing, but a sound had come from the balcony. It came again, an almost silent footstep—nearer. The soft rustling sound of small bare feet, nearer still, until they paused at the side of my bed.

I whispered, "Ilene—"

I reached out and my hand closed gently on slender fingers which seemed to squeeze mine gently in return.

I whispered, "Darling—"

Something that felt like the pointed end of a blacksmith's anvil collided crashingly against the top of my skull.

I must have blacked out without so much as a groan. The last thing I remembered thinking was, "More of my lousy luck." After minutes, consciousness came back like a runaway carousel, spinning painfully. Except for the comets cutting criss-cross streaks inside my eyeballs, the room stayed black; yet I sensed that something had happened in here—it wasn't happening any more.

I groped around until I knocked the shade off the bedside lamp. Its glare was brighter than five suns. Whatever it was that had been used to conk me, it had not been left behind.

I wanted to stay right there and wait for somebody to notice that the whole top of my head was torn off and kindly send me to the hospital for repairs. Instead, I dragged myself up, the bones grating together between my ears, and started to walk the four miles stretching between me and the french doors.

Something went wrong. I heard a thumping noise, felt another jolt and learned that I was now on hands and knees. That was all right. I could navigate better this way. So I crawled on and on and on, thinking with surprising clarity, "I must be nuts, because here I am with my brains dripping out and what worries me the most is Miss Deep Freeze of 1951."

CROSSING the balcony, I pulled at the iron railing until my feet slid back under me. The glow shining out the french doors showed me Ilene still over there in the same chair. Either she was the hardest-sleeping gal in the place and hadn't been disturbed by the noise of my skull shattering, or else she was pretending again, making like a baby in a crib. My suffering was

screaming itself through the night and she didn't appear to have noticed a thing.

Then, from below, sounds. At the far end of the balcony and directly beneath it, noises of movement. It must be the prowling of the same monster that had just split my cranium open. I had to see who it was. So I pulled myself along the railing until I was almost directly over those dark stirrings on the portico. I sensed that something was being *dragged* down there and I leaned farther over for a better look.

That was another mistake.

A silent, devastating force caught me from behind, rammed hard against me, pulled my feet upward, sent them whirling over my head. I was a pinwheel dropping through empty space. I smacked down, all the way through to hell's basement, flat on my back. The shock caused the whole Harrington mansion to bounce up and down.

But I was the indestructible man. I should be dead by now, but as usual I wasn't that lucky. Instead, after another too-brief blackout, my long-dissipated, beer-weakened body came back to life and went on suffering. I didn't hear anything worth living for. Just the wind shaking the trees and nodding the flowers prettily all around me.

Flowers. I'd fallen into the garden bordering the portico. Its soft, well-cultivated soil had blotted up the force of a fall that very probably would have been fatal if I had smacked down to the flagstones. The killer had had just that in mind, of course, when pushing me over the balcony railing. It was 'way up there above me, almost thirty feet up.

Instead of sensibly yelling for help I rolled over, found a fluted column to hug, then laboriously climbed it as far as a standing position. I had a hard boiled egg under my scalp. My nose was bleeding, loose on my face, and made gritty noises as I pushed it around. An incisor was also loose, my chin and knee-cap were raw. Otherwise I was in the pink.

Next I found myself fishing through all my pockets. I had a dreamy impression I'd been rolled while foundering there among the petunias. When I finished, I still felt something was wrong there, but I hadn't found what it was.

Going dizzily in search of the answer, I tottered into the house and within ten sec-

onds found more evidence that the joint was not quite as somnolent as it seemed to be.

A door in the ell of the first floor hallway was opening—the door, I'd learned, of Harlington's study. Out of it came quietly Harlington and Mimi Kimball.

Perhaps mist covered my mind—sky-rockets and roman candles were still popping off in my field of vision. For that reason I couldn't tell clearly whether the kiss Mimi gave Harlington was the you're-my-everything variety or just the thanks-pal type.

Mimi patted his cheek, turned and floated up the rear stairs, her wonderful legs flexing in a dancer's rhythm. Harlington, turning in the opposite direction, saw me. He glowered as he came toward me.

"What the devil's happening here tonight, Lane?"

"In your place, I would feel pretty sure of what had just happened to me," I said.

His wax-apple face grew riper in color. "Noises on the balcony, prowling on the grounds, people sneaking around inside the house. What's the meaning of it?"

"You should tell me," I said. "You know more of the answers than I do. Actually you don't need or even want a detective on this case, do you?"

His scowl grew black. "I should have expected this of you, Lane. I assign you to the most important case of your life, and what happens? Get a look at yourself, man! You've been out all night drinking with both fists and you're so abysmally swacked that you keep falling on your gutter-bum's face."

I let it go—groaned and brushed past him. He trailed me slowly as I performed the impossibility of hoisting myself up the stairway. Hurrying as best I could without taking another header, I eased into my room and closed the door on my host and boss.

Ilene was still out there on the balcony, Roland was still over there in his silver frame, and the Chinese chest—I wasn't too surprised when I lifted the lid and found Jody Dodd's body gone.

I thought raggedly, "She'll be found pretty soon now. They're going to dump her somewhere. *But I didn't hear any car leaving.*"

That was it, that was what I *hadn't*

heard while lying down there in the flower bed. No car had gone stealing off. Jody's body must still be somewhere close around, still somewhere on the place.

The realization started me to fishing all through my pockets again in crazy haste—and this time I found out what was wrong.

My keys were missing. Somebody had snatched all my keys, including the keys of my car.

A grisly hunch hit me then—a strong suspicion of the whereabouts of Jody Dodd's body at this moment. A thousand to one it was locked snugly inside the trunk of my venerable auto.

CHAPTER FIVE

Corpses Go, Corpses Come

GROGGILY, I headed back down the stairs, still weaving. Harlington wasn't in sight now. He was making clinking noises with a carafe at the big buffet in the dining hall, having himself a slug of scotch-type sedative. I detoured around him, across the terrace and then through the wet grass to the parking space.

My coupe sat just where I'd left it. The floodlight above showed the handle of the trunk lid shining free of dust. More dust had been brushed off the splash-pan behind the rear bumper—by something pushed across it. The trunk had been opened since my return and something put in and not by me. The hunch that had brought me out here was solid—Jody Dodd's lifeless body was in there, all right.

The keys had not been obligingly left hanging in the lock. The killer still had them.

Realizing that, my temperature skidded toward freezing. My beat-up brain began buzzing haltingly again. Had the killer taken away Jody's trick handbag too, the bag with the stolen stones in it—or was it still there, hidden behind the spare tire where I'd stuffed it? As long as my keys stayed missing I couldn't know.

Also, as long as those keys stayed missing I couldn't guess what diabolical use might be made of them. Potentially they were too explosive for comfort. A nice, sweet, panicky predicament, this—a dead teen-ager locked in the trunk of my car, and my counterfeit wife up there on the

balcony with the weapon of murder in her hand.

I headed quietly back into the house by way of the terrace, again by-passing Harlington, who was still taking his medicine from the carafe in the dining hall.

Passing through my strange bridal chamber to the balcony, I checked on Ilene. She was still there, too, just as before. Was she still pretending, or had she actually slept through all that hushed-up but deadly violence? She hadn't moved at any rate, and she still didn't stir as I went past her toward the master's suite.

The french doors of the adjoining room were closed. A rosy night-light shone on the lowered venetian blind. Through it I could see Lida's flame-red head lying on a pale green satin pillow. Even in slumber this gorgeous woman was a technicolor production.

I prowled on quickly, being more interested in the corner room, that of the master of the plantation. The doors here were also closed, but not locked. My suspicions of my boss were continuing at a brisk simmer, my punished head was sore as a boil and I had a growing disinclination to observe the niceties of etiquette among people who were trying to murder me, so I intruded right on.

First I ransacked Harlington's desk, without knowing specifically what I was looking for. Anything that might throw light on his true situation, such as a statement from the bank that his account was overdrawn by a quarter of a million, would be welcome. The desk yielded no such betraying papers, but in Harlington's dresser I came upon an enlightening item under a pile of nylon shirts.

It was a .32 automatic in a pocket holster. The gun smelled clean—hadn't been fired. On its butt, however, a little fuzz adhered. Human hair. Mine.

This gun had been used just a short while ago to conk me.

Adding it up, this looked as if Harlington had selected me for this case because I was the most expendable of all P.L.A.'s dicks. If so, I was about eighty-percent expended already. Caught in the middle, as I appeared to be, between Harlington, Steese and several other charming throat-slitters and back-stabbers as well, the other twenty-percent of me would run out fast.

I put the gun back in it's bed, moving rapidly now because of footfalls approaching along the hall—Harlington's. Easing out onto the balcony, I heard him come sluf-sluffing in and fall heavily onto his pillow in a way that meant he would stay down the rest of the night.

Turning back, I paused for a closer look at Ilene. Maybe she was really, deeply asleep after all—dreaming of her name in lights, no doubt, and Roland, too. Ambitious little girl, bright hopes soaring—still with an ice-pick ready in her little hand.

I prowled on down the balcony, intending now to really get down to brass tacks and platinum-set diamonds.

A throaty voice in the shadows said softly, "You're so restless tonight, darling."

MIMI KIMBALL, standing in the dark of her open doorway, had been watching me. She was a soft-focus figure there in the flickering shine of the light behind the trees. Her smile was pleasantly enigmatic, teasing.

"You're finding so many interesting things to do—for a brand new bridegroom," she murmured—and then, without giving me an opening to answer, she faded back, quietly closed the doors and snapped the bolt into its socket.

I remembered the kiss Mimi had given Harlington downstairs. I thought of the gorgeousness of Lida. I wondered why a guy lucky enough to have that redhead-among-redheads should risk losing her by going for her arch-rival, the pale-gold Mimi.

The answer I could think of offhand was a cliché—some gentlemen prefer blondes, that's all. Besides, some guys like to live dangerously. Me, I would never be so incredibly rash as to play Lida off again Mimi. Hunting starving tigresses with a BB gun would be healthier.

Behind the next door down the balcony, also closed, were noises of motions even more restless than mine—constant pacing.

I touched the knob. Instantly the pacing stopped. Then footsteps came to the door fast. It snapped open and rounded eyes stared out at me.

"Disappointed, Carlo?" I said. "Were you expecting Jody? Or Lida? Sorry."

Lionni's face was haggard with worry, his curly hair finger-raked. He watched me

warily in the light of a small, dim lamp as I closed the doors behind me.

"Confidentially, Carlo, I'm here to do a job of work. It may hurt you a little, so be smart and help me get it done fast."

He blinked at me.

"Just hand over that hateful of jewelry you stole from Lida," I suggested, "and I'll do all I can to keep Harlington from getting too rough with you about it."

Lionni's sharp-pointed Adam's apple bobbed in his thin neck.

"I can keep this whole thing hushed up, Carlo, provided you give me back Lida's sparklers right now. I'll fix it so nobody else will know you're the guy who burgled them. You see, I sympathize with you, Carlo—but Harlington won't. He's pretty impatient by now."

Lionni blurted, "What business is this of yours?"

"I'm an ill-paid dick employed by Harlington's insurance company—but let's keep that under our wigs. Let's wind this whole thing up strictly under cover. That way it'll be less rough on Jody too."

Lionni's face turned greasy. "Where is Jody?"

My tactics took a sudden change of pace. "Don't waste my time acting innocent, Carlo. I know for sure you're the guy who heisted Lida." It couldn't have been Vic Cornish who did it, for example—he was too noticeably tall. It couldn't have been Harlington himself—his bay window would have given him away. "It was a guy of average size, just like you."

Lionni answered, his upper lip curling, "There are a dozen others of average size who—"

"But you're the only one of the lot who went to the leather-craft shop in Newtowne a few days later to order a lady's handbag with a false bottom built into it."

So far as Lionni knew, I'd never seen Jody—she had disappeared before my arrival—but the way I had picked up this information was easier than using a crystal ball. Noticing the leathercraft shop in Newtowne and remembering that Jody's handbag was a special hand-made job, I'd gone in and asked questions. It was as simple as that, but to Lionni it seemed baffling. He looked twice as worried now and dizzy besides.

"You asked the man to keep it hushed up.

The bag was to be a birthday surprise for Jody. The secret compartment was for keeping her money in, because, you said, she had a careless habit of leaving her bag around. Actually you wanted it for stashing away part of Lida's trinkets."

Lionni's Adam's apple was really bouncing.

"You don't want little Jody put into prison for her part in it, do you? Me either. So just cooperate by handing over the rest of it—"

"P-prison?" Lionni blurted. "Not Jody! She didn't even know she had the stuff."

HERE WAS the first crack in Lionni's defenses. This could develop into a full-scale breakup. I pressed it. "Don't give me that. Of course she knew it. She was in this deal with you from scratch."

"Nothing of the sort!" Lionni insisted indignantly. "I gave Jody the bag with the stuff already hidden in it and she knew nothing about it, nothing." He straightened, bracing himself. "You are not so smart as you think, my friend. You don't understand this at all."

This was the start of a confession, all right, yet Lionni showed a peculiar lack of fear. He was plenty worried, but apparently about something other than the possibility of jail.

He went on, staring a challenge at me, "As for my own part, I admit it. Why not? It was I who stole Lida's baubles, yes."

"Why?" I asked. "You just happened to find yourself needing an extra three-hundred grand or so?"

He scowled. "I stole the jewels from Lida for reasons of my own and that is all I will say. Tell this to her stupid husband if you wish. It matters very little now. Because, you see, I have none of the jewels left, not one of them."

I asked it fast. "You mean you already sold the stuff?"

"Sold it? No!" Lionni smiled wryly. "I had no chance. No sooner had I stolen it from Lida than another thief stole it from me."

I shook my head at him. "It's a little too late to try a fastie on me, Carlo."

He shrugged. "It is true, absolutely. I stole Lida's jewels and, of course, I knew a search would be made immediately. I quickly buried the stuff in a previously

chosen spot in one of the gardens. Later, when the excitement died down, I dug it up and drove with it to another place which I selected because I thought it would be safer. I was so wrong. The very second I stepped out of my car—I got slugged down flat.”

“An old, old story,” I said, trying a feeler. “Crossed up by your accomplice.”

Lionni stared at me darkly. “No, my friend. That is not possible.”

“What about this guy who put the slug on you?” I insisted. “He was waiting for you to show up with the loot. How could he know in advance you’d be going to that certain place at that certain time?”

“He must have suspected me from the beginning, must have been watching me. Who he was, I don’t know. He was not too completely greedy, however.” Lionni said this ironically. “He didn’t take *all* the jewels from me, you see. He left a few.”

I stared at him “Intentionally?”

“Of course. My share, no doubt. A very small one. I cannot say it was better than nothing. Actually it was worse than nothing, much worse.”

It was my turn to get dizzy. A few minutes ago I’d thought I had a tight grip on this case. Now I felt it slipping out of my hands like a wet eel. This last remark of Lionni’s particularly made sense, in its own cockeyed way.

“Sure it was worse than having nothing—because it could be used to pin the robbery on you while the other guy quietly faded away with the major share.”

“I realized this at once. It was still very necessary to hide these trinkets safely. It must be in a place no one would think of. I hit on the idea of the handbag for Jody. I would not tell even her about it, she would know nothing at all. Fine idea, I thought, very fine—but now that Jody has disappeared I am not so sure.”

In searching for Jody, then, Lionni hadn’t been so anxious about the missing girl as he was about the missing handbag.

Somehow the loot hidden in that bag had spelled death for Jody. Suppose she had accidentally found it. Pawing around inside the bag for cigs or matches, she might easily have dislodged that little leather-covered trap-door and exposed the secret hollow underneath.

What would she have done next? Cover

up for Lionni? She liked him, but she may have been cooled off by the discovery that he was a thief. As for herself, she must have been plenty scared by the prospects of a ruined reputation and a blighted career, not to mention a fairly fearsome chance of getting put into the pokey.

She was a conscientious kid, eager to get ahead, and maybe she’d reasoned that by taking her discovery to Harlington and Lida she would earn their gratitude. Being naive and ingenuous, she may have tipped her hand somehow—and she’d been stopped, silenced by an ice pick driven into her heart.

I watched Lionni’s face. Lionni would have wanted to shut Jody up, certainly. On the other hand, he might not even know she was dead.

“So I confess, my friend,” he said defiantly, “but still you can prove nothing because I have lost it all. I have not a single sparkle of it left.”

This guy was holding something out on me. Aside from that, he sounded solid. At this point, anyhow, Lionni himself didn’t matter much. My company and I were far more interested in getting those jewels back than we were in nailing Lionni.

I decided it would be smart to let him go on circulating among this mob of classy double-crossers, with hearts full to bursting with larceny, jealousy and ambition. Presently they might eliminate one another like the characters in the last act of a Shakespearian tragedy, leaving me alone on the stage with the loot, bowing to the applauding stockholders.

“Maybe I’m giving myself a bum steer, Lionni,” I said, “but I’m going to keep clammed up about this, for a while at least, provided you play along with me. Stick around, understand? I’ll see you again tomorrow.”

I turned abruptly and went back out on the balcony, leaving him with a befuddled chance to think it over. My tail dragged. I’d gone in there convinced I had Lionni tagged and the case cracked, and now I was right back there at the starting line, with the jewels as far out of reach as ever.

I trudged past Ilene, no longer able to care whether she was faking or not. I headed for that lovely dream of a bed, eager to fall into it face first.

Something braked me to a tired but curi-

ous stop. Some odd new feeling was crawling through the air. I stared all around, finding nothing changed until I caught the gleam of a shiny spot on the floor—a dark glisten beside the Chinese chest.

With a numb and ghastly foreboding I touched a fingertip to that spot. Sticky, dark-red stuff. In a fraction of a second I had the lid of the chest lifted. I stood there staring down at the dead body of Sid Steese.

On Steese's face and neck was a thin, red rash like small pox. A larger red spot, a stain of still-wet blood, spread above his heart. They were the marks left by furious multiple stabbings with an ice pick.

CHAPTER SIX

Dance of Death

DARKNESS still lay deep—and I hadn't yet had even one wink, much less forty—when I stepped into the hallway from Room 21 of the Lion's Head Inn, in Newtowne, and quietly locked the door behind me.

I had frisked Steese while his dead body lay there in the Chinese chest. That had put his keys into my hands while my own stayed missing. It had turned out to be hardly worth the trouble. Pawing through Steese's effects, I had found nothing of interest except the carbons of six or eight reports that he had written about a character named Wickley Lane. These left me more puzzled than before. In themselves, they weren't half bad enough to account for such a fouled-up rep as mine.

I headed back to the Harlington estate in Steese's car. Having been unable to use either my own or any other guests', I had hunted around for Steese's, knowing it must be somewhere nearby. It was—in the music circus parking lot.

That made it easy to dope out Steese's actions. In his eagerness to beat me out, he had sneaked over to case the Harlington manse and watch me. Manifestly he had seen somebody lugging Jody Dodd's dead body out of the house. Then, in some way he had tipped his hand or had been spotted by the killer. Result: case closed for Steese.

That was the way it looked to me. The cops would see it a little differently. Open

and shut, they'd say. Lane and Steese hated each other. Just strap Lane into the chair, spin the switch on him and mark the case closed for him, too.

With this thought chilling me, I drove through the ugly-tempered wind, stepping up speed to escape from the fact that Steese had gotten it *inside* the house. Not outside, where it would have been safer, but indoors among sleeping people who would have been aroused by an outcry. So Steese must have entered with, or had come in close contact with—and then been killed by—someone who knew him. Someone using an ice pick. As, for example, Ilene.

The wind kept slapping at the car, and I kept reminding myself that of course there must have been more than one ice pick lying about on the several bars in the house. There must have been, I hoped.

Still, though, Steese may have found out something really about Ilene and Harlington.

But that left Roland out of account.

I couldn't think any more. Too dizzy, too shaky. Too heartsick, too scared.

The gusty blackness lay thick over the musical circus. I eased Steese's car back into the same spot where I'd found it in the parking lot. I trudged cross-country interminably until the Harlington mansion loomed up like a fairy-tale castle in a haunted dream.

Then even the dream faded. . . .

I lifted my head and saw Ilene. Seated at the vanity, tidy in a black dress, she was putting on a fresh mouth. Roland sat there in his silver frame watching her admiringly. If she knew her pal Steese was lying lifeless in the chest across the room, she didn't seem unduly depressed by it.

"Why are you up and about so early, my sweet?" I asked with a groan. "How can you look so bright and pert at this hellish hour?"

She turned a frown on me. "It's past nine. I have to start practising Jody's dance. It's my big chance, remember, and after all I must make sacrifices for the sake of my career." She crossed to the hallway door and paused there to remark with a bite, "You must have had a really wonderful night of it, to judge from your clothes, and especially that nose."

"Ilene, wait—"

She went out with a scornful sniff and

snapped the door shut firmly behind her.

I checked. My nose felt as if it were the size, shape and color of an over-cooked frankfurter. It made gritty noises inside when I pushed at it. I hurt all over. It would be very pleasant, I decided, just to lie right here and die. Only sensible thing to do, really. Don't be a fool, Lane, go ahead and die.

A FEW minutes later I found myself dragging out of bed, still clinging to the suicidal determination to crack this case or else get cracked up into little pieces myself.

I peeked into the chest hoping Steese had disappeared during my slumbers. He hadn't.

I groped my way down the stairs and out to the terrace just in time to see Ilene rolling off in a garish open convertible with Vic Cornish and Mimi Kimball.

Out there beside the garage I took another look at my coupe. It seemed exactly the same. If Judy had been stowed in my trunk a few hours ago, she must be still in there.

Now I was getting sore. That was no way to treat a nice kid like Jody. I didn't like any of this and wanted no more of it. The weather itself was nerve-racking. Those thick black-gray clouds rolling overhead were a storm in the making but perversely holding fire.

Pushed around by the wind, I went back into the house, onto the balcony. A fine, complicating factor in a homicide case, that balcony, because a body could be lugged along it from any one room to any other. I used it for a return trip to the master bedroom on the corner.

Mr. Leon Harlington, squire of the manor, still lay abed, curled up in noisy silk pajamas. He didn't stir as I stepped in. That was good. I wanted to rummage thoroughly among the big boss's private effects to make sure he wasn't holding unto my keys.

For five solid minutes I snooped rapidly about. No keys. Another detail came to light, however. There under that same stack of nylon shirts lay that same pocket holster, but empty now. The holster was still there but the automatic it had contained was gone. The gun had been taken. Somebody had felt they might need it.

"Well, Lane?"

Harlington's voice, sternly from behind me. I turned slowly, expecting to see that .32 in his fist, aimed straight at my gizzard.

He didn't have it. It was a delightful surprise to find him sitting up in bed, boil-sore but empty-handed.

"Just what the devil does this mean, Lane?"

I was tired of clamming up, sick of pussyfooting. Yet I couldn't spill the works, either. Not yet, not to Harlington, not with Steese lying murdered just down the hall.

"Mr. Harlington," I inquired wearily, "just how broke are you?"

"What?" The indignant word exploded. Then, after half a moment, he began to deflate. "So, Lane. Been keeping an ear cocked, have you? Well, I warned you not to trust anyone, not even me. All right, let's square away. Frankly, Lane, I'm broker than hell."

Down to his last million? Or even worse than that? He went on.

"I'm in frightful shape, really, Lane. Rate I've been going, can't last another six months. However, I've come to my senses in time. Brakes are going on as soon as this damned music circus ends after next week. I can still pull out then, can still save myself. Sure of it, Lane."

I could think of a slick, if illegal, way for Harlington to do that. First, steal his own wife's jewels, using a stooge for the actual job. Second, force his own insurance company to cover the loss. Third, disappear with the rocks and a yummy blonde named Mimi. Next, light in some unreachable but fashionable spot halfway around the world. Finally, cash in the rocks through underground channels, thereby collecting double value on them, and live there with Mimi happily ever afterward.

"You see, Lane, the real reason we must hurry up and find Lida's jewels is that once they're back in hand I can borrow very substantial amounts on them, and with that money I can pull myself out of this hole."

"Mr. Harlington," I said heartily, grasping his fat hand, "I'm certainly glad you've cleared up that point for me. I'm sorry I was suspicious, I apologize for this unwarranted intrusion, and I wish you all the good fortune in the world."

With that I left him—and as I strode out I felt his gaze following me in perplexity,

like that of a slick operator who couldn't be certain whether he'd hooked his sucker or not.

FINALLY, a few hours later, it really popped off. That was the night all the valves blew.

Over at the music circus the cars had begun streaming in on schedule. The light shone and the banners flapped in a wind that had grown even rougher. The weather reports said we were being brushed by the eddies of a hurricane. It was swerving out to sea and calmer weather would soon follow.

At any rate, the blow wasn't enough to discourage tonight's audience. Even though the canvas walls billowed and puffed, and the whole shaking tent seemed about to take off at moments, the customers went trooping happily to the tiers of seats encircling the round stage under the center pole.

Harlington had ferried me over early, with Lida, in his custom-built yacht-on-wheels. Tonight's would be the final performance of this week's show. Following it would come another of those lavish parties at Harlington Manor. The wind was expected to abate by that time, though right now it was still rolling around like a drunken bully.

Through the confusion of people and gusts and cars, I worked my way toward the dressing tents. I hadn't seen my devoted "wife" since early morning. Carlo Lionni had spent the day avoiding me and I had let him stew. I was sure where Sid Steese was—still in the Chinese chest. Also my coupe still sat unmoved, its keys still missing.

All this added up to a ghastly mess that couldn't possibly be stretched out much longer. Something must give very soon now, and with darkness closed down the evil forces of the wind seemed to be egging it on to blow up in our faces.

Despite the atmospheric ruckus, the performance started on time. The orchestra, in one small segment off the circular stage, tootled away and the singers tried to give out over the blustering all around.

While watching from the mouth of one of the aisles used by the performers for getting on and off the stage, I saw Vic Cornish come hurrying from the manager's tent. He spotted Mimi fussing with the

make-up of one of the dancing girls and headed for her. I eased close enough to eavesdrop as he whispered a quick message.

"They just found Jody's body—fished it out of the Delaware. Watch for the cops."

They stared at each other and Mimi whispered back, "For Pete's sake keep it quiet or the whole show will fall apart."

I backed away, stunned. Jody in the Delaware river? Somebody, then, had found a chance to dump her off the bridge? Using my car for the job, no doubt. A really sweet touch, that, and an eye-witness would make it perfect.

Had Ilene heard?

I stepped into Ilene's tent and lost my breath. Her costume was a leotard of golden satin and sheerest black nylon tights. Golden ballet slippers and her own raven-black hair made her dazzle. After a whole day of exhausting practising she looked daisy-fresh. So shining with eagerness was she that she even smiled at me.

"Roland should see you looking as delicious as this, honey," I said, and the smile snapped away. "Anyhow, good luck—and that's from the heart."

Round-eyed, she blurted, "I know it is, Wick, I do really."

This wasn't the best time for it, but I went on, hanging around just to look at her. "Let me connect with you for a few minutes after the show. It's important. Both Harlington and you have formed a low opinion of me on the basis of Steese's reports, and I don't get it, because those reports aren't really so bad."

Ilene caught her breath, frightened eyes lifted. She was really scared. I didn't know why and she had no chance to answer, because just then an assistant stage manager looked in through the tent flaps and cued Ilene, "Get set, Pavlova—one minute to go."

Instantly, Ilene went bug-eyed with stage-fright. "Relax, honey," I said, a little unfortunately, "you'll murder 'em." She brushed past me, hustling to meet her fabulous big chance. For her sake I hoped there was a scout for MGM out there tonight.

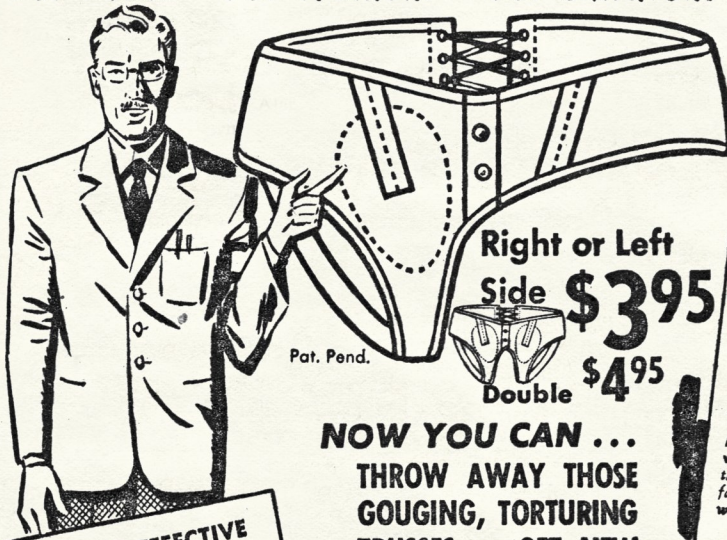
While she stood by, breathlessly waiting, I circled the tent to a position where I could watch her dance. It wasn't close enough—nothing farther away than the first row would be really close enough—but even

(Please continue on page 100)

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(Continued from page 98)

from back here every spin of that luscious body of hers would be sheer joy to behold.

Whatever the hell was happening on stage at this moment I couldn't make out. The show this week wasn't one of the old standard operettas, but, instead, something new being tried out here for the first time anywhere, and possibly the last. Something impressionistic and too-too moderne.

Lida was downstage, right, singing with all the fervor of her mediocre voice—a wordless song, just sustained notes, bravura stuff supposed to sound ecstatic. Her costume was an 1890 hoopskirt but with differences. The bodice had a neckline plunging deeper than Niagara Falls and prettier too. The hoopskirt was transparent. She had a little chinchilla muff with which she gestured while she sang.

Over on the left, in a deep purple spotlight, was Carlo Lionni, trilling up and down the scale like a tenor trying frantically to dodge a swarm of wrong notes. His costume resembled D'Artagnan's but it was all a phosphorescent orange. Whatever all this was supposed to symbolize, it was turning out—with the whole tent jumping and the wind scattering the music like dry leaves—to be something out of the looney-bin.

Then, like clean sunlight bursting in a murky midnight, Ilene bounded out into a dazzling spot. After a glittering pirouette she paused on tiptoes, exquisitely poised. A long "Oo-oo-oo" of approval went through the tent. Then Ilene bounded into motion again, a figure of scintillating and vital beauty.

Linda went on screeching and gesturing with her little gray muff. Carlo Lionni yodeled in classical poses. Ilene leaped, floated like a golden milkweed fluff, sparkled down. The tent walls puffed like crazy and the little orchestra wailed at the hoodlum wind.

Then the whole thing cracked grimly apart.

It really was a sharp, cracking noise that pierced the bedlam and sounded a signal of fear. Gunshots fired in anger.

How many? I couldn't guess. At that moment the drummer was beating hell out of his snares, using both sticks like a madman. No muzzle flash had cut the gloom anywhere. Confused banging, no spurt of fire—yet a gun had blasted.

Ilene had been whirling through another dazzling pirouette. She spun to a bewildered stop. Lida's voice sank out and Lionni's faded in a gurgle and the orchestra disintegrated in a discord. Ilene became the gold-and-black bulls-eye at whom a thousand eyes were aimed—horrified eyes seeing fresh blood flowing across her skin.

I went down the aisle so fast that I was the first to reach her. She was swaying a little, but staying on her feet while staring in stunned fascination at the spreading red. My first close look turned me dizzy with relief. Ilene was all right. This was just a bullet nick, only skin deep.

The killer missed, I thought. Tried to kill Ilene and missed.

Then a concerted gasp. Until this tense second every eye, concentrating on Ilene, had seen nothing else. Now that mass of attention shifted across the stage to Carlo Lionni.

Lionni had been standing there still as a statue, then had begun to totter. We could see blood gushing out of a bullet hole in his chest. Now he was toppling, going loose in every joint. Suddenly he dropped—hit the floor harder and flatter than d'Artagnan ever had.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lethal Luck

THERE followed a period of nightmare confusion. While a tentful of people watched, I bent over Lionni, expecting to find him dead. He wasn't. The bullet had drilled through his chest a little too high and his ticker was still working, but raggedly. The blood kept pooling under him, looking ink-black in that ghastly purple spotlight while he lay there like a phosphorescent ghost.

Harlington came loping up, wild-eyed, with stage-hands and chorus girls crowding all around. "Get an ambulance," I cried, "and get it fast." Somebody went dodging away toward a phone and at that moment a sound like a groan went through the tent.

Lida, the prima donna of the piece, now commanded star billing by fainting. She went down in a crush of wrecked hoop-skirt while Harlington rushed frantically to her. Stage-hands lifted her and lugged her off

(Please continue on page 102)



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(Continued from page 100)

while her husband followed in her wake, wringing his hands. She had dropped her little muff, so, remembering vaguely that chinchilla is worth a lot of money, I picked it up and stuffed it into my pocket.

Now it was Ilene's turn to turn on the dramatics. She broke out in uncontrollable blubbering sobs, spun about and dashed off the stage in a glisten of beautiful black legs. I dodged after her, through the milling company, and found her in her tent boo-hooing like a child. I shook her.

It struck me suddenly that this display was not caused by the nearness with which she had just missed getting murdered, nor was she grief-stricken for Carlo. She was simply furious because her first big chance at fame and stardom had been spoiled.

In disgust I left her bawling there and turned back to the big tent. Tonight's show would never be completed. The customers were herding out, fearful of becoming involved in a police case. Cars were crowding down the lane, blaring their horns at one another, in a jittery exodus.

Even the members of the company were eager to dodge the ugly complications that were sure to follow. Carlo Lionni still lay where he had fallen, screened by hastily propped-up flats, and the stage hands and chorines, having backed off, were trying to act as if they'd never heard of him.

I stayed there until the ambulance bucked its way up the lane. I also faded back as the interns and a pair of state cops took over. Presently the county detective and other officials would wade in to a task which looked like a little daisy.

Ilene had been spinning like a top when the bullet nicked her. No one could say definitely which direction the posturing Lionni had been facing when hit. The bullet might have come from any segment of that circular tent, from any one of the three-hundred and sixty degrees of the compass.

Added to this was the difficult fact that the principals in the incident had already scattered. Ilene was gone from her tent. So was Linda. So was Mimi. Accompanied by several dozen other fugitives, they had headed toward the Harlington mansion by way of the private paths beyond the parking lot. It wasn't a bad idea at all. I headed out in the same direction, feeling sure that this was the topper. There had been one mur-

der too many now, and Harlington could no longer keep it hushed up.

Incongruously, the Harlington grounds were being readied for tonight's party. Not having expected gunfire and bloodshed, the caterers had placed their linen-skirted tables about, had hung their pretty paper lanterns and, in general, were preparing the customary weekly festivities. Evidently no one had thought to call them off—the canapes were piling up and already the outdoor bars were going into production.

Inside the great baronial living room, the company sat and stood about, staring at each other, easing their nerves with stiff drinks and saying little. All of them were still in costume, the result being a colorful, cockeyed assemblage. Ilene was not among them, nor was Lida, nor was Mimi. Harlington, also missing momentarily, came striding back in, looking hot-faced and harassed.

"Come, come, my friends," he said, too loudly. "Don't sit around here looking scared to death. Let us take cheer. We will go on with our party—of course we will. If the police should come to question us, then we will cooperate with them to the utmost—see them privately one by one, as they may wish. But meanwhile the party will continue as planned. A regrettable thing has happened to be sure—a *most* regrettable accident, I'm afraid—probably careless raccoon hunters in one of the fields nearby—a stray bullet, of course—and—and—"

His voice trailed off into a skeptical silence. Nobody was buying this stuff about a stray bullet, obviously. Besides, a person had just stepped into the room like an actor making an entrance on cue. A car had stopped beside the terrace a moment ago, and this natty guy had strolled across the terrace, just in time to ruin the effect of Harlington's speech.

It was Roland.

OUTSIDE his silver frame he was this time, and in the flesh—Roland Whozis. He looked exactly like his picture, except maybe he was handsomer. He crossed the room toward Harlington with his hand extended genially, flashing an impossibly beautiful grin.

Harlington muttered, "George Wharton. Of course, George, welcome—expecting

Guns Across the Table

you—most happy.” While I listened to this incredulously, Harlington made a sweeping gesture toward his roomful of guests. “My friends, I am delighted to present George Wharton, whose name and voice you all know. The singer we had previously engaged for next week’s show is ill and George has most kindly consented to drop several other important engagements in order to sing the lead for us. Most fortunate—most—”

Harlington relapsed into silence and mopped at his melting wax-apple face, while a few of the guests advanced with half-hearted welcomes for Wharton.

Behind me one of the chorines remarked, “He’s really thrilling—even if he does have a wife and three school-age kids.”

Plenty dizzy now, I went up to grab this guy’s hand, got a closer look and made sure he really *was* the same guy whose portrait decorated Ilene’s life.

“Welcome, Roland,” I said.

He said, “Name’s George.”

“Ilene’s upstairs,” I said.

He said, “Who?”

Abruptly letting it go at that, I went upstairs to my make-believe bridal chamber. Ilene, wrapped in a woolly robe, but still wearing that heart-stopping costume underneath, was resting—actually reposing on that bed. She gave me a chilly keep-your-distance look as I stood there gazing down on her.

“There’s a couple of things I’ve got to know, Ilene,” I said. “First, what did you find out that makes somebody want to murder you?”

She whispered, “Was it really me they wanted to murder—or Carlo?”

Good question. Very good indeed.

While mulling it over, I made a discovery that dropped my temperature several degrees in an instant. There under the lamp on the bedside table were my keys.

I circled the bed and slowly took them up. “Thanks for returning the keys, sweetheart,” I said. “I’ve missed them.”

Eyes closed, Ilene murmured, “What keys?”

The feel of them sent icy prickles across my shoulders, prickles that felt like steel spurs prodding me. Before asking any more questions or prowling anywhere else, I had to check on my car.

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At the door I paused just long enough to suggest wryly, "Better hurry and join the party downstairs—because Roland's here."

Ilene's eyes snapped wide open. A peculiar expression was crossing her face when I hustled out—one of stunned disbelief.

By-passing the crowded rooms, I left the house by way of a side door and headed straight for the parking space beside the garage. My car was there. It had been moved since I'd last seen it, all right—used to dump Jody's body into the river.

After a wary look around, I slid the key into the trunk lock and lifted the lid slowly. The trunk was empty of dead bodies now, of course—although there was a crusty spot on the mat that could be dried blood.

I fished around behind the spare tire to check on Jody's bag. It was still there. I pulled it out, opened it and felt an Arctic breeze playing across me.

The bag was full to the top with jewels—literally crammed tight with them. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds sparkled up, pearls glowed at me, mockingly. Even without checking them I felt deadly sure that I had the entire loot of the Harlington jewel robbery right here in my hands.

These trinkets had actually been dumped. Murder had made them far too hot to keep. They had forced the crook into a triple kill and now said crook was desperately scrambling to get clear.

Dumped on me, they formed a glittering frame. Found on me, they would touch up brilliantly a perfect picture of a crooked dick double-crossing his boss. Drag the corpse of Streeze out of the chest in my bedroom and I couldn't stand a chance of beating a frying rap.

The one faintly favorable angle of this little predicament was the fact that I had found the loot first. The simplest and quickest way to get rid of it, I decided, was merely to drop it into the open spaces of that big-wheel cruiser of Harlington's. I did exactly that, then headed back toward the house. Within twenty minutes by the clock I was to discover an automatic hiding under a snowy table napkin and aiming straight across the festive table at my heart. . . .

HARLINGTON had been egging his guests into making merry. Taking it as an opiate, in self-defense, they were do-

Guns Across the Table

ing their alcoholic best. The bars and the tables were crowded, the lanterns were swinging less wildly in a subsiding wind and the orchestra, well-lubricated with nerve-soother, was giving out with bouncy melodies.

There were police in the background, to be sure—troopers and county officials calling people inside for questioning—but despite this official dampening of spirits, a strained gaiety prevailed.

Harlington, working like a beaver to save the evening, forced Lida to appear. Having abandoned her freak stage costume, unlike most of the others, she had gone back to looking her own gorgeous self. Mimi also appeared, under her boss's orders, in a mere sigh of an evening gown, glittering black. Then Ilene appeared too, still in the golden leotard but now wearing a green dirndl. To top off the group, Vic Cornish showed up in loud plaid slacks and flowing white silk shirt.

So the deadly combination formed—Ilene seated on my left, Lida directly across from me, her husband on my right, Cornish on my left—and behind them another person standing in shadow.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" This was the orchestra leader, speaking through a microphone directly behind me. His voice echoed from loudspeakers concealed here and there in the shrubbery. "A great honor, ladies and gentlemen. The star of next week's music circus presentation, George Wharton, has consented to sing several selections for us now. Mr. Wharton."

Applause as "Roland" wended his way to the microphone, past Ilene without so much as a glance. Her cheeks were fiery pink. She lowered her head like a guilty kid, not daring even to glance at me.

"You two-way faker," I said. "You're not only not my bride, you're not this guy's fiancée either. All this stuff about your engagement to him was phony."

She murmured, blinking back tears, 'Self-defense; Wick.'

It struck a spark. Staring at her, I went on, "And those reports of Steese's! Steese handed his reports to you, you handed them on to Harlington—but not in the same shape. You rewrote 'em! You blackened 'em up! *You're* the character assassin who's been wrecking my reputation. *Why?*"

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She turned her lovely face to me and her words spilled out. "B—because you *are* the irresponsible sort, Wick—and you do hang around bars too much—and you like wild playmates—I just can't believe you'd settle down—so b—because you're so attractive—and b—because I was afraid I was falling in love with you, I—I tried to get you fired—get you out of my life." Then she wailed. "Oh, Wick, I *do* want a stage career but I can't have one if I have a no-good bum of a husband to support!"

"Honey child," I murmured, completely knocked off my base, "how wrong can you be? That thing about settling down and making like a responsible husband—why, you're all I need."

We sat there looking at each other round-eyed, and then I leaned over and kissed her right in front of the people, and she kissed me back, and it was wacky, because there was "Roland" right behind us, singing about his own dream girl at the same time.

"Isn't it sweet?" some dame nearby said. "Just married, you know."

That kiss had a magical effect. It turned me into a highly responsible man practically instantly. I was reminded in a flash that I was here to do a job and I'd better do it fast if I wanted to keep out of the sizzle seat.

I turned to Harlington just as a servant bent over his shoulder and whispered a message. The message stiffened Harlington like a blow. He stared across at me.

"Lionni is dead," I said.

Harlington nodded. "Never recovered consciousness. Hospital just phoned. That—"

"That makes it murder, of course. First-degree murder at that. With malice aforethought—that kind. The bullet that happened to graze Ilene was meant for Carlo."

Harlington stammered, "B—but right there in the middle of the stage—everybody watching—"

"It had to be done as soon as possible, because word had just come in of Jody's body being found in the Delaware. Carlo knew Jody's death was a murder too. That was more than he'd bargained for, too much for him to take. He was sure to spill his guts over it, so he had to be shut up fast, even if it had to be done in front of hundreds."

Guns Across the Table

They were watching me, all of them, with a hot intensity—Harlington, Lida, Vic Cornish and the person standing behind them in the shadow.

"Steese is dead, too, you know," I added quietly. "Murdered like the two others and by the same hand. His body is upstairs, in the chest in my bedroom. Every angle of this jewel robbery, you see, points to an inside job."

RIGHT then I became aware of the gun hiding under the dinner napkin directly across the table. The gun was Harlington's automatic, of course, the one taken from his dresser drawer. But as to whose hand was holding it, that was a question—a really deadly puzzler.

Watching it, I asked, "Tell me, Mr. Harlington, just what plans do you and Mimi have together?"

Harlington answered me levelly, "Mimi and I have one very important interest in common, Lane. Both of us very much want Vic Cornish to remain Mimi's man—not Lida's."

Ah. Heat lightning began flashing in Lida's eyes. She was learning that she hadn't fooled her husband quite as deftly as she had imagined, or Mimi either. The electrical tensions here, building up, were beginning really to crackle.

"Of course Vic is the tall boy in Lida's life," I said. "I saw him disappointed in an attempt at an impromptu rendezvous with her last night on the balcony. It was Ilene he found there, not Lida. He faded so fast in the darkness that he did hit his head on the doorway. Nobody else in the place is tall enough to do that."

Just a glimmer of the gun's dark and deadly snout was visible under the napkin. I wished I might see it more clearly.

That fourth person was Mimi, out of the shadow now. Those eyes of hers could be promising anything, including death.

"We were discussing murder, not ar-dor," I said, playing for time. "Three murders, to be specific. Not just one, not even two, but three. First Jody, then Steese, next Carlo. All the work of the same bloody hand. If I'm not boring you, I'll work around in a minute to mentioning the name of the killer."

They didn't speak but just went on look-

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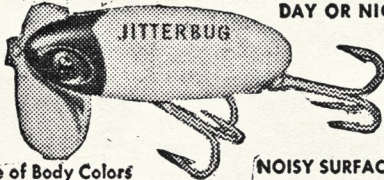
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Frederick C. Davis

ing at me, all four people and the gun too. "Carlo stole Lida's jewels," I went on. "He told me so. He was merely a stooge, not afraid of getting nailed for it because he was working with the top echelon. It adds up either one way or the other, Harlington. Carlo was used either by you and Mimi, or by Lida and Vic."

This was silly of me, unarmed as I was, except for a double scotch and a hope that if I lived I'd chalk up a home run with Ilene.

"It isn't much of a riddle at that," I went on, expecting to get blasted off the earth at any second. "It wasn't Mimi who could make a dupe of Carlo. It was Lida he went for. So it was Vic Cornish, carrying out the plan he and Lida had cooked up together, who then robbed Carlo. On Lida's part it makes sense of an utterly faithless sort, Harlington. She wanted to grab those jewels for herself and her boy friend and fade with them, before you sold them.

Lida was tightening in her chair, her eyes green fire—and the position of her arm told me the fist gripping the automatic was hers.

"Cornish," I said, rising slowly, "this didn't work out to your liking either, did it? You've no stomach for murder—particularly not a good kid like Jody. You hated the job of dumping her body. When Steese saw Lida push me off the balcony, and you hiding Jody's body in my car, it only added up to more killing. Steese tried to bargain with you about that, didn't he, Lida—for the top desk in Claims Investigation?"

She was tight as a death-trap spring now. I grabbed at two split-second chances. First, to distract her—

"Did you know, Lida darling, that you've already lost the game? Vic dumped your jewels overboard tonight, in an effort to get clear. They're in your husband's car now. Next he'll probably drop you. It isn't easy for a man of Vic's sensitivity to feel a tender affection for a three-time murderer."

Lida swung around on him. The napkin stayed draped over the gun. Cornish shrank away from a blazing hatred in Lida's eyes.

Harlington snapped at me, "You're crazy, Lane! Not Lida!"

"Proof," I said and tugged the little chin-cilla muff out of my pocket. "Lining's scorched. Lida fired the shot that killed

Guns Across the Table

Carlo, hiding your gun inside that muff. That's enough to clinch all three kills."

Then—I reached back, nudging Roland aside, grabbed the microphone and spoke loudly enough to cause all the speakers to blast.

"Look, ladies and gentlemen! Attention! You are about to witness a murder, a real one, a murder!"

The bawling power of the words startled and froze the crowd. At every table, heads turned and craned. Dancers stopped to start. Waiters paused with trays poised. The orchestra tinkled off into uncertain silence. Far back on the terrace two state troopers turned to watch.

"Keep your eyes on Lida Cordray Harlington." Doom itself couldn't have roared more fearfully. "She's got a gun. She's going to use it. She has already committed three murders. She's turning the gun on me now—number four. She's about to fire. She's going to kill me here and now, before your very eyes. Watch her—"

For a fraction of a second she hesitated, reason warning her she couldn't possibly get away with this, passion driving her into it. Then the gun made a loud bang. I had already started to drop. The bullet whizzed above me and made a crazy spanging sound as it drilled into the piano behind me. Then, before anyone could grab her, Lida turned the gun on Cornish. His thin body shook under two blasts. Then she pressed the gun deep into the V of her gown and the final shot was muffled by her body. . . .

Well, we've got something called the American dream. You work hard, persevere, get ahead, become a success. I had just cracked a major jewel-robbery case and in the normal course of events I should win a suitable reward. For example, I could be made head of Claims Investigation of Preferential Liabilities. . . .

Later that night, Leon Harlington glowered at me, a shattered man, and said, "Lane, this is the worst possible way it could turn out for me, utterly the worst. Lane, I never want to set eyes on you again. Lane, you're fired."

Anybody know of an insurance company that wants to hire a detective that gets results?

Ilene will give me a reference.

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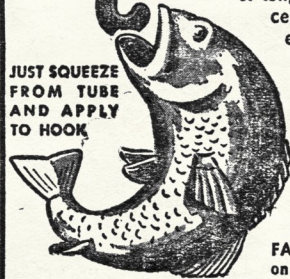
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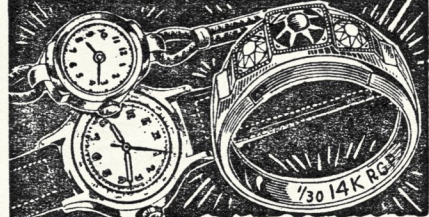
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Raymond Drennen

(Continued from page 39)

"Well, Godfrey," he said. "You've been moving pretty fast tonight."

Voices in ambush boomed behind Pete from the bedroom. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his forehead.

"Whew, coppers," he sighed. "Am I glad to see you. Hide behind that door a few minutes, and you can catch yourself a murderer."

Suddenly the apartment was swarming with police. Pete shook his head gravely. "Have to fix that window now," he muttered. "Too darn many people know about it."

"Hey, lieutenant," a voice called from the kitchen. "We got him. The punk's out cold."

The lieutenant walked to the kitchen and came back. He glanced at Jeanie and grinned obliquely, then looked at Pete, still grinning.

"Good job, Godfrey. We got the other one, Connors, in the cigar store across from your apartment."

"How did you know to pick him up?" Pete asked, perplexed.

"Your ex-wife's neighbors told us who belonged to the bag of pennies, so we came looking for you. We spotted Connors, and he tallied with a description of the man who killed Mrs. Nestor and stole the necklace this afternoon, so we picked him up." The lieutenant grinned. "His nerves are shot. He's trying to blame both killings on Sam. You two will have to come down to Headquarters in the morning and make a statement."

Two policemen carried the gently stirring body of Sam out between them and the lieutenant quickly cleared the apartment.

"Lieutenant," Jeanie purred, casting a sidelong glance at Pete, "who has the necklace?"

"Why, we have, lady," the lieutenant said. "We found it in Mrs. Godfrey's apartment. The killers had missed it. See you in the morning."

Pete watched him close the door, then he heard a small, plaintive voice behind him.

"Pete—please untie me—"

A Hitch in Crime

(Continued from page 42)

It seemed as though the answer would never come. When it did, she said urgently, "Operator, connect me with Irwin Hankey at the storeroom in the research lab. Quickly, please!"

There was a pause. "I'm sorry, madam, but that line is engaged. Will you hold on until it's free?"

She was fighting against time for Irwin's life now. The clock said ten-fifteen. "Operator! Operator! I must speak to Irwin Hankey at once. It's a matter of life and death. Please, please, operator."

She heard a variety of mysterious telephone sounds, and then the operator, with characteristic disinterest, told her, "Your line is available now. Here is your party."

The next voice she heard was Irwin's. "Thank heavens I've got you, Irwin. I'll have to talk fast. Listen closely: that parcel I gave you this morning to mail—"

"Oh, oh," Irwin interrupted with a shyness that belied a guilty feeling.

"What do you mean: oh, oh?"

"Oh, oh. Are you ever going to be mad at me!"

"Erwin! Is the parcel there—there, where you can see it?"

"Nope, honey, it ain't. Now, don't go and get mad at me. But on the bus this morning I happened to sit next to Joe Addison, on the bus. And I was telling Joe about this clock you're sending to Aunt Louise in Madison. And Joe says to me, 'Irwin, Tom Macaulay is driving down to the Dubuque branch today, Irwin, so why don't you give it to him to drop off in Madison, since Madison is right on the way to Dubuque.'"

"So when we got to the plant, I seen Tom's car parked there, and I just slipped the parcel into his trunk, meaning to tell him about dropping it off at Aunt Louise's. But I didn't get a chance to see him, and I just plumb forgot about that parcel until you called."

Irwin knit his brows in an expression of pain when he heard Alicia's hysteria through the receiver. "Well, for crying out loud, Alicia, that ain't no reason for you to go all to pieces like that. I'll mail it for sure tomorrow. Honest, I promise, just as soon as Tom Macaulay blows in with it."

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Duane Yarnell

(Continued from page 71)

and working on another. On either side of him sat Jimmy and his brother Georgie.

"Okay," the Chief said. "You've earned a crack at a plain-clothes job again. But one thing I want to know. How'd you do it?"

"Ask Georgie," Mike said.

"I don't speak so good, Your Highness," Georgie said.

"You read all right, though," Mike laughed.

"What the hell is this?" the Chief demanded.

Mike said, "Georgie's a fool about letters. He sees a word and he tries to remember it. So tonight, when I convinced Fat Slocum that we ought to eat I ordered soup—"

"Alphabet soup," explained Jimmy the Greek, waving his arms excitedly. "So when the fat man brings the bowl back and Georgie sees the words in the bottom of the bowl—but here, look." Jimmy took the bowl, and there in the bottom of it was the message as Mike had arranged it, using the letters he had found in the alphabet soup. The message read:

*FOLLOW FATTY. CALL COPS.
 I'M A PRISONR. MIK.*

"I guess I ate all the E's," Mike said.

"Well I'll be damned," the Chief said.

"We do the right thing, no?" Georgie asked.

"Like a good citizen," Mike said.

"Another lesson, now?" Georgie asked hopefully.

"Enough," said Mike sternly, "is enough." He reached for the pad at Georgie's elbow, scrawled something, then got up and walked out without a backward glance.

Georgie looked hurt, as did his brother, Jimmy the Greek. Then they looked down at the message Mike had printed and they began to smile again.

*N-E-V-E-R K-E-E-P A D-A-M-E
 W-A-I-T-I-N-G*

Georgie looked at the Chief. "Is a card, that Mike, no?"

The Chief began to smile.

"Give me some soup," he said. "That alphabet kind."

Traitors To Themselves

(Continued from page 14)

and ruthless Bluebeard of a killer. Her real name, as the police suppose, was Mirzhka Yaskirteff.

She appeared about 1924 as a handsome and highly magnetic man. Matrimonial advertisements which she inserted in various papers put her in touch with likely victims. She then persuaded them to carry their jewels and portable property to visit her country estate, twenty miles from a railroad, in a deserted countryside. The victims, who had been sworn to secrecy as to their movements, went there but never returned.

How long this business would have gone on, no one knows, but one night a stray motorist heard screaming and investigated in time to save one of the would-be brides of death from a violent end. The owner of the chateau fled.

Search in the house revealed stocks of women's clothing and odds and ends belonging to six girls reported as disappeared, two of them from wealthy families. The police believed that a furnace had been used to consume the remains, through there was evidence that the killer had been studying some method of chemical destruction.


One curious fact came to light. The victims were all blondes. The theory advanced was the killer had an anti-blonde complex, acquired perhaps when a former sweetheart forsook her for a blonde.

In Sydney, Australia, a jury brought in a verdict of guilty against Eugenie Fallini, age forty-five at the time, 1920. The charge against her was that, masquerading as a man, she had hoodwinked a woman into marriage, then killed her and burned the body.

In 1807, a personable young man made trouble in the city of Paris. Two murders of men and the attempted killing of a woman led, after some sleuth work, to arrest and revelation that the Human Tigress, as the Police Prosecutor described her, was Manette Bonhart of the weaker sex.

The catalogue could be continued at length, but enough has been said to prove that the imposture can be carried on so skillfully as to deceive the hardest-boiled native of Missouri.

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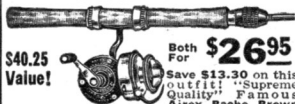
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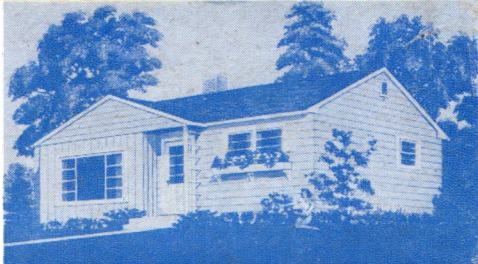
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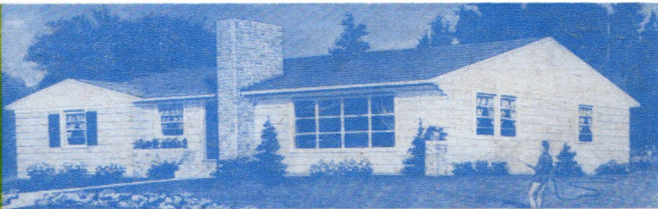


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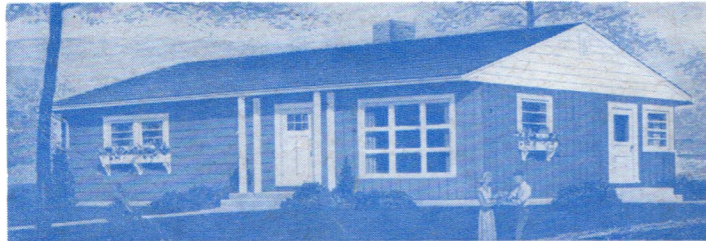
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